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:

ghetto n. (Merriam-Webster dictionary) [Italian, from Venetian dialect ghetto island where Jews were forced to live, literally, founded (located on the island), from Latin Jacobus 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 or societal ghetto b: a situation that resembles a ghetto especially in conferring inferior status or limiting opportunity

ghetto 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 quality 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 misspelling: 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. Ghetto.

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-e-e-e-e-e-t-o-o-o-o-o-o-o.

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" quality 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 howl 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—Pepsi-filled baby bottles, and babybamas, ghetto has a history. The original ghetto was in Venice. It was the Jewish quarter of the 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, an 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 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 come. 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 center. The French are quick to point out that these complexes are a throwback to the old Thames 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 ghettos no longer refers to where you live, it is how you live. It is a mind-set.

"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 babybamas, ghetto has a history. The original ghetto was in Venice. It was the Jewish quarter of the 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, an 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.

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What We Say

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

Adding an -ed or -o to the end of a word that’s already in the past tense (looked, aiming to sound more refined). Saying it (and loud and (and loud and) proud. This includes spelling details of private lives, private moments, and all (and all) household commentary to 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.


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

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That’s So Ghetto...

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