

{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the
University of Virginia

The Struggle in Black and Brown: African American and Mexican American Relations During the Civil Rights Era

THE STRUGGLE IN

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND MEXICAN AMERICAN
RELATIONS DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

BLACK AND BROWN

Edited and with an introduction by **BRIAN D. BEHNKEN**



Volume 45 (2012)

Reviewed Work(s)

The Struggle in Black and Brown: African American and Mexican American Relations During the Civil Rights Era. Edited by Brian D. Behnken (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011). Pp. 298. Paper, \$35.00.

Positioned in the emerging body of literature on comparative civil rights scholarship, [1] *The Struggle in Black and Brown: African American and Mexican American Relations During the Civil Rights Era*, explores the “instances of unity and disunity” that characterized the Mexican American and African American Civil Rights Movements (16). Too often the history of black and brown relations has been characterized as either impossibly divided or as an overly simplistic union amongst natural allies. Instead, the authors focus on “protest in local contexts” and offer a more textured portrait of black and brown relations that seeks to understand the historical causes for their (dis)unity (10).

Organized chronologically, this edited collection spans the “long Civil Rights Movement” beginning in the 1940s and ending with the election of President Barack Obama. One theme that emerges quickly in the book is Mexicans’ relationship to whiteness, an issue that frequently underlies tensions between Mexican American and African American activists. Behnken, in his essay, “The Movement in the Mirror,” enters this contentious debate by arguing that Mexicans in Texas in the 1950s and early 1960s attempted to racially position themselves as white, a strategy that ultimately failed to get Mexican students admitted into white schools and added to a growing chasm between black and brown communities. After this failure, Behnken argues, Mexicans claimed “brownness,” an identity that did not foreclose organizing with African Americans. However, for African Americans, this came to be seen as a disingenuous attempt to benefit from the successes of the African

American Civil Rights Movement. Alternatively, Lisa Ramos argues in “Not Similar Enough” that “key Mexican American middle class leaders... demonstrated an awareness of the limits of whiteness” and understood that “African American discriminatory experiences shared common traits with their own experiences” (23). Tensions like these abound throughout the text and remind readers that any discussion of black and brown organizing must be both geographically and temporally specific, and, furthermore, that easy paradigms fail to explain the complex, multilayered landscape of black/brown relations.

Perhaps the collection’s greatest success is its ability to move through a wide range of historical approaches and subjects. Methodologically, the collection includes analysis of the cultural history of the “brown-eyed soul” scene of the 1960s and 1970s where a syncretic musical form emerged from the combination of rock, soul, jazz, R&B, country western, Mexican, and Caribbean rhythms (212). Other works in the volume utilize intellectual history to examine the relationship between civil rights leaders George I. Sánchez and Thurgood Marshall. This author, for example, argues that Sánchez “had the ability to look beyond whiteness claims and imagine alternative avenues to equality” (38). Rather than commitment by Mexican Americans to whiteness—as argued by historians such as Neil Foley—it was “practical reasons, historical experiences, and the conservative politics of the time [that] prevented a more formal and lasting union” (38). The breadth and depth of the varied methodological approaches also allows a multivocal expression of black and brown struggles to emerge. The subjects of *The Struggle in Black and Brown* include the aforementioned intellectuals Sánchez and Marshall, civil rights activists and organizers in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Farmworkers Alliance (NFWA), and two women fighting for the safety and well-being of their community in South Central Los Angeles. The authors of this collection refuse stable definitions of black and brown organizing and instead highlight the constantly transforming and highly contingent nature of the relationship between black and brown people.

One criticism of the essays is the failure of many of the authors to engage with the role of the state in creating and maintaining the tension and conflict between Mexican American and African American communities. For example, struggles over resource allocation during the

War on Poverty can only be understood in the context of the rampant discrimination practiced in the distribution of those funds. Through this discriminatory rationing of resources, the state put African Americans and Mexican Americans in competition for already severely limited resources. In turning to the role of the state we might locate new causation for disunity and tension between Mexican American and African American peoples.

Overall, the book is a brilliant collection addressing a fantastic range of issues in the historiography of comparative civil rights. It is a welcome addition for any students of Mexican American, African American, or comparative civil rights history for it addresses some of the most current issues with increasingly innovative methodological approaches.

Cecilia Marquez

University of Virginia

[1] This burgeoning body of literature can be seen in the unpublished dissertations of Lauren Araiza, “For Freedom of Other Men: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the United Farm Workers, 1965-1975” (Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2006); Mark Brilliant, “Color Lines: Civil Rights Struggles on America’s ‘Racial Frontier,’ 1945-1975” (Dissertation, Stanford University, 2002); The editor of *The Struggle in Black and Brown* also offers a new take on comparative civil rights in Brian D. Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011).



Published by

 [View all posts by](#)

Book Reviews

20th century, Civil Rights, Race

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | **THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.**

UP ↑