

The Genie's Out of the Bottle: Journalist, author talks what it means to be Brown in Canada and impact of social media

By Brock Weir

The worst thing you can do is check your Twitter feed before turning off the lights at night, according to award-winning journalist Kamal Al-Solaylee.

Al-Solaylee, the author of *Brown: What Being Brown in the World Today Means (To Everyone)*, brought his unique perspective on this issue to the Aurora Public Library this fall as part of Lit On Tour 2018, a program of the International Festival of Authors. Hosted by this writer, Al-Solaylee shared with a packed audience in the APL's Magna Room, what inspired him to begin an in-depth look on what it means to be Brown in Canada, admittedly a task undertaken in 2015, well before the rise of Donald Trump in the United States and many right wing movements around the world and here at home.

There is a whole association with the term 'Brown,' particularly in South Asia and also with people from the Middle East and, to some extent, Latino people, he explained. I've always wanted to know where the term comes from and what it means in our world today. Much to my surprise, I couldn't find any books about that to get me going. I decided I was going to write a book about being Brown just to start a conversation on what it means to be brown-skinned in the world.

Brown, he said, is a buffer zone between black and white in racist science and around the world it can be seen as a middle ground that is not clearly understood.

It is premised on the fear of blackness and as an aspiration towards whiteness, he said. The second premise of the book is that Brown has become the colour of cheap labor, the idea of importing people to do the work that people in the community, once a certain country reaches a middle class level, or has enough to farm out work, they go towards countries that are poorer, but also people who are darker-skinned, who do the work; the labour-intensive work, whether that be child care, working in farms, in fields, work that is labour intensive and not particularly well-paid.

I wanted to talk about the colourization of Islam as a 'Brown Menace' taking off from every generation, or every few decades you have a group of people that have been designated as a 'menace'. Before that, it was the 'yellow peril' to refer to Japanese and Chinese people, and I do think at the moment we're living in a moment of what I would call 'Brown Menace' and that is largely to do with particularly Muslim populations in places like France, the UK, Canada, and, with that, a certain idea of values that don't belong in a Western, Judeo-Christian tradition.

Al-Solaylee ends his literary look at what it means to be Brown around the world on what he views as a bright note. He describes, for instance, the 2015 Federal Election as one that was peppered with divisive rhetoric and, ultimately, rhetoric that voters rejected. He said this left him feeling 'Pollyannaish' about the world around him. But, since 2015, the world has seen the rise of highly divisive, and often hate-filled politics.

That Pollyannaish feeling has quickly evaporated.

Who would have thought that in 2015 we would be talking about the return of Fascism or the return of White Nationalism White Ethno-State, or we would be talking about a Muslim ban or separating Mexican children from their parents in detention camps? he asked the audience. Who would have thought we'd be talking about Brexit, the demonization of immigrants, about a President of the United States describing Mexicans as 'rapists', his entourage using words like 'vermin' and 'cockroaches' to describe refugees? I think the world has turned on its head since the book came out.

I captured the beginning of this. I sensed it was happening and that's why I wrote the book, but I never in a million years, in 2015, thought we would reach where we are right now so fast. I thought it was something that was going to take another generation, but we reached it in three years. I am very depressed and pessimistic about the state of liberal democracies in general. I think they are under threat, failing and not fighting back because everyone is fighting too dirty. I don't know where this is going to lead. What world are we living in? How did it happen so fast?

The assembled audience had a few ideas, ranging from the rise of social media, to the role of traditional media.

One woman, who said she came to Canada from the United Kingdom, said she came from a multicultural city and didn't have the same experiences as Al-Solaylee had in his formative years, but more recently she has seen an 'uncomfortable' degree of hatred rising in her home city, thanks in no small part, she said, to the media.

While Al-Solaylee cited the predominant tabloid culture in the United Kingdom, and likened publications like The Daily Mail and The Sun in the UK to Fox News in the United States, he said one commonality was media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

There is one man who is actually wreaking havoc with the political systems in the U.K. and the European mainland particularly

with Brexit. On Fox News, here in Canada, he said. You have to admit also the rise of digital media, we'll take our fair share of blame as journalists and anyone can weaponize their Twitter accounts and turn it into a platform of hate and violence. If you're a woman on Twitter, I am sure you know what that feels like, and if you're a person of colour as well. As much as I like the idea of the democratization of media and everyone can publish what you like, and if you have a following you're a journalist, I do think this editorless work is a big concern in this world. You go to the comments section and you wonder just how frightening is the fact that some of these people might be our friends and neighbours and they are hiding behind the anonymity of social media.

The idea of the weaponization of social media struck a chord with another woman in the audience, who questioned whether there was any way to turn the tide and use social media as a way to build bridges and increase people's connectedness with each other. But the author said he felt the Genie was out of the bottle.

It is an uncontrollable platform. Studies show that when journalists step in, say they post something about their story, all the trolls come out of the woodwork and journalists come out and re-set the agenda and the conversation that follows is much more civilized and much more on-topic, he said, noting he asks his students at Ryerson University to take regular social media breaks. Good people should step in and start to redirect the conversation, but it is virtually impossible. We're dealing with things like bots and artificial intelligence that is just a whole new world and I honestly don't know.