



Relational Perspectives Book Series



Inhabiting Implication in Racial Oppression and in Relational Psychoanalysis

Edited by
Rachel Kabasakalian-McKay and David Mark



‘As our discipline undertakes the collective responsibility imposed upon it by its method—what good are we as analysts if we cannot face ourselves?—we could have no finer accompaniment than this volume. Braiding personal reflection (some searing), theoretical elaboration, clinical work and social activism, the text becomes a place where we meet ourselves beyond the facile comforts of binary thinking. If this book leads more deeply into the knotty racial labyrinths of our historically shadowed present, it is in the belief that there is no way out but through. Psychoanalysis needs such tools for staying with the good trouble it is in.’

Francisco J. González, *personal and supervising analyst; co-chair of Community Psychoanalysis Track, Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California; staff psychiatrist, Instituto Familiar de la Raza*

‘This is a book for our moment. Rachel Kabasakalian-McKay and David Mark and their colleagues have put together a collection of essays that are deeply and sensitively engaged with the myriad crises that define us—especially the crisis of racism, in the context of contemporary relational psychoanalysis. While diverse in their perspectives, the essays are united in taking up both sociopolitical injustices and intimate psychic dynamics: they powerfully combine emotional vulnerability and theoretical savvy. Whether focused on geopolitical conflicts or familial trauma, structural racism or the structures of educational and psychoanalytic institutions, this book helps us understand what it feels like to live in—and think through—complex forms of personal and political responsibility.’

Michael Rothberg, *author of The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*

‘This is a powerful and exceptional collection of essays and articles that the editors, Rachel Kabasakalian-McKay and David Mark, have astutely assembled and one that I highly recommend. In inviting their authors to address and integrate Michael Rothberg’s lens of the “implicated subject and complex implication,” they have assembled what will be an indispensable text for the field, both for training in psychoanalysis and for clinicians before and after their training. These authors, who write from a myriad of subject positions, advance how the social, historical/political, racial, cultural, class/caste, and gender/sexuality aspects necessarily can and must be fully integrated into psychoanalytic theories and praxis. These writers offer compelling examples and experiences that prove that no one is outside of regimes of oppression and privilege, and neither is psychoanalysis nor the training institutes. After reading each chapter, I am left with immense gratitude for the deep and thoughtful work that has been done and inspired to make sure this work continues.’

Jill Salberg, *faculty and supervisor at the NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis*



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Inhabiting Implication in Racial Oppression and in Relational Psychoanalysis

What does it feel like to encounter ourselves and one another as *implicated subjects*, both in our everyday lives and in the context of our work as clinicians, and how does this matter?

With contributions from a diverse group of relational psychoanalytic thinkers, this book reads Michael Rothberg's concept of the *implicated subject*—the notion that we are continuously implicated in injustices even when not perpetrators—as calling us to elaborate on what it feels like to inhabit such subjectivities in relation to others both similarly and differently situated. Implication and anti-Black racism are central to many chapters, with attention given to the unique vulnerability of racial minority immigrants, to Native American genocide, and to the implication of ordinary Israelis in the oppression of Palestinians. The book makes the case that the therapist's ongoing openness to learning of our own implication in enactments is central to a relational sensibility and to a progressive psychoanalysis.

As a contribution to the necessary and long-overdue conversation within the psychoanalytic field about racism, social injustice, and ways to move toward a just society, this book will be essential for all relational psychoanalysts and psychotherapists.

Rachel Kabasakalian-McKay (she/her) is a founding board member and the co-director of the Institute for Relational Psychoanalysis of Philadelphia and is on the faculty of the Stephen Mitchell Relational Study Center in New York. Her work has appeared in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, and *Psychoanalytic Perspectives*.

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Relational Perspectives Book Series

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The Relational Perspectives Book Series (RPBS) publishes books that grow out of or contribute to the relational tradition in contemporary psychoanalysis. The term *relational psychoanalysis* was first used by Greenberg and Mitchell¹ to bridge the traditions of interpersonal relations, as developed within interpersonal psychoanalysis and object relations, as developed within contemporary British theory. But, under the seminal work of the late Stephen A. Mitchell, the term *relational psychoanalysis* grew and began to accrue to itself many other influences and developments. Various tributaries—interpersonal psychoanalysis, object relations theory, self psychology, empirical infancy research, feminism, queer theory, sociocultural studies and elements of contemporary Freudian and Kleinian thought—flow into this tradition, which understands relational configurations between self and others, both real and fantasied, as the primary subject of psychoanalytic investigation.

We refer to the relational tradition, rather than to a relational school, to highlight that we are identifying a trend, a tendency within contemporary psychoanalysis, not a more formally organized or coherent school or system of beliefs. Our use of the term *relational* signifies a dimension of theory and practice that has become salient across the wide spectrum of contemporary psychoanalysis. Now under the editorial supervision of Adrienne Harris and Eyal Rozmarin, the Relational Perspectives Book Series originated in 1990 under the editorial eye of the late Stephen A. Mitchell. Mitchell was the most prolific and influential of the originators of the relational tradition. Committed to dialogue among psychoanalysts, he abhorred the authoritarianism that dictated adherence to a rigid set of beliefs or technical restrictions. He championed open discussion,

comparative and integrative approaches, and promoted new voices across the generations. Mitchell was later joined by the late Lewis Aron, also a visionary and influential writer, teacher and leading thinker in relational psychoanalysis.

Included in the Relational Perspectives Book Series are authors and works that come from within the relational tradition, those that extend and develop that tradition, and works that critique relational approaches or compare and contrast them with alternative points of view. The series includes our most distinguished senior psychoanalysts, along with younger contributors who bring fresh vision. Our aim is to enable a deepening of relational thinking while reaching across disciplinary and social boundaries in order to foster an inclusive and international literature.

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Note

- 1 Greenberg, J., & Mitchell, S. (1983). *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



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Credits List

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Introduction

Rachel Kabasakalian-McKay and David Mark

We write within a historical moment of devastation breathtaking in scope and form but also in which calls to reckon with past and present violence and injustice offer a path forward. Such calls confront us with the necessity for acknowledgment and the urgency for repair, processes infinitely more painstaking and complex than the brute force of destructiveness, pushing us up to the limits of what we may already understand and know how to do. How any of us respond to these challenges is shaped by the communities and shared points of reference through which we make meaning. As relational psychoanalysts, who have found community and shared values within this field, we searched for ways to expand our thinking that would both perturb and resonate with these values. Michael Rothberg's theorizing of "the implicated subject" struck us, as soon as we first read it, as offering a promising path forward. Rothberg's position as a theorist of the social realm spoke to the heart of what was unfolding in the global moment, while his focus on the "subject" suggested to us ways that relational psychoanalytic writers might elaborate on what this looks and feels like from the inside.

Along with some of our local Philadelphia colleagues, we began reading *The Implicated Subject* in late 2019, in tandem with the first installment of Nikole Hannah-Jones's culture-shifting *1619 Project*, thus linking these sources in our minds from the start. Where the latter shook and unsettled us, bringing us to reflect more searchingly on the foundational racism that shaped the United States and our own involvement in its continued corrosive forms, the former offered a conceptual tool that helped us name the nature of our involvement in the historical and ongoing destruction, especially of Black lives. Our hope for this volume was to bring together

colleagues who would write from and to the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of what it means to be implicated subjects, to pull back the dissociative curtain that has kept us from seeing and grappling with what this means in the circumstances both intimate and global.

As relational psychoanalysts and global citizens, we are motivated to try to understand the psychic experience more fully and to use such understanding not only for individual growth but for collective safety, dignity, and care. Reading Rothberg's work, we were struck by his insights regarding how people who do not see themselves/ourselves as perpetrators may nonetheless be in the position of beneficiary, perpetrator, or otherwise *implicated* in ongoing oppression, violence, and inequity. While his explicit intent is to interrogate and elaborate on the social positions beyond those of victim and perpetrator, he is equally clear that he is not negating the salience of either of those categories. One of the most compelling examples of implication in our contemporary context involves the ongoing trauma of racism: to be a white person living in the United States is to be implicated in the "foundational crimes of genocide and slavery" (p. 17–18). The past lives on into the present, as insidious forms of structural racism have continued to proliferate in the centuries beyond the original monstrosities of legal slavery, so that even recent immigrants, especially as they are or are read as white, become implicated as they participate, with varying degrees of consciousness, in the perpetuation of ongoing racial injustice.

In Rothberg's conception, the implicated subject is not a fixed identity but a position occupied "in particular, dynamic, and at times clashing structures and histories" (p. 8). Thus, shifting and overlapping modes of implication frame the multiplicity of our entanglements in past and present injustices. Rothberg uses the term "complex implication" to denote the coexistence of different positions in relation to past and current violence and oppression; one may be in an implicated subject position with respect to one historical trauma while being a victim, or the descendant of a victim, in relation to another trauma. Too often, awareness of being a victim or descendant of a victim in one historical trauma works to close off a person (or group) from accepting their (our) position as implicated subjects in other instances of injustice and violence. This defensive "dissociation," as we are thinking of it, results in political rigidity—in much the way dissociation of self-states creates a thinned-out or brittle mode of experience. As a kind of social therapy, Rothberg's theory enables the reader to bear conflict and hold two contrasting positions (the victim or

the descendant of a victim in one context, implicated subject in another) simultaneously. Ultimately, he is advocating for self-conscious awareness of and grappling with one's position as implicated subject, opening into "transfiguring implication," and joining with others in collective action for justice (p. 200).

Rothberg's theory orients toward the social realm as a site of both oppression and transformation, with the implicated subject situated within these larger forces. We believe that a relational psychoanalytic perspective can complement this emphasis by exploring and elaborating the dynamics of implicated subjectivity within and between specific persons. How do we find our way into recognizing our own implication and then grappling with what this entails, holding awareness both of complexities of position and vulnerabilities specific to each of us? We see relational theorizing and clinical work as having the potential to deepen our capacities to work our way into and through these questions while helping to make meaningful the inevitable intersubjective collisions as differently and similarly situated subjects engage one another.

At its best, relational work helps us to hold multiple registers at once, such as knowing that while we are shaped as social beings, subjects, and agents by historical and current social forces, we are simultaneously forged within the intimate forces of our families and other "ensembles" (González, 2020) that hold us, the intense pulls for loyalty and fears of betraying those we love, and traumas and "errands" (Apprey, 2014) inherited and largely unspoken. And in yet another (always overlapping and intertwining) register, we are individual subjects marked with traumas, longings, and creative aspirations that are unique to us. The implicated subject is thus infinitely complex; relational psychoanalysis may be particularly useful in facilitating the elaboration and holding of such complexity without shrinking from the challenges of implication. Our hope with this project has been to bring multiple voices to engage with the implication from differing vantage points within our field. In doing so, we hope to advance efforts to meet the implication head-on, elaborate on subjective experiences of coming to grips with this position in specific contexts or relational moments, and navigate through choppy waters toward ethical and responsive actions.

As relational analysts, we work daily to expand, deepen, and elaborate subjectivity and, together with others, create the conditions for intersubjective engagement. Part of what we hope to encourage here is the integration

of Rothberg's idea of implication into how we think about what shapes individual subjective experiences and what forces animate various inter-subjective encounters; how do we bring "implication" into our elaboration of this already dense weave? How do we, individually and collectively, grapple with and find ourselves within this subject position—if in fluid, shifting, and complex ways?

As we view the ways the analyst actively engages with their/our own struggles as central to how we can hear and participate with others in mutually influencing relationships, we begin with portions of our own stories, our differing pathways into inhabiting the identities of implicated subjects. We then follow that with an example of implication unfolding in real time as we worked on this book with our colleagues.

Rachel

The eldest of three daughters, I sat to my mother's left at the kitchen table. My mom wanted me to sit up straight, and so she would reach over and nudge me in the back to remind me to do so. One summer evening, when I was about eight years old, she and my father went into the city to meet friends for a concert at Lincoln Center. Although my father loved classical music and kept it on the radio in our home all the time, they didn't go to such things often. The concert was part of a series called *Promenade*; there was a buffet dinner beforehand, which you ate outside, in the plaza—the Metropolitan Opera House in view and excitement all around you. As my mother told me about it the next day, I asked if I could ever go. She smiled—yes, if I could sit up straight between now and next summer's concert. Whatever she did, my mother was dogged about it, and for the ensuing months, dinnertime was punctuated by the prods from her index finger near my mid-spine and her reminder "*Promenade!*" Instantly, I'd correct my posture. I was rewarded the following summer. Lincoln Center seemed, for a child who had moved from Brooklyn—which felt full of life and potential for a surprise on every block, to a suburb that was greener but lonelier—a magical place.

In my first job after college, I was working as an organizer at the American Friends Service Committee in Cambridge. Reagan's early budgets had been passed, and with these had begun the systematic, catastrophic dismantling of the programs the War on Poverty had brought less than two decades earlier: slashing funds for vitally needed social services—housing,

food stamps, Medicaid, Aid to Families with Dependent Children. My job was to work with community advocacy groups protesting against these cuts and elaborating on the implications for real people who relied on these programs. My closest colleague, G., worked with communities of color in Boston, collaborating with neighborhood organizations to make use of tools like Community Development Block Grants to bring financial resources to support initiatives in these communities. One day as we sat talking, G., a Black man, told me he was from Manhattan. Where in the city? I asked. He had grown up, he told me in his quiet voice, in an apartment in the West 60s—in one of the buildings that were torn down to make room for Lincoln Center.

I didn't have a name for what I felt at that moment, but I can now name it as an implication. I had not torn down the buildings, but the place I loved—where aspects of culture with which I was deeply identified were celebrated—was suddenly shaded. They had demolished homes where families had lived to build Lincoln Center. Many of these families were Black.

How do we grapple with implication when the fabric of the memories and longings that make us who we are, are associated with injury to others, not only accidental but viewed as acceptable or deliberately made invisible?

Reading Rothberg for the first time, I felt an immediate resonance, as his elaboration of the concept of implication seemed to allow for facing one's own participation in the perpetuation of harm without losing hold of complexity. This felt meaningful, even necessary to me in holding my responsibility in the present alongside the strands of my own transgenerational traumas. Rothberg makes clear that people can be victims or descendants of victims in some contexts and *are implicated in ongoing injustices* that oppress, torture, and condemn others. One particularly enormous, consequential, and urgent example of this is that those of us descended from victims of violence and persecution both bear the psychic scars of these histories and—especially to the extent that we carry whiteness—are called to recognize how we participate in ongoing manifestations of racism, especially anti-Black racism, that continues to savage people of color, to mark their lives as mattering less.

González (2020) writes of the “ensembles” we carry within us—the groups to which we feel intense if sometimes unconscious fealty. In the wake of the deaths of both of my parents, I am aware of the power of these

ties in a new, deeper, and sometimes unsettling way—I feel myself as the carrier of both their intergenerationally transmitted traumas and their personal efforts and injuries. This creates in me a sharper awareness of how I feel. I do not only speak for myself but for those who brought me here, to the social location from which I write.

My father was born in 1923 to Armenian parents who had just emigrated to the US from Anatolia in what is now Eastern Turkey, via Beirut. They were both survivors of the genocide in what had been their ancestral homeland. Eight years earlier, my grandmother was a nine-year-old child who was hidden by a Turkish family, a fact that spared her from the massacre that left her mother and younger siblings slaughtered in their nearby home. At 13, she was married to my grandfather, then in his late 20s. All the members of his family had been murdered or, in the case of his sister, “carried off.” In New York, the family lived in tenement apartments in the east 20s. My father attended Stuyvesant High School and City College, where he learned to love classical music and European literature. In going through his writings since his death, I’m struck by his lifelong efforts to reconcile belonging to a family and group with individual subjectivity, especially regarding creativity, and a unique personal trajectory. Reading González’s (2020) description of this kind of psychic struggle resonated with me deeply.

My mother was from the Bronx, an aspect of her identity she held with pride. In her work as a middle school math teacher, she spent much of her career in the South Bronx. She believed in the liberating power of structural understanding of math concepts, seeing equality of access to these foundational understandings as an essential part of equity in education. She was a Jew who married a Christian in 1954, when this was uncommon. The transgenerational historical traumas from her family would emerge in moments and then disappear again into the background. On a trip to Paris she and I made for my 40th birthday, she walked somberly into the old Jewish neighborhood in the Marais: here, she said, was where her Romanian maternal grandmother’s sisters had all been taken by the Nazis during the occupation. On the other side of her family, her father emigrated as a child with his brother from Belarus after their father was killed in a pogrom. A few years into their time in the US, this brother was found hung in a jail in Virginia, an obviously Jewish-looking man arrested for vagrancy where he’d gone looking for work. In later life, my mother

became increasingly distraught by the Israeli oppression of Palestinians so that when she died with no funeral plans in place, I found myself on the phone late at night, making sure the rabbi who agreed to perform the service understood and respected how central this feeling of implication was to how she was a Jew.

These are the strands that make up my own whiteness—a whiteness that is both Jewish and West Asian Armenian, that involves both inherited traumas and feelings of otherness, and that entails enormous privilege. This privilege has included a sense of entitlement to endless higher education and access to the tools to achieve in this arena, to choose a non-traditional professional path because it feels most authentic, to insist that my voice be heard. And it includes feeling welcomed in the spaces where classical music is played—often beautiful spaces and impressive structures that convey that if you belong here, what moves you matters.

Implication opens a space for the complexity of history and position; Rothberg cites the influence of both Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and the Combahee River Collective Statement (Smith et al., 1977), originators of the idea of intersectionality, on his work. In his formulation, implication describes a site within which “the dynamic interplay between subjectivity, structural inequality, and historical violence” takes place, reinscribing hierarchies of power and privilege in multiple and complex ways. One distinction he makes is between genealogical and structural implication with regard to the American history of slavery. Direct descendants of slaveholders bear the former; others of us live as beneficiaries of not only past but ongoing structural racism. Glaude (2020) writes of the perniciousness of what he calls “the value gap”; the unspoken but powerfully destructive belief that “in America white lives have always mattered more than the lives of others” (2020, p. 7). Exploring the writing of James Baldwin, Glaude comes to name as “the lie”: that “broad and powerful architecture of false assumptions” (2020, p. 7) that maintains this value gap; that continually, often wordlessly, grinds the engine of this insidious and corrosive force.

That the “powerful architecture” of Lincoln Center and all it contained was an embodiment of liveliness, hope, and possibility for me is inextricable from a system in which Black families were displaced to construct it—because their lives and longings, their community, attachment to home, and sense of place, all presumably mattered less. And in this, as in other similar situations too numerous to name, I am implicated.

David

I write this as a 66-year-old white, cisgender, heterosexual man. I grew up with enormous educational privilege, told that I could be anything I wanted and I didn't need to hurry to get there. In short, I'm implicated, implicated in the racial hierarchy that accorded great advantage, especially to men of my race and age. As I read Rachel's section (immediately before this section), I marveled at the difference in our experience of identification with, of love and connection to, the larger groups (groups larger than dyads and the conventional triad of child and two-parent figures) that make us up. This difference in our experience of group connection is highlighted by many surface similarities, only some of which will shortly be apparent. Rothberg's "complex implication" helped Rachel hold a painful awareness of participating in manifestations of racism alongside her own transgenerational traumas—traumas with which, out of love and loyalty to her family and ancestors, she is intensely identified with. In contrast, it was Rothberg's implication and his idea of the "implicated subject" as a third category, between victims and perpetrators, that spoke most directly to me with respect to my being a white person, with all the benefits that entails, in a pervasively anti-Black society.

With the important exception of friend groups, I have always felt outside, or on the borders of, most every grouping I can imagine. As best I can tell, there are many reasons for this. My father's mother died in childbirth. After this, his father returned to Romania, abandoning my father at birth on the steps of a Jewish orphanage, where he lived until he was eight. An only child, my father never felt securely attached to, or adequate for, his adoptive parents. While they are not at all malevolent, he felt too ashamed and too deprived of "family feeling" to feel like having a legitimate parent in one. My mother, also an only child, grew up Italian Catholic. Her mother and one aunt were the only children of seven not to spend significant time growing up in an orphanage after their father died young in an industrial accident, and their mother, who did not speak English, was unable to feed her many children. With two crucial exceptions, we did not see a great deal of my mother's large extended family, despite the fact that they continued to live in the Bronx, just miles from the village in which I grew up. At least in part, this was due to the fact that my mother converted to Judaism. My mother's parents lived with us, and her closest cousin lived with her husband and children a block from us. Both my