Carla Tempestoso
Il teatro di Caryl Phillips. Transnazionalità, identità e appartenenze

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Review of Tempestoso, C. (2020). *Il teatro di Caryl Phillips. Transnazionalità, identità e appartenenze*. Roma: Aracne, 180 pp.

In a creative piece of writing entitled "Rude Am I in My Speech", Caryl Phillips stated: "My father is no Othello" (Phillips 2011b, 190). In so doing, the difficult-to-be-labelled author drew an eerie parallelism between his father and a Shakespearean character: in the first place, it is grounded on what Frantz Fanon described as "epidermal racial schema" (Fanon [1952] 2008, 92) because both his father and Othello share the same skin colour, which defines them beforehand' as "extravagant and wheeling stranger" (*Oth.*, 1.1.135); in the second place, it connects Phillips with drama, the first genre he undertook at the dawn of his career.

According to Bénédicte Ledent, his early plays can be viewed as 'threshold texts' for his later writings (Ledent 2015, 85): and yet, Phillips's scholarship mainly focuses on either his novels or non-fiction works. Carla Tempestoso's *Il teatro di Caryl Phillips* seeks to fill this void by analysing, in the light of the Postcolonial Studies, the three stage plays performed and published between 1981 and 1984: *Strange Fruit* (1981), *Where There is Darkness* (1982), and *The Shelter* (1984). The volume consists of an introduction, three chapters and an afterword by Bruna Mancini.

In the introduction, Tempestoso, following Ledent's insight, out-
lines the commonalities of Phillips's plays and novels: as many second-
generation writers, his oeuvre is moulded upon the themes of belong-
ing, displacement, homelessness (12). Mindful of Phillips's biography,
she briefly relates them to his 'assimilation fatigue' (Phillips 2011a,
15): he was born in St. Kitts in 1958, brought up in England and, in
1978, he moved to the USA, where he now teaches Literatures in Eng-
lish at Yale University. Tempestoso describes these journeys as both
physical and metaphorical: Phillips did not just move from one place
to the other but, in the process, he had to go through the prejudices
of the "European tribe" as well (13). Consequently, he often felt – just
as Hanif Kureishi – "pretty out of place" (Kureishi 1986, 17); by writ-
ing, he was able to free himself from a fixed concept of 'belonging'
and give birth to an 'itinerant identity' (14). The adjective 'itinerant'
calls into question the idea of movement, which is at the core of this
monograph because, through the lens of the Postcolonial Studies, Tem-
pestoso analyses how Phillips's "diasporic wanderers" are affected
by – and affect in return – Eurocentric spaces and places.

Chapter 1 – *Multiple Identities in Transnational Spaces* – consists
of a theoretical discussion on the very concept of 'identity': accord-
ing to Tempestoso, as migrations have redefined humanity as a whole,
Postcolonial Studies and its 'progeny' (e.g. Diaspora Studies, Migra-
tion Studies, Transnational Studies) should take an intersectional
approach to the analysis of the Twenty-first-century migrant expe-
rience (22). In an attempt to do so and highlight what she otherwise
calls 'in-between spaces' (31), Tempestoso interweaves postcolonial
voices, such as those of Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha, and Stuart Hall.
She specifically deals with the topographical dimension of their writ-
ings: for instance, by taking her cue from Bhabha's *The Location of
Culture*, Tempestoso states that the so-called 'Third Space' – "which
makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent pro-
cess" (Bhabha [1994] 2004, 54) – aims at re-enhancing one's own
agency, thus reassessing our understanding of race as a Derridean
pharmakon (Bassi 2016, 75). In the case of Caryl Phillips, the Third
Space – complex, fluid, interstitial – is represented by the Atlantic
Ocean, being a site which carries no connotations of either colour or
race (Mancini 2014, 3): thus, he turns upside down the common idea
of belonging as land-based, in favour of the water-based counterpart.
Tempestoso is aware of the side effects of such a choice: by looking
at both Phillips's life and writing, she points out how the feeling of
physical, psychological, and cultural displacement has massively in-
fluenced his *Dasein*, his being-in-the-world (44).

Following these theoretical underpinnings, Chapter 2 – *Identities
and Belonging in Caryl Phillips's Theatrical World* – is centred on the
genesis of Phillips's early writing: from his experience as stagehand
in Edinburgh to the creative process itself. Beyond its unquestiona-

ble therapeutic effect, the act of writing turns out to be a way of ne-
gotiating his identity and becoming visible among the white British
writers (80). Furthermore, thanks to her research period at Yale Uni-
versity (USA), where she met Phillips, Tempestoso offers invaluable
information regarding genre classification: for example, she makes
reference to the existence of another stage play – *Rough Crossings*
(2007) – which the author himself refused to consider so, as it is a
'commissioned adaptation' of Simon Schama's novel (71).

The Shakespearean parallelism, which opened the review, is ex-
tensively explored in this chapter, through Phillips's collection of es-
says *The European Tribe* (1987) – specifically, "In the Ghetto" relates
how the tragedy of Othello affected him while in Venice (De Chiara
1996, 179) – and the novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which "inter-
weaves the fictional story of Othello and the true history of Venetian
Jews" (Bassi 2011, 243). Moreover, Tempestoso highlights the impor-
tance of both the paratextual apparatus and the intertextual refer-
ences, be they direct or indirect, to *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*,
and *The Tempest*: for instance, in *Strange Fruit*, a non-white man de-
fines himself as an "old black ram" (*Oth.*, 1.1.89); in *The Shelter*, the
black man and the white woman who inhabit a deserted island re-
mind us of Caliban and Miranda in *The Tempest*.

Chapter 3 – *Literary Displacements on Stage* – is devoted to the an-
alytical analysis of each and every stage play. With regard to *Strange
Fruit*, Tempestoso at first puts the stress on the title: it refers back to
a song of the same name which, as Phillips himself remarks, "made
reference to racially motivated violence in the American South"
(Philips 2011a, 99). In her view, besides the racial matrix, to mention
the so-called 'strange fruits' is to hint at the exoticisation and alien-
ation of Phillips's non-white characters in the white Western socie-
ty (102). She then pinpoints the characters' naming procedure: the
quality of "singular referring terms" (Casagranda 2013, 12) is lost
because Phillips chose common names (e.g. "Mother"); however, ac-
cording to Tempestoso, this allows the reader to better identify with
the *dramatis personae*, as if they were archetypes (103).

One of the major themes, which Tempestoso is keen on analysing,
is the communication between second-generation and third-genera-
tion migrants, which creates a powerful connection with the follow-
ing play, namely *Where There is Darkness*. Whereas she previously
focussed on either paratextual elements or naming procedures, here
Tempestoso offers a geocritical analysis of the setting: on the one
hand, there is the conservatory, which represents the *unheimlich*; on
the other hand, the house as the place of security (121).

The aforementioned dialectic replicates the margin-centre rela-
tionship and implies a meditation upon the post-migration stress and
psychological disorders a person can develop. This issue led Tempes-
toso to *The Shelter*, the last of Phillips's plays: by using Frantz Fanon's

theory of the white gaze and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), she focuses her attention on the spatial dynamics interracial relationships are exposed to.

Bruna Mancini's afterword, *Spaces of Memory, Identity, and Rebirth in Caryl Phillips's Theatre*, offers a literary-geography-oriented insight into the world of Caryl Phillips. She defines him as a cartographer because, in his entire oeuvre, he re-writes spaces and places, thus redefining power relations (151). By leveraging her experience as the Italian translator of *The Shelter*, Mancini identifies the stage as an inter-ethnic laboratory, a Third Space, where Phillips's characters can acknowledge their past, master their wounds, and reshape the white space they inhabit (152).

Overall, Carla Tempestoso's *Il teatro di Caryl Phillips* breaks new ground and adds significantly to the current scholarship on Phillips. Through the lens of the Postcolonial Studies, Tempestoso is able to characterise his three plays as a long continuum, rich in similarities, which redeems the "queer migrant" – i.e. the non-European, non-white, and non-Christian migrant (Chambers 2020, 18) – from any subaltern position.

Nevertheless, what the monograph lacks, and it could be the starting point for future research, is a textual analysis of Phillips's stage plays in the light of the Performance Studies: along with the drama text, the representation of the dramatic fiction could be an inviting field to be investigated, by looking at both its performances – recorded, ongoing, or upcoming– and at the dynamic relationship among sourcer (e.g. author), producers (e.g. directors, designers, technicians), performers, and spectators (Schechner 2020, 60).

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