

**From the Rural South to the Urban North:
The Influence of Interracial Relations in Black and Tans on the 1919
Chicago Race Riot**

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It is a hot July day in Chicago. A young black man, Eugene Williams, steps outside, surrounded by buildings on all sides, the dirt and cement below his feet capturing the sweltering heat. For this seventeen-year-old, relief came in the form of a day out swimming and playing on the beach of Lake Michigan with friends and family. As the sun rose high with the blistering heat on his back, the young man ran into the cool water with his friends. Because he could not swim, he and his friends held onto a makeshift raft. Unbeknownst to the young men, they had drifted into the white section of the beach, swimming across an imaginary line meant to keep the young black boys in their place. A white man on the beach began throwing rocks at the young boys. The young men tried to dodge the rocks until one hit Eugene in the head. He lost his grip on the raft and drowned. His friends dragged his limp, waterlogged body from the water, unable to save their friend. His lifeless brown skin contrasting with the white sandy beach.

Black beach goers in the area immediately called the police, demanding justice for Eugene. White witnesses claimed the white man who threw the rocks did nothing wrong as the boys were on the wrong side of the 'line.' The authorities arrived, looked at Eugene's body on the beach, and refused to arrest the man responsible for his death. The event sparked outrage on both sides of the color line. Black people cried out in anger at the death and injustice that befell young Eugene, and white people countered by justifying the killing by claiming that the boy should have known better. For six days Chicago erupted in racial violence and rioting. After the deaths of 38 people (23 blacks and 15 whites) the state militia ceased the violence.¹

For nearly a century, historians have cited the death of seventeen-year-old Eugene Williams as the catalyst of the 1919 Chicago race riot. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton explain in their book *Black Metropolis* how the daily struggle of establishing and separating black spaces from white spaces along with the need to display white superiority led to the destruction of black homes in 1918. The destruction of black spaces preceded the race riots in 1919, because the animosity between whites

¹ Ken Armstrong, "The 1919 Race Riots," *Chicago Tribune*, 2018.

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and blacks had been building for quite some time.² Eugene Williams' death- and the injustice by the authorities, broke the strained relationship between the white and black communities leading to six days of violence.

Allan Spear, author of *Black Chicago: the Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*, conversely claims that the obvious inferiority of services and housing offered in black neighborhoods, as compared to white neighborhoods, sparked the riot. The Black Belt encompassed approximately 30 blocks of black neighborhoods between 30th and 55th Street, extending from Madison Street to the east and west and State Street to the north and south. Most people living in the Black Belt lived in overcrowded and dilapidated housing. These black neighborhoods also lacked the same access to political and economic means for change, keeping them locked in subordinate living conditions, pushing them towards racial conflict. As Spear states, "So long as whites persisted in confining Negroes to an inferior city within a city, the potential for racial war remained."³ Any attempt to break away from social constructs or pursue rights for black citizens advanced racial tensions between whites and blacks. These tensions came to a head with the death of Eugene Williams.

While Historian Carl Sandburg acknowledges housing issues and poor living conditions, he cites a further explanation of what precipitated the Chicago race riots: labor. Due to the Great Migration, thousands of black people moved to northern cities in hopes of finding better employment opportunities, found in Chicago. Severe restrictions placed on European immigration since the start of the war in 1914 created a demand for laborers. The shortage of white immigrant labor created by the Immigration Act of 1917 opened the door for black Southerners. This was meant to be a temporary situation, but as the war continued, manufacturing plants began to rely more heavily on black labor to permanently fill positions previously held by white immigrants. Many white labor unions actively tried to recruit black workers, but to little avail. Black workers were weary of white labor unions, and at the time no unions existed exclusively for black workers. This meant that employers could hire blacks without having to worry about negotiating with labor unions as they did with white workers, which led to white workers resentment of black workers. White workers reasoned that if black workers were not part of the union and were willing to act as strike

² St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: a Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 65.

³ Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: the Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), viii.

breakers, they were undermining the unions ability to negotiate with their employers during strikes which made them as bad as the employers they were fighting against. Once again whites saw the increase in black workers as an encroachment across racial boundaries. This encroachment only widened the divide between blacks and whites. In *The Chicago Race Riots, July 1919*, Sandburg writes that while the death of Eugene Williams was a defining factor of the race riots, it was the encroachment of blacks in the white workforce that pushed racial tensions to the breaking point.⁴

In his examination of why the riot lasted six days historian William Tuttle advances a slightly different view. While Tuttle agrees with both Spear and Sandburg that white superiority, along with resentment in the labor force, caused the riots, he also attributes the violence to Irish/black animosity. He argues that discrimination by Irish union gangs turned a fight over Eugene Williams's death into a siege of Chicago's South Side. The area around the 26th Street beach, where Eugene Williams was killed, was Irish gang territory. Tuttle notes that on more than one occasion Irish gangs assaulted Eugene Williams and his friends.⁵ In *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, Tuttle claims that the riot would have been contained in a matter of hours if not for the Irish union gangs.

Historians have offered numerous theories about the direct and indirect causes of the 1919 Chicago race riot, but they all agree that segregation and discrimination indisputably factored into the rise of racial tensions that led to the death of Eugene Williams and the subsequent riot. Nonetheless, historians have failed to delve into the significant role that music and racial mixing, specifically within Black and Tans, played in the cause of the 1919 race riots. Black and Tans were interracial music and dance clubs located in black neighborhoods. After work, many blacks and whites headed to the theater, cabarets, and dance halls where they gathered for entertainment and drink.

From the early 1900s, the Black Belt housed numerous Black and Tans where one could explore the impressive musical talents of Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and by 1922, Louis Armstrong. While Chicago did not enforce Jim Crow laws of racial segregation, severe restrictions limited where black people could live and socialize, while white people were free to go wherever they wished. This often included music and dance clubs in black communities. In these Black and Tans, primarily

⁴ Carl Sandburg, *The Chicago Race Riot, July 1919* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1969), 71.

⁵ William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 4.

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located in an entertainment district of South Chicago known as The Stroll, blacks and whites could enjoy a drink and listen to jazz. Black and Tans also provided a rare venue where blacks and whites could gather with relative equality and limited segregation. Walking into a Black and Tan, a patron expected to find an all-black band with areas for both black and white audiences to drink, dance, and listen to jazz. In the 1919 *New York Times* article, "Vice and Politics as Factors in Chicago Riots," reporter E. Frank Gardiner stated that "all-night cabarets were jammed with whites and blacks."⁶

Gardiner claimed that interracial mixing occurred in Black and Tans due to the influence of the Mayor of Chicago, William Hale Thompson. Gardner explained that in 1919, two men controlled the Black Belt-Congressman, Martin B. Madden and city controller, George F. Harding. Harding, a former senator, held immense political sway, and upon his retirement Hale appointed Oscar De Priest to the post. Gardiner claims that because Thompson allowed the transfer of power from Harding to De Priest (a black politician and civil rights advocate), black voters reciprocated by electing Thompson as Mayor. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* described Thompson's relationship to the Black Belt by stating that "he not only is mayor but he is the particular political boss of the Negro vote."⁷ In influencing the vote, the Black Belt gained leverage with Thompson and according to Gardiner, it was this trade of favors that prompted Thompson to allow Black and Tans and other cabarets to operate.

Most middle and upper-class 'decent white society,' viewed Black and Tans as locations of deviant behavior-because of the stigma towards liquor in the days leading up to Prohibition-but whites also saw Black and Tans as sites of racial intermingling. The mere thought of blacks and whites sharing the same space terrified 'decent white society' and conjured thoughts of deviant behavior that could lead to the biggest threat to the white race-miscegenation. This essay examines how the fear of interracial relations and the threat of miscegenation was perceived by whites, specifically Irish workers, in Black and Tan clubs, which inspired an undercurrent of hate that erupted during the 1919 Chicago race riot.

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⁶ E. Frank Gardiner, "Vice and Politics as Factors in Chicago Riots," *New York Times*, 3 August 1919.

⁷ "Blak and Tan," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 August 1920.

During the first Great Migration, which took place between 1915 and 1930, approximately 1.5 million black people migrated from the South northward to cities, such as Chicago and New York. Author James Grossman notes that “from 1916 to 1919, between fifty and seventy thousand black southerners relocated in Chicago, and thousands more passed through the city before moving on to other locations in the North.”⁸ In 1920, 109,000 blacks resided in Chicago and by 1930, 234,000 blacks called Chicago their home. This drastic rise is more dramatic when compared to 1900 when a mere 30,000 blacks inhabited Chicago.⁹ Two defining factors compelled this rise in black migration from southern rural areas to northern urban areas: the economic boom of urban cities and the desire to escape the injustices of the Jim Crow South.¹⁰ Jim Crow refers to a series of laws established in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of 1896 that established the segregation of whites and blacks in the South.

Eugene Williams was born in Georgia, as was his mother. His father John Williams was born in South Carolina.¹¹ Their reasons for migrating to Chicago are uncertain; however, in the early 1900s Georgians grappled with the economic impact of natural disasters, including the flood of 1911 that destroyed crops in rural areas. Between 1914 and 1915, the South experienced further economic setbacks. These setbacks included the infestation of boll weevils in cotton crops. Cotton producers in the South could do little to escape the ravages of the boll weevil, which decimated much of the South’s economy. In 1914, Georgia produced 2.8 million bales of cotton. In 1915, Georgia reported their first case of the boll weevil infestation, and by 1923 no more than 600,000 bales of cotton were produced.¹² Much of the South’s economy was based on farm labor, so when the boll weevil infestation swept through the South, many farm laborers lost their jobs. The song *Far Away Blues* by Clara

⁸ James R Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 4.

⁹ Otis Dudley Duncan and Beverly Duncan, *The Negro Population of Chicago: A Study of Residential Succession* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 21.

¹⁰ Leslie V. Tischauser, *Jim Crow Laws: Landmarks of the American Mosaic* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012) and Jerrold M. Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* (New York: St Martins Griffin, 2002).

¹¹ *Certificate of Death: Eugene Williams*. State of Illinois, Dept of Public Health, Dept of Vital Statistics, Reg. Dist. No. 3104, File No. 25434. Filed 27 September 1919. Informant: John W. Williams, father of deceased.

¹² P.B. Haney, W.J Lewis, and W.R. Lambert, *Cotton Production and the Boll Weevil in Georgia: History, Cost of Control, and Benefits of Eradication*, Research Bulletin no. 428, The Georgia Agricultural Experiment Stations College of Agricultural and Environmental Science (The University of Georgia), reviewed March 2009.

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Smith and Bessie Smith document the correlation between the loss of jobs and migration:

We left our southern homes,
And wandered north to roam,
Like birds, went seekin' a brand new field of corn...
Some of these days we are going far away.¹³

The drastic drop in cotton production and cotton prices is one reason the economy, and therefore employment opportunities, impacted the South so acutely. The living wage in the South was miniscule in comparison to reports of wages offered in the North.

Reports of job opportunities in northern newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* encouraged black Southerners to migrate. Jobs in manufacturing, steel mills, stockyards, and packinghouses were starkly different than working on farms in the South. World War I generated a need for manufacturing, and black migrants were ready and willing to fill that need. Not only were black Southerners drawn in by the promise of jobs, but they soon learned that the living wage in Chicago could be double what they made in the South. Historian James Grossman notes:

Chicago daily wages in 1916 started in the \$2.00-\$2.50 range for men. Women reportedly earned \$2.00 per day as domestics-as much as many earned in a week in the South. By 1919, the average hourly manufacturing wage in Chicago was 48 cents, a rate unheard of in the South.¹⁴

These reports provided black Southerners hope of a better future.

While the promise of a better wage was enough to prompt many black Southerners to migrate, many more stayed in the South, refusing to leave their homes. For many of those that stayed behind, it was not the promise of economic benefits that eventually prompted their migration northward, but the increasing hostilities of white Southerners towards black Southerners that finally urged their migration. In his first-hand account, former Illinois State Representative Corneal Davis recounts the event that prompted for his migration northward:

¹³ Clara Smith and Bessie Smith, *Far Away Blues*, Piano- Fletcher Henderson, Columbia Phonograph Company - 13007D, October 4, 1923.

¹⁴ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 15.

When I came out of the army, all of my people, they had already left Mississippi because...there was a boy in Vicksburg that I used to play with...and one day they picked him up because some white woman said she had been raped or something, and they took that boy who was completely innocent, and they hung him up on a tree, and that's when the black people all started leaving Vicksburg...and so my mother...in her letter to me she said, "Son, we are leaving."¹⁵

Davis's first-hand account demonstrates the significant role that white supremacy played in the South during the Great Migration. The lynching of Davis' former friend coupled with his mother's urgent pleas made it clear that their future was in the North.

Most migrants travelled northward via the railways, where they found an important hub in Chicago.¹⁶ Friends and family who had urged their loved ones to migrate northward, met them at the station. Others arrived with nothing more than a bag or suitcase and had to find their own way around Chicago. Songs like *Travelin' All Alone* tell the story of the emotional cost felt most keenly by migrants who journeyed northward alone with no family or friends to meet them when they arrived:

I'm so weary and all alone
Feel tired like heavy stone
Travelin' travelin all alone
Who will see and who will care
Bout this load that I must bear
Travelin', travelin' all alone.¹⁷

Upon arrival migrants made their way to the South Side of Chicago and settled in the Black Belt. Settling in the Black Belt was not necessarily their choice, as clear housing boundaries existed between white neighborhoods and black neighborhoods. Realtors and leasing agents would not show blacks housing in white neighborhoods. Blacks who were prosperous enough to afford to live in nicer, and therefore,

¹⁵ Timuel D Black, Jr., *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 53.

¹⁶ Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 204.

¹⁷ Billie Holiday, *Travelin' All Alone*, written by J.C. Johnson, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., 1930.

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whiter, neighborhoods, were greeted by angry neighbors who were resistant to having blacks live so close to them. Hostilities over housing were not limited to affluent whites. Poor Irish immigrant communities found themselves backed up against the Black Belt. As the population of the Black Belt swelled the increased need for housing pushed blacks farther into poor Irish neighborhoods. Author Derek Vaillant describes the increasingly tense housing situation by noting, "one effect of residential segregation meant that African Americans...were often embroiled in boundary disputes with hostile white neighbors wishing to limit further expansion of the Black Belt."¹⁸ In *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940*, author Chad Heap describes the racial and social isolation between white and black Chicago. Heap notes that keeping blacks within the Black Belt allowed white Chicagoans a feeling of safety while simultaneously provoking their curiosity about black life. Even though Jim Crow Laws did not apply in Chicago, whites defended the strong racial boundaries they had painstakingly placed about the city.

Limited living spaces in Chicago caused most blacks to reside in the Black Belt. While they found strong ties to the black community, they struggled to find decent housing. Many landlords in the Black Belt found the best way to make money was to split normal size apartments into one-room tenements with practically non-existent living spaces. Given the overwhelming need for housing in the Black Belt, landlords could get away with renting tenements without running water, without electricity, and some even without basic kitchens. The rapid influx of black migrants, "gave rise to overcrowded housing in the black community and to kitchenettes, where apartments were cut up into single rooms, rented without a lease or, ironically, a kitchen, sometimes including a hot plate for cooking."¹⁹ These tenements were in deplorable conditions with little chance of ever seeing improvements by their landlords.

Disparities between whites and blacks extended from housing into education and were increasingly evident in the lack of access to resources such as parks and other outdoor recreational facilities. Authors Otis Dudley Duncan and Beverly Duncan documented that while blacks continued to migrate to Chicago, "no improvement in the school enrollment or the illiteracy of Chicago's Negro population occurred

¹⁸ Derek Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform: Progressivism and Music in Chicago, 1873-1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 174.

¹⁹ Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 23.

during the decade 1910-20.”²⁰ The lack of city resources applied towards the education of the black population was another way in which whites could maintain a separate and superior hold on the Black Belt.

These continual inequalities were evident when the city decided to create parks and outdoor recreational spaces increasingly in white neighborhoods, while black neighborhoods went without. Even though investigators of the Special Park Commission made specific mention of the inadequate park facilities available to residents of the Black Belt, the city persistently and systematically bypassed the Black Belt. Black neighborhoods were already overcrowded due to the imposed limitation in living spaces so the production of outdoor spaces to commune and come together was incredibly important. In 1908, the education and park deficiencies that plagued the Black Belt were again noted by the Special Park Commission who “addressed their concern for the racial imbalances in park recreational facilities,” describing the “friction between white and colored children,” and noted “falling off attendance of the latter. If there is any race problem connected with the playgrounds, it seems to be advisable, for the welfare of the colored children who are our fellow citizens, to give them a playground to themselves, or at least one in which they would feel as free to use as the white children use other grounds.”²¹

Despite the recommendation to build parks in the Black Belt, the city continued to deny blacks access to these spaces. In response to the disparities in housing and resources, the Black Belt created more clubs, cabarets, and dance halls as social spaces for the black community. The creation of these spaces led to the emergence of the Black and Tan.

Interracial Chicago and the Influence of Black and Tans

Housing restrictions made it difficult for black spaces to grow outside of the Black Belt. As the Black Belt expanded in population, and with further development of the South Side, the need for spaces in which blacks could socialize became increasingly important. Making the best of the situation thrust upon them, the Black Belt accessed buildings already designated to them and produced indoor community spaces in the form of social clubs, like the Pekin Theatre. The Pekin Theatre, which changed names throughout the years, was one of the first social clubs to be owned and operated by blacks in the Black Belt. The Pekin offered blacks the opportunity to view theater and vaudeville performances by all-black casts for all-black patrons. Author Amy Absher describes the emergence

²⁰ Dudley Duncan, *The Negro Population of Chicago*, 91.

²¹ Special Park Commissioners, “Annual Report, 1908,” 6.

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of black social clubs: “African Americans were slowly building an autonomous cultural sphere on the South Side where they could be the venue owners, the musicians, and the audience.”²² As social clubs began to grow, the Stroll, located on south State Street between 26th and 39th Streets, emerged as the preeminent place to go for entertainment.

With the progression of theater and music, and the creation of spaces like the Pekin, black musicians flocked to Chicago via railroads and waterways. One avenue in which young musician were able to ply their musical talents in the early twentieth century was on steamboats. Steamboat cruises up and down the Mississippi provided a popular and inexpensive way of experiencing entertainment. Some black musicians played for white crowds for the first time on steamboats. Many steamboat musicians hailed from New Orleans but with the closure of Storyville, the New Orleans vice district, the economic opportunities to be had on steamboats drew black musicians northward.²³

After Storyville was shuttered Louis Armstrong took a job on the famed Streckfus steamers. Streckfus steamers, the leader in steamboat excursions, offered talented musicians like Louis Armstrong the opportunity to gain money and experience before heading northward toward Chicago. While Louis Armstrong possessed a natural talent for music, he did not know how to read music until he worked with famed steamboat band leader, Fate Marable, on the Sidney.²⁴ While playing on the Sidney provided a way for Armstrong to earn money as a musician, performing controlled waltzes and foxtrots for white patrons left Armstrong bored and discontent. Throughout his time on the steamers Armstrong connected with musicians along port cities like St Louis and Cincinnati. These connections provided a way into Chicago’s music scene. In 1916, Chicago welcomed famed cornetist Joe “King” Oliver and a few years later Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong (Oliver’s protégé). In Chicago’s social clubs Armstrong found the freedom to play the improvisational jazz from his youth.

Armstrong was one of an increasing number of blacks that found work in Chicago as a musician. “In the decade between 1920 and 1930, 525 black men and 205 black women described their occupation as musician.”²⁵ Clubs, cabarets,

²² Amy Absher, *The Black Musician and the White City: Race and Music in Chicago, 1900-1967* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2014), 17.

²³ William Howland Kenney, *Jazz on the River* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 71.

²⁴ Kenney, *Jazz on the River*, 75.

²⁵ Leroy Ostransky, *Jazz City: The Impact of our Cities on the Development of Jazz* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1978), 88.

and dance halls teemed with jazz, dance, liquor, and women, everything one needed to have a good time. By the time of the race riot in 1919, over a dozen Black and Tans operated in the Black Belt. "Called, "Black and Tans," nightclubs catered to people from all over the city and gave birth to Chicago as a center of jazz, a nascent form of urban music."²⁶ In these establishments, blacks and whites listened to musicians such as Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver, danced together, and enjoyed illegal liquor.

As the development of the South Side advanced, so did the desire of white bohemians to venture across the racial boundaries that existed between the Black Belt and the remainder of Chicago. On a nightly basis one would find blacks and whites enjoying jazz, ragtime music, and vaudeville entertainment together. Journalist, E. Frank Gardiner describes the scene inside Black and Tans as a place where "jazz bands filled the air with syncopated sound, while in the cabarets whites and blacks intermingled in carousal."²⁷

As whites' interest in jazz and black culture grew, more clubs began opening their doors to white clientele. This invigorated interest in jazz did not stymie the racial tension towards Blacks. Instead whites' increased attention toward black women in particular furthered decent white society's fears of miscegenation and amplified the racial divide between whites and blacks. Blacks expressed this racial tension through music with lyrics like those in (*What did I do to be so*) *Black and Blue*, in which Ethel Waters sings,

Browns and yellors, all have fellers
Gentlemen prefer them light...
I'm white inside, but that don't help my case
Cause I can't hide what is on my face...
My heart is torn. Why was I born?
What did I do to be so black and blue?...
'Cause you're black, folks think you lack
They laugh at you, and scorn you too...
My only sin is in my skin
What did I do to be so black and blue?
Tell me, what did I do?²⁸

²⁶ Pacyga, *Chicago*, 207.

²⁷ Gardiner, "Vice and Politics as Factors in Chicago Riots."

²⁸ Ethel Waters, (*What Did I Do to Be So (Black and Blue)*), written by Harry Brooks, Andy Razaf, and Fats Waller, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner/ Chappell Music, Inc.

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While tensions grew over the Irish's refusal to share housing, economic, and social spaces with blacks, other whites were attracted to black culture. After the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, a mystique arose surrounding the South.²⁹ This created an interest among white bohemians to experience for themselves what it meant to be a black person in the South. For these bohemians, Black and Tans provided a taste of the exotic.

Paintings by Archibald Motley Jr., a black artist who was born in New Orleans but migrated to the South Side of Chicago with his family when he was an infant, captured the exotic appeal of Black and Tans. He spent most of his life in Chicago, and throughout his career created a series of paintings reflecting on the nightlife in Bronzeville, Chicago's South Side, where he documented interracial spaces, including Black and Tans.³⁰ The painting, *Saturday Night*, depicts a cabaret scene in a Black and Tan in which black waiters hurry about the club ready to fulfill the desires of black and white patrons. All eyes are on the lone black performer as she sways back and forth in exaggerated motion, enthralled by the jazz band. Enraptured by her voice and dance, the white bohemians depicted in the painting, found slumming to be the ultimate form of entertainment. Whites such as those featured in Motley's painting ventured into black neighborhoods to gratify their curiosities about life in the Black Belt; allowing them to remain white whilst satiating their voyeuristic needs.

One Black and Tan, The Plantation Café, catered to whites' voyeuristic needs by creating an image of the exotic black South. Inside the Plantation Café, white patrons would amuse their imaginations with pictures of southern plantations beside pictures of Africa. Even the Plantation Café's name spoke to the very desire of whites to connect to romantic notions of the South with southern belles, plantation estates, and the life and affairs of blacks, paying no attention to the horrors of slavery. Author David Grazian explains the duality of the Black and Tan for blacks and whites:

For blacks, the local club represented one of the few public spaces where they might be welcome... But for slumming whites, these black-and-tans promised a chance to experience the so-called primitiveness of black culture... And yet, if the multiracial interaction promised in these nightspots symbolized to whites the fulfillment of an

²⁹ *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. Griffith, San Francisco, 1915, film.

³⁰ Dr. Dennis Raverty, *Archibald Motley*, Illinois Historical Art Project, <http://www.illinoisart.org/archibald-motley-jr>, accessed 4 May 2018.

urban fantasy, to black performers and patrons it often serves as a constant reminder of the rigidity of the American color line...³¹

Black and Tans, and the lack of racial boundaries found therein, freed blacks and whites to not only share the same physical space, but also permitted and encouraged interracial relationships between black men and white women, much to the chagrin of disapproving whites. Song lyrics like those in *You Can't Tell the Difference After Dark* speak to the intermixing of racial boundaries,

I may be brown as a berry, But that's only secondary,
And you can't tell the difference, After dark...
They say that gentlemen, Prefer the blond haired ladies,
Tell me am I out of style, Just because I'm slightly shady?
Wait until I've won you, And my love drops down upon you,
You can't tell the difference, After dark.³²

Fears of racial mixing are also found in art. Artist Archibald Motley Jr. highlights these fears in his painting, *Blues*. In *Blues*, all of the components necessary to strike terror into the minds of whites were present. On the lower left side, a racially mixed jazz band plays and a white clarinetist is performing with a black trumpeter and trombonist. Delving further into the painting a black waiter is clearly visible providing a light skinned, perhaps white, woman with alcohol. Both scenes were provocative to whites, but it is the subject matter in the center of the painting that poses the greatest perceived threat. Larger than the other subjects around them, Motley purposefully directs the eye to the center of the painting where a black man is dancing closely with a light-skinned woman. As she glances at the band she smiles and hugs the waist of her black companion; indicating a level of intimacy uncomfortable for most whites. To the right of the couple is another black man dancing with yet another light-skinned woman.

The site of more than one interracial coupling indicates that interracial mixing in Black and Tans was not an anomaly. Chicago did not have Jim Crow laws, but an interracial relationship between a black man and a white woman, or even the portrayal of this would have prompted

³¹ David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: the Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 59.

³² Alberta Hunter, *You Can't Tell the Difference After Dark*, written by Maceo Parker, ARC Unissued.

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an immediate outcry from middle and upper-class whites and especially from the Irish as they were constantly embattled with blacks. This scene was the epitome of what the Irish feared which only heightened tensions between whites and blacks.

The influence of Prohibition on interracial mixing

Tensions between the white and black populations of Chicago were already high due to a rapidly expanding Black Belt. The animosity that the Irish felt towards blacks escalated because of Black and Tans-as Robin F. Bachin explains:

The issues that shaped the racial segregation of housing also structured leisure relations between the races. Efforts to promote a culture of respectability and eradicate “vice” exposed the ways race, space, and vice came to be intertwined during the Great Migration. These efforts also showed how far it was the intermingling of the races in brothels, saloons, and dance halls that prompted concern among the urban reformers...³³

Temperance societies faulted liquor for the destruction of moral values. The banning of liquor manufacturing was thought to be a solution. Those who chose to engage in drinking in social clubs were considered in need of moral guidance. Cabarets, dance halls, theatres, and Black and Tans that served liquor were therefore also responsible for the downfall of moral and social values. The fact that many of these establishments, like Black and Tans, provided spaces for racial mixing furthered justification and need for progressive reform. These societies felt that prohibition would not only morally reform society but would hinder the spread of racial mixing. One Black and Tan, the Pekin Theatre, was cited by the Chicago Daily Tribune as a place “where bad blacks and bad whites of both sexes gather” to illegally drink, dance, and intermingle in lude behavior.³⁴

While working class Irish did not necessarily support the prohibition of alcohol many adamantly supported the separation of races. During this time in Chicago, most working-class Irish including affluent

³³ Robin F. Bachin, *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 254.

³⁴ “300 arrested in wholesale anti-vice raids: Police Start Series of Drives to Close Up Undesirables,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 22 July 1918.

white citizens, considered any establishment that allowed or promoted the blurring of racial boundaries to be utterly unacceptable. Patrons who frequented these establishments were deviant and perverse individuals who were corrupting good society.

The Chicago Daily Tribune stated, "a crime ring with a mixture of races is a dangerous organization."³⁵ Comments like these pushed forward the idea that places where blacks and whites gather, such as Black and Tans, were breeding grounds for criminal behavior. What the Irish feared most was the incursion of blacks into every facet of their lives including the corruption of bloodlines through interracial mixing. Author Davarian Baldwin describes how newspapers fed these fears when writing about Black and Tans: "One sensational story describes a night at the famous black-owned Pekin Theatre as a miscegenated cauldron of "lawless liquor, sensuous shimmy, solicitous sirens, wrangling waiters, all tints of the racial rainbow...A brown girl sang...Black men with white girls, white men with yellow girls, old, young, all filled with the abandon brought about by illicit whiskey and liquor music." Black and Tans, including the Pekin Theater, were routinely raided by police based on perceived immoral and deviant behavior, even prior to the start of Prohibition in 1920.

The increasing frequency of police raids leading up to the riot of 1919 signaled a change from viewing racial mixing as a moral and social offense to becoming a criminal act. Raids became common practice for police. In one such raid, newspapers reported that "between 800 and 900 men and women, black, tan, and white" were arrested and as "the Negro orchestra took fright all the members dropped their musical instruments in the middle of a jazz selection and ran yelling for the rear door."³⁶ Police officials claimed that raids like this were unbiased and random and that the Pekin just happened to be the place that they decided to raid on that evening. While claiming this raid was random and unbiased, it was fairly common for Black and Tans to be the subject of police observation.

An increase in police observation along with the growing surveillance of blacks by Irish union gangs instilled fear among the black community. Black Chicagoans, including Eugene Williams and his friends, associated Irish union gangs with intimidation and violence. This was not the first time blacks had experienced hostility from Irish workers. From the 1850s Irish workers faced competition for jobs from both blacks and other ethnic whites. Even though the Irish faced the fiercest job competition from other whites they chose to focus their hostility on

³⁵ "Blak and Tan."

³⁶ "Blak and Tan."

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blacks. Historian David Roediger explains, "One obvious reason that the Irish focused so much more forcefully on their sporadic labor competition with Blacks than on their protracted competition with other whites was that Blacks were so much less able to strike back, through either direct action or political action."³⁷ Irish hostilities towards blacks over labor competition continued into the beginning of the twentieth century.

Irish gangs felt that blacks were overrunning their city in all facets, including work and home, and were resentful of blacks taking jobs in the stockyards that they felt belonged to white people. They were already upset that the influx of black migrants pushed the boundaries of the Black Belt further and further into Irish communities. The Irish who lived close to the border of the Black Belt soon found themselves in competition for housing, which only furthered resentment towards blacks. They must, at all costs, keep black people in their place to sustain racial and economic boundaries. Irish gangs such as the "Ragen's Colts" and the "Dirty Dozen" took the opportunity afforded by Eugene's death to agitate the restless atmosphere between whites and blacks. Soon after the beach crowds dispersed, the gangs gathered their members. At the time of the riot the Irish had been focusing their animosity towards blacks for decades. By 1919 the Irish gangs were tired of sharing jobs and housing with blacks and used the event of Eugene Williams death to push for further separation of racial spaces. It appeared to be the perfect time to strike back against blacks.

As the tension between Irish and blacks grew, the police became hyper-focused on Black and Tans and the prevention and regulation of interracial mixing. Increased raids only furthered the strained relations between whites and blacks, until the pressure erupted on July 27, 1919. The Chicago race riot began in the afternoon after seventeen-year-old Eugene Williams drowned in Lake Michigan at the hands of a white man. A day after Eugene Williams death the *Chicago Tribune* ran a cartoon in which the division between whites and blacks is succinctly documented. (figure 6) White men with clenched fists, reside to the left side of a rope with a group of black men and woman residing to the right. In an effort to keep blacks in their place, a white man points to the dividing rope as if to remind the black men and women of the lynching ropes of the South. The color line that divided the South was now visible in the North.

³⁷ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Races and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: New Left Books, 1991): 148.



Figure 6: John T. McCutcheon, *Chicago Tribune*, 28 July 1919, cartoon. (The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago © 2005 Chicago Historical Society.)

An Irish policeman, Daniel Callahan, refused to arrest the white man who threw the rock that killed Eugene, even after pleading from black beach goers, and the appeal of a black policeman who was summoned from 25th Street.³⁸ In August 1919, during an interview with Eugene's friend John Harris, Harris stated that while the two policemen were arguing over whether or not Eugene's killer should be arrested, the boys ran back up to 25th Street, where they alerted other blacks to the incident at the 29th Street beach, propelling them towards the area and into the ensuing arguments.³⁹ Officer Callahan's refusal to arrest the white man responsible for Eugene's death exacerbated the already tense situation. After this, events escalated rapidly.

On the night of July 27th, most blacks chose to stay in their homes in the Black Belt. Knowing that police would do little if anything to help them, many blacks armed themselves in preparation for the gangs. As blacks and whites readied themselves for whatever may come, a calm settled over the city. It was not until the next day that the real terror began when both races came out in force.

The Irish, along with other whites, decided to attack the Black Belt. Many of the black men posted along State Street fought in the army and were trained for war. As whites entered the area, they encountered violence. Most whites entering the Black Belt that evening did so from the safety of speeding cars that they used to shield themselves as they opened fire on blacks. Black snipers opened fire at the speeding cars in return. The atmosphere was rife with disquiet, so much so that through the night they mistakenly fired shots at anyone and anything that came through

³⁸ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 7.

³⁹ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 7.

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the Black Belt, including ambulances, hearses, and merchants. And “when they had no rifles or pistols, snipers used bricks and missiles”.⁴⁰

The blurring of racial boundaries in both their living and working environments caused Irish gangs to resent their black coworkers, prompting the violence of the riot to spill into the work yards. But as a calm broke in the late afternoon of Monday, July 28, 1919, black workers arrived at the stockyards and packinghouses to report for work. Instead of calm they found Irish gangs waiting for them. The gangs surrounded the black workers, brandishing irons, hammers, and anything else that they could find. As soon as they were inside the work gates, black workers were brutally beaten. The few who managed to escape found themselves chased down the streets with no reprieve. One such man, Oscar Dozier, ran for four blocks before the gangs overtook him. They stabbed him multiple times leaving him for dead in the street.⁴¹ Oscar Dozier was just one of 23 blacks who were murdered during the riot. Over 500 others, both black and white, were injured.

By Tuesday, July 29th, as violence against both blacks and whites intensified, police gave up their attempts to keep the peace. By the third day of the riots, people were running out of food. Due to the severity of the rioting, suppliers refused to enter the South Side, which in turn cut off food supplies to blacks. Feeling the pressure from businesses impacted by the loss of black workers and the dwindling food supply, Governor Lowden sent in the militia.

6,200 militia troops descended on Chicago’s South Side with a simple goal-stop all rioters regardless of race. By the sixth day, the militia gained control of the city. While most of Chicago failed to acknowledge the cause of the riot, newspapers took aim at the city, citing that “the lack of stringent adherence to socially constructed views of race ‘laid blame for the race riots at the door of the politicians, who...taught the negroes disrespect for the law’.”⁴² The death of Eugene Williams and the subsequent inaction by the police culminated in what would become a six-day riot where 23 blacks and 15 whites were killed, and dozens of homes in white and black neighborhoods were destroyed.

Conclusion

History was rewritten with the erasure of Eugene’s murder. According to Eugene’s death certificate, the coroner marked his cause of

⁴⁰ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 40.

⁴¹ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 37.

⁴² Gardiner, “Vice and Politics as Factors in Chicago Riots”.

death as “drowning during race riot.”⁴³ The death certificate does not state that Eugene was murdered, but that he drowned. The coroner’s refusal to justly attribute Eugene’s death to acts of racial violence from whites demonstrates the lack of value placed on the life of a young black teenager while acknowledging the inherent desire of whites to maintain strict racial boundaries.

For blacks, the twentieth century began with the hope of a better life through improved economic opportunities, the chance to escape the prejudices of the South, and the possibility of a better future than their ancestors. Their vision of this better life began with a move northward during the Great Migration. With these new opportunities came the idea they had left behind the hardships and prejudices in the South, but they soon realized there was no escape from racism.

In Chicago, black migrants found that while their dreams of higher pay and a more stable economy was achievable, access to fair and decent housing would be a futile pursuit for most. They had not considered the resistance of whites toward black migrants in this new urban environment. Nor did they consider the severity in which whites in the North feared blacks and how this would come to impact their ability to live and work. Many Irish feared that blacks would push them out by taking their jobs, taking their housing, and finally, taking their women which, they saw happening in Black and Tans.

The blurring of racial spaces was even more apparent in Black and Tans. Black and Tans provided a space where racial boundaries were continually and purposefully crossed. Blacks and whites drank together, danced together, and many carried on sexual relations across color lines. While race boundaries outside the Black Belt were constricted, inside, these boundaries were becoming more and more clouded. The growing inability of working-class Irish to make distinct racial boundaries within Black and Tans prompted increased scrutiny and persecution of the Black Belt.

A constant struggle to maintain racial boundaries continued to result in renewed aggressions as challenges to these boundaries arose. The disparities in housing, hardships in the workplace, and the death of Eugene Williams were all factors in the rise of the Chicago race riots. As Author, Robin F. Bachin noted, Eugene’s death “challenged the racial boundaries between public spaces in Chicago, which matched the more elusive racial separation in the workplace and in residential areas that contributed to the rising entrenchment of segregation.”⁴⁴ Ultimately, the

⁴³ *Certificate of Death: Eugene Williams.*

⁴⁴ Bachin, *Building the South Side*, 248.

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resistance to, pursuit of, and fight over racial boundaries in black and white spaces, particularly those of Black and Tans, brought about the death of Eugene Williams and the subsequent 1919 Chicago race riot.

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