

# So Ghetto: A Lover's Quarrel with the Word

by Sarah Goldstein, '05

## Prologue

Speak language come straight from the gutter  
Observe the terms that we trade with one another  
Like - what's good, what's popping, what's cracking  
What it is, how you living, what's happening  
Work songs that the slaves sang back then  
The playground chants, with little girls clapping

Ha, my ghetto nation get toe to toe

Stay rockin' steady cause I told you so

-*Ghetto Rock*, Mos Def

My grandparents had an album in their Ft. Lauderdale home called "Songs of Ghetto Life." A pull quote on the back of the disc said "these songs reveal a capacity for suffering." "Ghetto Rock" wasn't on it. When I heard this song for the first time in high school I wondered if Mos Def was including my ancestors in his ghetto nation, and if he was, I wondered if my Eastern European Jewish family would have gotten down to it. I wondered if Mos Def knew that the word "ghetto" comes from the Venetian term "getto," meaning "foundry," for in sixteenth century Venice it was the area surrounding the foundry to which the Jews were confined. I'm sure the ghettos of Krakow were filled with little girls clapping - how else were they going to stay warm?

In the mythologized link between blacks and Jews, people usually point to a shared capacity for suffering and oppression, but today in this ghetto nation Jews are generally not found below the poverty line, are not living in the projects - those structures of urban renewal that have come to signify the urban ghetto - are not learning in the lowest-performing schools, do not have a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison. We came and we prospered: in the land of milk and honey we made bagels and lox. The language of the gutter was not meant to be mine because my grandparents worked hard to lift their children into the middle-class - that oasis of dreams confirmed. Because my father taught me the difference between "me" and "I" at a young age, I now have the awful habit of correcting people exactly three times in my head whenever they make the dreaded mistake. And, as my grandfather said after the Rodney King riots, "Ech, those neighborhoods are different, they were not forced there like we were - we were forced - Sherry," he would say to my mother, "Sherry, Sarah knows what happened to the Jews? The coloreds are not the same as you and I" (the coloreds are not the same as you and me the coloreds are not the same as you and me the coloreds are not the same as you and me).

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In the beginning my great-grandfather, six-year-old Benny Pukel, made the arduous journey from a shtetel outside Belarus to the Lower East Side ghetto. Stepping off the boat at Ellis Island the word "New" before the City seemed to mock the weary travelers. The Bowery spread before them in all its squalor, beggars tugged even at little Benny and the family soon learned that the law of the land was not democracy and freedom but political corruption, child labor and neighborhoods neatly defined by gang territories. It was a city that stank of dreams deferred. Escaping the violence of Eastern Europe's increasingly common pogroms, the Pukel's prayed merely to survive disappearing into the cobbled fabric of the Jewish ghetto.

I was born 80 years later in 1983, the same year Run-DMC busted into hip hop's heartland - the ghettos and barrios of New York City's outer boroughs. Our record player sang a different struggle - the tunes of the Weavers, Paul Robeson, Joan Baez. Although I would not be introduced to Jam Master Jay's crew until 5<sup>th</sup> grade, by the time they were already "old school," even without hip hop's hardcore my mother did not raise my sister and me to be soft.

My parents bought our spacious, well-lit, three-bedroom apartment with exposed brick-walls and a walk-in closet big enough to hold a washer and dryer (still a novelty in New York) for less than \$300,000. They took out a fat mortgage that took 18 years to pay off, but with New York's current bull real estate our home is now worth a little over a million dollars. At the time they bought it, 94<sup>th</sup> Street between West End Avenue and Riverside Drive was a haven for drug addicts and prostitutes. Crack-cocaine bottles littered the street and as one of few white families on the block - those pilgrims of gentrification that we were - the police quickly seized on the opportunity of a couple they figured would be sympathetic to their cause. Happy to do their part in cleaning up the neighborhood, my parents let the police use their bedroom every couple of months to peer onto the block below when Narcotics thought they were particularly close to busting a drug ring.

Sherry Michelle Pukel Goldstein, my mother, has a laugh that makes you want to touch her. She is 50 going on 19 and speaks a language of triple-fast Queenstalk that you need bloodlines or Flushing roots to understand. I have never seen my mother take shit from anybody, not from tiny women who try to cut in

front of her in subway rush, not from the guy at the Hour Photo ripping her out of five cents then calling her a Jewish bitch, not from my father.

One afternoon in my junior year of high school I was working on a math project with my classmate Shreeta King while my mother vacuumed, did two loads of laundry, paid the bills, fixed a pipe under the sink, and then helped us figure out the profit margin for our imaginary washing machine company. As Shreeta was leaving she smiled at me, "Your mother is special, Sarah," - that's how people in high school pronounced my name - "she ghetto." I remember glowing with pride - my mother, ghetto queen. Shreeta, of course, had not meant my mother was straight from the street, but rather, watching my mother fix all that needed fixing, taking care of her home with no hands but her own, Shreeta must have seen that certain toughness my mother carries. *Chutzpah*, my grandmother would say, a Yiddish term meaning the no-shit-taking kind of courage. My mother tried to teach both of her daughters this kind of courage but after 21 years I'm not sure it is something that can be taught.

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In John Sayles' 1984 *Brother From Another Planet* starring a very young Joe Morton, there is a scene where a white teenager does card ticks for money on an uptown A train. As the train pulls into 59<sup>th</sup> Street Columbus Circle he shouts, "and now I will make all the white people disappear!" Indeed before the train pulls out of the station traveling up to 125<sup>th</sup> and Amsterdam the car empties of all its white passengers including the trickster himself.

I love this scene. I must have been around 11 or 12 when I first saw the film and I remember playing it over and over again memorizing the lines so that on my own ride home on the 2/3 express I could say the same line as the train pulls into 96<sup>th</sup> Street, the last stop on the Upper West Side before continuing on to no-white-man's land: East Harlem and beyond that the South Bronx.

I never actually said the joke out loud. I thought of it every afternoon but my commute was primarily a silent one, eyes down to avoid the inevitable "what you looking at *whitegirl*?" In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade I started riding the M7 bus uptown to *Ballet Hispanico* where I danced four days a week. As one of a few white kids who rode this bus I would try to sit as close to my black classmates as possible so that if anyone threatened "step on my Jordan's again I'll fuck you up," perhaps one of my tougher, darker peers would have my back. For me the ride was a game of invisibility: I concentrate first on my toes, my knees, my waist, finally my burning face. By the time we reach my stop I am floating somewhere on the bus's ceiling, scoffing at the small, paler version of myself gripping the pole with all my might below. When I finally quit ballet - a decision I believe my mother is still getting over - I could not help wondering if the relief was as much in not having to take the Harlem route as it was in stopping the tedium of the bar exercise.

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New York is a city obsessed with the authentic. With being *ral* as we said in high school. Like the worst thing that could happen is missing a beat when you're dancing or having the doors of the Express train close in your face just as you've jumped off the Local. New Yorkers have a tendency to do this, to blow matters of time into life or death. I think the fear is that, falling out of sync, you risk being caught inauthentic - putting on your blackface.

To live here - and I am not just talking about the people but the *things* - buildings, cars, art - every windblown thing that makes the concrete jungle its home - you better be the fastest, toughest, tallest, most original, intellectual, lifesaving, ethnic, pained *shit on the block*. It is important in a city that beats 8 million hearts (throw in another 2 or 3 million on the illegal end) to feel like your story is worth being told, otherwise, it can be hard to keep your head straight in the canyon lands of skyscraper and sidewalk. So when you sing "ha, my ghetto nation" you better know what the fuck you're talking about.

Knowing what you're talking about is different than knowing *who* you're talking about. *What* is the experience that signals where you're coming from, *what* is the story that backs up the front. *Who* are the faces that populate the *what*. But often the *who* and the *what* get conflated, the story and the face become one and the same; black is criminal, is welfare, is ghetto.

Mos, as kids in my high school called him, is arguably the only rapper to successfully cross over from underground to mainstream hip hop. Creating a fiercely intellectual ghetto style unlike anyone who has come before or since, his appeal has extended to white prep school kids and hardcore heads alike. For me, Mos is a New York lyricist in the tradition of EB White, Gil Scott Heron, Dylan. Ironically the first time I saw Mos live was not at Brooklyn's South Paw or the Hammerstein Ballroom, but at a predominately Jewish lefty poetry reading at Carnegie Hall.

In February 2003 just a month before the United States declared war on Iraq, my mom brought me and my sister to "Poets Not Fit for the White House," an event organized by a group of writers in response to First Lady Laura Bush revoking an invitation for the poet Sam Hamill to read at the White House. She canceled the invitation after he put out a call for people around the country to send him anti-war poems, of which he received thousands. Following a weekend of virulent nation-wide anti-war protest and charging only \$10,

Carnegie Hall was filled to the gills. It was a merging of the old-old school and the old-school and the new; Arthur Miller showed up pugnacious as ever, the legendary Odetta led the audience in song, but Mos Def stole the show.

I've been waking up to "Ghetto Rock" the last couple of mornings. Generally I need something that makes me move my hips; otherwise you will find me still in bed, dead to the world two hours later. Being dead to the world is something I am deathly afraid of, it seems the quickest way to miss out on being *ra!* In high school the gulf between real and fake was clear as black and white. I remember one of my mother's co-workers came over for dinner one night and after overhearing me sing some lyrics under my breath, asked my mother if they had replaced Spanish with Ebonics as the public school language requirement. But at school when I sang the same "what's good/what's poppin/what's happenin'?" I was met with "Sarah, nigga don't even like white people how you included in 'my ghetto nation?'" Sometimes I went into the history of my Jewish family - the pogroms, the Lower East Side ghetto - "their suffering was the same," I'd say. "The suffering is not the same for you and I" someone shouts back (the suffering is not the same for you and me the suffering is not the same for you and me the suffering is not the same for you and me).

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Shakisha Faley. Daquan Ford. Tireke Good. Carla Gomez. Shaniqua Hastings. Fatima Iman. Jamal Jenkins. These were the names directly before and after mine in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade roll call.

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1. Get your feet off the table, where do you think you are - the ghetto?

Uttered by a 10<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish substitute teacher to Felipe Munoz who was sitting with his feet on the desk.

2. Look at that ghetto booty! Whitegirl got some Negro blood in her.

Shouted at my sister while walking down the street in New York City. For the record, my sister Hannah is a gymnast and her rigorous workouts have created an unusually muscular, voluptuous, attention grabbing backside.

3. She eatin funions, a quarter water, and some BK? Girl, we havin a ghetto picnic

Uttered outside my high school by a girl who was teasing her friend for what she was having for lunch.

A brief glossary of terms:

Funions: Artificial onion rings sold in most New York delis for 25 or 50 cents depending on the neighborhood.

Quarter Water: Water, food coloring, and sugar sold in fist-sized containers for 25 cents. Is generally found only in certain delis where the clientele is typically of a lower-economic bracket.

BK: Burger King. Of course.

4. I can't write on this table yo, look how it's shaking, shit is ghetto, it's broken yo.

Heard while taking a math test in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Ms. Gastic eventually allowed Anthony Quarshie to take the test in the library.

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New Yorkers have a capacity for walking with their heads down. I grew up looking for stars in concrete - pavement glittering under a streetlamp, the blur of shooting headlights 20 stories below, the on-again-off-again flicker of the subway as it breaks from the tunnel. Maybe it is residual guilt that keeps our eyes averted, the best bargain of history: a kingdom for \$24. Once, on a particularly clear New Year's Eve I made out the Big Dipper from the roof of our apartment building. It must have been a fluke that I was even looking at the sky to begin with, so shocked was I by the natural phenomenon I kept it a secret certain it was meant for my eyes alone. "Keep your eyes on the street," my mother warned as soon as I was old enough to traverse the racket alone, and so I grew up taking pleasure in the sound of my boots hitting pavement, stomping the burning matter of urban stars, walking with keys in hand ready for on-coming attack; I haven't looked up since.

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I attend Brown University with a fat New-York-City-public-school-single-mama chip on my shoulder and I learn terms like "gentrification," and "social construction," and even "ghettoization," so that I may understand that chip on my shoulder. The elevator in the English Department at Brown is manufactured by a company called the SchindlerGroup, a Swiss engineering company that created the first hydraulic elevator more than 120 years ago. The elevator manufacturer has no relation whatsoever to Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist who kept 1,300 Jews alive by paying off the Nazis and insisting that their

Jewish labor was "essential" at his Emalia Factory in Krakow, but even so, as the elevator begins its descent I feel my ears burning up and sweat breaking out on my brow and lower back.

I do not have a fear of elevators and have never been afraid of small spaces but today in this elevator I start panicking. 4---3---*Why is it taking so long?* I am convinced that something is wrong and I reach for the alarm just as the bell signals our arrival on the ground floor. By this time I am shielding my eyes, certain that I will be shuttled into a cattle car headed for Bergen-Belsen. The doors open to harsh sunlight pouring into the English Department's lobby, and I make my way to a bench to catch my breath. Incidents like elevator trips to Bergen-Belsen are happening with frequency this year, as I hunt with increased fervor for our Jewish capacity for suffering, 102 years after my great-grandfather stepped off the boat.

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5. The CIT is the ghetto.

Heard while writing a paper in Brown University's main computer cluster - the CIT. The girl who said it appeared to be frustrated by how long her computer was taking to reboot.

6. I really think you kids should get rid of this furniture, it's so ghetto.

Uttered by a friend's landlord who wanted to get rid of old furniture that had been sitting on their front porch through winter.

7. "Spring Break in the Ghetto"

The title of an opinion column written by a Brown University student who, instead of going to Cancun or Miami Beach, planted trees and worked with a community service clean up crew in the projects of West Philadelphia.

8. I feel like I have a whole new perspective on what we're fighting for after canvassing in the ghetto.

Uttered by a neighbor who went to New Hampshire on November 2<sup>nd</sup> to campaign for Kerry. I responded by screaming "My school was in the ghetto, we ran track through the projects, don't talk to me about what you're motherfuckin fighting for." To understand my perhaps abrasive response I would like to say that my grandmother had died that same day.

9. If you ghetto get up on stage!

Uttered by Umi of Dead Prez at their show in Providence, Rhode Island last November. It was observed by sources in the audience that "the only people who got on stage were black. Dead Prez was not even trying to see a white person move."

10. Ha, my ghetto nation get toe to toe/Stay rocking steady cause I told you so.

Heard under the breath of the white boy sitting next to me at Brown University's John D. Rockefeller library - not to be confused with the "Rockafella" of "Rockafella Records" the name of Jay-Z's record label and hip hop empire.

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We eat dinner in a cute Thai restaurant on Hope Street in Providence. It's Bring Your Own Bottle so we're both a little tipsy from the jug of Shiraz we picked up on our way. The restaurant is small squeezing as many customers as it can hold so our knees touch under the table, and I like the way my laugh sounds - adult, I think, sexy. We have been dating for a few months now but the idea of a *date* is still something new. I make a list before dinner of things we can talk about in case conversation runs out:

mos def's acting career

the knicks

reparations

finals schedule

the ghetto

larry summers

By the time the food comes we are already silly from wine and I haven't had to go to the bathroom to consult the list once. We are talking about street cred - how one earns it or who is born with it. The conversation is pointless to begin with because if you have real street credibility you don't have to talk about how you have real street credibility. But I don't raise this objection, I have made it off the M7 and arrived at

Brown University unscathed so I'll put on my whiteface and discuss the "semiotics of street cred" with the best of them.

The logic of our conversation implies that one has to endure some kind of suffering to enjoy street credibility, which raises some concerns. For instance, is one afforded street cred simply for being black and thus enduring a given amount of racism in America? Did a Jew have street cred simply for being Jewish and thus toting a lineage of victimization? I raise my hand in mock personal affront and say, "I personally felt jipped in high school when my fellow African American and Latino peers exchanged the names of the do-gooders whom their housing projects were named after, granting them instant ghetto status when my family meanwhile had suffered the pogroms of pre-war Poland." My date shot me a look as though surprised and maybe disappointed that I would throw down in a game of victim status.

"What?" I asked indignantly, "I'm straight out the Krakow ghetto." I expected this line to get a laugh as it usually does, even in a pre-Ali G world people found amusement in the image of my Jewish ancestry warming their hands over a coal burning stove with gangsta bling and cornrows. However, rather than laughing, my companion responded with silence. I could not believe it - had he not seen *Annie Hall*? Had a multi-culturalist, PC-centered education co-opted his sense of humor?

"What is it?" I asked, increasingly concerned. "It's just that my grandparents are Holocaust survivors so I don't find ghetto humor really so funny." "Oh," I gulped my water. Not only had I been trumped once again in my absurd contest of the street but my favorite word conferred yet deeper social ramifications that I even thought. I asked him what he thought of the word shtetel. By the end of the meal we are happily talking about whether or not hip hop is dead.

Later, while we are making love I am reminded of my favorite joke from Annie Hall. Alvy Singer, Woody Allen's nom de plume, expresses amazement that Annie's grandmother - "Grammy Hall" - did grandmotherly things like knit sweaters and bake cookies for her. "My grandmother didn't have time to knit, she was too busy being raped by Cossacks," he cracks. I am thinking about this joke when he comes, as he sighs over me I am wondering if my great-grandmother was raped by Cossacks, how his grandmother was stripped down and prodded in the camps. I curse Woody Allen and his dumb joke, which has gone too far; I cannot turn off these searing images. As his breathing returns to normal in my ear, I quietly detach myself mumbling something about having to pee and duck into the bathroom. On the toilet I put my head between my knees; hoping the sensation of blood rushing to my head will shut off the mental slideshow. I start making a list of social constructions, a tactic which has calmed me down in my University induced race-and-class panic attacks many times before: bagels and lox, the M7, Jordans, my mother, the big dipper.

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As a young person, one of my favorite stories of blacks and Jews was told to me by my sportswriter step-father. Trying to get an interview with a professional black football star recently accused of rape, my stepfather found that he was unable to get past the football star's mother who was handling her son's calls. As he was about to give up the woman finally said "hold on - you Jewish?" Surprised and maybe a little offended by her question my step-father said "I don't see how that is relevant to my speaking with your son ma'am, but if you need to know, yes I am." "Well," said the woman, "your people have had a bad time too," and she passed the phone on to her Nike-endorsing son. But a story of this kind is rare. More common are the stories of blacks and Jews getting off at different subway stops, holding their breath in neighborhoods where their skin gives them away. Try as I might, when I attempt to link ghetto to ghetto - the slave built pyramids of Egypt to the Middle Passage to Kristallnacht to Crown Heights - I find myself forging a bond that is not there.

A friend of mine gave me a book a few years ago, *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* I think she thought it would resonate. To be fair, I never read the book, as far as I know it might be the solution to racism and world peace, but one thing I can say for sure is that the reason all the black kids sat together in my cafeteria was because white kids did not usually eat "hot lunch" or meals subsidized by the city for low-income students. You can guess what the other name for hot lunch was. Black and white were not an issue merely of black and white, but were substantive markers of poverty and privilege. In Robert MacNeil's linguistic history of America *Do You Speak American?* a chapter titled "Bad-Mouthing Black English" examines the ways in which black speech is both imitated and denigrated by white America. He tries to complicate white conceptions of a monolithic black America explaining that "[t]he inner cities of America - the term is often a euphemism for black ghettos - can look very different from one another." To be sure, the massive Frederick Douglass Projects on 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox in Harlem look different from the one-story houses separated by chain-link in Watts, but when someone next to me says that their computer is ghetto, I doubt they are referring specifically to the towers of Canarsie as opposed to those in Sunset Park. And even the kids at my high school I doubt were referring to their homes when they complained that their tables were ghetto yo.

Ghetto is not like the word nigger. White people, at least where I'm from, typically do not say nigger, it isn't done. But ghetto, as an adjective of colloquial American English is generally accepted, no matter what your race, without question. I've never seen someone stop a friend to ask "Excuse me but when you say that

your computer is ghetto are you referring to the whole of black America and their institutionalized confinement to the brick and concrete of inner cities and prisons or were you talking about the Jews in Warsaw, Paris, Belarus? Or were you talking about Palestinian confinement in settlements and camps?" When ghetto becomes an adjective what is it describing? If the American ghetto is home to our country's poorest living in color-coded confinement, then is it not merely another way to assert linguistic racism when people use the word to refer to all things malfunctioning, busted, broken? If white Americans are indeed fascinated by black culture then so are we fascinated by suffering. For it is the suffering that is *ral*, that confers your badge of street cred and authenticity, and like *chutzpah*, there is no amount of talking or teaching that is going to grant you that status. As I try to squeeze my way into the ghetto nation the trouble is people actually live there.

According to Robert MacNeil and William Cran's book *Do You Speak American?* in 2002 one in four African American households lived below the federal poverty line. In New York City it was one in three.