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Anne C. Rose. *Psychology and Selfhood in the Segregated South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. xiv + 305 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3281-3.

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The Mind and Those Who Studied It in the Segregated South

Perhaps the most disingenuous lines in the U.S. Supreme Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* are these: "We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it." Certainly, the Court's sole dissenting justice, Kentuckian John Marshall Harlan, recognized the legal establishment of caste when he saw it, even if he chose not to dwell on segregation's impact on African Americans' "hearts and minds," as the Warren Court would do in the 1954 *Brown* decision half a century later.[1] At the very core of segregation was whites' desire not only to stamp a badge of inferiority on African Americans but also to make them *feel* it. As Anne C. Rose writes, "Segregation was less a mandate for racial separation than a system of interaction, and its 'unspoken etiquette' ... daily sustained feelings of superiority and inferiority and prescribed behaviors of command or obedience" (p. 9). Socialized into such a system from the earliest days of childhood, black and white southerners alike often sought escape in a "regional propensity to dreaminess," a "disengagement" linked "to the difficulty of facing the truth about race" (p. 13).

In this psychological environment, the developing science of psychology, with its optimistic emphasis on the malleability of the human mind in relation to external stimuli, was a significant "cultural threat" (p. 2). Rose explores that threat along with her central question: "what became of a reform-minded psychological idiom in a society immured in racial injustice, and what happened to its people as a result?" (p. 3). Her well-researched answers make *Psychology and Selfhood in the Segregated South* a fascinating book.

On one level, Rose traces the slow growth of the psychological sciences within the South, making her book a valuable contribution to southern intellectual history. At another level, she argues that the failures of the South's "psychological experts" had larger consequences that extended well beyond the region. "The evidence I offer suggests that it was emotionally easier and socially safer for southern professionals to theorize about racial psychology than to analyze local conditions," she explains (pp. 4-5). One result was to divorce identities perceived as "racial" from their historical origins in the social milieu of southern segregation. "Yet racial behavior is only artificial so far as all culture is humanly made, and race relations in America have been entwined in southern history especially tragically" (p. 5). As Rose demonstrates, "many analysts skimmed over segregation's essential lesson about race: that racial identities and prejudices have deep cultural roots in America that do not yield easily to scientifically guided social adjustments" (p. 185). When such a far-reaching adjustment as the *Brown* decision failed to usher in a new millennium in race relations either in the South or in the nation as a whole, mainstream psychologists had little wisdom to offer. Meanwhile, after *Brown* the South became a "special refuge" for academic dissenters who "transformed the old theory of racial biology into an updated psychology of intelligence" that "acquir[ed] credibility by its surface resemblance to the rising field of genetics" (pp. 9, 15).

Victorian racial biology had shaped southerners' thinking in the days of *Plessy*, where Rose's story begins. Her first chapter examines black and white southerners' conceptions of the mind and mental illness "before psychology"–that is, before the psychological view of the self as indeterminate and psychic struggles as treatable became widespread. Even more than contemporary science, religion was most southerners' touchstone. "Whether southerners conceived the metaphysics of illness in Christian or pagan terms, or both," Rose writes,

"the belief that the mind is subject to forces transcending personal and even physical realms was central to their heritage. The psychological sciences, focused on individuals as discrete entities, would erode this sensibility though not erase it" (p. 24). Indeed, the erosion would be slow, as even well-educated southerners who had the means to seek treatment for mental disturbances tended to self-treat instead. This was true even of Lillian Smith, who embraced psychology's insights wholeheartedly. "Talking about the self, and particularly the identity of her region, seemed to substitute for talking about herself, an indulgence not permitted by her heritage," Rose observes. Similarly, Robert Burgette Johnson, the son of prominent black sociologist Charles S. Johnson, learned to deal with his "depressions" in private (p. 41). His experiences and those of other well-known southerners–Wilbur J. Cash, John Gould Fletcher–are "a reminder of how slowly southerners changed" (p. 43).

Change did come to the region, however, often in the form of migratory scholars, many of them people of color, who arrived in the South to work at various institutions. Rose's biographical sketches of such figures and descriptions of the academic departments, mental hospitals, and psychotherapy practices they developed are compelling. The most important factor in transforming southerners' conceptions of the mind, though, was educational reform. As progressive southerners collaborated with northern philanthropists to build schools and train teachers in the pre-World War II era, child development theory that emphasized nurture gained widespread acceptance. "The implications were radical," Rose argues, although she goes on to emphasize the ways in which racist whites suppressed educational reform's radical potential. Even though development theory "sharpened awareness of the personhood of children across the color line," segregation remained impregnable, and "some whites repeated long-standing doubts about black children … as soon as upgraded segregated schools began to appear" (pp. 52-53).

The radical potential of interwar social science research was also mediated, despite the fact that many scholars studying the South in this period hoped to "persuade the national government to act: a federal anti-lynching bill loomed contentiously behind mob studies, school desegregation became the objective of personality researchers, and New Deal support for disadvantaged American regions, especially the South, was the wish of white southern folk experts" (p. 88). In a chapter that builds on her impressive 2005 *Journal of Southern History* article, "Putting the South on the Psychological Map," Rose surveys the work of a number of well-known social scientists, including Arthur Raper, Charles S. Johnson, John Dollard, Allison Davis, E. Franklin Frazier, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, and Howard Odum.[2] Although Odum's scholarship illustrates whites' racial conservatism most fully, Rose's conclusions about black intellectuals are the most interesting. Black scholars had good reasons to emphasize race over region, Rose argues, including professional ambitions to leave the South as well as concerns about personal safety and individual dislike of segregation's restrictions. Racism was an *American* problem and needed to be tackled politically in national terms. Nonetheless, a valuable tool for understanding the impact of racism in America was lost, Rose insists, when black scholars' "racial analysis lost much of its regional orientation" (p. 89).

Southern distinctiveness remained evident in the immediate post-World War II years, particularly as the psychological sciences took an existential turn that aligned, to some extent, with southerners' tendency toward religious fervor. "The marriage of mind and soul liberated southerners working in the psychological disciplines from the sober mind-set of medicine and the racial questions of sociology," Rose observes, grounding her argument in the book's fourth chapter in three intriguing case studies (p. 118). First, she traces the small but unsettling impact of three scholars who moved south amid the dislocations of the war, who were each members of ethnic and religious minorities, and who each challenged segregation. Second, she explores the experimental practices of the Atlanta Psychiatric Clinic. Breaking away from the Emory School of Medicine, this group of doctors approached therapy as a remarkably engaged relationship through which not only the patient but also the doctor was transformed. Their reassuring and popular message was that mental illness was not a fearsome thing, but "instead curable by trust and freedom" (p. 134). Healing was also the promise of a new generation of southern evangelists, the subject of Rose's third post-World War II case study and an area where her interdisciplinary background in history and religious studies proves especially valuable. Like the Atlanta physicians, Christian healers, the most visible of whom were white Pentecostals, provided hope for psychic well-being. However, they too tended to focus on the individual rather than the social; neither psychiatry nor religious revivalism provided a strong platform for challenging segregation in this period.

As segregation did begin to unravel in the wake of the *Brown* decision, the psychological sciences as practiced in the South became increasingly conservative. Observers around the country "realized that discrimination's sub-

jective effects survived the legal end of Jim Crow, and they argued about why," Rose explains. "Long-standing explanations about the influence of culture on personality came to seem superficial; radical theorists began to talk about social power, and conservative thinkers, about genetics as hidden impediments to personal growth" (p. 153). The angry South of massive resistance proved a refuge for such conservatives, while northerners were particularly influential in reinterpreting race, which was "a social experience in the South, as a personal attribute connected with skin color"–a view that Rose and others committed to historical analysis are bound to find overly simplistic (p. 167). The result of these post-*Brown* intellectual shifts was to cut short the life of southern psychology: "Just when southerners grew accustomed to psychological thinking, professionals in the mental sciences, and not just in the South, turned away from troubling inquiries into southern minds and hearts" (p. 154).

Notes

[1]. Full text of both the *Plessy* and *Brown* decisions can be found at www.ourdocuments.gov.

[2]. Anne C. Rose, "Putting the South on the Psychological Map: The Impact of Region and Race on the Human Sciences during the 1930s," *Journal of Southern History* 71 (May 2005): 321-356.

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