

The Construction of Identities: Power Relations in Naomi Wallace's *In the Heart of America*

Ammar Abduh Aqeeli

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2019-3527>

Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

amaqeeli@jazanu.edu.sa

Abstract

This article explores how Naomi Wallace's *In the Heart of America* demonstrates the interconnectedness of xenophobia, racism and other forms of discrimination in American life and politics. Through the critiques offered by Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, this article investigates the relationships between ideological state apparatuses, production of power and the construction of social identities. The subjugated characters in the play attempt to resist, negotiate and accommodate normative or regulative discursive processes that impose fixed identities upon them. Wallace's play demonstrates that resistance constitutes power, which can be either weak, submissive, creative, and/or productive. Raising awareness of the possibilities of resistance to subjectifying power is what *In the Heart of America* yearns to do.

Keywords: identity; power; gender; ideology; Palestine

UNISA 

Journal of Literary Studies

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/jls>

Volume 39 | 2023 | #13800 | 16 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/13800>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

© The Author(s) 2023



Published by the Literature Association of South Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

Introduction

In the Heart of America involves characters who resist, negotiate and accommodate the normative or regulative discursive practices that construct identities or fix their racialised and gendered subject positions. Naomi Wallace demonstrates how these discursive practices contribute to the creation and reproduction of the unequal power distribution between social groups to maintain dominant social discourses. The play tends to “pose the question of how determinist forces conspire against the subject’s will” (Medalle 2018, 151). Most importantly, it shows that it is possible to resist power and its coercive imposition on one’s personal will, since power itself is shifting and unstable. Remzi’s Arab-American identity, for example, marks him as the negation of the “normal,” and he is disciplined by society due to his lack of conformity. Wallace also demonstrates that where there is power, there is also resistance. For example, Remzi changes his role to one that is more often associated with females; he soaks his sister’s foot in hot water and rubs her foot as a way of resisting fixed gender roles outlined for him by society. Moreover, some modes of resistance adopted by the main characters can be inferred as a recognition of the discursive practices engendered by power, which negatively portray them. This article will investigate how the characters in this play respond to, resist, and rearticulate the process of producing humans as subjects.

The Play’s Synopsis

In the Heart of America was written by Obie Award-winning playwright Naomi Wallace. It was first published in 2000 in a collection of plays titled *In the Heart of America and Other Plays*. The play is largely set before, during and after the first Gulf War in 1991. The play opens with Fairouz, who is limping while she searches for her missing brother, Remzi; and with her meeting with Craver, whom she finds hiding in a motel room in Kentucky. She believes Craver was involved in a love affair with her brother, and she tries to convince him to answer her question as to why the military will not give her any information regarding her brother’s whereabouts. When she exits Craver’s room, the ghost of a Vietnamese woman, Lue Ming, enters; Lue Ming is searching for Lieutenant William Calley, the real-life soldier who was responsible for the My Lai massacre in the Vietnam War during which her child was murdered. She later sees the spirit of Calley in the image of Lieutenant Boxler. In a different scene, Fairouz practises walking, and Lue Ming appears and walks in unison behind her. She tells Fairouz that she should meet her mother, who lost one of her feet in the Vietnam War.

A Departure from Conventional Drama

In the Heart of America conforms to Brechtian theatre in that it disrupts traditional dramatic conventions and presents itself in a non-linear episodic structure. The play’s non-linear narrative links past and present, emphasising that American imperialism’s effects are continuing and cumulative. The drama moves between the Vietnam and Gulf wars, and shows how American foreign policy repeats violence. This technique

encourages the audience to actively piece together the narrative and engage with the broader thematic concerns. According to Stephen Unwin (2014, 60), by exposing the audience to unconnected scenes, “Brecht hoped they would think independently and come to their own conclusions.” Rather than becoming fully absorbed in a fictional world, the play invites the audience to intellectually engage with its themes. The play challenges conventional narratives, provokes thought and prompts the audience to critically reflect on how power is deployed and (re)negotiated.

Wallace incorporates a number of characters representing different social identities and positions of power to emphasise the subjective nature of truth and challenge the notion of a single, authoritative narrative. Fairouz and Remzi Saboura are of Palestinian descent, but their family left Palestine, moved to America and settled in Atlanta, Georgia, after the violent birth of Israel. While Remzi is proud of being an American citizen, Fairouz clings to her Arab roots. Fairouz has a deformed foot, which Remzi had tried to cure but failed. Craver is a working-class kid from Kentucky who was stationed with Remzi in the Saudi desert. He exemplifies the inadequacy of the neoliberal economic tenets in the United States (US), which favoured the wealthy over the working class. Lue Ming is the ghost of a woman killed during the Vietnam War in the My Lai massacre. Lieutenant Boxler is Remzi’s and Craver’s commanding officer in Iraq who throws insults at Remzi, Craver and other minorities because of their subordinate position in society. Boxler embodies xenophobia, racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism as the true heart of America.

In the Heart of America asks—and perhaps yearns—for a harmonious multicultural society that enables marginalised communities and individuals to be treated as equal citizens. Wallace’s play echoes the “vitriolic debate” over multiculturalism, which gained prominence among both intellectuals and politicians in the US in the 1990s (Kerr 2006, 382). For example, Henry Louis Gates (1993, xv) asserts that the late twentieth century America was “profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender.” He calls to combat those divisions by “[forging,] for once, a civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities [...] through education” (xv). Although there was a significant emphasis on the diversity and inclusivity of the American society, the lived experiences of marginalised groups often contradicted this rhetoric. Wallace challenges such idea by reflecting the complexity of multiculturalism in the US, which operates through mechanisms of both inclusion and exclusion. It criticises the contradictions and limitations of a multicultural discourse that fails to address systemic exclusionary practices.

The Framework

In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser (1984) describes a process of subjectification where individuals become unknowing and fixed subjects through interpellation; through the process of interpellation, the individual becomes an agent of ideology, the individual becomes subjected to ideology. According to Althusser, “individuals are always already interpellated by ideology as subjects,” in

that they are denied autonomy or full actualisation (1984, 49–50). Individuals are adapted to their social roles to the extent that they start to live as if ideological practices were a natural state of being. Althusser argues that ideological state apparatuses—which include educational systems, churches, culture, and the mass media—produce ideologies within which subjectivities are constituted. These apparatuses position individual subjects within particular discourses to maintain a certain dominant ideology or to create the image of the dominant class. It could be argued, however, that Althusser’s theories fall short in explaining how individuals subvert or resist networks and systems of domination. Even though Althusser’s theories of subjectivity do not account for self-actualisation and self-determination, they paved the way to understand how language, meaning and power intersect with subjectivity and identity.

Althusser’s concept of a subject shaped by ideology was borrowed by his student Michel Foucault (1979), who developed the notion that the individual can be more than one subject at the same time. Depending on the discourses produced, people can embrace and support different discursive practices; for example, Foucault believed patriarchal societies rely on normative discursive practices to perpetuate patriarchal relationships between men and women, and all individuals are subjected to relations of power through discourse. What distinguishes Althusser from Foucault is the latter’s insistence that power is dispensed rather than centralised, as it operates from the bottom up rather than from the top down (During 1992, 130). The importance of Althusser’s notion of interpellation in this paper is the potential to study the way Remzi responds to the state apparatuses’ inscription of its ideology in his subject. Remzi willingly enacts the state’s desired ideology without waging resistance against it, yet believes himself to be free.

Power does not merely play repressive, negative, and prohibitive roles. Foucault (1979) accentuates the productive nature of power and its induction of knowledge when he states:

What gives power its hold, what makes it accepted, is quite simply the fact that it does not simply weigh like a force which says no, but that it runs through, and it produces, things, it induces pleasure, it forms knowledge, it produces discourse; it must be considered as a productive network which runs through the entire social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (1979, 36)

Power indirectly constitutes the subjectivity of individuals; it controls how we perceive reality and are perceived by the world, and our identities are shaped through systems of power and discourse. Yet, there is always the possibility that dominant discourses and the exercise of power can be restrained. Power drives us to actively participate in the discourse it produces; in other words, individuals become aware of their participation in power relationships, and resistance consequently emerges to perpetuate, create, or undermine different forms of power.

Discussion

Throughout the play, Wallace masterfully connects the Gulf War with the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Vietnam War. Before the start of the first Gulf War, Fairouz warns Remzi not to go to war on the grounds that he will kill other Arabs. But Remzi mistakenly thinks that by going to war, he will be fully accepted as an American without a hyphen. After the end of the war, a meeting between Fairouz and Lue Ming occurs during which they share their personal experiences with wars as a way of showing solidarity. Lue Ming lost her baby child during the Vietnam War, and Fairouz's mother broke her hip during the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Remzi does not own the power to be considered completely American. His subjectivity is constructed within and as a result of the productive power of the dominant discourses on race and ethnicity; such discourses subject him to relations of power by placing him on a lower rung of the social ladder. His ethnicity is considered a category of second-class citizenship, which puts him under pressure to yearn for personal change rather than social change, thus conforming to the values of the dominant cultural apparatuses. In the case of Remzi, the discursive practices of the dominant culture are operating through demonising Arabs and Muslims in the US media as enemies of America. As a result of the hailing process, Remzi attempts to assert his American citizenship on the one hand, while on the other hand, he shows an interest in reconnecting with his Islamic and Arabic roots. In other words, Remzi demonstrates a vivid instance of fluid, changeable and unstable subjectivity by which two conflicting social positions are constructed for him.

Every time Remzi is called derogatory racial terms, such as “pimp, terrorist, half-nigger, [and] mongrel” (Wallace 2001, 170), he subconsciously recognises such racist and offensive names because they are addressed to him. In this sense, it is really Remzi who is hailed, not someone else. Remzi's recognition of such negative hail is extended to a desperate resistance against racial slurs and stereotypes depicted in mainstream America. To prove that he is neither a terrorist nor an enemy of America, he insists on joining the army, despite his family's disapproval. Remzi is proud to be an American citizen, even though he hates being a hyphenated Arab-American. He confesses to his sister that he is “sick of being a hyphen” (Wallace 2001, 149), but he also tells her he is more American than she is: “Look. I'm sorry about the occupation and that you do not feel you have a homeland, but I do. And it's here. Not over there in some never-never land” (Wallace 2001, 144). Remzi believes joining the army will help overturn the mainstream culture's subjugation of him; for him, being hyphenated signifies the hesitation of mainstream America to fully accept him as an American.

Earlier in the play, Remzi explains why he is in the army. The recruiting officer tells him that being in the military will give him “a sense of quiet pride in himself,” as a soldier, because he has nothing else to be proud of (Wallace 2001, 134). However, he wants to prove to everyone that he is 100% American and to annoy his sister and mother, who oppose him joining the army and killing his fellow Arabs. His mother and sister

disagree with his decision, because they are more aware of their identity; they wear their identity as a badge of honour, rather than viewing it as a liability. Unlike Remzi, however, his mother and sister are not ashamed of adhering to a constituted subject that declares the truth of the self, even though this self is still subjected to power. In Foucault's words, the mother's and daughter's pride in their heritage is a form of resistance to power, yet their "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1978, 95). The mother's and sister's rejection of Remzi's joining the army plays out as a technique of the self, which is deployed to construct themselves as true Palestinians. As postulated by Foucault, when it comes to the formation of subjectivity, power not only operates from the top down, but from the bottom up as well. The mother and her daughter take on the operation of power and emerge as ethical subjects. While it is their subjects who resist the existing mainstream societal norms and beliefs, which may identify and classify other cultures as strange and lower in value and status, their resistance is in fact a recognition of the discursive discourses offered by power, which negatively portray Arab-Americans.

Indeed, Remzi points to the fact that his sister's activism in support of Palestinian freedom is merely a reactionary discourse that emerges as an attempt to encounter a larger, more powerful discourse. Although Fairouz's criticism of US policy in the Middle East is granted by the First Amendment, her belief that Palestinians should have the right to fight for their lands is considered unrightful, and to some degree, illegitimate by the pro-Israeli discourse in the US. Remzi reminds his sister that her activism is useless and stands very small next to US recognition of Israel as a legitimate country. Remzi states, "oh, martyrdom! Why don't you get out of the house and throw a few stones around here! You've got a big mouth, Fairouz, but your world is this small" (Wallace 2001, 149). In other words, Fairouz and her mother are free to disagree with US policies towards the Middle East, yet they must be aware of the limits set by the legal and political dictates of the government. When Fairouz's disagreement with and resistance to American foreign policy arise, the disciplinary power deploys the "metaphysics of power" to classify her as the stereotypical Arab terrorist.

In her quarrel with Remzi, Fairouz desperately tries to convince her brother not to go to the Gulf War by appropriating the same modes of resistance generated by Palestinians against the Israeli occupation. Fairouz reminds her brother that he should be ashamed of his determination to go to the war while Palestinians are abandoned and losing their lives in the occupation:

FAIROUZ: ... Did mother ever tell you how she broke her hip before she came to America?

REMZI: She fell down when she was running away from the soldiers ...

FAIROUZ: No. She was running toward the soldiers. (Wallace 2001, 145)

In this dialogue, Fairouz demonstrates that power is not exclusive to the dominant class, which employs different tools to secure authority and domination over the masses. Within the Palestinians' rejection of domination by and subservience to Israel, Foucault's notion of the inseparability of the exercise of power and the production of resistance comes into play. As a result, power is exercised rather than possessed. Fairouz lectures her brother on how Palestinians back home employ and exercise power through what Foucault (1980, 98) describes as "a net-like organization."

Moreover, Fairouz resists Remzi's refusal to see her as she wants to be seen. She believes his idea of being American does not represent her. When Remzi calls his sister an American girl, she indignantly disagrees and describes herself as neither American nor as a girl, but as "an Arab woman," to which he replies, "You've never even been there" (Wallace 2001, 146). The fact that she has never been outside the US might make her seem like less of an Arab in the eyes of other Americans, and even to many Arabs. By referring to herself as a grown Arab woman, rather than a girl, Fairouz tells her brother to treat her as a woman with a particular identity—the one she chooses—as an Arab, rather than an American.

Fairouz goes further to teach her brother the importance of resisting and standing up to let the voice of their people be heard in order to support what they believe in. She believes Palestine must be independent and free from living under the rule of Israel. For Fairouz, resistance is power, and it drives her to disagree and do something about the destiny of her home country. Fairouz's goal is to change the status quo of the Arab-Israeli conflict by exercising the power of resistance, even though she lives far from Palestine. She believes the Palestinian people have the right to exercise power through resistance, and she wants her brother to disassociate himself from the main source of power that supports Israel's occupation of Palestine. For Fairouz, the power of the oppressor is not absolute and does not hinder resistance. Instead of being passive to the power exercised upon Palestinians by the Israeli government, a mode of resistance must be activated to reject total submission. Fairouz reprimands her brother for his willing submission to the repressive mode of power and for trivialising the productive power exercised by his fellow Palestinians. She asks him about what the "Intifada," or uprising, means to every Palestinian, but he obviously does not care to listen to her:

FAIROUZ: Why don't you learn a little something about—

REMZI: About ruins?

FAIROUZ: The Intifada?

REMZI: What? They're finally letting the women out of their houses to throw stones?
(Wallace 2001, 148)

Fairouz understands what power relations entail more than her brother; relations of power cannot occur without resistance. For Fairouz, power is knowledgeable, which is

realised in the Palestinians' capacity to develop counter-knowledge of the Israeli settlements and the displacement of Palestinian civilians. Throwing stones at the Israeli troops to push their withdrawal from Palestinian lands is empowering, because it facilitates the knowledge that resistance will delay or hinder further displacement of civilians despite its painful consequences.

Moreover, the Palestinian women's involvement in resistance to the Israeli occupation highlights the idea that their resistance to situations of male gender dominance is also possible (Ryan 2016, 39). While Remzi's sexism perpetuates the view that home is the proper place for women, Fairouz's determination to resist the Israeli occupation challenges the gender-role stereotypes that oppress women. According to Foucault (1978, 96), "one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them." Fairouz's activism threatens how Remzi perceives gender roles. Her resistance against the Israeli occupation enables her to assume roles and responsibilities believed to be exclusive to men. In other words, nationalism expands the role of Palestinian women in society and facilitates their activities outside the home.

In contrast to Fairouz, Remzi provides us with a new mode of resistance to the interpellation process operated through ideological state apparatuses, which includes social institutions, day-to-day experiences, and interactions in society. From the outside, Remzi's desire to be accepted as an American implies resistance and an exercise of productive power, but from the inside, it legitimises and perpetuates his interiorised position in the society. Remzi's resistance to racist stereotypes of Arabs and to his placement in a lower status in society does not pose a threat to the status quo; in fact, it reinforces its legitimacy to exercise domination over him. This status quo was shaped by the historical political climate in America, which is not fond of multiculturalism. Remzi experiences resistance within himself by attempting to form a new subjectivity that is in line with the formulations offered by the dominant culture. Remzi's desire to embody the dominant culture's definition of Americanness is a willing affirmation of the interpellation it incites.

Remzi is very aware that even though he is officially an American and able to be called to fight for his country, as an Arab, he is somehow seen as second rate, and he believes even his friend, Craver, is ashamed to be seen with an Arab. Craver refuses to go with Remzi to his parents' village, to which Remzi responds, "Don't like to be seen with Arabs. Look I've got more money than you. You're broke and I'm Arab. That about evens it out, doesn't it?" (Wallace 2001, 133). Remzi takes for granted that Craver's refusal to accompany him to the village is due to his embrace of the ideological apparatuses of mainstream culture that represent Arabs as inferior, and he perceives Craver's refusal as a gesture of placing him into an unfavourable position within the social structure. Remzi opposes this subjection and creates a new positive position for himself. Remzi recognises another type of hailing process, however, by labelling

himself as a wealthy Arab, because he believes having money will make him a better person in the eyes of white Americans.

Remzi's assumption of his great wealth is in fact a perpetuation of "the wealthy Arab" stereotype with its negative connotations, such as greed, corruption, lust, and idleness. Obviously, Remzi uses the productive nature of power in the wrong way. He forms false knowledge that he mistakenly believes will induce pleasure, empower him and help him affect change to eliminate the way he is perceived as inferior. Remzi thinks he promotes a positive subjectivity, but it turns out to be the complete opposite. By claiming that he has more money than Craver, Remzi again reinforces the power of the ideological state apparatuses of the media, the culture and even the military. Remzi believes his wealth and his service in the military will be the best tokens for him to gain acceptance as an American. On the contrary, being a member of the armed forces does not help Remzi eradicate the negative attitudes ascribed to him as an Arab; Lieutenant Boxler describes Remzi as a "sand nigger" and exclaims at the irony of "a sandnigger killing sandniggers" (Wallace 2001, 154).

Remzi has constructed two conflicted identities, and he faces pressures from two different forces. On the one hand, his family attempts to urge him to keep his Arab identity, while on the other hand, his Americanness and patriotism are subject to questioning because he is Arab by origin, unless he can prove otherwise. Remzi clearly wants to be recognised as an American; otherwise, his life would be more difficult than a white American or he would not be trusted in the army. Remzi obviously struggles to reconcile his Palestinian heritage with his chosen identity as an American, and yet he visits the West Bank as a foreign soldier, an outsider. Remzi's lack of a fixed identity creates tension between the socio-political imperatives to embrace a unified self and the lived reality of having overlapping and conflicting identities.

Remzi's experience with his subjectivity shifts between and across two different positions as a Palestinian and as an American. His subjectivity is formed in response and as a resistance to the challenges of living with a dual identity and is shaped by both the dominant discourse of the Anglo-American culture and the ethnicity of his family. The village of his ancestors no longer exists; it is now just flat land with grass and scrubs. He cannot belong to a non-existent village, and he does not have the language, either. He complains, "I was a tourist there. An outsider" (Wallace 2001, 168). He does not really belong to America, and he can no longer belong to Palestine, which is not even a legitimate country in the eyes of the world.

Remzi describes how, back home in Atlanta, he is also seen as an outsider—even as an enemy—when he says, "On the streets of Atlanta I've been called every name you can think of: pimp, terrorist, half-nigger, mongrel, spic, wop, even Jew bastard" (Wallace 2001, 170). Yet they are not bothered about his origins in the refugee camp; they know he is a mixture, but this is not important to them. But he is still confused, describing himself as "[s]ome kind of a something else, born someplace in a somewhere

else than my face said. Or something like that” (Wallace 2001, 170). He calls upon his friend for support by asking, “Do you know what I mean?”; but Craver is no help, flatly stating, “Haven’t any idea” (Wallace 2001, 170). Remzi cannot articulate who he is because he is not yet ready to accept the fluidity of his subjectivity. He is largely affected by the discourse that promotes the subjectivity of the straight white male as a universal identity category.

In terms of subjectivity, Craver is also disciplined and interpellated as inferior because of the place and society into which he is born. He is not of the highest status, and he is even considered inferior among white Americans. For him, joining the army is a way to find a positive social identity. Although he joins the army against his will, he leaves his lower class and does something considered honourable to many Americans. In the dialogue between Boxler and Craver, we know why Craver joins the army:

BOXLER: Let me see your teeth? Hmmm. Trash, are you?

CRAVER: Yes, sir.

BOXLER: Joined up because you couldn’t get a job.

CRAVER: Yes, sir. (Wallace 2001, 156)

In this conversation, Boxler insults Craver, and Craver accepts it. This acceptance is in contrast to Remzi’s denial of his own origins. Wallace demonstrates that the characters in the play try to come to terms to some extent with who they are, even if they are not necessarily happy with that identity. In act 1, scene 11, Craver accepts the identity that society and birth have interpellated him as a “White trash, River boy” (Wallace 2001, 182). Coming from a long line of folks in Appalachia, however, Craver is considered to be a real American, whereas Remzi’s family are very recent migrants. While Craver accepts the officer’s preconceptions about him and concedes to them, and he accepts the designation placed upon him by other Americans, he is in a much better situation than Remzi. Craver is not as confused and frustrated as Remzi, whose family comes from the East to live in the West but does not belong to either. Despite the chasm between Craver’s and Remzi’s racial and cultural identities, both are relegated to a lower social position. In a Foucauldian sense, Craver and Remzi represent “those who cannot be classified, those who escape supervision, those who cannot enter the system of distribution, in short, the residual, the irreducible, the unclassifiable, the inassimilable” (Foucault 2006, 53).

Craver and Remzi both gradually realise the common experience they share as social outcasts, which brings them closer to each other. Craver considers himself a good friend to Remzi. This is shown in the scene where Remzi tries to imagine what it is like to be dead:

REMZI: ... I’m dead.

CARVER: But I'm alive.

REMZI: And glad to be that way.

CRAVER: But you were my buddy. We were friends ... just friends or good friends?
(Wallace 2001, 138)

In this conversation, Craver initiates an identity negotiation with Remzi. At this point, Craver only identifies himself with Remzi as just a “buddy.” Craver is still unsure whether his relationship with Remzi has reached the point where they should consider themselves very important to each other. Despite this uncertainty, the war narrows the gap between the two friends and formulates a joint identity, especially after they face the real horror in the battlefield together; this joint identity is perceived by the army as a homosexual relationship. This is vividly displayed when Boxler calls both Remzi and Craver various terms that are connected with femininity and homosexuality, such as “Barbies” (i.e., dumb girls), “Faggot,” “Sodemite” and “Fairy” (Wallace 2001, 154–158). By calling them such names, he is pressuring them into certain roles, which they might not necessarily choose for themselves. They are fixed into gendered subject positions, in which they are constructed as inferior. If they are gay, then other soldiers, including Boxler, seem even more masculine in comparison. Perhaps the use of “girl” and “faggot” is associated with military training practices aimed at imposing a culture of hyper-masculinity, which is linked to whiteness and American global dominance and power. Craver later seems to accept Boxler’s interpellation of him as a soldier who is less masculine. In act 1, scene 11, Craver reports to Fairouz what he has been told during his service in the military: “Remzi said to me the first time he kissed me: ‘What are you now, Craver Perry? A White Trash River Boy who kisses Arabs and likes it?’ I said, ‘I’m a White Trash, River Boy, Arab-Kissing Faggot’” (Wallace 2001, 182).

At the centre of Wallace’s play is the Foucauldian understanding of the normative and regulatory nature of disciplinary power, which operates to produce and control subjects. Drawing on Foucault’s critique of subjectivity, Judith Butler (1988) clarifies that gendered subjectivity is neither fixed nor essential, but a performative act achieved through the repetition of socially constructed gender norms. On that account, “gender is in no ways stable identity,” rather “it is an identity tenuously constituted in time” (1988, 519). This idea of gender instability is illustrated when Remzi soaks his sister’s foot in hot water and rubs it. He tries to turn her from a deformed girl into a woman without this imperfection. Remzi changes his role to some extent and acts as a caregiver, which is a role more often associated with females (Wallace 2001, 178). Perhaps these characters, like so many others, are in the process of becoming subjects. This is a gradual process, much of which happens whether the individual wants it or is active in the process, just as a female baby gradually develops the characteristics of an adult woman in most cases. As Butler suggests and Wallace demonstrates, gender and subjectivity are not fixed things, but rather a process of becoming. Wallace shows that Remzi’s sexism is constructed within a network of power relations, which themselves are

unstable and reversible, which in turn increases the opportunity for resistance to fixed gender roles.

It is obvious that the experience of power has reached into the very core of the female characters in the play, touching their bodies and impacting their actions, their attitudes, and their discourses. The women in the play have physical defects, which give them a unique identity between other women who enjoy their healthy physical appearance. Amany El-Sawy (2012, 43) shows “how a female body, considered a representative of its nation’s ideology, is often the main target of political violence and violations.” In the play, these women are not just marked by their race, gender, and nationality, but also by their deformed bodies resulting from war; this is demonstrated in the following conversation between Fairouz and Lue Ming:

FAIROUZ: Yes, Fairouz has a devil’s feet.

LUE MING (*chants*): Dirty Arab devil, you go home.

FAIROUZ (*chants*): Dirty Arab devil, you go home. (Wallace 2001, 206)

The conversation reveals some of the racial slurs they have heard: “Arab” and “Gook Boy” (Wallace 2001, 219). Lue Ming also mentions that her mother lost a foot when “she stepped on a mine on her way out for a piss” (Wallace 2001, 141). Here, Wallace makes a connection between Lue Ming’s mother’s injury and Fairouz’s deformed foot. Since both are members of ethnic minorities that are considered inferior by the dominant ethnic group, Lue Ming shares her mother’s story with Fairouz as a way of showing consolation and solidarity. The meeting between these two characters signifies the common problems shared by all the women in the play: They are all marked by their gender, race, and war wounds. The bodies of Fairouz’s mother and Lue Ming are damaged as a result of the war.

Additionally, Fairouz and Lue Ming have a hard time reconciling their female identities with their national ones. Their difficulties stem from the disciplinary language that uses sexuality to exert power and control over others. Fairouz calls herself an Arab, but she lost her virginity when she was 14 years old, which is extremely unacceptable in the Arab world; and because she is marked as a female, she is more likely to be shunned. Fairouz is physically away from her motherland and has never been there, yet she tries to distance herself from American culture. Lue Ming is not sure which country or time zone she is in. Also, it is Lue Ming’s child who dies, which would obviously have damaged her. Lue Ming herself is unlikely to be measured in any statistics kept by the American army, while the men who died as soldiers are listed and remembered. Norat (2002, 160) would have explained her absence as “pervasive cultural condition in which women’s lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all.”

Most of the characters in the play try to find out who they are in a destructive world, a world at war, whether in the Vietnam War, in the First Gulf War, or even in the years

that follow. They are affected by repeated performative acts of gender or ethnic identities. More specifically, these characters did not choose to be born in an area that became a war zone, or to become involved in the actions of soldiers. They did not have the privilege to choose their identity; rather, they were fixed into racialised and gendered subject positions in which they were constructed as inferior. Remzi shows resistance to the process of producing him as an inferior subject when Boxler sees something in him and Craver that they may not even be fully aware of, or at least are not willing to admit.

When Boxler tries to find out who these men are in act 1, scene 6, he again addresses them as females, and not even mature ones: “Where are you girls from?” he asks. Remzi does not tell the truth. At first, he just says, “The States”; but the officer is persistent: “Where are your parents from” (Wallace 2001, 151)? Remzi lies, as we know from an earlier scene that he knows exactly the village on the West Bank where his family comes from. He seems to be attempting to convince the officer that he is purely American, and being in military service reinforces his national identity and his masculinity. Boxler finds it an unsatisfactory answer, which leads him to say in response to Remzi’s denial of knowledge about his family, “That’s not nice. Parents own the knowledge of their roots to their sons. A root must know its origins” (Wallace 2001, 151).

Remzi finally resorts to what Foucault (1978, 101) deems “reverse discourse” “as a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” after his tour in his ancestral village. A reverse discourse is created to operate in resistance to a dominant one. For example, Remzi reflects on some facts about his ancestral past as a strategy to oppose dominant racial discourses; he does just that in act 2, scene 4, when he lists the many achievements of the ancient people of Mesopotamia: the wheel, the number zero, irrigation, and many other things. In doing so, Remzi asserts that Arabs—his people—are inventive and have positively contributed to the world; these inventions and discoveries were the product of a peaceful civilisation. Craver responds negatively to Remzi’s description of his ancestors’ positive contributions to the world, however, when he says, “There are no civilians in Iraq,” which implies that they are no longer useful, merely enemies (Wallace 2001, 195). Craver can see nothing positive about the Arabs, yet he is in love with someone who claims an Arab identity. It is as if he tries to put distance between himself as a white American and Remzi, his lover, as an Arab. This could be a way of coping with their ethnic differences. Wallace demonstrates that, even if they are good friends, Craver’s and Remzi’s different identities remain an issue. They are both subjected to ideological indoctrination from an ideological state apparatus regarding masculinity, ethnicity, and class, which is designed to divide them, rather than bring them together.

Boxler represents his dominant social and ethnic group in the play. He narrates his childhood experience of how the dominant culture’s construction of identities made him normal. In act 2, scene 3, he describes his very normal and privileged childhood to Lue Ming: “I had blocks and crayons, and when it snowed I’d open my mouth to catch the flakes on my tongue. I had a favorite blanket” (Wallace 2001, 190). What defines

Boxler's life as normal is the fact that as a white child, he was at the top of society, compared to children of colour. Boxler states, "I had a father I loved and a mother I loved, and then I went to school" (Wallace 2001, 190). He describes his classroom, where children were arranged according to the colour of their faces: "My teacher made us sit in a formation, with the white faces up front in the first row, then the second and third rows for the olive skins and half-breeds, and the fourth and fifth rows for the dark ones" (Wallace 2001, 190–191).

Here, Foucault's concept of "biopower" comes into play. In the words of Licia Fiol-Matta (2013, 251), "violence in biopower has less to do with overt acts of killing than with a series of institutionalized exclusions and hierarchies designed to guarantee that only some have 'the capacity to live' in a society of normalization." It was normal for Boxler to see children of colour filling in the seats from back to front, and white children filling in the seats from front to back. He sees himself as important when he says, "Did you know they made bumper stickers with my name on it" (Wallace 2001, 190)? Unlike the other characters, Boxler has no problem with his social identity, and he is proud of himself. He was granted more benefits in his childhood, while Lue Ming's child was killed by Calley, an officer who represents Boxler's social and ethnic group.

Conclusion

Naomi Wallace's *In the Heart of America* dramatises the myriad ways in which historical conditions and regulatory discursive practices penetrate individual and collective subjectivities and inform identities, identifications, choices, and acts. Through the critiques that Althusser, Foucault, and Butler offer, this article examines the power interactions throughout the play, including those which are invisible but operative. It is this aspect of the play that Wallace wants to demonstrate most, specifically the intersections of power and whether resistance can be creative, productive, or is in fact weak. One of the great strengths of Wallace's play is its staging of multiple subjectivities and therefore political choices or impossibilities within a single character who in turn encounters another character whose conflicted, regulated, minoritised, or subordinated subjectivity offers points both of intersection and rejection.

At the very least, these intersections expose how subjectivity has been regularised to enforce the status quo of nationalist identity, including dominant military-capitalist interests. Xenophobia, racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism are the true heart of America, even as the citizens marginalised by these biases are most often fighting American imperial wars. The encounters between differently but similarly subjugated people reveal how little the characters recognise the extent to which they have internalised their suppression or seek acceptance and survival in self-defeating ways. These encounters point to the denigration of American freedom as a fundamental value. Lest the audience experience this denigration as unique to this specific historical moment, Wallace layers into her play the ghost of Vietnam atrocities in the spectral characters of William Calley and Lue Ming. However, resistance within systems of

oppression is possible. Raising awareness of the possibilities of resistance is what Wallace's play attempts to do.

References

- Althusser, Louis. 1984. *Essays on Ideology*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.
- During, Simon. 1992. *Foucault and Literature: Towards a Genealogy of Writing*. London: Routledge.
- El-Sawy, Amany Mahmoud. 2012. "Naomi Wallace's *In the Heart of America*: The Portrait of a Woman's Body as an Ideological Text." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 16: 43–56. https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/ESTUDIOS_NORTEAMERICANOS/article/view/4665.
- Fiol-Matta, Licia. 2013. "'Race Woman': Reproducing the Nation in Gabriela Mistral." In *Foucault and Latin America: Appropriations and Deployments of Discursive Analysis*, edited by Trigo Beningo, 247–62. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel. 1979. "Powers and Strategies: An Interview with Michel Foucault by the *Revoltes Logiques* Collective." In *Power, Truth, Strategy: Michel Foucault*, edited by Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton, 49–58. Los Angeles, CA: Feral Publications.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Foucault, Michel. 2006. "21 November 1973." In *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973–1974*, edited by Jacques Lagrange, Arnold Davidson and Graham Burchell, 39–62. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gates, Henry Louis. 1993. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kerr, Kathy. 2006. "Race, Nation and Ethnicity." In *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Patricia Waugh, 362–84. London: Oxford University Press.
- Medalle, Rovie Herrera. 2018. "Two Decades Fighting Inhuman Natures: Naomi Wallace's *In the Heart of America* (1994)." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 22: 145–63. <https://doi.org/10.12795/REN.2018.i22.07>.
- Norat, Gisela. 2002. *Marginalities: Diamela Eltit and the Subversion of Mainstream Literature in Chile*. Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press.

Ryan, Caitlin. 2016. *Bodies, Power and Resistance in the Middle East: Experiences of Subjectification in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Unwin, Stephen. 2014. *The Complete Brecht Toolkit*. London: Nick Hern Books.

Wallace, Naomi. 2001. *In the Heart of America and Other Plays*. New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781636700748.00000034>.