Book explores new identity of the South

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DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

Living next door to Tracy Thompson’s former colleague in Marietta, Ga., is a Navy man, who watches Fox News and listens to Rush Limbaugh. The man and his wife, both of whom are White, recently adopted African-American twins.

Life with these kids, Thompson’s friend noted, did not alter his neighbor’s views on health care, social welfare, or any other aspect of American politics. Surprised at first, Thompson concludes that “then again, this is the South; cognitive dissonance is what we do.”

A journalist and a native of Georgia, Thompson takes the measure of Southern identity in the 21st century in “The New Mind of the South.” Its contents, and especially its demography, she claims, are changing; but its constants – evangelical religion and the legacy of slavery – remain the same.

Change is coming

As she examines them, she tries, with mixed success, to express her “deep love and respect for the South without pandering, apologizing, subscribing to racist delusions, or drinking anybody’s Kool-Aid.”

Thompson reminds us that the South has attracted more recent immigrants than any other region of the United States. Hispanics now make up about 5 percent of the population of the Deep South, even if Texas and Florida are not included, and Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee witness more live births from Hispanic mothers than any other states in the nation.

The newcomers will change the South, Thompson predicts, and the South will change them. She isn’t certain that they will call themselves Southerners.

Uncertain future identity

Although Thompson expresses confidence that the characteristics that generate the South’s best self remain largely intact, her account at times leaves readers uncertain about the nature and future of Southern identity.

She indicates that the influence of fundamentalist religion in the region may be waning, for example, and suggests, without much evidence, that a “more global, socially conscious evangelicalism” will replace it. She documents the decline of the rural South and a sorting out of the population into “haves” and “have-nots,” and then makes a mostly faith-based declaration that a sense of community “is a surprisingly hardy thing” that can flourish without being tied to a sense of place.

Treatment of race

Thompson’s treatment of race also raises fascinating questions it doesn’t fully answer. She reminds us that many Southerners persist in re-litigating what they call “The War Between the States.”

In 2010, she reveals, Texas officials mandated that the Inaugural addresses of Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln be given equal time in the social studies curriculum.

She then claims, however, that the 21st-century South “promises to be a region where Americans of different races learn, at last, how to honestly discuss both the present and the past with each other;” that the South “has gone a long way – maybe further than any other region – toward divesting itself of overt racism;” and that social barriers keeping Blacks and Whites “from moving in the same social circles are pretty dead.”

‘Historical amnesia’

Thompson asserts as well that the Black remigration to the South, which began in the 1970s and continues apace, originates in a search for “shared meanings, accents, folkways, and ways of doing things that they had always carried inside.” Blacks who reside in the South, she notes, are a bit more likely to identify as Southerners than Whites.
The continued existence of community, Thompson concludes, depends on memory and an understanding of history. She leaves you wondering how community can co-exist with the “willfully induced historical amnesia” she has identified with the South – but also hoping that her fellow Southerners will unlearn what she’s unlearned, “learn some other things, and have a clearer sense of what they still don’t know.”

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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