

## From Gorée to Gaza: Necropolitics, Carceral Geography, and the Comparative Cartography of Oppression in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Message*

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### Abstract

The present article examines how Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Message* (2024) constructs a transnational cartography of oppression by connecting three historically distinct sites — Gorée Island, the Jim Crow South, and Gaza — within a single comparative spatial argument. Conducted within postcolonial theory, critical geography, and Black literary studies, the study addresses a gap: the existing scholarship on Black travel writing has not offered a theoretically integrated reading of the book's three essays as a unified spatial argument, nor linked its content to the controversy surrounding its reception. The main variables are necropolitical governance, carceral spatial organization, and contrapuntal reading; the dependent variable is the transnational cartography of oppression the text constructs, together with its critical and institutional reception. The analysis relies on a qualitative, theoretically grounded close-reading methodology. Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, Ruth Wilson Gilmore's carceral geography, and Edward Said's contrapuntal reading serve as interpretive lenses applied to the three essays and to the book's reception. Coates constructs equivalence not through historical analogy but through a shared structural grammar of disposability operating across Gorée, South Carolina, and Gaza. The controversy surrounding the book's Palestinian sections reproduces, in real time, the mechanisms of spatial illegibility and institutional censorship the text theorizes, so that its reception continues rather than merely reacts to its argument. *The Message* exemplifies a form of comparative racial witnessing in which the political imagination of freedom depends on reading geographies of oppression relationally, opening avenues for further comparative research on Black and Palestinian spatial imaginaries.

**Keywords:** Comparative racial formation, critical geography, literary reportage, necropolitics, postcolonialism, Ta-Nehisi Coates

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## 1. Introduction

In October 2024, Ta-Nehisi Coates published *The Message*, a slim yet politically incendiary work of nonfiction reportage. The text collects three essays inspired by distinct journeys and experiences, including a return to Senegal, a meditation on the censorship of his earlier work *Between the World and Me* (2015) in South Carolina schools, and an extended visit to the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Although the three essays emerged from different contexts, they are united by the author's concern with memory, power, and the politics of narrative. The book was released against the backdrop of the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza. This historical proximity immediately charged its reception with both heightened attention and deep controversy, as the reader approached the book through the lens of a rapidly unfolding and highly contested moment.

Initially, the book presents itself as a set of letters addressed to students about the craft and ethical responsibilities of writing. However, it rapidly reveals itself to be considerably more ambitious. Beyond its pedagogical framework, the text offers a comparative meditation on the geographies through which racial, colonial, and imperial power organizes space so as to render certain bodies vulnerable and disposable. In Coates' analysis, such sites as Gorée, the Jim Crow South, and Gaza function as more than historical and geographical settings. They become epistemological vantage points from which the global architecture of white supremacy and colonial sovereignty can be examined. Through these three distinct places, the book traces connections across different histories of oppression while remaining attentive to their specific contexts.

Importantly, the three symbolic sites are not presented as identical or interchangeable. Instead, Coates performs what Edward Said (1994) called "contrapuntal reading," a method that encourages the reader to consider different historical contexts and experiences side by side without reducing them to a single narrative. As Said (1994) explains, "we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting" (p. 32). This reading holds different historical experiences in simultaneous view without collapsing them into identity.

The existing scholarship on Coates' earlier work has examined his engagement with embodiment, memory, and the afterlives of slavery within a primarily domestic, US-centered frame. What remains largely unexamined, however, is how *The Message* operates as a single, internally coherent spatial argument that binds three ostensibly unrelated geographies together through shared theoretical mechanisms rather than through loose analogy. Studies of literary reportage and Black travel writing have not yet accounted for the way in which necropolitics, carceral geography, and contrapuntal reading interact within a single text to produce this transnational cartography, nor have they systematically connected the book's content to the institutional and public controversy its reception generated. This leaves two related gaps: first, an absence of a theoretically integrated

reading of the book's three essays as a unified spatial argument rather than as three discrete travel pieces; and second, an absence of scholarship treating the book's reception itself as continuous with, rather than external to, that argument.

This article addresses these gaps by asking: How does *The Message* use the interaction between necropolitical governance, carceral spatial organization, and contrapuntal reading to construct a transnational cartography of oppression across Gorée, the Jim Crow South, and Gaza? And in what ways does the book's critical and institutional reception extend the very spatial logics it theorizes? By treating theory, text, and reception as three interacting variables within a single analytical frame, the article moves beyond site-by-site commentary toward an integrated account of how comparative racial witnessing operates as both literary strategy and political event.

The article also offers a critical reading of *The Message* as a work of spatial literature. The text's primary intellectual labor is cartographic rather than simply a recounting of a series of journeys: it traces the geography of power by following Coates' movements across coordinates marked by dispossession, exclusion, and historical violence. The argument proceeds in six stages. The next section situates the text within its theoretical and generic contexts, drawing on available scholarship in literary reportage, Black travel narrative, and critical geography. Then, the article's methodological approach is outlined. Subsequently, the discussion moves to the chapter on Gorée Island in Senegal, interpreting it as a reflection on the memory-geography of the Middle Passage and the Black Atlantic. Next, the analysis turns to the Jim Crow South and the politics of spatial narration in educational censorship. The penultimate analytical chapter, the article's longest and most substantial part, analyzes Coates's Palestinian reportage as an act of comparative racial witnessing. The following discussion considers the book's reception as a political event in its own right. It also illustrates the mechanisms by which dominant systems of power attempt to preserve their legitimacy by obscuring, policing, and rendering invisible the geographies of oppression that sustain them. The article concludes by synthesizing the main findings and reflecting on their broader implications.

## **2. Critical Geographies and the Literature of Witness**

### **2.1 Literary Reportage and the Black Intellectual Travel Tradition**

Coates' *The Message* is part of a long-standing tradition of Black intellectual travel writing in which the journey across space is also a way of reading global racial formation. In Richard Wright's *Black Power* (1954), James Baldwin's *No Name in the Street* (1972), and Amiri Baraka's *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze* (1971), the mobile body of the Black writer is deployed as an instrument of comparative racial analysis. In these works, travel is not tourism but investigation: encounters with other sites of oppression do not dilute the specificity of African American experience but rather defamiliarize it, rendering visible its structural logics through the detour of analogy. Wright (1954) set the paradigm when he described his journey to the Gold Coast as driven by the need to know whether "the same racial experiences I had as a Negro in America had evoked in the Africans a form of what

might be called the will to organization" (p. 13) — a spatial and comparative impulse that Coates inherits directly.

Scholars of the Black travel narrative have long argued that this tradition enacts what Michelle Wright (2015) calls "epiphenomenal" Blackness, a form of Black identity rooted in "the Now, through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted" (p. 4). In this view, rather than being anchored in a linear descent from a single African origin, Blackness emerges from the shared present-tense experience of racial subjection across multiple geographies. For Coates, places such as Senegal, South Carolina, and Gaza do not share a single origin; what connects them is a shared structural present. This shift, from genealogical to structural solidarity, forms the theoretical linchpin of the book's spatial argument.

Literary reportage is the genre most immediately associated with *The Message*. It has been theorized by scholars such as John Hersey, Michael Shapiro, and, more recently, Francine Prose, as a form that occupies the generic border between journalism and literature, fact and affect. For Prose (2006), this border resides in the obligation to read "as if your life depended on it," attending to each word and scene "with the attention we bring to things that matter most to us" (p. 2). What distinguishes Coates' intervention is his insistence that the reporter's subjectivity is not to be eliminated: his Blackness, his Americanness, and his formation through the specific genealogy of the Baltimore streets do not constitute obstacles to be overcome but the very instruments of perception and analysis. This aligns with the concept of "situated knowledge" formulated by Donna Haraway, for whom knowledge is never neutral or complete in an abstract sense but is always grounded somewhere: "the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular" (Haraway, 1988, p. 590).

## **2.2 Necropolitics and Carceral Geography**

The central theoretical framework guiding this article's reading of *The Message* is drawn from the convergence of Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, Ruth Wilson Gilmore's work on carceral geography, and Rashid Khalidi's scholarship on the Palestinian condition. Together, these scholars provide lenses for understanding how power operates through space, mobility, and the management of life and death. Mbembe (2003) defines necropolitics as the sovereign power "to dictate who may live and who must die" (p. 40), a power exercised not only through direct violence but through the spatial organization of territories into zones of life and zones of death. The result, he argues, is the production of "death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (p. 40). The plantation, the colony, the concentration camp, and the checkpoint can all be understood as instruments of necropolitical governance, each regulating movement, restricting rights, and sorting populations according to differential access to life, security, and belonging.

Gilmore's (2007) concept of carceral geography expands the Foucauldian theory of incarceration by demonstrating that prisons and prison-like spaces are not aberrations or exceptional institutions but fundamental components of the spatial order produced by racial capitalism. She defines racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (p. 28), a definition that foregrounds lethal spatial unevenness as a core mechanism through which racism operates. Within this framework, the ghetto, the reservation, the occupied territory, and the refugee camp are all continuous with the prison in their function, each serving to contain and immobilize surplus populations rendered disposable by the demands of capital and the anxieties of racial sovereignty. Reading Coates through Gilmore's lens reveals that his three geographic sites are linked by more than symbolic parallels: they emerge as interconnected settings within a global system that organizes racial domination, dispossession, and inequality across space.

Finally, Edward Said's contrapuntal method, developed primarily in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), provides a framework for reading across geographies without collapsing their different histories into a single narrative. In music, counterpoint involves the simultaneous interaction of two or more independent melodic lines; Said extended this concept to literary and cultural analysis, arguing that the full story of imperialism can only be told by reading metropolitan and colonial texts together, in their tensions and mutual implication. As he observes, "just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography" (Said, 1994, p. 7). Coates practices a vernacular version of this contrapuntal method. Rather than treating places as isolated sites, he reads Gorée, South Carolina, and Gaza contrapuntally, revealing how distinct histories of dispossession, domination, and resistance resonate across space and time.

### 3. Methodology

Although *The Message* is a work of literary nonfiction rather than an empirical dataset, this article follows a deliberate and reproducible methodological procedure, consistent with the conventions of theoretically grounded literary and cultural criticism. Making this procedure explicit allows the reader to evaluate the interpretive choices underlying the analysis and to replicate or extend it to other texts. Indeed, the study adopts a qualitative, single-text case-study design combined with comparative close reading. *The Message* (Coates, 2024) constitutes the primary corpus; its three constituent essays ("The Tolling of the Bells," "The Camera Obscura," and "The Gigantic Dream") are treated as the units of analysis. This design is appropriate to the research question because it allows for a sustained, internally comparative reading of a single text across its three geographic sites, rather than a survey of multiple texts that would sacrifice interpretive depth for breadth.

The analysis proceeds in three interacting stages. First, each essay was read against the theoretical vocabulary of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003, 2017), carceral geography (Gilmore, 2007), and contrapuntal reading (Said, 1994) to identify recurring spatial motifs (thresholds, checkpoints,

curricula, walls, water access) that organize Coates' descriptions of power. Second, these motifs were cross-read contrapuntally across the three sites — Gorée, the Jim Crow South, and Gaza — to determine whether the connections Coates draws operate through structural homology (a shared spatial grammar of disposability) rather than through simple historical analogy. Third, the critical and institutional reception of the book (reviews, rescinded invitations, editorial decisions) was analyzed as a discursive corpus in its own right and read against the same theoretical vocabulary, on the premise that reception can be treated as a textual extension of a book's argument rather than as an external, purely sociological fact.

To situate the primary text and evaluate the plausibility of its comparative claims, the analysis draws on a secondary corpus of scholarship in Black studies, postcolonial theory, and Palestine studies (e.g., Hartman, 1997, 2008; Khalidi, 2020; McKittrick, 2006; Robinson, 1983; Sexton, 2010; Weizman, 2007), as well as testimonial and literary sources from Palestinian writers (Barghouti, 2000; Shehadeh, 2007). These sources function as an interpretive check on the primary analysis: where Coates' claims align with, extend, or complicate this secondary literature, the article treats that alignment as evidence supporting a structural rather than merely rhetorical reading of the book's comparisons.

As with any interpretive literary analysis, the readings offered here are necessarily selective and shaped by the theoretical commitments outlined above; a different combination of frameworks (for instance, a strictly formalist or strictly historiographic approach) could foreground different aspects of the text. To mitigate this, the authors triangulate each major interpretive claim against at least one direct textual citation from *The Message* and at least one source from the secondary theoretical corpus, and they distinguish explicitly, throughout the analysis, between claims attributable to Coates' text and claims that represent the authors' own theoretical extension of it. This is a single-text, theory-driven qualitative study. It does not employ reader-response data, systematic content analysis of press coverage, or corpus-linguistic methods, and its conclusions about reception are therefore illustrative rather than exhaustive. Future studies could complement this approach with a systematic content analysis of reviews and institutional statements.

#### 4. Gorée and the Memory-Geography of the Middle Passage

The first essay in *The Message*, "The Tolling of the Bells", recounts Coates' visit to Senegal, particularly to Gorée Island, site of the Maison des Esclaves. For millions of visitors, and many members of the African diaspora, this island serves as a site of pilgrimage and remembrance closely associated with the transatlantic slave trade. In Coates' spatial imagination, Gorée functions as what Pierre Nora (1989) described as a *lieu de mémoire* — a site where memory crystallizes, where history becomes tangible and visitable. For Nora, such sites emerge precisely "because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (1989, p. 7); they carry the weight of collective identity that living tradition once bore.

At the same time, Coates remains attentive to the dangers and limitations of pilgrimage. His reflections echo what Saidiya Hartman (2008) theorizes as the risk inherent in diasporic tourism to sites of historical trauma, which can substitute affective release for political understanding. She describes the diasporic visitor arriving in West Africa as a stranger who discovers that "the history of the Atlantic slave trade and the radical discontinuity it created made Africa" both irresistibly home and "a place you've never been" (p. 41). Coates (2024) names this risk explicitly, admitting that he undertook the journey even knowing that "very few of the reported millions of enslaved people passed through that door" (p. 56). This frank admission highlights the gap between the symbolic authority of the site and the historical evidence surrounding it; Coates uses the discrepancy to explore how memory, history, and collective longing intersect in the construction of diasporic identity, rather than to diminish the site's significance.

Coates approaches Gorée not as a tourist but as a writer intent on understanding the spatial materiality of the slave trade. His focus extends beyond history itself to the ways architecture, geography, and physical dimensions produced, and still produce, particular forms of racial subjectivity. Gorée thus becomes a place through which a lasting spatial legacy can be understood. A central feature of this exploration is the Door of No Return, the architectural threshold through which enslaved Africans were said to pass onto the ships that would carry them to the Americas. In Coates' narrative, this door operates as a hinge between two spatial orders: the African world from which the enslaved were violently extracted, and the Atlantic world of racial capitalism into which they were inserted.

The significance of this threshold is not simply symbolic. It embodies social death in Orlando Patterson's (1982) sense, defined as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons" (p. 13). The Door of No Return is the architectural moment at which natal alienation is completed, the point of no geographic return. Coates is careful to mark this threshold as a constructed myth as much as a historical site. Rather than describing Gorée as an unquestionable historical archive, he highlights its symbolic power within the African diaspora. When he describes the Door of No Return as "a perfectly crafted peg for the hole in our story" (p. 56), he frames the island less as an archive of fact than as an instrument that diaspora memory requires. For him, the importance of Gorée lies not solely in historical certainty but in its capacity to give form to a shared narrative of loss, rupture, and remembrance.

What distinguishes Coates' engagement with Gorée from more conventional forms of diaspora pilgrimage is his insistence on connecting the historical geography of the slave trade to the spatial realities of the contemporary anti-Black violence. For him, Gorée does not simply commemorate past atrocities; it also illuminates the structural logics that continue to shape Black life in the present. Rather than treating the island as a symbol of a closed historical chapter, Coates reads it as a point of connection between the past and the present systems of racial formation. The first essay traces a spatial genealogy from the holding cells of the slave fort to the prisons of the

contemporary United States. This connection is not presented as a simple metaphor but as an analysis of the continuous spatial rationality through which anti-Blackness has been organized across historical periods. In this sense, his analysis resonates with Saidiya Hartman's argument in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) that "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (p. 6).

Coates presents Senegal, crucially, as a space shaped by a different spatial imaginary. The African world from which enslaved people were taken is not portrayed only through the lens of loss and displacement; it also emerges as a place of historical depth, cultural complexity, and political sovereignty. Throughout the essay, he resists the reduction of Africa to a site of pure suffering, insisting instead on the density of African social worlds before, during, and after the slave trade. This insistence carries important methodological implications: it performs a refusal of what Toni Morrison called the "Africanist presence" in American literature. In Morrison's (1992) words, Blackness has often functioned as "a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability" (p. 7). In such a framework, Africa becomes a blank screen onto which American racial anxieties are projected. Coates refuses this tendency by foregrounding African people as historical and political actors in their own right. The essay's closing scene, in which he joins a circle of Senegalese writers and activists, powerfully illustrates this refusal: he describes the gathering as a meeting of people for whom "the first word written on the warrant of plunder is Africa" (Coates, 2024, p. 76). Such a formulation locates Senegal within a shared and ongoing structure of global exploitation rather than positioning it as a distant mythic homeland; the country of Teranga appears not as a symbol of a lost past but as an active participant in a connected historical and political present.

## 5. The Jim Crow South and the Cartography of Censorship

The second essay in *The Message*, "The Camera Obscura", shifts the focus to what is ostensibly a more familiar American geography. Coates discovers that his *Between the World and Me* (2015) has been removed from a South Carolina school reading list following political pressure. The essay operates on two interconnected spatial registers. On one level, it is a meditation on the geography of racial segregation in the United States, as the author revisits the Jim Crow landscape of the South — its roads, its courthouses, its churches, the topography of terror that structured Black life under white supremacy for nearly a century after Emancipation. On another level, the essay analyzes what might be called the geography of knowledge: curricula, syllabi, and reading lists emerge as spatially organized instruments for shaping racial epistemology and determining which histories are remembered or erased. This perspective echoes Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial power. Fanon (1961/2004) identified the colonial dimensions of this process, observing that "the colonial world is a Manichaean world" in which educational and spatial arrangements enforce an absolute boundary between the world of the settler and the world of the native (p. 6). Educational

institutions play a key role in maintaining these divisions. In Coates' account, the controversy surrounding South Carolina's curriculum reproduces the same logic within the United States by transposing colonial forms of exclusion into the domestic register.

Epistemicide, a concept developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), describes the systematic destruction of non-Western knowledge systems through colonial power. Coates applies this idea to book banning in a distinctly American context. De Sousa Santos (2014) characterizes epistemicide as "the murder of knowledge", a process through which "a single, exclusive epistemology" is imposed, leading to "the disappearance of non-hegemonic knowledge and the social groups whose practices are informed by such knowledge" (p. 92). Viewed through this lens, the removal of texts centering Black experience from school curricula goes beyond censorship: it is a spatial intervention that redraws the cognitive geography students are permitted to inhabit and reshapes the intellectual landscape available to them. Coates analyzes the classroom as a contested terrain where competing visions of history and knowledge confront one another. The language used to justify the removal of *Between the World and Me* (2015) from Mary Wood's classroom illustrates this dynamic: some students objected that the book left them "ashamed to be Caucasian" (Coates, 2024, p. 95). Such a complaint reframes the curriculum as a space that must be protected from Black testimony, recasting the syllabus as a protected zone insulated from challenge to the dominant narratives.

Coates' analysis of the Jim Crow space in the second essay resonates with what Katherine McKittrick theorizes as the "demonic grounds" of Black geographies. McKittrick (2006) examines how Black people have always inhabited, navigated, and contested the racial geographies produced by white supremacy. Her foundational claim is that "black matters are spatial matters" and that Black communities have long cultivated "a different sense of place that critiques, and is seemingly unthinkable within, the hegemonic geographic order" (p. 14). The roads Coates travels through South Carolina are more than sites of historical terror; they are also the routes along which Black people built churches, schools, and communities in defiance of the logic of racial geography. These places embody what bell hooks calls "homeplace", the domestic and communal space created as a site of "resistance and liberation." In hooks' (1990) view, homeplace was where "all that truly mattered in life took place — the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls" (p. 42).

The essay thus develops a deeply dialectical spatial imagination, foregrounding the geography of oppression while simultaneously revealing the geography of resistance that has always existed alongside it. Coates (2024) captures this when he reflects on the statuary of the South Carolina State House and remarks that "politics is the art of the possible, but art creates the possible of politics" (p. 110). This observation resonates with Audre Lorde's (1984) argument that poetry and creative expression are "not a luxury" for Black people but "a vital necessity of our existence" (p. 37), providing "the means by which we give name to the nameless so it can be thought" (p. 37).

This formulation ties the built landscape of Redemption directly to the imaginative horizons available to the students Coates meets.

The connection to Gorée becomes explicit in this section. Coates shows that the Jim Crow system was more than a local or national phenomenon; it was part of the global structure of racial capitalism that the transatlantic slave trade had inaugurated. The South Carolina landscape still carries the material imprint of the plantation economy — its property patterns, its infrastructure, its demographics — just as Gorée bears the physical marks of the slave trade. Reading these two geographies contrapuntally reveals American racial geography as a local expression of a global spatial order shaped by slavery and its afterlives. Coates (2024) closes the essay by shifting attention to the future, writing of the State House monuments: "their Redemption is not about honoring a past. It's about killing a future" (p. 114). This line reframes the geography of memorialization as an act directed at the spatial and political horizons of students still to come.

## **6. Gaza and the Space of Colonial Siege**

### **6.1 Entering the Occupied Territory**

The third essay, "The Gigantic Dream", is the most politically controversial section of *The Message* and the one that has drawn the most sustained critical and political attention. As the longest of the three essays, it recounts Coates' visit to the West Bank, where he met Palestinian journalists, writers, and activists, and culminates in an analysis of the Gaza siege that, in the text's own temporal frame, preceded the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023. The analysis foregrounds the spatial dimensions of the Israeli occupation and siege, presenting them as part of a broader system of racial-colonial governance.

Coates enters the occupied Palestinian territories with conceptual frameworks shaped by his experience as an African American writer. The checkpoints evoke the spatial technologies of the Jim Crow South; the separation wall recalls the spatial logic of the ghetto; the demolition of Palestinian homes recalls the urban renewal programs that destroyed Black neighborhoods across many American cities in the mid-twentieth century. As some critics have charged, these parallels are not simplistic equations between distinct historical experiences but rather, as Cedric Robinson's framework would suggest, a comparative analysis of the spatial logics of racial capitalism across different sites of colonial accumulation.

Robinson (1983) demonstrated that Western capitalism "was not the product of the Enlightenment" but emerged through "the racialism of European feudal society" and its colonial extensions, such that racial differentiation is "the ordering principle" rather than an epiphenomenon of capitalist spatial organization (p. 9). Coates draws on this insight to interpret the spatial realities of the Palestinian-occupied territories. The pivotal moment that crystallizes this framework occurs at a Hebron checkpoint, where Coates is questioned by a soldier whom he perceives as racially Black. This encounter leads him to conclude that, in this context, "race is a species of power and nothing else" (Coates, 2024, p. 131). This formulation strips race of any fixed

biological or national referent, relocating it squarely within the structures of power that govern space, movement, and access. At the checkpoint, race appears not as an inherent characteristic but as a political relation produced and enforced through spatial control.

## **6.2 *Carceral Space and Necropolitical Sovereignty***

For Coates, the Gaza Strip presents an extreme manifestation of what Mbembe (2003) describes as a necropolitical space produced by late-modern colonial occupation. Rashid Khalidi (2020) provides the historical architecture for this analysis, describing the Palestinian struggle as the outcome of "a colonial war waged against the indigenous population, by a variety of parties, to force them to relinquish their homeland to another people against their will" (p. 16). This century-long dynamic forms the broader context within which Gaza's siege must be understood. The siege operates through the regulation of space and resources: control over the Palestinian territory and its airspace, coastline, border crossings, and its supply of electricity, water, and food constitutes a spatial mechanism for regulating Palestinian life and death at the population level. Coates captures the everyday realities of this condition by drawing on the testimonies of Palestinian writers and intellectuals, whose accounts reveal the instability of basic infrastructure, the ever-present possibility of airstrikes, and the claustrophobia of a territory that houses over two million people in an area of approximately 365 square kilometers.

Though not explicitly cited, Eyal Weizman's concept of "the politics of verticality" resonates with Coates' analysis. Weizman argues that the Israeli occupation extends across three dimensions — the surface of the land, the underground network of tunnels and infrastructure, and the airspace above — through which a new form of colonial sovereignty is exercised. As Weizman (2007) writes, "the frontier is not a line but a zone, not a plane but a volume", and "politics is practiced through the management of the physical fabric of the territory" (p. 6). Coates's reportage captures the phenomenology of this spatial control from the Palestinian perspective: constant surveillance by drones, checkpoints regulating movement, and settlements positioned on hilltops overlooking Palestinian communities below. These elements together form a landscape structured by asymmetrical power. Coates' guide, Avner Gvaryahu, clarifies this spatial logic, explaining that "the settlements create a ripple effect of violence everywhere they are" (Coates, 2024, p. 176) — a description that locates the violence of occupation not in discrete incidents but in the spatial logic of settlement itself.

The Palestinian writers and journalists Coates encounters in the course of his reportage play a structural role in the third essay. They are not only rich sources of information, but also the very subjects who inhabit the geography he analyzes, and their determination to narrate their own experience is itself a spatial act. Writing from within a besieged territory challenges the discursive geography that renders that territory invisible, distorted, or unknowable to outside audiences. Mourid Barghouti captures this spatial dynamic in *I Saw Ramallah* (2000) when he reflects on

displacement and return: "whoever sees his village or his city from a distance, from behind a fence, and for the first time, cannot be certain he is the same person who lived in it" (p. 30). This passage emphasizes a defining tension: the dispossessed writer's vantage point is always simultaneously inside and outside the geography he inhabits.

Within *The Message*, Coates' visit functions as a relay between Palestinian spatial knowledge and the American readers largely insulated from that knowledge by the dominant media representations of the conflict. Raja Shehadeh describes a similar experience in *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape* (2007), mapping the Palestinian territory as one where each walk reveals "new paths created by the settlers" that make "the familiar landscape unrecognisable," so that "the hills I have loved and known all my life" become "enemy territory" (p. 7). These observations from Shehadeh convey the experiential knowledge Coates' reporting transmits to those who have never walked these paths. The testimonies of those who live under these conditions further shape the essay's spatial analysis. For example, Nasser Nawaj'ah, an activist in the South Hebron Hills village of Susya, provides the term that organizes Coates' own spatial reading of the West Bank. When Nawaj'ah tells Coates simply, "I see this as apartheid" (Coates, 2024, p. 178), the designation emerges not from outside scholarship but directly from the inhabitants of the geography it describes. *The Message* does not merely impose a framework from the outside; it receives one from those whose daily lives are structured by the realities the book addresses.

### **6.3 The Comparative Logic: Palestine, Blackness, and the Grammar of Disposability**

The most analytically significant move in the Palestinian section of *The Message* is its explicit comparative turn: Coates reads the Palestinian condition through the lens of African American experience, and vice versa. This comparative framework has been the primary point of controversy in the book's reception. Some critics charge that it instrumentalizes Palestinian suffering in the service of African American political claims, while others contend that it instrumentalizes Black American experience to delegitimize Israel.

Against both critiques, this article maintains that the comparative move is analytically essential, since the relationship between anti-Blackness and settler colonialism has been theorized extensively in recent scholarship. Jared Sexton's (2010) "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery" develops the relationality of anti-Blackness and indigenous dispossession while warning against a "people-of-color-blindness" that treats "blackness as one of many minority cultures" rather than recognizing "the position of blacks as the foundation for the modern world" (p. 47). Similarly, Saidiya Hartman (1997) traces the genealogy of racial capitalism from slavery to the present, showing how its logics persist across time. Alongside this, a growing body of scholarship under the rubric of "solidarity studies" examines the political and analytical connections between African American and Palestinian liberation movements. Angela Davis

(2016) frames such solidarities not as strategic alliances but as structural recognitions: "if we are not able to use our imagination to recognize the connections, to see how the histories of Black people in this country and Palestinian people are linked, then we will not be able to effectively move forward" (p. 3). Coates' comparative move is thus not an idiosyncratic journalistic invention but an engagement with a substantial body of theoretical work.

What *The Message* adds to this existing scholarship is a spatial phenomenology of comparison. Rather than treating the connection between anti-Blackness and settler colonialism as an abstract claim, Coates traces it through the lived, embodied experience of moving between geographies. Hortense Spillers (1987) helps clarify what is at stake in this embodied approach, describing how the colonial-racial order imposes "a theft of the body", converting flesh into a "cultural text" in which "hieroglyphics of the flesh" carry the marks of domination (pp. 67–68). From this perspective, the body moving through checkpoints and classrooms bears evidence comparable to the body archived in the slave fort.

Comparison, in this frame, is not primarily propositional (Gaza is like the Jim Crow South) but experiential, emerging from the felt encounter with checkpoints, separation walls, demolished homes, and displaced communities. Such a phenomenological mode of comparison is less vulnerable to the charge of historical equation than propositional comparison, since it keeps sight of the specific, embodied reality of each site. The clearest instance of this experiential method occurs when Coates observes the illegal cisterns and disparate water access of the West Bank and concludes that Israel "had advanced beyond the Jim Crow South" by segregating not merely public facilities but "the water itself" (Coates, 2024, p. 131). This observation emerges from direct encounter with infrastructure rather than analogy asserted in advance, and it precisely aligns with what Mbembe (2017) terms "the becoming Black of the world", the global expansion of racializing logics in which "more and more human beings are placed in the condition previously reserved for slaves, savages, and colonial subjects" (p. 6). Coates reads this spatial grammar fluently because it is also part of his own lived experience.

## 7. The Reception of *The Message* as a Political Event

The reception of *The Message* in the United States was, by any measure, extraordinary. The book was both celebrated and sharply criticized with an intensity rarely seen in contemporary nonfiction, quickly reaching the top of bestseller lists while simultaneously being denounced by prominent cultural and political figures. The controversy carried professional consequences: several universities and literary organizations that had invited Coates to speak withdrew their invitations following the book's publication, citing its Palestinian sections as contentious, and even *The Atlantic*, the magazine most closely associated with Coates, declined to publish excerpts from the book.

This reception is not simply a biographical or journalistic detail; as argued throughout this article, it is structurally continuous with the book's own analysis. The text is, among other things, a meditation on the mechanisms through which oppressive geographies produce and sustain their own illegibility. Within the American public discourse, the suppression of the Palestinian narrative forms the reception-context within which the book intervenes. Simultaneously, the withdrawal of speaking invitations and the institutional pressure to silence Coates instantiate the very forms of censorship the book tackles in its South Carolina sections.

Roberto Schwarz, a prominent Brazilian literary critic, essayist, and Marxist intellectual, argues that Brazilian cultural life is structured by the "misplacement of ideas" (Schwarz, 1992): the adoption of European liberal ideas in a society founded on slave labor creates a structural contradiction between official ideology and social reality. Schwarz (1992) explains how liberal concepts "became an ornament or an ideology" rather than a practice, precisely because they "were borrowed" into a social formation whose "slavery sat at the centre of national life" (pp. 19–20). A comparable form of misplacement can be seen in the American discourse on free speech and academic freedom: such principles are vigorously invoked to defend Coates' right to publish, yet the institutional pressure to silence Palestinian perspectives continues without apparent contradiction. By naming this structure, *The Message* makes it visible, and the ferocity of the reaction to the book is in part a measure of the threat that such visibility poses. The term Coates ultimately settles on for the spatial condition his book describes is the Nakba, which he defines not as a discrete historical event but as "a plunder of your home, a plunder both near and perpetual" (Coates, 2024, p. 222). This definition extends the book's argument about ongoing dispossession directly into the present-tense controversy surrounding its own reception.

The book's reception also raises important questions about the geographies of readership: who is permitted to read what, who is authorized to narrate which experiences, and whose spatial knowledge counts as legitimate. Institutional efforts to restrict the book's circulation and to de-platform its author can be understood as spatial interventions in the sense developed throughout this article: attempts to reshape the cognitive geography of the American public discourse that quarantine Palestinian spatial experience from the circuits of political sympathy and comparative analysis. Said had already shown in *Orientalism* (1978) that knowledge is never neutral, functioning instead as "a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (p. 12). This distribution bears political force, as it determines not only what is known but whose suffering is acknowledged. Coates extends this insight by situating this dynamic within a broader, older pattern of exclusion, drawing on research by historian Maha Nassar, according to whom, across five decades of American opinion journalism, "less than 2 percent" of pieces discussing Palestinians were written by Palestinians themselves (Coates, 2024, p. 233). Seen in this light, the controversy surrounding the book appears not as an aberration but as a single, highly visible instance of a much older geography of exclusion.

## 8. Conclusion

The present article set out to explain how *The Message* uses the interaction between necropolitical governance, carceral spatial organization, and contrapuntal reading to construct a transnational cartography of oppression, and how the book's reception extends the spatial logics it theorizes. The analysis supports three principal findings. First, Coates' *The Message* is best read as a work of spatial literature whose central intellectual operation is the construction of a transnational cartography of oppression linking Gorée, the Jim Crow South, and Gaza — not through equivalence, but through structural analysis grounded in a shared grammar of disposability. Second, reading through the intersecting lenses of necropolitics, carceral geography, and contrapuntal reading demonstrates that Coates performs a form of comparative racial witnessing that is simultaneously analytically rigorous and politically consequential, moving from propositional analogy toward an embodied, experiential comparison across sites. Third, the controversy surrounding the book is not external to its argument: the institutional attempts to silence or discredit Coates' comparative analysis enact the very mechanism of spatial illegibility that the text sets out to expose, so that the book's reception functions as a continuation of its content rather than as a separate context.

Taken together, these findings support the article's broader claim that the political imagination of freedom requires the capacity to read geographies comparatively, refusing the quarantining of suffering into discrete, incommensurable spaces that cannot speak to one another. For Coates, such spatial imagination is not merely strategic or rhetorical; it is a necessary condition for any politics adequate to the global scale of the racial-colonial order against which Black and Palestinian liberation movements struggle.

These findings open several productive lines for future inquiry. Future studies might situate *The Message* within the longer tradition of Black travel writing and comparative racial analysis, using a comparative corpus rather than a single-text design. Other studies could explore the relationship between Coates' spatial imagination and that of Palestinian writers deeply engaged with questions of place, displacement, and memory, including Mourid Barghouti, Raja Shehadeh, and Susan Abulhawa. A further line of inquiry, building directly on the methodological limitations noted above, could apply systematic content analysis or reader-reception methods to the press coverage and institutional statements generated by the book's publication, testing empirically the claim advanced here that reception reproduces the text's own spatial logics. Finally, research could examine the political and institutional conditions under which comparative racial analyses become possible or impossible in the contemporary academy. In sum, the significance of *The Message* extends beyond a single act of political intervention: it demonstrates how racial power can be understood through a geographical lens, inviting the readers to recognize how power operates through the organization, representation, and lived experience of space.

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