UCF professor examines public sphere of South in ‘To Render Invisible’

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DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

Following the election of 1888, the local press in Florida complained that White voters stayed away from the polls while “motley crowds of negroes loaded to the muzzle,” ready to cast Republican ballots had showed up in force. One resident complained that “here in Jacksonville, where ninety-nine hundredths of our visitors and immigrants are white men, two thirds of ‘the guardians of the city’s welfare’ are Negroes.”

They were exaggerating, of course, perhaps with malice aforethought. After the Civil War, as Robert Cassanello, a professor of history at the University of Central Florida reminds us, Blacks in the South did, indeed, exercise their hard-won right to vote, but Whites tried to remove them from the public square.

In response, Cassanello demonstrates, Blacks developed a “counterpublic,” challenging racism at the ballot box, in schools and public transportation, and at the workplace. “This back and forth,” he writes, “epitomized the history of the public sphere and public space” between 1865 and 1920, when Jim Crow laws were firmly in place.

Case study
In “To Render Invisible,” Cassanello uses Jacksonville as a case study to reinforce the conclusion of historians that segregation was implemented in the post-Civil War South following a decades long struggle in which Blacks “were politically assertive and contentious in public life.”

Orange Park, a private school, he reveals, tested the constitutionality of segregation laws in 1896, by putting Black and White children in the same classrooms and White teachers and Black pupils in the same dormitory building.

The superintendent of schools declared that “such commingling of the races as now exists in the south is thoroughly wicked.” A state law banning these practices, however, was not passed and signed by the governor until 1913.

Organized boycotts
Blacks also resisted a 1901 city ordinance separating the races in streetcars. Respectable Blacks, they argued, should not be subjected to the insults of poor, vulgar and racist Whites.

Black passengers refused to obey streetcar conductors. They organized boycotts of public transportation and formed a Black-owned and operated North Jacksonville Line.

They made streetcars an issue in municipal elections. And they challenged legislation in the courts.

Blacks organized labor unions as well. Demanding a 10-hour day, they called a strike at Jacksonville’s lumber mills in 1873. They went out again seven years later, forcing concessions from some mill owners. In 1902, a carpenter’s strike marked the first time Black and White unions acted in concert.

The limited successes achieved by Black workers, Cassanello points out, were due in part to the desire of local management to retain them as sources of cheap labor. Eventually, however, White officials used vagrancy laws to keep Black laborers “in their place.”

‘Geography of freedom’
“To Render Invisible” provides a timely reminder that Blacks in the South were by no means passive bystanders during Reconstruction (1865-1877) – and the years following their virtual abandonment by the Republican Party.

Careful, most of the time, not to pose a direct threat to White political supremacy or to explicitly endorse social
equality between Blacks and Whites, they "practiced the geography of freedom," Cassanello writes.

By the early 20th century, alas, Whites in Jacksonville (and elsewhere) had deployed poll taxes, redrawn ward districts to deprive Black councilmen of their seats, and actively or tacitly encouraged the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, to reclaim the public spaces from Blacks they deemed ignorant, uneducated, superstitious and uppity – and used those spaces to codify a social order grounded in racial supremacy.

A moment had passed, Professor Cassanello concludes, but it was only "a single moment" in the long history of Blacks, insistently "engaging the public sphere in the South."

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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