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After erasure

State violence and fugitive memory in Buenos Aires, 1990-2005

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Publication date

2026

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Evans, F. H. (2026). *After erasure: State violence and fugitive memory in Buenos Aires, 1990-2005*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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Summary

My PhD thesis, *After Erasure: State Violence and Fugitive Memory in Post-Dictatorial Buenos Aires* (University of Amsterdam, 2025), employs historical materialist methods of archival, visual, and textual analysis to examine how liberatory social movements challenged Argentina's neoliberal transition following its 1976-1983 dictatorship. The military *junta* kidnapped, tortured, detained, and forcibly disappeared an estimated 30,000 people while systematically destroying documentation and infrastructure that could evidence these crimes. Despite pioneering legal processes in the dictatorship's immediate aftermath, institutionalised impunity laws established in 1989 and 1990 protected military perpetrators from legal justice for crimes against humanity for over a decade, creating the conditions for state-managed memory that served political reconciliation rather than justice.

The thesis asks: How did artist-activists respond to both state violence and the neoliberal management of its memory during the period of institutionalised impunity (1995-2005)? What forms of remembrance emerged outside and in opposition to state frameworks of recognition and reconciliation? How did these practices constitute sites of ongoing political struggle rather than cultural commemoration? Through case studies ranging from film, photography, and performance art to the public dissemination of archaeology and police archives, I trace practices that resisted the state's attempts to contain, resolve, or domesticate dictatorial memory, examining them as forms of class struggle waged through culture against military authoritarianism and market capitalism operating under conditions of uneven and combined development.

I theorise these practices as fugitive memory, the deliberately illegible, unresolved, and anti-archival modes of remembrance that maintained the speculative and politically generative dimensions of violence. Drawing from the concept of “fugitivity” as developed in Black Studies

(Moten 2003; Hartman 2008; Sharpe 2016), wherein flight and evasion constitute forms of resistance to domination and capture, I demonstrate how practitioners developed performative and embodied practices of memory that evaded the logics of official documentation and legibility. These artist-activists understood that state-controlled narratives about dictatorial violence, particularly within contexts of legalised impunity, served to legitimise successive governments rather than support justice or accountability.

I conducted original archival research at El Club Atlético, and ESMA (commemorative sites of former clandestine detention centres), and with declassified provincial police files managed by an activist collective turned public body (Comisión por la Memoria). Through this work, I recovered ephemeral activist practices previously excluded from discussions of commemoration. The thesis repositions post-dictatorial memory work as cultural and aesthetic analysis in the historical materialist tradition, revealing how creative practice functions as a critique of political economy. Key contributions include: theorising fugitive memory as a transnational analytic for understanding anti-state cultural resistance beyond the Argentine context; demonstrating how the erasure of material evidence itself constitutes a material fact requiring historical materialist analysis; and showing how communities generate justice claims precisely where material evidence has been systematically destroyed.

This extended engagement with primary sources, combined with my theoretical grounding in radical traditions of critical theory and established relationships with activist communities in Buenos Aires, positions me to intervene in social movement studies as an area which has historically privileged material traces over embodied and ephemeral practice. Furthermore, the thesis contributes to memory studies scholarship that takes seriously the political stakes of *how* violence is remembered.

Samenvatting

In mijn proefschrift, *After Erasure: State Violence and Fugitive Memory in Post-Dictatorial Buenos Aires* (Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2025), maak ik gebruik van historisch-materialistische methoden van archief-, beeld- en tekstanalyse om te onderzoeken hoe bevrijdende sociale bewegingen de neoliberale transitie van Argentinië na de dictatuur van 1976-1983 hebben uitgedaagd. De militaire *junta* ontvoerde, martelde, detineerde en liet naar schatting 30.000 mensen verdwijnen, terwijl ze systematisch de documentatie- en informatie-infrastructuur vernietigden die deze misdaden konden bewijzen. Ondanks baanbrekende juridische processen in de directe nasleep van de dictatuur, beschermden geïnstitutionaliseerde straffeloosheidswetten die in 1989 en 1990 werden ingesteld, militaire daders meer dan tien jaar lang tegen gerechtelijke vervolging voor misdaden tegen de menselijkheid, waardoor de voorwaarden werden gecreëerd voor een door de staat beheerd geheugen die eerder politieke verzoening dan gerechtigheid diende.

De thesis stelt de vraag: hoe reageerden kunstenaars-activisten op zowel het staatsgeweld als het neoliberale beheer van de herinneringen daaraan tijdens de periode van geïnstitutionaliseerde straffeloosheid (1995-2005)? Welke vormen van herdenken ontstonden buiten en in tegenstelling tot de staatsstructuren van erkenning en verzoening? Hoe vormde deze herdenkingsvormen plaatsen van voortdurende politieke strijd in plaats van culturele herdenking? Aan de hand van casestudy's, variërend van film, fotografie en performancekunst tot de openbare verspreiding van archeologische en politiearchieven, traceer ik praktijken die zich verzetten tegen de pogingen van de staat om de dictatoriale herinnering in te dammen, op te lossen of te domesticeren, en onderzoek ik ze als vormen van klassenstrijd die via cultuur wordt gevoerd tegen militair autoritarisme en marktkapitalisme onder omstandigheden van ongelijke en gecombineerde ontwikkeling.

Ik theoretiseer deze praktijken als vluchtig herinneren, de opzettelijk onleesbare, onopgeloste en anti-archiefachtige vormen van herinnering die de speculatieve en politiek-generatieve dimensies van geweld in stand hielden. Op basis van het concept van “vluchtigheid” zoals ontwikkeld in Black Studies (Moten 2003; Hartman 2008; Sharpe 2016), waarin vlucht en ontduiking vormen van verzet tegen overheersing en gevangenneming vormen, laat ik zien hoe beoefenaars performatieve en belichaamde praktijken van herinnering ontwikkelden die de logica van officiële documentatie en leesbaarheid ontweken. Deze kunstenaars-activisten begrepen dat door de staat gecontroleerde verhalen over dictatoriaal geweld, met name in contexten van gelegaliseerde straffeloosheid, dienden om opeenvolgende regeringen te legitimeren in plaats van gerechtigheid of verantwoordingsplicht te ondersteunen.

Ik heb origineel archiefonderzoek gedaan bij El Club Atlético en ESMA (herdenkingsplaatsen van voormalige clandestiene detentiecentra) en met vrijgegeven provinciale politiedossiers die worden beheerd door een activistencollectief dat een openbare instantie is geworden (Comisión por la Memoria). Door dit werk heb ik vluchtige activistische praktijken teruggevonden die voorheen waren uitgesloten van discussies over herdenking. Het proefschrift herpositioneert post-dictoriaal herinneringswerk als culturele en esthetische analyse in de historisch-materialistische traditie en laat zien hoe creatieve praktijken functioneren als kritiek op de politieke economie. Belangrijke bijdragen zijn onder meer: het theoretiseren van vluchtige herinneringen als een transnationale analyse voor het begrijpen van anti-staatscultureel verzet buiten de Argentijnse context; het aantonen hoe het wissen van materieel bewijs zelf een materieel feit vormt dat historisch-materialistische analyse vereist; en het laten zien hoe gemeenschappen juist daar waar materieel bewijs systematisch is vernietigd, aanspraak maken op gerechtigheid.

Deze uitgebreide betrokkenheid bij primaire bronnen, in combinatie met mijn theoretische basis in radicale tradities van kritische theorie en gevestigde relaties met activistische

gemeenschappen in Buenos Aires, stelt mij in staat om in te grijpen in onderzoeken naar sociale bewegingen, een gebied dat historisch gezien materiële sporen heeft bevoorrecht boven belichaamde en vluchtige praktijken. Bovendien levert het proefschrift een bijdrage aan de herinnering onderzoeken die de politieke belangen van *hoe* geweld wordt herinnerd serieus nemen.