

# 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.

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In her urban racial history of Miami, *The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami: Civil Rights and America's Tourist Paradise, 1819-1968*, Chanelle N. Rose reminds us that place is never singular. Miami is a southern city, yet it is populated with internal migrants from the United States's Northeast. Miami is an American city, yet it is arguably the capital of the Caribbean if not all of Latin America. Miami is Florida, but not like its northern sister cities of Tallahassee, Jacksonville, and Orlando are Florida. Miami is a tourist paradise, or it is a place much less utopian if you happen to be African American. These various Miamis frame Rose's history of African Americans in this most hybrid of American cities. Early on, Rose contrasts Miami with New South cities, such as Birmingham, Atlanta, and Charleston, but her historical narrative of Miami reminds me most of histories of African American Los Angeles, a city, like Miami, that has never been just black and white.[1] And like Los Angeles, Tijuana, El Paso, Juárez, and San Antonio, Miami is a border city possessing many of the paradoxes that make border cities peculiar places.

One of the ongoing themes of the book is the paradox of race in Miami. This paradox is made visible in a description of a sit-in to desegregate lunch counters in 1959. A female protester of obvious African descent sits down and begins to eat lunch. The manager hesitates and then asks her if she is Puerto Rican. She replies that she is a Negro, a black American. He then informs her that he can no longer serve her. Why? Because no matter how dark her skin, the manager operates under the assumption that she is a Caribbean or Latin American tourist, and tourism was and is the lifeblood of the

city. Hence dark-skinned non-Americans are valued customers, while black Americans are just Negroes or worse.

The city's dependence on tourism created distortions in race relations, and Rose convincingly argues that this dependence elided and elides racial tension, ethnic strife, and abject poverty (p. 249). The "Magic City," as Miami is sometimes called, is so invested in its image as a tropical paradise that it will go to lengths both great and small to protect it. This image consciousness manifests itself in the city's white power structure bending Jim Crow but not actually breaking Jim Crow. In housing, education, and transportation, under pressure from the black community, the white power structure would retreat and then hold fast. They did this to avoid the racial violence that was common in other southern cities in the 1950s and 1960s. As one white businessman noted: "Miami cannot afford a riot... Birmingham can have one and open the steel mills the next day...; Miami could open its hotels the next day, but there wouldn't be anyone in them for about the next five years" (pp. 196-197).

Rose's history of organized resistance against racial injustice is unique in that it chronicles a history of black struggle in a rather unique place. If I have one criticism of the work it is in its intense focus on this place—Miami. Garveyism, the contrasting race theories of W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s are mentioned, but their links to the racial struggle in Miami are never actually fully elaborated upon. They are presented as background. With the exception of chapters on the influx of Cubans into the city starting in 1959, much of the book

feels and reads insular.

But this is not surprising in that Miami is such a particular American city and its particularities offer a rich field for a writer. Rose does an outstanding job of mining the city's racial particularities and in so doing, she illuminates the particularities of race. Her book will be of interest to anyone concerned with the social constructions of race, border towns and border cultures, and the

collective struggle for civil rights in the United States.

Note

[1]. Douglas Flammig, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Josh Sides, *LA City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

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