

# GHETTO NATION

A Journey into the Land of Bling and the Home of the Shameless

From an award-winning journalist and cultural commentator comes a provocative examination of the impact of “ghetto” mores, attitudes, and lifestyles on urban communities and American culture in general. Here is an excerpt:

**ghet-to** n. (Merriam-Webster dictionary) {Italian, from Venetian dialect *ghèto* island where Jews were forced to live, literally, foundry (located on the island), from *ghetàr* to cast, from Latin *jactare* to throw}

**1:** a quarter of a city in which Jews were formerly required to live

**2:** a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure

**3a:** an isolated group <a geriatric *ghetto*> **b:** a situation that resembles a ghetto especially in conferring inferior status or limiting opportunity <stuck in daytime TV’s *ghetto*>

**ghet-to** adj. (twenty-first century everyday conversation)

**1a:** behavior that makes you want to say “Huh”? **b:** actions that seem to go against basic home training and common sense

**2:** used to describe something with inferior status or limited opportunity, usually used with so <That’s so *ghetto*. He’s so *ghetto*.>

**3:** a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live, especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure.

**4:** common misuse: authentic, Black, keepin’ it real.

When was the last time you used, heard, thought, snickered, whispered (under your breath), shouted (at the radio), the word ghetto?

I use it so many times a day I can’t even count. When the teenagers sitting on milk crates outside my house in Brooklyn get rowdy playing cards late on a school night. When the man-boys on the corner see my wedding ring as just a challenge instead of something to respect. Whenever I turn on BET, period. *Ghet-to*.

And it’s not fabulous.

You say it too. Admit it. I have a friend who stretches the word out whenever he utters it, as if it needs any more emphasis: As in *gh-e-e-e-e-et—to-o-o-o-o-o-o*. My training? My life. But it wasn’t until

recently, when those ghetto moments got overwhelming, that I felt compelled to write about it. The question most authors hate to answer while they are still writing is the dreaded “What is your book about?” Or maybe it’s just me. As a journalist I’m much more comfortable spreading the word about others than talking about anything that I may be doing. It is more than the panicky “What do I say?” flash of shyness. Instead, there is this initial wave of self-doubt and fear that whoever you are talking to is going to give you that look. That “What are you talking about?” look. Or the “Why would I want to read about that?” look. Or the worst, the “fading-into-total-bored-disinterest” look that grows more pronounced with each of your sentences. When you are still writing, looks like these can push you into an unproductive tailspin as you ask yourself, What am I talking about? Why would anyone want to read this? It’s hard to describe a work in progress because while you’re writing you’re still on the trail of discovery and development.

While writing *Ghettonation* I never had to answer the “what is it about?” question. The moment people heard the title they assumed they knew intimately what I was sitting on. Everyone, it seems, thinks they know ghetto. Even our great thinkers: academics. “Ghetto?” asks Dr. John L. Jackson Jr., a communications

and anthropology professor at the University of Pennsylvania who has spent his career theorizing about race and class. “We know it almost immediately when we see it, when we hear it.” No doubt, professor.

Still, I found it pretty remarkable that no one would let me even fumble my way through some awkward explanation of my project. Instead, just hearing “ghetto” usually sent them—strangers, close friends, folks on the corner, in the beauty parlor, on the stoop, at the office, on the subway, after work—into a tailspin. Reactions were tinged with a bit of anger, a bit of frustration, and a huge bout of “I just got to get this off my chest.”

“Are you going to write about nails and gold teeth, about weaves—blond and red—about baby bottles filled with Pepsi, about babymamas...?” people wanted to know.

“Yes...maybe...no..., and more,” I wanted people to know.

Ghetto, you see, is a mind-set. And that is so much more.

As all consuming as ghetto is in these days of gold teeth, weaves—

blond and red—Pepsi-filled baby bottles, and babymamas, ghetto has a history. The original ghetto was in Venice. It was the Jewish quarter in this Catholic city. Before it became the Jewish area, it was an iron foundry or ghetto, and thus the name was born. In the fourteenth century, gates surrounded the ghetto. Jews were not allowed to leave it. The gates were locked at night. Besides the literal gates, the world’s first ghetto was remarkable in another sense too: it was an affluent neighborhood—home to Jewish merchants and moneylenders. By the seventeenth century, with encouragement of the Vatican, ghettos spread across Italy. Each had its own justice system, further isolating these districts from papal rule. Then in the nineteenth century, driven by the equality ideals of the French Revolution, the walls of the ghetto came crashing down. Pope Pius IX had Europe’s last ghetto—Rome’s—destroyed, walls and system in 1870.

During World War II, the Jewish ghetto was resurrected by the Nazis. By 1940 it was being used as a stopover on the way to the concentration camps. The ghettos were overcrowded communities of filth, starvation, violence, and despair. The Warsaw Ghetto in Poland housed close to 400,000 people in a 3.5 square-mile area that had previously been home to about 160,000 people. This time instead of just gates, the threat of being shot by armed guards ensured that Jews stayed in the ghetto.

The Jews of Europe who survived the Nazi horrors were freed in 1945. Meanwhile, in America’s cities, ghettos fed by housing discrimination, segregation laws, and racism were starting to flourish. Just as ghettos were once a part of every major city in Italy, they were now in every major city in America. Instead of Jews, Black faces were the ones now trapped inside. Ghettos were overcrowded communities of filth, starvation (maybe not for food but for hope), violence, and despair. Instead of gates, highways often artificially divided and isolated these neighborhoods from the rest of the city, helping to keep folks in. And the threat of being shot or stabbed or beaten by armed natives guaranteed that others stayed out of the ghetto.

Coming full circle, ghettos have traveled back to Europe. Today in France when people talk about ghettos, they are referring to high-rise public housing complexes built far away from the city centers to house African and Arab Muslim immigrants. The overcrowded communities of filth, starvation (for a voice), violence, and despair are hotbeds for Islamic fundamentalists on the prowl for their next terrorist recruits. The alternative justice system that has sprung up in France is reminiscent of the way gangs can rule the streets of America’s ghettos.

That’s the history. Sometime after the Jewish slums of the Nazi era and the urban slums of America, after the dream was deferred, ghetto stopped being just a place on the map and became also a place of mind. Now *ghetto* no longer refers to where you live; it is how you live. It is a mind-set.

## That’s So Ghetto...

### What We Say

“I seen” as in “I seen that movie,” “I seen him before,” and the all-purpose “I seen it.” Ditto for *did*. “I just got my hair did.”

Adding an *-ed* or *-t* to the end of a word that’s already in the past tense (*tooked*).

Saying it (too) loud and (too) proud. This includes spilling details of private lives, private moments, and all foulmouthed commentary in public.

Yelling at your boo in the middle of the street.

Using the walkie-talkie feature on your cell phone to discuss personal drama in order to save minutes.

Talking on your cell phone while being examined by the doctor.

Talking on your cell phone while at work, especially at jobs where you are supposed to be dealing with customers or the public, as in parking attendants, cashiers, postal workers.

Talking on your cell phone to say a whole lot of nothing.

Ever uttering “Nigga,” “My Nigga,” “Nigger,” “N-word,” “Bitch,” “Ho,” “Motherfucka,” “Babydaddy/mama,” “Keeping it real.”

Using your baby’s name as an opportunity to give a shout-out to your favorite luxury brand. Children bearing the names Armani, Dior, Courvoisier, Hennessy, and Lexus (there were actually 1,263 babies named Lexus born in the year 2000) are roaming preschools across the country, according to the Social Security Administration.

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