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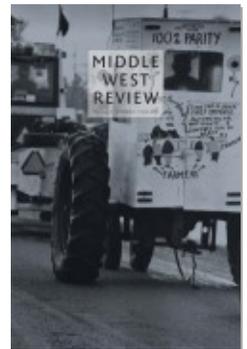
*The Indicted South: Public Criticism, Southern Inferiority,
and the Politics of Whiteness* by Angie Maxwell (review)

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sion” by the South and a “clear gain to the antislavery side” (123). Van Atta, however, concludes the opposite about “who got the better of the deal?” His simple answer: “The South.” Benton’s recollections to the contrary, “few southern leaders ever believed they had actually ‘compromised’ in any serious way.” Instead, most southern slaveholders accepted the free labor semi-encirclement of Missouri, at least, for now” (99). That was because they recognized that lands in which slavery was restricted held little promise. And, in exchange, for this concession, “the slave states got what they wanted most: a victory of state self-determination, and, with that, a temporary repulsing of antislavery nation building designs for the trans-Mississippi West” (100). Only later, as Benton’s memoir attests, did calculations shift and convictions about who won and lost change.

At other points as well, Van Atta stakes out controversial ground, at least as far as recent historiography is concerned. Consider, for example, Van Atta’s portrait of Henry Clay. Reviewing Clay’s handling of the Missouri Crisis and considering it alongside his broader political economic vision, Van Atta rescues the Great Compromiser’s reputation from scholarship that has of late regarded him “with suspicion, underestimated his economic vision, and dismissed him as a mere political opportunist, especially on slavery.” Van Atta insists instead that Clay’s “words and actions must be taken in context, judged not by how opponents saw him or against prevailing values of today” (93).

That last point is one all historians would do well to remember. It is essential if we are to produce balanced histories—and better histories too.

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Angie Maxwell, *The Indicted South: Public Criticism, Southern Inferiority, and the Politics of Whiteness*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

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Psychologists such as Peter Jason Rentfrow already recognize the existence of American regional differences in personality. Historians thinking along the same lines are building on classic works such as W. J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* to inquire about regional psychologies and their historical im-

plications. In *The Indicted South*, Angie Maxwell relies on the theorist Alfred Adler, who first used the phrase “inferiority complex.” Adler maintained that many people who feel inferior and sustain criticism compensate by seeking superiority and recognition, and also by rejecting society. Maxwell argues that outsider criticisms of white southerners during the twentieth century strongly shaped a white southern conservative consciousness on issues ranging from race and religion to ideas about art, science, education, and the role of government.

Maxwell focuses on three examples of external criticism of the South that contributed to this regional psychology and consciousness. The first is the scathing ridicule, exemplified by H. L. Mencken, of southerners during the Scopes trial of 1925. People in Dayton, Tennessee, had invited the trial to their town thinking it might bring good publicity. The result of the widespread criticisms, though, turned moderate churchgoers into vigorous fundamentalists who founded William Jennings Bryan College, which still teaches creationism and promotes a fundamentalist outlook.

The second example treats the Nashville-based writers who became known as the Agrarians, especially John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tate. In response to various criticisms of the South, especially those in the Scopes trial, they published *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, authored Lost Cause biographies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis, and aggressively defended an agrarian South, authoritarian religion, and a critique of industrial capitalism. Most people, however, did not accept their ideas, especially because they advocated a return to a mythic past and were unwilling to deal with slavery and its legacy. According to Maxwell, the Agrarians responded to this rejection by creating a literary theory that became the New Criticism. New Criticism emphasized an almost “fundamentalist” reading of texts that ignored the importance of author and reader, of historical and social context, and focused almost exclusively on the literary merits of the text and its form. This ahistorical hermeneutical approach to the teaching of literature in the United States had a profound influence for a half century, ultimately succumbing to more historically oriented and culturally cued ways of reading that emerged in the 1960s.

Finally, Maxwell turns to Virginia, where, following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the governor appointed a group of legislators known as the Gray Commission to recommend a response to *Brown*. The Commission’s report concerned how to handle a situation if whites abandoned the public schools and proposed tuition vouchers for whites to at-

tend (segregated) private schools, yet ultimately envisioned compliance with federal law. Following criticisms of segregated public education from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the United Nations, though, many white Virginians, including some Gray commissioners, endorsed Massive Resistance, the idea of refusing to abide by the Supreme Court's decision. James J. Kilpatrick, the indefatigable editor of the *Richmond News Leader*, promoted the concept of interposition—the notion that the state could “interpose” itself between the federal government and Virginia citizens to protect those citizens from integration. A resulting radicalism propelled Virginia whites to contemplate shuttering public education in Virginia and to actual closure of some public schools for years.

These identity forming events added dimensions to southern definitions of “whiteness,” giving the concept “overdetermined” meanings. In other words, even when southern conservatives shed racial animus and fear, their southern white cosmology remained—manifested, according to Maxwell, in Tea Party hostility to a more powerful federal government, creationism, “Birther” beliefs that President Obama was not eligible to his elected office, and other ideas that have especially influenced the Republican party. The Republican party, from the 1960s onward, adroitly captured many southern white votes by recognizing and playing upon the same insecurities of white southerners that Maxwell describes.

For scholars of the Midwest or of regionalism generally, Maxwell's study raises important questions. Is there, or has there been, a psychological profile of midwesterners or of a dominant group within the region? If so, what are the chief characteristics and what conditions or events shaped that mentality? How has this psychology endured or evolved over time? To what extent has a midwestern psychology developed from within the region, and to what extent is it defined against other regional or national identities or narratives, or in reaction to ideas or criticisms from people outside the region? The situation in the Midwest is quite different, of course, because for most white Southerners, as Maxwell puts it, their regional identity is “at odds with American national identity” (87). This well-written book, though, provides a fine model for studies of other regions, will serve as a point of comparison, and will be read with interest by a variety of scholars.

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