

UNDER THE STRAIN OF COLOR

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UNDER THE STRAIN OF COLOR

*Harlem's Lafargue Clinic and the Promise
of an Antiracist Psychiatry*

GABRIEL N. MENDES

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For my father Maxwell Mendes, the Tod Cliftons,
and the Lafargue Clinic patients

In practically all its divergences, American Negro culture is not something independent of general American culture. It is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture.

Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 1944

It does not occur to Myrdal that many of the Negro cultural manifestations which he considers merely reflective might also embody a *rejection* of what he considers “higher values.” . . . It is only partially true that Negroes turn away from white patterns because they are refused participation. There is nothing like distance to create objectivity, and exclusion gives rise to counter values. . . . It will take a deeper science than Myrdal’s—deep as that might be—to analyze what is happening among the masses of Negroes.

Ralph Ellison, “*An American Dilemma*: A Review,” 1944

The Freudians talk about the Id
And bury it below.
But Richard Wright took off the lid
And let us see the woe.

Dr. Fredric Wertham, “Underground,” 1942

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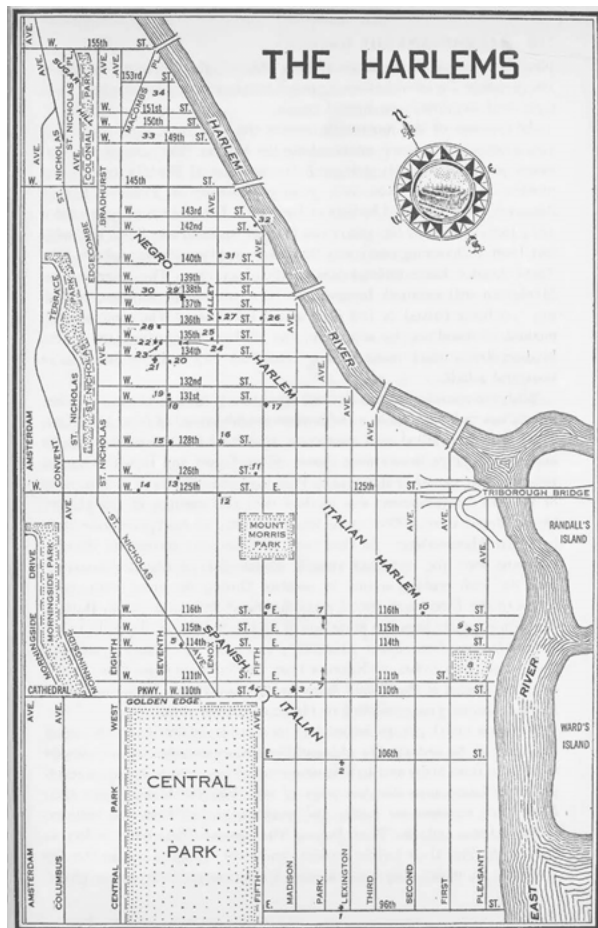
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KEY TO MAP OF THE HARLEMS	
SPANISH HARLEM	
1. Church of St. Francis de Sales	5. Church of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal
2. Church of St. Cecilia	6. Teatro Hispano
3. Iglesia Metodista Episcopal	7. Public Market Place
4. Teatro Latino	
ITALIAN HARLEM	
8. Thomas Jefferson Park	10. Haarlem House
9. Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church	
NEGRO HARLEM	
11. Finnish Hall	23. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
12. Harlem Community Art Center	24. Y.M.C.A., Harlem Branch
13. Kingdom of Father Divine	25. New York Public Library, 135th Street Branch
14. Apollo Theatre	26. Central Harlem Health Center
15. Metropolitan Baptist Church	27. Harlem Hospital
16. Commandment Keepers' Congregation	28. Offices of the New York Urban League
Order of Ethiopian Hebrews	29. Abyssinian Baptist Church
17. Kings Chapel Assembly	30. Strivers' Row
18. Tree of Hope	31. Savoy Ballroom
19. Lafayette Theatre	32. 369th Regiment Armory
20. Offices of the Amsterdam News	33. Dunbar Apartments
21. St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church	34. Harlem River Houses
22. Offices of the New York Age	



Figures 1 and 2. The Harlems. From *New York City Guide*, American Guide Series, Works Progress Administration (New York: Random House, 1939). Copyright © 1939 by the Guilds' Committee of the Federal Writers' Publications Inc.

INTRODUCTION

“A Deeper Science”

At some time or other the conscience of society will awake and remind it that the poor man should have just as much right to assistance for his mind as he now has to the life-saving help offered by surgery; and that the neuroses threaten public health no less than tuberculosis, and can be left as little to the latter to the impotent care of individual members of the community. . . . It may be a long time before the State comes to see these duties as urgent. Present conditions may delay its arrival even longer. Probably these institutions will first be started by private charity. Some time or other, however, it must come to this.

SIGMUND FREUD, “LINES OF ADVANCE IN PSYCHO-ANALYTIC THERAPY,” 1918

On October 11, 1941, the *New York Amsterdam News* ran a headline: “Dick Wright’s Bigger Thomas Comes to Life in Clinton Brewer.” Brewer was a black man who had been convicted in 1923, at the age of eighteen, of stabbing his teenage wife to death. While at the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, he read *Native Son*, Richard Wright’s controversial novel that told the story of Bigger Thomas, a young black Chicagoan who murders two women, one white and one black, and is later executed. Joining many other black male prisoners who felt that Wright had in some way told their own story through the figure of Bigger, Brewer wrote to Wright in hopes that the novelist might be an ally in his effort to be paroled. Impressed by the letter—and by the fact that Brewer had taught himself music

composition—Wright visited him in prison in the winter of 1941 and soon dispatched a letter to the governor of New Jersey asking for his parole.

Time magazine reported on Wright's successful intervention:

The New Jersey State Court of Pardons last week paroled a lifer, Negro Clinton Brewer, because during 19 years in jail he had become a musician. He had written Stampede in G Minor, a jazz tune which sold well on an Okeh record; stood to get an orchestra arranger's job if freed. Convict Brewer, who had killed his wife during a quarrel, lost his speech because of a prison neurosis. Negro Richard Wright, author of *Native Son* (the story of a Negro killer), became interested in Musician Brewer. So did Jazz Pundit John Hammond and Band Leader Count Basie, who recorded Stampede and offered the prisoner a job.¹

As Wright's biographer, Michel Fabre, later explained: "Wright . . . felt convinced, as he told the governor, that Brewer had established through his art an organic social relationship to the world, making a second offense highly unlikely."² He was wrong. After working with the Count Basie Orchestra for three months, Brewer killed Mrs. Wilhelmina Washington, a mother of two, because she refused to marry him. He was quickly arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death.³

That same October, Wright received a copy of Dr. Fredric Wertham's recently published *Dark Legend: A Study in Murder*.⁴ Best remembered today as the author of the anti-comic book polemic *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Wertham was at the time senior psychiatrist of the New York City Department of Hospitals, as well as an increasingly prominent public voice of psychiatry.⁵ He wrote to Wright at the suggestion of the radical journalist Ella Winter, an acquaintance of the novelist who happened to be Wertham's first cousin.⁶ *Dark Legend* presented a psychoanalytic portrait of a young Italian immigrant, Gino, who had killed his mother, ostensibly because she had dishonored his dead father through her promiscuity. Based chiefly on a clinical examination of Gino, the book was also a work of literary analysis, with figures such as Orestes and Hamlet serving as archetypes for Wertham's exploration of the unconscious motivations that contributed to Gino's urge to commit matricide.

Wright read *Dark Legend* and immediately sent an enthusiastic letter to Wertham. "My reactions to Gino, his plight and his crime were so many and varied that it would be futile to attempt to set them down in a letter,"



Figure 3. Richard Wright (*right*) and Count Basie at a recording session in New York City on November 24, 1940. Courtesy of Bettmann / Corbis Images.

he wrote. "It is enough to say that I think it is the most comprehensive psychological statement in relation to contemporary crime that I have come across. Indeed, it is as fascinating as any novel."⁷ Another letter followed, in which Wright asked Wertham to examine Brewer, whom he believed to be psychotic rather than a cold-blooded murderer. Brewer had been a

guest in Wright's home, had sat with him and his wife Ellen for dinner, and news of the second murder had shaken the novelist. Wertham accepted the invitation and examined Brewer. In a later sentencing hearing, Wertham testified that Brewer exhibited a psychotic obsession with control over women and thus was "not in his right mind" at the time of the murder. His testimony was successful; Brewer was spared the death penalty.⁸

The Clinton Brewer case was for Wright and Wertham the genesis of both a personal friendship and a shared commitment to providing psychiatric care to those who had been previously excluded from it: the poor, the oppressed, and, above all, black people. Wright had been interested in the nature of madness for several years, but Brewer's second murder propelled him toward a systematic attempt to understand sources of mental stress and disorder that could lead a person to murderous violence. Wright's search for answers inspired him to participate in practical efforts to address the mental health of those he believed to be in most need of access to treatment and care: black people in the ghettos of northern U.S. cities. He was convinced that humane psychotherapy could alleviate much of the psychic strain that engendered violence against others and oneself. He joined Wertham in the belief that psychotherapy rooted in a recognition of the social realities of American life—of racism, violence, and economic exploitation—could provide a weapon in the quest for racial justice. As Wright and Wertham became closer, their relationship culminated in March 1946 with the founding of the first outpatient mental health clinic in and for the community of Harlem, New York, the Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic.

Under the Strain of Color tells the story of how Richard Wright and Fredric Wertham, along with an interracial group of intellectuals, doctors, clergy, and artists, attempted to establish a progressive model of mental health care as an integral part of the struggle for racial equality in the United States in the early post–World War II era. And it reveals the Lafargue Clinic to be a unique prism through which to navigate the contours of race on the unsteady terrain of the midcentury U.S. urban North.

In and for the Community

Fredric Wertham had long wanted to establish a clinic in New York City that would offer inexpensive psychotherapy to African Americans, along

with anyone else who could not afford psychiatric treatment. Born in Nuremberg, Bavaria, in 1895 to a nonreligious Jewish family, Wertham attended some of the most prestigious universities in Europe, including King's College in London and the Universities of Erlangen and Munich. He received his medical degree in 1921 from the University of Würzburg, and did postgraduate work at the Universities of Paris and Vienna, becoming an assistant at Dr. Emil Kraepelin's famed German Institute for Psychiatric Research, in Munich in 1922. At the end of that year he emigrated to the United States, where he took a position at the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic at Johns Hopkins, working with Dr. Adolf Meyer, America's preeminent psychiatrist at the time. Meyer reputedly coined the term "mental hygiene" around 1910 to refer to the provision of psychiatric services outside of asylums, as a broad type of public mental health program.⁹ While living in Baltimore in the late 1920s, Wertham became acquainted with the renowned lawyer Clarence Darrow. Darrow soon began referring his black clients to Dr. Wertham because he was the only psychiatrist Darrow knew who was sympathetic to examining and treating African Americans. It was then that Wertham became concerned about the lack of medical and mental health services for black Americans. When he went to work in the psychiatric clinic of New York's Court of General Sessions in 1932, he noted very early on the relationship between racism, violence, and mental disorders.¹⁰

There in New York City, Wertham saw repeated examples of discrimination against African Americans who either voluntarily sought psychotherapy or who were committed to institutions such as Bellevue Mental Hospital, where he directed its Mental Hygiene Clinic from 1936 to 1939.¹¹ If the popular 1940 book *Bellevue*, by Lorraine Maynard, is any guide, clinicians hardly regarded black patients in any ward of Bellevue as people possessing a mental makeup akin to that of any of the various "white peoples" who frequented the hospital.¹² According to Maynard, who wrote her tabloid-style, behind-the-scenes exposé with the help of a Bellevue staff doctor named Laurence Miscall,

[Often] it is possible, with a little practice, to estimate a person's general condition by his typically racial response. . . . Most colored folk seem able to accept life as it comes and take trouble in stride. They are apt to make a fine recovery after operation because of this calm, positive flair for living in the moment. They do not get so tense and flurried as other people, and it just

doesn't occur to them to expect the worst. . . . The average negro is often too inured to discomfort for his own good. *Being less physically, mentally or aesthetically sensitive than a white*, what he will stand without a murmur is sometimes amazing to the staff.

Published in the same year as Wright's *Native Son*, this book consistently trafficked in a variety of well-worn stereotypes about how "Polacks," "Hebrews," "Slovaks," "Spaniards," "negros," and other "races" interacted with hospital staff. Perhaps unwittingly, Maynard documented how Bellevue staff used the mark of racial difference as a substitute for a truly therapeutic reckoning with the problem of diagnosis and treatment for both physical and mental traumas and diseases.¹³

Wertham's experiences at Bellevue led him to begin pushing for the establishment of a nondiscriminatory clinic that would address the mental health care needs of African Americans, and he argued that it should be housed within the black community itself, most specifically Harlem. In the late 1930s, Wertham had elicited the interest of the La Guardia administration in a plan to have New York City open and support a mental hygiene clinic in Harlem. But the city never followed through on the plan.¹⁴ When Wertham's attempts to have a city-sponsored clinic foundered, he approached several corporations and philanthropies. He was denied by each of them.

One evening in late 1945, Wertham met for tea with Wright and Earl Brown, the first black staff writer for *Life* magazine.¹⁵ That night, Wertham was again lamenting his inability to secure funding for a Harlem clinic project providing inexpensive psychotherapy to African Americans, along with anyone else who could not afford psychiatric treatment. Sitting in the Gramercy Park apartment in Manhattan that he shared with his wife, Florence Hesketh, Wertham jumped up from his seat and asked his guests, "Do we really need the money?" In the manner that would come to garner him both praise and scorn, allies and enemies, Wertham exclaimed, "Let's begin without money; we'll do our worrying later. All we need is talent, and I can get that. Let those of us who feel the need contribute our services and see if psychiatry cannot be given to the poor."¹⁶

Along with having little money, Wertham, Brown, and Wright had no space in Harlem to establish a clinic. Harlem had been a crowded and congested section of New York for many years, but the result of wartime

migration was a population of about four hundred thousand African Americans living in a space designed to house seventy-five thousand people. On average there were sixteen hundred people per acre, as compared to six hundred per acre on the notoriously overcrowded Lower East Side.¹⁷

Wertham soon found an unlikely home for the clinic, as well as a life-long ally. In the winter of 1946, the Reverend Shelton Hale Bishop, rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church on West 134th Street in Harlem, offered Wertham the use of two rooms in the basement of the church parish house. Bishop had learned of the clinic proposal from the writer Ralph Ellison, who had become associated with Wertham, and of the latest plan through Richard Wright. Bishop was an African American progressive Episcopal priest known for his commitment to social justice and violence-prevention programs, and one of the few prominent clergymen to embrace psychotherapy as a component of his ministry.¹⁸

The Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic opened its doors without much fanfare on March 8, 1946, and it operated every Tuesday and Friday evening until it closed in November 1958. The clinic charged its patients twenty-five cents per visit and fifty cents for testifying in court on their behalf if necessary.¹⁹ It was free, though, for those who could pay nothing. In its first year and a half alone the clinic saw over two thousand patients, both adults and children. Some were simply in need of someone to talk to about their daily problems; some were indeed suffering from neuroses; others were diagnosed with a psychosis. Some were offered medication to alleviate the immediate tension or anxiety they were undergoing, and in some cases patients were quickly referred to hospitals that the staff deemed trustworthy. The clinic's staff was drawn from friends, colleagues, and students of Dr. Wertham, as well as members of the Harlem community. All the staff members offered their services free of charge. At its start, the clinic received only small financial contributions from individual, private donors. It would never garner the type of government or philanthropic funding it needed to develop into a full-time outpatient clinic. (In a letter to Wright, Wertham's wife, Hesketh, wrote, "There has been another rebuff from Marshall Field. I sent you the correspondence. It's really a definite class thing—no money from the rich and every day, practically, a few dollars from the poor."²⁰) With the combination of Reverend Bishop's retirement from St. Philip's in 1957 and "an unforeseen accumulation of deaths and severe illnesses" among staff members in the subsequent year,

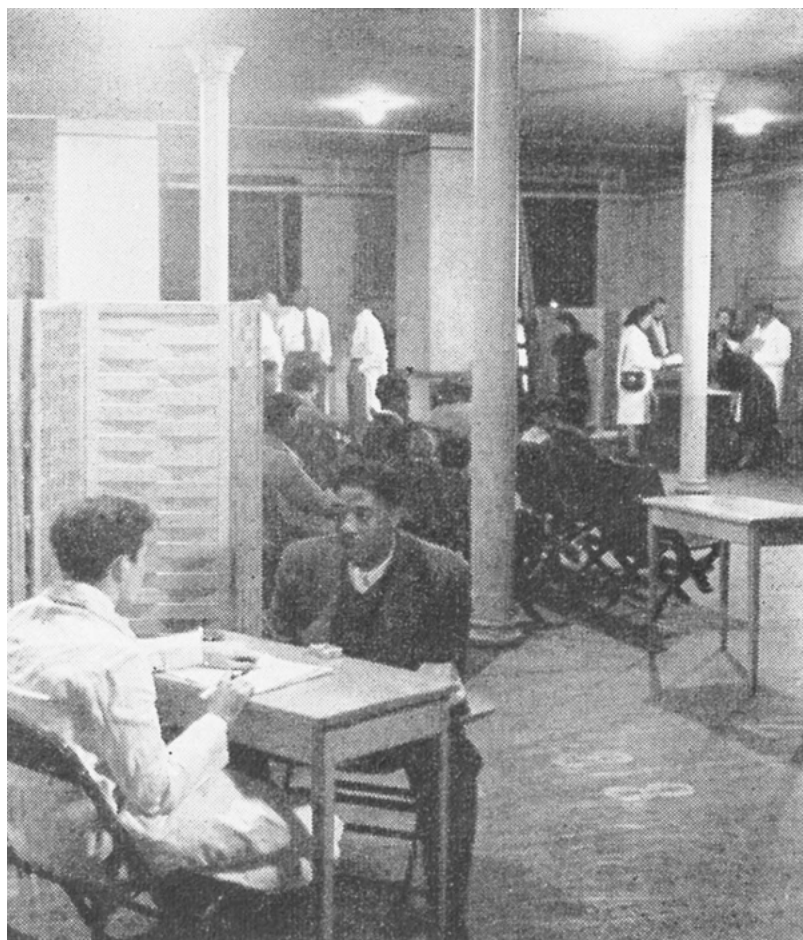


Figure 4. Inside the Lafargue Clinic, St. Philip's Episcopal Church parish house basement, February 1948. Photo by Lisa Larsen.

the Lafargue Clinic announced in December 1958 that it would have to cease operating.²¹

The clinic took its name and its animating philosophy from the Afro-Cuban French socialist Paul Lafargue. Lafargue (1842–1911) was a physician, an activist, and a social theorist, who, according to the clinic brochure, “devoted his whole life to the fight against oppression, prejudice, bigotry and false science.” He also happened to have been married to Karl Marx’s daughter Jenny Laura. A well-known and highly regarded public

speaker, Lafargue also wrote a number of important books, articles, and pamphlets promoting revolutionary socialism. It was in the preface to his polemical book *The Right to Be Lazy* (1883) that he declared, "In the communist society of the future . . . the impulses of men will be given a free rein, for 'all these impulses are by nature good, we have nothing to avoid but their misuse and their excesses,' and they will not be avoided except by their mutual counter-balancing, by the harmonious development of the human organism." While not by any means a vehicle for bringing about the advent of communism, the clinic embodied its founders' embrace of Paul Lafargue's vision of social and psychological liberation.²²

The Lafargue Clinic represented a landmark in both the history of African American encounters with psychiatry and the history of American psychotherapy's reckoning with the social sources of mental disorders.²³ The clinic explicitly incorporated the social experience of racial and class oppression into its diagnostic and therapeutic work. *Under the Strain of Color* shows that in doing so, the clinic was simultaneously a political and scientific gambit, challenging both a racist mental health care system and supposedly color-blind psychiatrists who failed to consider black experiences of oppression in their assessment and treatment of African American patients. The Lafargue Clinic embodied a distinctly radical confrontation of the psychic costs of antiblack oppression. In doing so, it challenged American psychiatry's fundamental orientation, directing it to the social aspects of mental disorders among the oppressed.²⁴

Race, Nation, and Normality

The Lafargue Clinic emerged within a nexus of discourses and institutions in the United States that viewed the mental health of each individual citizen as a matter of grave concern for the body politic. In the wake of the Second World War, American social scientists, policy makers, and social service professionals envisioned a normal American citizen whose personality was under persistent pathogenic threats both psychic and political. This idea of normality was expressed in the psychological language of developing healthy personalities, well-adjusted individuals. A considerable number of American behavioral and social scientists, social service workers, and policy makers, particularly in the North, became concerned about whether black Americans could function as healthy American citizens.