H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Chanelle N. Rose. *The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami: Civil Rights and America's Tourist Paradise, 1896-1968.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. 385 pp. $47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-5766-4.

Reviewed by Devin T. Leigh (University of California, Davis)

Published on H-Florida (September, 2015)

Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami is the first book written by Chanelle N. Rose, associate professor of history and co-coordinator of the African Studies Department at Rowan University, New Jersey. The book is a social and political history of the long civil rights movement in Miami, a unique city in the American Deep South. According to Rose, Miami is unique because the cityâs white power structure had an historic investment in a resort-style tourism that depended upon the perpetuation of a facade: a racially progressive national reputation that masked widespread inequality. In other words, white civic elites were historically more interested in keeping their lucrative tourist economy going by avoiding the explosive social unrest that characterized other cities in the New South during the civil rights movement than in actually changing the cityâs institutions of systematic racial oppression. Rose surveys seventy years of black activists and black-led organizations in Miami fighting to achieve first-class citizenship from this racist power structure. In doing so, she sets to paper the protracted struggle for personhood in what she describes as an often neglected, racially heterogeneous southern US border culture during the volatile era of Jim Crow.

Rose obtained her degrees from Florida International University and the University of Miami. *The Struggle* is a refurbishing of her 2007 dissertation, *Neither Southern nor Northern: Miami, Florida and the Black Freedom Struggle in Americaâs Tourist Paradise, 1896-1968.* Understandably, Rose demonstrates an exceptional knowledge of the breadth of Afro-history in Miami. She makes considerable use of both the HistoryMiami and Black Archives, and she demonstrates a solid understanding of texts by Marvin Dunn, Raymond Mohl, Melanie Shell-Weis, and N. D. B. Connolly that pertain directly to her work. Historians of Miami will recognize iconic scholars throughout her text, from Dorothy Jenkins Fields to Paul George and Stetson Kennedy. But how successful Rose is at integrating the historiography on the New South, African American/West Indian relations, the broader civil rights movement, and US border cultures is for another reviewer to judge. Rose employs William H. Chafeâs concept of the white, tourist âprogressive mystiqueâ as the central organizing principle for her analysis of historic race relations in Miami (p. 7).

The Struggle is a difficult book to review because Rose covers an enormous amount of ground. She claims that her work âis not intended to offer a conclusive history of Miamiâs black freedom struggle,â but this is often hard to believe (p. 11). Her work is broad and appears to strive for completeness. Sometimes the book takes on an encyclopedic tone, listing black figures and black-led organizations from Miamiâs past. Rose addresses Caribbean transnationals, Garveyites, black boosters, militant radicals, Pan Africanists, leftist labor leaders, moderates, conservatives, liberal Jewish transplants, anticommunists, white supremacists, New Dealers, NAACP heads, accomodationists, gradualists, Spanish tourists, Latin immigrants, Cuban exiles, grassroots desegregationists, Black Nationalists, and more. Each of these groups appears to be represented by a half-dozen organizations with their own acronyms in any given decade. This broad scope is typical of a refurbished dissertation, and one gets the sense that Rose has created many opportunities for future projects. She has built a basic scaffolding of major

players and events in the struggle for black liberation in Miami; any one of her chapters could be expanded into a book of its own, a book where the author is permitted to narrate more, question more, and more fully explore the inner emotions of her characters.

At the risk of being reductive, the next three paragraphs will attempt to summarize the chronology Rose sets forth in regard to the long struggle for civil rights in Miami. At first, there is a âtourist progressive mystiqueâ (p. 7). This promotional image was constructed mainly by white business elites who desired to control the pace of racial change in accordance with their financial interests. Later, these elites wanted to establish ties with Latin America that would foster business and thwart communism during the Cold War. This became the context in which early black boosters and militant radicals lobbied for social change, often amidst significant intraracial and interethnic tensions. In the 1930s, the black liberation struggle became defined by a more âbroad range of black protest,â symbolized by accomodationists and militants whose activism was shaped by the liberal context of the New Deal (p. 66). In the 1940s and 1950s, black liberation movements won an increasing number of tangible concessions against a volatile Jim Crow segregationist structure. Nonetheless, certain segments of the black liberation struggle felt that these were only token concessions, granted by a white power structure that was ultimately unwilling to concede systematic change. This appears to be one of the main arguments set forth by Rose: elites in tourist-resort cities like Miami will be motivated to do only what is necessary to protect their image and nothing more.

The Struggle emphasizes the period from 1950 to 1968. The first 92 pages take the reader up to 1950, with the last 150 pages discussing themes from these last eighteen years. In fact, the first thirty-five years of Miami history are given particularly short shrift, covered in only twenty-six pages. Chapter 4 addresses political alliances between black activists and liberal Jewish transplants from the North in the context of Cold War hysteria. Chapter 5 and 6 focus on the pivotal role of the NAACP in causes like school and housing desegregation after 1954. There is also a discussion of political gradualism in Floridaâs postwar administration and coverage of a face-off between the NAACP and an anticommunist group. Chapter 7 discusses how the Latinization of Miami after World War II transformed the black civil rights struggle. The eliteâs willingness to profit by catering to dark-skinned, Spanish-speaking tourists while simultaneously denying first-class citizenship to native blacks resulted in an arbitrary racial caste system. Activists leveraged the hypocrisy of this system against image-conscious moderates as a tactic to accelerate social change. This resulted in a Faustian bargain: leaders consented to desegregation to preserve the progressive image, but real change was once again deferred, resulting in the social unrest of the 1980s, when no less than four race riots occurred in Miami.

Chapter 8 explores how modernizing elites and activists collaborated to secure Miamiâs Pan-American reputation as âGateway to the Americas.â Finally, chapter 9 explores how the modern black liberation struggle was shaped by emerging groups: disgruntled Black Power advocates, Liberty City rioters, and Cuban exiles. The latter groupâs privileges in the context of whiteness, Cold War federal aid, the ability to speak Spanish, and their âstaunchly political conservative ideologyâ drove a new wedge between Anglos fleeing the city and the black communities that remained (pp. 244-255).

Above all else, Roseâs *The Struggle* is dedicated to complicating the story of the fight for black freedom in Miami, showing how the many nuances and tensions of Miamiâs black liberation movement disrupted âthe normative narrative of a biracial Southâ (p. 8). By augmenting the standard cast of dramatis personae of civil disobedient radicals and white supremacist racists with moderate black boosters, foreign nationals, Jewish transplants, and conservative Cuban exiles, Rose reminds her readers that the historic battle lines for racial equality in the Deep South were not necessarily drawn according to the one-drop rule. There are sections where Rose juxtaposes dynamic leaders in the black liberation struggle with different political outlooks, such as the accomodationist John Culmer and the militant Sam Solomon. These moments are exceptional. Rose does justice to the viewpoints of both her subjects without taking sides. In doing so, she demonstrates the âmultifaceted forms of struggle for racial empowermentâ (p. 5). Moreover, Rose does not downplay interethnic or intraracial tensions. Instead, she sees them as opportunities to be honest about the complexity of struggles for social justice in a multiethnic city.

One of the downsides to *The Struggle*, however, is there remains a lack of nuance in regard to segregationists and non-allies. Rose assumes that her readers will understand where the prejudices of white boosters, or black elites like Joe Kershaw, in Miamiâs history originate. Whether Miamiâs racism is formed by a perceived competition for opportunities, by fear or hatred of cultural differences, or by other factors entirely, Rose leaves

this question largely untouched. As a result, the narration is occasionally reduced to a dichotomous battle between good activists and bad elites. The good activists are given all of the wonderful nuance and complexity stated above, while the bad elites are used as a backdrop for the valorization of heroes. When summing up a particular section and restating her thesis, Rose tends to attribute the idea of a tourist progressivism solely to white elites, despite stating elsewhere that black boosters, newspapers, and accomodationists also bought into the assumptions of Miami progressivism. As is sometimes the case with histories written to document the struggle of a particular minority group, *The Struggle* credits oppressed peoples with action when something positive occurs yet depicts them as acted *upon* when something negative occurs.

Rose ends *The Struggle* by suggesting that complete social change in Miami remains deferred. Black Miamians continue to face such systematic issues as foreclosures, police brutalities, disproportionate incarceration rates, housing discrimination, unequal employment competition, a widening economic gap, and a brain drain to other regions of the New South. In an epilogue that takes the history of the struggle up to 2013, Rose cites the murder of Trayvon Martin by the neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman. To this reviewer, the inclusion of this event symbolizes the way that the otherwise exceptional nuances of *The Struggle* break down at critical moments. Rose cites the incident as an example of the continued brutality against blacks, but brutality by whom? Are we to place Zimmerman in the same camp as the segregationists, supremacists, or civic boosters of Miamiâs history? Are we supposed to place Martin in the same camp as people like Herbert Brooks, who was lynched in the 1920s? In other words, when we think about this recent incident, does Rose want us to see two complex people with nuanced motivations? Or does she want us to see two peopleâone black and one notâwho exemplify a racial binary between the oppressed and the oppressor?

A final point of critique is that *The Struggle* is difficult to read because it conforms to some of the awkward conventions that are typically associated with history dissertations. Recurring abstract concepts like progressive tourist mystique and civic boosterism often stand in for more meaningful discussions of the factors that drive the storyâs antagonists. On this note, the idea of a tourist economy is helpful for understanding why desegregation was initially less violent in Miami than in other New South cities, but its explanatory power is ultimately limited. What other cities, tourist destinations or not, have succeeded in making the kind of systematic changes that Rose suggests the elites and moderates avoided?

On a technical note, *The Struggle* exhibits a writing habit that is symptomatic of our graduate training in history. This habit is the presence of lengthy topic sentences, sometimes five or six lines long, that strive to be impenetrable. In these sentences, the subject and the verb are occasionally separated by as many as three lines. Here is an example: â*The desire of African American leaders* to help cultivate Miamiâs tourist progressive mystique by embracing a civic boosterism that served their own economic interests while fostering interracial conciliatory relations *often resulted* in their decision to distance themselves from black foreigners, particularly transient Bahamians who had less invested than permanent residents or citizens forced to live under oppressive Jim Crow conditionsâ (p. 26).

In this instance, would it be simpler to say â*Some African American leaders wanted* to help cultivate Miamiâs progressive mystique,â and then break the remaining content into additional sentences? Also, does the passive-voice combination of the abstract subject (*desire*) and the qualified verb (*often resulted*) alleviate responsibility from the leaders who actually made the choice to distance themselves? This comment is not intended as a minor critique of writing, though this reviewer accepts that it may be seen that way. Rather, this critique is meant as an opportunity to discuss some of the popular conventions that are encouraged in our genre. These conventions make modern historical works difficult to read, especially for those outside of academia but even for those within its halls.

In 2014, the historian N. D. B Connolly demonstrated in his book *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Making of Jim Crow South Florida* that the clichÃ©d political binary between the racist, conservative capitalist and the radical, liberal reformer was complicated during Miamiâs long struggle for civil rights. Connolly argued that both parties had significant roles to play in processes that hurt the greater black community, such as urban renewal, slum clearance, gentrification, and revitalization. Now, one year later, Rose has complicated the clichÃ©d *racial* binary of activists in Miamiâs long civil rights movement during the same period, 1896 to 1968. *The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami* is an exceptional history in at least two respects: for bestowing on black activists the full range of political tactics, and for using Miami as a case study to demonstrate how race relations have been both supported and undermined by a tri-ethnic border

city dependent upon a tourist economy. On this note, Roseâs chapters on the intersections between the black liberation struggle and the postwar Latinization of Miami will make valuable reading for any graduate seminar.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida

Citation: Devin T. Leigh. Review of Rose, Chanelle N., *The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami: Civil Rights and America's Tourist Paradise, 1896-1968.* H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44878

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.