MICHAEL ROTHBERG, *THE IMPLICATED SUBJECT. BEYOND VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS*

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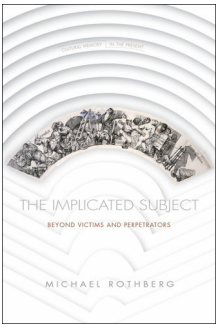

Reviewed by
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Like many people, I once sought to be apolitical. Young and naïve, I saw this as a prudent means of avoiding the violence that had accompanied the childhood predation of the political world into the cozy fortress of my family. Yet life has taught me that to "be political" is inseparable from existing in the world. The political indicates the metaphorical space of the polis, an organizational system for communal life. We can only participate and/or opt out of political life to the extent that our position in the sociopolitical collective allows. Whether through happenstance or self-fashioning, the closer we are to hegemonic power, the more likely we are to frame our experience as free; the more likely we are to imagine that we can be political or not. Contingent on fixed social positions, whether constructed through gender, race, class, or citizenship, such liberty betrays its claim to universality by perpetuating injustice. To the same extent that the personal is political, the political is thus also personal.

What does it mean to face this truth when the political is so often fraught not only with the realm of negotiation and compromise which naturally belong to it, but also with opportunism, favoritism, divisiveness, exclusion, and violence that gives it such a bad name? What does it mean to participate in democracies that cause harm in our name? To what extent do we bear the burdens

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inherited from our forebears? How do our imagined relationships with past and present conflicts frame our living interactions? In *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Michael Rothberg explores these questions using examples from popular, academic, and artistic discourse. Challenging each reader to move past our own discomfort of victim or perpetrator, guilt or innocence, participation or resistance, the book offers a provocative and inspiring means to think through what it means to develop political agency without the simplifications and erasures so frequently required in the production of collective political identity. Building on the insights of his previous *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009), which engages diverse intellectual and artistic voices to argue that the dynamics of memory "do not obey a zero-sum logic, but are instead generative" (p. 122), *The Implicated Subject* articulates the relationship between the individual and our complex political frameworks. The book's masterful engagement with multiple expressive contexts and forms makes it not only indispensable for human rights or memory studies, but exemplary for the analysis of political engagement through popular culture, literature, and contemporary arts.

The basic tropes that frame the book reflect a sensitivity to expression characterizing the entire work. The notion of "implication" derives from a notion of being folded into the world in a manner distinct from "complicity", which implies agency. No less real in situating us within the political, "implication" suggests that we may fold ourselves into the mix, but we are also folded in whether we like it or not. The question, then, becomes not simply whether we are innocent or guilty, but how we come to recognize this relationship with the world, and what we decide to do with it. Such complexity peaks in the conclusion, where Rothberg points to the ironic bifurcation of the word "figure", at once suggesting the human form at the center of "figurative art", and yet also suggesting "figurative language" that diverges from literal meaning. The implicated subject lives within these folds, functioning not as an identity so much as a figure through which to move through all aspects of the political world, from histories of colonialism and genocide, to contemporary articulations of racism and the ramifications of rethinking the future not in terms of the Anthropocene so much as what Rothberg convincingly renames the Capitalocene. Far from wordplay, engagement with the vocabularies that have emerged through scholarly analysis, including Primo Levi's "grey zones" (p. 39), Karl Jaspers' "political guilt" (p. 45), Simona Forti's "mediocre demons" (p. 53), Jacques Lacan's "extimacy" (p. 79), and Maria Lugones' "world traveling" (p. 159), enables Rothberg's concept of implication to function less as a paradigm than as the recognition of a sensibility that connects with existing methods.

Informative in their own right, the book's many examples explore function as means rather than as ends. "The wager of this book is that an approach based on implication can illuminate het-

erogenous cases of historical and contemporary violence and injustice" (p. 12), such that each chapter aims to formulate "avatars of injustice" through which to complicate familiar positions including descendants, beneficiaries, and perpetrators, as well as victims, perpetuators, and bystanders. "By foregrounding the 'impurities' that characterize all identities," Rothberg points out, "the framework of implication de-moralizes politics and encourages affinities between those who are positioned as victims and those who have inherited and benefited from privileged positions" (p. 21). Although perhaps naively trusting of a political framework capable of discursive complexity, this articulation of implication offers some hope for our era of polarized politics frequently based more on divisive grievances than on shared interests and objectives.

Each chapter traverses time and space to build a network of unexpected and increasingly complex intellectual constellations around the concept of implication. Already in the introduction, Rothberg's comparison between responses of identification and distancing that both aimed to critically respond to the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 engages the reader in unraveling the premises of identity built into political speech. The first chapter articulates the book's project in terms of its inheritance from the black feminist theory of intersectionality, particularly as articulated by the Combahee River Collective Statement, in conversation with thinkers deeply influenced by National Socialism and the Holocaust. The second chapter engages the Legacies of British Slave Ownership project, led by Catherine Hall and Nicholas Draper, with Jamaica Kincaid's acerbic analysis of tourism and neocolonial relations in Antigua, articulated in the essay *A Small Place* and analyzed through engagement with the thought of Franz Fanon. Using this example, Rothberg suggests that the concept of the implicated subject adds to Nancy Fraser's theorization of "abnormal justice" (p. 82) by articulating a historical dimension that begins with the premise that all modes of "normal" or direct representation have failed. For him, this recognition involves articulating how powerful groups are collectively responsible without being criminally guilty, ultimately calling for a redistribution to offset inherited inequalities. Oddly though, his emphasis on the distinction between direct and indirect representation fails to recognize his own reliance on the indirect representational forms of the arts as a powerful means to articulate and through which to recognize the void that emerges in the absence of official representation and documentation that are often thought of as direct historical speech. The book itself serves as a compelling argument for the importance of the arts as a means of discovering the voids constructed by hegemonic history and language, yet it is an argument Rothberg does not explicitly make.

In the subsequent chapters, Rothberg's analysis of non-literary artworks allows agency to shift from a meta-analysis of texts articulating sociopolitical critique to a recognition of implication through the analysis of visual art and film. Chapter 3 examines the subjectivity of implication expressed through the combination of drawing

and animation to represent the implicated subjectivity of William Kentridge, a European Jew in South Africa, as a figure whose family happened to escape victimization in the Holocaust only to benefit from, if not perpetrate, the horrors of Apartheid. Recognizing the resonances of Kentridge's work with both artistic and political language, Rothberg points to how it undermines the "homogenous, empty time" (as described by Walter Benjamin) upon which nations like South Africa and Germany come to fetishize a narrative of healing that necessitates a chronotype of progress that erases the type of implicated, embodied subject whom Kentridge's work represents. His detailed analyses not only articulate the richness implicit in Kentridge's work, but also demonstrate the central role of interpretation in fully recognizing and memorializing the political interventions of art. Through descriptions of video works normally available only in exhibition settings, Rothberg not only brings them to life for the reader but contextualizes them in relation to South Africa and pertinent parallel political frameworks elsewhere.

Rothberg's thorough analysis of an individual caught in the political trap of implication enables him to engage with the fraught territory of Israel/Palestine, where the discourses of victimization and perpetration overlap on a grand scale. Chapter 4 recognizes the similar oxymoron of a politics positioning subjects through both victimization and perpetration in comparisons sometimes made between the Warsaw Ghetto and the Gaza Strip to reflect the power dynamics in the region of Israel/Palestine. Reviewing his diagram of multidirectional memory from his earlier work, he proposes a model for public memory composed of an axis of comparison (between equation and differentiation) that crosses an axis of political affect (from solidarity to competition). Through this, he proposes that "a radically democratic politics of memory needs to include a differentiated empirical history, moral solidarity with victims of diverse injustices, and an ethics of comparison that coordinates the asymmetrical claims of those victims" (p. 124). Easier said than done with tragedies and tempers flaring on all sides, yet Rothberg's calm interpolation between thinkers undermines any direct attacks on partiality. Expanding on analyses from *Multidirectional Memory* and earlier articles, Rothberg addresses the complexities through the voices of two authors who wrote on the problem of the ghetto, W. E. B. Du Bois and Marguerite Duras, before dominant narratives of the Holocaust and Israel had emerged, as well as the video collage of Alan Schechner, *The Legacy of Abused Children. From Poland to Palestine* (2003). Engaging the multidirectional memory of slavery, Saigon, Warsaw, and Gaza, Rothberg deploys examples explored to continually expand and complicate the model of implication, building a vortex of understanding that moves beyond the assertion of power, the vindication of rights, or the compromises of political action. Clear statements such as, "Israel's defenders have become its enablers" (p. 119), and "working through the implications and particularities of genocides needs to be separated from a discursive sacralization of the Holocaust that legitimates a politics of absolut-

ism" (p. 139), express the genuine anguish shared by many of his readers at the deployment of past atrocities as justification for current and future ones in Israel as in Germany.

The spiral of examples increases in Chapter 5 through the examination of films by the Paris-based SLON collective, directed by Chris Marker, and the internationalism of Marceline Loridan-Ivens (central to the argument of *Multidirectional Memory*) in their filmic engagement with the United States' war in Vietnam and with the Algerian war of independence from France. Examining the implication of distance, the chapter explores the temptations and limitations of socialist internationalism of the mid-twentieth century and the limitations of contemporary human rights discourse that pays ritualistic attention to memory while favoring the global and the national over the local (p. 157). Elaborating Loridan-Ivens' suggestion that she was "born under the sign of suitcases", Rothberg argues that her example shows how "an ethical future for memory demands that we cultivate what Lugones calls an 'openness to surprise' as well as a self-reflexivity about the surprising ways we are entangled in and weighed down by histories that at first seem to take place far from home" (p. 170).

The final substantive chapter, Chapter 6 examines the complex of videos through which the German artist Hito Steyerl responds to the martyrdom of a close childhood friend as a militant for the Kurdish cause in Eastern Turkey. Like Loridan-Ivens, Steyerl's recognition of cross-border implications leads her to witness the travesty of justice in distant lands. Yet in contrast to witnesses of earlier generations, she comes to a landscape long past the moment of its destruction, what Steyerl recognizes as the "November" that comes after the "October" of revolution, a process that recognizes the militant/terrorist response to German histories of violence as echoing in distant territories. As Rothberg points out, "Although Steyerl's work engages intensively with the forces of capitalist globalization, it emerges out of a conviction that we live in a postrevolutionary age in which internationalism has lost its luster and 'the myth of the leftist hero [has] come crumbling down'" (p. 174). Her quest for the bullet that killed her friend returns, via Germany and the Art Institute of Chicago, to herself and the complex financial webs that launder the military deeds that define "the West" into the aesthetic languages of cultural hegemony. As with his analysis of Kentridge, Rothberg successfully engages not just the denotative aspects of the works, but also the centrality of the medium of the "poor image" as meaningful artistic language that underscores the absence of narrative resolution, transforming representation into a thing of remembrance that circulates, like a commodity. Instead of becoming a subject with agency, the individual gives the self over to the "potential agency" of the image. In the intersection of Steyerl's work with those that precede it, Rothberg articulates the shift that places the personal nature of political implication back into public, political agency. "Acts of fidelity", he explains, referring to Steyerl's search for her friend's remains, "construct truths out of the voids

of state violence [...] [They are] forced to confront a multiplicity of events; fidelity is an iterative act [...] The implicated subject can become a political subject when the fact of implication becomes the occasion for a work of fidelity that creates the conditions for a new subject. Implication, in other words, defines an event with the potential to create new figures that contest their status as implicated subjects" (pp. 196–197).

When I began reading *The Implicated Subject*, the notion of being implicated by my past and my present, from my home countries and in my migrant lands, threatened me like a snowball of burden and culpability. Yet the point of the book is quite the opposite: by articulating the complexity in which we all are implicated in the political, Rothberg placated my fear of guilt, healed my sense of victimization, and offered avenues for developing agency through memory. The vortex of conversations woven between many actors and thinkers across time and place produced a community with whom to recognize that we cannot move forward on the foundations of simplified, polarized, and weaponized memory. The implicated subject is not an end in itself, but a means to political agency. "The ultimate point, though, is not to dwell on or in implication but to transfigure it: to acknowledge and map implication in order to reopen political struggles beyond the defensive purity of self-contained identities" (p. 201). The enemy, then, is not new: it is silence. It is tribalism. It is the failure of empathy that doesn't project one's own experience or example, as well as the failure to recognize our own collective implications. It is the resistance to critique that branches from the work or the object or the event to the implications of context, as well as the resistance to listen to such critique. It is the rejection of the personal aspect of language, when ultimately every act in public space is driven by this mind, this heart, this flesh that is as deeply, inexorably personal as it is implicated in the world through which it lives.

In the "Capitalocene" era, when the humanities are often impugned as useless for not producing appropriately fungible products, the *Implicated Subject* reminds us of how the arts of many media – literature, drawing, photography, film – collude to express that which cannot be expressed, the aporia of direct speech in which truth can become articulate. It urges its readers first to imply ourselves, and then to apply ourselves beyond the boundaries of language.