

Journal of Urban History

<http://juh.sagepub.com/>

Global Elites' Power Over Urban Space: The Long History and Bleak Future of Segregating and Selling the City

Brian McCammack

Journal of Urban History 2014 40: 1161

DOI: 10.1177/00961442144214536862

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://juh.sagepub.com/content/40/6/1161.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

[Urban History Association](#)

Additional services and information for *Journal of Urban History* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://juh.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://juh.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Oct 8, 2014

[What is This?](#)

Global Elites' Power Over Urban Space: The Long History and Bleak Future of Segregating and Selling the City

Journal of Urban History
2014, Vol. 40(6) 1161–1167
© 2014 SAGE Publications
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
juh.sagepub.com


Marina Peterson and Gary W. McDonogh, eds. (2012). *Global Downtowns*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, vii + 360 pp., notes, bibliography, index, \$59.95 (cloth).

Carl H. Nightingale (2012). *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, xviii + 517 pp., illustrations, notes, index, \$35.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by: Brian McCammack, *Williams College, USA*

DOI: 10.1177/0096144214536862

For at least the past two decades, spurred in part by the effects of globalization on today's world, humanists and social scientists have self-consciously executed a "turn" toward what are variously called global, transnational, or world perspectives. But global stories are also always inevitably bound to local ones. As Durba Ghosh noted in a recent *American Historical Review* forum, this "'new' world history is increasingly shaped by our urgent need to understand and historicize our own globalized condition from the perspective of many locals," something that is especially true for urban histories, which are often deeply invested in ground-level local stories.¹ In their own ways, Marina Peterson, Gary McDonogh, and Carl Nightingale fashion a global story out of the interconnection of many locals, suggesting the possibilities—or lack thereof—for local struggle against powerful global trends. In doing so, they reveal both the analytical rewards and methodological challenges of synthesizing a vast array of source material from a variety of cultures into a unifying narrative.

Nightingale's *Segregation* is a well-researched and eye-opening analysis of how residential race segregation emerged predominantly from European colonial endeavors to penetrate nearly every corner of the world. It is a magisterial contribution to the ever-burgeoning field of global history, ambitiously probing the limits of method and narrative in a monograph by simultaneously examining countless cities spanning the globe while tracing the role of global elites in the evolution of "city splitting" over the course of seven thousand years (though admittedly the focus is predominantly on the last two centuries). The contributors to *Global Downtowns* also survey global elites who control cities' built environments, but approach the subject primarily from an anthropological rather than historical perspective. The collection's focus on the forces of globalization and neoliberalism at work in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries' downtowns offers a telling epilogue to Nightingale's sweeping historical examination of the intellectual and political currents that shaped and spread global residential segregation.

Divided into five roughly chronological sections, *Segregation* is primarily a top-down institutional history that tracks how and why global elites implemented residential segregation in cities the world over, from Chicago to Johannesburg, from Mumbai to London. Although Nightingale briefly examines other forms of segregation (gender, religious, and most notably class), *Segregation* is almost exclusively about race segregation. Eschewing distinctions between de jure and de facto segregation because "segregation has always involved some form of institutionally organized human intentionality" (p. 7), Nightingale defines urban segregation as "separate, unequal, and compulsory residential zones for different races" that are "designed to enhance

elite groups' power and wealth" (p. 2). But race as Nightingale understands it was a concept that did not emerge and begin to inform the impulse to segregate until the late eighteenth century, and *Segregation's* story begins much earlier to elaborate on the practice's much deeper and more varied roots. Indeed, Nightingale's exploration of segregation begins in the cradle of civilization, seventy centuries ago, when ancient Mesopotamian elites initiated "city splitting" by creating separate spaces for gods and mortals while also dividing city from country (p. 24). Nightingale explores how over the next several centuries segregation emerged along religious, cultural, and ethnic lines, from Jewish ghettos in many different cities to merchant enclaves the world over. Nightingale demonstrates how, at this relatively early stage, segregation was not yet global in the sense that it spread from place to place; instead, various spatial separations independently sprung up in a variety of different contexts. But later ideas and practices drew on these earlier instances of segregation, and the three elite institutions primarily responsible for dividing cities throughout history were already present: "governments, networks of intellectual exchange, and the institutions associated with the modern capitalist real estate industry" (p. 5).

Governments—particularly colonial governments—emerge as the most important and powerful of these segregationist institutions when Nightingale turns his attention to British colonialism's impacts on Calcutta, India. Perhaps one of *Segregation's* most noteworthy contributions is Nightingale's argument that segregation and, hence, race formation, were essentially (mostly British) colonial exports. That contention shifts our gaze from the Atlantic slave trade east toward British colonialism in India, away from global and transnational history's more well-established attention to cultural flows across the Atlantic and towards the Pacific (p. 14). According to Nightingale, the reason for this focus on the Pacific is relatively simple: segregation persisted and grew in the East because European colonists were unable to wield their power through slavery as they were in the West. "Urban residential segregation waned quickly in the Americas, but it was slavery that killed it outright" (p. 52), Nightingale argues, because slaveowners needed absolute control over their slaves and that necessitated living in close proximity to them. Colonists in the East, on the other hand, used segregation as a way to keep their colonial subjects at arm's length while designing a porous-enough dividing line to maintain a relatively unimpeded flow of labor and capital. Nightingale contends that, "The modern politics of urban racial segregation owes its origins—and its capacity to spread almost everywhere—to the relationship between two cities: London and Calcutta" (p. 75), and indeed this is where the reader begins to more clearly see the emergence of the three institutions—government, intellectuals (particularly those who work in public health and sanitation), and real estate interests—that initiate and drive segregation in dozens of cities throughout the rest of the monograph. Thus, although Nightingale's intellectual pedigree is of a piece with transnational American historians like Daniel Rodgers and Thomas Bender, he pushes well beyond the United States as home base. Indeed, the acknowledgments make clear that Nightingale enlisted the support of a dizzying array of scholars with diverse expertise to help open provocative new avenues of truly global inquiry, and the United States' role in spreading segregation remains minimal until "segregation mania" in Part Three.

Nightingale writes that "the book's main point" is that "movements to segregate cities spread because they were interconnected" (p.5), a contention that is perhaps most compellingly supported when Nightingale analyzes responses to the bubonic plague outbreak that swept across the globe at the turn of the twentieth century. The interconnections between East and West, colonial governments, and national governments came to the fore as public health intellectuals and colonial government officials traveled the world, using a mix of disease and race science to rationalize the further segregation of cities, especially in Asia and Africa. With the cooperation of colonial governments, Western city planners and architects (particularly from France) further compounded these trends, writing segregation into the built environment through slum clearance and the erection of architecturally distinct spaces for different races. Nightingale terms this practice "segregation mania," which dominated city planning late in the nineteenth century and never waned until around 1920.

A masterful synthesis of a diverse array of scholarship and primary sources, the heart of *Segregation's* original archival research is found in Part Four. Nightingale tightens his global focus and zooms in on the two cities emblematic of what he dubs “archsegregation” in the early twentieth century, Johannesburg and Chicago, building on and challenging the comparative work initiated by scholars like George Fredrickson.² Placing Johannesburg more concretely in the established narrative of segregation’s spread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Nightingale shows how it was “the arrival of bubonic plague in 1901 that set off the first nationwide bout of urban segregation mania in South Africa” (p. 255) and helped spur in Johannesburg more particularly “the most ambitious and complex system of urban color lines in world history” (p. 229). Rather than focus on the American South for his comparative study like Fredrickson, however, Nightingale implicitly argues that an examination of Chicago is more instructive as far as his three segregationist institutions of government, intellectual networks, and especially the real estate industry are concerned. Chicago’s elite segregationists were “far stealthier” (p. 296) than those in Johannesburg, operating mainly through private real estate markets that were eventually backed up by discriminatory federal housing programs and postwar prosperity that disproportionately favored whites over people of color. This is all fairly well-trodden scholarly ground, but cast in a new light by Nightingale’s global lens and his preceding analysis of segregation’s long international history.

One dominant trend Nightingale traces in Part Four is the growing importance of real estate markets in segregation. Indeed, during the twentieth century the more overt racist influences of government and intellectuals wane, and the “stealthier” role of real estate institutions waxes. In many ways, Chicago was ground zero for discriminatory innovations like racial covenants, making it a natural case study for American segregation. But the relative lack of consideration for how segregation played out contemporaneously in the American South is somewhat jarring, leaving the reader wondering what urban segregation looked like and how it developed in the heart of Jim Crow, from Birmingham to Nashville, from Charleston to Atlanta—and how the South’s history of legal segregation in all facets of life impacted residential segregation as compared to cities in the North. There is little sense of how segregation took hold and grew after slavery’s abolition in the American South, perhaps because the global turn has compelled Nightingale to search for trends across rather than within national borders (late nineteenth century race segregation in San Francisco’s Chinatown, for instance, is read in the context of segregation in the Pacific Rim, and potential connections to the simultaneous emergence of Jim Crow in the American South are left unexplored). The global connections that Nightingale argues are “the book’s main point” are murkier here, too, leaving the reader wondering if *Segregation's* comprehensiveness more often demonstrates global parallel developments rather than the connectedness to which it aspires. For example, Nightingale earlier explained how, in the nineteenth century, “London land speculators invented the driving intellectual principle of class segregation, the idea that having poor people as close neighbors brought down the property values of the rich” (p. 96), introducing the restrictive covenant and reviving the idea of exclusive semi-rural suburbs. But it is less clear how or if Chicago’s “archsegregationists” drew on these earlier ideas when they instituted their own restrictive covenants and made arguments about the specter of declining property values; *Segregation* often falls short of demonstrating how they may have been consciously operating in a global context rather than simply responding to a parallel local situation.

Even so, among the strongest aspects of the entire monograph comes through Nightingale’s comparative analysis of Johannesburg and Chicago, when his attention turns to the ways in which elite segregationists enlisted the support (sometimes overtly, sometimes not) of the middle and working classes in carrying out their objectives. Because *Segregation* is primarily an institutional history concerned with the motivations and methods of elites (planners, bureaucrats, and developers) and about how power is wielded from city hall, universities, and military encampments, relatively little attention is paid to the actions of average working- or

middle-class segregationists, or to what extent non-elites had similar motivations, objectives, and expectations in their own support of race division. For example, an earlier comparative chapter examining cities along the Pacific in both Asia and North America begins to address this underlying tension concerning how segregation may have evolved differently when segregationists were the overwhelming racial majority as compared to the racial minority (or when white elites formed a numerically large proportion of the race in power as compared to a small proportion), but stops short of fully examining the implications of class in both colonial and noncolonial contexts. In Part Four, however, Nightingale reveals how segregation developed in conversation with unique local contexts, perhaps driven by elites and their institutions but not always completely determined by them. In Johannesburg in the early twentieth century, for instance, the reader learns that “Ordinary white male settlers,” through their voting power, “brought fiercer forces of propulsion to the country’s segregationist visions” (p. 261). Nightingale goes on to argue that two factors that inclined South Africa to “archsegregation” were “the emotional intensity of daily encounters between whites and people of color in smaller urban spaces” where “whites experienced abstract theories . . . as personal matters” and “the consensus among Johannesburg’s white homeowners that their property values were vulnerable to racial threats” (p. 263). In one of the most textured and nuanced passages in the whole book, Nightingale similarly analyzes the complex interaction between the working-class, middle-class, and elite segregationists in Chicago (pp. 307–17), illustrating how diverse groups worked together to erect racial barriers. Even more of this sort of analysis that combines top-down and bottom-up perspectives would have been welcome, showing how intellectuals’ “abstract theories” influenced the average city-dwelling homeowner. One suspects that more inquiry along these lines might have complicated Nightingale’s notion that because segregation is so capital and time intensive, “segregationists have to make a strategic calculation that all the trouble necessary will give them more power than they had before” (p. 11), a contention that perhaps gives too much credit to segregationists as power-hungry rational actors and fails to account for less rational race prejudice among both the elites and the masses.

Segregation suggestively addresses important methodological questions about how urban historians who aspire to write global histories can calibrate the tradeoffs between a broad, sweeping global study and a deep, fine-grained local study. That tradeoff presents special challenges to urban histories like Nightingale’s, which aim to expose the way urban space—city block by city block—is constructed politically, legally, imaginatively, and materially. Nightingale’s global lens compels him to take a bird’s-eye view in tracing the ways in which the practice and promotion of segregation circulated and spread from city to city; indeed, the bread and butter of global or transnational histories is in tracking movement, following migrations, examining networks—whether of ideas, commodities, or people—across national borders and therefore illustrating vital connections unapparent to studies that remain cloistered within political or geographical boundaries.³

However, when examining how segregation was actually implemented in colonial outposts and city neighborhoods—as well as what that meant for urban dwellers’ lives—Nightingale is necessarily more bound to the local: the way “city splitting” was written into the landscapes and laws at the ground level. True, a city’s residents move in and out, bringing and taking ideas from far-flung places with them; traded commodities always prove the porousness and muddiness of a city’s borders; and those borders expand or contract or otherwise evolve over time. But Chicago’s segregated neighborhoods will always be on the shore of Lake Michigan and Johannesburg’s on the Witwatersrand, and urban historians who write about any of these places with an attention to how residents lived in and experienced those built environments are, to an extent, bound to them. Nightingale’s solution to this tension between local depth and global breadth is to narrow his focus to global elites and their institutions, tracing the variety of ways they implemented segregation around the world before honing in on the deeper comparative case study of the apotheosis of

their efforts in the two “archsegregationist” cities, Chicago and Johannesburg. But perhaps too often, questions about how elite white segregationists and their institutions wield power differently at the local level in radically different cultural contexts are left underdeveloped, sacrificed in favor of establishing a more coherent global narrative.

The edited collection *Global Downtowns* attempts to illustrate common global trends by narrowing its focus to a series of local case studies examining elites’ domination of urban space, largely marginalizing the lived experience of downtowns. The editors contend that the collection displays “above all the crowds, life, and sheer vitality of downtowns” (p. 18). But what emerges from the essays more than this bustling daily life are the ways global neoliberal capitalist elites seek to control, organize, homogenize, and commoditize cities around the world.⁴ Although the editors make the case that the distinguishing feature of downtowns is their “centrality—whether geographic or symbolic” (p. 16), the common thread that emerges from the collection’s loosely organized sections (titled Imagination, Consumption, and Conflict) is that late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century downtowns the world over are places created, defined, shaped, and bounded by the same sorts of global elites who dominate Nightingale’s narrative. More often than not, contributors are guided by the concept of “downtown” as a place increasingly subject to global neoliberal capital flows, a canvas and capital center for local and international power brokers: planners and developers, architects, and bureaucrats. Although nearly all of the contributors at least briefly explore the histories of these trends (and many of the cities, from Chicago to Mumbai, are the same as those Nightingale examines), history is more background than foreground to these anthropologists who are most concerned with the present and future, and most conversant with theorists like Richard Florida, Arjun Appadurai, and, more distantly, Jane Jacobs. In part, this is why *Global Downtowns* serves as such an appropriate and complementary coda to Nightingale’s study. In *Segregation*, Nightingale briefly reads the import of globalization’s contemporary effects back onto the long historical spread of “city splitting,” and concludes that while “the direct role of multinational corporations in drawing urban residential color lines was inconsistent” (p. 6), “land markets are the one capitalist institution in which race-infused economic interests became consistently and increasingly important to the division of cities, even arguably becoming the single most important segregationist force in cities today” (p. 7). Although *Global Downtowns* only obliquely addresses residential race segregation in favor of exploring the impacts of neoliberal business interests on cities around the world, these contemporary land markets are precisely where the edited collection picks up.

What ultimately defines most major downtowns around the world, *Global Downtowns* argues, is the elite groups who wield power over urban space and how they go about it: “starchitects” and planners botching a tourist-friendly redesign of a Barcelona port, city hall politicians and real estate developers squabbling over developing riverfront land on the Hudson in New York City, ambitious and perhaps critically naïve developers modeling a proposed Nashville skyscraper on Dubai’s striking skyline, the World Bank and “Lebanese financial mercantile elite” (p. 146) driving a plan to literally reconstruct Beirut’s history in the landscape, and UNESCO’s paternalistic involvement in developing tourist enclaves in cities as far-flung as Zanzibar and Havana. Indeed, one of the most productive tensions that emerges from the collection is how local culture gets embedded, appropriated, and reified in urban redevelopment projects around the world, from Beirut to Barcelona, from Havana to Zanzibar—and to what extent these developments function to serve the local population or an ever-growing global tourist population. In *Global Downtowns*, elites compete with one another for capital investment and tourism dollars, manufacturing cultural authenticity and creating sanitized (and often segregated) urban spaces that marginalize not only the working classes but the local population more generally. In fact, global heritage tourism emerges as a sort of soft neocolonialism, an updated version of global elites’ real estate power-grabbing strategies that Nightingale traced in *Segregation*.

One intriguing example of how these trends in cultural tourism, real estate development, and urban segregation come together on the ground can be seen in recent efforts to rehabilitate one of the segregated areas on which Nightingale focuses: Chicago's South Side, a few miles distant from the city's downtown Loop. In the first half of the twentieth century, African Americans managed to build their own vibrant, parallel downtown—a commercial center within Chicago's segregated Black Belt that thrived in spite of widespread discrimination and a relative dearth of economic opportunity. That success was short-lived, however, and was followed by decades of postwar economic deterioration known as the “urban crisis.” Now the story on the South Side is much the same as the one told by the majority of *Global Downtowns*' contributors, but with an ironic twist: local black elites are attempting to adapt global neoliberal elites' real estate development strategies to their own segregated neighborhoods that, as Nightingale shows, have been historically walled off from investment. Some developers are attempting to capitalize on a nostalgic, utopian version of the once commercially viable—but segregated—past by promoting, as Michelle Boyd has argued, “racial tourism districts, mixed-income housing developments and black gentrification.”⁵ There is little question that the residents of Chicago's South Side desperately need expanded economic opportunity to counter the devastating impacts of race segregation and disinvestment that continue to damage African American communities. But as both Boyd and Mary Pattillo have shown in fine-grained, ground-level local studies that complement the much more sweeping global ambitions of *Segregation* and *Global Downtowns*, these attempts to revitalize (or gentrify, depending on one's perspective) Chicago's historically segregated African American neighborhood have revealed significant class tensions within the black community.⁶ They also raise critical questions about the barriers to addressing the entrenched racial and economic inequalities examined in *Segregation* and *Global Downtowns*. Among others: Whom do these efforts ultimately benefit, and whom do they marginalize? Does “black gentrification” merely perpetuate the segregation that Chicago's white elites thrust upon the community a century ago? And do these developments also perpetuate the patterns of elite neoliberal dominance over local working-class residents? What are the alternatives? And what are the possibilities for community revitalization from the ground up?

The closing pages of *Segregation* attempt some answers. Nightingale quickly brings his story up to the present and paints a grim picture of how segregationists successfully worked to undermine gains by anticolonial and civil rights freedom movements in places like Chicago in the second half of the twentieth century.⁷ But after acknowledging that the persistence and in some instances intensification of segregation could lead one to believe that “humanity looks a lot like a species hopelessly addicted to its seventy-century habit of dividing cities,” Nightingale claims that “it would be a mistake to end the world history of segregation upon such a dispiriting note” (p. 422). Assessing recent history and looking ahead to the future (while also giving more attention to local, bottom-up efforts to resist segregationist policies than the rest of the book generally affords), he lauds “unprecedented” (p. 422) antisegregation efforts led in part by “scrappy and courageous community-based organizations” (p. 426) and fueled by the Internet. This reader found it difficult to share Nightingale's optimism, however, after more than four hundred pages showing just how successful segregationists have been at “city-splitting” over the past seventy centuries despite many similar resistance efforts, and after seeing firsthand how grassroots challenges to entrenched economic inequalities largely fizzled in the wake of 2008 global financial crisis. Indeed, if anything, *Global Downtowns* works to confirm the continuing—and perhaps strengthening—grip of elites on cities worldwide.

Notes

1. Durba Ghosh, “Another Set of Imperial Turns?” *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (June 2012): 778. On distinctions, similarities, and ambiguities between the terminologies and methodological

- approaches, see also C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441–64; Marcus Graser, "World History in a Nation-State: The Transnational Disposition in Historical Writing in the United States," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 4 (March 2009): 1038–52; Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, "World History in a Global Age," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (October 1995): 1034–60.
2. In particular, see George Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).
 3. More a political and intellectual history than an urban spatial history, this is what a complementary account of the idea of whiteness during what Nightingale calls "segregation mania" in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries accomplishes. See Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
 4. Two notable exceptions are the essay contributed by Peterson on Los Angeles, and McDonogh and Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong on global Chinatowns. The latter, in particular, is perhaps one of the more suggestive points of conversation between *Global Downtowns* and *Segregation*, given its focus on racially/ethnically segregated neighborhoods adjacent to downtowns. It is also the one chapter that most self-consciously explores how "downtown" is differentiated from the rest of the city, both as an idea and a physical space. While Chinatowns generally are not located within downtown itself, McDonogh and Wong argue, their locations bordering downtowns make them "deeply enmeshed with the structure and nature of central districts" while still offering racial and cultural minorities a measure of agency, putting the two distinct spatial and cultural areas in a sometimes tense dialectic relationship (p. 274). For a somewhat different vision of what constitutes a downtown, see Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). She argues that American downtowns are simultaneously the centers of "urban commercial life" and "invested with civic meaning," spaces that are ambiguously "democratic yet exclusionary, public yet also private" (pp. 5, 7).
 5. Michelle Boyd, *Jim Crow Nostalgia: Reconstructing Race in Bronzeville* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xiv.
 6. Proponents of such investment and development tend to cast these changes as a bottom-up push for community revitalization rather than a top-down remaking of city blocks by elites. But as Pattillo puts it in her study of Chicago's North Kenwood-Oakland neighborhood, "The line between revitalization and gentrification is a thin one," and ultimately the idea is to "attract middle- and upper-income families to working-class or poor urban neighborhoods." Mary Pattillo, *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 8.
 7. Nightingale traces these developments to three factors: the economic incentives for segregation that have deep historical roots, anti-Communist fears and first-world intervention in newly independent nations, and most importantly the New Right's rise to power (p. 386).

Author Biography

Brian McCammack is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at Williams College. Most recently, he has published work on African American urban history and the modern environmental movement in, respectively, the *Journal of Social History* and *American Quarterly*. He is finishing his book manuscript *Recovering Green in Bronzeville: An Environmental and Cultural History of the African American Great Migration to Chicago, 1915–1940*.