Abstract

FLIGHT, FRIGHT, AND FREEDOM: The Criminalization of Black Boys at the Illinois Training School for Boys at St. Charles, 1920-1950

Between 1920 and 1950 the Illinois State Training School for Boys at St. Charles (hereinafter St. Charles), became a site through which notions of delinquency, demographic change, and black freedom were contested. The experiences of African American boys who were institutionalized at St. Charles not only elucidates the ways in which intersecting notions of race, age, gender, and sexuality shaped the administration of justice, but illustrates a process of racialized criminalization in a city and juvenile justice institution. St. Charles was born of the Progressive child-saving movement and was an integral part of Chicago’s juvenile justice system. The emergence of juvenile justice in the city marked the political viability and ascendancy of the idea that children who committed crimes required a separate justice system that would ‘rehabilitate’ them because children—unlike adults—are inherently innocent. But, as the number of black boys the Juvenile Court sent to St. Charles increased as a result of the Great Migration and child welfare agencies racially discriminatory exclusion of black children from their facilities, residents in towns surrounding the institution, school administrators, state legislators, and the public at large constructed and rearticulated lines between children they believed had the potential to be rehabilitated and children who did not. In the early twentieth century, popular constructions of black masculinity increasingly embodied a hyper-masculine trope of inherent criminality, danger, and menacing sexuality. These ideas fueled changes in school policies and created a milieu in which a political assault on the rehabilitative ideal became viable and ultimately made juvenile justice more punitive for all children. Illinois constructed its very first maximum security youth prison in 1936 for boys that judges and school administrators believed were too dangerous to be housed at St. Charles. Black Chicagoans were well aware of the ways in which race shaped juvenile justice and by the 1930s St. Charles had become an institution of symbolic importance and a site through which they demanded a recognition of their children’s vulnerability and black humanity.