

**Building a Nation:**

**How Does Art Censorship Participate  
in the Reimagining of the Nation in the  
United States during the Trumpian Era?**

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, **Jasmijn Stam**, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled 'Building a Nation: How Does Art Censorship Participate in the Reimagining of the United States in the Trumpian Era?' is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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## Abstract

This research seeks to contribute to the scholarly debate surrounding censorship, specifically attending to the question of how art censorship participates in producing the boundaries of the nation. As such, the author will be opening up the concept of censorship and employing an integrative approach to censorship that encompasses both its regulatory and constitutive dimensions. Taking the concept of censorship as its theoretical starting point, the research will use critical discourse analysis to illuminate how censorship participates in a struggle over the content of hegemony. Of particular interest is the way in which cultural meaning emerges through visual and verbal text in the context of the Make America Great Again movement and the broader conservative project. As such, this research not only interrogates how orders of inequalities are maintained and/or challenged through censorship, but also which orders of inequality are maintained and/or. Altogether, this thesis adds to the literature by suggesting that practices of art censorship, particularly in relation to the contemporary political developments in the United States, should be understood as part as systemic rather than accidental, isolated and/or extraordinary events.

**Keywords:** Art Censorship, Cultural Hegemony, Make America Great Again, Reimagining the Nation, Orders of Inequality

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# Introduction

*Time is running short.  
If we fail, the fight for the very idea of America may be lost.*  
- Kevin D. Roberts in project 2025

Recent developments in the United States, particularly the turn to far-right politics and the rise of the Make America Great Movement (MAGA) movement, have heightened the need for research on art censorship not merely as a repressive tool, a negative exercise of power or a by-product of the culture wars, but rather as a means for reimagining the nation through cultural hegemony. Therefore, this study examines contemporary art censorship cases, focusing on the visual and verbal text and remaining particularly attentive to the discourse that justifies, rationalizes and/or calls for the censorship of a particular exhibition or artwork. As such, censorship will be analysed through ‘its regulatory trail’ while illuminating how it solidifies and reinforces hegemonic power structures (Luís and Fernandes 2024, 99).

Notably, both censorship and cultural conflict are far from new in the United States (Mintcheva and Altkins 2006, 6); some scholarly work even contends that the old cultural conflict of the late eighties and nineties never entirely disappeared (Hunter and Bowman 2016, 42). Of particular concern to this study is a new form of identity-driven insurgency, which could prove to be more harmful than the former mobilization of cultural conflict as shifting economic circumstances and cultural conflict merge (Hartman 2018, 2018). In recent years, the United States government has grown increasingly dysfunctional, while a big part of the population saw their real income declining, essentially heightening existential insecurity (Inglehart 2016, 22). As a result of this heightened insecurity, parts of the population are more likely to reject new cultural norms (Inglehart 2016, 20). Essentially, pointing at a shift



along the continuum of hegemonic culture, possibly moving away from the ‘open end’ in which counter-hegemonic culture can be created (Lears 1985, 573).

To elaborate, as marginalized groups move away from the margins in American society, majority groups in positions of power feel threatened (Alfonseca, 2023). Such a development aligns with the epistemological assumption that within an absolutist, binary, and hierarchical Western epistemological context, the self cannot exist without contrasting it to the other (Kuelzer Eckhout et al. 2024, 27). These dynamics are reinforced through verbal and visual text, and, conversely, through their absence, an absence made possible through censorship.

While research into censorship has a long history (Burt 1994, 12), censorship is often framed in juxtaposition with freedom of expression (Luís and Fernandes 2024, 98). This dichotomy largely overlooks how repressive acts of censorship can be productive and set out norms a priori (Butler 1997, 128). More recent theoretical contributions to the study of censorship have turned towards a productive understanding of censorship; while these are invaluable to an all-encompassing understanding of censorship, they complicate the operationalization of the concept in empirical research (Luís & Fernandes 2024, 97-98). Consequently, this research employs an integrative approach to censorship encompassing its regulatory and constitutive dimensions.

Furthermore, the thesis takes the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony to further our understanding of how particular manifestations of culture, or the absence thereof, contribute to a symbolic universe that serves the interests of ruling groups more effectively than those of subordinate ones (Lears 1985, 573), asserting that art censorship participates in the manufacturing of consent. This follows from the idea that the very presence of the

regulatory dimension of art censorship indicates the absence, or at least limitations to, genuine pluralistic debate supporting the application of the concept of cultural hegemony.

Building on these scholarly insights and theoretical contributions, the research will seek to answer the question: how does art censorship participate in the reimagining of the nation in the United States during the Trumpian Era? The phrase ‘reimagining the nation’ refers here to continuous processes of reconstruction and maintenance of culture, which inform both the nation as an imagined political community and the boundaries of the nation (Anderson, 1983). Additionally, within this research, ‘the Trumpian era’ is not merely understood as Donald Trump’s former (2017-2021) or current presidency (2025-present) but rather as a period in which continuous processes of meaning-making were informed by Trumpian policies and rhetoric and the broader conservative project, as will be elaborated on in the subsequent chapter.

The methodological approach used to examine contemporary cases of art censorship, particularly the discourse that justifies, rationalizes and/or calls for the censorship of a particular exhibition or artwork, is critical discourse analysis. In specific, this research draws on Fairclough’s (1989) three dimensional-model and Lui’s (2013) representational model of hegemony to uncover the how the struggle over cultural hegemony is exercised, in other words, how the building blocks of the nation are reimagined.

This thesis begins by outlining the MAGA project and the broader conservative project, which helps us understand the symbolic universe these political projects try to uphold. It then will go on to review the literature on hegemony, the culture wars, and art censorship. The paper proceeds with the conceptual framework, within which different conceptualizations of censorship are examined, situating the research within an integrative approach that accounts for both its regulatory and constitutive dimensions. After which, the methodological approach

will be discussed before the thesis moves onto the empirical analysis of a multitude of art censorship cases. The remaining part of the thesis concludes the research and outlines directions for future research on the topic of art censorship.

## Background and Context

This section provides background information essential to comprehending how the MAGA movement and the broader conservative project seek to reimagine the nation in their effort to ‘advance positive change for America’ (Dans & Groves 2025, 4). As such, it explores the ideological underpinnings of MAGA through two key contemporary documents<sup>2</sup>: the 2024 Republican Platform and the Mandate for Leadership 2025, which provides the policy agenda for Project 2025. The 2024 Republican Platform, unlike the 2016 Republican platform, positions Trump as the defining figure of the Republican party and tailors the platform both to Trumpian policies and rhetoric (Senter 2024; Wolf & Merrill 2024). Additionally, while Trump has distanced himself from the policy agenda for Project 2025, his early executive orders, such as ending federal diversity, equity, and inclusion and defunding research on gender-affirmative care, closely mirror the policy agenda and importantly reflect the ideological underpinning of the agenda (Quinn 2025; Cruz et al. 2025). Consequently, both these documents inform the understanding of the MAGA ideology, situated in the broader conservative project.

### 2024 Republican Platform

The 2024 Republican Platform puts forth twenty promises to ‘restore our Nation of, by, and for the People’ (Republican National Committee 2024, 3), framing them as ‘forward-looking’ and to be ‘accomplished very quickly’ (Republican National Committee 2024, 4). As apparent in *Figure 1*, these promises are presented as declarative statements that emphasize ‘a return’ to ‘sensible Border Security and Immigration Policy,’ ‘Domestic Manufacturing,’ ‘American Energy,’ ‘a Strong Military,’ ‘Equal Treatment for All’ and ‘Republican Leadership at every level of Government’ (Republican National Committee.2024, 3-4). To

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<sup>2</sup> This section incorporates extensive quotation to remain attentive to the specific language employed within the documents, as the discourse itself is central to the underpinnings of ideology. This includes the use of capital letters.

elaborate, the platform asserts that the United States is currently a ‘Nation in SERIOUS DECLINE’ and that the solution lies in what the platform calls ‘a return to common sense’ (ibid). More specifically on the foundations of society, the platform calls for a renewal of what it terms ‘the pillars of American Civilization,’ which ‘supports families, restores Law and Order, cares for Veterans, promotes beauty, and honors American History’ (Republican National Committee 2024, 14). These pillars are constructed in various ways.

First, the family is constructed as a married couple with children, supported by gainful employment (ibid). Second, law and order are understood as the enhancement of protections for law enforcement personnel and to compassionately address homelessness (ibid). Third, care for veterans is positioned in zero-sum terms, where resources are reallocated from undocumented migrants to veterans (ibid). Fourth, the promotion of beauty and the honouring of history centres on national symbols and heroic stories. In addition to these foundational pillars, importance is given to combatting antisemitism through the revocation of visas for foreign nationals suspected of ‘supporting terrorism and jihadism,’ as well as reducing left-wing influence in education (ibid). While these commitments only reflect a part of the broader agenda, they nevertheless give a first idea of how the MAGA movement seeks to reimagine the nation.

### **Project 2025**

Similarly, to the platform, the Mandate for Leadership 2025 articulates a notion of decline because of the current day ‘ruling and cultural elite’ and “the totalitarian cult known today as ‘The Great Awakening.’ (Quoted in Roberts 2023, 1-2). Roberts (2023) adds that the conservative movement finds itself divided, and the Republican party is facing uncertainty about its direction, while ‘the very moral foundations of our society are in peril’ (Roberts 2023, 1). However, Roberts (2023, 2) states that ‘conservatives should be confident that we

can rescue our kids, reclaim our culture, revive our economy, and defeat the anti-American Left—at home and abroad.’ As such, ‘the conservative promise,’ across the four key elements critical to its vision, focuses on the ‘moral and foundational challenges America faces in this moment of history’ (2023, 3). *Figure 2* outlines the key elements of the so-called conservative promise, each of which will be briefly summarized.

Starting with ‘Promise #1’, which constructs the family, understood as a heteronormative, married, two-parent household, as both the building block for a healthy society and the foundation of the American nation (Roberts, 2023, 4). Within this construction, leftist politics are said to be undermining the family structure as they ‘replace natural love with unnatural ones’ (ibid). Alongside the family, the institutions of marriage, work, church, school, and volunteering are positioned as essential for a healthy society (ibid). Parental authority is greatly emphasized, with the assertion that ‘schools serve parents, not the other way around’ (Roberts, 2023, 5). Consequently, the promise calls for the removal of critical race theory and gender ideology from public school curricula as these directly undermine the conception of the family and the understanding of the family as a moral community (ibid). Furthermore, Roberts (2023, 6) notes that the ‘greatest pro-family win’ is the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* while asserting that there should be more protections for ‘the unborn.’ In sum, this promises advocates for consolidating a conservative understanding of civil society by erasing what is understood as progressive vocabulary (i.e., gender, reproductive health, and abortion) from federal legislation (Roberts 2023, 4-6).

‘Promise #2’ calls for reducing the size of the federal government, particularly through the reduction in of federal expenditures, which are understood as instrumental to progressive ideological dissemination and referred to as ‘the secret lifeblood of the Great Awakening’ (Roberts, 2023, 6-8). Additionally, this promise calls for ‘restoring national sovereignty to the American people’ and criticizes supernational treaties and organizations

(Roberts 2023, 8). As such, a narrative emerges that there is a Left elite that came to power undemocratically and ‘centralizes power up and away from the American people’ (ibid).

In a similar vein, ‘Promise #3’ puts emphasis on American sovereignty, underlining the following ideals: ‘self-governance, the rule of law, and ordered liberty’ (Roberts 2023, 10). According to the author, ‘government authority derives from the consent of the people’, but this authority is under threat from progressive elites who, through appeals to ‘openness, progress, expertise, cooperation, and globalization’ undermine constitutional authority and erode the rule of law (ibid). In specific, the promise argues for ‘the abandoning of international organizations’, ‘sealed borders’ and ‘full-spectrum strategic energy dominance’, while emphasising power should be rebalanced away from China, Russia and the Middle East (Roberts 2023, 12-13).

Lastly, ‘Promise #4’ puts the ‘pursuit of Happiness’ at the centre of ‘America’s heroic experiment in self-government’ (Roberts 2023, 13). Here, happiness is found in religious devotion, spirituality, work, the family and local (voluntary) communities, echoing earlier themes from promise 1. As such, great importance is given to the individual’s right to live in accordance with their values (Roberts 2023, 14). Simultaneously, the author asserts that ‘wokeism’ will ultimately be rejected by American people, while equating it to various systems of oppression, such as colonialism, and different types of political thought, such as socialism (ibid). In sum, the narrative emerges that constitutional freedoms should be championed as long as they are exercised in accordance with conservative cases (Roberts 2023, 16).

1. SEAL THE BORDER, AND STOP THE MIGRANT INVASION
2. CARRY OUT THE LARGEST DEPORTATION OPERATION IN AMERICAN HISTORY
3. END INFLATION, AND MAKE AMERICA AFFORDABLE AGAIN
4. MAKE AMERICA THE DOMINANT ENERGY PRODUCER IN THE WORLD, BY FAR!
5. STOP OUTSOURCING, AND TURN THE UNITED STATES INTO A MANUFACTURING SUPERPOWER
6. LARGE TAX CUTS FOR WORKERS, AND NO TAX ON TIPS!
7. DEFEND OUR CONSTITUTION, OUR BILL OF RIGHTS, AND OUR FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS, INCLUDING FREEDOM OF SPEECH, FREEDOM OF RELIGION, AND THE RIGHT TO KEEP AND BEAR ARMS
8. PREVENT WORLD WAR THREE, RESTORE PEACE IN EUROPE AND IN THE MIDDLE EAST, AND BUILD A GREAT IRON DOME MISSILE DEFENSE SHIELD OVER OUR ENTIRE COUNTRY -- ALL MADE IN AMERICA
9. END THE WEAPONIZATION OF GOVERNMENT AGAINST THE AMERICAN PEOPLE
10. STOP THE MIGRANT CRIME EPIDEMIC, DEMOLISH THE FOREIGN DRUG CARTELS, CRUSH GANG VIOLENCE, AND LOCK UP VIOLENT OFFENDERS
11. REBUILD OUR CITIES, INCLUDING WASHINGTON DC, MAKING THEM SAFE, CLEAN, AND BEAUTIFUL AGAIN.
12. STRENGTHEN AND MODERNIZE OUR MILITARY, MAKING IT, WITHOUT QUESTION, THE STRONGEST AND MOST POWERFUL IN THE WORLD
13. KEEP THE U.S. DOLLAR AS THE WORLD'S RESERVE CURRENCY
14. FIGHT FOR AND PROTECT SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE WITH NO CUTS, INCLUDING NO CHANGES TO THE RETIREMENT AGE
15. CANCEL THE ELECTRIC VEHICLE MANDATE AND CUT COSTLY AND BURDENSOME REGULATIONS
16. CUT FEDERAL FUNDING FOR ANY SCHOOL PUSHING CRITICAL RACE THEORY, RADICAL GENDER IDEOLOGY, AND OTHER INAPPROPRIATE RACIAL, SEXUAL, OR POLITICAL CONTENT ON OUR CHILDREN
17. KEEP MEN OUT OF WOMEN'S SPORTS
18. DEPORT PRO-HAMAS RADICALS AND MAKE OUR COLLEGE CAMPUSES SAFE AND PATRIOTIC AGAIN
19. SECURE OUR ELECTIONS, INCLUDING SAME DAY VOTING, VOTER IDENTIFICATION, PAPER BALLOTS, AND PROOF OF CITIZENSHIP
20. UNITE OUR COUNTRY BY BRINGING IT TO NEW AND RECORD LEVELS OF SUCCESS

Figure 1. The twenty promises outlined in the 2024 Republican platform.  
Source: Republican National Committee, 2024

1. Restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our children.
2. Dismantle the administrative state and return self-governance to the American people.
3. Defend our nation's sovereignty, borders, and bounty against global threats.
4. Secure our God-given individual rights to live freely—what our Constitution calls “the Blessings of Liberty.”

Figure 2. The four key elements of the conservative promise  
Source: Robers 2023, 3



## Literature Review

This section provides a summary of relevant literature on hegemony, the culture wars and art censorship. Drawing on this literature, it explores how hegemony is maintained and reconstructed through culture, how the culture wars have re-emerged, and how art censorship functions as a primary arena where meaning is contested.

### Hegemony

The concept of hegemony has been of great interest in a wide range of fields. This literature review incorporates theoretical insights from a multitude of disciplines: cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, and history.

First, it is important to note that the concept of hegemony has two interrelated definitions (Adamson 1980, 170-171; Hoare & Smith 1999, 20). This distinction has been extensively examined by Adamson (1980), who mainly considers hegemony in terms of historical processes of class development and bloc formation. These two definitions are as follows: first, ‘the consensual basis of an existing political system within civil society’ and second, “overcoming of the ‘economic-corporative’” (Adamson 1980, 170-171). Importantly, the latter definition enabled the theorization of the former, hegemony as a mode of rule for the present ruling class (ibid). Moreover, the latter definition is used to designate a historical phase rather than a continuous exercise (Hoare & Smith 1999, 20). As this thesis is concerned with the continuous struggle over the content of hegemony, the former definition is centered in the subsequent section.

A closer look at Gramsci’s development of the concept of hegemony reveals that it only got contrasted with the concept of domination, which denotes ‘the state’s monopoly on the means of violence and its consequent role as the final arbiter of all disputes’ later on (Adamson

1980 171-172). This conceptual insight allows us to account for hegemonic rule as the normal state of affairs; in essence, hegemony is chosen over domination as a form of political control (Adamson 1980, 173). Thereby, the author notes that hegemonic states do differ in how their hegemonic apparatuses operate but they all actively propagate dominant ideology through society (Adamson 1980, 174).

Moreover, the focus of this thesis on the arts necessitates a closer examination of cultural hegemony, which is rooted in the concept of hegemony but not explicitly defined by Gramsci. Lears (1985, 571) notes that cultural hegemony is achieved when the leaders of a historical bloc succeed in projecting their worldview to other groups or classes, essentially asserting that their particular interests align with the interests of society at large. As such, particular manifestations of culture contribute to a symbolic universe that serves the interests of ruling groups more effectively than those of subordinate ones (Lears 1985, 573). This does not mean that subordinate groups do not participate in maintaining a symbolic universe; rather, they ‘half-consciously’ participate in the legitimation of their own domination (ibid). Building on this, practices of censorship need not originate directly from ruling groups to ultimately serve their interest, underlining how Gramsci’s concept of hegemonic consensus proves useful in examining how orders of inequalities are maintained or challenged through censorship in the cultural sphere.

Furthermore, Lears (1985 573-574) underlines the flexibility in Gramsci’s concept of hegemony by imagining hegemonic culture as a continuum ranging from “closed” to “open” (Quoted in Lears 1985, 573. At the closed end of the continuum, subordinate groups are incapable of resistance due to a lack of discursive resources, whereas at the open end, hegemonic culture cannot only be resisted but counter-hegemonic culture can be created (ibid). Within this continuum, visual and verbal texts, such as artworks, but also censorship justifications, are within the discursive arena where there is a constant struggle over meaning

(Lears year, 591). As such, the author underlines the importance of discourse and ‘the ways cultural meaning emerges in various historical “texts” (Quoted in Lears 1985, 589).

Crehan (2002, 200), informed by the anthropological tradition, approaches Gramsci’s concept of hegemony through empirical realities and underscores that ideas and material relations are always interactive and entangled. As such, the author rejects a simple base-superstructure hierarchy; this is informed by Gramsci’s refusal to define hegemony as part of the base or superstructure (Crehan 2002, 182). The notion of culture is approached in a similar vein, neither allocated to the base nor superstructure, as Gramsci does not seek to separate instrumental and ideological forms of culture (Crehan 2002, 185). The author notes that for Gramsci, culture is not static or ‘something that simply persists through time’; rather, it is informed by economic relations, more specifically, it is a means to win hegemony and therefore has to be actively created (Crehan 2002, 129). Moreover, the author contends that culture for Gramsci is ‘the way in which class is lived in particular time and place’ (Crehan 2002, 200). Consequently, hegemony is produced and reproduced through everyday lived realities (ibid). In light of Crehan’s contribution, it is imperative to remain attentive to the negotiation of censorship practices in everyday life. In other words, to explore how justifications, rationales, and calls for censorship are constructed and embedded in lived experiences.

A critique of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is articulated by Stuart Hall, who contends that not only class is central to the maintenance of hegemony but race as well (Hall 1980). The author defines hegemony as a “state of ‘total social authority’” which, at certain specific conjunctures, a specific class alliance wins, by a combination of ‘coercion’ and ‘consent’ over the whole social formation, and its dominated classes” (Quoted in Hall 1980, 45). As such, the author manages to combine the two interrelated definitions. Thereby, it should be noted that this state, which is hegemony, extends not only to the economic level but also to the political and ideological level (Hall 1980, 45). Importantly, Hall (1980, 45-46) does not argue for a static

concept of hegemony, as the preceding definition might suggest; rather, hegemony is understood as ‘a state of play’ in which there are continuous processes of reconstruction and maintenance. In other words, the state of hegemony enables the ruling class to secure the superstructure (Hall 1980, 47). Similarly, to Lears (1985), Hall contends that society can shift into and out of phases of “hegemonic direction” (Quoted in Hall 1980, 47), underscoring hegemony as a question of continuity.

Furthermore, the author draws attention to how racist practices, which differ based on specific historical conditions, secure hegemony (Hall 1980, 52-53). This follows from the idea that these practices inform social formation, both fixing and ascribing positionings of social groups in relation to one another (*ibid*). As such, racism undermines the unity of a class because it obstructs the construction of a representation of the class in its entirety (Hall 1980, 56). Hall (*ibid*) also illuminates how racism “is particular powerful’ because of ‘natural’” characteristics (Quoted in Hall 1980, 56). To elaborate, racism both functions as ‘the vehicles for the imposition of dominant ideologies and as the elementary forms for the cultures of resistance’ (Hall 1980, 57). This particular functioning of racism is important to our understanding of censorship, as artistic expression can be shaped by or contribute to cultures of resistance.

In a different vein but with similar implications, Yuval-Davis (1997) illuminates the way in which gendered practices secure hegemony. In other words, the author examines the ways in which ‘gendered relations are at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities as well as in most cultural conflicts and contestations’ (Yuval-Davis 1997, 38). Drawing on both Gramsci and Foucault, the author problematizes essentialist notions of culture which posit aesthetics, symbols and ways of behaviour as fixed and inherent to ethnic or national communities (Yuval-Davis 1997, 40-41). Moreover, the author recasts culture as a site of negotiation, recognizing that within the operation of cultures, there is: ‘the tendency for stabilization and continuity on the one hand, and for resistance and change on the other’ (Yuval-

Davis 1997, 41). Similar to Crehan (2002), the author puts emphasis on the way in which lived experiences, through processes of social reproduction, cultural modes come to inform ‘the ways individuals experience themselves, their collectivities and the world’ (Yuval-Davis 1997, 42).

### **The United States and the Culture Wars**

In 1991, James Davison Hunter published the book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, in his book, the first scholarly inquiry into the culture wars, the author explores the cultural conflict in American society and contends that ‘America is in the midst of a culture war’ (Hunter 1991, 34). To gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in contemporary American society, it is helpful to revisit Hunter’s work.

The American story is a colonial one, and rooted in this colonial experience is a persistent struggle for power and disagreement on doctrinal truths (Hunter 1991, 31-39) In essence, there is an uneasiness with pluralism and more importantly, an enduring competition to define social reality (Hunter 1991, 39). Hunter (1991, 42) defines cultural conflict as ‘political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding’ ultimately aimed at achieving cultural domination. Thereby, the beliefs stemming from these systems of moral understanding provide a sense of identity, purpose, and community (ibid).

While the old cultural conflict between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews has become irrelevant, a new societal divide between orthodoxy and progressivism has emerged (Hunter 1991, 43). These terms are conceptualized as formal properties of a belief system (Hunter 1991, 44). As such, orthodoxy connotes ‘the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority’ (ibid). While progressivism connotes ‘the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumption of contemporary life’. Thereby, novelty emerges out of the fact that the contemporary cultural

conflict includes religious and non-religious groups and alliances supersede traditional religious divisions (Hunter 1991, 47). Altogether, the contemporary cultural conflict stems from fundamentally different understandings of moral authority (Hunter 1991, 49).

Consequently, the same social issues, such as abortion, gay rights and multiculturalism, are still debated today (Hartman 2018, 49). Hunter (1991, 50) contends that the debates over these social issues are ultimately a debate on national identity itself. In other words, it is a struggle over what it means to be American, how to live an American life and the very meaning of America in past, present and future (ibid).

In revisiting Hunter's scholarly inquiry, Thomson (2010, 2) finds support for the claim that both sides of the societal divide draw from the same American values but promote differing visions of what American society should look like. Moreover, the author contends that specifically elites sustain the idea of a culture war, which reinforces the perception of polarization in American society (ibid). Additionally, the author notes that public culture is a way through which elites seek to frame 'how most Americans think' (Thomson, 2010, 1). This aligns with a Gramscian understanding of public culture, which comes to reflect the interest of the ruling class, in other words, the elites.

This is consistent with Hartman's account of "Make America Great Again", which, according to the author, came to mean much more than a mere campaign slogan; the slogan marks the latest stage in the culture wars (Hartman 2018, 48) The slogan began to reflect the narrative of decline that has shaped conservative cultural attitudes over the past decades (ibid). The revival of the culture wars is largely unforeseen by the author, given the finding that its logic had been exhausted, however, the author argues that this has changed with Trump's victory in 2016 (ibid). Pointing at a shift in hegemonic direction and/or a shift alongside the continuum of hegemonic culture.

## Art Censorship

Hunter (1991, 226) touches upon various fields of cultural conflict, highlighting the arts and media as the primary arena where the very meaning of ‘speech’ and ‘expression’ is contested. As such, there is an ongoing dispute over what forms of speech and expression the First Amendment is meant to protect (Hunter 1991, 230). Consequently, the commitment to free speech has largely become conditional on the views expressed in an artwork and whether those align with one’s belief system (Hunter 1991, 246).

This conditionality becomes even more significant when considering that art serves as a ‘privileged medium’ revealing knowledge about political life at both abstract and deeper cultural level, while constructing political meaning (Negash, 2004, 191-194). Negash (2004, 196) notes that encountering art may lead to a sudden insight into a particular element of the political life. Moreover, because art is, in most cases, inherently public, it is especially powerful in constructing meaning (Negash, 2004, 188).

To come back to art censorship, the author highlights that art censorship is perpetuated on both sides of the cultural divide while simultaneously, the cry of art censorship is utilized as a means to silence the other side of the cultural divide (Hunter 1991, 246-247). In this way, the line between actual art censorship and allegations of art censorship becomes blurred. To further complicate this dynamic, the censor often does not account for its actions as censorship; the censor “protects the children,” “is sensitive to community standards,” or “cannot spend taxpayer’s money to support work that might offend” (quoted in Mintcheva & Altkins 2006, 15).

To complicate the matter, progressivism tends to lean towards pushing the boundaries of artistic expression, driven by a belief that art is a ‘symbolic presentation of behavior and ideas that test the limits of social acceptability’ (Hunter 1991, 237). This inclination aligns with the broader driving force within the arts to seek novelty, which mirrors America’s general demand for constant improvement (Hunter 1991, 230). As a result, understandably, this is perceived as an institutional bias favouring progressive ideas to the extent that it is conceived as a prejudice against orthodox values (Hunter, 1991, 226).



# Chapter I: Conceptual Framework

This section focuses on the conceptual framework, within which different conceptualizations of censorship are examined, ultimately situating the research within an integrative approach to censorship that accounts for both its regulatory and constitutive dimensions.

## 1.1 Defining Censorship: Competing Conceptual Frameworks

Research into censorship has a long history, and the definition of censorship has been widely explored and contested (Burt 1994, 12). A prevailing idea within liberal thought is that censorship is a repressive state action enforced upon its subjects, in other words, an explicitly coercive process (Bunn 2015, 29). To elaborate, within liberal thought, censorship is seen as an act external to speech and communication: an act of interference by an authoritative third party (ibid). Foundational to this understanding of censorship is a dichotomic approach to censorship: censorship juxtaposes freedom of expression (Luís & Fernandes 2024, 98). Moreover, censorship is understood as a self-evident concept, considered synonymous with prohibition, persecution, and intended to foster fear and silencing' (ibid). Similarly, in the legal sense, we can make sense of censorship as the 'government suppression of speech, which is prohibited by the First Amendment' (Mintcheva & Altkins 2006, 15). However, one could reconsider the liberal conception of censorship, which stresses that censorship functions purely as a negative exercise of power (Burt 1994, 16).

New Censorship Theory, which centres around Foucault's theory of power, offers a powerful critique of the liberal conception of censorship, it essentially treats the view as 'a separate and ultimately subordinate species of censorship' and argues for a productive and generative understanding of censorship (Bunn 2015, 25). Various scholars have contributed to

the development of a new understanding of censorship, with Judith Butler making the most effective contribution (Bunn 2015, 27).

Thus, Butler (1997) departs from the understanding of censorship as a state-imposed restriction of free speech. Instead, the author accounts for censorship as a way of producing speech, in other words, setting out the norms, rules, and possibilities of speech a priori (Butler 1997, 128). As such, subjects make decisions within pre-existing linguistic structures and institutionalized norms, which determine what is to be included in the sphere of public discourse (Butler 1997, 129). Moreover, the author contends that it is important to distinguish between explicit and implicit forms of censorship because explicit censorship, i.e., the regulation of speech, often paradoxically brings speech into being, while implicit censorship, i.e., institutionalized norms, can be more efficacious and pervasive in limiting the domain of speakability (Butler 1997, 130-131). To further explain, the regulation of speech acknowledges its very existence and contributes to a ‘circular imaginary production of its own making’ (Butler 1997, 131).

Furthermore, mechanisms of censorship establish norms that produce subjects, in Butler’s words, ‘make certain kinds of citizens possible and others impossible’ (Butler 1997, 131-132). Consequently, censorship can function in a formative and constitutive manner in processes of nation-building to exemplify, in some instances, ‘a dominant power seeks to control any challenges posed to its own legitimacy’ (Butler 1997, 132). Likewise, censorship is used to build consensus within a nation or to codify historical narratives (ibid). To elaborate, Butler (1997, 133-135), drawing on Language and Symbolic Power, argues that a social domain of speakability is constructed, while ‘the unspeakable’ becomes to form subjects, as one’s survival as a subject depends on staying within this domain (Butler 1997, 133-135).

Jansen (1991), in her book *Censorship: The Knot That Binds Power and Knowledge*, notes that while liberal societies perceive censorship as something that the Other does, the powerful still control the discourse within these societies. Correspondingly, the author acknowledges that historically liberalism played an emancipatory role in advancing intellectual freedom but criticizes the enlightenment discourse which views censorship as ‘a regressive practice of the un-enlightened’ (Jansen 1991, 4).

Similarly to Butler, the author contends that the power to name enables the powerful to create a social reality that enhances their sovereignty (Jansen 1991, 6). Consistent with Foucauldian thought, the argument put forth recognizes the reciprocal relationship between power and knowledge; power is constitutive of knowledge, but knowledge reinforces power (Jansen 1991, 7). As such, the powerless are set up to negotiate ‘their own recipes for survival’ within the dominant knowledge structure (ibid). Commenting on constituent censorship, or in Butler’s words ‘implicit censorship, Jansen (1991, 7) argues that it provides an anchor for regulative censorship. Thereby, the author asserts that constituent censorship is a feature of all societies, even though liberal political theory denies this reality (ibid).

## **1.2 An Integrative Approach to Censorship**

Bunn (2015), taking a different approach, re-examines the development of New Censorship Theory and argues that research on censorship both adheres to the liberal tradition and simultaneously should ingrate insights from newer theories, most importantly accounting for state censors as actors embedded within communication networks. Developing this further, the author points out that there is no comprehensive theoretical text laying out a singular New Censorship Theory, however, there are some consistencies, New Censorship Theory:

- ‘Recasts censorship from a negative, repressive force, concerned only with prohibiting, silencing, and erasing, to a productive force that creates new forms of discourse, new forms of communication, and new genres of speech.’ (Bunn 2015, 26)
- ‘Understands censorship as a diffuse, ubiquitous phenomenon in which a host of actors (including impersonal, structural conditions) function as effective censors.’ (Bunn 2015, 27)
- ‘Overturns a paradigmatic model in which censorship constitutes an extraordinary, repressive intervention into the default norm of “free speech,” a violation of a natural freedom usually, if not exclusively, undertaken by agents of the state.’ (ibid)

The author argues for exploring how state censorship (explicit/regulative censorship) functions in a similar way to non-state censorship, no longer treating it as a separate category but integrating both into a post-structuralist discursive framework (Bunn 2015, 43). Such rethinking of New Censorship Theory allows for an exploration of how different forms of censorship produce different effects (Bunn 2015, 28). Moreover, an investigation of all forms of censorship within a post-structuralist discursive framework would centre around examining the actual practices of censorship within communication networks in which powerful actors, particularly the state, inevitably operate (Bunn 2015, 44).

A broadly similar point has also recently been made by Luís & Fernandes (2024, 97-98), who find that there is a risk in broadening the concept of censorship, but simultaneously, an overly narrow definition fails to account for structural forms of exclusion and constraints exerted on freedom of expression. The authors reiterate the common criticism of New Censorship Theory (NTC), namely, that it dilutes the concept of censorship and makes the operationalization of the concept more difficult, but do not completely reject this new conceptualization Luís & Fernandes (2024, 98). They contend that ‘a clear articulation between regulatory and constitutive dimensions’ of censorship is needed (ibid). While they

offer a compelling argument for integrating the regulatory and constitutive dimensions of censorship within the context of a dictatorial regime (ibid), in which regulatory censorship is more explicit (ibid), it remains somewhat unclear how this articulation functions in liberal democracies.

Therefore, a deeper understanding of an integrative approach to the regulatory and constitutive dimensions of censorship is needed, which requires engagement with the conceptual framework by Luís & Fernandes. In a new conceptual framework, the authors seek to articulate both dimensions of censorship in the following way:

1. 'Expanding the range of agents to be investigated as contributing to censorship processes.' (Luís & Fernandes 2024, 99)
2. To recognize that 'the social fields, to use a Bourdieusian concept, where the censorship phenomenon can be investigated, are not only externally regulated, but also self-regulating.' (ibid)

The authors argue that this broader concept enhances the operationalization of constitutive censorship, by analysing it through 'the regulatory trail' (ibid). Additionally, regulatory censorship gets recast as a productive force, as it consists of exclusionary mechanisms that are in a permanent negotiation with societal norms (ibid). To elaborate, regulatory censorship can solidify and reinforce hegemonic power structures as it responds to these structures (ibid). Altogether, this framework proves adequate for analysing censorship in liberal democracies, but only insofar as forms of regulatory censorship are present.

## Chapter II: Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative case study design, including nine cases that will be examined through critical discourse analysis (CDA). Particularly drawing upon Fairclough (1989) and Lui (2013) to examine the justifications, rationales, and calls for art censorship in the United States in order to uncover how art censorship participates in the re-imaging of the nation by MAGA and the broader conservative project. The cases of art censorship include the relocation and cancellations of exhibitions, seizure of artworks, mandatory consent waivers, content warnings, cancelation of residencies, vandalization, financial coercion resulting in removal, and (calls for) removal of artworks.

### 2.1 Research Design

The research will analyse nine cases of art censorship, of which three cases will be explored in depth namely, the censorship of Sally Mann photographs, the F13TCHER EXHIBIT and the Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hopes exhibition. The cases are employed to uncover how art censorship participates in the reimagining of the nation. While the nine cases selected do not capture the full range of ways in which censorship participates in the reimagining of the nation, they do provide preliminary insights into the struggle over the content of hegemony. As such, this research is concerned with the imagined building blocks of the nation, or in other words, the themes that are uncovered in the analysis of these cases of censorship.

This research draws on Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model, put forth in Figure 3., to analyse discourse that justifies, rationalizes and/or calls for censorship. Rather than incorporating all three dimensions, this research adopts a two-dimensional operationalization of Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model, focusing on the text and

sociocultural practice. While the research recognizes the importance of the discourse practice, which sheds light on processes of production and consumption of text (Fairclough 1989, 26), this research is primarily concerned with uncovering how art censorship participates in a struggle over the content of hegemony and therefore interrogates the text in relation to the sociocultural practice. In this regard, the research foregrounds the representational dimension of discourse, drawing on the notion that ‘that the hegemonic struggle can be exercised through controlling discursive representation’ (Lui 2013, 138). As such, the research builds on the assumption that the discourse that justifies, rationalizes and/or calls for censorship is the primary indicator of how art participates in the struggle over hegemony and hence how its censorship does too. In this way, art censorship constitutes the primary discourse, while the text that justifies, rationalizes and/or calls for censorship serves as its discursive representation of the imagined nation.

Importantly, this research employs a simplified version of Lui’s (2013) representational model of hegemony, put forth in Figure 4., focusing on discursive representation and hegemony, equated with the third dimension of Fairclough’s model. Thus, the more detailed clause-level and transitivity analysis proposed by Lui fall outside the scope of this study, as familiarity with granular data analysis and the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework is required. Instead, this research draws on Fairclough’s (1989) first dimension to account for the textual analysis and chooses to focus on key terms & lexical choices, emotive language and rhetorical devices utilized by the discursive agent. Building further on Lui’s framework, ‘the field’ constitutes justifications, rationales and calls for acts of art censorship. This integration of the two models is chosen as Lui’s representational model of discursive

representation provides additional concepts, such as discursive representation, that deepen the analysis.

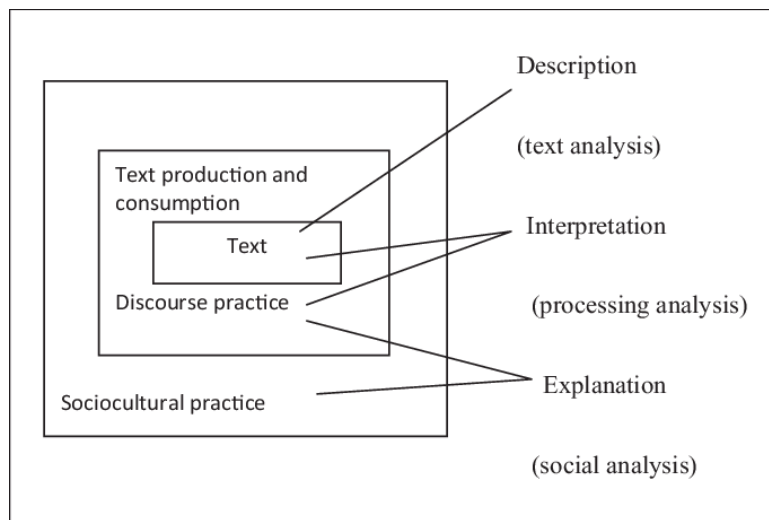


Figure 3. Fairclough's three-dimensional model

Source: Fairclough, 1989

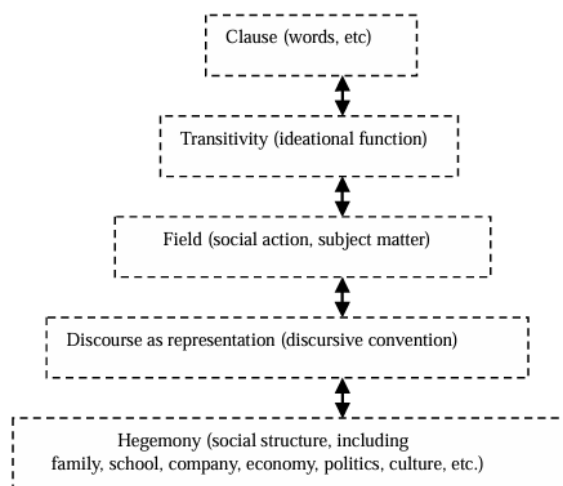


Figure 4. Lui's representational model of hegemony

Source: Lui, 2013



## 2.2 Data Collection

The data collection is guided by the goal of capturing a set of discursive strategies employed to justify, rationalize, and/or call for art censorship across various thematic contexts. The selection of the dataset is predicated upon several factors: Firstly, the dataset is limited to incidents of art censorship from 2045-2025, reflecting a so-called shift in the cultural landscape because of repression (Cascone, 2025). Secondly, the dataset is limited to well-documented cases of censorship, meaning that each case of censorship has at least been reported by a news outlet and preferably also by a free speech organization. Thirdly, the dataset is selected based on the availability of textual discourse on the censored artwork, as non-textual forms of discourse fall outside the scope of this research. It is important to note that these methodological choices, such as the reliance on media coverage, create inherent biases offering a skewed understanding of art censorship in the context of the United States. This essentially means that the research does not account for both under-documented cases of art censorship and cases of pre-emptive censorship in which art never came into being.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

For each of the three selected case studies, the analysis will follow the same structure. First, a brief description of the case will be given, after which the type of censorship will be outlined. The analysis proceeds with textual analysis, referred to as the micro-level hereafter; this part of the analysis focuses on key terms & lexical choices, emotive language, and rhetorical devices utilized by the discursive agent. In the macro-level analysis, there is a focus on the constructs that emerge because of discursive choices made throughout the discourse. The analysis will then go into what this means for the content of hegemony.

## Chapter III: Analysis

### 3.1 The Photographs of Sally Mann

#### 3.1.1 Case overview

In January 2024, the Fort Worth Police Department seized four photographs by Sally Mann that were on display at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth as part of the exhibition *Immediate Family* (Aton, 2025; Fuentes, 2025; Kite 2025; Werbel 2025). Among these works were *The Perfect Tomato* (1990) and *Popsicle Drips* (1985), both of which depict the children of the artist in the nude (NCAC 2025). *Immediate Family* features not only photographs by Sally Mann but also a range of works by women and non-binary artists who explore ‘the multi-layered concepts of family, community, and home’ (Karnes & Milliken 2025). Moreover, the works by Sally Mann were seized after local officials, most notably Tarrant County Judge Tim O’Hare, alleged that these images constituted ‘sexual exploitation of a minor’ (Kite 2025; NCAC Comms 2025). A criminal investigation was launched shortly after a formal complaint was made by O’Hare. However, the Tarrant County Grand Jury declined to bring charges against either the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth or Sally Mann (ArtReview 2025; Fuentes 2025).



Figure 5. *The Perfect Tomato* by Sally Mann, 1990.



Figure 6. *Popsicle Drips* by Sally Mann, 1985.

### 3.1.2 Type of censorship

The seizure of these photographs establishes a clear ‘regulatory trail’, with law enforcement and local officials acting as the primary agents of censorship. As such, this case aligns more closely with an understanding of censorship as an extraordinary repressive intervention undertaken by agents of the state. However, drawing on the conceptual framework, the act of censorship should still be understood as constitutive and productive, in other words, as a struggle over the content of hegemony. Furthermore, it should be noted that the museum has simultaneously acted as an agent of censorship by the inclusion of a sign in the exhibition that reads, ‘This exhibition features mature themes that may be sensitive for some viewers’ (Werbel, 2025). In sum, in the case of Sally Mann, censorship manifests in the removal of works and the imposition of content warnings.

### 3.1.3 Micro-level: Textual Analysis

Table 1. presents the discursive choices made by different discursive agents in justifying, rationalizing, and/or calling for the censorship of Sally Mann’s photographs. The analysis reveals constructs of criminality, the innocent and voiceless child, and nudity.

#### 3.1.3.1 *Constructing Criminality*

The lexical choices made by the discursive agents across the discourse construct Sally Mann’s photographs as the product of criminal activity. Terms such as ‘warrant’ ‘child pornography’, ‘comprehensive investigation’ and ‘sexual exploitation of a minor’ not only inscribe meaning to the artwork but recast artistic intent as deviant and/or pervert intent. Importantly, descriptive phrases such as ‘splattered liquid’, ‘lying in a puddle’ together with ‘sexual exploitation of a minor’ and ‘sexualize children’ function associatively, in other words, they are instrumental to the construction of Sally Mann’s images as ‘child

pornography’ and ultimately work towards the denial of aesthetic value. Similarly, the instrumentalization of terms such as ‘naked’ and ‘fully nude’, instead of just ‘nude’ deny the artwork’s aesthetic value. Additionally, emotive language serves to position the discursive agent as distanced from the act, portraying them as ‘upset’ by the alleged criminality of the artwork. Similarly, A binary opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’, for example, ‘Christians and concerned citizens cannot stand idly by while child exploitation is reframed as art’, both reproducing a hierarchy and constructing complicity. Additionally, associative equivalence is utilized to produce a notion of criminality with regard to the ‘the LGBTQ lifestyle’ and ‘the breakdown of the God-ordained definition of family’.

### *3.1.3.2 The Innocent and Voiceless Child*

The lexical choices made by the discursive agents across the discourse construct children as passive subjects in need of protection. For instance, the phrase ‘protecting the most vulnerable members of society, our children’ points to an understanding of children as inherently dependent on adult protection. In this instance, it is particularly relevant to consider the omissions within the discourse, for instance, the absence of references to joy, experimentation, adventure, and other characteristics that might be referred to when talking about childhood. Moreover, the protection of children is not only required because of their inherent vulnerability, it is also a moral obligation, underscored by emotive language such as ‘The protection of children and the moral fabric of our society demand it’, ultimately intensifying the call for action by phrasing it as a demand. Again, a binary opposition is constructed as it is ‘our community,’ which ‘has such strong advocates for children’ and not yours. Additionally, the construction of the innocent and voiceless child is dependent upon the construction of the (Christian) adult that ‘must speak up’ and ‘will not accept,’ underscoring that they ought to determine what constitutes ‘mature content.’

### *3.1.3.3 Constructing Nudity*

The lexical choices made by the discursive agents across the discourse point to the construction of nudity, particularly children in the nude, as inherently sexual. For instance, rather than the images themselves, terms such as ‘they sexualize’ reproduce the very understanding of children in the nude as sexual. This construct is further underscored by terms such as ‘mature content’ or referencing appropriateness. Additionally, moral authority is invoked through referencing to Christianity and divine judgement, as exemplified by the phrase ‘The exploitation of (even adult) nakedness was condemned by God’ and ‘Christians should follow in this biblical example’.

Table 1. *Overview of Textual Analysis of Texts Indicating Justifications, Rationales and Calls for Censorship of the Photographs by Sally Mann*

<b>Type of Discursive Agent</b>	<b>Textual Medium</b>	<b>Key terms &amp; Lexical choices</b>	<b>Emotive Language</b>	<b>Rhetorical Devices (i.e. us vs. them, moral absolutism)</b>
<b>Public Official</b>	X post (tweet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘child pornography’</li> <li>○ ‘warrant’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘upset’</li> <li>○ ‘This is sick.’</li> </ul>	‘Lone Star Left and her followers are upset ..’
<b>Public Official</b>	X post (tweet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘The images of children’</li> <li>○ ‘Sexual exploitation of a minor’</li> <li>○ ‘appropriate action’</li> <li>○ “under the guise of ‘art’”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘deeply disturbing’</li> <li>○ ‘protecting the most vulnerable members of society, our children’</li> </ul>	○ ‘should never be tolerated’
<b>Public Official</b>	X post (Retweet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘warrant’</li> <li>○ ‘comprehensive investigation’</li> <li>○ ‘leadership’</li> <li>○ ‘God bless you all’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘deeply grateful’</li> <li>○ ‘brought me tears of relief’</li> <li>○ ‘It’s reassuring’</li> </ul>	○ ‘our community has such strong advocates for children’
<b>Community Member</b>	Facebook post (incl. sharing of post Danbury Institute)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “These aren’t horrid enough descriptors to portray the level of depravity being disguised as ‘art’”</li> <li>○ ‘In reality criminal p*rnography’</li> <li>○ ‘Anyone with what is openly available in the museum on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘One of the most disgusting, sickening, evil things I’ve EVER know’</li> </ul>	N/A

		their computer or phone would be criminally charged.'		
<b>Community Member</b>	Facebook post (incl. sharing of post Danbury Institute)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'Adults'</li> <li>○ 'Christian adults'</li> <li>○ 'the normalization of child p*rnography'</li> <li>○ 'those who cannot speak for themselves'</li> </ul>	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'must speak up'</li> <li>○ 'we will not accept'</li> </ul>
<b>Civil Society Organization</b>	Open letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'naked'</li> <li>○ 'splattered liquid'</li> <li>○ 'lying in a puddle'</li> <li>○ 'fully nude'</li> <li>○ 'child pornography'</li> <li>○ 'These images are presented under the guise of art, but in reality, they sexualize children and exploit their innocence.'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'disturbing'</li> <li>○ 'shockingly'</li> <li>○ 'dangerous cultural shift'</li> <li>○ 'exploitative'</li> <li>○ 'inappropriate'</li> <li>○ 'they risk becoming normalized nationwide'</li> <li>○ 'The protection of children and the moral fabric of our society demand it.'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'morally unacceptable'</li> <li>○ 'degrades the values of our community'</li> <li>○ 'Christians and concerned citizens cannot stand idly by while child exploitation is reframed as art.'</li> <li>○ 'The exploitation of (even adult) nakedness was condemned by God'</li> <li>○ 'Christians should follow in this biblical example'</li> <li>○ 'the exhibit as a whole effectively works to normalize paedophilia, child sexual abuse, the c, and the breakdown of the God-ordained definition of family.'</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural Institution</b>	Content warning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'mature content'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'sensitive for some viewers'</li> </ul>	N/A

**Source:** Author's compilation of public statements, social media posts, and institutional announcements collected in May 2025.



### **3.1.4 Macro-level: Societal Context**

#### *3.1.4.1 Discourse as representation*

Here, the focus is on how these discursive constructions work together and what forms of representation they produce. Firstly, the construction of criminality points to how we come to understand the museum as a potential site of criminality, essentially rationalizing the involvement of law enforcement in determining what art ought to be and what is not. In other words, this construction delegitimizes the museum's cultural authority while it legitimizes the state interfering with artistic expression. Secondly, the construction of the innocent and voiceless child allows for the foregrounding of parental authority in society, as such cultural institutions, similar to schools, come to serve parents. Moreover, the parent becomes the primary arbitrator of what is included in the domain of speakability and what is not. Thirdly, the construction of nudity, particularly tied to sexuality, maturity, and inappropriateness, foregrounds notions of perversion and indecency rather than notions of bodily autonomy and authenticity. This construction not only determines societal perception of children in the nude but also the ways in which children, who eventually grow up to be adults, ought to understand their bodies.

#### *3.1.4.2 Hegemony*

The discursive representation outlined in the previous section reveals the particular understanding of how the nation should look, in other words, how it is imagined and what values are under threat, by allowing the photographs of Sally Mann to be within the social domain of speakability. As such, the language points to the hegemonic function of this specific case of censorship, namely, establishing norms based on an idea of morality that is rooted in religiosity, more specifically Christianity, as well as heteronormativity, patriarchy, and the nuclear family. Specifically, drawing attention to the understanding of the family

within the nation and the relationality between parents and/or children. In which children in the nude are reproduced as innately sexual. As such, roles for parents and children serve as markers of a healthy society. If these children are photographed in the nude by their parents, it signals deviance. In sum, this case demonstrates the centrality of the Christian family as a foundation of the American nation, aligning with one of the pillars put forth in the 2024 platform and ‘Promise 1#’ of the conservative promise..

## **3.2 The 2024 FL3TCH3R EXHIBIT**

### **3.2.1 Case overview**

November 2024, Republican lawmakers, most notably Member of Congress Tim Burchett, began calling for the removal of the 2024 FL3TCH3R EXHIBIT at the Reece Museum of East Tennessee State University (Arns, 2024; Palmer; 2024), ‘an international juried exhibition focused on socially and politically engaged art’ (FL3TCH3R Exhibit 2024, 1.). The 2024 exhibit focused on the theme ‘make your vote count to preserve democracy (FL3TCH3R Exhibit 2024, 1). The exhibit included the artwork Evolution (2024) by Joel Gibbs, which depicts Republican U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson against a backdrop of crosses evolving into swastikas, as well as the artwork It’s All Connected (2024) by Joe Quinn, which depicted conservatives figures together with swastikas, the Confederate flag, the star of David and many more symbols and textual elements in a collage (Farfan, 2024). While the president of East Tennessee State University has expressed that he finds the 2024 exhibition ‘abhorrent,’ he did not remove or close the exhibition because Tennessee’s laws protect campus free speech (Arns, 2024; Palmer; 2024). Instead, the president decided to include a mandatory consent waiver and a content warning (NCAC Comms 2024).



Figure 7. *Evolution* by Joel Gibbs, 2024



Figure 8. *It's All Connected* by Joe Quinn, 2024

### 3.2.2 Type of censorship

In this case of censorship, the ‘regulatory trail’ is less clear, as the university’s president refused to meet Republican lawmakers’ demands to take the exhibition down. As such, this case of censorship does not align with the understanding of censorship as an extraordinary repressive intervention undertaken by agents of the state. However, the university’s museum did ultimately act as a censor as it added what can be understood as a prejudicial content warning and required visitors to sign a consent waiver before their visit to the exhibition (NCAC Comms 2024). Moreover, the language in both the content warning and consent waiver is constitutive to one’s understanding of the exhibition; in other words, it reproduces the exhibition in a certain way before one engages with the exhibition.

### 3.2.3 Micro-level: Textual Analysis

Table 2. presents the discursive choices made by different discursive agents in justifying, rationalizing, and/or calling for the censorship of the FL3TCHER EXHIBIT. The analysis reveals constructs of sacred national history, the taxpayer as a cultural gatekeeper, hate, and threat.

#### 3.2.3.1 *Constructing Sacred National Identity*

Part of the discourse constructs the FL3TCHER EXHIBIT as an offense to a sacralised narrative of national identity. Essentially, one ought not to draw parallels between past and present unless such comparisons affirm a sense of American pride or national virtue. As such, the artworks in the exhibit are reproduced as a form of symbolic violence to the nation by phrases such as ‘fighting for the very flag tragically defiled and on display at your university.’ In specific, the phrasing ‘tragically defiled’ constructs a very emotionally charged violation of something sacred, in this instance, the American flag. Moreover, the discourse

draws upon the American role in WWII to legitimate a request for removal through an appeal to national belonging, which is exemplified by phrasing such as, ‘My father fought in World War II, and my mother flew an airplane for the war effort.’ Additionally, the idea of the American nation as one opposed to tyranny is reproduced through phrasing such as ‘Some, like my uncle Roy, gave their lives fighting tyrannical regimes in Europe and the Pacific.’ As such, the discourse both legitimates and authenticates the position of the discursive agent. Notably, war is simultaneously reproduced as a thematically sensitive and divisive topic, raising questions about which parts of the nation, more particularly national history, can be celebrated and which ones are deemed ‘to be offensive, unwise, immoral, indecent, disagreeable, conservative, liberal, traditional, radical or wrong-headed.’

### *3.2.3.2 Constructing the Taxpayer as Cultural Gatekeeper*

The lexical choices made by the discursive agents across the discourse surrounding the FL3TCHER EXHIBIT construct the taxpayer as a cultural gatekeeper understood as both the financier and moral arbiter of art. Phrases such as ‘WHY are hard earned tax dollars funding this’, together with terms like ‘hard earned tax dollars’ construct entitlement to how public resources are allocated based on economic contribution. Additionally, phrasing like ‘permitted on the campus of a tax-payer funded institution’, specifically the term ‘permitted’ together with ‘tax-payer funded institution’ constructs the university museum as a steward of consensus rather than a space of artistic exploration, underlining that the tax-payer decides what is permissible within society. Furthermore, the discourse makes use of two rhetorical devices, namely antithesis and hyperbole. Firstly, in the phrase ‘You have the right to free speech, but taxpayers have the right to not fund this hateful display,’ the right to free speech is placed in opposition to the right to not fund; as such, they are reproduced as two competing rights while the right to not fund is not constitutionally protected in any way. Secondly, in the phrase ‘definitely a TOTAL waste of taxpayer money!’, the term ‘TOTAL’ greatly amplifies

the wrongdoing in funding this specific exhibition. In sum, these discursive choices construct the taxpayer as a legitimate figure controlling the arts.

### *3.2.3.3 Constructing Hate*

The lexical choices made by the discursive agents across the discourse construct the FL3TCHER EXHIBIT as a ‘hateful display’, a term that both appears in initial denunciation and is echoed in the community response. The exhibit is deemed hateful because of a multitude of reasons. Firstly, the exhibit is deemed hateful because of how it engages with Christianity, as evidenced in phrasing such as ‘abhorrent mockery of my Christian faith’ and ‘Christophobia’. Secondly, it depicts direct colleagues of the discursive agents alongside ‘hateful symbolism.’ Thirdly, because it incorporates ‘antisemitic slogans. While it is evident that the artwork includes symbolic speech that is part of hateful ideologies, the inclusion of hateful symbols does not necessarily equate to the endorsement of hateful ideologies. However, the discursive agents reproduce the idea that this type of speech is not protected under the First Amendment, as exemplified by the phrasing ‘Limits on free speech’, ‘this exceeds those limits’ and ‘slander is in there as well’. The appeal to ‘slander’ is particularly interesting as this form of speech is indeed not protected under the First Amendment.

### *3.2.3.4 Constructing Threat*

Part of the discourse constructs the FL3TCHER EXHIBIT as a threat, most notably through the discursive choices in the consent waiver and content warning. Exemplified by phrasing such as ‘I understand that I am choosing to choose this artwork voluntarily’ and ‘injury and damages that may arise from or be attributable to my viewing of this artwork’. In specific, lexical choices such as ‘injury and damages’ connote legally measurable forms of harm, essentially elevating ‘sensitivity’, ‘disturbance’ and ‘offense’, in other words emotional discomfort as grounds for liability. In addition, the discourse invokes a sense of danger by

phrasing such as ‘an art collection depicting extremely dangerous left-wing propaganda’. Not only does this phrase construct danger, but it also reframes the exhibit as ‘left-wing propaganda’, both underling the political character of the exhibit and situating it within a partisan conflict. In a different vein, it is interesting how the discursive agent groups ‘sensitive and potentially divisive themes’, which include ‘antisemitism, Christophobia, Nazi-ism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, abortion, miscarriage, domestic violence, physical violence, war, and sexual content’. Essentially constructing equivalence between structurally oppressive ideologies and lived experiences.

Table 2. *Overview of Textual Analysis of Texts Indicating Justifications, Rationales and Calls for Censorship of the FL3TCHER EXHIBIT*

<b>Type of Discursive Agent</b>	<b>Textual Medium</b>	<b>Key terms &amp; Lexical choices</b>	<b>Emotive Language</b>	<b>Rhetorical devices (i.e., antithesis, hyperbole)</b>
<b>Public Official</b>	X post (tweet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘hateful display’</li> <li>○ ‘permitted on the campus of a tax-payer funded institution’</li> <li>○ ‘abhorrent mockery of my Christian faith’</li> <li>○ ‘associates many of my close colleagues with such hateful symbolism’</li> <li>○ ‘demand it will be taken down immediately’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘deeply appalled’</li> <li>○ ‘equally disappointed’</li> <li>○ ‘I feel sorry for many outstanding students at ETSU’</li> <li>○ ‘endure this display’</li> </ul>	N/A
<b>Community Member</b>	X post (response)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘Limits on free speech’</li> <li>○ ‘this exceeds those limits’</li> <li>○ ‘slander is in there as well’</li> </ul>	N/A	N/A
<b>Community Member</b>	X post (response)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘WHY are hard earned tax dollars funding this.’</li> <li>○ ‘I hope DOGE looks into this’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘hateful display’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘You have the right to free speech but taxpayers have the right to not fund this hateful display’.</li> <li>○ ‘definitely a TOTAL waste of taxpayer money!’</li> </ul>
<b>Public Official</b>	X post (retweet news article)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘defund this garbage’</li> </ul>	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘We will’</li> </ul>

CEU eTD Collection



<b>Public Official</b>	Letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘an art collection depicting extremely dangerous left-wing propaganda’</li> <li>○ ‘depict Donald Trump alongside swastikas and Ku Kux Klan hoods’</li> <li>○ ‘House Speaker Mike Johnson, with swastikas turning into Christian crosses’</li> <li>○ ‘Another collage combines photos of President Trump and conservative political figures with images of Adolf Hitler, swastikas, KKK members, and antisemitic slogans.’</li> <li>○ ‘An American flag sewn in a manner resembling a KKK hood’</li> <li>○ ‘I request the exhibit to be taken down immediately’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘serious concern’</li> <li>○ ‘shockingly’</li> <li>○ ‘fighting for the very flag tragically defiled and on display at your university’</li> <li>○ ‘find the exhibit disturbing and hateful’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘One image features my colleague and fellow Christian’</li> <li>○ ‘My father fought in Word War II, and my mother flew an airplane for the war effort.’</li> <li>○ ‘Some, like, my uncle Roy, gave their lives fighting tyrannical regimes in Europe and the Pacific’</li> <li>○ ‘I, along with many students at ETSU</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural Institution</b>	Consent waiver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘Viewer discretion is advised’</li> <li>○ ‘mature subjects’</li> <li>○ ‘I understand that I am choosing to choose this artwork voluntarily’</li> <li>○ ‘I hereby agree to release, waive, indemnify and forever discharge’</li> <li>○ ‘any and all claims of liability’</li> <li>○ ‘that may arise from or be attributable to my viewing of this artwork’</li> <li>○ ‘I expressively give my child permission to view this exhibit’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘some may find these works to be offensive and disturbing’</li> <li>○ ‘sensitive subjects’</li> <li>○ ‘injury and damages’</li> </ul>	N/A

<b>Cultural Institution</b>	Content warning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘sensitive and potentially divisive themes, including antisemitism, Christophobia, Nazi-ism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, abortion, miscarriage, domestic violence, physical violence, war, and sexual content’</li> <li>○ ‘some works might be construed as hate speech’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘sensitive and potentially divisive themes’</li> <li>○ ‘to be offensive, unwise, immoral, indecent, disagreeable, conservative, liberal, traditional, radical or wrong-headed’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘ETSU faculty, students or staff are not involved in determining which works will appear or the annual focus of the exhibition’</li> <li>○ ‘ETSU universally condemns bigotry, the use of derogatory language or slurs, and harassment or discrimination’</li> <li>○ ‘many people find disturbing’</li> <li>○ ‘most members of the institution’s community’</li> <li>○ ‘ETSU is committed to maintaining a marketplace of ideas’</li> </ul>
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**Source:** Author’s compilation of social media posts, and institutional announcements collected in May 2025.

### 3.2.4 Macro-level: Societal Context

#### 3.2.4.1 *Discourse as representation*

This section aims to highlight how these discursive constructions work together and what forms of representation they produce. Firstly, the construction of the nation as sacred produces representation in which national identity is tied to the reverence of national symbols and collective responsibility to honour them. As such, it becomes impossible to critique the same nation through symbols and historical references. In specific, one ought not to draw parallels between racial injustice and systemic forms of inequality in the past and present. They expose a different version of the national story. Secondly, the construction of the taxpayer as a cultural gatekeeper foregrounds a notion of ownership, emphasizing a capitalist understanding of the arts and culture. As such, those with economic power can make demands on what is shown at public institutions, highlighting increasing commodification in the arts. Third, the construction of hate works to suppress speech that critically engages with oppressive systems. In doing so, it conflates critically engaging and exposing hateful ideologies with endorsing them. Similarly, through the construction of threat, especially when discomfort is equated with bodily harm, the arts are further securitized, essentially rendering the politically engaged art of this exhibition unsafe.

#### 3.2.4.2 *Hegemony*

The discursive representation outlined in the previous section reveals the particular understanding of how the nation should look, in other words, how it is imagined and what values are under threat by allowing the FL3TCH3R EXHIBIT to be within the social domain of speakability. As such, the discourse points to the hegemonic function, namely, establishing norms on the basis of white supremacy, resulting in inability to use national symbols, such as the flag, to critique oppressive systems leaving experiences of marginalised communities

invisible. Simultaneously, a capitalist and colonial logic is reinforced, wherein the public space is controlled by those with the most economic power. Furthermore, the discourse works to suppress what can be understood as counter-hegemonic speech by constructing challenges to patriarchal norms, including reproductive autonomy and domestic violence, as socially divisive.

### **3.3 The Exhibition Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hopes**

#### **3.3.1 Case overview**

In June 2024, Craft Alliance, a non-profit art centre based in St. Louis (Craft Alliance 2024), removed several elements from the exhibition *Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hopes* before cancelling the exhibition in its entirety (NCAC Comms 2024; Pontone 2024; Futterman; 2024). The exhibition addressed themes related to Palestinian liberation, as reflected in one of the artists' statements that 'Everything is symbolic of peace, hope, and freedom for Palestine' (McCullough 2024). Prior to the scheduled opening, artworks part of Daniel Collete's installation *Sow Seeds of Hope for Land Back* were removed, along with title cards from her works *From the River to the Sea* and *Indigenous to Palestine* (Holcomb 2024). After which, the exhibition was removed altogether, asserting that the 'artwork and titles contained antisemitic imagery and slogans calling for violence and the destruction of the Jewish state of Israel' (Craft Alliance, 2024). The artworks in the exhibition depicted and/or were in the form of watermelons, keffiyehs, keys, and olive branches (Pontone, 2024). Importantly, the executive director of Craft Alliance, Bryan Knicely has stated that a volunteer previewing the exhibition found the artworks and 'slogans' to be antisemitic, after which the board decided they were (Futterman 2024; Holcomb 2024).



Figure 9. *Sow Seeds of Hope for Land Back* (Dani Collette). Image courtesy of Allora McCullough



Figure 10. *From The River to the Sea* (Dani Collette). Image courtesy of Allora McCullough

### 3.3.2 Type of censorship

In this case of censorship, the ‘regulatory trail’ is quite clear, particularly because Craft Alliance asserted that the exhibition violated its diversity, equity, and inclusion policies (DEI) (Craft Alliance 2024; NCAC Comms 2024). However, this case of censorship illustrates how censorship is not necessarily a top-down repressive intervention by the state but can equally be a bottom-up ubiquitous intervention. As such, both the volunteer and the board of Craft Alliance acted as censors without the direct input of public officials and without apparent party affiliation. This does not mean that this case of censorship is less significant; rather, it illuminates how every censor, independent of their political affiliation, participates in the struggle over hegemony. In sum, this instance of censorship includes the removal of exhibition elements and cancellation of the exhibition.

### 3.3.3 Micro-level: Textual Analysis

Table 3. presents the discursive choices made by different discursive agents in justifying, rationalizing ,and/or calling for the censorship of the exhibition *Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hopes*. The analysis<sup>3</sup> reveals constructs of antisemitism, peace ,and Palestinian life.

#### 3.3.3.1 Constructing Antisemitism

In December 2023, the United States House of Representatives passed H. RES. 894, which expands the definition of antisemitism. Specifically, the resolution declares that: ‘*That the House of Representatives – (4) clearly and firmly states that anti-Zionism is antisemitism.*’ (U.S. House of Representatives 2023)

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<sup>3</sup> The case studies are not treated symmetrically in terms of literature engagement because the researcher finds that this case presents greater conceptual complexity, requiring explicit referencing of academic and non-academic sources to adequately frame the analysis. As such, the researcher may risk discursively producing a sense of exceptionality, an aspect that was only reflected upon later in the research process.

Different advocacy groups, among which, J street, Jewish Voice for Peace and Muslim Public Affairs Council have expressed deep concern for the passing of H. RES. 894 for a multitude of reasons. J street, a pro-Israel organization, asserts that this expansion of the definition of antisemitism is a ‘counterproductive statement with no recognition of the complexities of the Jewish people or the definition of Zionism and anti-Zionism itself’, particularly underlining that there are many members of the Jewish community that do not support the Zionist movement (Jstreet, 2023). In a different vein, Jewish Voice for Peace, a Jewish anti-Zionist organization, asserts that the resolution is ‘an attempt to silence those who speak in support of Palestine’ (Jewish Voice for Peace-Kansas City, 2023). Similarly, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, an organization working to promote and strengthen American pluralism, asserts that the resolution ‘effectively discredits any criticism of the Israeli government’s ongoing assault on Gaza’ (MPAC, 2023).

Drawing on the discourse, the exhibition *Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hopes* seems to be understood first as an anti-Zionist exhibition and consequently also as an antisemitic exhibition. Exemplified by phrasing such as ‘The artwork and titles contained antisemitic imagery and slogans calling for violence and the destruction of the Jewish state of Israel.’, which directly relates anti-Zionist language, ‘challenging the state of Israel’, with antisemitism. This is in line with how antisemitism is understood in H.RES. 894. Additionally, phrases such as ‘Those of us who recognize the Jew-hate in this exhibition are both impressed and proud of your firm stand’ and ‘Thank you for not promoting antisemitism’ point to the understanding of this exhibition as antisemitic.

While this appears to hold true under H. RES. 894, there is much at stake in constructing antisemitism in this way, as explored by Klug (2003). The author critically interrogates the concept of Israel “as the collective Jew”, underlining that even if Israel asserts itself as such, it still does not make critique of the state inherently antisemitic (Quoted

in Klug 2003). This follows from the definition of antisemitism as: “hostility towards Jews as ‘Jews’” (Quoted in Klug 2003, 123). As such, underlying hostility towards Israel is not necessarily ‘hostility towards the state as Jewish but as European interloper or as American client or as non-Arab and non-Muslim—and, in addition, as oppressor’ (Klug 2003, 134). The author asserts that this does not mean antisemitism is never part of or informs anti-Zionist discourse; it is rather the very conflation that makes antisemitism lose its meaning (Klug 2003, 134-138). Consequently, an understanding of the exhibition as antisemitic recasts a call for Palestinian liberation, while it can be understood as partisan, as an expression of hatred towards Jews.

One of the discursive agents does acknowledge the conflation of Zionism and antisemitism and asserts that Craft Alliance ‘appears to be closing an exhibition that contains material that incites violence<sup>4</sup> as we have seen across the country directed at Jewish people and communities despite their thoughts on Zionism.’ Any assertion that the material incites violence should be evaluated according to the criteria established in UN document A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, which outlines the thresholds for incitement under international human rights law. While an analysis of how these thresholds are applied in this specific case falls outside the scope of this study, this section has aimed to demonstrate how the discourse mainly constructs antisemitism through its conflation with anti-Zionism.

### 3.3.3.2 *Constructing Peace*

The lexical choices made by the discursive agents across the discourse surrounding the exhibition *Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hopes* construct a certain understanding of peace. Phrasing such as ‘It is possible to want peace and an end to the suffering of Palestinians

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that there are different conceptualizations of violence. A reading of Fanon (2004 [1961]) reveals that decolonization is always a violent event because of the colonial experience which is coloured by violence. However, this section foregrounds a legal conceptualization of violence, highlighting how violence can be discursively constructed in relation to criminality, often with insufficient regard for context, speaker, intent, content, form, extent of the speech act, likelihood, and imminence.



without calling for the destruction of the hope and security of another people’ frames the exhibition, which explores Palestinian liberation, as obstructive to peace, essentially linking it with ‘destruction’. There are multiple things to note about this construction; drawing on Fanon (2004 [1961]), one could ask whether it is Palestinian liberation that obstructs peace or rather the settler-colonial logic of occupation. In specific, Fanon (2004 [1961], 74) asserts ‘that the colonist is no longer interested in staying on and coexisting once the colonial context has disappeared’. Furthermore, the discourse creates a false antithesis because Palestinian liberation does not have to mean the insecurity of another people, as articulated by Davis (2024). Additionally, peace is understood as the absence of suffering without any calls for justice; this reflects a call for negative peace. To elaborate, the discourse constructs suffering as the consequence of the ‘ Hamas strategy of hatred’, as seen in phrasing such as ‘If you want to help the suffering there, consider advocating for the release of the hostages and an end to the Hamas strategy of hatred.’ This construction displaces attention from ongoing settler colonial violence by reinforcing a narrative that Palestinian suffering is self-inflicted. In sum, the discourse constructs a depoliticized notion of peace, reaffirming colonial hierarchies by obscuring the colonial situation.

### 3.3.3.3 *Constructing Palestinian Life*

To comprehend how Palestinians are discursively constructed in this discourse one should pay attention to their very absence in this discourse, whether intentional or not, this omission frames Palestinian life in a certain way. More specifically, the discursive agents only reference ‘Palestine apologists’ and ‘the suffering of Palestinians’ in conjunction with ‘the Hamas strategy of hatred’, this framing reproduces notions of illegitimate solidarity and resistance. Moreover, these frames together with the discursive erasure of Palestinian life as (lost) life largely excluded Palestinians from the realm of grievability (Butler 2009, 15). As Butler (2009, 15) asserts “without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something

living that is other than life. Instead, ‘there is a life that will never have been lived,’ sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost.” Furthermore, this absence reflects the structural racism necessary for sustaining the settler-colonial system, particularly evident in phrasing such as ‘as a Jewish person, I would never tell a Black person what is or isn’t racist’ and ‘nor would I tell an Asian person what defines anti-Asian hate’, where Palestinians continue to be excluded from the frame of racialized oppression.

Table 3 *Overview of Textual Analysis of Texts Indicating Justifications, Rationales and Calls for Censorship of the Exhibition Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hopes*

Type of Discursive Agent	Textual Medium	Key phrasing & Lexical choices	Emotive Language	Rhetorical devices (i.e., us vs. them, antithesis)
<b>Cultural Institution</b>	Instagram post & Facebook post	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘Art Exhibit Will Be Removed After Antisemitic Slogan And Imagery Was Illicitly Used By Artists’</li> <li>○ ‘due to the artists’ violation of Craft Alliance’s policies on anti-bullying, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility’</li> <li>○ ‘The artwork and titles contained antisemitic imagery and slogans calling for violence and the destruction of the Jewish state of Israel.’</li> <li>○ “We are putting safeguards in place to prevent this type of policy violation from happening in the future.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “We are heartbroken for any pain this might have caused our visitors, members, staff, and volunteers,’ said Board Chair Jackie Levin.’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “At Craft Alliance, we cultivate a welcoming community that values creativity and artistic expression within a Safe Space culture for our visitors, employees, members, students, and artists,’ said Craft Alliance Executive Director Bryan Knicely.’</li> </ul>

<b>Community member</b>	Instagram comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘Palestine apologist’</li> <li>○ ‘What you’ve done is shown moral clarity in the face of great blowback’</li> <li>○ ‘Those of us who recognize the Jew-hate in this exhibition are both impressed and proud of your firm stand.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘utterly ignorant these Palestine apologist are’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘I’m a ceramics ally’</li> <li>○ ‘Thousand of hours supporting this community.’</li> </ul>
<b>Community member</b>	Instagram comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘It is possible to want peace and an end to the suffering of Palestinians without calling for the destruction of the hope and security of another people.’</li> <li>○ ‘If you want to help the suffering there, consider advocating for the release of the hostages and an end to the Hamas strategy of hatred.’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘destruction of hope’</li> <li>○ ‘Hamas strategy of hatred’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘We, as artist, need to stay united for peace not attack organizations for a simple concern for safety.’</li> <li>○ ‘appears to be closing an exhibition that contains material that incite violence as we have seen across the country directed at Jewish people and communities despite their thoughts on Zionism.</li> </ul>

<b>Community member</b>	Facebook comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘All these comments saying the artwork was not antisemitic, are you Jewish?’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘what feels homophobic’</li> <li>○ ‘All these comments saying the artwork was not antisemitic, are you Jewish?’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘as a Jewish person, I would never tell a Black person what is or isn’t racist’</li> <li>○ ‘nor would I tell an Asian person what defines anti-Asian hate’</li> <li>○ ‘nor would I tell a queer person what feel homophobic’</li> </ul>
<b>Community member</b>	Facebook comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘Thank you for not promoting antisemitism.’</li> <li>○ ‘I wish more people like you would understand that we’re repeating the mistakes of Nazi Germany’.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘we’re repeating the mistakes of Nazi Germany’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘We need to understand what the difference is between free speech and propaganda is’</li> </ul>
<b>Community member</b>	Facebook comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘Thank you for your support of the Jewish people and the state of Israel!’</li> <li>○ ‘It does not go unnoticed’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ‘nor does it go unappreciated’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ We will continue to support you financially and in every other way in the future.’</li> <li>○ ‘Anti Semitism, in any form, is completely unacceptable.’</li> </ul>

**Source:** Author’s compilation of social media posts, and institutional announcements collected in May 2025.

### **3.3.4 Macro-level: Societal Context**

#### *3.3.4.1 Discourse as representation*

As previously stated, this section aims to highlight how these discursive constructions work together and what forms of representation they produce. Firstly, the construction of antisemitism as Anti-Zionism makes the critique of Israel virtually impossible. Additionally, it produces the representation that the Jewish people are a homogenous people who share one and the same opinion about Zionism. Secondly, the construction of peace obscures both the colonial occupation of Palestine itself and the very logic of colonial occupation. Drawing on Mbembe (2003), the construction negates the role of the sovereign to command death and give meaning to death and, consequently, the state of exemption prevalent in the occupied territories in Palestine. Third, the construction of Palestinian life, or rather Palestinian life not worthy of discursive construction, not only denies life but upholds the very structural conditions necessary for settler-colonial violence to persist.

#### *3.3.4.2 Hegemony*

The discursive representation outlined in the previous section reveals how the nation is imagined through a settler-colonial lens, rendering the erase of the Indigenous and racialized Other permissible and simultaneously legitimating the American-settler colonial logic. Specifically, it shields the foundational story of the American nation from critique and makes decolonial imaginaries impossible. Not only does the discursive representation uphold settler-colonialist imaginaries, but it also sustains broader structures of racialized oppression, including white supremacy. Additionally, the discursive representation participates in sustaining epistemic violence as Palestinians and their voices are rendered invisible.

### 3.4 Additional Evidence of Art Censorship

The three case studies in the previous sections offer a first understanding of how art censorship participates in the struggle over hegemony. While these cases exemplify how art censorship ultimately upholds different orders of inequality, the question remains whether these are accidental and isolated events. Therefore, this research has included six additional cases of censorship; Table 4. gives an overview of how these participate in the struggle over hegemony. The cases address multiple themes, such as abortion, indigeneity, and black activism, and offer a broad range of censorship types. By situating the three case studies within this wider analysis, it becomes clear that censorship can be understood as a systemic process.

Table 4. follows the same structure as the three case studies. However, the key difference lies in the depth of analysis and the size of the dataset, with the case studies providing a more detailed examination. The cases of art censorship in the table show both new discursive constructions and ones that were already present in the discourse examined in the previous sections. For instance, the constructions of the ‘taxpayer as cultural gatekeeper’ and ‘antisemitism’ were previously identified. Furthermore, the table shows a diverse set of discursive representations, from ‘Abortion equals child sacrifice and is of satanic nature’ to ‘The civil rights movement cannot be politicised in current day and time’, the broad range of discursive representations shows the diversity in strategies to uphold different hegemonic content. The hegemonic content largely overlaps with those previously identified, with the exception of ‘Imperialism’. Altogether, this table underscores that art censorship participates in the reimagining of the nation along a broad range of topics, maintaining and or reconstructing various orders of inequality and eventually recasting them as hegemonic.

Table 4. *Overview of the Analysis of Various Censorship Cases in the Period 2024-2025*

Month/year	Censorship Case	Type of Censorship	Examples from the Discourse	Discursive Constructions	Discursive Representations	Hegemonic Content
02/2024	Statue 'Witness'	Call for removal  Vandalization (party unknow)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'satanic imagery to honor abortion and memorialize the late Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg'</li> <li>○ 'an 18-foot naked female figure with braids shaped like goat horns and arms like tentacles'</li> <li>○ 'disobedience to god certainly should not be esteemed by society'</li> <li>○ 'a statue honoring child sacrifice has no place in Texas'</li> </ul>	Abortion  Women's rights	<p>Abortion equals child sacrifice and is of satanic nature</p> <p>Women's rights are only permitted within a framework of obedience to God, otherwise they threaten public morality</p>	<p>Patriarchy</p> <p>Heteronormativity</p> <p>Christianity</p>
05/2024	Artist Residency Danielle Seewalker	Cancellation of residency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'concerns arose around the potential politicizing of the public art program'</li> <li>○ 'embraces her messaging and artwork surrounding Native Americans'</li> <li>○ 'public messaging has focused on the Israel/Gaza crisis'</li> <li>○ 'to not use public funds to support any position on a polarizing geopolitical issue'</li> </ul>	Indigeneity  Taxpayer as cultural gatekeeper	<p>Public art should be apolitical</p> <p>The 'Israel/Gaza crisis' is a polarizing issue</p> <p>It is permitted to talk about settler-colonialism in regard to Native Americans but not in regard to Palestinians</p> <p>The tax-payer decided which art is permissible</p>	<p>Settler-colonialism</p> <p>Capitalism</p>



01/2025	Art Billboard 'Make America Great Again'	Removal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'politized image of Bloody Sunday'</li> <li>○ 'mindful of how we use such images of our shared history'</li> <li>○ 'politically charged'</li> <li>○ 'our history deserves to be treated with utmost respect and care'</li> <li>○ 'unites rather than divides'</li> </ul>	<p>Sacred History</p> <p>Activism</p> <p>Unity</p>	<p>The civil rights movement cannot be politicised in present day</p> <p>Highlighting injustice undermines the cohesion within society</p>	White supremacy
01/2025	Artwork US-Israel war machine	Call for removal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'The piece is extremely offensive to the United States and to Israel and crosses into unprotected hate speech.'</li> <li>○ 'artwork that is this divisive should not use public funds without a clear, transparent vetting process'</li> <li>○ 'promote hatred and bigotry against the Jewish community'</li> <li>○ 'Anti-Jewish and Anti-American hate speech disguised as "art" has no business appearing in a public space and being paid for by taxpayers'</li> <li>○ 'antisemitic artwork'</li> </ul>	<p>Antisemitism</p> <p>Sacred State</p> <p>Taxpayer as cultural gatekeeper</p>	<p>Anti-Zionism equals antisemitism</p> <p>Critique of war is offensive and the state's foreign policy is beyond reproach</p> <p>The tax-payer decided which art is permissible</p>	<p>Settler-colonialism</p> <p>White supremacy</p> <p>Imperialism</p> <p>Capitalism</p>

03/2025	'Black Lives Matter' street mural	Financial coercion by the state, resulting in removal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'We're making our nation's capital GREAT again!</li> <li>○ 'celebrated domestic terrorists at the People's capitol'</li> <li>○ 'America's capital city must serve as a beacon of freedom, patriotism, and safety—not wokeness, divisiveness, and lawlessness.'</li> <li>○ 'The demolition of BLM Plaza perfectly illustrates America's rejection of this woke nonsense.'</li> <li>○ 'Dont forget all George Floyd statues too'</li> </ul>	Capital as heart of national values  Black activism	Black activism has no belonging in the capital  Black activism opposes freedom, patriotism and safety	White supremacy
03/2025	Exhibition 'To Every Orange Tree'	Relocation to building which is not open to the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'continues to condemn antisemitism and all forms of hate, and we seek to foster an environment where artistic expression, freedom of speech, and cultures of care co-exist'</li> <li>○ 'prioritize the safety of staff and student employees'</li> <li>○ 'engage with this exhibition of their own volition'</li> </ul>	Antisemitism  Safety	Anti-Zionism equals antisemitism  Engagement with an exhibition on political resistance (specifically anti-imperialist artworks) is unsafe	Settler-colonialism  Imperialism

<sup>5</sup>**Source:** Author's compilation of public statements, social media posts, and institutional announcements collected in May 20

<sup>5</sup> For full source details, see reference list.

## Conclusion

This thesis has argued that art censorship can have both a productive and regulatory dimension. While emphasizing its productive dimension, censorship cases were identified through their regulatory trails. As such, this thesis set out to examine how art censorship participates in the reimagining of the nation, particularly in the context of the United States in the Trumpian era. Moreover, the approach in this study has highlighted that art censorship can simultaneously appear as a tool of domination and consent building. This follows from the very idea that by its repression, it paradoxically produces.

Consequently, in this thesis we relate censorship to the struggle over the content of hegemony through examining empirical realities and the negotiation of censorship in everyday life. From this, the choice to investigate how justifications, rationales, and/or calls for censorship are articulated by various discursive agents, essentially underlining the range of agents that contribute to the censorship process, follows. Therefore, we have investigated three censorship cases in depth and given an overview of nine cases in total.

The analysis shows the content, which is struggled over because the very justifications, rationales, and/or calls for censorship articulate what the art represents to the censors. In other words, what ought to be erased from the domain of speakability? As such, it is not just the art that produces meaning; it is the censorship that participates, as articulated by the censor, in the struggle over the content of hegemony. To illustrate, in some cases, the nation is reimagined as white and settler-colonial and in others as Christian, patriarchal, and heteronormative.

The case study of Sally Mann's photographs illuminates how the state participates in the censorship process, particularly through law enforcement. In this instance, discursive constructions of criminality, the innocent and voiceless child, and nudity come to represent the

art, ultimately establishing norms based on Christianity, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and the nuclear family.

In contrast, the case study of the FL3TCH3R EXHIBIT demonstrates that censorship does not always take the form of suppression; it may be enacted through a content warning and consent waivers. These essentially discursively construct the exhibition before one gets the chance to engage with the art themselves. In this case, discursive constructions such as sacred nation identity make it impossible to draw parallels between past and present and, more broadly, critically engage with the nation, essentially upholding norms based on white supremacy.

The case study of Planting Seeds, Sprouting hopes shows how the cultural institution can act as the primary agent of censorship. In this case, discursive construction, such as antisemitism or Palestinian life, can obscure the inherent violence of the settler-colonial occupation of Palestine. Consequently, settler-colonial imaginaries can upheld within the nation. Not all discursive constructions identified in the analysis are explicitly named in this conclusion; nevertheless, their operations remain equally significant in reimagining the nation. Moreover, the nine cases of censorship show that these cases are not isolated or accidental events and, therefore, should not be understood as such; rather, they should be understood as systemic, ultimately shaping the boundaries of the nation.

As such, recognizing that censorship operates not merely as repression but as production compels us to explore interventions that expose and destabilize regulatory mechanisms through which censorship extends its productive force. Conceptually, as previously mentioned, this entails recasting censorship as a systemic process rather than an extraordinary intervention that is isolated and accidental and treating cultural institutions as sites of struggle. Practically, this entails holding cultural institutions accountable and

acknowledging their complicity in making certain kinds of speech impossible. As such, cultural institutions should critically reflect on their role in the processes of censorship and must work on their resilience to withstand both bottom-up and top-down pressure to censor certain artworks or an entire exhibition.

Moreover, the findings of my research could be particularly relevant to those who try to understand how nationalist projects relate to the arts. This study shows that it is not necessarily MAGA politicians who reproduce the nation in a particular way, yet the reimagining of the nation, as explored in this analysis, largely overlaps with the nation the MAGA movement and the broader conservative projects seek to reimagine. This points to the usefulness of investigating the arts not only as a critical site where national identity is produced, contested, and reimagined but also as offering insight into the trajectory of the state as the imaging of the nation potentially comes to inform state policies when political elites of a certain movement come to power.

Future research could be attentive to the ways in which censorship is resisted. This could include both a priori forms of resistance, investigating the resilience of discursive agents before censorship happens, and ad hoc resistance, where discursive agents respond to specific cases of censorship. Particular attention could be given to how marginalized groups have used discursive strategies to resist their narratives being censored. In this sense, resisting censorship can be understood as a form of counter-nation-building, where those who previously existed outside the domain of speakability move away from the margins and push the very boundaries of the domain.

One of the limitations of this study is the reliance on well-documented censorship cases reported on by multiple media outlets and/or free speech organizations. This gives us a skewed understanding of censorship practices as undocumented and more covert forms, such as self-

censorship, are unaccounted for. Therefore, another way future research could build on this research is to investigate self-censorship, which choices artists and curators make when they find themselves at the margins of the domain of speakability. Specifically, future research could be attentive to the topics, themes, opinions, and symbols that agents within the arts consciously exclude from their creative practices to uncover how hegemony can be sustained through self-censorship. Such research could be conducted using qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured interviews.

Lastly, one should note that the research is situated within the specific context of the United States during the Trumpian era, limiting its generalizability. However, this specificity also points at the strength of this research as only through an in-depth study of censorship one can illuminate both its productive and regulatory dimension.

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