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HOST: LIVING ROOMS is our new digital series looking at the transformation in where and how we live. Read, listen, and watch at thewalrus.ca/livingrooms.

The idea of a marginalized community living in low-income housing, or “priority housing” is not a new concept. It stems from anti-Semitism and is left-over language from the aftermath of slavery. But erasing these communities from our cities and Canadian history is not the answer. Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Kamal Al-Solaylee, author and professor at Ryerson’s School of Journalism.

KAMAL AL-SOLAYLEE: Good evening. My name is Kamal Al-Solaylee, and I'm going to talk to you today about a word and a place that not that not a lot of people, like to acknowledge or discuss. And this is part of an a project that I'm actually working with The Walrus magazine, it's going to be a feature, and a book. So, you're my, test audience. If you have any ideas or suggestions, please feel free to, come and talk to me. So, my title is “In defence of ghettos,” and in seven minutes, I'm going to ask seven questions and I'm trying to answer to try to give you some responses.

My first question is why is ghetto such a difficult word and place? There's no denying that when we hear the word ghetto, we do feel somehow uncomfortable. I don't blame. I don't blame you. I don't blame myself, blame anyone for feeling that way. It has this origin is actually from Italy, from the word ghetto, and it's become a word that has become a source associated with a long history of anti-Semitism. It obviously developed over, over the centuries that, and ended up in the Holocaust in North America. We actually associate the term largely with the African-American community and the segregation of housing segregation. So, as you can see a word that that's come to us, through antisemitism and the aftershocks of slavery, it's not one that we are very keen to preserve or replicate. We think of poverty, isolation, crime alienation, and maybe even guilt. So, that's why it's such a difficult word.

My second question is where are today's ghettos and how do, how do they, how do they differ from ethnic enclaves? We like to think that we don't have ghettos anymore, but that's not true. Actually, ghettos exist. They do in reserves, they do in refugee camps in Europe. We may not always call them that. We've always found some euphemism and ways around them. My favourite one actually is from Toronto. We call them “priority neighbourhoods.” Perhaps the most remarkable among them is the rise and fall of the gay ghetto. The gay neighbourhood, where members of the LGBTQ community will come together. Play sometimes work in part. What they felt safe as that community expanded that has become more, more accepted, more accepted than mainstream society. The need for a ghetto has abated. Today's ghettos are not just in inner cities anymore, but at least not in Canada's bigger cities like Toronto and Vancouver because the real estate boom have forced out and priced out entire communities from city cores.

We talk about the city, the cities of migration and the racialization of poverty and precarious work mean that the working poor largely come from ethnic and migrant community. They work in the city, but can only afford to live on, on its margins. Sometimes cut off from the core by bad transportation options. If you're doing a little bit better than you can, and you can afford the car, then you, you, you opt for a suburban living. But the question I, I want to ask you is a fancier car dependent get ghetto any more or any less of a ghetto. Have we just upgraded the idea of ghetto and created a two-tier version one in inner city and one in the suburbs or in large cities?



So why do we fear ghettos denying that ghettos have become a kind of a parking space for our collective anxieties about race and racially based economic disparity. Again, the migrant experience we've projected our worst fears into poor, poor ghettos. They're places where the black male body, prevails, and we sometimes think of Brown extremists. They ghetto are places where mainstream institutions, whether it's policing, education, social services are, are at a disadvantage, they're outnumbered. Other languages and other ways of life dominate here. The state is not in control. Cultures. Cultures from home countries are. Ghettos and ethnic enclaves are barometers. The ultimate test of how we really live with the other. Even when statistically speaking, the other is no longer an oppressed or a small minority.

So, why do we try to transform or tear down ghettos? You've heard words like mixed, mixed income neighbourhoods. Gentrification. The truth of the matter is, is that in inner cities bound by greenbelts or water or other kinds of restrictions, ghettos where largely migrant communities have been left to fend for themselves. And where housing projects for the working poor have been falling apart as suddenly desirable. It's all about location, location, location. So, gentrification and mixed income neighbourhoods are the only way that cities like Toronto, for example, can expand and still not fall for urban sprawl. A ghetto, once shunned, is now a geographically desirable arena for social entrepreneurs and speculators.

So, who loses when we erase ghettos and I'm going to answer just in the interest of time, question six as well, and who wins. Well, who loses is not just the people who once lived in them; as the rents increase and gentrification builds up. A kind of flight happens. I call it Black and Brown flight. And they fly further into the outskirts. What happens with migrant communities is that our connection to the city is lost. A whole history, way of life stories, community, community roots disappear. In places like Brooklyn and Harlem, particularly Black residents and Black history are being brushed out of the picture, whitened through hipsters, or browned, through a more upwardly, mobile, Hispanic community. There's a loss of collective wisdom and the threat of communities being dispersed. Thinned out. I worry about that because with every community that is being erased, a history is being wiped out at the same time.

I understand that community is a fluid word. Places, people come and go. We see the grounds for highways, for subways, for the greater good, but I'm not entirely convinced that that's what's happening here. Who wins? This is not going to be a diatribe about development or, or condo developers or anything like this. But I don't think anybody actually wins in my opinion when, when we erase ghetto, because among other things, it, we validate seeing the ethnic and working poor as categories of people in need of either salvation or exile.

My final question is why should you care about all of this stuff? Why should ... I don't live in a ghetto? And, and, but why should I care about it? I care about it because for most residents in, in, in, in, in ethnic enclaves or ghettos, they, the place where they live is a point of reference is a path to identity.

And even to a point of view, to as being Canadian,.I teach in a university in downtown Toronto, where I supervise the education on both the privileged and the marginalised. And I can tell you that the next generation will have completely different stories about what Canada is and 150 years from now. It'd be completely different narrative from the one we're going to celebrate next year. And I think that's a good thing. The face of Canada is changing. And so should it's narrative. One place where these narratives are happening is the ghetto. One place where these narratives may cease to exist is the gentrified or demolished ghetto. Put simply you can't tell new stories when your history has been erased. Thank you so much.

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Kamal Al-Solaylee from The Walrus Talks



HOST: Kamal Al-Solaylee spoke at The Walrus Talks Cities of Migration in 2016, and he's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked, wheeled, and web-cammed into the virtual stage at The Walrus Talks.

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