Cristina Delgado-García
Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre

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Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity

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For Luke

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Contents

Preface: Character Remains

This book intends to bring specificity and political value to the discourses on character prevailing in Anglophone theatre studies, with particular focus on the experimental script-led work that has emerged in Britain since the late 1990s. Writing about Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*, and Sarah Kane's *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, scholars have frequently noted that there are no characters in these plays (e. g. Sierz 2001b: 287; Zimmermann 2002: 106; Busby and Farrier 155; Barnett 2008: 23). While these claims have been reinforced outside of academia by theatre critics writing about these works and others with similar aesthetics (e. g. Billington; Clapp; Hickling; Wilmot), they have also gained momentum and found theoretical grounding in a number of monographs published around the same time as Crimp's and Kane's plays premiered. Elinor Fuchs's *The Death of Character* explicitly traces the alleged disappearance of character from modernist to postmodern theatre, while Gerda Poschmann's still untranslated *Der nicht mehr dramatische Theatertext* [*The No Longer Dramatic Playtext*] and Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* illuminate a heterogeneous style of theatre writing and performance that resists abiding to dramatic conventions – among these, character. "In the postdramatic theatre", David Barnett summarises, "there are no characters but what Gerda Poschmann has called *Textträger* (text bearers) who do not speak dialogues but *Sprechtext* (text to be delivered)" (2006: 33).

These contributions have offered an invaluable insight into the aesthetic experimentations epitomised in Britain by Crimp's and Kane's work. However, I find their prompt dismissal of character questionable on at least three counts, which I explore in the introduction to this book. These are the inconsistent usage of the term 'character', the problematic methodologies deployed in attesting its presence or absence and, finally, the narrowly circumscribed understanding of subjectivity.

Taking all these issues into account, this monograph sets out to offer a politically-inflected renegotiation of the notions of character and subjectivity as they are currently used in Anglophone theatre studies. To this aim, the book assesses the debate on the crisis and death of character (Chapter One), offers an alternative body of theories of subjectivity by which to help theatre theory expand its understanding of character (Chapter Two), and then examines a sample of British works from the 1990s and 2000s (Chapters Three and Four). The plays composing this sample share the same aesthetics in their scripts: speech is either unattributed or assigned to opaque speakers, appears to be (dis)embodied or receiving several incarnations at once, and does not foster a cogent or stable

sense of fictional individuality. In particular, I examine Sarah Kane's *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, Ed Thomas's *Stone City Blue* and Tim Crouch's *ENGLAND*. The resemblance between these plays' scripts offers a starting point to debunk a number of existing overgeneralisations regarding character in theatre, and these plays in particular. While it is a widespread position that these works challenge notions of individuality, my objective is to think beyond the disruption occasioned by such a challenge. How do these plays widen our understanding of what constitutes theatrical character, as well as where it is located? And what notions of subjectivity are effectively produced as a result?

My contention is that these works evoke and arouse understandings of the subject that are unintelligible under the liberal-humanist norm that appears to dominate the received concept of both subject and theatrical character. Or to put it differently, through their articulation of character these plays reconfigure what we know about the subject and how it can be apprehended. They formulate epistemologies of the subject that are not animated by identity and individualism, but by queer indeterminacy, intersubjective constitution, and universalising affect, or by practices that shape the present time politically. As such, they need to be situated within understandings of subjectivity beyond liberal humanism. For this reason, I place *Crave*, *4.48 Psychosis*, *Stone City Blue* and *ENGLAND* as discussants with the theories on subjectivity proposed by Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. The ultimate aim is to offer a less prescriptive definition of character – namely, that character can be any figuration of subjectivity in theatre, regardless of how it looks on the page, of how it is materialised (or not) on the stage, and irrespective also of the idea of subjectivity it figures. The central thesis of this book is that, so long as a notion of subjectivity is evoked, presented or induced in a text or performance, character remains.

Introduction

> The theatrical experiments carried out by these directors and many other practitioners during the twentieth century have shown us that theatre is not dependent upon its location in a designated building or institution and that it is possible to do away with plot, character, costumes, set, sound, and script.
> — Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (2)

> The character is not dead; it has merely become polymorphous and difficult to pin down.
> — Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre* (52)

> '[C]haracter' as a term of dramatic art can never be independent of contemporary constructions of subjectivity.
> — Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (8)

Experimentation with character has been a prominent feature of a strand of British playwriting since the 1990 s. Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* and Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* have become paradigmatic examples of such work, but other British plays that warp or do away with the *dramatis personae* include Gary Owen's *Ghost City*, debbie tucker green's *Stoning Mary*, Mark Ravenhill's *Pool (No Water)*, Simon Stephen's *Pornography* and Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*. Obscuring, fragmenting or refusing to demarcate their speakers, these plays disfigure the familiar contours of dramatic character.

Scholars and critics have tentatively or resolutely described these texts and/or their performances as lacking characters. This is a problematic claim for historical, methodological and ethico-political reasons, as I aim to elucidate now with specific reference to the reception of *Attempts on Her Life* and *4.48 Psychosis*. The present study emerges precisely from the identification of the limits and possibilities associated with the understanding of 'character' marshaled in these debates. My contention is that 'character' warrants rethinking, given that as a category of analysis it has come to determine what forms of being we make matter.

Inconsistent usage

Claims about the disappearance of character are often grounded on a popular yet rather rigid understanding of the term, overlooking what character has been and restricting what it can be. These accounts admittedly respond to a

strong tendency in theatre practices and discourses in the West to equate character with the illusionist representation of a person generated by an actor. Patrice Pavis notes this predisposition in his *Dictionary of the Theatre*, as he claims that, throughout the centuries, "the character is identified more and more with the actor and becomes a psychological and moral entity similar to other human beings, entrusted with producing an effect of identification on the spectator" (1998: 47).

Terminologically speaking, however, the term 'character' only began to be understood as meaning "an individual created in a fictitious work" (51) in English in the eighteenth century, as Martin Harrison explains. Prior to this, 'character' referred to "an instrument for marking and engraving" (51). Its use was extended in the seventeenth century to denote physical appearance and, later on, "the sum of the qualities which constitute an individual" (51). Regardless of this relatively recent usage, we have retrospectively branded as characters the human figures that populate the Western theatre canon: the list of *personae* appearing before a script. In practice, what we commonly label 'a character' does not always match with its received definition as *one fictional person* impersonated by *one actor*.

In other words, our contemporary use of the term already includes instances of theatre practice that do not correspond with the ideals of fictional individuality and illusionist performance. For example, we refer to characters in Greek texts but, as David Wiles reminds us, "[t]he Greek word for 'character', *êthos*, implies a moral attitude rather than a set of idiosyncrasies" (97); that is, it is a moral stance rather than a portrait of an individual. The Greek actor was understood as the "executor [of character] rather than its embodiment" (Pavis 1998: 47), and the masks worn to signify a change of speaker or actant were neutral (Wiles 97). This discrepancy between the idea(l) of character and the historically and aesthetically diverse circumstances in which we continue to apply this label is particularly apparent in debates on modern and contemporary theatre. Some continue to speak of characters in Maeterlinck's and Strindberg's symbolist drama despite the fact that their ethereal nature disrupts realism (e. g. Dorra 143; Lysell 68 – 70). Scholars have similarly referred to the "non-psychological characters" (Bermel 172) of Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias* (1917) regardless of their surreal and playful trajectories in the play. It is also widely acknowledged that the materialist deconstruction of reality offered by epic dramaturgies results in a fragmented character that the actor is not supposed to impersonate fully, yet Brecht's Mother Courage is often referred to as a character (e. g. Leach 139 – 140).

This inconsistent usage of the term invites us to test the elasticity of the notion of character. For example, Beckett's drama might present improbable existences in empty spaces, along with damaged bodies or body fragments, and

speech physically and temporally dislocated from speakers. However, a *sense* of an existing character arguably persists in the mimes of *Act Without Words I* (1956) and *Act Without Words II* (1959), in the non-gendered existential birth cry in *Breath* (1970), in the stream of words spoken by the mouth in *Not I* (1973), and in the female bundle in *Rockaby* (1982). Though we might not be able to impart identities to the voices or figures on the page and the stage, a sometimes-abstract, sometimes-harrowing characterisation of human existence is nonetheless conveyed through these works. It might also be argued that character remains in the staging of radically meta-theatrical works with no plot, such as Peter Handke's 1966 play *Offending the Audience*. Although the speakers in this play do not impersonate four fictional individuals, they are not performing themselves either. Handke's instructions specify that the actors' training should include listening to "the litanies in the Catholic churches", "football teams being cheered on and booed" and "monkeys aping people and llamas spitting in the zoo" (3). Even if the actors display a non-committal and casual appearance on the stage (5), as commanded by the playtext, their real identity is not what is being performed or perceived – rather, it is a vague amalgamation of many other performances of public address, with all the exciting, engaging but also threatening power that public performers command over their addressees. Arguably, we can speak of characters too in Quarantine's devised piece *Entitled* (2011), even though there is no acting. When Greg Akehurst, Lisa Mattocks and Chris Whitwood set up the stage and address the audience as themselves, as the company's technicians, the authenticity of their words is difficult to ascertain. Yet, even if they are *being themselves*, the modes of feeling and thinking that a theatre piece entices are different from those that we deploy outside our engagement with art: we do not see the performers' persons exactly as we see our fellow spectators, and we also regard the performers differently depending on whether they are onstage or not. As Stephen Bottoms contends, "[p]laced within the frame of art, the 'real' is always already representational, and the 'self' always already a characterization" (2009: 74).

To be sure, some of the works mentioned above have been summoned to exemplify the inexistence, crisis or death of character by German- and English-language scholarship (Fuchs 1996; Lehmann 2006). However, as the first chapter demonstrates, in France and Spain such performances are often taken to illustrate the variability and health of character as an intrinsically elastic category (Abirached; Ryngaert and Sermon; Hormigón). The competing uses of the term 'character' suggest that this is not as self-explanatory a category of analysis as might initially be thought, and that it can be understood in less prescriptive ways than those applied in the reception of works that experiment with speech attribution. One of the points of departure for the present project has been, thus,

the desire to bring a historically-grounded openness and European flavour to the term 'character' in British theatre studies. Acknowledging that this category of analysis is already more heterogeneous and unstable than the ideal definition is a freeing premise. This allows us to operate with a more nuanced definition of character, sensitive to its potential variations on the page and on the stage – both with regards to *what* is being characterised and *how*. I will return to this later when I outline the definition of character I propose in this book, but suffice it to say for now that in resisting claims about 'the death of character' I intend to offer a politically and ethically charged opportunity to exercise non-exclusionary thinking, both about aesthetics and ontology. This is an opportunity to widen the frames by which we understand subjectivity to be constructed, sensuously apprehended, conceptualised and valorised.

Problematic methodologies

My desire to renegotiate the term 'character' also stems from the perception that there is little evidence to support the claim that plays such as *Attempts on Her Life* or *4.48 Psychosis* lack characters. Very often, the charge that these plays have 'no characters' is laid in passing in scholarly contributions with other agendas – broad brush-strokes summarising the textual and performative features that render character absent. Writing about the portrayal of women in *Attempts on Her Life* under the section heading "Speakers not characters", Heiner Zimmermann offers a succinct summary of the most frequently-cited reasons for the disappearance of character in Crimp's and Kane's work:

> The reader of Crimp's text no longer encounters the habitual image of passages of dialogue headed by the names of their protagonists, but "expanses of speech" (Elfriede Jelinek, "Sprachflächen"), which make no distinction between narration, dialogue, description, expository text and stage direction. The postdramatic play is performed by a group of anonymous speakers who do not impersonate characters. (2003: 74)

With regards to the formal aspects of the script noted by Zimmermann, the lack of *dramatis personae* in *Attempts on Her Life* and *4.48 Psychosis*, and its opacity in *Crave*, is one of the recurrent pieces of evidence offered to dismiss character. This is a problematic starting point, as it implies that the existence or inexistence of character in the script hinges exclusively on the conventions used to notate it on the page. This position suggests a post-Enlightenment epistemological confidence in the readability of the world – in this case, of character – and in the correlation between existence, visibility, representation and knowledge to discern whether there is character in a play or not. In these accounts, the search for

the recognisable boundaries of conventional character takes place on the page, and it is only satisfied when the text provides a personal name as a focal point of identity, with individuating physical and psychological descriptors as its contours. However, the argument about the absence of character fails to explain who, then, is speaking in the script, and what becomes of the performers voicing, embodying and producing texts with 'no characters'. In other words, who is it that appears on the page and the stage in the wake of character? And who disappears: who remains invisible, inaudible, unrepresented – and why?

Certainly, as Judith Butler suggests, there is "something like an *embodiment effect* that follows from certain kinds of writing practices, and which leads audiences to conclude that they are somehow in the presence of a body in the text" [emphasis in original] (qtd. in B. Davies 16). However, the result of these writing practices is that they become dangerously normative and regulatory. Butler notes how "one can actually qualify as an appropriate [...] subject or as a recognizable icon of embodiment if and only if you learn to write in such a way that produces that effect" (qtd. in B. Davies 17). These contentions refer to writing practices in general, and respond to the criticisms raised against the elusiveness of the body in her writing. However, Butler's argument seems particularly pertinent to the realm of playwriting, as being able to identify bodies or subjects in a text is crucial if such a document is geared towards a performance event that often places speaking or moving bodies on a stage. In this respect, the use of clearly-defined *dramatis personae* is perhaps the conventional starting point of such an 'embodiment effect' in a text for theatre: it offers a list of *prêt-à-porter* characters. This initial effect can be reinforced throughout the script, using writing techniques that generate a sense of personal distinctiveness, self-expression and social interaction. It is thus that they conventionally appear as recognisable, fully-fleshed and – although Butler is not referring here to the psyche – psychologically-rounded characters.

In a similar vein to Butler, I argue that, while these conventions have crystallised as the only way to infuse a script with characters, employing alternative writing practices need not mean that character is gone. It is simply that the forms of inscribing it on the page may differ from more conventional scriptwriting practices, and/or that the bodies or subject positions on the page might vary from the normative bodies and subjects we have learnt to recognise as such. My contention is that this is the case in the playtexts of Crimp and Kane, and in the works examined in this book, and that the argument against character in such plays is normative and obfuscating. To put it differently, claiming that a text has no characters focuses attention on what the script lacks or destroys (i. e. stable and illusionist representations of individualities), yet fails to account for and examine those forms of subjectivity that are produced instead (e. g. queerly

hybrid, relational or practice-based subjects that problematise the notion of identity and its politics).

One of the aims of the present project is therefore to identify and interrogate alternative modes of textual characterisation in specific case studies, as well as the bodies, psyches, exchanges, forms of agency and political gestures that are outlined in each text. In doing so, I aim to bring a higher degree of specificity to the use of the term 'character' regarding theatre texts in general, and scripts that experiment with speech attribution in particular. Such specificity is much needed, especially given that differences between works have often been eclipsed or flattened out by their shared participation in postdramatic aesthetics.[1] At any rate, differences do exist among texts that are *a priori* similar on the page. For example, the characters formulated in Stephens's play *Pornography* (2008) do not differ vastly from a conventional playtext: they are recognisable in terms of gender, interpersonal relations, social status, race, profession and place of residence. Even if the script has no *dramatis personae*, these features can be inferred from the lines. The play, presenting seven different stories set in London around the terrorist attacks of 2005, does not transgress the traditional idea of character as an individual. However, through the erasure of individual character names on the script, *Pornography* simultaneously formulates a collective character – the citizens of the British capital city, defined by their heterogeneity and anonymity, but also by an assumed commonality of experience and ethos. The reader of *Pornography* navigates the text like the rescue services who confronted the victims of the London bombings: identifying bodies and subjects, discerning individuality out of an unnamed collective. It would be impossible to put forward an equivalent inventory of characters for the text of *4.48 Psychosis*, despite this also being composed of free-floating lines; Kane's despairing script can hardly be subsumed under any given identity or identities. Taking this on board, this monograph not only acknowledges and celebrates the possibility of writing characters otherwise, but it also recognises that non-conventional writing might not necessarily invoke a radically transgressive notion of character

1 Postdramatic theatre is described as rejecting drama's alleged twofold representational drive, both in the sense of the dramatic will to *represent the world* "as a surveyable whole" (Jürs-Munby 12) through the imitation of actions, and also in reference to the dramatic subjugation of performance to the representation of a text, a text marked by textual structure and coherence (Lehmann 2006: 21; 2007: 42–43). It is generally acknowledged that character is one of the categories corresponding to the dramatic rather than the postdramatic. However, Lehmann's influential monograph avoids a direct elucidation of the status of character in postdramatic theatre. See page 37 f for more on Lehmann's stance on character in postdramatic theatre.

or subjectivity, and refutes the possibility that unascribed scripts must necessarily configure the same character or its absence.

If the experimental notation of subjectivity on the page has prompted claims that particular theatre works have no characters, the theatrical productions of plays such as *Attempts on Her Life* and *4.48 Psychosis* have been similarly received. The argument that character may also be lacking in performance often makes reference to the actors' rejection of impersonation techniques and other artistic strategies used by the creative teams (Saunders 2002b: 116; Zimmermann 2003: 76). The suggestion that performers do not impersonate characters when engaging with no-longer-dramatic texts is a misguided generalisation. In the National Theatre revival of *Attempts on Her Life* (2007), for example, director Katie Mitchell worked closely with the actors to generate a very specific fictional setting: they decided that the performers would play the part of participants in an imaginary live BBC competition in 1997, in which they had to improvise in front of a judging panel on a topic given only minutes before the show started. In this case, the imagined topic was "A Satire on the Ills of Western Consumer Society" (Kerbel 3). The actors impersonated each participant as a well-defined creative professional, although the biographical information they had generated as preparation for their characters was not explicitly conveyed to audiences (Kerbel 6). There are further examples: director James Macdonald has explained that "the breakthrough" for actors in rehearsals of the original production of Crimp's unassigned text *Fewer Emergencies* (2005) "was to realise that, actually, if there are no characters, then you are directly in the writer's head [...]. [Y]ou're all playing the writer" (144). Writing about Deborah Levy's *The B File* (1992), a play that actually precedes Crimp's no-longer-dramatic engagement with postmodern ideas of subjectivity through an elusive female character, Claire MacDonald offers an alternative way of thinking about stage character. For MacDonald, "character is not pre-formed but exists as the outcome of all that is said and done on the stage, however contradictory" (244): it is collectively created by the five female performers without requiring impersonation, physical unity, or psychic coherence. The possibility that character may be produced without each performer's impersonation of individuality is a line of inquiry that this book aims to pursue.

An interesting assumption underlying readings on the absence of character in theatrical production is also that character can only be neutralised in performance through the collaborative work of the creative team – for example, through the use of mirrors decentring the origin of speech in *4.48 Psychosis* (Saunders 2002b: 116). What is implicitly acknowledged here is that the contours of character are not outlined by the actor's work exclusively, as it is commonly expressed. This is why collective artistic work is necessary in order to placate character, be-

cause character threatens to persist or to be reconfigured on the stage through the actors' presence, their voices, their costume, through lighting, sound, and set design. My project takes as its starting point the assumption that is expressed here in negative terms – that character cannot be reduced to the impersonating work of the actor – in order to vindicate the persistence of character in the production of plays that experiment with speech assignation.

Yet what is most striking in these academic readings on the staging of *Attempts on Her Life* or *4.48 Psychosis* is their fidelity to authorial intention. The power to eschew stage character is invariably placed onto the creative work of the playwright and/or the creative team in a production. Very often, only the plays' premieres are considered. This position disregards "the transmutation of theatrical character from one production to another" (Bourassa 83), and fails to acknowledge the co-creative role of the spectator, and the legitimacy of audiences' ability to recognise and construe 'character' from whatever sensible material a play offers. As Michael Kirkby's article "On Acting and Not-Acting" has persuasively demonstrated, there are forms of performance that do not involve impersonation but are perceived as such within the frame of the theatre event. My own experience as a spectator of *4.48 Psychosis* jars with the postdramatic promise of doing away with character. Seeing TR Warszawa's production of Kane's last play in 2010 at London's Barbican made it very clear to me that there were discrete characters in the play – or rather, in that particular production of the play. In it, a young, tormented female protagonist entered a spiral of self-loathing, self-harm and self-inflicted isolation following the rejection of her female lover and the incomprehension she faced from friends and medical staff. This was a different proposition to the Argentinian production directed by Luciano Cáceres, in which middle-aged actress Leonor Manso delivered the text as a monologue on an almost bare stage. What my experience demonstrates is that a play's proposition on character does not remain with the script or with the artistic decisions made in its first performance: the formulation of character created by a play admits legitimate variation across different stagings, and the audience's work of recognition and co-creation must also be accounted for. These are some of the premises about character upon which the present research is founded.

The erasure of the subject

While subjectivity in the plays of practitioners such as Crimp and Kane has indeed begun to be interrogated,[2] the connections between subjectivity and character have not been fully explored. This is surprising given the widespread acknowledgement that theatrical character lies at the intersection of aesthetic and philosophical inquiries about subjectivity. As Elinor Fuchs puts it, "'character' as a term of dramatic art can never be independent of contemporary constructions of subjectivity" (1996: 8). Consistent with this idea, Erika Fischer-Lichte has suggested that "it is likely that [...] change to the structure of a drama and change to the concept of identity are directly interdependent" (2004: 5).[3] In a more general sense, the absence of studies of character alongside the discourse of subjectivity in contemporary theatre contrasts highly with the profusion of research on the links between conceptualisations and representations of selfhood in Renaissance drama. The emergence of drama in the Renaissance has been consistently linked to the appearance of the liberal-humanist notion of selfhood, which was mimetically reproduced and reinforced in theatre through new, individuated characters (Szondi; Belsey). However, debates on the twentieth-century crisis of drama, the emergence of a postdramatic theatre, and the alleged death of character have not offered an in-depth exploration of how current understandings of the subject beyond the liberal-humanist paradigm have informed theatre practices and vice versa.[4] In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann questions the existence of character in the work of Sarah Kane amongst other contemporary playwrights, but warns that the appearance of lan-

2 See for example Clara Escoda Agustí's "Short Circuits of Desire: Language and Power in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*", Karoline Gritzner's "The Fading of the Subject in Sarah Kane's Later Work" and "(Post)Modern Subjectivity and the New Expressionism: Howard Barker, Sarah Kane, and Forced Entertainment", and Julie Waddington's "Posthumanist Identities in Sarah Kane".

3 Problematically, Fischer-Lichte uses the terms 'identity', 'subject', 'self', 'selfhood' and 'person' almost interchangeably throughout her account of the history of European drama. See Glossary, pages 14 – 22, for definitions of some of these terms.

4 Critiques of Cartesian, liberal-humanist notions of subjectivity do exist in theatre and performance studies, and these have been approached particularly from the point of view of feminist and/or queer agendas. See, for example, Elin Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. The novelty of my project is threefold: it focuses on contemporary, script-led theatre, both on the page and on the stage, which has not received the same scholarly attention as performance; it is open to any schools of thought that challenge normative, identity-based ideas of subjectivity within but also beyond gender studies; and it proposes a reconsideration of character alongside these alternative conceptualisations of subjectivity.

guage as "autonomous theatricality" should not be equated to "a lack of interest in the human being" (2006: 18). "[R]ather than bemoan the lack of an already defined image of the human being in postdramatically organized texts", Lehmann warns, "it is necessary to explore the new possibilities of thinking and representing the individual human subject sketched in these texts" (2006: 18). Such exploration, however, is not provided in his study. Furthermore, as Zimmermann has claimed, "[t]he reasons for the erosion of the traditional model of drama in postmodern theatre lie not only in a changed understanding of the subject and of history but also in the altered relationship between reality and art" (2003: 73). As I understand it, character is precisely the node where theatre's aesthetics and conceptualisations of subjectivity intersect, and as such it is a suitable starting point for addressing transformations in these two realms.

Interrogating the links between theatre's experimentation with character and various understandings of subjectivity is not solely a means to filling a gap in theatre studies. It is my belief that the operations at the core of this book can be conceived as part of a wider and more pressing political task. At a time when identity politics are accused of essentialism, the grand political narrative of communism seems to have collapsed with the Berlin Wall, and no feasible alternatives to unjust globalised capitalism and neoliberalism are visible, it is possible to paint the present as a post-political era in which theatre's engagement with politics is either thematically overt yet ineffectual, or simply non-existent. Contrary to this pessimistic stance, I believe that theatre is able to articulate an important and effective political gesture through the very category of character: first, by signalling the ways in which injustice and oppression continue to operate at the basic level of essentialising what we understand and treat as a subject, and second, by expanding our expectation of what a subject is and can be, productively demonstrating that we can continuously widen our frame of apprehension of subjectivity. In a world where, to paraphrase Butler (1993), the bodies and the lives that matter are severely circumscribed, and their possibilities limited, expanding the definition of what can be apprehended as a human life is an important political task towards equality. This is the political task I believe theatre can conduct even when party politics or identity politics are not thematically salient – a task that can be executed through the theatrical formulation of character.

Aesthetics, politics, subjectivity

The four works considered in this book are a small sample of the trend in contemporary British playwriting interested in experimenting with speech attribution, disrupting conventions about performers' onstage roles, and exposing a discontent with ideas of subjectivity formulated around a solid identity. Although the last two decades have seen an extraordinary number of playtexts with these characteristics in Britain, this is neither a specifically contemporary writing practice, nor is it exclusively British.[5] As a matter of fact, the avoidance or subversion of traditional *dramatis personae* offers too vast and heterogeneous a body of works to be taxonomically meaningful in its own right. As such, it is important to emphasise that my selection of case studies is not grounded on the claim that I believe they offer radically new articulations of character or that they produce a conceptualisation of subjectivity that, for the first time, veers away from the liberal-humanist norm.

Rather, my choice of case studies responds, first, to the acknowledgement that this trend against identity and individuality in theatre-writing practices has been particularly strong in Britain since the 1990s but, as argued above, Anglophone studies has met it with problematic preconceptions. Focusing on British plays written and performed within the last two decades has provided this study with cultural, geographical and temporal specificity that would have been impossible to attain otherwise. The British context in which these plays were written roughly coincides with the New Labour government (1997–2010). Tony Blair's Third Way – an alleged Centre-Left political route, between the market-driven, individualist and neoliberal Thatcherite approach and the collectivist, state-centred interest of previous Labour governments – was not only more indebted to neoliberalism than the party's rebranding would like to suggest (Heffernan), but it also effectively contributed to deflating the Left in the country. This paved the way for the fast and deep delegation of social responsibility to individuals and communities currently undertaken by the newly re-elected Conservative government. During the time the plays I examine were written, New Labour's cultural policy endorsed participatory art with an agenda of social inclusion, an agenda in which, according to Claire Bishop, an identity politics-derived "ethics of interpersonal interaction [came] to prevail over a politics of social justice" (25).[6] In the realm of popular culture and public discourse, the

5 For a brief account of British *character-less* playtexts in the last two decades, and a relation of contemporary counterparts and predecessors in Europe, see Appendix, pages 200 – 207.

6 Already in 2003, David Ian Rabey had pointed out New Labour's entrepreneurial view of the arts, and the emphasis on 'accessibility' and participation – a utilitarian stance that failed to

status of Britain as the new and exciting capital of the world for arts, fashion, music and business was beginning to dissolve by the late 1990s when Kane wrote *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*. By the time Thomas's *Stone City Blue* and Crouch's *ENGLAND* premiered in 2004 and 2007 respectively, the national and international image of Britain had dramatically changed – no less because of Blair's support of military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A survey of the entire field of British works featuring character experimentation written during the New Labour period would potentially risk fostering the sort of superficial generalisations that the present book endeavours to debunk. The case studies selected for this study have in common their subtle engagement with politics despite an overarching dismissal of both party/doctrine affiliation and identity politics. Arguably, this double repudiation is symptomatic of a political Zeitgeist during the New Labour mandate, when traditional doctrines were progressively perceived by the public as ineffectual or eroded,[7] and identity politics was accused of being dangerously essentialist or lacking a deeper materialist critique of the world.[8] Rather than conflating right-wing individualism with community ideals, or exposing the plights of a marginalised identity within a given social order, these plays engage in politics by rethinking subjectivity itself beyond identity, individualism and community – exposing the hybrid and interdependent nature of the subject at micro- and macro-social levels, highlighting the possibility of intersubjective recognition regardless of identity, and pointing at singular and collective responsibility for structural economic oppression.

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value arts in general and theatre in particular for its artistic merits alone (2003: 191 – 192). See Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* for a critique of New Labour's discourse on the role of the arts to promote social inclusion.

7 Writing about the 1997 general elections, Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell and John Curtice argue that Labour lost the enthusiasm and support of its traditional voters due to the party's "distancing from the trade unions, and its active courting of the middle classes", and purport that this disillusionment was a reaction to the political decisions of New Labour and "not part of a general trend towards civic disengagement or political cynicism" (155). However, some writers have qualified Labour's subsequent victory as "an apathetic landslide" (Harrop), as the number of abstainers in the elections of 2001 and 2005 was higher than the actual number of Labour voters, particularly first-time voters (Henn *et al.*). This young scepticism was perhaps extended to older and middle-class supporters after Britain's participation in the Iraq war (Clarke *et al.*).

8 Within the realm of feminist theory and practice, for example, intersectionality has aimed to tackle these criticisms by considering how oppression takes place in complicated, intersecting patterns where classism, racism, sexism and homophobia meet. For more on this, see Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color".