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Under the Strain of Color: Harlem's Lafargue Clinic and the Promise of an Antiracist Psychiatry (Cornell Studies in the History of Psychiatry)

Gabriel N. Mendes

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In *Under the Strain of Color*, Gabriel N. Mendes recaptures the history of a largely forgotten New York City institution that embodied new ways of thinking about mental health, race, and the substance of citizenship. Harlem's Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic was founded in 1946 as both a practical response to the need for low-cost psychotherapy and counseling for black residents (many of whom were recent migrants to the city) and a model for nationwide efforts to address racial disparities in the provision of mental health care in the United States.

The result of a collaboration among the psychiatrist and social critic Dr. Fredric Wertham, the writer Richard Wright, and the clergyman Rev. Shelton Hale Bishop, the clinic emerged in the context of a widespread American concern with the mental health of its citizens. It proved to be more radical than any other contemporary therapeutic institution, however, by incorporating the psychosocial significance of antiblack racism and class oppression into its approach to diagnosis and therapy.

Mendes shows the Lafargue Clinic to have been simultaneously a scientific and political gambit, challenging both a racist mental health care system and supposedly color-blind psychiatrists who failed to consider the consequences of oppression in their assessment and treatment of African American patients. Employing the methods of oral history, archival research, textual analysis, and critical race philosophy, *Under the Strain of Color* contributes to a growing body of scholarship that highlights the interlocking relationships among biomedicine, institutional racism, structural violence, and community health activism.

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