

KAREEM U. CRAYTON

Meet the New South...

Much has changed in the South, but enough hasn't that more change is needed. And...it's coming.

THE NEW MIND OF THE SOUTH BY TRACY THOMPSON • SIMON & SCHUSTER
2013 • 263 PAGES • \$26

Is “the South” a particular grouping of states, a cultural and social sensibility, or perhaps even a period in history? The most intellectually defensible answer is that the South represents all three concepts—and possibly more. Whatever the best characterization, the South in each form has consistently been inconsistent—seasoned by existential contradictions and swift transitions. Just as crucial as the project of learning what has happened in the South (including how or why it has happened) is a deeper and perhaps unanswerable question about the South: What is *about* to happen?

The New Mind of the South, a provocative work by journalist and Georgia native Tracy Thompson, is an often poignant contemplation of old times and new below the Mason-Dixon Line. The book arrives in the second term of America's first black chief executive, and though every Southern state except Virginia and

KAREEM U. CRAYTON *is a professor at the University of North Carolina Law School. His research focuses on questions about the politics of race, voting rights, and election law. He is a native of Montgomery, Alabama.*

Florida opposed his re-election, major internal shifts in the region's economy, social norms, and essential character are underway. The title explicitly recalls W.J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, a seminal examination of the South's mentality on the issue of race from more than half a century ago. Thompson's claim of a "new mind" invites one to ponder what change has wrought and to muse about what lies ahead.

The New Mind adopts several identities as it explores the elements that define the modern conception of the South. Morphing from journalistic travelogue to family history to social analysis, Thompson's work tries to locate the South's special place in the American psyche. An argument can be made that any modern-day de Tocqueville who wishes to discover the soul of America must begin that search in the South. It accounts for the truly American contribution to music (jazz), most of the political titans of our era (heroes and scoundrels alike), and the current population boom in terms of size and diversity. Thus, Thompson's effort to investigate the place she calls home is also a chance to take stock of America's story and identity. She finds a South resembling the one of her childhood, but now with unfamiliar features and people that defy its conventional views about Southern customs and norms. And while tradition still reigns, this South remains distinct from other conservative parts of America due to its religious, social, and political attitudes. The intriguing possibility is that potent new forces are about to profoundly alter even the most entrenched conflicts in the region.

Thompson brings bona fides to this topic. She came of age as a white teen in the Atlanta area during the 1960s, and her family lineage reaches back to the Civil War era. After leaving for a time to work for several national media outlets, Thompson returned to assess a region that has in some ways been transformed. Each chapter in the book explores different themes, including race, religion, and class, and Thompson encounters a wide range of perspectives in her reporting. The fullness of the South's varied colors is on vivid display, a credit to Thompson's journalistic eye. The stories (including the author's own) provide insight into how people adjust and wrestle with the forces of change in the South.

Despite the changes evident in the region, its past retains a firm grip on the present. Thompson dutifully invokes Faulkner's truism: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The reality of that most peculiar of Southern institutions, slavery, is the point of origin for virtually every dispute and lingering tension about history. The Big Lie is what Thompson calls the romanticized view that (white) Southerners have traditionally imposed on their past. The catechism

is composed of three precepts: 1) Slavery was not the South's motive for seceding from the Union; 2) most people in the South did not own slaves, which only large landholders could afford; and 3) many slaves fought for the Confederacy. Thompson persuasively shows that even a cursory review of the facts reveals the fundamental flaws in each of these notions.

The good news, Thompson announces, is that the project of valorizing the so-called Lost Cause is giving way to a more realistic assessment of slavery's role in Southern heritage. Romantics like the United Daughters of the Confederacy still celebrate the war at their annual conventions. However, slavery is now included as a key reason that Confederate states rebelled. On a more intimate level, there have been efforts, sometimes awkward, to join the multiracial branches of genealogical trees with deep roots in slavery. Thompson writes about the prominent Moncure family of Virginia; the discovery of a black relative, Patricia Moncure Thomas, made for an awkward family reunion, but her acceptance of the invitation indicates some measure of progress. Through these fits and starts, the people in the South are "finally disentangling... from the Confederacy" by starting to face their complicated heritage.

Thompson's image of "salsa with your grits" crystallizes the point that Latinos are drawn to the South's traditions but are not bound by them.

Still, as Thompson notes, "It's hard to confront the legacy of history when you don't know what the history is." The energy once directed to defending and promoting the Big Lie has been diverted toward what Thompson might have called the modern Tall Tale—a similarly imagined account of life in the post-Reconstruction South. The Tall Tale essentially fast-forwards history from the end of Reconstruction to the March on Washington, omitting the entirety of the Jim Crow era. The effect is to willfully erase one of the ugliest and most enduring chapters of Southern history. Thompson interviews John Herbers, who grew up in Brownsville, Tennessee, but only learned of the lynching there after he moved away. "It was blacked out. They didn't want you to know about it." Likewise, white Southerners who came of age during the social turbulence of Jim Crow—with its mass protests, fire hoses, and police dogs—are likely to remember them (if at all) simply as isolated or exceptional events.

In her account of her own top-shelf education at Emory, Thompson admits to having never heard of similar lawless atrocities near Atlanta, offering more evidence of how pervasive the historical amnesia is in the South. But here too, Thompson notes, things are changing. Research efforts are underway to recover

the lost facts of lynchings in several areas. Furthermore, truth and reconciliation groups have emerged in places like Oxford, Mississippi. Fashioned partly on the South African model of promoting a joint recognition of racial subjugation under apartheid, the Southern model has found moderate success in opening a cross-racial dialogue about this shared history.

The changes Thompson documents also extend to the economic front. *The New Mind of the South* explores a region transformed by global economic changes. Gone are the days of the iconic Land of Cotton, when the rural farm served as the building block for the South's agrarian economy. According to Thompson, this era was defined by a strong sense of community in rural counties, as identifiable tracts of land were associated with generations of one's "people," and the small, stable towns strengthened linkages between a given family and its neighbors.

Southern life was transformed with the changing economy. Labor and commodity markets have made cultivating raw goods for profit infeasible for most local farmers. The Mississippi Delta and similar areas have ceased to be agricultural dynamos in the global economy. (The United States is now only the world's third-largest cotton producer, lagging behind China and India.) The results are evident in the vacant farmhouses and untended fields Thompson visits outside of Clarksdale. "[D]istances are long, and there are no meeting places," she notes. The breakdown of once-vibrant farming communities has led to an employment exodus. The few jobs left these days are in agribusiness and casinos. Infrastructure continues to crumble as the middle-class tax base needed to support it further erodes.

Deepening this trend of rural blight, says Thompson, is the absence of educational opportunity in the South. The book repeatedly points out the powerful stream of exiting local talent. The young and ambitious are pursuing opportunities in the cities or in other regions of the country. Thompson reminds us that this pattern of decline is not uniform throughout the South. African Americans and Latinos are in fact relocating to the South in large numbers, but that growth is limited to the already bustling communities and suburbs like the Charlotte and Atlanta metro areas. The rural communities that Thompson is lamenting remain starved of the resources and skills that new and returning populations are bringing to Southern cities. And there are no easy answers. Roosevelt Lee of Clarksdale stated the point bluntly: "We're depending heavily on tourism and the blues [music festivals], but I don't think that's going to get it."

Even the way religion is practiced has changed to some extent. One of Thompson's most vivid encounters occurs on her visit to a predominantly

black Atlanta-area megachurch. While Thompson is clearly intrigued by the spectacle, she can't help but cast a wary eye on this version of the church. Like the disappearing farms, churches are no longer small community meeting places; they are massive enterprises that form national networks. Moreover, as Thompson's experience revealed, a social-movement agenda to address poverty and homelessness was mostly absent. The so-called prosperity gospel of the New South asserts that the good and just should expect to earn rewards now and in the hereafter. One cannot help but mourn the loss of a theology that once focused on organized marches, sit-ins, and boycotts.

As wonderfully rich as Thompson's take is, a more complete account would address what politics has done to reshape the South's landscape. Some parts of *The New Mind* do hint at it. Thompson attributes the decline of family farms and the disappearance of much of the natural landscape to the longstanding coziness between elected officials in the Mississippi Delta and commercial interests. She also notes how entrenched interests contribute to the political gridlock that has stymied innovation in urban communities. For example, the dispersed and sometimes conflicting local governing powers in the metropolitan Atlanta area pose the largest impediment to developing a coherent public transportation strategy that can keep pace with the city's population boom.

But a fuller analysis would have lingered on the political realignment of the region from a unified bloc of Democratic voters to a now-solid Republican stronghold. Today, Republicans hold majorities in every single state legislature in the South and all but one of its governorships (the lone exception is Arkansas). As Thompson would surely agree, race has always played a leading role in crafting the South's political identity. The one-party states that existed during much of the twentieth century enabled Jim Crow to thrive in the South.

Beginning in the 1960s, the one-party system gave way to a new competitive politics, spurred partly by the federal government's resolve to enforce the right to vote. The South has since become the center of the GOP's electoral coalition. The significance of race in this calculus, then as now, cannot be ignored. As newly registered blacks entered the Democratic Party, conservative whites moved out. The GOP's Southern strategy attracted these voters by marrying the South's traditional brand of social conservatism among whites (i.e., distaste for policies that guaranteed racial equality) with the party's existing wariness about federal interference (most of it coming from the courts). The connection has proved successful in national elections for the last five decades, and Democrats have succeeded only in the few areas in the South where African Americans were majorities or forged coalitions with white voters.

Where does this leave the South today? Does it truly have a new mind, or is the legacy of race discrimination still too powerful to shake?

How much of the Old South remains seems the central question in a major case before the Supreme Court. The Court is expected in June to offer its own answers in *Shelby County v. Holder*, the latest challenge to the special provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA). The portion of the Act at issue requires federal review of new voting laws in certain states (mostly in the South) with a sustained pattern of discriminatory practices. Proposed changes must receive “preclearance” from the Justice Department before being enforced; states must show the changes have neither the purpose nor likely effect of denying voting rights to nonwhite citizens.

Shelby County, Alabama, has asked the Court to strike down the statute, telling its version of the Tall Tale. The county claims that although Alabama and other states were some of the nation’s worst racial offenders in the past, political conditions have fundamentally changed. The justification for addressing the harms with legislation in 1965 cannot be sustained today because severe discrimination in the political system no longer exists in the South. Measures of black registration, voting, and office holding are evidence of good-faith efforts by states to abide by the law.

Shelby County is not alone in questioning the present system. Some academics have framed arguments about the preclearance process with the claim that “Bull Connor is dead,” suggesting that the most overt forms of discrimination are now as extinct as the infamous Birmingham public-safety commissioner who enforced them during the 1960s. But these claims wrongly assume that the discrimination and bigotry among whites that animated the politics of the twentieth-century South somehow disappeared with the adoption of the VRA. Most surveys report that racial bias remains more pronounced among white voters in states covered by Section 5 than elsewhere. In both state and national elections, white voters in covered areas register consistently higher levels of racially polarized voting; even taking partisanship into account, white voters in Utah (a very Republican state that is not covered by Section 5) voted for Barack Obama at a higher rate than those in Georgia (a covered state) in 2008. In fact, Alabama leads the nation on almost every one of these metrics of racial discrimination. Thus, Congress, when it renewed the law in 2006, had good reason to doubt that states like Alabama have been sufficiently rehabilitated.

Whatever the Court decides in *Shelby County*, what is certain is that the conflicts about the South’s present and future will continue. Thompson’s book offers a helpful vantage point in marking the progress of the South in the modern

MEET THE NEW SOUTH...

era, even as it rightly shows how much work remains and reserves judgment about what comes next.

That is obviously unknowable—but the author provides an important clue. In North Carolina, Thompson interviews several young Latinos who are trying to harmonize their distinct ethnic traditions with the existing identity of the South. These new Southerners are just as enamored of reading *Gone with the Wind* as they are Isabel Allende. The narrative of the Southern freedom movement inspires them, even while some are unsure of the location of Montgomery.

When these students become voters, they will complicate the racial and class dynamics that have long defined the rules of the South's political game. Lasting and durable coalitions, based on religion or class, are possible for both parties. Thompson's image of "salsa with your grits" nicely crystalizes the point; Latinos are drawn to the South's (culinary, religious, cultural) traditions but are not bound by them. And this group will be a key variable in shaping what comes next.

The Republican Party's much-publicized antipathy toward immigration (particularly where Latinos are concerned) may obscure why the most anti-immigrant bills have passed in Southern legislatures. Texas and Florida's politics are most obviously affected by Latino population growth, but neither state has seen the fastest rate of it. That would be South Carolina, and that trend will not reverse anytime soon. How Latinos of the South will remake this region while embracing its imprint is the most intriguing factor that will define how the South's next chapter unfolds. **D**