

## Book Reviews

**Cristina Delgado-García.** *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015, xii + 228 pp., € 99.95 (hardcover, PDF ebook).

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Cristina Delgado-García's *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity* is a highly significant contribution to character studies and political theatre. Against a number of postmodern and postdramatic scholarly interventions (such as by Elinor Fuchs, Gerda Poschmann, and Hans-Thies Lehmann) that have heralded the death of character in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century theatre, *Rethinking Character* argues that character – which Delgado-García defines as “any figuration of subjectivity in theatre” (14) – is still very much present in such work. What makes this very plausible argument politically generative is its claim that these recent articulations of character are “unintelligible under the liberal-humanist norm that appears to dominate the received concept of both subject and theatrical character” (xii). The implication is: these figurations of subjectivity – not fully legible in our current neo-liberal socio-economic context – have the capacity to press at the edges of normative discourses of identity and make space for the recognition of oppressed, marginalized, and subaltern subjectivities.

Building on Elin Diamond's argument that considers Fuchs' proposition of the death of character to be valid only in relation to *humanist* understandings of character, *Rethinking Character* identifies fuzzy definitional boundaries of character and inconsistent usage of the term to be part of the problem. The tendency in the West is to equate character with the “illusionist representation of a person generated by an actor” (2). The argument goes: we need to widen our understanding of character through moving beyond the common sense formulation that the character's name in *dramatis personae* = character on stage impersonated by an individual actor = character. This is not so much a new position on character, but the exciting and original intervention here is the political effects Delgado-García claims for her approach to character:

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. (10)

This broadening of our apprehension includes moving beyond our conventional confidence in individuality and independence as the basis of subjectivity, and in turn makes visible not just the marginalized or subaltern, but, in more general terms, a philosophical appreciation of alternative (non-capitalist?) registrations of the subject.

*Rethinking Character* is, roughly, a book of two halves: the first is theoretical and the second engages closely and extensively with four case studies, all of which are, what Delgado-García calls, “character-less:” their “alleged characterlessness is not complete: [...] character persists even when attributes such as age, gender and social background are diminished” (197). The character-less plays selected all use unattributed lines in their dialogue: Sarah Kane’s *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (1999), Ed Thomas’s *Stone City Blue* (2004), and Tim Crouch’s *ENGLAND* (2007). Within this loose division there are four chapters: the first provides a historical and theoretical account of character; the second introduces the four main theorists of interest to the thesis: Louis Althusser, Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière, and Alain Badiou; the third discusses the Kane plays and Thomas’s *Stone City Blue* in terms of what Delgado-García calls ‘singular subjectivities;’ and the fourth examines Crouch’s *ENGLAND* in the context of ‘collective subjectivities.’ The book also includes a glossary of performance philosophy, which includes terms like ‘character,’ ‘(dis)embodiment,’ ‘individuation,’ ‘ontology,’ ‘selfhood,’ and ‘subjectivity,’ as well as an appendix, which comprises a sample of plays without conventional characters (‘character-less’) from 1900 to the present.

The early section of the book engages with definitional debates on character and provides a useful historical appreciation of the development of the term. This is accompanied by recognition of earlier examples of work which deviated from the production of conventional character, such as Beckett’s very short plays and the metatheatrical work of Peter Handke. While she thus acknowledges that challenges to humanist constructions of character pre-date the 1990s, Delgado-García’s rationale for focusing the book on the contemporary period is that the “trend against identity and individuality in theatre-writing practices has been particularly strong in Britain since the 1990s but [...] Anglophone studies has met it with problematic preconceptions” (11). The book is additionally only interested in particular character-less plays, ones considered to produce radical effects through character, and not, for example, character-less plays such as Simon Stephens’ *Pornography* (2008), which actually reconstruct a fairly familiar form of

characterisation. Delgado-García selects the particular plays she does because they “move away from identity-based understandings of character and subjectivity but, more importantly, because the characters and subjects they outline are politically and ethically affirmative” (13).

Chapter 2 explores 1) what figurations of subjectivity manifest in play texts and theatre performances; 2) the aesthetic apparatus through which the subject is invoked; and 3) the political implications of such formulations of subjectivity. Here there is a deep engagement with, and wonderfully lucid explications of, theories of subjectivity. Beginning with Althusser (and to a lesser extent Foucault), *Rethinking Character* explicates very clearly received poststructuralist wisdom on the construction of the subject, and in particular the concept of ‘subjectivation:’ the process by which a subject is formed. Butler’s reformulation of Althusserian subjectivation as a process of failed interpellation – the subject can repudiate the norms upon which interpellation depends – facilitates readings of theatre texts and performances that resist gendered, sexual, or racial objectification, and provides “the occasion for agency within the scene of address” (57). Badiou rejects the Althusserian notion that subjectivation involves subjugation: “for Badiou the Subject is *the process* that takes place *after the disruption* of a Situation” (64); thus, subjectivation is a potential force for transformation – “a praxis related to a disruption in historical time” (64) – rather than a continuation of the current order. Rancière breaks further with Althusserian interpellation: “subjectivation is not the scene where the subject is addressed but the scene where the subject *makes an address*” (76). In this understanding, interpellation begins with disobedience, an insistence on visibility in a currently unequal order: “the subject for Rancière emerges from the repudiation of any interpellative call, from the impossibility of identifying with any existing identities, and from active management of a wronging of equality” (77). Delgado-García argues that engaging with “four theoretical alternatives to the liberal-humanist notion of the subject” allows her to dislodge the notion of character from “its received understanding as a recognisable, discrete, autonomous and self-same entity” (83).

The move into play and performance analysis begins in chapter 3 and focuses firstly on ‘singular subjectivities,’ which the author defines as incorporating a person or an individual. But importantly, the term “does not have to entail the status of personhood, or the uniqueness, homogeneity and indivisibility normally attached to individuality” (86). Kane’s *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* are read as expanding our frames of apprehension of subjectivity: the omission of named characters works to undo a certain set of (identity-related) expectations that readers/audiences unconsciously but inevitably bring to the work. Of particular note in these playtexts is the disruption of heteronormative gendered consistency across the speech acts, a disruption that enlarges the scope of our political

recognition and simultaneously makes visible the normative constraints on the formation of the subject. This section of the chapter very usefully finishes with a discussion of the plays in performance and considers ways in which some productions may have produced individualized ideas of character, seemingly against the radical potential of the text. However, Delgado-García insists that this does not diminish the plays' "radical departures from liberal-humanist notions of the self" (112). She sees the plays as encouraging variation, as invoking subjectivity as always fluid, changeable, and precarious.

The second half of the chapter discusses Ed Thomas's *Stone City Blue* in terms of hybridity and relationality. Singular subjects that are at the same time plural (as a proliferation of speakers) and which also collectively outline a singular subject of experience form the main interest of this section's discussion of subjectivity. The author reads *Stone City Blue* as disrupting the connections among the 'I' of the speaking subject, the 'I' of experience, and the 'I' as a syntactical unit, and as producing a fragmented, fluid, queer subject that is "surreptitious, elusive to power, excessive to its signifiers" (131). However, individuality is not rejected as such in *Stone City Blue*; rather, it is argued, the play reimagines it without the conventional expectations of autonomy, unity, and identity. As with the Kane plays, *Stone City Blue* is also discussed as performance, including engagement with illuminating accounts of rehearsals and the actors' attitudes to the original production, accounts gained from Delgado-García's telephone interview with Thomas.

The final chapter – "Collective Subjectivities" – examines Crouch's *ENGLAND* as an example of work that exceeds singular subjectivities. Strikingly, the argument departs from common discussions within Crouch studies that focus on the co-creation of the performance among audience members and performers, a practice Delgado-García notes as potentially "deeply embedded in the logic of individualism and ownership on which (neo)liberalism rests" (152). A detailed and sensitive reading of *ENGLAND* demonstrates the accumulative and developmental effect of the thinking in this book, as the author brings together the concepts of singular and collective subjectivities in her reading of the play's political agility. What is also important here is the focus on the materiality of the site of the performance: of the active presence of the gallery space and its role in the process of subjectivation, and the recognition that "immaterial affects, percepts and concepts" (155) are inextricably intertwined with capitalist consumption. *ENGLAND*, Delgado-García argues, "requires spectators to undergo politically-charged operations" through a range of contradictory interpellations (first as equals, then as subaltern others); "on the other hand, it encourages spectators to conceptualise subjectivity as materially and affectively interdependent, to 'see' subjects that are otherwise erased from the representational field, and to exercise their agency to position themselves within the spectacle" (196).

There is not much to criticize, but it would have been interesting to see the book's productive challenge to postmodernist proclamations of the death of character extended to include a certain troubling of poststructuralist accounts of humanism (in terms of humanism's role as the philosophical underpinning of conventional understandings of character). Some engagement with recent challenges to poststructuralist conflation of the humanist subject with the liberal-humanist subject would have been welcome (see LePage). I would also add that the book might have moved a little further from its PhD origins: perhaps a shorter theory section and the inclusion of one or two additional case studies would have expanded the argument. In particular, it would be fascinating to see the thesis applied to more explicitly political character-less plays, such as Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children* (2009). That said, *Rethinking Character* is a stimulating, rewarding, and pleasurable read: it navigates complex ideas clearly and persuasively and offers politically incisive and imaginative readings of a sample of contemporary work. It should be read by all scholars and students interested in character, subjectivity, and political theatre.

## Works Cited

- LePage, Louise. "Rethinking Sarah Kane's Characters: A Human(ist) Form and Politics." *Modern Drama*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2014, pp. 252–72.