

## Book Review

Anne C. Rose. *Psychology and Selfhood in the Segregated South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 320 pp. Cloth \$47.50.

When the U.S. Supreme Court declared in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case that separate educational facilities were “inherently unequal,” it drew on social science research that linked school segregation to black personality damage. That the *Brown* decision helped to reshape American liberalism, pave the way for psychological interpretations of social problems, and enshrine the therapeutic in postwar American life is well known to historians. That the tensions between psychology, race, and region proved “unusually tangled” (p. 1) in the American South both before and after *Brown* is less well known, and forms the subject of Anne C. Rose’s carefully researched and compelling book.

*Psychology and Selfhood in the Segregated South* charts the strange career of southern psychological thought from the 1896 *Plessy* decision through the post-*Brown* era. Moving between and among multiple literatures—the history of psychology, history of education, and southern intellectual and cultural history—Rose explores the relationship between the emergence of Jim Crow and the growth of the psychological sciences. The “unspeakable difficulties” (p. 5) of racial segregation, she argues, forestalled sustained psychological attention to race relations and helps to explain why the “once-dominant American psychology of personhood did not better serve the South” (p. 15).

Rose begins her analysis with the origins of southern psychology and the slow pace at which it developed at the turn of the century. The common view of the South as a “scientific outpost” (p. 5) reluctant to embrace the social and psychological sciences derived from a number of factors: a longstanding aversion to medical expertise, structural barriers such as widespread poverty, racial inequality, geographical isolation, and a shortage of doctors (p. 32). But Rose suggests that the major reason southerners resisted psychological prescriptions for psychic pain and dislocation is because they preferred religious and metaphysical ones. Even though by 1900, most southern states financed at least one public hospital and private clinics and rest homes proliferated, for most of the twentieth century, southerners relied on more traditional antidotes to mental illness such as prayer, folk cures, and family care. To illustrate this point, Rose describes how southern intellectuals such as W.J. Cash, John Gould Fletcher, Lillian Smith, and Robert Burgette Johnson “had an exceptional acquaintance with psychology” and helped to bring “new ideas to the region,” yet privately battled mental illness (p. 43). Rose juxtaposes these individuals’ “willingness to endure psychic struggles”

against “the growing scientific optimism about diagnosis and cure” (p. 43) in order to illuminate broader patterns of cultural resistance to psychological solutions for human suffering.

Despite these obstacles, psychology slowly migrated to the region through the movement of individuals and the transmission of ideas. Psychology and the science of self-knowledge came to the South through a variety of mechanisms: philosophers, psychiatrists, sociologists, and psychologists, both black and white, pushed the boundaries of porous disciplinary lines in academic settings and in the field, while everyday southern professionals—faith healers, social workers, and teachers—reshaped attitudes through their work in religious revivals, black communities, and schools throughout the South. Indeed, it was through education, Rose argues, that psychological thought and practice gained a foothold in southern life.

Education reform and the northern philanthropy that supported it “carried up to date psychological ideas southward” and served as the leading conduit for the transmission of psychological knowledge in the South (p. 51). Northern philanthropists and southern education reformers drew upon progressive education and child development to advance an environmentally contingent and malleable, rather than biologically fixed and immutable, theory of the self. Jackson Davis, a field agent for the General Education Board, applied a “northern” view of the plasticity of childhood to the work of southern education reform and conceived “every child an object of value,” regardless of race (p. 52). Black and white teachers were trained in child psychology and, however crudely interpreted and applied, these theories changed southern attitudes about the possibilities of psychological progress. Working within the constraints of a segregated society without ever challenging it, education reformers redirected social scientific thought toward the prevention of emotional maladjustment and claimed the inner life of the child as a worthy area of examination. For the first time, Rose argues, “southerners came to value the child’s personality in the process of improving their schools” (p. 67).

At the same time that psychology migrated southward via school reform, it also became institutionalized in higher education through northern philanthropists’ funding of academic psychiatry. During the 1920s, the Rockefeller Foundation and the General Education Board, for example, funded the expansion of the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine and the historically black Meharry Medical College in Nashville to help develop psychiatry as a medical specialty in the south. Reformers, however, remained less sanguine about the possibilities of psychiatric advancement. The esoteric nature of the field, cultural resistance to medical expertise, religious differences, and racism limited its reach. At the same time that psychology and child study could “stir

optimism about progress,” academic psychiatry was “restrained by overtones of disorder and fatalism” (p. 86). Throughout the interwar years, Rose concludes, psychological thinking would consequently be cast in educational terms in the name of therapeutic progress and reform.

Southern field studies probing the intersection of psychology, sociology, and race continued to generate the support of northern philanthropists in the interwar years. Influenced by the work of Robert Park, W. I. Thomas, and the Chicago School of Sociology, black and white social scientists such as Harry Odum, Charles Johnson, Allison Davis, and John Dollard focused their studies on folk cultures, personality development, and group behavior (p. 88). This part of the book will be familiar territory to scholars of race and the social sciences: the Clarks’ doll studies, E. Franklin Frazier’s *Negro Youth at the Crossways* (1940), and Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey’s *The Mark of Oppression* (1951) forged a racialized psychological framework that connected segregation and discrimination with black personality damage. During the middle of the twentieth century and well beyond, Rose argues liberal social scientists could study black pathology while avoiding any direct confrontation with “white perversion” (p. 94) and its implications for southern racial equality.

The decades-long fight for racial justice and desegregation turned the school into the key “battleground . . . for contentions over racial distinctions” that endured long after *Brown* (p. 154). Expert debates over the psychic promise and peril of desegregation endured. While noted Harvard child psychiatrist Robert Coles rejected the idea of innate black pathology and viewed desegregation as “a problem in human development” that pointed toward social progress (p. 159), African-American psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint remained far less hopeful. Rose concludes that *Brown* helped usher in a new “science of the mind” that was steeped in the liberal promise of therapeutic progress but was, ultimately, checked by the lingering power of racial prejudice.

Anne Rose makes an important contribution to our understanding of race, region, and the psychological sciences in the twentieth century, and this book will be of interest to social, cultural, educational, and intellectual historians. Future research will need to reconcile Rose’s portrayal of the region as a “complex geographic subculture” (p. 3) with more recent work in southern history, which aims to transcend regional boundaries and rethink the distinctiveness, the peculiarities, indeed the very “exceptionalism” of the American South.