

INTRODUCTION THE PURSUIT OF SELFHOOD
IN THE SEGREGATED SOUTH

The sciences of the mind arguably served Western culture in the twentieth century as the chosen means of self-knowledge. Inquiries into human nature stretching back to the Bible, filled with insights about motivation and behavior, bore a kinship to modern psychology, and beginning with the Enlightenment, philosophical debates about cognition and scientific investigations of racial temperaments offered secular terms for reflection about identity as well. These enduring conversations converged around 1900 in a fascination with the self, newly conceived. This person was individualized and indeterminate. Not wholly fixed by a God-given or racial nature, every human being seemed to possess an elusive subjectivity affected by circumstances. In their own ways, the era's medical psychiatry, experimental psychology, and psychotherapy acknowledged a malleable personality.¹

Early optimism that the psyche might be explained and repaired by means of these premises, and society restored in the process, has faded. The thought that we might adjust our social environments to secure private well-being seems almost quaint. Nonetheless, the psychological disciplines as we know them began precisely with excited attention to a self in flux and in context, and the passing of this mood was no simple matter of scientific progress. Social outcomes tested psychological ideas, and in America, the struggle between the new mental sciences and regional mores was unusually tangled in the segregated South.

The rise of the scientific study of selfhood and the establishment of legal segregation were nearly simultaneous, and their relationship was both natural and problematic. “From about 1888 to 1895 a wave of laboratory-founding swept over America,” recalled one historian of experimental psychology, at the same time that massive humanistic works such as William James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence* (1904) appeared in print.² In 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* gave federal sanction to the separation of the races in public places. It is easier to grasp the conflict between psychology’s expansive temper and segregation’s restrictions than to discern the pair’s subtler kinship. Although psychological ideas have been adapted to serve many political masters, the early American field celebrated individual development in a flexible environment. On the surface, segregation struck a similar note by endorsing the races’ autonomy. Yet the deeper aim of Jim Crow was the preservation of mastery and subordination. Hopes for growth and self-fulfillment, as presented by psychologists, posed a cultural threat in a society that made the races unequal.

Psychology and segregation shared a taste for civility, however, and their predilection for quiet social adjustment situates them in the same historical period. Just when well-educated Americans were beginning to turn away from the sweeping canvas of evolutionary struggles to explore the mind’s hidden mechanisms, the nation’s elites endorsed racial policies based more on law and manners than on politics and physical force. Indeed, segregation worked in large measure psychologically: statutes defined identities, but socialization was the means of ensuring compliance.³ The awareness of personality common to psychologists and segregationists does not mean that there was complicity between them. It does make them inhabitants of a single culture, who could and most likely would communicate, as well as clash.

The South was the principal American site of encounter between early psychological ideas and a customary inequality of the races so central to the region’s identity that its prescriptions long defined social behavior. Roughly 90 percent of African Americans in 1900 lived in the former slave states, and even after decades of black exodus, more than half reside there now.⁴ These statistics help establish the South as an essential place for an investigation of how the psychological sciences responded to racial identities and injustices. Our suspicion of cultural essentialism and embrace of a

global perspective, however, make the subject of personality in one region seem little more than a footnote in a provincial tale.

The truth is sadly otherwise: this is everyone's history. Precisely because segregation cannot be separated from southernness and the South was never isolated, how the self was discussed there in a repressive era is no marginal matter. The American South is indeed a complex geographic subculture, and its tragic experience, honor code, and religious conservatism are traits in addition to its racial arrangements that are said to distinguish it. We are fascinated by the region because it includes more than Jim Crow.⁵

Similarly, southern commentary on racial matters has always been part of national and international debates about race and racism. "An interesting aspect of this phase of anti-Negro thought," wrote I. A. Newby in 1965, referring to belief in racial dispositions attributed to biology, "was its acceptance by persons who were little interested in the Negro or what racists called 'the Negro problem,' and even less interested in the popular extremism which that problem generated."⁶ Whether conceived as an endowment of nature or culture, racial identity as an analytical category has commanded the Western imagination. If day-to-day interracial contact had little to do with ideas, the South might not be a promising focus for a study of science and race. Yet it seems unwise to suppose that lifelong intimacy with racial mores made reflection on human nature any less compelling. This thought recommends my subject: what became of a reform-minded psychological idiom in a society immured in racial injustice, and what happened to its people as a result. From this angle, the South's social intricacy and worldwide connections are not liabilities but instead tools to unravel troubling events. Had southerners spoken in a single voice or repelled unfamiliar ideas—had regional identity been less fuzzy—there would be no story worth telling.

This book examines the consequences of the psychological idea of an indeterminate self for the American South between the ratification of racial segregation by *Plessy* and the slow dismantling of social separation in the two decades after *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. It is a history of a specific time and place, and although science, race, and region are all my themes, the principal goal is to explain regional experience. I argue that segregation was responsible for blocking the development of psychological commentary on racial relations articulated by southerners and responsive

to southern culture. In place of the scientific ideal of dispassionate investigation, fear, anger, and distaste stirred by segregation shaped southern discussions of the psyche. Only with great caution did moderates of both races working in psychological fields openly explore their theories' social implications. Many southern black intellectuals, in contrast, quickly saw how valuable an assertion of environmental determinism was for racial reform; those who went north to escape Jim Crow themselves, however, recast the problem of segregation as a generalized racism. Northern philanthropists and researchers brought psychological information southward for many decades, but it was racial reactionaries seeking a conservative haven who were most likely to stay. Although southern universities gradually made commitments to psychological research and teaching, and increasing numbers of patients had access to therapy, public conversations among scientists about the mind in the South, and particularly about the states of mind of contemporary southerners in a racially troubled region, were muffled, abstracted, or strident. Nor was the failure strictly intellectual. In the absence of clear thinking and plain speaking about regional matters, racial inequity continued to affect professional opportunities in the psychological fields and access to mental health care. Americans like to believe that science improves society, but psychological experts in the South stumbled when it came to self-knowledge. Because they declined to analyze region, their work was limited by its problems.

Some readers will object that my charge of evasiveness in southern psychology during segregation mistakes the character of science. General laws are the goal of systematic inquiry, one may argue, and early American social science was especially determined to match natural science's objectivity.⁷ The scope and significance of the *Brown* decision in particular depended on research indicating that racial separation anywhere causes minority children to feel inferior.⁸ So, too, the medical successes of psychotherapy rely on the application of principles to individual cases.

The truth in all these points obscures the fact that science is also empirical. In the period I study, American social science eagerly cast "society as the patient," the title of an article in 1936 in one professional journal.⁹ Southerners equipped with psychological knowledge backed away from this mission when the subject bordered on racial mores. 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 con-

ditions. Their use of abstraction did not mean that they had no practical interests, and their detached style much resembled the wider American scientific habit of seeking to influence public policy by presenting research as broadly truthful. In the South, however, concern with the authority of science worked side by side with the unspeakable difficulties of segregation to restrain regional analysis.

Some of the roots of our current scholarly commonplace that racial categories are culturally constructed lie in this southern penchant for indirection. We speak generally about racial identities, as if self-image may be separated from its historical origins and reform consists of enlightenment. 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. Skimming over regional entanglement risks simplification.

The disinclination to speak concretely about southern racial behavior in an earlier period was by no means the handiwork of southerners only. The South deeply disturbed Americans of the segregation era. It was “the nation’s problem child number one,” declared the Princeton psychologist Hadley Cantril in 1941, because it suffered “retarded cultural development.”¹⁰ Outsiders’ zealous forays into the South to work a cure alternated with widespread distaste for the region and its consequent neglect. I wish to explore American forgetfulness about region, using the historical case of the migration of psychological ideas about personhood, to better apprehend the cultural influence of place and of the South in particular.

To say that intellectuals who otherwise thought long and hard about the development of identity skirted the implications of segregation does not mean that an appreciation of subjectivity failed to take root in the South at all. Over and over, even the most provocative southern views of selfhood circled the subject of racial mores with studied caution. Nonetheless, attentiveness to the latest theories was a necessary precondition of professional reluctance.

A sense of the plasticity of the individual psyche entered the South after 1900 through such activities as school reform, settlement work, veteran care, legal debates, and religious revivalism. These informal routes of intellectual transmission were unusually important because provincialism as a mind-set restrained southern science. The impression of educated northerners and southerners alike that the South was a scientific outpost meant

that no person of ambition could be expected to sacrifice his career for the sake of southern development. Pride or shame, as the case might be, contributed to slow growth. Only 5 southern universities had experimental psychology laboratories in 1929, out of 117 institutions included in a national survey, and the northern specialty training of virtually all southern practitioners of the mental sciences at the time confirms the weakness of professionalism at home. Teachers, social workers, sociologists, and faith healers clearly helped circulate ideas in the South about how people behave and why. White teachers at a Mississippi workshop in 1937 observed their instructor encourage a student's self-confidence in spelling by giving "her simple sentences until she had had success several times," and Tougaloo College made Clifford Beers's classic story of his mental illness, *A Mind That Found Itself*, recommended reading for black teachers a decade later.¹¹

My interpretation centers on examples of psychological interest that reveal how awareness of selfhood figured in public life. Although my strategy includes analyzing professionals in their social contexts, I have not written an institutional history of southern mental hospitals or a disciplinary survey of the psychological specialties in the southern academy.¹² This emphasis on work in the field follows the mood of the psychology of self-culture. No longer did mental disease preoccupy theorists. Whether an investigator pictured identity as a stream of consciousness, product of maturation, or series of behaviors, the interest was normal human nature. On-site observation and psychological tests were preferred methods to assess subjects as close as possible to their everyday circumstances.¹³ The southern professionals I highlight examined ordinary pursuits such as learning, communicating, and healing, all the while, though, skirting the personal consequences of racial segregation.

Indeed, to proceed as if progress in the mental sciences were equivalent to hospital reform or scholarly achievement reinforces a false contrast between an enlightened North and a retrograde South. Concentrating on leading men helps make the new view of identity more concrete, but an emphasis on professionalism also dangerously leads toward the half-truth that southern science was simply backward. At a time when disciplinary boundaries were still permeable, philosophers, sociologists, and psychiatrists were prominent among early architects of psychological thinking of an environmental slant, and the best known were not native southerners:

William James, G. Stanley Hall, and John Dewey, all grounded in philosophy; Franz Boas, Robert Park, and W. E. B. Du Bois, social scientists; and Adolf Meyer and William Alanson White, medical doctors. Of these men only Du Bois, the first African American to complete a doctorate at Harvard, was compelled to accept a southern job, at Atlanta University in 1897. The presumption that a black scholar belonged at a black college, more often than not located in the South, made his migration almost predestined. By the same token, southern-born white men who left a mark on psychological study before World War I, including James Mark Baldwin, John B. Watson, and W. I. Thomas, never returned to the South to work after their graduate training.¹⁴ The North was the place of opportunity.

To be sure, the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, begun in 1904, was the first regional association devoted to investigation of the mind, and its priority might restore the South's image as a pioneering site. A mood of exile dominated its inception, however. The brainchild of a Yale-educated philosopher teaching in Alabama, the organization elected either one of the famous expatriates, Baldwin or Watson, president for half of the first decade, and meetings were held as often in mid-Atlantic cities as in southern states. Since slave times, southern declarations of sectional pride contained notes of doubt about the vitality of the region's high culture, and this self-condemning habit might well have led educated southerners now to seize on the uneven geography of psychological scholarship as the whole truth.¹⁵ But in other ways as important to twentieth-century mental science, the South resembled the rest of the country.

Americans faced limited options for therapy in an atmosphere deeply marked by utopian hopes for cures for many decades after G. Stanley Hall earned the nation's first doctorate in psychology at Harvard in 1878. Although reformers were inclined to present the South's state-run asylums as unusually horrific, care was scarce nearly everywhere. *But for the Grace of God* was the desperate title of a memoir of Georgia's Milledgeville State Hospital around 1950, when only one full-time psychiatrist served the 10,000 patients who made it "the world's largest insane asylum."¹⁶ Data collected in the mid-1930s located four-fifths of public psychiatric clinics for children in just five northern states, however, and not one in a community with a population smaller than 150,000. Wealth was clearly as decisive as region for patients seeking treatment. Le Roy Percy of Birmingham, an attorney, traveled northward to the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic in Baltimore

in search of relief before taking his life with a shotgun at home in 1929.¹⁷ But anyone then living outside a few American cities would similarly travel and pay for private treatment.

Nor was fervency restricted to the proverbial Bible Belt. Authors eager to spread respect for psychological knowledge found consumers ready for a new gospel. Clifford Beers's 1907 account of his recovery from suicidal depression was in its form a conversion narrative. Likening his mood change from despair to "elation" to being "born again," he saw his campaign to prevent mental illness as "an obligation placed upon me by God."¹⁸ Although his mental hygiene movement, centered in New York, was a serious effort to detect emotional problems early in childhood, his own story was pure revival, drawing readers through forty-one printings of *A Mind That Found Itself* by the early 1980s. Across the nation, fascination with mental science's redemptive potential outran practical solutions for the mentally ill.

Racial assumptions insisting on the natural inequalities of biological groups were also articulated more precisely as science outside the South. This evolutionary view attributed fixed intelligence and temperaments to visually distinguishable peoples. It long served as the dominant psychology across the nineteenth-century West and survived, even flourished, in the hands of an intellectual minority at a time when most scholars were being persuaded of the self's flexibility. I. A. Newby again states the irony that "no anti-Negro work ever enjoyed the success of *The Passing of the Great Race*," the grand exposition of the laws of global racial competition issued by Madison Grant in New York in 1916.¹⁹ Scrappy southern polemics, in other words, fell short of more polished efforts at science.

A simple tabulation of a cluster of articles on the mental endowment of the races in scientific journals before World War I indicates that even numerically these studies were not mainly southern. Among researchers who assessed physical variables such as brain size and mixed-race descent, one did his work at Johns Hopkins University, four at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in the District of Columbia, and the last in the Milledgeville hospital. Having access to black patients was as crucial as a southern location to the argument that the races had unequal capacities. The authors' professional mobility confirms the wide acceptance of racial analysis as good science well into the century. Robert Bennett Bean, who measured brains at Johns Hopkins, became chair of the Department of Anatomy at the University of

Virginia in 1916, just one year before E. M. Green, who speculated about psychosis in the black patients at Milledgeville, become superintendent of Pennsylvania's State Hospital for the Insane.²⁰

I argue, however, that advocates of innate racial differences, particularly in the aftermath of the *Brown* decision, embraced the South as a special refuge. In the face of mounting faith in individual potential across Western culture, a vocal cadre of dissenting scholars transformed the old theory of racial biology into an updated psychology of intelligence, and they headed south to teach. What was once a scientific orthodoxy became an outsider's critique, and the catalyst was that northern social behavior could deviate from inherited racial conceptions.

In 1917, for example, near the end of a long career at Clark University, G. Stanley Hall advised an incoming student from Arkansas, Francis C. Sumner, an African American, to give up his plan to study in Germany, because "if you make your study of psychology a practical matter you can be of greatest service to your own people." The white truism that the black mind had a limited capacity and modest needs informed this discouraging remark. Nonetheless, Sumner earned his doctorate at Clark in 1920, becoming the first black American to achieve a Ph.D. in psychology, and he wrote his dissertation on psychoanalysis.²¹ In contrast to Sumner's success at Clark, the University of Georgia awarded its first doctorate in the field to a black student in 1974. Its Department of Psychology had the first laboratory in the Deep South, founded in 1907, and a Cornell-trained scholar born in upstate New York was chair for thirty-five years beginning in 1916.²² In 1959 a white man achieved the first doctorate awarded in psychology. Segregation made the difference in these regional histories of black scholarship, and although it is noteworthy that Georgia's premier public university accepted no black students until 1961, unequal access was not the sole characteristic of Jim Crow that skewed southern responses to new thinking about identity.

It was the psychological mind-set of segregation that most affected how southerners heard developmental ideas about personhood. Segregation was less a mandate for racial separation than a system of interaction, and its "unspoken etiquette," to borrow wording from Melton McLaurin, daily sustained feelings of superiority or inferiority and prescribed behaviors of command or obedience.²³ Although the roots of these interracial dynamics lay in slavery, twentieth-century customs, backed by law, repeated lessons

of pride and shame. In a society where both races were now said to be free, manners silently exposing the lie of democratic professions added a burden of untruthfulness to obligation. It was normative, for example, for a black person to step aside for whites in a crowded place, to go to the back door of a white home, and to be called a diminutive like “uncle” or “auntie” instead of “Mr.” or “Mrs.” You knew you were seriously ill if black family or friends advised you to consult a white doctor. Once at the office, you sat in the Negro waiting room until all the white patients had been seen. Even where there was an inch of breathing space, awareness of race hovered over the smallest decision. In a private car, whites and blacks of the opposite sex almost never rode together in the front seat, although an older black woman well known to a young driver’s white family on occasion sat next to him.²⁴

Members of both races, whether lowly or famous, generally observed these rules for fear of gossip, ostracism, or violence. Our scholarly inclination to depict historical figures as deliberate actors is tested by the spectacle of modern people routinely submitting to expectations that defied true civility. Free agents might be expected to comprehend psychological theories of constructed individuality, but these southerners, white and black, commonly permitted themselves to be restrained by prescription and the emotions that customary practices provoked. Because I offer a historical study of a vexed encounter between a particular science and society, it is worthwhile to pause to examine the mentality of Jim Crow. Memoirs are especially useful to “tell about the South,” to borrow the title of Fred Hobson’s book, which echoes William Faulkner in turn. Combining disclosure and concealment, intimacy and posturing, solitary confession and cultural resonance, reminiscences have suited “the southern rage to explain” in a way that the precision of the mental sciences could not match.²⁵ Literary recollection blends truth telling with apology and a tacit plea for compassion, and southerners have revealed themselves in the medium, to an extent.²⁶

At segregation’s psychological center was the emotional intimacy of the races. When Walter White noted the “sex-obsession” of the white South in his exposé of lynching, *Rope and Faggot* (1929), he implied that miscegenation bore symbolic weight for the tangle of racial relations overall. Self-doubt was the soul-eroding message conveyed to black southerners by demeaning contacts with whites. “It was difficult, virtually impossible, to