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MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY AND THE IMPLICATED SUBJECT: INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL ROTHBERG

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As part of the 18th International Congress of the Goethe-Gesellschaft, focusing on German-language memory literature in the context of contemporary debates, Johanna Vollmeyer engaged in a conversation with Michael Rothberg on November 17, 2023. This discussion, which is partially reproduced here, took place online and was broadcast to an audience at the Faculty of Philology at the Universidad de Alcalá.[1]

Michael Rothberg is Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and the 1939 Society Samuel Götz Chair in Holocaust Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. He was the founding director of the Initiative in Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Among his long list of publications, the most renowned are *Multidirectional Memory*, *Memorizing the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009) and *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (2019).

Johanna Vollmeyer is a research associate at Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM), where her research focuses on the intersections of memory with trauma, power, and violence, as well as the constructions of identity and alterity. She is currently exploring new conceptualizations of time and memory in the postdigital era. Vollmeyer serves on the Executive Committee of the Memory Studies Association and is a co-founder of the research group ReOTi (Rethinking the Order of Time). Her most recent publication is *Cultural Recycling in the Postdigital Age*, co-edited with Miriam Llamas Ubieto, published by Peter Lang in Lausanne, 2024.

The conversation partially reproduced here focused on the concepts of "multidirectional memory" and the "implicated subject", both coined by Michael Rothberg in his books. The first title, *Multidirectional Memory*, was translated into German in 2021.

During the debate, questions arose about structures of power in the process of doing memory, along with inquiries into the implications and responsibilities of individuals in perpetuating violent structures that are still present in our

[1] The first part of the interview is published in Georg Pichler/Lorena Silos: *Deutschsprachige Gedächtnisliteratur im Spiegel der aktuellen Debatten.* Peter Lang, 2025.

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societies. In his publication *The Implicated Subject* Rothberg highlights that those who aren't directly involved but whose actions or inactions sustain systems of violence help enable "lethal vectors" of harm. Such an approach helps connect a concept of societal complicity to broader issues of systemic violence.

JV: In your 2019 book, *The Implicated Subject*, implication is defined as the everyday conditions that facilitate systemic racism and, as you term it, enable "the lethal vectors" of perpetration (p. 8). Could you clarify what you mean by implication and the implicated subject? How did you come to develop this theory?

MR: After publishing *Multidirectional Memory*, I became interested in how multidirectionality might manifest in various configurations, particularly concerning subject positions beyond the binary of victims and perpetrators. Many of the connections established in *Multidirectional Memory* predominantly reflect a "victim-to-victim" experience. For instance, W.E.B. Du Bois's visit to Warsaw, where he observed the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto, illustrates this point. He recognized a connection between the Jewish experience of genocide and his own experiences as an African American facing racism in the United States. Importantly, he does not equate these experiences; rather, he perceives them as interrelated in some way and says something like: from the perspective of someone who has been a victim of racism, I am contemplating another group that has experienced genocide. While not all examples in *Multidirectional Memory* follow this pattern, many do.

My interest then shifted to a few figures where I observed something different occurring. The initial figures I examined were W.G. Sebald, the UK-based German writer, and the South African Jewish artist William Kentridge. I would argue that both of them have very multidirectional bodies of work; however, their perspectives are not articulated from the position of the victim. I was particularly interested in *Austerlitz*, which I consider a masterpiece and one of the most important novels of recent decades. *Austerlitz* is an incredibly multidirectional work. It addresses themes such as the Holocaust, colonialism, and modernity at large. Whether this is a positive or negative aspect is uncertain, but it is certainly present within the narrative. The fabric of Sebald's work is incredibly multidirectional. At the center of *Austerlitz* is a victim figure, Jacques Austerlitz, a survivor of the *Kindertransport* who was sent from Prague to England to escape the Holocaust. What particularly interests me is that the narrative, like all of Sebald's books, is presented from a different perspective—one that is clearly marked autobiographically, albeit somewhat ambiguously. Sebald, a non-Jewish German, was born at the very end of the war. What I find particularly fascinating in Austerlitz is the identity of the narrator figure, who closely resembles Sebald himself. How do we classify him, and what kind of

position does he occupy? He's not a perpetrator, obviously, but he is implicated in the story he's telling about Jacques Austerlitz by virtue of his relation to the perpetrator generation among whom he grew up.

This exploration is somewhat analogous to my analysis of Kentridge, who also intertwines echoes of the Holocaust in his work. However, his focus is predominantly on apartheid and the post-apartheid condition. Kentridge does not approach this history from a victim's perspective. He acknowledges the significance of the Holocaust and antisemitism, but his artistic voice emerges from the position of a white South African who is implicated in the apartheid structures surrounding him. Both figures engage in a multidirectional discourse about political violence, but they do so from a position that is somewhat removed. This observation led me to conclude that we lack a specific category for this stance. The closest concept we have is that of the bystander. However, I find the term "bystander" to be inadequate, as it implies a degree of detachment and non-involvement that does not describe well what we find in Sebald and Kentridge. While important work is being done to complicate the notion of the bystander, it does not accurately capture the "implicated" engagement I observe in the works of Sebald and Kentridge.

We need a different term for individuals who are neither perpetrators nor direct victims but are indirectly involved in various forms of historical violence. In some cases, these individuals may even be beneficiaries or enablers of that violence. For instance, one could argue that someone like Kentridge benefits from the apartheid system, or, in the context of the Holocaust, Sebald represents those who inherit a sense of responsibility for events that occurred before they could have possibly been direct participants.

So I developed the concept of the "implicated subject" as an umbrella term to discuss various forms of historical or "diachronic" implication, as well as contemporary or "synchronic" implication. This concept addresses how we are situated in relation to different histories and structures, contributing to them or bearing responsibility for them, even if we did not initiate them, are not in charge of them, or if they occurred before our birth.

The theory comes—in part—out of reflection on my own position as a white, Jewish American whose family immigrated to the United States in the early part of the twentieth century. I benefit from the histories of the nineteenth century, including the history of slavery and the genocide of Indigenous peoples, even though my family was still in Eastern Europe at the time. While I am not a perpetrator of these injustices, I acknowledge the implications of my position. I bear a form of indirect responsibility by virtue of being a beneficiary of the relations established in those histories.

JV: From what you say we understand that you are also very much interested in exploring the present beyond the standard categories typically used to discuss violence, particularly the binary distinction between victims and perpetrators. In the German context, and considering your previous explanations, can the approach to the Holocaust as a singular event lead to de-historization and mystification? In other words, does it detach the past from the present and ultimately enable contemporary racism?

MR: Yes, I do believe that there is a form of detachment that arises from an insistence on singularity. There is a sense that what happened is somehow closed off and so unique that it cannot be related to contemporary issues. This raises the question of relationality concerning current events. Here it is important to clarify that my argument is not that what is occurring in the present—whatever it may be—is the same as what happened in the past. That has never been my position. While some may assert those kinds of equivalences, I believe we need an ethics of comparison to address these issues. There are different ways of establishing relationality, and those that tend toward equating experiences while erasing differences carry problematic ethical and political implications.

For some years, I have been involved in a joint project on migration and Holocaust memory in the German context, along with the German studies scholar Yasemin Yildiz. We have been examining questions related to how the embrace of responsibility for the Holocaust in Germany has contributed to the consolidation of a dominant German identity. The notion of the Holocaust's uniqueness and Germany's "unique" responsibility for it has, in turn, become a resource for disciplining minority and migrant groups. In this context, one can clearly observe the dynamics of power and inequality at play.

In the late 2000s, particularly around 2008 during a visit to Berlin, we began to notice a shift in the tenor of discussions regarding antisemitism and the Holocaust. There was a widespread narrative that portrayed Muslims and immigrants as particularly susceptible to antisemitism and as notably disinterested in the Holocaust and its memory. We were skeptical of this framing and could think of numerous examples that would seem to contradict it. This skepticism led us to consider those examples more deeply and to initiate a book project on what we call "migrant archives of Holocaust remembrance." This project aims to document the various ways in which immigrants—often those with a so-called Muslim background—have been actively engaged with, and frequently contributed creatively to, discussions about National Socialism and the Holocaust.

JV: What you have observed directly links your ideas of the implicated subject back to your concept of multidirectional memory.

MR: Indeed, many of these engagements are inherently multidirectional or at least relational. Consequently, they may not always be perceived or valued within the German context, as they do not consistently adhere to the established precepts of uniqueness that shape this memory culture. Nevertheless, we believe these engagements are significant and interesting.

In this context, I would like to reference Ezra Özyürek's book *Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory and Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany* (2023). She offers an empirical and historicized understanding of the dynamics at play. Özyürek demonstrates that in the early 2000s, there were numerous funding opportunities for projects aimed at specific forms of anti-antisemitism education and Holocaust memory education targeted at individuals identified as Muslim or migrant. Her research illustrates how these narratives began to unfold in the early twenty-first century.

What Yasemin Yildiz and I observed over a decade ago—and this connects back to some of the points I mentioned earlier—was that this self-critical memory culture had begun, paradoxically, to produce a self-assured German subject. We described this phenomenon as the "German paradox," which posits that the act of taking responsibility for the Holocaust necessitates the preservation of a an ethnic or even racialized notion of German identity.

Politicians have often articulated that what defines someone as German is precisely the acknowledgment of these historical events and the subsequent rejection of them. At first glance, this sounds commendable and resonates with my discussion on implication. However, it ultimately serves to consolidate a particular kind of identity, which I would characterize as a white, non-Jewish Christian subject. As the historian Dan Diner put it in the late 1990s, "Germans are those who define themselves in terms of belonging by rejection of the Nazi past." And that belonging is often imagined in terms of "common descent from those who did it," as the Social Democratic politician Klaus von Dohnanyi once put it.

Then, in the 2000s, something that we termed the "migrant double bind" started to emerge. This concept describes the increasing insistence that migrants must also engage with Holocaust memory. Prior to this shift, second-generation Turkish Germans and others were often viewed as having no connection to the German past. Suddenly, however, there emerged a demand for them to remember the Holocaust. This demand was framed as a double bind, however: you must remember the Holocaust to be considered German, yet you are not truly German, which renders you incapable of genuinely engaging with that memory. Consequently, individuals with a so-called "migration background" found themselves in an impossible position.

Özyürek, in her book, presents poignant examples of how this dynamic plays out, particularly in programs focused on addressing antisemitism and Holocaust memory aimed at individuals with a Muslim background. Many of these individuals are genuinely committed to confronting antisemitism and engaging thoughtfully with the Holocaust. However, despite their efforts, they repeatedly find themselves positioned as racialized others. This creates an impossible situation: they are told they must engage with these memories, yet their status as non-German subjects undermine their ability to do so authentically. We noticed this phenomenon around 2010, as I mentioned earlier, and we published an article addressing these issues in 2011 in the journal *parallax* ("Memory Citizenship: Migrant Archives of Holocaust Remembrance").

I believe the structure of the paradox remains intact today. The double bind persists, although I think it has evolved somewhat. Today, we are witnessing a shift in emphasis: there is less focus on remembering the Holocaust, while the dimension of antisemitism has become much more prominent. Additionally, there is a growing expectation that one must adopt a specific perspective supporting the State of Israel (what has come to be called "Staatsräson"). Other scholars, including Özyürek, have noted this shift as well. The backdrop continues to be Holocaust memory culture, but the terms that are particularly salient at this moment relate more to antisemitism and Israel. There is now a requirement that individuals must explicitly state that they are not antisemitic and must acknowledge Israel's right to exist. I'm not arguing against the importance of combating antisemitism; rather, I want to highlight how these expectations manifest themselves in a racialized manner. Certain groups are specifically targeted with these demands. This dynamic exemplifies how structural racism is reproduced in discussions surrounding memory, antisemitism, and racism more broadly.

JV: This is indeed a fascinating topic, and I have many more questions about it. However, I also want to give the audience the opportunity to ask their questions or share their thoughts on what we have been discussing.
Question from the audience: Thank you for your presentation. I would like to ask a question regarding your earlier reference to fictional literature. It seems to me that this type of literature has always practiced multidirectionality, even before you coined the term in 2009. For example, I think of Im Krebsgang, the novel by Günter Grass, which breaks a significant taboo in German society by depicting Germans as victims. I'm considering other fictional works as well. To what extent has your own theory been influenced by this literary perspective in general? Thank you.

MR: That's a really interesting question. I think you are absolutely right; often—though I wouldn't say always—fiction and fictional discourse contain elements of multidirectionality. I certainly don't claim that multidirectionality begins with me or with the moment I named it. Rather, I aim to describe something that I see as already present in various forms.

Among the sources I draw from, fictional texts are quite rich for contemplating multidirectionality. I mentioned Sebald, who serves as a notable example. Günter Grass is also an intriguing case. I don't want to make an essentializing argument about literature or fiction, but I think of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and multivocality. There is something about the novel, in particular, that lends itself to a variety of voices and languages, as Bakhtin argues. Thus, fiction may structurally facilitate multidirectionality; it allows for the exploration of different histories. In many ways, what makes fiction compelling is this ability to experiment with various narratives. So yes, I do believe there is a significant connection to be made here. While I find multidirectionality in other contexts, the most rich and complex expressions often appear in fictional works.

Question from the audience: I would like to ask about the reactions of the relatives of perpetrators regarding their involvement in perpetration. Can they feel implicated in these acts, or can they develop empathy with the victims? Thank you.

MR: I think that's a very important question—ethically, politically, and socially. Yes, I do think that relatives of perpetrators can feel implicated in what has happened or feel a sense of responsibility. However, I don't think this always occurs, but there are certainly examples where that sense of implication does take place.

In Germany, for instance, this has happened quite a lot. I believe one of the positive dimensions of German memory culture is that it was built on a sense of responsibility for what one's ancestors did or what society as a whole perpetrated. This feeling of implication and responsibility has motivated a lot of memory work, which I think is really important and valuable.

However, there was one prominent, ironic response in a newspaper to my book *Multidirectional Memory* when it was translated into German. The response claimed that I wanted to "take away" Germans' responsibility for the Holocaust. This completely boggled my mind, as there's nothing further from my agenda than wanting to diminish anyone's responsibility for historical crimes, whether they are my own or those of other Americans or Germans. Rather, my project, including the concept of the implicated subject, aims to help us see that we are implicated in and responsible for *more* histories than we might want to acknowledge. Not being a direct perpetrator does not free us from responsibility.

So, yes, I think the question of "feeling implicated" is an interesting and important one to explore further and I co-edited a special double issue of *parallax* on that theme in 2023. I have no idea whether most people who are descendants of perpetrators feel this way; I suspect that many do not. It may be easier to ignore, forget, or deny one's implication. However, there are many people who embrace this position of the implicated subject, even without using that specific language, and who take responsibility for it. It is essential to learn from such individuals and their memory work. I hope that addresses your question.

JV: Dear Michael, this conversation has been incredibly enlightening, and I want to express my sincere gratitude for sharing your insights with us. Your contributions to the ongoing debate about multidirectional memory and the implicated subject are invaluable. I believe I speak on behalf of the organizers and the audience when I say that we feel truly honored that you took the time to answer our questions. Thank you once again for this enriching experience.