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Racial Performativity in Naomi Wallace's Plays: *The War Boys* (1993), *Things of Dry Hours* (2007), and *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East* (2009).

MA Thesis

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Abstract

The thesis intends to explore the racial identities in three of Naomi Wallace's plays and how these identities are performative, within the theoretical framework of Judith Butler's performativity theory. These racial identities fight and defy the American power structure, hoping for gaining agency and power. Chapter One focuses on performativity theory, exploring the main notions proposed by Butler, and how it applies to race and identity formation. Chapter Two tackles *The War Boys* that highlights the racism embedded in the American society towards the Chicano identity, and how it subordinates Mexicans and those of hybrid race and persecutes them. Chapter Three analyses *Things of Dry Hours* which explores the black vs. white conflict, where black subjects face racism and fight for agency. Chapter Four introduces *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East*, highlighting the struggle of the marginalised Arab identity in the eyes of the Americanised history. The chapter investigates three short plays that take place in the Arab world, where the Palestinian-Israeli and the Gulf War are the background of these plays. The journeys of the marginalised racial identities in the plays under-study are traced from subordination and injury, to subversion of power-balance and norms, and they eventually gain agency.

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Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of
healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing
in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs
be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now
rise and take control.

-Margaret Walker, "For My People."

Introduction

Take up the White Man's burden--

In patience to abide,

To veil the threat of terror

And check the show of pride;

By open speech and simple,

An hundred times made plain

To seek another's profit,

And work another's gain.

-Rudyard Kipling, "White Man's Burden."

In a world governed by western media and culture, art is the means of resistance. Today's world has long nominated U.S.A and its allies as the powerful, marginalising other worlds as beneath them: unheard and ungrievable. The American man has assumed this responsibility, controlling the mainstream media, leaving the subaltern not worth-living. However, it is only the responsible citizens of the world who take the leap of faith and defy racism, to transgress against the dominant culture that has brought them up. Theatre has given room to break the confinements, and diminish the white man's image; but it takes more audacity to lose the

white mask and identify with other races. This has been the mission of the American playwright, Naomi Wallace (1960-), who has not only assumed the responsibility to resist the culture that has the upper hand, but also to “unwhite” her own self and mind, and give rise to ethnic characters onstage. She fought for the cause of the Black, Chicano, and Arab; she has shown the brutality of capitalism and imperialism, and called for equality and liberty; she has exposed the American and Israeli war crimes; but she has also defended the Arab and erased the terrorism label adhered to them.

Wallace is a passionate writer and a political activist. She is both a poet and dramatist. She has started off her career as a poet, publishing *To Dance a Stony Field* (1995) for which she was awarded the National Poetry Competition Award in the U.S. in 1993. Her poetic language and unique style are manifested in her plays. She sees that “Writing is a way for me to embrace my artistic impulse and my political vision” and she thinks that “Theater is a community endeavour” where she can indulge with

the audience and assume change to take place (“Naomi Wallace” 454). Her themes thus vary between dysfunctional families, capitalism, socialism, and race. These themes are evident in her numerous plays including: *The War Boys* (1993), *In the Heart of America* (1994), *One Flea Spare* (1995), *The Slaughter City* (1996), *The Inland Sea* (2002), *Things of Dry Hours* (2007), *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East* (2009), and *And I and Silence* (2011), among others. Her drama repertoire has received prestigious awards and grants such as: the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize (1996), Joseph Kesselring Prize (1996), the Obie Award (1997), the Horton-Foote Award for most promising new American play (2012), and most recently, she received Windham Campbell Prize in 2013.

Though coming from a privileged family, Wallace was brought up in a working-class community, by politically-oriented parents. She was so close to communist ideas, stories about war, and the poor. Wallace thus in her work narrates the stories of the endless struggle of the marginalised. Therefore, Wallace is

foremost a political writer. She says in her interview with Alexis Greene:

All theater and all art have to do with representations, and certainly with representations of power. From the moment you talk about who has, who doesn't, who's weak, who's strong, and what position they're in, you're talking about power, and therefore you're talking about politics. ("Naomi Wallace" 451)

As a political writer, Wallace is preoccupied with breaking away from power relations. The background where she comes from has definitely influenced her personality, as well as her political stance and writings.

Wallace's name has always been connected with terms of resistance and transgression, and imagining a better world. She is concerned with the idea that "when you study history, you see how much resistance there always was to poverty, to war, to injustice. How much resistance and how little of it was recorded, or recorded

in the mainstream” (“Naomi Wallace” 460). In this respect, Wallace, in her influential essay “On Writing as Transgression” (2008), describes writing for the theatre as an act of transgression. She defies mainstream theatre that calls for keeping peace, and encourages writers “to disrupt the lie, to speak truth to power” (“Transgression” 98). She elaborates on how mainstream culture nurtures racism, homophobia, and sexism; and it is the mission of writers to stand against power that causes such ailments. She also pinpoints how “Heterosexuality continues to be foregrounded; white privilege continues to go unquestioned; writing against injustice continues to be sidelined” (100). In calling for writing as an act of transgression, Wallace actually means to write against one’s own taught self. She defines transgression as “a dissection of one’s self and a discovery of larger worlds. Both processes (or perhaps they are one) involve questioning entitlement and empathy” (100). In transgression, one gets out of his own bubble and tries to learn about other worlds apart from his own. This act of transgressing requires audacity to fight the demons of one’s self

that restrict him to certain rulings, conceptions, and stereotypes. Once out of this bubble, new dimensions of the world are discovered and they gain newer meanings. Consequently, with transgression, a hope for a better world shall rise.

It is in this sense that Wallace criticises in her plays the evil power systems that oppresses people. “In my work, I attack a system, never its people. You will never find ‘evil’ people in my plays, just evil systems,” she explains (“Naomi Wallace” 471). She thus cares for and lends an ear to the subaltern, those marginalised because of their race, class, or gender. She rigorously attacks capitalism and the norms that produce inequality and injustice. She ridicules the American dream, goes as far as criticising the American policy of war, and even exposes the crimes of its ally, Israel.

One of the main issues Wallace is interested in is race and those marginalised because of their ethnicity, against the white society. Betty Shamieh, the Arab-American playwright,

interviews Wallace and praises her efforts to upstage the subaltern:

There is something particularly devastating about being invisible. Having no representation of your ethnic group on-stage . . . Never having any representation of your people in mainstream theatre at all whispers “Whatever you may or may not be, you simply do not matter.” Or, at least, not to the people who have the theatres, audience bases, resources, power. (“Countering Despair ”)

Wallace courageously loses her own white label, writes against her taught self, and defies the mainstream culture that dictates on her all its norms, and thus she identifies with the Black, the Arab, and the Chicano. In this transgression, Wallace admits her strategy to Shamieh: “Confronting my own ignorance about the world. Confronting my own assumptions. I’m a citizen of empire. I can reject this empire. I can work against it. And yet I was born and raised in the belly of this beast” (“Countering Despair”). Bearing this in mind,