

A conference sponsored by the American Historical Association and the National Museum of African American History and Culture with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and HISTORY™

## **The Future of the African American Past**

May 19-21, 2016  
Washington, DC

### ***Diascalar Perspectives on American Urban Color Lines: How Words We Imported Long Ago from Abroad Can Inspire Transnational Histories for the Future***

Carl Nightingale, University at Buffalo, SUNY

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Scholars who study the African American experience in cities have long made a practice of importing concepts from abroad to frame their analysis. *Ghetto* was the first and probably most important. When the sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton brought that word into the American academy in the 1940s, they were imitating Chicago civil rights activists they interviewed for their classic study of *Bronzeville*.<sup>1</sup> Like those activists, Drake and Cayton were eager to equate American urban color lines with coercive segregationist practices that went back to early sixteenth-century Venice. More pointedly, they drew a connection to Nazi Germany's grisly system of Jewish enclosures in Eastern and Central European cities, which played a key role in the mass extermination that soon followed.

In the 1960s, scholars inspired by Black Power activists also got into the verbal import business, insisting that the word *colony*--borrowed from French and British imperialism and derived another sixteenth-century Italian word, this one with roots in ancient Greek and Roman practices of overseas

conquest--better framed the toxic combination of territorial control and capitalist class exploitation that characterized the African American urban experience.

In the 1990s, frustrated by the lack of national or global attention to the problem of American urban segregation and its racially unequal effects on poverty, sociologists Douglas A. Massey and Nancy Denton raised the specter of "American Apartheid," importing a term that resonated on college campuses celebrating the global divestment movement and its success in bringing the Afrikaner nationalist regime of South Africa to an end. In so doing, Massey and Denton implicitly reminded us that, while American activists had been helping to make progress against legislated practices an ocean away, they had at the time largely thrown up their hands at widespread and very damaging, yet largely extra-governmental and even illegal practices in the United States, like racial steering and redlining.

Last year, I helped organize a group of American, Australian, New Zealander, Canadian, South African, British, French, Belgian, German, and Israeli scholars to ask whether it makes sense to import the concept of settler colonialism--first theorized by Australian anthropologists but now rampant in American Studies circles as a way to denote white attitudes and practices concerning Native Americans--to write a globalized history of white-dominated cities that could have implications for the study of black communities in the U.S.

As we imagine the future of African American urban history, should we stick to this tradition of conceptual cosmopolitanism? Deeply complicit as I am in the practice I am actually of three minds about it. In my political head, first of all, I am all for it. Words like *ghetto*, *colony*, *apartheid*, and *settler* all call immediate and multifarious attention to the injustices that continue to frame the urban experience of Black Americans. They also honor the intellectual traditions and strategic genius underlying the struggles that African Americans have waged to overturn those injustices. As accusations against the political forces that created those injustices, these words cannot be beat--especially when paired with another potent series of Italian-derived imports into English--*race*, *racial*, and *racist*. To give up the enduring shock-value and the

sharp indictment these words carry with them would be a major mistake for the movement, especially at this moment of renaissance.

In my scholar's head, however, I am also bothered by some very different versions of these same words, the versions that result when social scientists launder the political fight out of them, starch them with heavy doses of positivism, and re-sell them on academic shelves as board-stiff "ideal types." "What *is* a ghetto anyway?" they ask far too often, "what *is* a colony, apartheid, a settler colony, racism? "If we are to use these words as scientific terms," they claim, "we need to define them for all times and places." In this second brain, I am a radical abolitionist: as professionals focused on the study of change, historians should have absolutely no stake in the outcome of these discussions, and should keep anything that sounds like an *a priori* or ahistorical concept out of the discipline entirely. Ghettos, colonies, apartheid, and settler colonies, not to mention racism, are historically far too varied, they have changed far too dramatically over time to be considered outside history. They deserve, in fact, precisely that: *histories*, not definitions.

That brings up my third attitude toward these imported concepts, which is at once hopeful and also a bit cranky and restless. Concepts that we have imported from abroad, which describe varied and changing groups of practices from enormous swaths of time and from places across the world, contain the kind of intellectual fuel needed to continue the process of kindling a transnational imagination within the study of the African American urban experience. But if they do, they should inspire a mutually-enhancing group-marriage between perspectives currently labeled separately as local, comparative, transnational, or global. Let me underline that in making this point, I am both hopeful and also cranky and impatient. I don't think that the items on the list--local, comparative, transnational, and global--are separate options for us anymore. I think they can only go forward *in combination*, maybe in studies that prioritize one perspective somewhat over the other, but henceforth *always* as mutually enhancing methods of understanding change over time and across space. To make that point as clear as possible I am going to do something historians

usually and very correctly greet with skepticism. I am going to invent a word for this combined imagination, and urge us to reimagine African American urban history in terms of a “diascalar” perspective.

To ignite such an diascalar history, the concepts *ghetto*, *colony*, *apartheid*, *settler*, and *racism* make great kindling. Recall that all refer to groups of historical phenomena that varied and changed in different places. Thus they are ripe for comparative analysis: how were these things similar and different at different times and in different places? Those are interesting questions, but it’s not enough anymore to ask only about similarities and differences. First of all, there is the problem that things differ and change radically over time in any one place, and secondly there is the matter of scale—how are we defining the size of those places in the first place and why? Here comparative history’s traditional problem of defining comparisons at the scale of the nation state has been thoroughly critiqued, and rightly so. What about things that happened only in specific smaller places within nations, and what about things that were bigger than nations, engulfing multiple nations in larger historical patterns? Also, while similarity and difference can and have inspired arguments about historical causality, we can’t explain why things are similar and different—let alone why they converge or diverge over time--unless we also engage in what we now call transnational or global analyses. Were segregation or colonization similar in different places because these places were connected, and if so by what? Were they different because potential connections between those places were disrupted in some way? Once again, what is the scale of the connections involved, and when did they begin and end? On what geographic scale did forces of disruption alter those connections, and where and when? Those are the questions of a “diascalar” method, one that starts with the assumption that the geographic and temporal extent of historical connections and disconnections, and thus similarity and difference, must be established empirically, and, more importantly, that the project of the historian is not to “transcend” any scale of analysis, as implied in the term “transnational,” but instead to weigh the complex interplay of historical forces of many sizes upon each other—to establish the *dialog* or the *dialectic* of many sizes of geographical and temporal phenomena. Hence, the watchword *diascalar*.

Ok, that's all fine as an abstraction. How exactly are ghettos, colonies, apartheid, settlement, and racism all diascalar phenomena? Well, all were created by exertions of institutional power over very long and very short distances and many other-sized distances in between. All involved movements of people, again across many geographic dimensions. All involved multi-scalar flows of money, once again through variety of large, medium, and small institutional channels. All involved flows of ideas, often big, global ideas, such as race, that just as often had to be adapted for various regional, national, or local political purposes. Indeed--and here's where the rubber of my abstract mongering in neologisms truly meets the road--as institutional power, people, money, and ideas travelled from one place to another, changing, adapting and diversifying in response to other historical phenomena operating at all different sorts of geographical scopes, they all coagulated into *practices*. To segregate a city, as I argued in a very long sentence on p.12 of my book on the world history of segregation, city-splitters could opt from a vast range of practices that were invented or reinvented in many often deeply-connected places across the world, some of which were more or less appropriate for export and import for any number of reasons between those places no matter how deeply connected they were. Read the evidence with all of this in mind, and it's possible for a historian to show that these practices were indeed traded worldwide, and also that, as they travelled and as segregationists put them into practice in any given locality—whether in a single city, across a whole colony or a nation state, across a whole region, or even a whole hemisphere—they could also become part of increasingly similar or rapidly diversifying *combinations* of practices.<sup>2</sup>

Faced with that evidence, the diascalar historian of urban color lines needs to be a lumpener, a splitter, a measurer of time and space, and an explainer all at once. To understand the process by which various actors brought together the particular combination of neighborhood-level, local, state, regional, and national practices to create what 1940s civil rights activists eventually called black ghettos in the United States; to compare and contrast those changing combinations with similar yet varied and changing combinations of practices across the colonial world, or across the subset of the colonial world established by

white settlers, or with the specific set of actions and contingencies that created segregation then apartheid in South Africa in any of its many guises at any given time and locality, and to explain those similarities and differences: all of those questions are deeply messy matters. (How suited it is to urban historians, by the way, who of all historians perhaps love *messy* the most!)

To help visualize analytically useful diascalar patterns within the mess, I have developed a digital tool I call the “World Atlas of Urban Segregation and Spatial Control,” which I hope to make public on-line sometime soon. My nickname for this tool is the “diascope.” Unlike a microscope or a telescope, it helps us look at things close up, far away, and along the entire spectrum in between, allowing us to catch these things as they interact with one another. It lumps, splits, measures, and in so doing spits out explanations in the way a diascalar historian must think.<sup>3</sup>

I’ll just leaf through it today to give you a basic idea of how it asks us to imagine things like ghettos colonies, settlements, and apartheid. Zooming in and out upon different pieces of geo-historical data, it can, for example, help us visualize five different chapters in the spread of urban segregationist practice and politics as they spread across varied-sized regions of the world according to discrete flow-patterns of institutional power, ideas, people, and money. The British conquest of India spawned the first large-scale spread of segregation by color and race, based on a pattern of White Town-Black Town segregation first established in the East India Company’s outpost at Madras. That practice itself came into being because of a combination of factors operating on trans-hemispheric, inter-hemispheric, regional, provincial, inter-imperial, intra-imperial, and neighborhood scales.

A second chapter involved the spread of segregation connected to the project to open China to western mercantile interests, which also stimulated Chinese migration across Asia and the Pacific over the course of the nineteenth century. A third chapter, which I call segregation mania, was characterized by a flourishing trade in the idea that segregation could be a tool of public health, first as a means to combat plague, then also malaria, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases. A fourth chapter, which overlapped

the others in time and space, involved the rise of the trade in urban planning innovations, most of which had their origins in France, but which travelled across oceans and imperial lines in the service of building segregated cities characterized by the idea that monumental architecture and comprehensive planning could convince the world of the superiority of Western progressive ideals.

The fifth chapter concerns the connections between apartheid South Africa and the United States, asking us to move beyond traditional comparative analyses to look at the complex diasporic patterns in the trans-Atlantic flow of practices--such as restrictive covenants, slum clearance, state mortgage protection systems for first-time home buyers, and many others--from Britain and elsewhere in Europe to both societies. Here the basic argument concerns the varied history of the two settler societies. Because the matrix of black-white politics in South Africa was more directly shaped by the act of settler conquest, people of color faced greater obstacles to challenging the expansion of precedents for legislated forms of segregation, tortured as that history was by divisions within white settler communities. Apartheid came into being as the result of precedents that met relatively little constitutional impediment to the country's racial politics, even as it took on marked tinges of fascism. In the U.S, black-white politics was far more heavily stamped by the experience of slavery, civil war, and regionally-inflected politics of emancipation. Enfranchisement of black men during Reconstruction, while repealed in the South, nevertheless gave Northern urban African Americans far more political leverage than any other colonial subjects in the world and enabled them to organize challenges to legislated forms of segregation such as the Baltimore-style ordinances. The state would of course continue to play an important role in splitting American cities, but reformers such as the economist Richard T. Ely and real estate professionals like the lawyer Nathan MacChesney took the lead in creating a toxic mixture of non-legislated racist practices with formally non-racial laws that could be put into practice locally in racially discriminatory ways. This mix of practices, as we know well, unfortunately succeeded in creating yawning color lines in American cities almost as firm as

those in apartheid-era South African cities, leaving black activists and their allies scrambling behind to demonstrate the ways they violated the Fourteenth Amendment.

Because of what I know about the connections between the U.S. and South Africa, I am eager to promote a diascalar approach to settler colonial urban history. The “diascope” can help here too, as my colleagues and I trace similarities, differences, connections, and disconnections in the segregationist practices employed in Ireland, Australasia, the North American Pacific, French North Africa, South Africa, the Americas, Palestine-Israel and even along the fringes of settler colonialism elsewhere in Africa and outside the West.<sup>4</sup> To what extent do settler revolutions, with their potent combination of migration, conquest, and subsequently skewed systems of land control and commodification, leave their mark on the cities settlers founded or rebuilt with projects of radical and permanent territorial transformation in mind? Do efforts to create racialized system of privilege based in discriminatory systems of land ownership, radically contradictory ideologies of white racial superiority and vulnerability, and especially intense forms of demographic engineering lead to something we can call a settler colonial urban order, or at very least an urban settler political style? Only a diascalar analysis of these phenomena and the specific practices that make them up in different places can answer such questions and probe the implications for African American urban history specifically.

There is no better way of looking toward the future than with tools that have been well-honed in the past. If we can harness the political fire contained in concepts like *ghetto*, *colony*, *apartheid*, *settler*, and *racism*; push past any temptation to drain their beating blood and embalm them into ideal types; rediscover the histories of similarity, difference, connection, and disconnection they contain; and use them to plot the flow of practices of urban injustice across many scales of geo-historical analysis, we will have given African American urban history one very promising route upon which to enjoy an expansive, if deliciously messy, future.



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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1945), eg., pp. 201, 383.

<sup>2</sup> Carl H. Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 12. The next few paragraphs give summaries of arguments I flesh out a length in subsequent chapters of the book.

<sup>3</sup> Nightingale, “A World Atlas of Urban Segregation and Spatial Control,” a series of Prezi® presentations intended for on-line distribution and currently under development. Please contact the author for access to prototypes.

<sup>4</sup> This project will be launched at a three-part session entitled “Settler Cities: a Useful Concept for Reinterpreting Transnational Urban History?” organized by Carl Nightingale, Vivian Bickford-Smith, and Johan Lagae at the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the European Association of Urban Historians in Helsinki, Finland, August 24-28, 2016.