

# The Right-Wing's Dirty War Against History and Education: Beyond the Politics of Disappearance

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## Introduction

The past haunts the present moment because it increasingly offers terrifying narratives and images of what Walter Benjamin once called “a catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin.”<sup>1</sup> The catastrophe to which Benjamin refers is the ghost of fascism and its irrepressible ability to reappear in different forms at certain moments in history. At the present time, memory and catastrophe have merged as past images that flash before us, signaling danger and suggesting that the current era is a “state of emergency” that is no longer “the exception but the rule.”<sup>2</sup>

Like the flesh-eating zombies in George Romero’s horror film, *Night of the Living Dead*, fascist politics have emerged in updated forms with a brutalizing power that carries with it the threat of apocalyptic violence, the terror of white supremacy, the horror of civic death, and the nightmarish unleashing of the politically unspeakable and ethically unimaginable. As fascist politics increasingly imposes itself on public and higher education, America’s history, memories of resistance, and struggle for racial, gender, and economic justice are assaulted and subjected to a politics of disappearance and erasure.

At the core of all authoritarian regimes is a politics of disappearance—a practice of elimination that targets dangerous memories, the oppositional press, troubling knowledge, revolutionary ideas, perceived enemies, migrants, people of color, women, trans people, and bodies—all of which are marked as a threat to the existing order. In the U.S., violence has become the preferred instrument of disappearance. The violence of everyday life, with its landscape of uncertainty, racial and political divisions, staggering degrees of inequality, increasing levels of state repression, and ecology of bigotry and social atomization, has created a culture of existential despair, loneliness, and individual malaise. People now disappear in an orgy of violence that leaves no space protected. Mass shootings have become routine as bodies of innocent children are killed in schools, shoppers are gunned down in supermarkets, and worshippers are brutally murdered in churches and synagogues. In 2022, there were 640 mass shootings—a disturbing figure which suggests that the roots of violence and the history of the merchants of death who benefit from an armed society too often disappear in overtly personalized, irrelevant, or trivial conversations about violence. Under such circumstances, the root

causes, underlying structures, and driving forces that benefit from a culture of violence in the United States vanish into an abyss of social and political amnesia.

As violence and hatred become organizing principles of American society, a political culture of “hyper-punitiveness” and brutality emerges. This is a culture in which disappearance and erasure produce a culture soaked in blood—reflected in endless images of dead bodies, shattered families, and human suffering.<sup>3</sup> In an era of what Alex Honneth calls “failed sociality,” symptoms of ethical, political, and economic impoverishment are all around us.<sup>4</sup> Punishment rather than governance has become the dominant feature of politics and, with it, the collapse of ethical consciousness. A culture of creeping punishment now extends from the prison-industrial complex, criminal justice system, and public schools to attacks by the state on trans youth, women’s reproductive rights, and democracy itself.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. mirrors a society that appears to have gone mad, lost in a spectacle of nihilism, consumerism, fear, hatred, manufactured ignorance, and organized irresponsibility.

Historically, the politics of disappearance has a long reach. Moreover, in the existing moment, its boundaries of repression have expanded under a savage neoliberal capitalism that has morphed into an unapologetic mode of white supremacy and fascist politics. In an age of organized forgetting, the politics of disappearance has been removed from history. When events signaling danger do appear, they are normalized as part of the spectacle, and too often examined in fragments within an image-based culture. After the initial shock of their appearance in the 24/7 news cycle, they are soon forgotten. We are currently inundated by images of violence, but they are too often isolated from each other and disconnected from the past—just as the past is disconnected from the present.<sup>6</sup>

## **Dirty War and the Politics of Disappearance as a Tool of Repression**

History is filled with incidences of disappearances that make memory a potent vehicle of political reckoning and moral witnessing.<sup>7</sup> The deeply historical character of terror and state violence is clear in the genocidal violence directed at Native Americans, the massive crimes of slavery and Jim Crow, the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, the cultural genocide directed at Indigenous children in residential schools, and the killing of millions by the Nazis. State violence from 1974-1986 was also part of a sordid history in Argentina, Chile, and other Latin American countries. This was a period in which Operation Condor, supported by the U.S., was responsible for organizing right-wing death squads and military security forces for the purpose of hunting down political dissidents and anyone considered a Marxist or socialist.<sup>8</sup>

As Erin Blakemore points out, referring specifically to Argentina, this was a period of state-sponsored “torture and terrorism. During this time, the military junta waged what was later labeled as the “Dirty War.”<sup>9</sup> This was an era in which the state turned against its citizens, “whisking away political dissidents and people it suspected of being aligned with leftist, socialist or social justice causes and incarcerating, torturing and murdering them.”<sup>10</sup> Fought on a number of fronts, the “Dirty War” resulted in over 30,000 people “disappearing” as the “country’s military dictatorship turned against its own people.”<sup>11</sup> Argentina was not alone in exercising a politics of disappearance. Brazil also engaged in forced disappearances, as did Chile. One of the more notorious cases took place in Chile after Pinochet’s coup in 1973. With the backing of the Central Intelligence Agency, Chile also relied on enforced disappearance as a ruthless political tool and further inaugurated a terrifying means of repression that spread to many other Latin American countries.<sup>12</sup> Under Pinochet, thousands of dissidents were killed, tortured, and eliminated.<sup>13</sup>

With the emergence of white supremacists in control of the Republican Party, the House of

Representatives, and a number of state governments, state violence is increasingly legitimated as a tool of repression and a vehicle for seizing political power. While incidents of overt violence by right-wing extremists against perceived enemies such as school teachers, librarians, and election officials who oppose the fascist politics of the current GOP are well established, white supremacist politicians have not fully embraced historical tools of institutional repression such as Gulags, mass deportations or executions in order to consolidate their power.<sup>14</sup> Instead, they have resorted to an updated ideological and pedagogical version of the “Dirty War,” in which a government wages a struggle against its own citizens within the framework of fascist politics. This “Dirty War” is not conducted exclusively through the naked forces of repression but by engaging in a politics of disappearance and silencing that erases history, bans books, destroys vital civic institutions such as public and higher education, and wages a massive attack on critical education and thinking. This is a politics that aims at producing a form of moral blindness, a crisis of social responsibility, the erasure of moral witnessing, and a crisis of political agency.

### **The War on Memory and Machineries of Disappearance**

This is a war on memory and historical consciousness. The legitimation of state violence in all of its registers is now connected to the destruction of historical memory, the covering up of dark truths, and the residues of collective resistance. This ongoing management of terror directed at the American public is now organized through a systemic attack on civic culture, critical education, and historical consciousness. At work here are forms of domination that employ repressive pedagogical models, rely on cultural apparatuses and avenues of power such as Fox News that engage in full-time propaganda, and systemically construct policies that reduce educational institutions to indoctrination factories engaged in what right-wing extremists euphemistically label as “patriotic education.”

The frontiers of political and moral imagination, memory, and knowledge itself, are under siege by a right-wing politics of enforced disappearances whose aim is the manufacturing of historical amnesia and a politics of disconnections.<sup>15</sup> Historical consciousness has fallen prey to disappearance machines that produce and legitimate a culture of absences, displacement, the whitewashing of memory, and white supremacist notions of agency, inclusion, and identity. For regimes of terror, the politics of disappearance and the attack on historical memory include pedagogical and political tools as strategies that feed illusions and impose upon the public a psychic numbing, a diminished capacity and sensitivity to human suffering, and a paralysis of ethical consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

The fascist disappearance of bodies in a systemic and lethal manner has a long history, and its connection to current practices of disappearance is crucial to understand.<sup>17</sup> The current politics of disappearance is a strategy that has unique and important connections to historical contexts, and current mechanisms of disappearance used by the GOP are connected to older totalitarian regimes. What is distinct about the politics of disappearance at work currently in the U.S. is that it takes place under the cover of state legislative policies that erase the histories of minorities and other displaced populations. Such laws constitute a form of erasure that hides its repressive fascist politics in the dark recesses of legal illegalities. Professor James Ron gets it right in stating that “Repressive states cloak their activities in a mantle of pseudo-legality that channels their techniques of repression into ways that appear, at least to the outside observer, to follow legitimate patterns of violence.”<sup>18</sup> The disappearance of bodies in the advent of the repressive policies of past totalitarian societies has since been criminalized. However, in the current historical moment, the ongoing attack on and disappearance of ideas, books, critical education, reason, and the institutions that support them have yet to be acknowledged as criminal activities in the service of a fascist politics.

## GOP Cultural Wars and the New McCarthyism

Evidence of the current politics of disappearance is on full display in the ultra-right-wing educational policies promoted by former president Trump, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis, and a number of other GOP politicians. Education has long been the subject of attack by right-wing Republicans. One reason is that public schools and higher education have a history of defining themselves (however inadequately) as democratic institutions that serve the public good. They have been in the crosshairs of the GOP since 1954 when the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling officially mandated racial integration while condemning racist segregation in public schools as illegal.

Right-wing culture wars intensified with "the domestic struggles over civil rights, the women's and gay liberation struggles and in the worldwide protest movement against America's brutal war in Vietnam."<sup>19</sup> In addition, the rebellions on university campuses in the sixties calling for the democratization of higher education and more access for minority students further frightened and angered right-wing Republicans and their followers. With the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980, the war on public and higher education accelerated--not because public schools and higher education were failing but because they were public. This attack on schools as a public good correlated strongly with the right-wing attack on any idea or institution that supported the common good and its notions of equity, social justice, and social responsibility. With the takeover of the GOP in the 90s by Newt Gingrich and Karl Rove, the battle lines hardened --the cultural and political conditions that made possible the move from Reagan's conservatism to Trump's fascist and white supremacist politics were now weaponized and secured.<sup>20</sup> Increasingly, the common good was viewed by the GOP as the enemy of free choice, privatization, and unchecked individualism. According to the GOP, education should not be defined as a right but as a privilege whose rewards should benefit young people educated in private schools in the dictates of "patriotic education." It gets worse. As Thom Hartmann has noted, the current attack on public schools has escalated to calls to end them altogether by white supremacists and a neoliberal financial elite. He writes:

America's right-wing billionaires and their racist Republican politician toadies are dedicated to ending public schools and replacing them with non-union, private, for-profit education that best serves well-off children while ghettoizing poor children. The idea of America as a true "land of opportunity" is anathema to their ideal of a nation of "classes and orders" where every person knows their place and morbidly rich white men are in charge of everything.<sup>21</sup>

The current politics of disappearance relating to educational practices and policies goes much further than calling for the privatization of public education through voucher systems and attempts to defund public and higher education. What is being put in place today is an attempt to smear certain books, ideas, histories, and critical thought itself by connecting the latter to socialist ideas and social relations. In the first instance, attempts to control the curriculum and classroom teaching are initiated by labeling certain content as "subversive anti-American leftist indoctrination."<sup>22</sup> This is evident in many of the speeches of former president Trump, who has stated, "Our public schools have been taken over by radical left maniacs."<sup>23</sup> In a video he made as part of his 2024 presidential run, he stated that, if re-elected, he would fire "radical zealots and Marxists" who have allegedly "infiltrated" the Department of Education." He also made clear that he would get rid of "pink-haired communists teaching our kids," abolish tenure for teachers, and create a certification program for teachers who "embrace patriotic values."<sup>24</sup> For Trump and his followers, public and higher education are portrayed

as laboratories of left-wing ideologies whose ultimate purpose is “to destroy family, community, and national unity.”<sup>25</sup> All of these policies represent the return of what Ellen Schrecker has called “the new McCarthyism,” which uses the smear of communism to attack critical education, teacher autonomy, and “real-world issues of race, gender, and social inequality.”<sup>26</sup> She writes:

The current [McCarthyite] campaign to limit what can be taught in high school and college classrooms is clearly designed to divert angry voters from the deeper structural problems that cloud their own personal futures. Nevertheless, it is also a new chapter in the decades-long campaign to roll back the changes that have brought the real world into those classrooms. In one state after another, reactionary and opportunistic politicians are joining that broader campaign to overturn the 1960s’ democratization of American life. By attacking the CRT bogeyman and demonizing contemporary academic culture and the critical perspectives that it can produce, the current limitations on what can be taught endanger teachers at every level. In contrast, the know-nothingism these measures encourage endangers us all.<sup>27</sup>

The right’s attack on universities as citadels of leftist ideology dates further back than the purge of academics by the rabid anti-communists under Sen. Joe McCarthy in the 1950s. Authoritarian governments in the 1930s performed a similar task in order to control universities. Professor Ruth Ben-Ghiat makes this point clearly. She writes:

From the fascist years in Europe...right-wing leaders have accused universities of being incubators of left-wing ideologies and sought to mold them in the image of their own propaganda, policy, and policing aims. ... Given the virulence the Nazis showed in silencing their critics in and out of the academy after Hitler took power in 1933, it is remarkable that this talking-point has retained traction for the right. It has done so thanks, largely, to the military juntas of the cold war era, which gave new life to fascism’s battles against the left.<sup>28</sup>

## **Apartheid Pedagogy and the Plague of Historical Amnesia**

In addition to right-wing policies that disparage anti-racist pedagogy, silence cultures of questioning, and smother independent thinking by associating the latter with socialist ideals, there is also an attempt to remove the intellectual and institutional conditions in which historical memory, critical education, and civic literacy inform each other as part of the broader goal of creating informed and engaged citizens. Central to this repressive pedagogical project is an attempt to squelch memory and freeze history in order to domesticate thought and turn historical amnesia into a weapon of miseducation. In this attack by the assassins of history, memory, and truth, there is an erasure of the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, systemic racism, the Black Power movement, Black Panthers, and the political and racist conditions in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>29</sup> There is more at work here than a right-wing attempt to rethink the legacies of slavery and anti-racist struggles; it is also a concerted attempt to ban any attempts to teach Black children the truth about their history. As Marian Wright Edelman notes in her comments on Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the son of a former slave, he was clear about white people refusing to teach Black students about their rightful place in history and about how the stakes in these debates involved “more than an academic discussion.” She writes:

He saw the connection between erasing Black history and assaulting Black bodies. He said that the crusade to teach the truth about Black history was “much more important than the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom. Why not exploit, enslave, or exterminate a class that everybody is taught to regard as inferior?”<sup>30</sup>

What also disappears in this right-wing indoctrination project are elements of the long war on Black people waged by both Republicans and Democrats. These would include the rise of the Southern Strategy, Nixon’s racially-motivated war on drugs, Ronald Reagan’s disparaging of welfare queens, Clinton’s racist and punishing welfare and incarceration policies, and Trump’s relentless demonization of migrants and Black people.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the myriad of achievements, struggles, resistance, and culture produced by Black people over 400 years is either erased or trivialized.<sup>32</sup> How else to explain the current right-wing attempt to censor, disparage, and ban the 1619 Project from being used in public schools? How else to explain right-wing attempts to ban books by Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Ruby Bridges, Angela Y. Davis, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Robin D.G. Kelley, and other prominent African Americans?

How else to explain the campaign by Gov. Ron DeSantis and Florida’s Department of Education decision to ban a pilot Advanced Placement African American Studies course because it was “political” included “woke education masquerading as education,” and “lack[ed] educational value”? DeSantis makes his case for disparaging the A.P. course by citing the work of a range of notable African-American writers, including bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and others as propaganda. Moreover, it is hard to take seriously DeSantis’ charge that the A. P. course lacks educational value when it includes work by the famed literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., historian Nell Irvin Painter, and Black icons such as Frederick Douglass and Bayard Rustin. As Janai Nelson notes in the *New York Times*, “This disturbing pattern of silencing Black voices and aggressive attempts to erase Black history is one of the most visible examples of performative white supremacy since the presidency of Donald Trump.”<sup>33</sup> Jelani Cobb adds insightfully to this critique by insisting that DeSantis and the Florida education department want the American public to believe “that the evils of the past are not nearly as dangerous now as the willingness to talk about them in the present.”<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, if not shamelessly, the College Board released a revised version of the A.P. African American Studies course in which it scrapped a number of issues that were essential to any viable study of Black history. Removed from the final revision of the A.P. course were topics such as Black Lives Matter, structural racism, reparations, Black queer studies, mass incarceration, and slavery. In addition, it removed from the A.P. curriculum prominent authors and academics such as “James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, June Jordan, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Manning Marable, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Michelle Alexander, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Barbara Ransby, Roderick Ferguson...E. Patrick Johnson, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor.”<sup>35</sup> In their decision to revert to a politics of historical erasure, the College Board has become complicit in both sanctioning the white supremacist culture wars being waged against public and higher education. There is more at work here than an act of bad faith on the part of the College Board; there is also complicity with Florida and its educational policies in using the state as a laboratory of fascism. As Ngakiya Camara writes in *Truthout*, there is nothing surprising here since “cowering to white supremacy and political power may be easy for the College Board because it is an institution forged from racism and eugenics, and designed to preserve higher education for the white, wealthy and privileged. And today, it continues to work exactly the way it was initially intended.”<sup>36</sup>

## The Ghosts of the Past and the Fascist Embrace of “Patriotic Education”

The historically based attacks on Black people and the war waged against public and higher education are not unrelated. Both assaults echo elements of an authoritarian past reminiscent of the McCarthy period in the U.S., the cultural genocidal practices in Nazi Germany, and a torture-saturated Chile under the rule of Augusto Pinochet, in which a politics of disappearance led to the expulsion of thousands of students and professors who were punished not only for holding oppositional political views, but also for being considered dangerous, disposable, and outside the parameters of contained citizenship. The historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat provides an insightful commentary and warning on how right-wing authoritarian actions against education in the past created a template for a politics of disappearance aimed at faculty, staff, and students who are deemed political enemies.<sup>37</sup> She is worth quoting at length:

Strongmen disappear people, and they also disappear areas of knowledge that encourage critical thinking or that conflict with their ideologies and social engineering goals. In Hitler's Germany, art criticism was forbidden. In Pinochet's Chile, philosophy and sociology departments closed down [with the] goal of forcing 'a profound change in the mentality of the country,' as one official put it, that placed higher education in the crosshairs of the government.... Authoritarians thus depend in part on turning campuses into sites of mistrust and fear. As authoritarianism takes hold in a society, what happens on campus—from the recruitment of informers to the expulsion of dissidents—often reflects, or even anticipates, broader transformations.<sup>38</sup>

In the present political and ideological climate, public and higher education are viewed not only as centers of unpatriotic education but also embraced as crucial institutions for policing dissent, eliminating unions, indoctrinating faculty and students, and for normalizing white Christian nationalism, white supremacy, and pedagogies of repression. In the minds of the far-right GOP, education is the most powerful tool for creating a public that is neither informed nor willing to struggle to keep a democracy alive. Authoritarian societies firmly embrace the notion that history is written by the victors. In doing so, they wage a war on historical memory as part of an effort to not only control historical knowledge, particularly in relation to Black and Indigenous people but also to disguise dominant power relations in acts and policies that produce a “diligent and continual silencing ... required to maintain its claims on the present and future.”<sup>39</sup> As Whiteness is increasingly secured through voter suppression, border enforcement, gerrymandering, and state violence, far-right politicians and their allies have expanded their repressive pedagogical mechanisms of discipline and economic measures of control to include cultural apparatuses such as social media and public and higher education.

It is the attempt on the part of the GOP to control historical knowledge and extinguish democratic freedoms in the service of rampant white nationalism and white supremacy that fuels the attack on public and higher education and its dirty war against racialized populations. There is more at stake here than putting up barriers to the development of critical thinking and the fostering of a radical imagination among students. The fascist politics at work in the GOP's view of America is more expansive and more destructive and has become the bedrock strategy to transforming public and higher education into citadels of repression and white supremacist dis-imagination machines. It is an ongoing project designed to prevent Black and Brown students from learning from the trajectory of history. As Angela Davis observes, it is an attempt to prevent all students from understanding the

“nature of U.S. history and the role that racism and capitalism and heteropatriarchy have played in forging that history.”<sup>40</sup>

## **DeSantis, the Scourge of Remembrance, and the Racial Politics of the Dirty War**

America’s dirty war is a battle against those histories, memories, and social institutions that make democracy possible. It is a war against the development of an educated public for the present and future, especially from the ranks of people of color. At the heart of this war is a project of indoctrination that views dangerous memories and critical thought as anti-American. It encompasses an attack on historical consciousness as the foundation of critical thinking, the civic imagination, and empowered forms of political agency. Its core organizing idea is the suppression of Black history and the teaching of anti-racist practices. What is called anti-WOKE by right-wing politicians and pundits is nothing less than an attempt by white supremacists and nationalists, in the words of James Baldwin, to barricade themselves “inside their history.”<sup>41</sup> This historical racism and attack on memory is a part of a larger political strategy the right-wing self-proclaimed “culture warriors” enthusiastically promote as their “culture wars.” The historian Jason Stanley, writing in *The Guardian*, argues that right-wing “cultural warriors” who conduct a “culture war” that whitewashes history, bans ideas, and censors books is nothing less than naked fascism.<sup>42</sup>

This initial anti-woke ideology was unapologetically articulated by former President Trump, who made his ongoing support for white supremacy clear when he claimed at a rally in Florence, South Carolina in March of 2022 that keeping critical race “out of our schools...was a matter of national survival,” going so far as to ask his supporters to “lay down their lives” in the fight against anti-racist policies and practices, along with ideas regarding equity and social justice. Trump is worth quoting given his merging of racism and McCarthyite, anti-communist rhetoric:

We have no choice. The fate of any nation ultimately depends on the willingness of its citizens to lay down, and they must do this—lay down their very lives to defend their country...If we allow the Marxists and commies and socialists to teach our children to hate America, there will be no one left to defend our flag or to protect our great country or its freedom.<sup>43</sup>

Since 2020, the white supremacist assault on Black history, anti-racist pedagogy, and social justice issues have moved from the White House to a state-based strategy-- most visible in the educational policies put into play in a number of GOP-controlled States. One striking, if not scandalous, example is evident in the educational policies and pedagogy of cloning implemented by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, whose aim is to mold human agency by turning schools into dead zones of the imagination. DeSantis’ regressive policies extend far beyond preventing the A.P. course on African-American history from being used in his state. As is well known, DeSantis’s war on critical education, anti-racist pedagogy, African American history, and curricula that includes knowledge about trans people has been as aggressive as it is extensive--and always with a whiff of high-drama political theater, which makes clear that the discourses of racial hatred and white nationalism contain valuable political currency. DeSantis has brought Jim Crow back without apology and, in doing so, has focused on policies that erase history through the imposition of censorship and a form of apartheid pedagogy that constitutes a form of anti-memory that refuses to hold racial injustice to account. Under DeSantis, the politics of disappearance emerges as a set of take-no-prisoners policies that combine censorship, the demonization of educators, and full-fledged attacks on public and higher

education; it also entails the criminalization of teachers who engage in matters of racial injustice, forcing professors to take loyalty oaths, and the enactment of politics of silencing aimed at erasing trans people from the historical record, books, and curricular materials.

According to David A. Love, DeSantis has turned Florida into what he calls “a circus of white supremacist madness [while] staking a claim for fascism. He has waged a full-scale war on both the teaching of Black history and classroom discussions of sexuality and gender identity issues. His “Don’t Say Gay Bill” forces elementary school teachers to be silent about sexual orientation and gender identity issues while using his office to target and label people who oppose this bill as pedophiles. In a number of states, there are “bills that not only restrict teachers from having conversations in educational settings about sexuality but also “bar public school libraries from displaying books about “the study of sex, sexual preferences, sexual activity, sexual perversion, sex-based classifications, sexual identity, or gender identity or books that are of a sexual nature.”<sup>44</sup> In Texas, there are GOP calls to criminalize anyone who provided care for trans people. There is more at work here than enforced ignorance; there is also a culture of deformation and cruelty that makes societal pariahs out of LGBTQ youth while doing irreparable harm to their parents, teachers, and caregivers. This is unadulterated hatred hiding behind the fake respectability of the law.<sup>45</sup> Will Bunch, a talented writer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, is right in stating that the “violent, expanding war on LGBTQ kids” by DeSantis and other Republican lawmakers “should make you think about 1930s Germany.”<sup>46</sup> DeSantis’ war on academic freedom, critical pedagogy, troubling knowledge, and dangerous memories is also evident in his ludicrous “Stop Woke Act,” which restricts teachers from talking about racial inequality, systemic racism, civil rights struggles, slavery, and any other issue regarding racial justice that might make students uncomfortable, as if how they feel is the ultimate measure of teaching them to be informed and critical citizens. Paul Krugman, writing in the *New York Times*, is right in stating that in reality, it appears that DeSantis and his Republican allies want to ban anything “that makes right wingers uncomfortable.”<sup>47</sup> DeSantis has banned math books he claims are politically offensive, passed a bill requiring that teachers remove or cover up books from classrooms that have not been approved by a state compliance censor, used public school funds to expand charter schools, attacked public schools that are crucial civic institutions, and waged a full-scale war on democratic values and social relations. What DeSantis and others seem to need to remember is that the ideal of a critically informed civic education is teaching students how to be creative, innovative, and courageous—not comfortable.

Barbara Ransby is laser sharp in arguing that DeSantis’ attack on critical education and his support for white nationalism and authoritarianism “stands in the tradition of practices we have seen in the fascist past that have remerged in the present.” She writes:

In this way, DeSantis and his allies uphold the kind of indoctrination he claims to oppose. He stands in the tradition of the Nazis who burned books for fear that their antisemitic lies would be challenged in print. He stands in the tradition of the 1976-1983 Argentinian dictatorship that jailed and exiled dissident professors and killed their students. He stands in the tradition of Turkey’s dictator Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has purged, jailed, or exiled over 100,000 educators and intellectuals because they wrote and taught ideas he saw as a political threat. DeSantis’s dangerous actions are textbook proto-fascist measures. His militant opposition to any teaching of the Black freedom struggle is also reminiscent of the South African apartheid regime’s book banning and curricular and speaker censorship, which limited the circulation of ideas that could undermine the legitimacy of an unjust system.<sup>48</sup>

At the heart of the “Dirty War” being waged against marginalized groups in the U.S. is an attack on

historical consciousness that not only connects the past to the present but also provides the memory work essential for understanding the repressive nature and structural forces at work in the war against Black people, women, LGBTQ people, and others relegated to the category of disposable. The right wing's declared war on democracy is rooted in a politics of disappearance in which history is shredded, and matters of truth, evidence, and moral witnessing are erased. Subjectivity is the material of politics, and uncovering alternative histories is not simply a pedagogical task but a crucial tool in creating political agents capable of remembering the horrors of a past that cannot be repeated. When the racist history of the past disappears and educators who teach critical ideas are criminalized, structural racism becomes invisible, and racist acts become individualized as a matter of attitude and faulty character. When racism is reduced to alleged self-inflicted behaviors, people blame themselves for their feelings of inadequacy, impoverishment, and alleged deficits, making it all the more difficult to translate and understand individually experienced acts of racism as part of a larger system of racial capitalism.<sup>49</sup> The fascist plague that is now shaping public and higher education needs to be addressed with a new language that makes education central to politics and historical consciousness. Such a language needs to make the politics of remembering a crucial pedagogical tool in changing the way people connect events, rethink the present political conjuncture, and understand the history of the present.<sup>50</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

A politics of disappearance is a thread that connects the plethora of fascist assaults on public and higher education in the U.S. This is a politics that erases history, memory, critical ideas, dissent, and racial justice. Its tools are fear, manufactured ignorance, engineered panics, and paranoid racist politics draped in the language of white nationalism and bigotry. Its goal is racial cleansing, a white nationalist notion of citizenship, and the undermining of the public and civic imagination. Its endpoint is a rebranded fascism. The fight against fascism must recognize that history is power, and that when it is weaponized for political purposes, as is currently being done by the GOP, memory, historical consciousness, and critical thought become one of the first casualties of authoritarianism. Memory as mis-education traps history in the present and eradicates claims of the past as a site of injustice. Equally important is the recognition that the politics of disappearance takes historical memory as its first target in order to produce a form of moral blindness and a crisis of thinking and agency. Censoring history as part of the politics of disappearance undermines the necessity of critical interpretation, erases the contemplative nature of inquiry, and limits the possibilities of disrupting conventional and hegemonic notions of historical understanding and learned helplessness. In doing so, right-wing GOP legislators enact laws that refuse to offer classroom pedagogical practices that both place people of color self-consciously in their histories and provide the conditions for empowering forms of individual and collective political agency.

Under such circumstances, reviving the political and moral imagination is more crucial than ever in order to resist the assassins of memory and social justice who have turned critical education and thinking into a crime. This suggests a mass movement in defense of education as a public good and the right of educators to teach as a practice of freedom in order to make education a formidable site of literacy, liberation, and individual and collective empowerment. The right-wing fear of cultural memory, history, and racial struggles is part of a longstanding practice informed by a modern fear of living with difference, embracing the common good, and expanding the capacities for critical and political agency. Rewriting the past in line with the imperatives of economic, racial, and social justice is a fundamental political and pedagogical task because it both shapes social memory and makes

new demands on how to fight against a fascist politics that defines itself by reducing history and its absence to a fundamental form of mystification and depoliticization. Overcoming the divorce between historical memory and political agency is the first and crucial step to learning how to remember differently-- and deeply-- so as to act urgently, and collectively in the face of the looming fascist threat.

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## Endnotes

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