



"Segregation is Everywhere: Experiments in the World History of Urban Color Lines Starting with the London-Calcutta Connection"

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Urban race-segregation was once thought to be a virtually essential characteristic aspect of colonial cities, built into the very contact between dissimilar western and non-western cultures. Research has since demonstrated that colonial cities have very diverse and constantly changing experiences with racial segregation and that the connection between colonial city building and segregation is highly contingent upon a wide diversity of factors--including both the complex nature of the transnational flows of ideas, people, money, policies, and institutions involved; and equally complex and variable regional and local factors.

This paper outlines my efforts--as part of a book project called "Segregation is Everywhere: A World History of the Urban Color Line"--to synthesize and periodize the history of urban color lines in the modern era by putting these complexities in the history of colonial cities at the center of the story. I begin with the eighteenth-century connection between London and Calcutta. It was in Britain's efforts to establish a capital city in India, I argue, that colonial authorities first deployed the three ocean-spanning institutions that would set the stage for the political dramas of colonial urban space elsewhere in the colonial world and beyond. Empire is the first of these institutions; transnational networks of academics and reformers are the second; and the third is the international real estate business.

As British imperial officials built a grander urban expression of imperial might on the Hugly River, it imported the newly re-configured and expanded notion of race to do much of its ideological work. Though early-modern colonial cities often had separate sections for Europeans and natives, it was at Calcutta that the concept of race was first applied to marking out the divisions between a "White Town" and "Black Town," in part reflecting the new exigencies of imperial administration over conquered Bengal. Monumental and military architecture were also central to this imperial plan.

To manage the environmental and social problems associated with urban growth at Calcutta, imperial officials also joined hands with networks of enlightenment-era doctors and Benthamite public health officials to first elaborate a crucial discourse in the history of urban segregation which held "natives" to be a threat to the moral and physical health of whites.

Finally, the building of white town in Calcutta was heavily dependent upon institutions of modern capitalist land markets originally deployed in the interest of class segregation of London's West End and brought piece-meal to India: more secure property rights, land surveys, deeds registration systems, restrictive covenants, and various architectural expressions of class exclusivity.

In Calcutta itself, the landed Bengali bhadralok were able to counteract the segregationist tendencies of some of these institutions, especially within the land market. Thus the British defense of the urban color line was much weaker in Calcutta than it would be elsewhere in the colonial world.

That said, the precedent of segregation in the interest of imperial might and control, urban health and solutions to other urban problems and protection of white title to urban land had been set. The legacies of the institutional ties between London and Calcutta and the flows of key elements of the politics of space they initiated can be seen in subsequent expansions of segregationist politics: across India throughout the "stations" of the Raj; eastward via Singapore into the Concessions of China; from China and India to Africa during the turn-of the century plague pandemic; in the expansion of Haussmannian, Beaux-Arts, and Garden-City inspired monumental architecture from France and Britain to colonial cities; and in the multifarious and more virulently segregationist movements in white-settler dominated cities around the Pacific rim, in South Africa, and in the United States. Thus the influence of institutions and practices of urban division by race that began in colonial cities ultimately adapted themselves to local politics in cities beyond the borders of what we traditionally hold to be colonial cities. In recent times, some of them have arguably indirectly and in new forms made their way back to the metropol.

KEY WORDS: Segregation, colonial cities, global connections, social geography.