COMMENTARY

# One year after October 7: A return to forever

Ta-Nehisi Coates seeks to return America to moral clarity

By RANN MILLER

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 7, 2024 5:54AM (EDT)



Ta-Nehisi Coates (Bryan Bedder/Getty Images for HISTORY)

Add as a preferred source on Google

save

Palestinians in Gaza began running, again, on October 8, 2023. “We Palestinians are always running,” Suheir Hammad writes in the poem Silence from her collection, "Born Palestinian, Born Black." “Where do we go?” One day after the deadly Hamas attack in Israel, the Israeli government warned and directed Palestinians in Gaza to leave targeted areas. Nowhere in Gaza was safe. One year after Hamas’ massacre, much of Gaza is reduced to rubble.

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF




According to Gaza's Ministry of Health, over 41,000 Palestinian civilians (16,500 children) were killed in Israeli attacks with thousands buried under the rubble. Others estimate the death toll to be higher. American medical professional volunteers, in a letter to President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, conservatively estimate the death toll — from attacks, famine, disease, etc. — at over 118,000 people or 5.4% of Gaza's population. Other estimates are even higher. Additionally, over 96,000 people were injured from Israeli attacks and 10,000 people are missing. According to the UN, the WHO and the Palestinian government, 80% of commercial facilities, 85% of school buildings, and more than half of all homes are either heavily damaged or destroyed and less than half of all healthcare facilities are functional.

This is genocide. This is genocide on top of settler colonialism, occupation and apartheid. South Africa recognized it. That's because South Africa was an apartheid state for 46 years, preceded by racial segregation laws. South Africa charged Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with committing genocide in Gaza following Hamas' attacks. The ICJ "mandated Israel to end its occupation, dismantle its settlements, provide full reparations to Palestinian victims, and facilitate the return of displaced people." Despite the ruling, Israel continues to lay waste to Gaza, where Hamas continues to hold hostages captured one year ago on Oct. 7, 2023.

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

South Africans weren't the only ones to recognize the settler colonialism, apartheid and genocide of the Zionist government of Israel. African Americans recognized it as well. From el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz to James Baldwin to SNCC to the Black Panther Party, many Black freedom fighters and intellectuals alike recognized the injustices laid upon Palestinians since 1948, and have worked to see those injustices end. After his own reflection and reconsideration, Ta-Nehisi Coates now joins that tradition.

We need your help to stay independent

**Subscribe today to support Salon's progressive journalism**

Coates, a renowned writer and social critic, has recently promoted his new book, "The Message," in several intriguing interviews, some contentious. Coates, no stranger to criticism over his previous views from the left and the right, anticipated criticism surrounding his evolved views on apartheid and genocide in Gaza. In his book, Coates shares that he once held views on Palestinians and wrote in ways that "reduced people, diminished people, erased people." A major reason, apart from having the ignorance of one without first-hand knowledge, while no excuse, was a default deferral to the white institutional space that permitted his ascendence to public intellectual.

According to his testimony, white writers surrounded Coates; the norm for most Black writers in mainstream spaces. Coates befriended and admired many of them. Some had previously written on Israeli-Palestinian conflicts and from that, Coates "derived a sense that comprehension of *conflict* was a matter of knowledge, not morality."

**Coates' critique of this genocide places him squarely in the Black Radical tradition.**

He writes: "I felt the great hand of luck in my life, and I was now, miraculously, surrounded by people who knew real things about the world — journalists who had covered civil wars and had been evacuated from war zones and knew the correct use of words like 'internecine' and 'sectarian.' I felt my deep ignorance of the world beyond America's borders and, with that, a deep shame."

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

The conventional wisdom dominating mainstream media pundits and politicians alike is that Israel has the right to exist and the right to defend itself — effectively with impunity.

Backed by their news reports, security briefings, trips abroad and meetings with curated dignitaries as "evidence" of their so-called knowledge, those who disagreed were cast aside as ignorant. A majority of Americans now disagree with Israel's genocide in Gaza. "Knowledge" of the conflict seems to matter more than the morality of the matter. Whataboutism and bothsidesism are tactics utilized to dismiss moral calls to end genocide.

---

***Want a daily wrap-up of all the news and commentary Salon has to offer? Subscribe to our morning newsletter, Crash Course.***

---

Coates was wise to anticipate criticism of his evolved views. In one of his first televised interviews with CBS "This Morning," Coates was met with the familiar trope that the "conflict" is complicated, along with whataboutisms and bothsideisms. Anchor Tony Dokoupil even suggested that Coates' new book would be cheered by terrorists. But Coates' feet touched the ground in Gaza and the West Bank. Coates spoke with Palestinians and Israelis; including those who changed course after working for the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Coates experienced occupation — although a visitor — reminiscent of the apartheid conditions forced upon African Americans in the United States when told by a soldier he had to declare a religion to clear a checkpoint. Coates took the opportunity to see the world AND the people in it. His response in the interview was straight-forward:

> The country of Israel is a prime example of such a state [an ethnocracy], where half the population exists on one tier of citizenship, while everyone else, including Palestinian Israeli citizens, is relegated to a lower tier… As the child of someone who experienced the horrors of Jim Crow, I am deeply troubled by this system… Why do we support a system that denies basic rights and freedoms to half its population? Why is it OK to prioritize the interests of one group over another? These are the questions that I grapple with throughout this book, and they are essential to understanding the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict… I have a [very] moral compass about this and again perhaps it's because of my ancestry either

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

> apartheid is right or it's wrong it's really simple either what I saw was right or it's wrong.

Lost in the vitriol surrounding Coates' moral clarity on Palestine is the clarion call to Black writers in "The Message," that now is not the time to shrink from the tradition of which our vocation is a part — the Black Radical Tradition. Maybe that — the fear of and desire to destroy the Black Radical Tradition that is responsible for making America freer than it originally was — is the stem that grounds criticism of Coates here.

But Coates is in good company with the truthtellers of today, including Angela Davis and Michelle Alexander. He's also in good company with those who've resigned from the Biden Administration. He's had less contentious interviews, like those with Jon Stewart and Chris Hayes. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of criticism likely to come Coates' way.

Honestly, it's already here.

Coates' critique of this genocide places him squarely in the Black Radical tradition and in opposition to many white liberals, and conservatives, alike. It places him in the company of the many truthtellers of the Black Radical Tradition. Although it's not a job one seeks. Truthtellers of the tradition are so used to running, like Childish Gambino; asking themselves, like Hammad, *where do we go*?

A return to forever? Have we ever actually been?

**Read more about this topic**

- **A sequel of injustice 60 years in the making**
- **"What should I do with this pain?": Israelis, Palestinians try to move forward**
- **How the hard work of wooing "Uncommitted" voters could make history**

---

By **RANN MILLER**

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

Rann Miller is an educator and freelance writer based in Southern New Jersey. His Urban Education Mixtape blog supports urban educators and parents of children attending urban schools. Miller is also the author of "Resistance Stories from Black History for Kids the Expanded Edition." You can follow him on X @RealRannMiller.

**MORE FROM RANN MILLER**

Related Topics

*Apartheid* *Black Liberation* *Books* *Commentary* *Gaza* *Hamas* *Israel* *Oct. 7* *Terrorism* *War*

## Related Articles



**Make America hate again**
HEATHER DIGBY PARTON



**The first line of Trump's obituary**
ALLAN J. LICHTMAN



**MAGA attacks on women voters are no joke**
AMANDA MARCOTTE

Information from your device can be used to personalize your ad experience.

Do not sell or share my personal information.

A RAPTIVE PARTNER SITE

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF