

Nina Cvar\*

## Erasure as a Constitutive Mechanism of Global Capitalism: From the Periphery to the Centre

### Keywords

erasure, translation, modernity, capitalism, race, coloniality, global capitalism

### Abstract

Fredrikzon and Haffenden (2023) argue that the so-called notion of erasure has remained largely under-researched. But what does erasure mean—how does it operate and how is it reproduced, particularly in relation to global capitalism? Contrary to the inclination to individualize the repressive character of erasure, this text will aspire to thematize erasure as a constitutive mechanism of global capitalism that permeates its logic. Stemming from distinct disciplinary areas yet which intersect in various ways, this research will therefore investigate erasure as a notion that is not isolated but related to its political, social, cultural, physical, and technological dimensions and processes that give meaning to it within a temporal horizon. Thus, the central thesis of this paper will be that the process of erasure needs to be understood as the essential element of modernity, appearing uncompromisingly in its histories and in particular in contemporary politics.

### Izbris kot konstitutivni mehanizem globalnega nekrokapitalizma: od periferije k centru

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### Ključne besede

izbris, prevod, modernost, kapitalizem, rasa, kolonialnost, globalni kapitalizem

### Povzetek

Fredrikzon in Haffenden (2023) trdita, da je tako imenovani koncept izbrisa ostal v veliki meri neraziskan. Toda kaj pomeni izbris – kako deluje in kako se reproducira, zlasti v

\* Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia | Laboratory for Multimedia, Faculty of Electrical Engineering, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia  
nina.cvar@ff.uni-lj.si; nina.cvar@fe.uni-lj.si | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7404-2778>

povezavi z globalnim kapitalizmom? V nasprotju z individualizacijo represivnega značaja izbrisa, si ta tekst prizadeva tematizirati izbris kot konstitutivni mehanizem globalnega kapitalizma, ki prežema njegovo logiko. Izhajajoč iz različnih disciplinarnih področij, bo ta raziskava tematizirala izbris kot pojem, ki ni izoliran, temveč povezan z njegovimi političnimi, družbenimi, kulturnimi, fizičnimi in tehnološkimi dimenzijami ter procesi, ki mu dajejo pomen znotraj časovnega horizonta. Osrednja teza tega prispevka bo torej, da je treba proces izbrisa razumeti kot bistveni element modernosti, ki se neizprosno pojavlja v njeni zgodovini in zlasti v sodobni politiki.



## Introduction

Is erasure a singular act or is it never truly complete—or, to refer to Avery Gordon, with erasure there is always some aftermath, “some reminder of the violence done to make the world look new again.”<sup>1</sup> This dialectic of violence performed to make something look new again should be regarded as the starting point of this research. As erasure can be understood as the process of removing or even obliterating; there is always something violent about it, yet, as argued by Fredrikzon and Haffenden, the notion of erasure has largely remained unaddressed and left to marginalization.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this can be attributed to the intricate, dual process of erasure, which leaves the subject inadequately conceptualized. Whether it occurs physically—through the destruction of lives, belongings, cultural artifacts—or symbolically—through the omission of certain narratives or identities from history, media, or social consciousness—erasure typically involves a power dynamic in which dominant groups or ideologies, either intentionally or unintentionally, marginalize or suppress others. However, remnants of what has been erased often persist, challenging the totality of the erasure and potentially fostering resistance or resurgence.

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Gordon in Brian Dillon, “The Revelation of Erasure,” *Tate Etc.*, September 1, 2006, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-8-autumn-2006/revelation-erasure>.

<sup>2</sup> Johan Fredrikzon and Chris Haffenden, “Towards Erasure Studies: Excavating the Material Conditions of Memory and Forgetting,” *Memory, Mind & Media* 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2023.2>.

In “Towards Erasure Studies: Excavating the Material Conditions of Memory and Forgetting,” Fredrikzon and Haffenden propose five types of erasure: repressive erasure as being characteristics (albeit far from it) of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes; protective erasure as an erasure concerning control from the imperatives of a wider system, underscoring the necessity of managing exposure to broader social or political forces; operative erasure as erasure within the bureaucratic mode; amending erasure, which refers to the revision or correction of elements of text or data, ultimately influencing relations of power; and calamitous and neglectful erasure, which is related to the problem of agency.<sup>3</sup> Fredrikzon and Haffenden outline the different types of erasure being, as they argue, aware of the complexities and multifaced history of erasure.

But my interest goes beyond these characteristics. I will focus specifically on this dual dynamic of erasure: erasure as both a mechanism and a constitutive process of global capitalism that ultimately conceals the very mechanism of erasure itself. The proposed theoretical framework will largely build upon the legacy of critical thought, while acknowledging its inherent limitations—particularly, as Achille Mbembe notes, Europe is no longer the center of the world.<sup>4</sup> The interpretive framework I propose will primarily incorporate Black critical studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, as well as Marxist critiques of capitalism.

### **Erasure as a Structural Mechanism of Coloniality**

What exactly is erasure? The most straightforward answer might suggest that erasure involves manipulating the dynamics of presence and absence inherently tied to power. Analyzing erasure, therefore, requires rethinking the very contours of reality: how its narratives are constructed, assumptions formed, representations disseminated, and discourses reproduced. However, erasure is also about difference. Yet, contrary to what one might expect, difference is not simply erased. On the contrary, it is further generated, even as the process of erasure becomes naturalized and normalized. Thus, the process of erasure entails a reconfiguration of the representation’s limits, which is a manifestation of power and an embodiment of contradiction.

<sup>3</sup> Fredrikzon and Haffenden.

<sup>4</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 157.

It is precisely this sharp contradiction of difference that forms the foundation of this paper and serves as its central epistemic point of departure for analyzing the mechanism of erasure. Moreover, understanding erasure in relation to difference—considered here as a phenomenon in itself which acts as recognition of the fact that behind unity there is always difference<sup>5</sup>—allows for a challenge to the order of representation as the dominant mode of organized knowledge. But which order of representation is at stake? It is the order of meaning and representation grounded in the epistemologies of modernity, which, as I argue, cannot exist without coloniality and, to reference Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, results in a so-called subaltern subject, which is, according to Spivak, missed in Foucault's and Deleuze's analysis of representation.<sup>6</sup>

Coloniality, as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni contends, is tied to structural processes that subordinate peripheral societies to a global imperial model, functioning through forms of domination that perpetuate themselves by producing essentialisms within the colonial matrix of power.<sup>7</sup> In tandem with modernity, this dynamic generates what is known as the colonial difference, which, I contend, is inseparable from the logic of erasure. Indeed, I argue that erasure operates as the mechanism through which the colonial difference is continuously produced, maintained, invoked, and reproduced along the axes of erasure.

### **The Construction of the Colonial Difference and the Re-examination of the Concept of the Universal**

By employing the concept of the colonial difference, the global architecture of inequalities is illuminated, while also providing an epistemic framework for understanding erasure. Specifically, the notion of the colonial difference reveals the dynamics of colonialism by addressing the hierarchies it produces. Walter D. Mignolo, for example, uses the term to describe how colonial powers create and

<sup>5</sup> Rolando Vasquez, "Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity's Epistemic Violence," *Sociology Lens* 24, no. 1 (March 2011): 27–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6443.2011.01387.x>.

<sup>6</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

<sup>7</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Coloniality of Power in Development Studies and the Impact of Global Imperial Designs on Africa," *Australasian Review of African Studies* 33, no. 2 (December 2012): 48–73.

sustain distinctions between colonizers and the colonized, thereby generating a systemic difference known as the colonial difference.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the colonial difference highlights the colonial divide and illustrates how colonialist discourses are reproduced at the expense of knowledge, critical insights, and political strategies originating from the subaltern perspective. This implies that the production of knowledge is not neutral, and suggests the use of the colonial difference for epistemic relocation—“to view the world from perspectives critical of hegemonic viewpoints.”<sup>9</sup> Referring to Ramón Grosfoguel, the claim that there is no modernity without coloniality underscores that the production of knowledge is far from neutral, with the colonial difference functioning as a fundamental topos of the modern world.<sup>10</sup>

### Production of the Metaphysics of Erasure

Given that the colonial difference constitutes a structural framework, subjectivity is shaped within its symbolic order. This process of formation, however, is governed by a pernicious mechanism meticulously described by Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason*—a subversion of the Enlightenment legacy. The *Critique of Black Reason* unveils the conditions of the Western matrix of power and, through the figure of Blackness as a political figure of universalization via the universalization of dehumanization, exposes Western metaphysics. The mechanism ensuring this specific formation is *fabulation*—a tendency to present fictional or imaginary facts and narratives as real. I derive this concept from the so-called fantasizing, as introduced by Mbembe.<sup>11</sup> Fabulation is intrinsically linked to the slave trade, colonial plantation economies, and extraction—the so-called *cornerstones* of modernity that inaugurated the principles of race and racial subjectivity.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Walter Mignolo. “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 57–96, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-1-57>.

<sup>9</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, “Colonial Difference, Geopolitics of Knowledge, and Global Coloniality in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist World-System,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 25, no. 3 (2002): 209, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-1-57>.

<sup>10</sup> Grosfoguel, 209.

<sup>11</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Mbembe, 40.

According to Mbembe, this is facilitated by Western thought, which understands identity not as co-belonging but rather through a *self-referential perspective*—“the emergence of being and its revelation primarily in its own being, or even in its own mirror.”<sup>13</sup> This logic of autofiction, autocontemplation, or closure is the foundation from which the modern era emerged, along with the conception of *race* as a phantasmatic, material, and primordial category.<sup>14</sup> The colonial difference thus perpetuates the Enlightenment idea of the (White) Man, along with its associated social and psychic representations. As Mbembe shows, the category of Man is arbitrarily determined,<sup>15</sup> resulting in specific modes of identification that can be regarded as axes of erasure. In the following section, I will outline structural lines along which erasure unfolds. These lines reveal how racial, class, and gender divisions emerge, leading to displacement, dispossession, and erasure. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, these processes ultimately contribute to the formalization of reality.

### Axes of Erasure

Building on Mbembe’s analysis of the emergence of the modern world, this paper will propose a framework for understanding the structure of erasure through three key axes: 1. The axis of the *subject*; 2. The axis of the *gaze*; 3. The axis of *sociohistorical conditions*. I will begin with the axis of the *subject*, specifically focusing on the concept of identification. Identification is a theoretically complex notion that pertains to the formation of subjectivity. For example, Fanon demonstrates how the internalization of the colonizer’s gaze occurs. Homi K. Bhabha’s analysis of Fanon is particularly insightful in this context, as it elucidates three conditions of identification, which I will consider to be one of the axes where erasure takes place.

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The first condition addresses the relationship between being and otherness, where being is only affirmed in relation to otherness. The second condition highlights the tension between desire and demand, which manifests in the division of doubling, thereby perpetuating differentiation within the different, based on the liminal distance between the colonizer and the colonized other. The final

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<sup>13</sup> Mbembe, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Mbembe, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Mbembe, 12.

condition emphasizes the construction of an image resulting from identification, aptly summarized by Bhaba's quote: "Identification [. . .] is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the Other place from which it comes."<sup>16</sup> Identification is intrinsically linked to visual processes, specifically the gaze, which plays a crucial role in the formation of subjectivity.

The *gaze*, presenting the second axis, possesses a distinct power; in other words, the image and the gaze are inextricably connected through an ontological coupling that emerges with the representational regime of modernity, relegating non-Western subjects, such as the Black subject, to the margins of its exteriority. The mechanism underlying this representational regime is a cognitive logic that has profoundly reshaped our conceptions of liberalism, individualism, and egalitarianism, operating through principles of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.<sup>17</sup> This means that modernity, which Mignolo characterizes as the reverse side of coloniality, was established as a specific order of signification associated with the so-called imperial gaze. According to Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, the imperial gaze pertains to the ways visual and photographic practices are implicated in the exercise of imperial and colonial power.<sup>18</sup> It encompasses the entire apparatus of seeing, displaying, and recording, and—crucially in relation to erasure—the imperial gaze is grounded in imperial ideologies and practices that perpetuate imperial power.<sup>19</sup>

The imperial gaze determines who can be seen and how the gaze is structured, making its history also the history of the constitution of the modern (imperial) subject, unfolding along racially and sexually defined mechanisms of reproduction. Visual apparatuses, such as cinematic technology, play a significant role in unifying perception, memory, and affect, ultimately shaping specific modes of embodiment. This corresponds to the third structural axis: *sociohistorical conditions*. According to Foucault, apparatuses are productive and material-discur-

<sup>16</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Aïsha Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 5–7.

<sup>19</sup> Azoulay, 146, 156.

sive formations that fulfill specific strategic functions within power relations,<sup>20</sup> to which I will add the power relations of the historical development of *capitalism*. However, apparatuses actively contribute to the production of phenomena.<sup>21</sup> Barad's perspective, for example, connects apparatuses with the body, emphasizing how the body is mediated at the intersection of discourse and production. Consequently, mediation culminates in a specific form, which, according to Agamben, results from the separation of life through subjection to apparatuses.<sup>22</sup>

### Aporias of Form and the Transition of Erasure as Translation

Given that both Bradley and Agamben engage with the notion of form, a comparison of their respective approaches would be valuable. Bradley's starting position on form comes from her reading of Calvin Warren, for whom the modern world operates as formalization, with anti-Black violence being subtended via the order of forms.<sup>23</sup>

For Bradley, form is a conceptual tool to examine the ways in which race, affect, and the body are mediated through various artistic and cultural forms. But most importantly, for Bradley, form is an active actor in the construction of meaning. On the other hand, Agamben approaches form through the concepts of bare life and potentiality, examining it as a mechanism of biopolitical inclusion and exclusion. Through the concept of the anthropological machine, Agamben demonstrates how the Western episteme defines life.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, Bradley places greater emphasis on aesthetics, advocating for a move beyond a naïve understanding of aesthetics and form; Bradley argues for recognizing their intricate entanglement with socio-cultural and political contexts, underscoring the structural relation between aesthetics and the political economy of

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," trans. Colin Gordon, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 194–228.

<sup>21</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Calvin Warren, "The Catastrophe: Black Feminist Poetics, (Anti)Form, and Mathematical Nihilism," *Qui parle* 28, no. 2 (December 2019): 353–72, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10418385-7861859>.

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).



accumulation, extraction, and dispossession. In this regard, Bradley interrogates the foundation of the form's becoming, showing that form ultimately is not just about life, but death as well. Nonetheless, both positions address form as a mechanism that constructs meaning and content. However, while Agamben approaches these processes from an ontological perspective, Bradley engages with ontology through the lens of aesthetics.

If we follow Caroline Levine's assertion that form "always indicates an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping,"<sup>25</sup> Bradley's and Agamben's focus on form as a force that shapes and conditions how modern individuals understand reality demonstrates how the world operates through processes of formalization. The formalization of reality consequently leads to the creation of "proper bodies."

However, as Bradley suggests, the critical challenge lies in rethinking the formation of these "proper bodies" based on the concept of *non-relation*, which I will dwell on in more detail in the section on the decolonization of erasure. As I have demonstrated, the notion of appropriateness is inextricably tied to the onto-epistemological axes of erasure and the metaphysics of fabulation. This suggests that form not only organizes content and experience but also serves as a boundary, functioning as a mechanism for exercising political or sovereign control; it structures meanings, experiences, and actions which unfold through continuous displacement, reconfiguration, transformation, and even erasure, all of which contribute to the articulation of the framework I have conceptualized as the colonial difference. What, then, enables this articulation, made possible by the colonial difference?

Building on the work of Rolando Vázquez, I propose that this process is translation. Furthermore, Vázquez's claims that "what we know is built on erasure,"<sup>26</sup> emphasizing the epistemological aspect of translation, which could be understood as adjustment to the social ramifications of the colonial difference. Vázquez addresses the concept of translation in two broad terms: as a tool of

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<sup>25</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Rolando Vázquez, "What We Know Is Built on Erasure," interview by Carolina Rito, *The Contemporary Journal*, January 25, 2019, <https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/on-translations/what-we-know-is-built-on-erasure-an-interview-with-rolando-vazquez>.

colonial power that erases the cultural, linguistic, and epistemological frameworks of marginalized communities, and as a means of plurality.

Furthermore, the relationship between erasure, translation, and difference can be examined through the lens of modernity—a Eurocentric project that operates on the assumption of being at the center of both history and geography.<sup>27</sup> This presumption of centrality is reflected in a mechanism of truth, which, as Vázquez notes, “is a single truth that is only sustained by the erasure of other worlds of meaning.”<sup>28</sup> Vázquez argues that erasure occurs because translation fails to capture the richness and specificity of non-Western traditions, reducing them to categories that conform to Western thought. Erasure thus exposes its structural debt to modernity and as such functions as a referent for modernity’s epistemic territory and its semiotic mechanism. It operates by translation, which, quoting Vázquez,

has to be understood not only as a “technology” of the scriptural enterprise of modernity, but also a movement of appropriation of the world, of incorporation into modernity’s territory, its reality and visibility. Translation appears thus as a process of selection and appropriation that erases all that does not fit into the proper place of the already established epistemic territory.<sup>29</sup>

Vázquez’s critique aligns with the broader discussion of how modernity is intertwined with coloniality, where Western epistemology dominates and marginalizes alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Examining how erasure is intricately linked to the formalization of life in modernity, a process I have demonstrated to be inseparable from coloniality. This dynamic generates a specific notion of the human through what Vázquez describes as a double movement of translation: modernity expands through appropriation, on one hand, while on the other, such appropriation is always accompanied by rejection—or, as Vázquez puts it, appropriation is inseparable from erasure.<sup>30</sup> Building on Vázquez’s claim about the violent epistemic nature of translation, I propose that

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<sup>27</sup> Vázquez.

<sup>28</sup> Vázquez.

<sup>29</sup> Rolando Vázquez, “Translation as Erasure,” 33–34.

<sup>30</sup> Vázquez, 33.

translation, erasure, and modernity should be conceptualized through the lens of *relationality*.

Erasure thus serves as an indicator of modernity's mechanism of epistemic exclusion and oppression, accompanied by a specific set of power relations that generate modes of political (in)visibility and exclude non-Western peoples.

### Unlearning the Relationality of Erasure

I apprehend relationality, following Fred Moten, Axelle Karera, Rizvana Bradley, and Marina Gržinić, as an expression of power that grants transcendental subjectivity exclusively to the “chosen ones,” systematically excluding Black bodies.

Additionally, as Karera puts it via Moten, the structure of relationality is essentially the condition for the possibility of the enslavement of Black bodies.<sup>31</sup> Building on Mbembe's concept of Blackness—specifically his emphasis on the broader episteme of the “becoming-Black of the world” as a form of negative universalization<sup>32</sup>—I argue that the epistemicity of relationality serves as the driving force behind the mechanism of erasure. This process generates a form of sociality that systematically produces the “underside” of the category of *Man-as-human*.<sup>33</sup> In this context, the relationality of erasure enforces conditions that reduce the Other to an objectified status. This process is dictated by the epistemic categories of the Western matrix of power and is commodified through mechanisms of dispossession. Consequently, it produces various regimes of (neo)colonial capital accumulation and modalities of surveillance and control.

Paradoxically, by invoking *non-relationality*, erasure exposes that which has been rendered invisible, yet it is anterior to capitalism, underlining its generativity within the material-discursive structuration of the world. Erasure can be considered alongside primitive accumulation, through which the capitalist

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<sup>31</sup> Axelle Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 32–56, <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.7.1.0032>.

<sup>32</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Kolonializem Evrope, dekolonialnost, rasizem,” in *Politika, estetika in demokracija*, ed. Marina Gržinić (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2015), 107–22.

<sup>33</sup> Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Catherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

mode of production emerges via dispossession, colonization, and exploitation; however, with necrocapitalism representing contemporary capitalism that organizes its modes of accumulation through dispossession and the subordination of life to the power of death,<sup>34</sup> erasure functions as a mechanism that is continually reasserted in each subsequent iteration of violence, collapsing Benjamin's distinction between the first constitutive violence and law-preserving violence, as Azoulay explains the transformation of Benjamin's theoretical observation.<sup>35</sup> This places erasure within the dynamics of the necrocapitalist mode of governance, systematically neglecting (as needed) or actively inflicting harm on certain populations in the name of economic gain or profit maximization, legitimized by settler colonialism.

Erasure can therefore be regarded as the constitutive mechanism of global necrocapitalism, and to unlearn its effects it is to move beyond the grips of the relationality of the (White) Western matrix of power.

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<sup>34</sup> Marina Gržinić, "A Passion for History in the Depoliticized and Castrated European Union Regime," lecture at the Ludwig Museum, Budapest, Hungary, May 3, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Azoulay, *Potential History*, 33.

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