
Remembering Complicity and Resistance: A Review of Mihaela Mihai's *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance* (2022)

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Abstract: This article offers a review of Mihaela Mihai's book *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance* (2022). In it, Mihai courageously brings together insights from critical theory, political and legal science, philosophy, literary studies, and feminist theory to argue for the need of rearticulating how we remember complicity and resistance in the aftermath of political violence. Mihai develops her argument in three steps. First, she provides an account of how complicity and resistance are misremembered after systemic violence. Second, she tracks the political, epistemic and ethical consequences that this faulty work of memory-making holds for the present and future. And third, she proposes a strategy for challenging reductive narratives of the past and fostering more nuanced models of remembrance. The review analyses each of these steps with the aim of sketching out Mihai's contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on complicity and implication in violence.

Sofía FORCHIERI

Remembering Complicity and Resistance: A Review of Mihaela Mihai's *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance* (2022)

In her new book, Mihaela Mihai undertakes an ambitious, three-stepped "critical-hermeneutical exercise" (12). First, she provides an account of how complicity and resistance are misremembered in the aftermaths of systemic violence. Second, she tracks the political, epistemic and ethical consequences that this faulty work of memory-making holds for the present and future. And third, she proposes a strategy for challenging reductive narratives of the past and fostering more nuanced models of remembrance. As she masterfully works her way through these tasks, Mihai draws on an interdisciplinary body of work on complicity and implication that has continuously grown in the last two decades,¹ but also expands it by yoking together complicity with its (apparent) conceptual opposite, resistance. The central premise of *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care* is that revising the public memory of these two forms of historical agency can offer a way of disrupting the subterranean continuities between past and present, and enabling "more responsible futures" (241).

The book is divided into five chapters. The first two chapters of the book, taken together, trace the trajectory of Mihai's argument, comprised of a diagnostic effort followed by an antidotal one. Mihai, indeed, begins by identifying what she describes as a double erasure in the forward-looking and reconciliatory discourses that often emerge in the wake of systemic violence. On the one hand, she argues, these discourses, focused as they are on punishing perpetrators, recognizing the victims, and canonizing the nation's heroes, obscure the troubling fact of widespread practices of complicity with violence. By refusing to come to terms with these practices, redemptive narratives of the aftermath leave untouched the social, cultural and ideological scaffoldings of violence, thus dooming any 'never again' to failure and absolving the collective of all responsibility. On the other hand, these narratives erase the ambivalences, compromises and impurities that shape all forms of resistance. This obliteration, explains Mihai, not only occludes the less laudable aspects of resistance, but also enshrines the nation's past resisters as noble, virtuous and exceptional subjects, thereby constructing an unattainable and politically paralyzing example for ordinary citizens in the present.

After delineating the contours of the double erasure and its detrimental consequences for "the community's hermeneutical space," Mihai provides a provocative conceptualization of the forces that originate it and keep it in place (23). At the root of the disavowal of "widespread complicity and impure resistance" from public memory, her argument goes, lies a more fundamental denial of our basic and inescapable state of entanglement with others: one that lies at the core of the Western liberal legalist understanding of responsibility (27). Adding her voice to recent critiques of the methodological individualism that informs this paradigm, which solely derives responsibility from a presupposed autonomous subject who acts intentionally and deliberately, Mihai then proceeds to chart an alternative articulation of complicity and resistance based on a categorical acknowledgement of the relationality of human agency.² With the self-reflexivity that characterizes the book as a whole, however, she is quick to add that her attempt (and any attempt) to remember complicity and resistance differently is faced with enormous challenges, given communities' strong investment in the official memories of the past.

This sharp yet somewhat grim diagnosis concerning the difficulties of undoing the double erasure is immediately followed – and counter-balanced – by a remedial proposal. Works of art, posits Mihai, "can become valuable instruments" for unsettling hegemonic historical scripts (49). Specifically, by providing more nuanced and discomfiting accounts of complicity and resistance, they can destabilize sedimented certainties about the past and generate processes of epistemic friction, thus potentially short-circuiting "the automatism of remembrance" (49). In enlisting the arts in the broader project of enabling alternative ways of remembering ambivalent, indirect and often hidden forms of historical agency, Mihai joins a number of studies that similarly approach the arts as powerful resources for understanding and responding to complicity.³ While building on this body of work, she innovatively contributes to it by framing the labour of undoing mnemonic erasures carried out by certain writers and artists as a form of

¹ See for instance Kutz, *Complicity*; Sanders, *Complicities*; Afxentiou et al, *Exploring Complicity*; Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable*; Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*.

² See Kutz; Celermajer, *The Sins of the Nation and the Ritual of Apologies*; Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*; Kaufman-Osborn, "We Are All Torturers Now."

³ See Sanyal; Rothberg; Schiff, *Burdens of Political Responsibility*; Kelly and Norman, "Literature and Complicity"; Wächter and Wirth, *Complicity and the Politics of Representation*.

care for the community's political memory, but also for the manner in which that memory shapes the present.

Chapters three, four and five of the book simultaneously test and enrich the theoretical framework developed in the first two chapters by offering a series of analyses of three cases marked by the double erasure: France, Romania and South Africa. The three analytical chapters are constructed symmetrically. Each begins by mapping the dynamic spectrum of complex involvement in each of the violent contexts at stake: Vichy France, the Communist dictatorship in Romania, and the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Each continues by describing how the double erasure was differentially implemented in the aftermath of violence. Lastly, each analytical chapter turns to a selection of films and literary works with the aim of demonstrating how they work against the double erasure by shining the spotlight on ambiguous historical actors; by critically questioning the motives behind the double erasure and exposing some of its aftereffects; or by investigating complicitous or outright violent acts and practices within spaces of resistance.

Mihai's interpretations of her artistic corpus add important nuances to her argument regarding the potentially political effects of artistic works. Perhaps most importantly, they eloquently illustrate the necessity of historically attuned approaches for teasing out the varying and unpredictable meanings artworks might acquire in specific mnemonic contexts, but also for detecting the public narratives they address and the strategies they mobilize to subvert them. There is but one methodological decision which is not entirely vindicated in the analyses: namely, the choice to prioritize the level of the story or content instead of becoming entangled in "debates about form" (Mihai 12). Through this choice, Mihai seeks to distance herself from "elitist celebrations of the avant-garde and formal innovation" (8). The consistent focus on the twists and turns of plot and the intricacies of character construction that characterizes Mihai's readings, however, could have been enriched through a more sustained engagement with the formal elements of her materials, especially given the fact that these elements can be, in fact, powerful agents of defamiliarization, disruption or disorganization when they "collide" against political orders, structures or narratives (Levine 16). A closer attention to aesthetic form, in other words, would have only strengthened Mihai's elaboration of how certain works of art can "*seductively sabotage* our attachments to dominant – comfortable and reductive – narratives about the past" (Mihai 9, emphasis in original).

The concluding chapter of the book operates on a slightly different level than the preceding chapters. It returns to one of the crucial insights gleaned in Chapter 1 – namely, that academic and legal discourses, too, are implicated in the double erasure – and takes this idea as a starting point for a brief yet highly compelling reflection about the need for researchers working on systemic violence to assume responsibility for how their work informs the way in which communities remember that violence. With *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care*, then, Mihai not only offers a rich resource for scholars working on questions of complicity and implication across different fields and disciplines – from history, to sociology, to political theory and philosophy, to memory studies, and to comparative literature among others. She also lays the foundation for new and deeper critical inquiries into the ethical demands and political stakes of studying complex involvement in violence.

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