



White Sand Black Beach: Civil Rights, Public Space, and Miami's Virginia Key

Gregory W. Bush

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“Provides new insights into the torturous legacy of race in Miami through the vantage point of Virginia Beach.”—Paul S. George, author of *Along the Miami River*

“With ample measures of passion and research, Bush has written a remarkable book about a special place: Virginia Key, a reminder of the possibilities of protest and change.”—Gary R. Mormino, author of *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida*

“Illuminates the African American contribution to the ways in which we understand and attach meaning to the notion of public spaces.”—Robert Cassanello, author of *To Render Invisible: Jim Crow and Public Life in New South Jacksonville*

In May 1945, activists staged a “wade-in” at a whites-only beach in Miami, protesting the Jim Crow-era laws that denied blacks access to recreational waterfront areas. Pressured by protestors in this first postwar civil rights demonstration, the Dade County Commission ultimately designated the difficult-to-access Virginia Key as a beach for African Americans. The beach became vitally important to the community, offering a place to congregate with family and friends and to enjoy the natural wonders of the area. It was also a tangible victory in the continuing struggle for civil rights in public space.

As Florida beaches were later desegregated, many viewed Virginia Key as symbolic of an oppressive past and ceased to patronize it. At the same time, white leaders responded to desegregation by decreasing attention to and funding for public spaces in general. The beach was largely ignored and eventually shut down.

In *White Sand Black Beach*, historian and longtime Miami activist Gregory Bush recounts this unique story and the current state of the public waterfront in Miami. Recently environmentalists, community leaders, and civil rights activists have come together to revitalize the beach, and Bush highlights the potential to stimulate civic engagement in public planning processes. While local governments defer to booster and lobbying interests pushing for destination casinos and boat shows, Bush calls for a land ethic that connects people to the local environment. He seeks to shift the local political divisions beyond established interest groups and neoliberalism to a broader vision that simplifies human needs, and reconnects people to fundamental values such as health. A place of fellowship, relaxation, and interaction with nature, this beach, Bush argues, offers a common ground of hope for a better future.

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