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## *Documentary Review*

### **Reacting to “Red Chicago”**

**Shreyes Nallan**

In July 1919, decades of racial tension in Chicago, Illinois boiled over when an African American teenager accidentally drifted over to the white side of a public beach. The boy, Eugene Williams, was stoned and drowned, and when police refused to arrest the white beachgoers who killed Williams, fighting erupted across the beach and throughout the city. Whites—organized in gangs euphemistically named “athletic clubs”—stormed Chicago’s “Black Belt,” attacking Blacks and looting their houses. Blacks fought back, organizing their own gangs to try and counter the threats to their neighborhoods. As the riots continued, the African Americans who had come to the city to escape the racism of the South watched as their co-workers, employers, and neighbors turned against them. Even the Chicago Police Department stood by as white mobs burned entire Black neighborhoods to the ground. The violence only abated a week later, when the National Guard swept in to establish a cordon around the Black Belt, and a fortuitous rainstorm sent the “athletic clubs” home. In the end, 23 Blacks and 15 whites were dead, and relations between the various communities of Chicago were forever altered.

In the 2019 PBS documentary “Red Chicago,” produced to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the riots, historian Ed Ayers discusses these momentous events and their effects on Chicago today. The traditional narrative of a race riot separates all involved parties into “whites” and “Blacks,” with no gradations in between—just as I did in the previous paragraph. But Ayers’ documentary—to its credit—lets us know that this isn’t the whole story. Chicago in 1919 was not comprised exclusively of white Anglo-Saxons and Blacks fleeing the South. Like any other major city, it was populated by a dizzying array of ethnic groups: Irish,

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Slavic, Lithuanian, Chinese, Japanese, and more. How did these other groups fare during the riot? And how should they be remembered in the narratives we continue to create a century later?

Surprisingly, the primary instigators of the 1919 riot were not the Anglo-Saxon Protestants who had long claimed this country as their birthright. The instigator title instead fell to the Irish—a relatively recent immigrant population who, just a few decades before, would not have even been considered “white.” When the Irish first emigrated to the US, the prejudices they faced were comparable to those experienced by African Americans—who could forget, for instance, the “Irish Need Not Apply” signs posted by English-origin business owners in the 1870s and 1880s? In a better world, this may have helped the Irish and Black communities understand each other, enabling them to ally with each other in response to Anglo-Saxon dominance. Yet, when the riot broke out, the Irish became the chief instrument of white supremacy. They formed the “athletic clubs,” stormed the Black Belt, and shot at Blacks to drive them out of their homes and places of employment. So, what happened? Some might say that the virulent racism of the Irish was due to economic anxiety—the mass migration of freed Blacks to the Northern cities threatened Irish jobs, and the fear that this change engendered quickly curdled into hatred. But perhaps there was something even deeper at play. Perhaps by “defending the white race”—by committing acts of violence and terror in service of a race they weren’t fully part of—the Irish could finally be accepted as part of that race. Perhaps if the Irish fought enough Blacks, Anglo-Saxons would remember that the Irish were just as white as they were. To prove your whiteness, start a race war—and lead the white side. For what it’s worth, the tactic worked: no one would make a distinction between “Irish” and “white” today.

The Irish may have played the most outsize role in the riots, but the story of 1919 must include the stories of many other peoples too. In those days, Chicago was home to another ethnic group who would be considered white today, but certainly wasn’t

back then. These were the Central and Eastern Europeans, who emigrated to industrial cities like Chicago in search of manufacturing jobs. Generally mistrusted, they were relegated to the second-worst neighborhoods in the city (with the worst, of course, going to the Black community). We don't get much information about them in "Red Chicago"—their fate is one of the many fascinating narratives left out of the documentary. What we do know is that they were hit hard in the riots, their homes looted and destroyed just like those in the Black Belt. Who was responsible? Was it the Irish athletic clubs, trying to terrorize another group of racial inferiors? Was it the Blacks, trying to fight back against the intruding whites but inadvertently attacking an entirely different group instead? Was it no one—simply collateral damage in a city-wide race war? The documentary doesn't say, and we can probably assume that the true answer was lost amid the chaos of the riots. In any case, a position of true neutrality proved quite dangerous for this beleaguered quasi-white race.

Others, however, managed to use their remove from the Black-versus-white struggle to positively affect the progress of the race riot. Take, for instance, the Chicago photographer Jun Fujita, a Japanese American who chronicled the riots for the Chicago Evening Post. His pictures—showing the sheer scale of the damage wrought by both white and Black Chicagoans engaging in property destruction and armed violence—form the backbone of "Red Chicago." And according to the documentary, Fujita's unique racial background gave him the ability to approach the violence objectively. "Partly because he was neither white nor black," explained literary historian Liesl Olson, "he was able to get access to the violence in ways other people could not." Since Fujita did not harbor an animus against either side of the confrontation, Black and white readers would have trusted that his photographs resembled reality—enabling the *Post*, to continue spreading factual and important information to the entire city.

Near the end of "Red Chicago," community activists describe a new project to aid communal remembrance of the 1919 race

riots. They aim to place a series of landmarks around the city, each one commemorating a Black Chicagoan killed by white mobs. It's a beautiful idea—and no doubt an effective one—but I fear it may be missing something. Where are the monuments for the Lithuanians and Serbs, caught in the crossfire between white attacks and Black counterattacks? What about memorials for men like Jun Fujita, who used his outsider status to deliver true and trusted accounts of the violence, thereby helping to quell a race war partly stoked by sensational journalism? And what about the Irishmen, the men who were in some grotesque way driven by their own prior persecution to become the chief persecutors in 1919?

These stories are not part of the traditional narrative of a race riot. Even “Red Chicago,” an otherwise comprehensive and affecting documentary, only lets us see glimpses of these more complex narratives before subsuming everything into an overarching Black-versus-white storyline. But we can't let these histories be erased. They shaped the tenor of the riots, and they continue to affect the city today. And any attempt to grapple with the effects of July 1919 that does not include these stories is doomed to failure.

**Author Bio:**

Shreyes Nallan graduated in 2020 with a Physics and Electrical Engineering double major.