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Review Of "Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot And The Reshaping Of American Race Relations" By D. F. Godshalk

Allison Dorsey
Swarthmore College, adorsey1@swarthmore.edu

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Review
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In anticipation of the centennial of the 1906 Atlanta riot, scholars have produced a number of monographs that struggle to put that orgy of racial violence in proper historical context. David Godshalk’s Veiled Visions makes a significant contribution to this literature. “Atlanta’s history,” he argues, “underscores the potential instability of Jim Crow social identities, the multiplicity of intraracial divisions among both blacks and whites, the potentially far-reaching consequences of highly localized struggles, and the numerous opportunities for social change, even in the nadir of American race relations.” Incorporating Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s “politics of respectability” into an analysis of Atlanta’s long-standing political coalition of “white racial moderates” and socially conservative black elites, Godshalk places the riot at the heart of an explanation of why and how American race relations stagnated in racial hostility for the bulk of the twentieth century.

Godshalk notes that white antagonism in the aftermath of the riot “discouraged black elites from forming visible alliances with working class African Americans.” Black leaders chose instead to pursue “elite cooperation across the color line as the surest catalyst for social and racial justice.” Rejecting open racial pride and political militancy as the path to civil rights and equality as argued by Atlanta’s “New Negro Men” (W. E. B. Du Bois, John Hope, and Jesse Max Barber) before the riot, black leaders such as First Congregationalist Church’s Henry Hugh Proctor pursued a patron/client relationship with the white elite as part of a strategy to win support for local black institutions and to stave off racial violence. Atlanta’s black leadership, as well as local and national white elites, embraced Booker T. Washington’s politically conservative rhetoric that discouraged agitation for political rights.

Washington himself, Godshalk argues, stubbornly refused to acknowledge the limits of his accommodationist philosophy in the face of the violence of 1906 (both Atlanta and Brownsville) and the Republican Party’s withdrawal of support for black civil rights. Within the limited range of options occasioned by this pernicious racial climate, Atlanta’s black leaders pursued either Proctor’s top-down exclusionary programs of racial uplift, including self-segregation from working-class blacks, or the “face to face” grassroots activism of Lugenia Burns Hope’s Neighborhood Union. Proctor and other black elites who joined hands with Atlanta’s businessmen and city
boosters (now concerned about the riot’s negative impact upon the
city’s reputation despite their role in fomenting the violence) secured
financial and social support from their white benefactors. This pattern
became part of the city’s racial status quo through the mayoralty of
Andrew Young and beyond, to the disadvantage of black Atlanta’s
growing urban poor.

Well-written and meticulously researched, Godshalk’s work is
persuasive. Scholars may question his premise that Atlanta influ-
enced the national model of race relations more than other moments
of racial violence, though I was more challenged by his timeline. The
divide within the black community was visible prior to the 1906 riot.
Educated and increasingly middle class, men like Proctor began to
critique and withdraw from social contact with the black “lesser sort”
before the violence. Although the black elite would learn paternal-
istic relations with whites would not save them from attack during
the riot (Godshalk’s detailing of armed self-defense on the part of
working-class blacks beautifully highlights the convoluted logic of the
black elite), much of the city’s black leadership recommitted to this
biracial alliance, believing it offered the only hope of freedom from
overt violence and provided a secure niche in which to pursue their
own agenda for racial development. In the end, black elites sold their
heritage of racial solidarity for the pottage of economic advantage
and personal dignity.

Allison Dorsey teaches history at Swarthmore College. She is author of To Build
Our Lives Together: Community Formation in Black Atlanta, 1875-1906 (2004),
and is completing “Listening to Mammy Tales,” an article analyzing white emotional
connections to and recollections of black nannies and domestic servants.

Dangerous Strangers: Minority Newcomers and Criminal Violence in the
Urban West, 1850-2000. By Kevin J. Mullen. (New York: Pal-
grave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. xii, 203. $69.95 cloth.)

Kevin Mullen is to be congratulated for his latest work, Dangerous
Strangers. In it, he tackles a potentially controversial subject. Under-
standing that popular wisdom presumes a connection between im-
migration and crime, Mullen considers to what extent such a nexus
does indeed exist. “Are immigrants in fact responsible for more than
their share of violent crime?” he asks (p. 3). The author’s provoca-
tive reply is sure to unsettle many readers: at least in San Francisco
between 1850 and 2000, immigrants exhibited unusual criminality.
Even more people certainly will find discomfiting Mullen’s further