



Fig. 1

Forgetting Machines: from Memory Theaters to Critical Rap

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Alongside the history of memory theatres, let us imagine an obscure genealogy of forgetting machines, apparatuses of power/knowledge whose operations not only shape the seeable and sayable but also engage the movements of eruption-erasure, the coming and going, hither-and-thitherings that give existence rhyme if not reason. Within such a genealogy, memory theatres would continue to evoke the anamnesis or total recall that defines ideational knowledge, while their backstages and infrastructures would reveal in ghostly form the flipside, the massive effects of active and passive forgetting that shadow and project any apparatus. Memory theaters and books along with them would then become what they already are: forgetting machines, technologies of life-death.

To put things another way: any memory system entails processes of forgetting, for in memorizing something one way, innumerable other ways are forsaken. What types of thought and action did alphabetic writing and Platonic ideation *make the world forget*? In "Funes the Memorious," Borges the narrator gives us the readers a glimpse of a forgotten world through the

main character Ireneo Funes' prodigious memory, a memory which also limited the young Uruguayan. "He was, let us not forget, almost incapable of general, platonic ideas. It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term dog embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front)."

What appears as a startling incapacity to form ideas and name physical entities also reveals something else: Funes inhabits a world of material differences forgotten by Platonism, a world inaccessible to its categorical thinking, its principle of identity, and its dualisms. Funes seems pre- or post-Platonic, and indeed Borges comments: "Pedro Leandro Ipuche has written that Funes was a precursor of the superman, 'an untamed and vernacular Zarathustra;' I do not doubt it, but one must not forget, either, that he was a countryman from the town of Fray Bentos, with certain incurable limitations." Nonetheless, if Funes can be cast as a Uruguayan precursor to the superman, this casting suggests that a prodigious memory may operate alongside a powerful machine of active forgetting, a capability Nietzsche attributed to creative individuals.

While passive forgetting evokes a lapse or fall into oblivion, active forgetting appears more like a pushing or moving away—a clearing away as something new emerges. *This* erupts or surges forth rather than something else, and as it does all else slips away. And if *this* then catches, becomes a style or method or algorithm or way of life, if *this* becomes, say, a bicycle, an entire world opens up and one rides it a given way and not others.

Moreover, what begins as active forgetting may through repetition become passive, and if we distinguish between individual acts and entire regimes of forgetting, we can see that what one or several people actively forget only with great trial and tribulation, multitudes may later passively forget as if on auto-pilot: a break-away prophet and followers or, alternatively, a radical political cell may initiate a new set of practices forged through long and difficult struggle, and then

generations later an entire religious or social community may follow along for the ride, occupying a different world with little fanfare.

Those who forget history are bound to repeat it, while those who remember it have already done so. It is not a question of remembering or forgetting but of different patterns of eruption-erasure, some healthy, some not. In “How to Forget the Unforgettable? On Collective Trauma, Cultural Identity, and Mnemotechnologies,” Ciano Aydin writes, “A damaged capacity to forget seems to be characteristic of a culture with a collective trauma caused by atrocities such as genocide. Because of this damaged capacity to forget, the trauma experienced cannot be given a proper place in the identity of that culture. To use a Nietzschean metaphor, the trauma is too big to digest and, as a consequence, damages the metabolism of a culture, which hinders further growth and flourishing.” It is then that a digestive regimen of restorative mnemotechnics and active forgetting becomes necessary.

Troubling and inspiring cases can be cited throughout history and across political spectrums, from erasures and falsifications to reconciliations and reimagings of different and even one and the same contested event. Sometimes one event is remembered precisely to erase another: thus Milosevic’s 1989 Gazimestan speech commemorating the 600th anniversary of the Ottoman defeat of Serbian forces in the Battle of Kosovo, a speech whose performative force helped trigger genocide and the eventual erasure of the nation of Yugoslavia with its legacy of anti-fascist partisan struggles. Alternatively, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996-98), in which thousands of people testified and bore witness live and on television, sought both to remember and bury the legacy of racial apartheid, and it has subsequently served as a model of psychophysical digestion at national scales.

What presents itself as world, as history, as truth, does so only by occulting what does not. From this perspective, the great mnemonic regimes of oral repertoire and literate archive described by Diana Taylor harbor world-historical forgetting machines. What, again, have Plato and his

Academy made the world forget? Can one even access this forgotten world through scholarly texts, theoretical methods, or historical questionings since these approaches are formatted by Western protocols of thought defined as eidetic anamnesis, as the recollection of ideational forms? Based on this properly epistemic knowledge of ideas, Plato expelled the Homeric poets in *The Republic* and dismissed centuries of myth and images as *doxa* transmitted via the mimetic enchantments of music, song, and dance. On a far grander scale, Enlightened European scholars later overwrote thousands of indigenous lifeworlds as “myths” and “rituals,” replacing them with colonial histories, maps, and schools. (Culture names the remains of these lifeworlds, remembered and honored today in museums and libraries, tourist shops and humanities courses.)

With the passage from repertoire to archive, what was once ritual has slowly become theater—and with the rise of databases, both rapidly become performance. Ritual, theater, and performance constitute massively embodied memory-forgetting machines that operate at global, millennial scales. Indeed, if we recognize repertoire, archive, and database as the respective holding patterns of orality, literacy, and digitality, then we can recast performance not just between ritual and theater but as powerful remixes of them and the emergent cosmos. Equipped with cybernetic feedback loops installed early on by Schechner and Turner and Bateson, all performance is electronic, even as its machinic phylum runs through bodies and objects from times and places immemorial.

History and myth both suggest that singular figures will produce prototypal performances of the emergent eruption-erasure apparatus, which not only digitizes materials from innumerable sources but also facilitates their recombination across genres, geographies, and eras. In this light, we can recast Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, Marshall McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Massage*, Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, Laurie Anderson’s *United States*, and other 20th-century works as exploratory communal guides to transmedia processes of digitality, as they all reinscribe conceptual material within multiple genres of text, image, and other media.

More recently, the African-American scholar A.D. Carson has produced “Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes and Revolutions,” a dissertation not simply *on* rap but also composed and performed *in* rap and complemented with videos, images, and online lyrics. Carson remixes the memory-forgetting machines of orality and literacy by creating transmedia experiences of critical race rap and making it available for free download at <phd.aydeethegreat.com>.

If “Funes the Memorious” offers a glimpse of what Platonism made the world forget, what might the massive eruption-erasure machine of performative digitality actively forget in our near and distant futures? What if the world were to forget Platonism itself, with its memory theaters housing genus and species, cause and effect, original and copy, literal and figurative, idea and image, *episteme* and *doxa*, subject and object...? And if both subject and object are really in play and at stake, who or what remains in forgetting ideation?

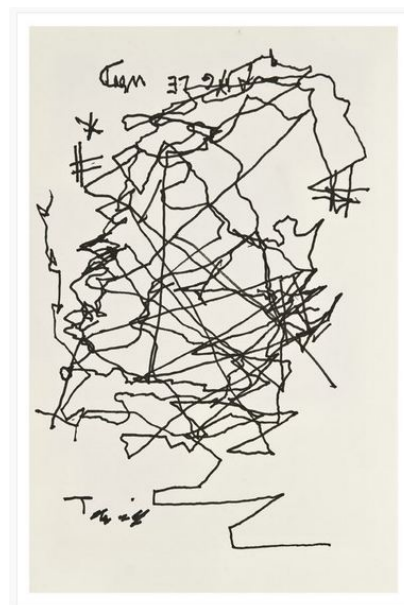


Fig. 2

Figures

1. A still from the video introduction of “Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes and Revolutions,” showing A.D. Carson rapping in front of a statue commemorating Thomas Green Clemson, slaveholder and founder of Clemson University.
2. A self-portrait drawn by Jorge Luis Borges who like Homer was blind.

Sources

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