

Ta-Nehisi Coates Sends a Message

by Edward S. Shapiro

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Author and critic Ta-Nehisi Coates appeared on CBS television on September 30, 2024 to promote his book *The Message*, which was to be published by Random House the following day. The interview did not go well either for Coates or Tony Dokoupil, the program's anchor. Dokoupil opened the six-minute interview by stating that the book's discussion of Israel "would not be out of place in the backpack of an extremist." He noted that it did not discuss the terrorist attacks on Israel, the bombing of buses and cafes, and the killing of Israeli children and asked Coates why it did not affirm Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. Dokoupil also pointed out that Israel was surrounded by countries seeking its destruction. From his perspective, *The Message* was akin to analyzing Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* without mentioning the white whale.

Coates accused Dokoupil of "commandeering" the interview and ignoring the historical context laid out in his

book. CBS employees, including CBS News CEO Wendy McMahon and CBS News executive Adrienne Roark, sprang to Coates' defense. They claimed Dokoupil came with an axe to grind, had violated CBS's reputation for objectivity and neutrality, and suggested that he be rebuked. Corporate executives, including Shari Redstone, the head of CBS's owner, Paramount Global, defended Dokoupil. "I frankly think Tony did a great job with that interview," she said.

In any case, it was never clear what Dokoupil did wrong besides asking Coates some pointed questions and violating the canons of political correctness.¹

Coates first came to widespread public attention when he began writing essays for *The Atlantic* two decades ago. His 2014 essay "The Case for Reparations," which focused on modern racial housing discrimination, was particularly noteworthy. The next year saw the publication of his block-buster volume *Between the World and Me*. This over-

ly hyped book of 150 thin pages was a best-seller, and its author became for some the go-to authority on American race relations. The book won the 2015 National Book Award for Nonfiction, and that same year Coates received a MacArthur Fellowship “Genius” award. He is currently the Sterling Brown Endowed Chair in the English Department at Howard University, his alma mater.

Between the World and Me, written in the form of a biographical letter from its author to his adolescent son, exhibits its author’s unmodulated rage regarding the faults of Western civilization in general and the United States in particular and his belief that American history is an unadulterated chronicle of evil. Americans, he wrote “had acquired the land through murder and tanned it under slavery,” and they inhabited a country “whose armies fanned out across the world to extend their domination. The world, the real one, was civilizations secured and ruled by savage means.”

Coates’ advised his son to ignore how far the country had come. He should instead reject the sanitized version of the country being taught at school and remember “the horrors” of the present. “It is still too difficult for most Americans to do this,” he said. “But this is your work. It must be, if only to preserve the sanctity of your mind. The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are.” Coates believes that the racial “madness” of America has changed little since the days of slavery and the Civil War, and that America’s blacks comprise a race “in which the wind is always at

your face and the hounds at your heels.” “Entire narrative”? Always “in your face”?

Such musings help us understand the mind of a radical black writer who has given up on the promise of America, but that doesn’t make them evidence of “genius,” and it is doubtful they should be “required reading” for understanding the hazards and hopes of black men, as the black novelist Tony Morrison once claimed. The prominence of black athletes and entertainers, the advance of political figures such as Colin Powell, Corey Booker, Raphael Warnock, Kamala Harris, Tim Scott, Eric Adams, and Barack Obama into the highest rungs of American politics—indeed, the election of roughly 10,000 black officials across the land—and the increasing number of blacks (54 percent in 2022)² who have attained middle- and upper-class status mean little to Coates.

Raised in the Baltimore ghetto, Coates was deeply conscious while growing up of the contrast between his economic and social condition and that of his white peers. “Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.” He despised the calls for nonviolence espoused by the civil rights establishment in Baltimore. How could they, he asked, “send us out into the streets of Baltimore, knowing all that they were, and then speak of nonviolence?”

Instead, Coates' hero was Malcolm X, "the first honest man I'd ever heard" and his father's "patron saint." He had a close relationship with his father, a leader of the Black Panther Party in Baltimore and the founder of Black Classic Press, which published books by black radicals. One of these was the antisemitic *The Jewish Onslaught*, which discussed the supposed Jewish involvement in the slave trade.

The specter haunting Coates' career, the black writer Coleman Hughes said, "is the crudest version of identity politics in which everything—wealth disparity, American history, our education system, and the long-standing conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors—are reduced to a childlike story in which the 'victims' can do no wrong (and have no agency) and the 'villains' can do no right (and are all powerful)." This explains the praise in *The Message* for Nikole Hannah-Jones' *The 1619 Project*. The project has been widely derided by some of America's most distinguished historians for arguing that 1619, the year that the first blacks from Africa landed in Virginia, was the real start of American history. Coates dismisses such criticisms as racist "backlash," and insists that a history of America which begins with genocide and slavery is more accurate than one that begins with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

This vision also explains Coates' response in *The Message* to the attempt to remove *Between the World and Me* from school libraries in South Carolina. He ignored that the censorship's opponents

were whites since this would have detracted from his binary view of America, and at any rate dismisses them as acting solely out of self-interest. "In this case," he wrote, "self-interest meant that here in the heart of Jim Crow and Redemption, ideas to the contrary could not be driven from the public square. And that is progress. It just isn't inevitable that such progress continues."

Coates then mentioned several nineteenth and twentieth century racist South Carolina politicians, including Ben Tillman and Strom Thurmond, whose portraits and statues remain on the grounds of the state capitol in Columbia. What must it mean, he asked, "to walk amongst these Klansman, enslavers, and segregationists raised up on their platforms to the status of titans." Nowhere, of course, does Coates mention Tim Scott, the current United States Senator representing South Carolina, who is black and married to a white woman he met at church. In Coates' imagination racial matters never seem to change. "We have lived under a class of people who ruled American culture with a flaming cross for so long," he says, and "we regularly cease to notice the import of being ruled at all." Little wonder, then, why Coates' critics view him as a race hustler.³

Around half of *The Message* is dedicated to recounting Coates' ten-day visit to Israel and the occupied West Bank just prior to the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel in which over 1,200 persons were murdered and 250 more were kidnapped.⁴ The book was thus thrust into the debate over America's Middle

East policies and the ensuing war in Gaza. Coates admits that he does not like hearing both sides of any controversy, much less one involving the Middle East. “I don’t really care much for hearing ‘both sides’ or ‘opposing points of view,’” he declared, “so much as I care about understanding the literary tools deployed to advance those views.” The “elevation of complexity over justice” by the other side, he argues, “is part and parcel of the effort to forge a story of Palestine told solely by the colonizer.... No other story, save one that enables theft, can be tolerated.” Such certainty, particularly about a topic beyond the author’s usual area of competence, is not a sign of wisdom.

Reviewers were harshly critical of Coates’ criticisms of Israel. Coleman Hughes’ lengthy review in *The Free Press* termed his book “a masterpiece of warped arguments and moral confusion,” and so “shamelessly one-sided summary of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” that it could be rightfully called “antisemitic.” Barton Swaim declared that Coates was “comically ill-equipped to talk about Israel and its conflicts with Palestinian terror groups and Arab states.” He “has no idea what he is talking about and doesn’t care.”

There are plenty of reasons why Coates’ discussion of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians raised such ire. One reason might simply be his florid and manic prose, which leave little room for subtlety or generosity. Even at Yad Vashem, the memorial in Jerusalem to the six million, Coates finds fault with Jewish memory:

The human mind can only conceive of so much tragedy at once—and when lost lives spiral into the hundreds, then thousands, and then millions we lose our ability to see its victims as anything more than an abstract, almost theoretical, collection of lives. In this way, a second crime is perpetrated: Human beings are reduced to a gruel of misery. (116)

And while it doesn’t help that Coates starts the chapter on Israel with an epigram from Noura Erakat, the Rutgers University professor and Palestinian-American activist—“We have all been lied to about too much”—he proceeds to claim that Gaza was under Israeli occupation while he was in Israel, even though Israel had left it nearly two decades earlier. Coates does not mention Hamas, Fatah, Hezbollah, the Hamas charter calling for the murder of Jews, and the numerous attacks by Palestinians on Israelis culminating in October 7, 2023. These have been decisive in shaping the psyche of Israelis but are irrelevant to Coates. He mentions the many cameras in Hebron and elsewhere tracking the population but seems oblivious to the reason for their existence. Broadening his analysis would have challenged his racial paradigm that the situation for Arabs in Israel and the disputed territories simply replicate what blacks have experienced in America.

Such historical illiteracy stems from Coates’ refusal to see the history of the Middle East on its own terms, rather than something out the American racial playbook. Thus, he equates Israel’s control of the West Bank with the Jim Crow South. “For as sure as my ances-

tors were born into a country where none of them was the equal of any white man," he says, "Israel was revealing itself to be a country where no Palestinian is ever the equal of any Jewish person anywhere."

Coates' animus toward Israel stems from its being part of the West, closely allied with America, and the beneficiary, in his view, of Western imperialism. The prosperity of the West, Coates believes, stems from slavery and the exploitation of the native population, a notion that belies the affluence of Western and non-Western countries alike that have paired free markets and democratic governance. It is an even worse transgression against Israel's history.

Exploiting Arab labor was the last thing on the minds of the Labor Zionist pioneers who insisted on using Jewish agricultural labor in order to nurture the Jews' identity with their ancestral homeland after centuries of landlessness. And the exploitation of Arab labor is not what comes to mind when West Bank Palestinians complain today that Israel makes it difficult for them to commute to jobs in Israel. And when Coates claims that "this putative 'Jewish democracy,'" is "like its American patron, an expansionist power," he is blindingly ignorant of Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai in 1982, southern Lebanon in 2000, and Gaza in 2005.

For Coates, the crux of the problem is not anything specific Israel has done but its existence as what he sees as a white state in the midst of a colored population. He recounts in *The Message* when his father handed him the book

Born Palestinian, Born Black by the Palestinian-American poet Suheir Ham-mad. "(T)his combination felt natural to me, though I could not have articulated why."

Coates' ten-day trip to Israel seems to have strengthened his belief that the status of Palestinians resembles that of American blacks. He met with a group of Palestinian writers who invoked "James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, or Angela Davis, explaining how these writers and activists revealed something of their own struggle to them." This convinced Coates that race is Israel's fundamental social cleavage. "I don't think I ever, in my life, felt the glare of racism burn stronger and more intense than in Israel," he writes. Israel was a faux democracy, a nation of "barbed wires, settlers, and outrageous guns," where "separate and unequal was alive and well," and where "rule by the ballot for some and the bullet for others was policy."

Yet Coates writes this at a time when Arabs are attending Israeli universities, serving in Israel's *Knesset* (legislature), working in Israeli hospitals as doctors and nurses and in myriad other Israeli industries, acting as judges in Israeli courts, serving in its diplomatic corps, and representing the country in cultural, educational, and athletic events. Contrary to Coates, "Arab," "Israeli," and "Jew" do not designate races, and over half the population of present-day Israel are not whites of European ancestry but immigrants from Arab countries and Iran and their descendants, most of whom not only look dark-skinned, but exhibit many of the cultural traits

of their Arab and Persian neighbors. Coates gives no indication he is even aware of the 168,000 Israelis of Ethiopian descent living in Israel thanks to Operation Moses (1984), and Operation Solomon (1991), two mass immigration waves assisted by the Israeli government.⁵

The popularity of Coates is due to the congruence between his ideas and those currently in fashion on American campuses. For example, Coates drinks deeply from the well of Critical Race Theory, which claims that racism is so fundamental to American politics, so deeply imbedded in the law and social institutions, and so prevalent within public discourse, that it was unlikely it could be dislodged through the normal workings of the political system. Critical Race Theory became a major presence within the academic legal community in the late twentieth century, and it helped confirm the suspicions on the Left of the iniquity of America.

One can also detect in Coates' work the influence of "intersectionality," a theory that says the similarities between prejudices are far more important than their differences, that prejudices cannot be viewed in isolation, and that marginalized identity groups based on race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation should, therefore, join with Palestinians opposing Israel.

The most recent progressive academic craze that finds its way into Coates' work is "settler-colonialism," a theory that distinguishes colonized countries ruled from afar from those ruled by a foreign power's relocated population.

Adam Kirsch, a *Wall Street Journal* editor and author of *Settler Colonialism: Ideology, Violence, and Justice* (2024), blames the teacher of settler colonial ideology for the popularity of Hamas and the Palestinian cause on college campuses.

Essentially, settler colonial states are made up of those home-country populations that disembarked in order to discover land deemed unclaimed ("terra nullius"), settled permanently in that land, then expanded rapaciously over an entire continent while presiding over the destruction of the Indigenous population.⁶ Along with the United States, Australia, South Africa, and Canada, Coates believes Israel exhibits all the traits of a settler colonial state, including a ubiquitous triumphalist imagery which permeates Israeli society and makes Palestinians feel unwelcome. In fact, Coates believes that Israel has gone beyond the mere displacement of the indigenous population and is guilty of genocide. "The emancipated enslaves, the oppressed colonizes; the vanquished ethnically cleans; a people survives a genocide only to perpetuate another." And this genocide has the imprimatur of the United States. "This was not just another evil done by another state," Coates declares, "but an evil done in my name."

As Kirsch and others have shown, Israel is a poor fit for the settler colonial paradigm developed by its academic theorists. Jews have lived there in larger or smaller numbers for nearly four millennia. The early Zionist immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries settled in Palestine when it was governed by the Ottoman Empire and continued to do so through the time of the British Mandate. Far from believing that Palestine was *terra nullius*, the Zionists needed the permission of the governing authorities to settle. Nor did they expand their territory rapaciously. Israel's territory in 2024, seventy-six years after the state's establishment, was only eight thousand square miles, approximately one-tenth of one percent of the 5.4 million square miles of the surrounding Muslim nations, and only 6.2 percent of the 125,000 square miles of the Levant (the area forming the land bridge between Africa and Eurasia). And far from displacing the native population of Palestine, the Arab population has more than quintupled from 1.3 million in 1948 to 7.5 million. Israel's total population of 9.8 million is only 1.9 percent of the Middle East's 507 million. Of the twenty-two countries comprising the Middle East, Israel is the only Jewish state.

But none of this has prevented Coates and other progressive radicals from portraying Israel as a settler colonial state extraordinaire, the embodiment of an evil so grotesque that it must be destroyed by any means possible. The pro-Hamas protesters on college campuses after October 7 have been infused with a settler colonial Manichaeism which transforms the most heinous cruelty carried out by Hamas into actions both necessary and virtuous.

It is no wonder that Coates is lauded by large swaths of the American academy, as he echoes many of its most

fashionable dogmas. He is an ideologue awash in his grievances, and the adulation accorded him is symptomatic of the intellectual rot currently corrupting higher education. We live at a time when intellectual distinction has been sacrificed for the sake of diversity, victimhood has replaced serious historical study, self-loathing has supplanted patriotism, and common sense has become increasingly uncommon. If Roger Kimball is correct that the American university has been transformed "from an institution dedicated to the preservation and transmission of the highest values of our civilization into a wrecking ball aimed at destroying that civilization," then *The Message* will be on course syllabi for years to come.

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1. Joe Flint, Jessica Toonkel, "Interview over Israel Sparks CBS Furor," *Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 2024; Matthew Hennessey, "You Can't Report in Here. This Is the Newsroom!," *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2024; Christine Rosen, "Mao-Maoing the News Anchors," *Commentary*, 158 (November, 2024), 10-11.
2. Rakesh Kochar, "The State of the American Middle Class," Pew Research, May 31, 2024.
3. Barton Swaim, "Delete This Message," *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2024; Daniel J. Mahoney, "Poisonous Fruit," *Claremont Review*, 24 (fall, 2024), 51; Mike Cote, "Coates the Charlatan," *Commentary*, 158 (December, 2024), 36-37.

4. For the war in Gaza, see Seth J. Frantzman, *The October 7 War: Israel's Battle for Security in Gaza* (New York: Post Hill Press, 2024).
5. "Ethiopian Jews in Israel still await the promised land," *The Telegraph*, November 20, 2009.
6. Adam Kirsch, "The False Narrative of Settler Colonialism," *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2024.