

Aesthetics of the Unseen

# Disappeared Memory in the Age of Fascism

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## The MAGA War on Memory

Without memory, democracy runs the risk of turning itself into an authoritarian state. A vibrant democracy requires citizens to confront injustice, to learn from the crimes of the past, and to imagine futures that do not repeat them. William Faulkner's warning still resonates: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."<sup>1</sup> In America today, history has become a battleground. The ghosts of slavery, Jim Crow, and white supremacy remain with us, shaping institutions and social life. As Angela Davis<sup>2</sup> reminds us, we live with these ghosts every day. The real question is whether we choose to acknowledge them, or to erase them. For when a society turns away from its own horrors and promotes forms of historical amnesia, what kind of culture is normalized? What political order emerges from the silence of forgetting? Under Trump, we have already been given a terrifying answer: a society organized around violence: against immigrants, Black people, youth, students, dissidents, women, the unhoused, and all those who fail the regime's loyalty test to white Christian nationalism.

As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman observed, our times are not marked simply by the fading of collective memory, but by "the aggressive assault on whatever memory remains."<sup>3</sup> That assault takes the form of book bans, censorship, intimidation of educators, and the replacement of critical history with patriotic myth. Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>4</sup> has noted that the panic over "critical race theory" was never about pedagogy, it was an attempt to whitewash

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/48409/requiem-for-a-nun-by-william-faulkner/9780307946805>

<sup>2</sup> <https://truthout.org/articles/black-liberation-the-ghosts-of-the-past-the-potential-of-the-future/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://truthout.org/articles/data-storms-and-the-tyranny-of-manufactured-forgetting/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/07/how-critical-race-theory-mastermind-kimberle-crenshaw-is-weathering-the-culture-wars>

slavery and racism from the national narrative. The suppression of historical memory produces not only ignorance but moral paralysis. As Robert Jay Lifton<sup>5</sup> warned, erasure of the past creates a psychic numbing, a diminished capacity to feel and act against injustice. Forgetting is never neutral. It is a political strategy. Under the Trump regime it has become a central element in a war against democracy, informed citizens, the truth, and rationality. Put bluntly, it has become a central tool in the weaponization against literacy, knowledge, consciousness, and critical agency.

This is domestic terrorism, rooted not only in incendiary words but in their violent translation into state policy. It is the organized weaponization of fear, the calculated deployment of intimidation and cruelty to hollow out democratic life and silence dissent. It is a deliberate assault on citizens, on institutions, and on every idea that refuses to bow before authoritarian power. As John Ganz<sup>6</sup> observes, under Trump, citizenship ceases to be an inalienable right; it becomes a conditional prize, a privilege dispensed at will. In Trump's hands, it is both gift and bludgeon, "a transferable and revocable commodity," bestowed on the loyal and withheld or revoked from the condemned. Wielded as a threat, it enables the regime to deport, to banish, to resurrect the ancient horror of statelessness, expelling individuals not only from the nation but from humanity itself. In this sense, Ganz is right: Trump's assault on citizenship is not merely reactionary; it bears the unmistakable mark of fascism, the totalitarian logic that decides who counts as human and who may be erased.

Appropriating Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics<sup>7</sup>, domestic terrorism is where political power thrives by reducing human life to disposable, expendable objects. Under the Trump regime, this takes the form of a violent, racialized project that merges capital accumulation with the subjugation of marginalized groups. His policies—driven by a toxic mix of racial hierarchy, xenophobia, and the celebration of violent histories—create a society where certain lives are deemed unworthy of protection or consideration. This regime operates on a death drive, relentlessly attempting to eliminate both the lives and futures of those who resist or defy its vision. In this environment, the space for dissent shrinks, historical amnesia thrives, leaving only room for those willing to submit to the dominance of a fascist, authoritarian regime.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/psychic-numbing/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.unpopularfront.news/p/death-to-america>

<sup>7</sup> <https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/2640/Necropolitics>

This war on memory is not just theoretical; it takes concrete form in the attacks on institutions that hold our collective history. Under Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, memory, let alone history itself, is under siege. What we face is not neglect but an orchestrated assault fueled by a systemic violence of forgetting<sup>8</sup>, and the whitewashing of the past that echoes the darkest traditions of fascism. For Trump, any reckoning with slavery, Jim Crow, or the long arc of racial violence is treated as an unforgivable stain on America's story. Equally intolerable are the histories of resistance, by workers, Black communities, women, immigrants, and LGBTQ people, all of which he and his allies disparage as "woke" ideology. As journalist Dean Blundell recently observed<sup>9</sup>, "In recent days, he has attacked the Smithsonian Institution as 'out of control,' insisting its museums focus too much on 'how bad slavery was.' His administration has ordered a 120-day review of eight Smithsonian museums and hinted that funding could be used as leverage to 'get the woke out.' The message lands with the subtlety of a hammer: make the story brighter, or else. This is not a debate about one label or a curatorial tone. It's an attempt to police memory." The policing of history is not incidental; it is central to Trump's authoritarian project and nowhere is this clearer than in his attack on the Smithsonian<sup>10</sup>.

#### Censoring the Smithsonian

In March 2025, Trump signed an executive order targeting the Smithsonian Institution<sup>11</sup>, declaring its exhibits were corrupted by "improper ideology." Trump argued that the "Smithsonian museums were 'out of control' and "painted the country in a negative light, including about slavery."<sup>12</sup> The language of the order feigned neutrality, but the intent was unmistakably authoritarian: to sanitize the nation's cultural memory. For Trump, As the White House "focused on seven museums for their exhibits and messaging," the chilling effect was immediate. References to Trump's two impeachments quietly vanished from an exhibit on the "Limits of Presidential Power." What had been a straightforward record of checks on executive abuse was erased in real time, as though history itself could be made to serve the whims of power.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/20/opinion/the-violence-of-forgetting.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://znetwork.org/znetarticle/trumps-war-on-black-history-why-the-smithsonian-and-black-history-are-in-his-crosshairs/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://truthout.org/video/historian-rebukes-trump-imposing-his-own-views-of-us-history-on-the-smithsonian/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://wreg.com/news/nation-and-world/trump-targets-museums-as-last-remaining-segment-of-woke/>

This was no isolated act of censorship. Trump has repeatedly sought to bend the past to his will, recasting the violent January 6th insurrectionists as “hostages,” stripping diversity and equity programs of content that celebrated Black history, and encouraging allies to push bills that would defund schools for teaching that the nation’s founding documents were entangled with slavery. The thread binding these assaults together is clear: the authoritarian logic of erasure. Memory is to be disciplined, history domesticated, truth is subordinated to the spectacle of Trump’s political theater. What is at stake is not simply the content of museum exhibits or school curricula, it is whether democracy itself can survive without an honest reckoning with its past. As history warns us, fascist regimes—from Hitler’s book burnings to Franco’s cultural purges—have always begun their reign of terror by waging war on memory. The thread uniting these efforts is the logic of erasure: history must serve power, never truth.

From Nazi Germany to Trump’s America

The Trump era’s assault on memory recalls, in chilling ways, the memory politics of Nazi Germany<sup>13</sup>. In 1933, Nazi officials staged massive book burnings, consigning to the flames the works of Jewish authors, feminists, Marxists, and anyone deemed “un-German.” These were not just acts of censorship, they were spectacles of purification. Fire was the ritual through which dissent was eradicated and mythic unity forged. Schools and universities were purged of Jewish and oppositional voices, textbooks rewritten, and history recast as propaganda for the racial state.

The United States has not replicated those bonfires, but the spirit is unmistakable. Books by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Margaret Atwood are being pulled from libraries. Governors stage press events around banned books, turning censorship into political theater. Viral videos of parents denouncing “divisive concepts” in classrooms circulate widely, feeding the illusion that banning history is an act of protection.

As the Trump presidency unfolds, the politics of erasure and historical amnesia increases with shocking intensity. Images and information about slavery is removed from multiple national parks and institutions. For instance, the Trump administration has ordered the removal of signs and exhibits related to slavery at multiple national parks. In addition, it has ordered the removal of exhibits deemed as reflecting a “corrosive ideology” at the Smithsonian. One of the latest removals included “the removal of a photograph illustrating

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<sup>13</sup> <https://doaj.org/article/0d4597a3c5e14fb88ac47a3fe9f7ac32>

violence against slaves, known as “The Scourged Back,”<sup>14</sup> at one national park...The photograph, taken in 1863, shows scars on the back of a man probably named Peter Gordon from wounds inflicted by his masters before he escaped slavery.” Equally shocking is the Trump administration removing “a large image of and a quote from Harriet Tubman ... from a National Park Service webpage about the Underground Railroad.”<sup>15</sup> There is more at stake here than the Trump regime exercising control over what Americans learn, there is also an attempt to control how we think, act, and learn from history.

The attack on the Smithsonian, the banning of books, the silencing of universities, and the stigmatization of “woke” as a code word for racial justice and historical truth all make visible how white supremacy fuels the cleansing project of authoritarianism. The assault on memory and historical consciousness connects strongly with a wider pedagogy of repression and the attempts on the part of MAGA ideologues to turn public and higher education into crude laboratories of indoctrination. In one particular instance, this project takes a particularly grotesque form, as with Oklahoma’s Ryan Walters<sup>16</sup> requiring applicants from “liberal states” to pass an anti-woke test before teaching. These assaults on memory are also an assault on critical thinking, critical pedagogy, and civic literacy. It is crucial to view them as anything but isolated. They are part of a systematic effort to weaponize education, culture, and memory to manufacture a fascist subject, passive, obedient, and stripped of critical thought. Primo Levi warned that “wherever you begin by denying the fundamental liberties of mankind and equality among people, you move towards the concentration camp system.”<sup>17</sup> Forgetting, he argued, is the first step toward barbarism. The lesson of Nazi Germany is that erasing memory is not collateral to authoritarianism, it is central to it.

Conclusion: The burden and duty of memory

At the heart of Trump’s war on memory lies an act of pedagogical terror<sup>18</sup>, a poisoning of history and the transformation of culture into a blunt instrument of indoctrination. To resist this death of memory is to recognize that the fight for democracy cannot be separated from the fight over history, over culture, and over the economic forces that shackle both under gangster capitalism. To defend truth is to defend freedom; to erase history is to pave the road to authoritarianism. Trump’s censorship of the Smithsonian, his bans on books,

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2025/09/15/national-parks-slavery-information-removal/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/06/us/national-parks-underground-railroad-harriet-tubman>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/20/education/oklahoma-woke-teacher-test.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.littlebrown.co.uk/little-brown-news/2023/04/13/read-an-extract-from-if-this-is-a-man-the-truce-by-primo-levi/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.bloomsbury.com/ca/burden-of-conscience-9781350506916/>

and his whitewashing of slavery are not mere cultural disputes. They are weapons aimed at the very life of democracy. Culture is never simply a mirror of society; it is a battlefield that shapes how we imagine the world and our place within it. In a time when neoliberalism and fascism bleed into each other, culture becomes the decisive ground where narratives of domination collide with possibilities of resistance. Authoritarians seek to turn it into a machinery of obedience, silencing dissent and numbing consciousness. Yet culture also holds the fragile, indispensable power to ignite memory, nourish critical thought, and keep alive the hope of resistance.

At the heart of this project lies a war over culture and consciousness. Antonio Gramsci, in the *Prison Notebooks*<sup>19</sup>, warned that every political struggle is also a struggle over pedagogy, over who shapes the common sense of a society. Paulo Freire<sup>20</sup> reminded us that education is never neutral—it either nurtures liberation or reinforces domination. Trump’s pedagogy of repression seeks nothing less than a populace severed from memory, stripped of critical thought, and rendered compliant to authoritarian power. What is at stake is not simply the narcotic of censorship and erasure, but the calculated use of state terrorism to fashion a fascist subject, anti-intellectual, morally hollow, obedient to authority, and emptied of democratic agency. The United States has become a warfare state, where the instruments of militarization and the machinery of control no longer remain at the edges of empire but are turned inward, disciplining culture, stifling memory, and colonizing everyday life under the banner of “law and order.” What once was unleashed abroad in the name of empire now circulates within, producing citizens as enemies and culture itself as a battlefield. War should be a warning; under Trump it has become theater, a grotesque spectacle where cruelty parades as civic virtue.

If democracy is to endure, memory must be defended with the same ferocity as freedom itself. Yet remembrance alone is not enough. What is required is a critical culture that binds past and present, a pedagogy that transforms historical consciousness into collective action. The ghosts of Auschwitz, of Jim Crow, of January 6th, remain with us, not as abstractions but as urgent reminders of the abyss that awaits when memory is erased. Our responsibility is to teach, to narrate, and to reimagine, so that memory itself becomes an act of resistance. Only by turning remembrance into struggle can we block the return of barbarism and reclaim democracy as a living, unfinished experiment in freedom. Only through mass

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<sup>19</sup> [https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/prison\\_notebooks/problems/intellectuals.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/prison_notebooks/problems/intellectuals.htm)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.bloomsbury.com/ca/pedagogy-of-freedom-9798216369158/>

movements of organized resistance can we dismantle the machinery of ignorance, disposability, and death that now threatens the remnants of American democracy.

In the end, culture remains the decisive ground where radical democracy either withers under authoritarian rule or is reborn as the terrain of resistance and hope. What is clear is that the Trump regime does not merely flirt with fascism, it embodies it, hurling the United States over the abyss. And that abyss stretches far beyond American borders. Trump arms Netanyahu, an indicted war criminal who wages genocide against the Palestinian people with impunity; he aligns himself with dictators like Russia's Vladimir Putin, India's Narendra Modi, Argentina's Javier Gerardo Milei, El Salvador's Nayib Bukele, and others who traffic in repression, violence, and cruelty. The warfare state is drenched in blood. Resistance is no longer a choice; it is a necessity that sears the conscience, demanding action.

Charlotte Delbo, an Auschwitz survivor, pleaded in *A Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive*: "You who are passing by, I beg you, do something...to justify your existence...because it would be too senseless after all for so many to have died while you live doing nothing with your life." Her words reverberate through time, transcending the horrors of a specific moment in history, and call us to a moral reckoning we cannot ignore. The choice before us is unambiguous: silence or resistance, complicity or memory, barbarism or democracy. The weight of this decision cannot be overstated. The time to act is now, for what is at stake is not just our collective humanity, but the very survival of democracy itself.