

## Introduction

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The publication, in August 2019, of Michael Rothberg's *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, was nothing short of an event, one that was long awaited, and will have profound repercussions across a range of fields and disciplines, including, of course, perpetrator studies. In the book, Rothberg sets out to expand the way we think and talk about political violence and injustice: 'We must enlarge our understanding of the actors involved in injustices beyond the most often invoked figures of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders,'<sup>1</sup> he writes. But in order to do so, we must first find the necessary vocabulary. To this end, Rothberg proposes a new critical term, the implicated subject, an 'umbrella category'<sup>2</sup> that refers to indirect forms of participation in violence and thus gathers subject positions such as the accomplice, the beneficiary, the perpetrator, the spectator, etc. Implicated subjects participate in 'histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator'.<sup>3</sup> Thinking about implication, in this sense, is tantamount to thinking about perpetration and vice versa.

For this issue of *JPR* we have assembled a special section on *The Implicated Subject* in order to begin exploring the implications of Rothberg's intervention for the field of perpetrator studies. The special section opens with an interview with Rothberg in which we asked him to reflect on how his work relates to questions of perpetration, guilt, responsibility, and complicity. We also invited him to talk about the status of memory and commemoration, the relationship between implication and multi-directionality, the role of affect, and the special status he accords to art as a site for thinking through and making visible structures of implication.

The publication of this issue is overshadowed by the currently unfolding global coronavirus crisis. When we began the interview in early February, COVID-19 had not yet been declared a pandemic, but by the time we finished the interview, it was clear that the category of the implicated subject had taken on a new and powerful resonance in this context. While the pandemic poses a potentially mortal danger to everyone, certain marginalized groups are more exposed and vulnerable

1 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 202.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 1.



to that danger because of the way the pandemic is inextricably bound up with already existing historical, political, and economic structures of 'power, privilege, violence, and injustice'.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, as with other global phenomena like climate change, the pandemic lays bare the effects of slow violence, and it can be difficult if not impossible to apportion blame or to identify a single perpetrator, not least when we may all inadvertently become vectors of harm. We thus become implicated in the spread of the virus, possibly without even knowing it. As we conducted the interview remotely, via e-mail, while observing the newly imposed social distancing regulations, we became acutely aware of the importance of what Rothberg calls 'long-distance' solidarity.

The interview is followed by three responses to Rothberg's book, all of which were commissioned and largely written before the current crisis. We asked three scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds – Nathan Snaza (English and curriculum studies), Honni van Rijswijk (Law), and Juliane Prade-Weiss (Comparative Literature) – to reflect on and think with Rothberg's book and to bring it into dialogue with their own work. Nathan Snaza (University of Richmond) researches and teaches at the intersection of posthumanism, new materialisms, queer and feminist theory, and critical ethnic studies. In his response, he revisits some of the arguments of his new book, *Animate Literacies* (2019), by way of an engagement with the concept of implication. Snaza zooms in on Rothberg's claim that cultural texts can help readers conceive implication and sets out to explore the material conditions that structure the reader-text encounter. He does so by tracking how reading Rothberg's book implicates him in settler colonialism and ecological devastation. Through this critical exercise, Snaza makes a case for the importance of expanding the notion of implication to conceptualize the political in the more-than-human forms of relationality that allow subjects to emerge.

Honni van Rijswijk's (University of Technology, Sydney) research brings together law, literature, and critical theory. In her essay '#MeToo under Colonialism,' she mobilizes Rothberg's notion of diachronic implication to investigate the linkages between sexual violence in the present and the legacies of colonialism and slavery in Australia. Van Rijswijk argues for the urgency of rethinking #MeToo intersectionally to capture how subjects who are addressed by this movement as victims may, at the same time, be implicated in ongoing forms of colonial violence in Australia. She urges non-Indigenous feminist scholars like

4 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, p.1.

herself to acknowledge and contest these complex forms of implication by thinking through their own situated responsibility with the purpose of reframing #MeToo in postcolonial contexts.

The special section closes with a reflection by Juliane Prade-Weiss (Ludwig Maximilian University Munich). Her research is situated at the intersection of philosophy, literature, and psychoanalysis and explores topics such as exile and migration, reciprocity and violence, plaintive language, grief, as well as participation and complicity. In her response, Prade-Weiss argues that any theory of implication must engage with the concepts of 'guilt' and 'morality' in all their philosophical and historical complexity. Through a reading of Herta Müller's novel *The Hunger Angel*, Prade-Weiss suggests, moreover, that problematic forms of implication are best understood against the background of broader, more fundamental and unavoidable structures of implication such as language. Considering these basic forms of implication in which we all take part, she argues, is essential if we want to resist falling into the assumption that there is a neutral, uninvolved position of critique.

The contributions show the manifold ways in which an approach based on implication can illuminate urgent contemporary issues, and intervene productively in long-standing debates on morality, guilt, and responsibility. A similar self-critical impulse underlies all three responses: an openness to reflect on the position of the critic or the scholar and to disentangle the lines of implication that intersect at this location. Together, the responses testify to the power of Rothberg's theory of implication to provoke self-reflexive practices that are, themselves, generative. Not only because they open up new forms of thinking about political responsibility, but also because they can give rise to unexpected affiliations between differently situated subjects, as well as between the human and the nonhuman. We are curious to see how the concept of the implicated subject will travel further, and what kinds of knowledge in relation to past and present violences it will yield along the way. We hope you will enjoy this special section and we invite further responses for a future issue.