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Entangled Geographies of Control: Gaza and the Collapse of the Colonial–Indigenous Spatial Divide

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Introduction

The contemporary political and spatial condition of Gaza has often been framed through dichotomies: occupation versus autonomy, colonial space versus indigenous space, enclave versus city, or humanitarian crisis versus political conflict. This paper proposes to move beyond such binary frameworks by situating Gaza within a unified and entangled spatial regime where colonial and indigenous geographies are mutually constitutive and inseparable. Gaza is neither a mere colonial outpost nor a purely indigenous territory; rather, it is a complex urban environment where layers of control, exclusion, and governance interpenetrate, shaped by colonial legacies, global capitalism, humanitarian governance, and securitized infrastructures.

This paper builds upon Anthony D. King's foundational work on colonial urbanism and the world-economy (King, 1990, 1996), positioning Gaza as a spatial node in an evolving global system of internment and control. Drawing on legal geography, settler colonial studies, and postcolonial urbanism, the analysis also foregrounds how contemporary European and international engagements in Gaza sustain spatial logics of segregation, containment, and legal exception (Evans, 2007; Gordon, 2024; Nabulsi, 2022; Paquette, 2023).

In arguing for the collapse of the colonial–indigenous spatial divide, the paper highlights the everyday technologies of confinement and governance –walls, camps, biometric infrastructure, donor-driven masterplans– operating within Gaza's dense urban fabric. Gaza thus becomes paradigmatic of a broader shift: from localized colonial control to globally networked regimes of spatial internment under the guise of humanitarianism and development.

Theoretical Framework: Urbanism, Internment, and World-Economy

Anthony D. King's *Urbanism, Colonialism and the World-Economy* (1990) conceptualizes colonial cities not as isolated experiments but as integral components of a global capitalist order. The spatial logic of these cities, King argues, was never self-contained but deeply embedded within global circuits of extraction, authority, and racial hierarchy. This framework is crucial for understanding Gaza not merely as an occupied zone but as a site of colonial-modern urbanism

shaped by international actors, funding regimes, and legal infrastructures that interlink the local with the global (King, 1990).

In *Colonial Urban Development* (1996), King deepens this account by revealing how spatial practices –from zoning and sanitation to public space regulation– were used to naturalize European dominance and indigenous marginalization. The urban environment itself became a technology of governance. In Gaza, donor-built infrastructures (roads, housing projects, water systems) replicate similar logics of spatial ordering –disciplining mobility, enabling surveillance, and engineering humanitarian spaces that mimic the camp-city dualism observed in postcolonial settings (King, 1996; Pappé, 2022).

From a legal-geographical perspective, Gaza's spatial fragmentation is not a failure of governance but a calculated system of layered exceptions. Evans (2007) conceptualizes Gaza as a place where "lawlessness is law," describing a space where legal categories such as occupation, sovereignty, and borders collapse, enabling indefinite control without legal accountability. This aligns with Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of "bare life," where law functions primarily to suspend itself, creating states of exception that normalize extraordinary violence.

Gordon (2024) further unpacks how settler regimes deploy racialized legal logics under humanitarian justifications to structure internment spaces. Nabulsi (2022) likewise shows how humanitarian law and bureaucratic order sustain carceral infrastructures, drawing from European imperial legacies now repurposed in contemporary aid regimes.

Gaza as a Unified Global Carceral Space

The idea of internment as a spatial technology resonates strongly in Gaza, where colonial urban logics have mutated into new forms of confinement shaped by international donors, security actors, and legal ambiguities. Buffer zones, border terminals, checkpoints, surveillance towers, and tunnels constitute an infrastructural matrix of confinement. These are not just tools of spatial management –they produce a lived condition of internment, where architecture, law, and economy coalesce to govern bodies and movement.

Following Israel's 2005 disengagement, Gaza entered a new phase of remote control. While Israeli forces withdrew ground presence, control mechanisms intensified through aerial surveillance, regulated crossings, maritime blockades, and algorithmic targeting (Evans, 2007; Weizman, 2007). Gaza became a laboratory of securitized urbanism –what Pappé (2022) calls a "global export of internment strategies." This resonates with Makdisi's (2008) framing of Palestine as a site of "everyday occupation," where control is no longer an event but an atmospheric condition.

The carceral logic extends into humanitarian infrastructure. Refugee camps, once perceived as temporary, have ossified into permanent urban forms –internment spaces hidden in plain sight. Donor-driven reconstruction programs, while framed as recovery, operate within and reproduce spatial orders of control. As Gordon (2024) observes, such practices reflect "the racial governance logics of settler regimes," wherein humanitarianism becomes the ethical cover for internment technologies.

Collapse of the Colonial–Indigenous Spatial Divide

One of this paper's core arguments is that the spatial distinction between colonial and indigenous geographies is no longer analytically useful in the context of Gaza. Rather, these geographies are entangled, co-constitutive, and operationally inseparable. Colonial logics persist not in opposition to indigenous life but through its management, segmentation, and conditional inclusion.

The refugee camp and the city are not opposites –they are infrastructurally linked, often spatially overlapping, and governed by the same legal exceptions and planning regimes. For instance, donor-funded housing projects for displaced residents are sited adjacent to military no-go zones or rely on Israeli approval for basic materials. Roads built under international development initiatives often serve dual use –as civilian connectors and military corridors (Weizman, 2007; Erakat, 2019).

Legal and spatial infrastructures thus work in tandem. As Agamben (1998) noted, the camp is the "nomos of the modern" –not the exception but the rule of spatial ordering. Gaza, with its urbanized camps and securitized peripheries, embodies this transformation. The built environment reflects a fusion of indigenous resilience and colonial control: neighborhood mosques next to watchtowers; schools monitored by drones; hospitals built by aid agencies yet surveilled by satellites.

This blurring challenges not only geopolitical categories but epistemological ones as well. As Paquette (2023) argues in her reflection on "unsettling public spaces," postcolonial geographies require us to recognize how publicness, space, and law are continually remade through settler-colonial violence and indigenous endurance. In Gaza, what appears as public infrastructure is often privatized, militarized, or provisional –an interned urbanism built to limit, not enable, collective life.

Europe's Role in Shaping Gaza's Internment Geography

While Gaza is often portrayed as a peripheral crisis, Europe's active role in shaping its spatial order is significant and underexamined. From colonial legacies to contemporary aid regimes, European institutions have consistently participated in the production and management of Gaza's geography of control.

Historically, European powers exported models of spatial segregation, urban planning, and legal governance across their colonial holdings –from Algeria to South Africa, from Cyprus to Ireland. These practices laid the groundwork for modern techniques of surveillance, zoning, and spatial containment. The planning doctrines used in Belfast or Algiers –mixing counterinsurgency with urban design– echo in today's Gaza Strip, where security rationales override civilian needs (King, 1990; Nabulsi, 2022).

Contemporary European involvement operates through softer but equally potent tools: funding border management programs, supporting Palestinian Authority infrastructure development, training security forces, and imposing development conditionalities. These engagements rarely disrupt the structures of internment; rather, they provide its technocratic support.

For example, the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Rafah, intended to facilitate mobility, has been suspended for years while simultaneously justifying the border's closure. Similarly, reconstruction funds often flow through tightly regulated channels, requiring Israeli approval and European oversight –ensuring that control remains transnationally managed (Gordon, 2024; Erakat, 2019).

This mirrors King's (1990) metropolitan-periphery model, where the "center" sustains spatial dominance over the "edge" not only through military means but via epistemic and institutional frameworks that define what kind of urban life is permissible.

Conclusion: Toward a Unified Spatial Theory of Internment

This paper has argued that Gaza represents a paradigmatic case of how colonial and indigenous geographies collapse into a unified spatial regime of control. Drawing on King's urban theory, legal geography, and settler-colonial critiques, the analysis reveals that Gaza is not exceptional – but emblematic of a broader global shift toward networked internment, where humanitarianism, law, and infrastructure converge to manage surplus populations.

By recognizing Gaza's spatial condition as both a product and producer of global carceral urbanism, we reposition the Strip not as a humanitarian anomaly, but as a strategic site in the global geography of control. Internment is no longer confined to camps or prisons; it has become the grammar of urbanism itself –visible in gated borders, donor housing, algorithmic surveillance, and permanent temporariness.

The task, then, is not merely to critique this system but to unsettle its epistemological foundations. By collapsing the colonial–indigenous divide, we make visible the continuities and contradictions of modern spatial governance. Gaza challenges us to think differently about space, power, and possibility –insisting that even under conditions of extreme control, new spatial imaginaries can emerge.

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