HOWJ The Human Occupation & Wellbeing Journal

Perspective

The Lion's Right to Speak: Historical Erasure, Constitutional Memory, and the Politics of "Progress"

Lisa Shoko[1]

Affiliation:
[1]School Race Equity Consultant
Venekai Consulting Services
Liverpool
United Kingdom

Corresponding Author:
Lisa Shoko
Email: lisa.shoko@venekai.com

Dates:
Received: 11/02/2026
Accepted: 11/04/2026

Article citation:
Shoko, L. (2026). The Lion's Right to Speak: Historical Erasure, Constitutional Memory, and the Politics of "Progress". *The Human Occupation & Wellbeing Journal. 2(1)* https://doi.org/10.18552/aqg30025

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Scan QR Code to share

ABSTRACT

In a world where "progress" is increasingly weaponised as justification for historical erasure, the deliberate suppression of national memory poses a direct threat to democracy, justice, and human rights. This article interrogates how state-led narratives of being "too progressive" or "protecting children" function as strategies of governance that distort constitutional purpose and undermine collective wellbeing. Through comparative analysis of curriculum restrictions and book bans in the United States, the systematic silencing of Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe, and the bureaucratic erasure of the Windrush scandal and Chinese seamen deportations in the United Kingdom, this work argues that the constitutional duty to preserve collective memory is fundamental to safeguarding citizenship, dignity, and rights. Drawing on postcolonial theory, decolonial jurisprudence, feminist epistemology, and queer legal theory, this article argues that historical erasure operates as epistemic violence: a form of structural harm that fractures communities, sustains intergenerational trauma, and undermines the conditions necessary for meaningful democratic participation. The article examines the transformative potential of truth and reconciliation commissions, exploring how societies that confront the past through inclusive, transparent processes more effectively uphold the rights to protest, to speak, and to live with dignity. It proposes a jurisprudence of remembering that recognises memory as a constitutional right essential to both justice and healing. Ultimately, it calls for a reconceptualisation of constitutional memory as a living archive of dissent and survival, one that guarantees the lion's right to speak, and the state's obligation to listen.

Keywords: epistemic violence, decolonial jurisprudence, collective memory, constitutional memory, historical erasure

INTRODUCTION

"When the lion tells the story, the hunt will be different." (African proverb). This proverb, often invoked by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her reflections on narrative power, serves as a stark and enduring reminder that history is never neutral (Adichie, 2009). History is shaped, mediated, and often mutilated by those who wield authority over the archive. Across many nations, there is a discernible resurgence of efforts to sanitise, revise, or erase social and political histories cast as "too progressive." Legislatures increasingly position themselves as under threat from a perceived ideological excess, while curricula, libraries, and sites of public memory are subjected to heightened scrutiny, restriction, and, in some cases, removal. This article adopts an explicitly interdisciplinary approach, drawing on postcolonial scholarship, feminist epistemology, decolonial theory, and queer legal theory. These frameworks illuminate how knowledge production itself becomes a terrain of power. Feminist legal scholars have long demonstrated that law is not only a mechanism for adjudicating disputes but also an institution that determines whose testimony is considered credible and whose experiences are rendered invisible (Fricker, 2007; Harding, 1991). Queer legal theory further reveals how states regulate belonging through narratives of normality and national innocence, often excluding histories that disrupt dominant heteronormative or racialised accounts of the nation (Butler, 2004). Together, these approaches allow historical erasure to be understood not simply as political oversight but as a form of epistemic governance with legal, social, and psychological consequences.

This article argues that the discourse of "too much progress" is not merely cultural rhetoric. It is a juridical project and an attempt to manipulate constitutional memory, weaponise state-sanctioned forgetting, and undermine core human rights, including freedom of expression, the right to protest, and the right to life and wellbeing. Historical erasure is a form of structural violence (Galtung, 1969 p.171). It fractures collective identity, constrains democratic participation, and narrows the horizon of justice. In doing so, it destabilises constitutional orders, which at their most robust rest not only on a nation's normative aspirations but on its willingness to confront, reckon with, and learn from the historical conditions that have shaped those aspirations.

Across the world, authoritarian, post-authoritarian, and liberal democratic states employ similar logics of selective memory. Contemporary geopolitical landscapes are increasingly defined by the systematic regulation of historical memory. In the United States, the proliferation of 'divisive concept' legislation leverages the rhetoric of child protection to delegitimize critical historical inquiry as an existential ideological threat. In Zimbabwe, Gukurahundi, despite constituting a defining episode of postcolonial state violence, remains subject to state-sanctioned constraints on public memory and historical representation. The ongoing marginalization of this period within the official national narrative underscores the tensions between state-led historiography and the pursuit of historical accountability. In the United Kingdom, histories that expose entrenched infrastructures of racialised control are frequently marginalised or selectively curated, as reflected in the limited public reckoning with episodes such as the deportation of Chinese seamen in Liverpool and the Windrush scandal, in which Black Britons were effectively reclassified as illegitimate residents.

At the center of these practices lies a shared anxiety. If citizens remember too well, the state becomes accountable. If the lion tells the story, the nature of the hunt is revealed. The case studies that follow examine three distinct political contexts. These are Zimbabwe, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Although these states differ in their constitutional histories and political structures, each demonstrates how selective memory can operate as a governance strategy. The analysis proceeds through a common framework, examining (1) the historical event or policy in question, (2) the mechanisms through which memory is restricted or reshaped, and (3) the broader implications for democratic participation, constitutional accountability, and social wellbeing.

Comparative Case Studies: The Architecture of Forgetting

Historical erasure is neither a coincidence nor an apolitical oversight. (Spivak, 1988) It is a patterned and intentional governance technique observable across political contexts (Bourdieu, 1991; Spivak, 1988). Whether in postcolonial nations wrestling with early-state violence, liberal democracies invoking “anti-progress” rhetoric, or former imperial powers avoiding accountability for their global legacies, the mechanisms of erasure share striking continuities. These case studies reveal how the state curates national identity through deliberate silencing and how such silencing becomes a legal, constitutional, and psychosocial injury.

Gukurahundi and the Politics of Silence in Zimbabwe

Between 1983 and 1987, the Zimbabwean state conducted a campaign of violence in Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands commonly known as Gukurahundi. The violence, carried out primarily by the Fifth Brigade, resulted in the deaths of an estimated 20,000 civilians, the majority of whom were Ndebele speakers. (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace & Legal Resources Foundation [CCJP & LRF], 1997, pp. 39-45; Mlambo, 2014) Survivors reported widespread torture, sexual violence, forced disappearances, and the destruction of entire villages. The term Gukurahundi, derived from the Shona language, refers to “the early rain which washes away the chaff,” a metaphor that chillingly reflects the state’s framing of the violence as political cleansing.

Nearly four decades later, Gukurahundi remains shrouded in official silence. The 1987 Unity Accord between ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU was framed as political reconciliation, but it achieved unity through erasure. The implicit bargain was clear: peace required forgetting. To remember became unpatriotic. To demand accountability became divisive.
This silence is not organic, it is legally and administratively enforced. The National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, established under the 2013 Constitution, was granted neither prosecutorial powers nor meaningful archival authority. Families seeking to exhume loved ones encounter bureaucratic obstruction and political intimidation. Survivors who speak publicly are cast as agitators threatening national stability. Memory itself has been criminalised. (Moyo, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, pp.203-205.

The psychological toll is devastating. Communities carry unresolved grief, burying trauma alongside their dead. Children inherit stories told in whispers, learning that their family's pain is nationally illegitimate. The wound becomes cyclical: first the violence, then the denial of the violence, then the punishment for naming the denial. Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s psycho-affective analysis (Fanon, 1963) we can understand how the state of Zimbabwe has collapsed the

categories of victim and dissident. Anyone who remembers becomes dangerous. The constitutional implications are profound. Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution promises healing, transparency, and human rights protections. Yet without truth, these commitments ring hollow. Constitutional memory is fractured. The social contract becomes distorted—the state demands loyalty while withholding recognition. Citizens are expected to trust institutions that refuse to acknowledge their suffering.

The United States: Curriculum Wars, Book Bans, and the Rhetoric of "Too Progressive"

In America, the erasure of history is both overt and institutional. The restriction of texts that engage with racial oppression, gender identity, or colonial violence, such as The Bluest Eye, Beloved, and Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You, signals an intensifying effort to curate collective memory in ways that align with and reinforce nationalist narratives. Across state legislatures, lawmakers have enacted sweeping restrictions on curriculum content, banning discussions of structural racism, settler colonialism, gender identity and what they term "divisive concepts".

The selective editing of history produces citizens unable to recognise the patterns of injustice that continue to shape their lives. When the transatlantic slave trade is reframed as "involuntary relocation", or indigenous genocide is diluted into "conflict", the nation reproduces ignorance as virtue. (Wolfe, 2006, pp. 388-392) This suppression of truth sanitises the nation's moral image but endangers its people by normalising the systems that perpetuate harm. (Fricker, 2007, pp. 1-29). Governors and school boards argue that such content is "too woke", "indoctrinating", or "unpatriotic". The phrase "too progressive", far from being descriptive, functions as political technology casting historical truth as existential threat. Governors and school boards position themselves as defenders of innocence, protecting children from ideas that might make them uncomfortable.

But whose discomfort matters? When a young Black student cannot find themselves in the curriculum, when an Indigenous child learns nothing of their ancestors' survival, when a queer teenager discovers their identity erased from history, the message is personal and unmistakeable – your existence is too disruptive, your history too inconvenient and your humanity too political.

This constitutes multiple forms of injury. (Crenshaw, 1991) It violates freedom of expression (United Nations, 1948, Articles 19 & 27) and academic freedom which are core civil liberties. It inflicts cultural harm by excluding marginalised communities from collective memory. Most critically, it represents constitutional injury, narrowing the civic imagination and undermining the social conditions necessary for democratic participation. American exceptionalism requires a myth of innocence. The narrative insists that systematic violence happens elsewhere, in authoritarian regimes, failed states, or distant histories, never here and never now. Truth telling destabilises this myth. By labelling critical histories as "divisive", the state does not protect children, it protects itself. The children most harmed are precisely those whose histories are erased. Research consistently demonstrates that students from marginalized communities perform better academically, develop stronger civic engagement, and experience improved mental health outcomes when they encounter curricula that reflect their experiences and honour their ancestors. (Hooks, 1992, pp. 2-15) Erasure

tells them they do not belong. It teaches dominant groups that certain lives, certain truths, certain citizens do not matter.

The United Kingdom - Administrative Amnesia

Britain's erasure differs in texture but not in substance. Where American culture wars are overt and confrontational, British silencing operates through bureaucratic subtlety, an erasure conducted through paperwork rather than bonfires.Consider the deportation of Chinese seamen from Liverpool in 1945-1946. (Lee, 2008, pp.167-182) Hundreds of Chinese sailors, many of whom had served in the war effort and married local women, were forcibly removed without due process. Their families were told they had been abandoned. This history remained suppressed for decades. Entire families lived shaped by a wound they could not name, carrying grief for men who were taken, not lost.

This is racialised citizenship in practice, where people welcomed when useful become disposable when no longer required. (Mbembe, 2001, pp.25-27). The Windrush scandal demonstrates that such erasure is not historical artefact, instead it is an ongoing practice. Beginning in 2012, the "hostile environment" policy reclassified long-settled Black British citizens as illegal immigrants. (Home Office, 2020, pp. 18–27) People who had lived in Britain for fifty, sixty, seventy years – and who had worked, paid taxes, raised families, buried loved ones in British soil - were suddenly detained, deported, denied medical care, prevented from working, and stripped of dignity.

This was living erasure and persists in 2025. These individuals were always British, legally and morally. Yet the state erased their belonging through administrative cruelty, transforming citizens into deportable bodies through the stroke of bureaucratic pens.

British national identity depends heavily on avoiding sustained engagement with colonial harm. School curricula present empire as primarily economic and administrative rather than violent and extractive. Museums retain stolen artifacts from the ages of empire and colonialism, while narrating themselves as benevolent custodians. Public discourse prefers nostalgia to accountability, heritage to history. The result is a nation that cannot fully understand itself and therefore cannot protect its people from repeating harm (Bhabha, 1994; Mbembe, 2001).

Why Erasure Matters - The Human Cost of Denial

Erasure operates on multiple planes of reality. It penetrates the very fabric of society, shaping psychology, transforming material conditions, and fundamentally altering the constitutional order itself. When the state denies historical violence, the consequences ripple outward in devastating waves. Survivors are robbed of something essential – the possibility of acknowledgement. Their suffering remains unwitnessed, their testimonies dismissed, their experiences denied the validation necessary for healing. Psychological research demonstrates that acknowledgement such as being heard, being believed and having one’s reality confirmed is foundational to recovery from trauma. (Herman, 1992, pp. 133–145) Without it, wounds remain open, grief becomes pathological, and dignity erodes.

Meanwhile, communities inherit the weight of unresolved trauma, carrying forward wounds they cannot name or understand, passing them silently from generation to generation. Children sense catastrophe in what is not said, in the conversations that halt when they enter rooms, in the ancestors never mentioned. Intergenerational transmission of trauma is well-documented. The

children and grandchildren of those who survived genocide, mass violence or state persecution demonstrate measurably higher rates of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms even when they themselves did not directly experience the violence. This suppression is an assault on human dignity itself. It tells those who suffered that their pain does not matter, that their truth is inconvenient, that their humanity can be discounted (Spivak, 1988). Citizens, watching this unfold, lose faith in the very institutions meant to protect them. Trust erodes. The foundations of human rights protections begin to crack and crumble. And perhaps most dangerously, society draws the wrong lessons from its past or learns nothing at all.

This also affects generational memory within communities. Denial alters how families speak, or do not speak, about their past. Intergenerational impacts include silence as survival strategy, fractured identity formation, limited access to ancestral knowledge and difficulty locating oneself within national belonging. Without honest reckoning, patterns repeat. Police brutality continues unchecked because its historical roots remain unexamined. Discriminatory immigration policies proliferate because past deportations were never acknowledged as wrongs. Surveillance states expand because populations never learned how surveillance was weaponised against their grandparents.

The Constitutional Politics of Memory

The concept of a constitutional duty to remember should not be understood as purely symbolic. It emerges from existing constitutional commitments to dignity, equality, freedom of expression, and democratic participation. Where states actively suppress historical truth, they restrict citizens' ability to understand the structural origins of present inequalities and to hold institutions accountable. Transitional justice scholarship has increasingly recognised that truth-telling mechanisms such as truth commissions, memorialisation processes, and archival transparency serve constitutional functions by safeguarding democratic legitimacy and preventing the repetition of violence (Teitel, 2000; Minow, 1998). In this sense, remembering is not an optional moral exercise but an enabling condition for the meaningful exercise of constitutional rights.

If constitutions are, as many theorists argue, "public covenants with the future," they are also repositories of collective memory. (Teitel, 2000, pp. 69–72) Constitutionalism is not simply a matter of arranging institutional powers; it is an ethical commitment to preserving lessons learned at great human cost. Transitional, post-conflict and post-authoritarian states often recognise this explicitly. South Africa's Constitution foregrounds dignity and historical injustice; Germany embeds memory of fascism into its legal order; Chile and Argentina have progressively constitutionalised memory to prevent the return of dictatorship.

By contrast, where states deny or sanitise brutality, law becomes what Costas Douzinas calls "an accomplice to forgetting." The simultaneous rise of anti- "progressive" rhetoric in the US, Zimbabwe and the UK illustrates this backlash. These states are not rejecting progress; they are rejecting accountability. They are resisting the constitutionalising of memory because memory names perpetrators, demands reparation, and empowers the citizen to speak back to power.

The fear of memory is fundamentally a fear of democracy. Without historical knowledge, rights become abstract concepts divorced from lived reality. Citizens cannot defend rights they do not understand as hard-won protections against documented harms.

When states suppress truth, they violate their foundational obligations. (Douzinas, 2007, pp. 12–15) Constitutions promise protection, dignity, and justice. Erasure delivers abandonment, shame, and impunity (Teitel, 2000; Minow, 1998). A nation that cannot confront its past has no moral authority to promise safety to its people. Without reckoning comes no redemption. Without truth, there can be no trust.

Toward a Jurisprudence of Remembering

Countering erasure requires more than good intentions. It demands structural change: constitutional amendments guaranteeing historical transparency, independent memory institutions with archival and investigative powers, legal penalties for state-led historical distortion, and robust protections for those who speak truth e.g. whistleblowers, academics, journalists, teachers, survivors.

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions offer instructive models. (Hayner, 2001, pp. 14–19) Where they succeed i.e. South Africa's early years, Sierra Leone, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on Residential Schools, the truth is established publicly and officially, victims gain recognition, perpetrators are named, archives are created, national curricula change, and protest and expression rights are strengthened. Crucially, these processes create the conditions for collective healing. They allow communities to begin processing intergenerational trauma, transforming unspeakable wounds into narratives that can be witnessed, mourned, and integrated into social memory.

Most fundamentally, it requires recognising that memory itself is a constitutional right - derivative of dignity, identity, and collective security. (Butler, 2004, pp. 28–32) Citizens have the right to know their histories, to access truthful education, to protest false narratives, and to speak without fear. This is not merely a political or legal necessity; it is a public health imperative. The wellbeing of individuals and communities depends upon the possibility of acknowledgement. Without truth-telling, trauma calcifies across generations. Children inherit anxiety they cannot name; communities carry grief they cannot express, and entire populations remain suspended in a state of unresolved mourning. Healing cannot begin where denial persists (Herman, 1992).

A decolonial jurisprudence must be intersectional, (Tuck & Yang, 2012, pp. 3–8) recognising that women's histories are often erased first, queer histories are censored to protect heteronormative national myths, and colonial histories are sanitized to preserve contemporary geopolitical legitimacy (Butler, 2004; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Addressing these erasures is essential not only for justice but for the psychological and emotional wellbeing of those whose ancestors survived what the state refuses to name.

CONCLUSION

Until the lion learns to speak, “the story will always glorify the hunter.” Yet the evidence examined here suggests that the lion has always been speaking. What changes across political contexts is whether the state chooses to listen or instead constructs institutional mechanisms to ensure that some stories remain unheard. This article has argued that historical erasure is not merely a cultural phenomenon but a governance strategy with constitutional implications. Across Zimbabwe, the United States, and the United Kingdom, selective memory functions to protect institutions from scrutiny, sustain myths of national innocence, and marginalise communities whose histories challenge dominant

narratives. These silences produce real harms: fractured identity, intergenerational trauma, weakened democratic participation, and diminished trust in public institutions.

A jurisprudence of remembering recognises that confronting painful histories is not a threat to national wellbeing but a constitutional obligation. Legal systems must therefore move beyond passive acknowledgement toward institutionalised mechanisms of historical accountability. This includes strengthening archival transparency, protecting academic and expressive freedoms, establishing independent memory institutions with investigative authority, and embedding historically grounded human rights education within public institutions. Such measures are not merely symbolic; they are structural safeguards designed to ensure that democratic societies remain capable of recognising injustice when it emerges in new forms. Without these protections, erasure becomes normalised as a tool of governance. Citizens lose the historical knowledge necessary to defend their rights, institutions lose their moral legitimacy, and societies risk repeating the very harms they refuse to name. By contrast, when states commit to truth-telling, they create the conditions for justice, democratic resilience, and collective healing.

The lion and hunter proverb ultimately speaks to the power of narrative, but in constitutional democracies narrative is inseparable from law. Until the lion's testimony is recognised as part of the legal and historical record, democracy remains incomplete, justice remains deferred, and healing remains impossible. A jurisprudence of remembering insists that the stories of those who suffered state violence are not peripheral to constitutional life; they are central to the ethical foundations upon which legitimate governance must stand. Until the lion's testimony is recognised as part of the legal and historical record, democracy remains incomplete, justice remains deferred, and healing remains impossible. A jurisprudence of remembering insists that the stories of those who suffered state violence are not peripheral to constitutional life; they are central to the ethical foundations upon which legitimate governance must stand.

REFERENCES

Adichie, C. N. (2009). The danger of a single story. TED Talk. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture.* Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Polity Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Routledge.

Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace & Legal Resources Foundation. (1997). *Breaking the silence, building true peace: A report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988.* CCJP & LRF.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour. *Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299.* https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Douzinas, C. (2007). *Human rights and empire: The political philosophy of cosmopolitanism.* Routledge.

Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing.* Oxford University Press.

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research, 6(3), 167–191.* https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301

Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives.* Cornell University Press.

Hayner, P. B. (2001). *Unspeakable truths: Transitional justice and the challenge of truth commissions.* Routledge.

Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—From domestic*

abuse to political terror. Basic Books.
Home Office. (2020). *Windrush lessons learned review*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
Hooks, B. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation.* South End Press.
Lee, G. B. (2008). *The deportation of the Liverpool Chinese.* In G. B. Lee, China imagined: From European fantasy to spectacular power (pp. 167–182). Reaktion Books.
Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.
Minow, M. (1998). *Between vengeance and forgiveness: Facing history after genocide and mass violence*. Beacon Press.
Mlambo, A. (2014). *A history of Zimbabwe. Cambridge* University Press.
Moyo, J. N. (2020). Gukurahundi and the politics of memory in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Southern African Studies, 46(4), 623–642.*
Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2013). *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa.* CODESRIA.
Spivak, G. C. (1988). *Can the subaltern speak*? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), Marxism and the interpretation of culture (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
Teitel, R. G. (2000). Transitional justice. Oxford University Press.
Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Government of Canada.
Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. Decolonization: Indigeneity, *Education & Society, 1(1), 1–40.*
United Nations. (1948). *Universal declaration of human rights*. United Nations.
Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research, 8(4), 387–409.*