

North American Cities, Change and Continuity in the Metropolis.

Swimming Pools, Streets and Sidewalks: Policing the Color Line in St Louis.

Firstly St Louis is interesting because of the clear division between city and county, in 1877 the city became independent of the county, so the city's political boundaries have been determined and fixed for some time. This is unusual, in the United States there are only two other independent cities: Carson City, Nevada and Baltimore, Maryland. The city's independence brings its own problems, chiefly when voters move to the county their tax dollars are lost for good. So the city gets poorer and more deprived....link to The Wire.

St Louis occupies a privileged geographical location at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers in the heartland of the United States. This geographical position not only offers a convergence of rivers but a meeting and mixing of the cultural and social norms of the North, South, East and West. (Some elements of the city might be deemed more attuned to a Southern mentality, other elements seem to belong to the Western, frontier, Gateway of the West ideology, and it is part of my PhD project to unpick which bits are which!).

So, when considering how St Louis approaches race it should not be forgotten that St Louis is also a Southern border-state city in the former slave state of Missouri. The social customs and political beliefs of the South have played a determining factor in parts of St Louis's history. And yet, the city has pretensions as a world-class industrial urban centre. The Industrial make-up, immigration and inner city problems created by the boom and bust of a Northern economy are also all present in St Louis. It has been suggested that the discrimination of blacks (both historically and in the present day) in St Louis is best understood in a regional historical context as the political-economic and cultural confrontation of three societies – southern plantation, western rural, and northern industrial. The cultural commitment to the racism of the Deep South had long-term economic consequences for the city. The extent to which the history of black/white relations is polarised in St Louis suggests that the city almost caricatures race relations in the United States.

The issue of race is indeed never far from the surface of St Louis's political and cultural make-up. Whether it was residential segregated Ordinances (amongst the first in the nation) or the race riots (the first and most violent of the twentieth century) race has

seemed to be the prime factor in prominent (and infamous) national firsts in St Louis. However, the 'southern plantation' attitude does not explain all of St Louis's history and the claim that there is a particular Deep Southern or plantation attitude relies upon a gross generalisation of the region and its history. It is therefore important to also look at the Northern mentality present in St Louis and how that determines who can use what space, and how they should use it. A close study of inner city ghettos and the close quarters in which different ethnicities lived and mixed suggests that class, gender, and race intersected particularly during the city's industrial period.

It is correct, I think, to stress that the significant of St Louis for scholars is found within its social space because it is where contradictions and inconsistencies of ideologies of race, gender and class are taken to their logical conclusions. The work of Joseph Heathcott has added nuance to the view that St Louis exposes the inconsistencies of race. Heathcott argues it is the rather unique position of the city which results in the unevenness of its application of racial ideology and when this haphazard process is added to the pretence of civility present in the North-South border state what results is the presence of ruptures in the political culture that can (and do) encourage resistance and offer alternative racial and ethnic ideologies.

In the time remaining to me I want to talk about two specific incidents in St Louis racial and urban history. The first incident I want to talk about today is the St Louis Swimming Pool Riots. This occurred at the Fairground Park Pool on the 21 June 1949. For a bit of background for you Fairground is an area in St Louis that is now inhabited almost 100% by African Americans. The surrounding neighbourhoods are now also largely African American. It is very poor and rundown; the area is losing residents at an alarming rate. At the turn of the twentieth century however the Fairground neighbourhood was surrounded by affluent white areas, and a little further afield was the middle class black community who lived in an area called The Ville. The jewel in the crown of this loose collection of neighbourhoods was Fairground Park, which had hosted agricultural fairs and horse racing since the early nineteenth century. Placed as it was the Park provided a focal point for interaction (and otherwise) between local white and black communities. In 1909, Fairground Park was dedicated as a public park; in 1912 the city began construction of an open air swimming pool in that public park. It was the first municipal pool in the city of St. Louis, this - the original Fairground Park pool - was the largest in the world. It had a diameter of 440

feet, almost one and a half times the length of a football field (an American football field I should add), and hosted between 10,000 and 12,000 swimmers per day... Those swimmers were all white.

In 1949 the city provided seven indoor swimming pools, four for whites and three for African Americans. The two outdoor pools in city parks were for whites only; for 37 years the pool at Fairground Park provided an escape from the blistering summer heat for its white patrons. In 1949, St. Louis city officials decided to open the pool to the city's black residents in response to a Federal Court's holding that prohibiting blacks from using public golf courses was a violation of the 14th Amendment (this is the Amendment that was adopted as one of the Reconstruction Amendments and addresses citizenship rights and equal protection of the laws, it was bitterly contested by Southern States at the time it was ratified after the Civil War and went on to be instrumental in landmark civil rights cases in the 1950s and beyond). So, the decision made by St Louis city officials (under some Federal duress) is of interest to scholars who are trying to understand how entrenched racial prejudice created and acted out in urban space could be contested via legal means, how this worked and also how it failed.

The legal means which would be used to initiate and protected fully integrated facilities and city space could not always be enforced in the face of racial prejudice. On the opening day for the city's Fairground Park pool, about thirty African American children entered and swam with white children without incident. However, as they were swimming, a group gathered outside of the pool's fence shouting threats at the African American swimmers. Who were these people who posed the threat? The people who were so insistent on maintaining the color line (which marked a strict separation between whites and blacks)? LIFE magazine report on the St Louis riot stated that the African-American swimmers were escorted by the city police 'through a wall of 200 sullen whites' but the gender, age and ethnicity of these sullen whites is lost to us. The wording of that report is worth considering for a moment: the children, having been allowed (however fleetingly) to frolic in the fluid, transparent, colorless waters, were hit by 'a wall', the wall, of the color line, which once passed through would be closed again behind them.

How the wall of whiteness is policed and reinforced and just how solid it is or isn't in certain times and particular places is a subject that fascinates many scholars in American Studies (and beyond). In the particular instance of the Fairground swimming pool conflicting eyewitness reports suggest that either the children were not subject to violence while they were under the police escort, or that despite the police escort white teenagers would periodically strike the black children without police reprisal. It is worth considering who is protecting and enforcing the color line in such eyewitness reports: the police or the crowd of 'sullen whites'? Does the fact that the police officers are escorting the African-American children *away* from the supposedly integrated swimming pool suggest that they are helping to sure up the wall of whiteness, or are they helping to dismantle the color line?

The African American children were safely escorted from the pool. In the early evening witnesses reported that a crowd of several hundred whites had gathered. Looking at the press photographs there does seem to be a preponderance of young white men in the crowds. Only 20 to 30 of the people gathered were African American youths. This is another way in which the color line is 'policed', the sheer numbers of whites escalating their protests quickly and effectively in public space they could freely move around within. Another way that whites policed the color line was to exaggerate their protest, relating an infringement on "their" space, "their" property, with an infringement upon their other privileges (and this is related particularly to gender and sexuality) and all relate to the creation and protection of whiteness. Although I have not been able to find anything definitive in the records I wonder if the nature of swimming (being semi-clad, in the outdoors, with the potential for black and white naked skin to physically touch) helped to enflame the white protesters keen to retain their control of the physical and sexual assumptions surrounding both the white and black race. After all there is no record of riots following the desegregation of the golf course I previously mentioned.

The white protest escalated. White boys with baseball bats surrounded a group of black boys, one of whom was said to have a knife, and beat one of the African American youths until a police officer fell on top of the victim to stop the attack. Here then is the use of another white privilege, the white youths can carry baseball bats whilst the black youth is accused of carrying a knife, blackness is quickly equated to criminality and danger. However, the police officer did protect the black youth and probably saved his life, legally then blacks

were being protected however selectively and against a rising tide of extra-legal activity in the shape of the riots. The riot report suggests the original crowd of several hundred swelled to the thousands as other park users and baseball fans on their way to Sportsman's Park heeded the apparently false cry that a black boy had killed a white youth. By playing off previously held racial prejudice and fear large groups of whites (coming out of a ball game, another white privilege at this time) could be mobilized quickly. The violence that resulted required the involvement of nearly 150 police officers. Relative order was established by 10 o'clock, though crowds did not disperse completely until after midnight. According to the official report only seven people were arrested - three whites and four blacks – despite the fact that of the six people who were seriously injured five were African American.

The Mayor immediately reinstated segregation policies in order to minimize the potential for future violence. He stated,

“there has existed for many years in St. Louis a community policy with respect to public swimming pools, voluntarily complied with by both white and colored citizens. Our white citizens have customarily used the pools conveniently located to them, while the colored citizens have patronized the pools in their neighborhoods. This practice has worked well. St. Louis has become noted for its tolerance and its progress in the field of amicable race relations.”

Clearly the Mayor was appealing for a continuation of the norm: white and African Americans citizens to be separate however unequal their respective housing and facilities might be. The Mayor's reinstated segregation lasted for 12 months. A Federal Court ruling in July 1950 ordered the public pools to be integrated once more, it seems the city officials had lost the desire to push this through themselves and rather waited for Federal enforcement. The pool was integrated and this time without incident, why was this? Within the first year after integration attendance at the Fairground Park Pool decline by 80%. By 1954, the pool was no longer profitable enough to be maintained appropriately, and the city closed it down. Whites had bailed on the swimming pool. Between 1950 and 1960, the population of the city of St. Louis dropped by 107,000 white residents, whilst the number of African American residents increased by 10%. The demographic shift created by white flight from the city began in earnest at the same time that the Fairground Park Pool became an

integrated facility. This might be yet another reason why the riot happened when and where it did; white residents made one last attempt at enforcing their racial privilege upon the city space. Political rhetoric and legal actions having had little effect to quell their long-entrenched fears of the effects of racial integration white residents upped sticks to the suburbs.

It is to the suburbs where I would now like to focus, looking at a very recent (indeed still occurring) events in St Louis racial history which has highlighted how some of the issues surrounding the Fairground Park swimming pool riot have continued into the twenty-first century, and that is the events in Ferguson.

For a few weeks in August this year the world's media attention was focused upon one particular drive, in one particular suburb, in one particular county: Canfield Drive, Ferguson, St Louis County. The fatal shooting of unarmed African-American teenager Michael Brown on the 9th of August by Darren Wilson a white Ferguson police officer sparked vigils, protests and civil disturbance as the largely black community of the impoverished suburb tried to come to terms with what had happened on their doorstep. This was met with an almost militarised response from local police and subsequently the Missouri National Guard.

Eventually television cameras were packed away and reporters moved onto the next story, however nothing in this case has been resolved; Wilson is suspended with full pay whilst the county grand jury continues to deliberate as to whether a crime was committed (and whether there is probable cause that Wilson committed it), and can do so until January 7th 2015. Cries for justice, racial equality and fairness continue to be made in Ferguson and echo around the rest of the United States, for whilst the shooting occurred in one particular place on one particular day there is a growing acknowledgement that Ferguson could happen anywhere in the country, especially in areas where a majority black population is governed and *policed* by a majority white population. The Ferguson case has some tragic similarities with the 2012 fatal shooting of the unarmed African-American Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida and the assault on Rodney King in Los Angeles in the early 1990s which lead to extensive and fatal race riots in that city (and that is to name but two prominent cases that have exposed race relations in post Civil-Rights era of America). Whilst the Ferguson shooting has indeed highlighted widespread and longstanding racial discrimination and

intolerance in the United States it has also focused attention upon distinct parts of St Louis's urban and racial history.

Ferguson is a poor suburb in the county of St Louis. It is populated by a majority of poor African-Americans. African-Americans were a minority in Ferguson until a decade ago when white residents began to move out to suburbs further afield. White flight can happen *within* suburbs. Many of the inner city problems that white residents sought to escape by moving to the suburbs are, it seems to them, being repeated in those very suburbs. Whilst the black population has risen the number of African-Americans in the police force has not: it is worth noting that of the 53 commissioned officers in the Ferguson Police force only 4 are black.

The changing demography of Ferguson also serves as a reminder that suburbs are not exclusively populated by white residents; whilst most of the county is white, Ferguson and neighbouring towns are majority black. There are also pockets of disadvantage in these largely working and middle-income suburbs. The city of St Louis has lost many of its white residents to white flight, but many of its black residents also fled as house prices plummeted and the infrastructure of the city saw chronic lack of investment due to the loss of tax dollars from its former inhabitants. Many black residents of the city of St Louis had also relocated due to the controversial slum clearance of the Mill Creek Valley area of the city, Mill Creek Valley, although it sounds rather agricultural was located in the central corridor of the city, and it had been home to a thriving African-American community: churches, schools, business and a nightlife scene that gave birth to Scott Joplin's jazz and ragtime. The area had long been an area much studied and critiqued by civic improvers (their plans and correspondence provide much of the primary material for my PhD project, they are interesting to me because there are clearly very different ideas circulating in these documents surrounding issues of community, decency, and 'improvement' and I want to investigate who has the right and/or the power to decide what is a decent community, what should it look like and who is in it and who should be excluded?). Anyway, back to Mill Creek Valley which was cleared away in 1959, and this meant that roughly 5,600 families 95% of whom were black had to relocate, and they did so to the North of the city into suburbs like Ferguson. So it should be noted that whilst some people (chiefly white people) chose to live in certain suburbs, some people have been relocated there following long-term housing discrimination and deprivation.

Ferguson is also a reminder that not all suburbs are created equally: Ferguson is no Levittown of the 1950s, lack of investment in housing stock, facilities, shops and businesses means there is little opportunity in Ferguson. As more people move out of Ferguson the poorer it gets.

I would just like to focus upon the actual incident in Ferguson for a moment. A ferocious media campaign followed the death of Michael Brown, in an attempt by local police to justify his shooting. A video emerged of Brown stealing cigarillos from a local convenience store just before midday; five minutes later Brown and his companion were stopped by Officer Darren Wilson, who (at the time) was unaware of Brown's very recent theft, Officer Wilson told the two young men to move off the street. So, a dispute about jaywalking escalated quickly (and this is the point that is in dispute) either Brown tried to grab Wilson's gun so Wilson acting in self-defence shot him, or Brown (following a minor scuffle) surrendered with his hands up "Don't Shoot" and was then shot dead. Clearly there are many points to consider here, such as why are black men being told to move along in their own neighbourhood in the middle of the day, or at any time for that matter? The right for a black person to movement, to walk along a street where they live, is treated as a crime by the police force. Movement is policed, curtailed and monitored, which has lead to the common adage across America (and beyond I might add) that police stop certain people because "they were driving whilst black". Brown and his friend were "walking whilst black". To draw a comparison to the Fairground Park swimming pool riots, black bodies are controlled in particular ways and in particular (seemingly innocuous) places, such as streets and swimming pools; when it is deemed that they do not belong they are removed.

Ironically however in the much-reported protests following Michael Brown's shooting the Ferguson Police force made every attempt to keep the protesters (most of them black) moving in an attempt to disperse the crowds. At one point in the protest (and this is at the height of the Missouriian summer) the police adopted a "Keep Moving" policy, which meant that they arrested anyone who was standing still, apparently to maintain order on the streets and sidewalks and prevent violence from the crowd. This was later ruled to be unconstitutional as a violation of the protesters' first amendment rights (which is the amendment designed to protect freedom of speech and the right to peaceably assemble etc etc). This instance however highlights how local police attempted to monitor and manipulate the movements of the Ferguson community.

In the days, weeks and months that have followed the Michael Brown shooting protesters have adopted as their motto “Hands Up! Don’t shoot”, it is emblazoned on their t-shirts and placards. The motto is effective for so many reasons: put simply however it draws attention to the uncomfortable and tragic truth that just for being black in America men, women, and their children can be stopped, searched, and maybe even shot.

I have chosen to talk today about the Fairground Park swimming pool riots and the Ferguson shooting and its aftermath because these incidents separated by over 60 years show that race matters in the American city. Race determines where you can go, who you can do it with, and what can be done to you in the city and its suburbs. Whilst the swimming pool riots and the shooting and riots in Ferguson each highlight issues that are particular to St Louis (such as the consequences of its separation of city and county, and St Louis’s particular cultural hybridity caught between neither the East nor the West, either the North or the South), the colour line (with all its contradictions) is not particular to St Louis. Rather its wall of whiteness (how it is built, how it is enforced, and how it can crumble or be dismantled only to be rebuilt) is ever-present in American cities: it is policed at times by the law, at other times by particular parts of society; it is enforced by housing codes, regulations and gentleman’s agreements; and it can be shown to be a construction through protest on the very streets it enforces.