

Implicitly

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Michael Rothberg's *The Implicated Subject* arrived in my mailbox right as I was leaving to co-facilitate a seminar, with Chad Shomura, at the Society for the Study of Affect Summer School in late July, 2019. In the interstices of that event, I read Rothberg's book, almost feverishly, and by the end of the week I had used the concept of the implicated subject so many times, and had had so many occasions to share ideas and arguments from the book with people, that I felt like the book had been with me forever. The ease with which the implicated subject became part of my critical vocabulary signals, I think, how much I (and I would guess that I'm far from alone here) needed this concept to mark something that has been *implicit* in my thought for a while, but for which I lacked a term.

The most succinct definition of Rothberg's concept arrives on the first page: 'An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles.'¹ Disentangling the implicated subject – which, as even this pithy formulation signals, designates a *range* of subject positions – from what Bruce Robbins calls 'the beneficiary'² and what Mark Sanders calls 'complicity,'³ Rothberg's book feels like a clear attempt to build on the project begun in *Multidirectional Memory*, but shifts from a sustained focus on relations between Shoah and post-colonial memory toward an account of the subjects produced within that matrix and the possibilities for opening up 'a space for new coalitions across identities and groups'.⁴ In particular, Rothberg's new book pivots on implication to bring his earlier work on the Shoah and decolonization into conversation with what Christina Sharpe calls 'the wake' of trans-Atlantic slavery, which includes ever-proliferating forms of anti-Black state violence, and the violent colonial occupation of Palestine.⁵ Sketching his own implication in these violences (as a

1 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 1.

2 Ibid, pp. 16–17.

3 Ibid, p. 13.

4 Ibid, p. 20.

5 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).



tax-paying US Jewish subject), Rothberg's book works against what he calls 'socially constituted ignorance and denial' which 'are essential components of implication' in order to 'reconfigure it as the basis of a differentiated, long-distance solidarity'.⁶

My encounter with Rothberg's book happened, coincidentally, during the week I first held my own book, *Animate Literacies*, in my hands, and so what I want to think about for the rest of this essay is how I might use the concept of the implicated subject to clarify and extend some of the arguments I make in that book. It also seems important to note that this meeting between Rothberg's thought and my own has already happened – in the pages of a *Parallax* issue called 'Memory after Humanism' co-edited by Susanne Knittel, the person who solicited the present essay. In my contribution to that special issue, I returned to Adorno's writings on Auschwitz and education to query what a 'posthumanist' education after Auschwitz might be.⁷ I was interested in tracking the more-than-human *objective* conditions that structure and produce 'subjects' as after-effects of nonhuman agencies, and I turned to work in biopolitics (broadly understood) and Julietta Singh's provocative extension of Rothberg's praxis of multidirectional memory toward thinking animals and other nonhumans.⁸ In his response to my essay, Rothberg wrote,

More recently, my approach to both intrahuman and trans/material connections has involved theorizing what I call the 'implicated subject' [...] such modes of implication and entanglement involve both traditionally 'human' histories, such as genocide and slavery, and those that test the limits of the human, such as climate change.⁹

I want to pursue this direction again here, this time using a concept I develop in *Animate Literacies*: the literacy situation. My point of departure is work in the field of Literacy Studies, an interdisciplinary subfield of educational scholarship that draws on linguistics, semiotic, anthropology, literary studies, and cultural studies to study 'literacy events' as scenes where humans make meaning in relation to texts.

6 Rothberg, *Implicated Subject*, p. 200.

7 See Nathan Snaza, 'Posthuman(ist) Education and the Banality of Violence', *Parallax*, 85 (2017), 498–511.

8 Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 145–146.

9 Michael Rothberg, 'Memory and Implication at the Limits of the Human: A Response to Nathan Snaza', *Parallax*, 85 (2017), 512–516 (p. 514).

Compared to the neoliberal nation state's conception of literacy as a discrete set of encoding and decoding skills, this concept enables the field to explore a wide and more capacious understanding of what literacy is and *does*. While commonly taken to refer to the human practices of reading and writing print-based language, Literacy Studies scholars have extended this to include multiple literacies and multi-modal literacies where meanings are generated, not just those involving printed words.¹⁰ But this expanded field still appears quite narrow and restricted, and so I 'move from the literacy events commonly taken to be the whole of literacy toward a scene of affective movement that conditions these events' emergence'.¹¹ The concept of the literacy situation allows me to re-focus my attention away from scenes where *conscious* meanings are at play toward a spatially and temporally diffuse scene of encounter and collision among a vast number of agencies and entities with different animacies *from which* subjects emerge. It is in such situations where the violences of colonialist de/humanization condition how subjects are differentially oriented in and around social, psychic, and physical spaces such that *some* attain proximity to, and even recognition as, what Sylvia Wynter calls 'Man', while most are disciplined into 'not-quite humans and nonhumans'.¹² For me, the literacy situation is where assemblages of humanization affectively generate the human in relation to the less-than-human/nonhuman 'constitutive outsides it requires for legibility'.¹³

One of the ways I try to attune to this in my book is thinking about the materialities of literacy, where 'literacy links the human to fragile, diffuse, ever-shifting multispecies and multiobject networks'.¹⁴ While I track a variety of material literacy practices in *Animate Literacies*, I want to return here to one specific form: the book. I write,

10 New London Group, 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies', *Harvard Educational Review*, 66.1(1996), 60-93.

11 Nathan Snaza, *Animate Literacies: Literature, Affect, and the Politics of Humanism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 17.

12 Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 3. Sylvia Wynter makes the distinction between the human as such (a hybrid biological/cultural creature that can develop in a variety of genres) and Man as a colonialist overrepresentation that violently passes itself off as 'the human'. See Sylvia Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation - An Argument', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3.3 (2003), 257-337.

13 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 8.

14 Snaza, *Animate Literacies*, p. 64.

The pleasures of the text that are affirmed in humanism, then, are never innocent, never removed from a complicity with forms of social segregation and manufactured inequalities in literacy and access to leisure time, from the deforestation and toxic production of paper, from the networks of distribution and labor that make every book possible, from the entire history of literature as a humanizing and dehumanizing assemblage.¹⁵

I cite this sentence in part because it's one of the many in my book I wish I could revise in relation to Rothberg's concept of implication (which I think works better here than 'complicity'), but also because it allows me to ask how *reading Rothberg's book* implicates me in conditions of settler colonization, ecological devastation, and intrahuman politics of exploitation and immiseration. This framing also allows me to dwell on how difficult it is to attune to implication, given that a massive edifice of educational institutions, capitalist corporations, and legal structures works precisely to *render imperceptible* our implication.

The Implicated Subject was published by Stanford University Press, a press that was caught up in a highly publicized scandal right before this book appeared, when a Provost suddenly announced that the university would cut a substantial amount of support, a cut that would have seriously compromised the press's existence.¹⁶ David Palumbo-Liu, a professor at Stanford, and a range of other high-profile scholars, including Rothberg, responded by noting that Stanford's mission was tied to the press and arguing that the university was simultaneously spending enormous amounts of money on other initiatives, betraying how much the Provost's announcement constituted a direct attack not only on a certain idea of academic freedom, but also on critical, humanistic knowledge.¹⁷ This crisis, and the swift (and, at least for now, successful) campaign that emerged to push for the press's continued funding, had the fascinating effect of bringing into conscious consideration the economics and infrastructures of scholarly book publishing and perhaps universities in general as they function as apparatuses of accumulation and sorting.

I remain struck, though, by how anthropocentric most discussion of publishing is, and by how that humanist framing militates against

15 Snaza, *Animate Literacies*, pp. 122–123.

16 Scott Jaschik, 'Reprieve at Stanford', *Inside Higher Ed*, 1 May 2019, <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/05/01/stanford-backs-down-year-ending-support-university-press>> [accessed 5 January 2020].

17 David Palumbo-Liu, 'Failure to Support Presses is a Betrayal of the Academic Mission', *Times Higher Education*, 15 May 2019, <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/failure-support-presses-betrayal-academic-mission>> [accessed 5 January 2020].

understanding even the intrahuman politics of literacy (to say nothing of the more-than-human politics). So, I thought it would be interesting to try to track precisely the material, situational conditions of emergence of *The Implicated Subject*. I say ‘try’ here because my queries were routinely met with statements that the information I was requesting – exactly where was the book printed? On what papers, sourced from what land and processed with what chemicals? With what inks?¹⁸ – was ‘proprietary’. On the one hand, this is obviously about capitalist legal structures that privatize production processes to prevent certain kinds of competition, but it also reveals just how much stands in the way of a subject being able to conceptualize their implication in exploitative labor practices, ecologies of extraction and processing, and settler colonial land theft. These violences function *implicitly* in the situations that enable our lives.

While I was simply told that the book was printed ‘in the United States’, if I assume that it was printed in or around Stanford, California (the city listed on the book’s title page), then the press (like Stanford University) sits on Ramaytush and Ohlone land. The book’s pages are printed on 60 lb. Natures Natural paper, which is manufactured by Glatfelter (whose motto is ‘Beyond Paper’!). This paper is made from 30% post-consumer waste, and in addition to being acid-free for archival purposes, is made with pulp from trees grown in ‘managed’ domestic forests that are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. While the company’s sources and processes are ‘proprietary’, I was able to learn that the trees would almost certainly have been grown in forests within 100 miles of the two mills that produce the pulp on Osage, Shawnee, and Miami land (Chillicothe, OH) and the home of the Susquehannock people (Spring Grove, PA).¹⁹ Even without knowing more specific details

18 I have not been able to confirm that the book is printed in soy inks, but many presses now use them as an ‘ecological’ alternative to petroleum-based inks. While that might sound sustainable, it’s worth noting that the need for large swaths of land to grow soybeans (monoculturally) was a major force in the recent fires in the Amazon. See, e.g., Meg Kelly and Sarah Cahlan, ‘As Fires Continue to Rage in the Amazon Rainforest, Who is Really to Blame?’, *The Independent*, 7 October 2019, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/amazon-fires-rainforest-brazil-bolsonaro-trump-trade-war-soy-bean-a9146336.html>> [accessed 5 January 2020].

19 These are both counties that voted, by around 2 to 1 margins, for Donald Trump in the 2016 election, which is to say where conditions (linked in complex ways to industry and employment) generate subjects who favor political candidates seeking to remove environmental regulations, dismantle the meagre social welfare programs still in operation in the United States, and roll back any political protections for minoritized populations. Given how strongly many social scientists correlate economic conditions with electoral politics, it seems necessary to ask about how the economic/material conditions of these paper mills (sustained in part by the money we spend on books like Rothbergs) are part of the matrix from which increasingly rightwing populism is sustained.

about the paper's production, we can note that paper manufacturing is enormously resource intensive, as is every stage of a book's writing, design, and circulation, and even consumption (I tend to have on at least a lamp when I read, for instance).

This is why, in my book, I turn in chapter seven, 'What is Literacy?', to the field of book history, which documents the historically and geographically specific ways that various material objects such as papyrus, wax, clay, hemp paper, etc. have shaped human literacies (even if many disciplined scholars in the field take it as axiomatic that these objects cannot actually assert something like 'agency').²⁰ This material history must also be read through and against histories of ecology and the economies that structure the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, or Eurocene.²¹ As an excellent example of the kind of attention I'm interested in, I'd point to the second appendix to *Living Oil* by Stephanie LeMenager, which provides an analysis of the approximate amount of energy required to produce a single copy of the book. While the book notes, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that a single book requires just under twice the resources required to make a cheeseburger, it also says

So even though the printing phase seems to occupy a small share of the energy consumption in this study, if paper were to be included in the system boundary it might have shifted the energy share percentages between processes considerably.²²

In putting all of this together, what I'm interested in is the point made by many Indigenous and decolonial thinkers, namely that settler theft of land is an *ongoing* dispossession and violence.²³ That is, even when academic books offer substantially decolonial arguments, the *material, situational* possibility of those books being produced and distributed implicates them in settler colonization and ecological extraction.

In the last chapter of *The Implicated Subject*, Rothberg turns to the work of Hito Steyerl, a filmmaker who queries relations among globalization, the Turkish state, and Kurdish rebels (relations that have

20 Snaza, *Animate Literacies*, pp. 60-65.

21 For a discussion of these different terms and the ways they signal specific ways of conceptualizing the motor of 'climate change', see Jairus Victor Grove, *Savage Ecology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

22 Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 207.

23 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

moved to the very center of US geopolitics as I write). Writing about Steyerl's film *November*, Rothberg states, 'By highlighting the way subjects become entangled with the circulation of objects and images, these shifts make possible a grasp of implication, but they also evacuate the position of the subject from which a new politics might emerge.'²⁴ Reading this, and thinking about a range of ways in which the artists with whom Rothberg engages attempt to foreground the material conditions of implication, I'm left thinking that there are serious limits to our abilities to know and conceptualize the situations *within which* we emerge and are sustained. And I think this requires a recalibration of how we attune to the political. While human subjects are a crucial *part* of the political, I don't think they come close to exhausting the field. As I put it in *Animate Literacies*:

Once we find ways to turn our backs on the state and its humanizing assemblages – actualizing other, virtual possibilities for relation that always haunt literacy situations – we have to reject the idea that such relations are prepolitical and instead affirm the irreducibly political nature of all aesthetic/ethical touching.²⁵

Situations *are* political, even in the absence of subjects consciously knowing what and whom they touch, and this political field is constitutively, irreducibly more-than-human.

At the end of his reply to me in *Parallax*, Rothberg wrote, 'I am not yet ready to give up the subject of memory and political responsibility, even as we rethink that subject from a radically nonhumanist perspective.'²⁶ I agree with this entirely, but I think more than Rothberg I want to see the condition of possibility for this rethinking in attending to the material, 'objective' conditions that structure situations, situations which form the discursive, which is to say material, field from which subjects emerge and in relation to which they endure. Another way to say this might be that I am entirely in favor of the project Rothberg proposes whereby subjects encounter texts – which may be protests or literature or film or visual art – and through their interpretative labor come to be more consciously aware of their implications. But I also want to think about how such 'progressive' shifts in consciousness, the result of texts' pedagogical force, are *also* implicated in situations structured by colonialism. Even progressive or radical commitments I

²⁴ Rothberg, *Implicated Subject*, p. 174.

²⁵ Snaza, *Animate Literacies*, p. 163.

²⁶ Rothberg, 'Memory and Implication', 515.

might make as a conscious subject, when those commitments involve the writing or reading of an object like a book, are still *materially implicated* in violences that I might 'oppose' but which make possible the situations in which I come to express those politics. The concept of implication is enormously generative for attuning to this, but there may be good reason to keep elaborating this concept well beyond a sense of the political tethered to the subject.

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