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Towards a Minor Theatre: The Task of the Playmaker in *Our Country's Good*

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ABSTRACT

Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Our Country's Good* (1988), as an adaptation of Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker* (1987), traces how a group of convicts, who are isolated in an eighteenth-century Australian penal colony, work together to produce George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* in celebration of the birthday of King George III. Arguably, *Our Country's Good* is characterized by a kind of metatheatrical minorization of the major, a subtraction of the official State representatives, such as history, power structure, society, language, and text; the play is characterized by a polemicizing the sense of other spaces, and a form of threshold traversing that is rendered possible in the context of translation/adaptation and dramatic text/performance text in the theatre. This paper aims to analyze Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* in terms of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's theories—such as the concepts of deterritorialization, reterritorialization, lines of flight, and minor theatre—in order to explore how the dispossessed convicts traverse the threshold of "becoming other" via the historicized immigration of transportation, which opens up lines of flight and generates the unceasing mapping of a new life. I would like to suggest that Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* presents a subtle counterpoint between the major theatre and the minor theatre: whereas a major theatre seeks to represent and to reproduce the power structure of the dominant state apparatus, the minor theatre operates by disseminating, varying, subverting the structures of the state and major theatre. Such a contrapuntal agon finally leads to the celebration of the minor theatre, a theatre that works to highlight the recurrence of difference, and the recurrence of theatrical performance that is not a repetition of the same, but a series of variations.

KEY WORDS: Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, deterritorialization/reterritorialization, the minor theatre

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邁向少數劇場：《吾國吾民》中造戲者之任務

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摘　要

渥坦貝克(Timberlake Wertenbaker)之《吾國吾民》(*Our Country's Good*, 1988)改編自肯尼利(Thomas Keneally)之《造戲者》(*The Playmaker*, 1987)，敘述十八世紀時一群流放至澳洲流刑地的英國罪犯，如何因應時局，在此窮山惡水的天涯流刑異域編排法夸爾(George Farquhar)之《招募官》(*The Recruiting Officer*)以慶祝英王喬治三世之壽辰。本文以為《吾國吾民》旨在挪用轉化多數/主流劇場之元素，藉以對抗國家機器之表表徵，舉凡歷史、權力結構、語言、或文本。本文旨在透過德勒茲(Gilles Deleuze)與瓜達希(Félix Guattari)之理論——如脫離疆界(deterritorialization)、再建疆界(reterritorialization)、少數劇場(minor theatre)、逃逸路線(lines of fligh)——俾以彰顯這些顛沛流離、人權尊嚴蕩然無存的罪犯們如何透過罪犯少數劇場之機制，得以跨越藩籬，「蛻化」而成「他者」，將原本是剝奪身份家國認同之流放，轉變而成聚集異質流量、再創新機的逃逸路線。《吾國吾民》饒富多數劇場與少數劇場之對位角力，其中所彰顯的少數劇場展演，絕非一味的因襲主流文化之情節、語言、或文本，而是透過一系列的差異性的重覆，藉以呈現連續之消解與變異。

關鍵詞：渥坦貝克、《吾國吾民》、德勒茲、瓜達希、脫離疆界/再建疆界、少數劇場

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Introduction

In 1988, when Australia celebrated its bicentennial, the history of transportation of criminals and the treatment of Australian Aborigines became an embarrassing memory. As Peter Buse points out, there was nothing worth celebrating about "the 'dumping' of thousands of criminals or the devastation of an indigenous population" (154). Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Our Country's Good* was first performed in 1988, curiously coinciding with the bicentennial celebration. *Our Country's Good*, as an adaptation of Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker* (1987), traces how a group of convicts, who are isolated in an eighteenth-century Australian penal colony, work together to produce George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* in celebration of the birthday of King George III. *Our Country's Good* shares with Keneally's novel a desire to shed light on the "penumbral darkness" of early Australian history (Hughes xii; qtd. in Buse 155). The 1789 convict production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, directed by Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark, is a matter of public record. Fact or fiction, this historical story serves as a paradigm of Wertenbaker's thematic preoccupations with diaspora and immigration, transformation and difference, lines of flight, and deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The play questions not simply "Who and What is English," nor does it simply redefine "the Anglo-Australian connection" in the past, present, or future. Instead, *Our Country's Good* interrogates whose country, whose identity, and whose history, both by means of form and content. Arguably, *Our Country's Good* is characterized by a kind of metatheatrical minorization of the major, a subtraction of the official State representatives, such as history, power structure, society, language, and text; the play is characterized by a polemicizing of the sense of other spaces, and a form of threshold traversing that is rendered possible in the context of translation/adaptation and dramatic text/performance text in the theatre.

Since the first production of *Our Country's Good* in 1988, critics have tended to focus on the function of, or the debate on, theatre in society: the theatre is described as an expression of civilization and it is championed for its potential as a mechanism of cultural rehabilitation for the convict. However, as Susan Carlson points out, there are two critical receptions and readings of the therapeutic theory of the theatre in *Our Country's Good* (Carlson 138-9).

Optimistic critics, such as Ann Wilson, tend to affirm Wertenbaker's theatre-as-therapy experiment, to celebrate the triumphant expressions of the role and function of theatre in society, as, in the course of theatrical production, individual self-worth develops and community evolves. However, there are more negative recent readings which challenge the play's complicity in underwriting imperialism and colonialism. As Esther Beth Sullivan claims, by performing Farquhar's classical drama *The Recruiting Officer* on the occasion of the King's birthday, the convicts are recruited as willing rather than resistant participants in the Empire's colonial project. Furthermore, Sullivan maintains that by glorifying the theatre's collective as well as corrective/redemptive humanizing power, the dominant ideology is produced and reproduced both on stage and off-stage at the expense of social criticism (such as of the brutalized, impoverished situation in the penal colony).[1] This conceptual friction between the liberation/containment debate on the power of the theatre indicates the intrinsically ambivalent and subversive nature of *Our Country's Good*.

However, the interrelations in Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* between power, control, authority, surrender, subversion, resistance, and presence and absence are more nuanced than are generally recognized. Surely, the defense of the theatre as a societal institution with ideological functions has been hailed overwhelmingly by critics, and even endorsed by Wertenbaker herself.[2] Yet, it is the defense of the minor theatre that is more nuanced than what has been previously recognized. As distinct from previous critical studies, this paper aims to analyze Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* in terms of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's theories—such as the concepts of deterritorialization, reterritorialization, lines of flight, and minor theatre—in order to explore how the dispossessed convicts traverse the threshold of "becoming other" via the historicized immigration of transportation, which opens up lines of flight and generates the unceasing

[1] For detailed analysis, see Sullivan 139-45.

[2] In a 1997 unpublished interview, Wertenbaker claimed that: "*Our Country's Good* was a plea for the value of the Theatre and because the characters discovered this value for themselves, it ended up an up note. *Three Birds* was a plea for the value of Art, but showed how Art is also corrupted by the price put on it by a cynical society." Quoted in Carolson 138. Wertenbaker also reprints a series of letters from the inmate-actors attesting to the ways of theatre-making as "one of the only real weapons against the hopelessness of these places." Letters from Joe White to Timberlake Wertenbaker, dated April 1989, appended to *Timberlake Wertenbaker: Plays I* (166).

mapping of a new life. I would like to suggest that Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* presents a subtle counterpoint between the major theatre and the minor theatre: whereas a major theatre seeks to represent and to reproduce the power structure of the dominant state apparatus, the minor theatre operates by disseminating, varying, and subverting the structures of the state and major theatre. Such a contrapuntal agon finally leads to the celebration of the minor theatre, a theatre that works to highlight the recurrence of difference, and the recurrence of theatrical performance that is not a repetition of the same, but a series of variations (Fortier 3-6).[3]

The Task of the Playmaker

Critics tend to complain that in *Our Country's Good*, Wertenbaker's stage space is given over to the preparation for or the preliminary to action, rather than to action itself (Brustein 30). When read in relation to Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* and Keneally's *The Playmaker* as major texts, Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* sets the audience/reader a profusion and congestion of verbal and nonverbal challenges which are involved in the concept of "minor." By means of theatrical adaptation and via a radical rewriting or restaging of an existing work, *Our Country's Good* offers more opportunities for the project of deterritorialization, and of the unravelling of fixed, hegemonic meanings, which have been advocated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as the concept of minor literature, or minor theatre.

In their study of Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari mapped out a genealogy of minor literature. According to these critics, minor literature is a kind of work constructed by minorities within a major literature, such as when a Czech Jew writes in German, an Ouzbekian writes in Russian, or an Irishman writes in English or French (*Kafka* 16-19). A major literature is a literature of masters: oppressive, interiorizing, centripetal, and homogenizing. In contrast, a minor literature arises from the reactions of the minority within a major literature and culture, and moves to be a collective project of becoming,

[3] In another paper of mine, entitled "Diasporas on the Move: Lines of Flight in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*," included as a book chapter in the forthcoming book *Writing Difference: Nationalism, Literature and Identity*, I focus my discussion on the alternative history lived and witnessed not only by the displaced convicts but also by the colonized Aborigines. I argue that *Our Country's Good* plays with the diasporic and multicultural practices of home, nation, and identity, so as to challenge the politics of identity via social spatialities of inside/outside, centre/margin, close/open, foreign/local, or colonial/colonized relationship.

diversification, and deterritorialization. That is, a minor literature shall not be merely identified with or restricted to any specific and actualized political or ethnic minorities; instead, it is to extend to any possible community in which there is no other master to be privileged, no other category to be followed (be it literary, cultural, political, or whatever). Instead, the minor literature works to demolish any single ethnic affiliation, or prefabricated cultural identity, and aims to induce "a series of variations" (Fortier 2).

Mark Fortier further maps out the trajectory of Deleuze's and Guattari's movement from a minor literature to a minor theatre. Theatre is by nature engaged with an assemblage of more systems of expression than other literary genres, and thus offers more fertile soil for "minorization," for lines of flight away from "the hegemony of the word and verbal meaning" (Fortier 3). Furthermore, theatrical adaptation, which involves a less constrained rewriting or a more radical restaging of an existing work, renders possible not only a process of "the unraveling of hegemonic structures of identity" (Fortier 1-2), but also a new assemblage of bodies, a new "haecceity," and a new becoming (Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues* 120).

As critics also note, most of the titles of the play's twenty-two scenes are related to the diverse twenty-two characters in different narrative contexts. For example: *A Lone Aboriginal Australian Describes the Arrival of the First Convict Fleet in Botany Bay on January 20, 1788* (1.2.), *The Authorities Discuss the Merits of the Theatre* (1.6.), *John Wisehammer and Mary Brenham Exchange Words* (1.10.), *The Question of Liz* (2.10.), and so on. Instead of framing one unified history around a single protagonist, Wertenbaker violates dramatic conventions by having subjects and narrative lines revolve around a heterogeneous set of characters (Roth 166; Bligh 177). Characteristically, the play is imbued with senses of hybridity, syncretism, multiplicity, and openness. *Our Country's Good* foregrounds a proliferation of the transnational, transcultural, multilingual, and multiethnic spatialites which are defined as much by what they lack as by what they include. It follows that the play (with its problems concerning the concepts of displacement, dislocation, and identity fragmentation), reconstitutes the other beginnings, endings, and continuums of the human histories of exile and diaspora.

A sense of contrapuntal agon/debate is manifested in the structural arrangement of the play, which is composed of two acts, each with eleven scenes. In the fashion of a diptych—a hinged two-tableted

framework—Wertenbaker has orchestrated such an agon as follows: "The Authorities Discuss the Merits of the Theatre" (Act I, Scene 6) is juxtaposed with "The Meaning of Plays" (2.7.); "The First Rehearsal" (1.11.) is counterpointed with "The Second Rehearsal" (2.5.); while "The Question of Liz" (2.10.) with the pre-show "Backstage" (2.11.), to create a multiperspectival portrait of the minor theatre.

As Sullivan has observed, "to act or not to act" is the overwhelming question of *Our Country's Good* (141). The convict production of *The Recruiting Officer* is the product of a wrestling for power. It is an experiment in social engineering and the theory of social contract. Set in an isolated, nineteenth-century colonial outpost, when a hierarchical but precarious order is struggling for its own survival, a theatrical project is proposed. In terms of Philip the Governor, it is likely that the convicts might be diverted from their troubles and troubling behavior if they could learn to love such things as the theatre. And the theatre is expected to be able to level hierarchical distinction and discrimination, or to create a privileged space in which people of the penal colony would no longer confront each other as "despised prisoner" and "hated gaolers" (1.6. 206; Sullivan 142). Above all, the theatre is Philip's vehicle for advocating Enlightenment liberalism and for founding a more civilized outpost for the further colonial expansion of the Empire. "Some of these men will have finished their sentence in a few years," the Governor explains, and "[they] will become members of society again, and help create a new society in this colony" (1.6. 206; Sullivan 142). However, the competition between the civil and military authorities within the camp makes Philip's theory of social contract appear subversive to some other officers, some of whose responses include: "insubordination, disobedience, revolution," "waste of time," and "order [becoming] disorder"(1.6. 209, 210).

This scene reproduces a world of the majority. The authorities are heard speaking in the languages of platform oratory and mannered speech to harbor a different consciousness such as that of machination, Machiavellianism, or a Fascist police-state with a façade of utopian democracy and Enlightenment liberalism. Stephen Weeks points out that the convict production of *The Recruiting Officer* is "the product of power" (Weeks 149), and the production is a major theatre that is complicitious with the state. Philip the Governor wants the play done to serve his own political concerns. First, the convicts are supposed to be disciplined and recruited into the imperialistic programme of

global colonialism. The theme and plot of *The Recruiting Officer* evolves around Captain Plume's and Sergeant Kite's mission to recruit new soldiers for the King's army for military service at home and abroad. Likewise, the major plot of the convict production is built around discipline, obedience, capitulation, and recruitment. At one point in the play, Philip exhorts Ralph:

> What is a statesman's responsibility? To ensure the rule of law. But the citizens must be taught to obey the law of their own will. I want to rule over responsible human beings, not tyrannize over a group of animals. I want there to be a contract between us, not a whip on my side, terror and hatred on theirs.
> (2.2. 246)

However, there is another hidden agenda behind such a civilizing theory of social contract. As a matter of fact, Philip the Governor is taking the plunge because he needs the convict playmaking to test the merit of his leadership, as well as to secure the success of his political career (which is threatened by the likelihood of mutiny from the military officers), and to validate the social order and the survival of the penal colony (which is under the shadow of a shortage of supplies and imminent mutiny).

Therefore, the convict production planned by Philip the Governor is the very manifestation of the major theatre, which is characterized by a spectacle of European civilization that ranges from Socrates's slave boy, Plato's great dialogues, all the way through Rousseau's and Locke's social theories, and finally to Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* and Keneally's *The Playmaker* (*Our Country's Good*, Act II, Scene 2). Eventually, Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark, who is initially anxious for notice and promotion rather than interested in the humanity of the convicts, claims to direct the convicts in a play to perform the exercise of "remembering England together." In their orchestration of latent feelings of "nation-ness" or "nationalism" (via the motif of "we'll remember England together"), the marines are heard:

> RALPH. (*over them*) I speak about her, but in a small way this could affect all the convicts and even ourselves, we could forget our worries about the supplies, the hangings and the floggings, and think of ourselves at the theatre, in London with our wives and children, that is, we could, euh—

PHILIP. Transcend—
RALPH. Transcend the darker, euh—transcend the—
JOHNSON. Brutal—
RALPH. The brutality—remember our better nature and remember—
COLLINS. England.
RALPH. England. (1.6. 208)

The exercise of "remembering England together" via playmaking is performed not so much out of humanist concerns as for political praxes. When the outcast characters learn to act in socially acceptable ways, hunger, poverty, class conflict, crime, and punishment recede from the foreground. These issues give way to the upstaging of the ideological recruitment of "our country's good"—a great cultural heritage, a colonial enterprise, or an imperialistic commonwealth (Sullivan 144). "We will remember England together" here in this Australian penal colony should not be read as the realization of cultural utopianism; instead, it signifies the monolithic, hegemonic "England" or "English-ness" constructed by imperialist centrism.

Wertenbaker's play directly refers to George Farquhar and Thomas Keneally, who are white, male, European, privileged, and authorial, and who speak the King's language. It is by means of employing the King's language that civil obedience and order is expected to be maintained. In terms of Deleuze's and Guattari's concepts, this is the very realization of the "the constant or standard" of the major theatre: it is "the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language" so as to assume "a state of power or domination" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 105).

However, a counter minorization is taking place and eventually realized in the convict theatre. The convict theatre will summon all the concerned marginals into a new assemblage to resist, to dislocate, to deterritorialize the major language and the major theatre. In "The Meaning of Plays" (2.7.), various characters bring different levels of commitment to their participation in the major theatre. In this scene, the convicts are seen learning their lines for the play, and these lines are constantly interrupted or amputated by debased variations in a subversive manner. For example, the motif and ideology of courtly love, which is celebrated in the Silvia/Plume relationship, is sneered at and juxtaposed with sexual vulgarity:

> MARY. Her [Silvia's] interest is to love.
> DABBY. A girl will love the first man who knows how to open her legs. She's called a whore and ends up here. I could write scenes, Lieutenant, women with real lives, not these Shrewsbury prudes. (2.7. 258)

Dabby even refuses to say the lines which she considers "stupid," while Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark, the steward of the major theatre, can only insist weakly, saying that "[it's] written by the playwright and you have to say it" (2.7. 263). Dabby further criticizes Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* as "a silly play" with no "interesting people in it," and claims that she wants to see and to be seen in a play that shows life as people know it (2.7. 261, 262). Likewise, Wisehammer offers another prologue written by himself to replace Farquhar's. This replacement occurs because the original prologue is rather anachronistic, with lines such as "In ancient times, when Helen's fatal charm," and he feels that it "won't make any sense to the convicts" (2.7. 258). Arguably, Farquhar's language is a literary language that is mired in a heavily Latinate/Greek vocabulary and origin; it is a "dead" English "buried" in the crypt of its classical roots and word-systems. Arguably, Farquhar's play is composed of words that are not in referential life and use, of words learned or obsolete which look back to ancient roots that do not stir with current life. Wisehammer therefore claims that "[a] play should make [people] understand something new" (2.7. 262). Obviously, the convict theatre is undergoing the process of haecceity, as the convicts resist being subsumed by the literature of masters in the major theatre, which is transcendental, indifferent, oppressive, hard, and ungiving. Eventually, the convict theatre will become minorized for the convicts' own good.

The process of becoming minor, or the fleeting moment of "the unraveling of hegemonic structures of identity," can be recognized briefly in the monologue uttered by John Arscott, the convict who plays Sergeant Kite:

> I don't want to play myself. When I say Kite's lines I forget everything else. I forgot the judge said I'm going to have to spend the rest of my natural life in this place getting beaten and working like a slave. I can forget that out there it's trees and burnt grass, spiders that kill you in four hours and snakes. I don't have to think about what happened to Kable, I don't have

> to remember the things I've done, when I speak Kite's lines I don't hate any more. I'm Kite. I'm in Shrewsbury. (2.7. 261-62)

Kate Bligh points out that for Arscott acting is "a liberating process through which he can transcend himself and circumstances" (Bligh 183). And Peter Buse suggests that Arscott remains "the ideal recruit" to Governor Philip's proposal of the redemptive power of high culture—the convict life that is dominated by crime and punishment will be redeemed and elevated temporarily when he enters into the theatre (Buse 162). However, I maintain that Arscott's monologue highlights a condition of obscurity, a moment of painful suspense in which one feels on the margins of a society and feels held in an interval, where experiences of the past must be forgotten, the life of the present is meaningless, and the contour of the future is unpredictable and uncertain. Only in the convict theatre will a process of becoming be rendered possible, through which Arscott and his convict playmakers will have become different from themselves, have become a new party of individuals, a collective of minority that resists any absolute or formulated analysis in terms of personal, ethnic, hierarchical, or national identity.

"The Authorities Discuss the Merits of the Theatre" (1.6.) is juxtaposed with "The Meaning of Plays" (2.7.), and this diptych evokes the merits of a minor theatre, which is an assemblage of a minority consciousness that triggers the machinery of minorization, and induces a series of variations (Fortier 1-3). Indeed, this convict theatre presents a collective of minority consciousness, which includes the European downtrodden Outcast (the convicts), the non-European colonialized Outsider (the Aboriginal Australian and Black Caesar the Madagascan), and the gender and ethnic victimized Other (the women convicts and Wisehammer the Jew). However, in terms of Deleuze and Guattari, such a project of becoming minor is open to everyone, and is not necessarily restricted to specific or actualized minorities.[4] In this scene, the presence of the mythic figure of the Aboriginal Australian who

[4] According to Kate Bligh, Wertenbaker succeeds in distinguishing herself from the conventional dramaturgy which represents the opposition of the oppressor and the victimized in a kind of vertical hierarchy. Instead, Wertenbaker tends to have her characters perceived along a more horizontal spectrum—as complex individuals struggling in the interface of the individual and the society, caught between the nature and will of the individual on the one hand, and the requirements of social conformity and survival on the other (192). To me, such comments partially reveal the character of a rhizome (a structure without hierarchy) as well as a new haecceity (a process of becoming and variation) in Wertenbaker's plays.

observes detachedly the colony's activities dramatizes not only the complicity of Enlightenment philosophy with imperial colonialism, but also the subversive minorization of the entire colonialistic project.

The Burrow Space of the Convict Theatre

Like Philip the Governor and Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark, the convicts are initially motivated by self-interest to participate in the playmaking. The convict theatre is expected by the convict players to offer an opportunity for self-assertion, self-expression, social acceptance, escapism, or safety (Dymkowski 124, 133; n. 6). Yet, the collective concern of the performance eventually goes beyond the limited scope and vision of temporary acting of make-believe; it instead creates a collaborative enterprise between the convict theatre and the burrow space. I suggest that Wertenbaker's convict theatre functions in some ways similar to Kafka's version, or Deleuze's and Guattari's concept, of the "burrow." According to Deleuze and Guattari, the burrow is an example of a rhizome; it is a structure of escape, and within it nothing is "beautiful" or "loving" as there are "underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 15). For Deleuze and Guattari, to be "rhizomorphous" is to "produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 15). Arguably, Wertenbaker does not turn a deaf ear to the violence and oppression that threatens the convicts and their theatre. Moreover, the convict theatre is not based upon illusion either to ward off evil, to voice the outcry from the underground, or to mimic, to define that part of the self by means of its very absence. Instead, Wertenbaker's convict theatre maps out a rhizomorphous negotiation of space, a process of territoriality between the major and the minor, and it is best prefaced by "The First Rehearsal" (1.11.) and "The Second Rehearsal" (2.5.).

"The First Rehearsal," which ends the First Act, is designed as the counterpart to "The Second Rehearsal," which is situated in the center of the Second Act. Both scenes are characterized by the appearance of hordes of messengers, judges, state-police, or a juridical-political "assemblage" of the machine of the state and law, which keeps haunting the convicts and their theatre. In the first rehearsal, Ralph and his convict players are seen gathering together to secure a space and time for their rehearsal. However, their rehersal

is sneered at and interrupted by Major Ross, the active commander of the colony's military forces as well as the hostile representative of the majority:

> ROSS. Rehearsing! Rehearsing!
> CAMPELL. Tssaach. Rehearsing.
> ROSS Lieutenant Clark is rehearsing. Lieutenant Clark asked us to give the prisoners two hours so he could rehearse, but what has he done with them? What? [. . .]
> ROSS. While you were rehearsing, Arscott and Kable slipped into the woods with three others, so five men have run away and it's all because of your damned play and your so-called thespists. And not only have your thespists run away, they've stolen food from the stores for their renegade escapade, that's what your play has done. (1.11. 238)

Major Ross, bitterly yet acutely points out the subversive burrow space that is created by the "two-hours-rehearsal" within the rigid constraints of penal authority. The license for rehearsal and for playmaking obviously encourages "renegade escapade," as well as various kinds of contestation of orthodoxy within an absolutist regime (Weeks 155). Ross successfully blocks out the flow of the minor theatre by arresting Wisehammer (who is accused of being guilty of being Jewish, and of being seen in the company of Kable) and Liz (who is accused of being seen in the company of Kable, and then of stealing food from the stores). After such an assault by the majority, Ralph and the convicts are left "in the shambles of their rehearsal" (1.11. 239).

Major Ross appears again at the second rehearsal and he launches his assaults against the burrow space of the minor theatre more fiercely and brutally. Angered by the "modest proposal" of Ralph the director of the convict theatre ("rehearsals need to take place in the utmost . . . privacy, secrecy . . . The actors are not yet ready to be seen by the public"; 2.5. 251), Ross makes a public spectacle of humiliating the convict players: Sideway is required to expose his scarred back as a display of penal colony torture and Dabby is ordered to go down on all fours, wagging her tail and barking like a dog. When Ross tries to sexually harass Mary by insisting that Mary lift her skirt higher to reveal the tattoo on her inner thigh, Sideway abruptly and boldly turns to Liz and starts acting, then all of a sudden Ross—the majority—is faced with the words of Farquhar: "this I am sure of, I shall meet

with less cruelty among the most barbarous nations than I have found at home" (2.5.252). This is the fleeting moment when Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*—the King's literature and language—is used as an act of resistance. It is the first attempt of the underground stems, also known as rhizomes, which try to connect themselves with the roots or the trees of the majority to put them into strange new uses (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 15). Stunned by such a staged dramatized fightback, Major Ross then resumes by commanding Captain Campbell to start Arscott's punishment. The scene ends with Liz losing her lines and dropping down onto the ground, and there is a dead silence that is punctuated by sounds of beating and of Arscott's cries (2.5. 253).

Yet, insofar as the inhumanness of the diabolical powers of the state is seen enshrouding the penal colony, there appears at the same time a line of escape in the convict theatre. It is the process of reterritorialization taking place inside the system of submission and authorities. In "The Question of Liz" (2.10.), when Liz is brought before the colony court on charges of having stolen food, she refuses to speak. The possible reasons for her silence may be as follows: she is guilty, as Ross insists; or she adheres to the convict code of honour and does not want to beg for her life, as Ralph defends her; or she no longer believes in the process of justice, as Judge David Collins speculates. Her failure to speak in her own defense will be eventually taken by the court as an admission of guilt, and she will be condemned to death by hanging:

> RALPH. Morden, you must speak.
> COLLINS. For the good of the colony.
> PHILIP. And of the play. (2.10. 271)

Upon Philip's appeal to speak for the good "of the play," Liz gives up her silence and adopts the eloquence of Farquhar's language to reclaim not only her own dignity but also that of the minor theatre before a group of delegates of the majority: "Your Excellency, I will endeavour to speak Mr. Farquhar's lines with the elegance and clarity their own worth commands" (2.10. 272).

Some critics tend to praise this scene as the play's most triumphant moment in terms of the redemptive power of the theatre, or of the relationship between language and identity (Wilson 32; Carlson 138). Conversely, critics such as Esther Beth Sullivan argue that the scene symbolizes the willing subjugation of the dissidents to the dominant ideology of the ruling class.

Sullivan maintains that Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* is the epitome of classical literature, and since it is performed on the occasion of the King's birthday, the convict performance is viewed as the emblem of imperialist recruitment in this far-flung penal colony. That is, by underwriting imperialism and colonialism, *Our Country's Good* ends up reproducing and collaborating with the dominant ideology at the expense of a social critique (Sullivan 142-144). Liz, who is described by Philip the Governor as "one of the most difficult women in the colony," and who is "[lower] than a slave, full of loathing, foul mouthed, desperate" (2.2. 245), is the ideal recruit to the Governor's colonial enterprise—the establishment of a new homogeneous, totalizing community/nation which will celebrate England and the English-ness as its ideal. Liz becomes complicit in imperialist colonization.

Critical voices like these highlight the unfinalizing, subversive, and dialogic nature inherent in the theatre of *Our Country's Good*: the play uses the dynamics of rehearsal and playmaking to expose the ideological tug-of-war between containment and resistance. I suggest instead that "The Question of Liz" realizes the glory and the revolutionary force of the minor theatre: when Liz breaks her long silence and turns the courtroom into a theatre, it is the very realization of Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of "the utilization of English," the appropriation of the King's language by way of theatrical "exhilaration" and "overdetermination" in order to bring about minorizing reterritorialization (*Kafka* 19).

Intriguingly, this scene—"The Question of Liz"—involves Liz's questioning of languages, in terms of how to deterritorialize the major language. Let us compare this scene with Liz's monologue, which starts the Second Act and which, characteristic of "eighteenth-century street slang," is the saga or her/stories of female victimization by the patriarchal male: betrayed by her father, pushed into prostitution by her brother, brought into the pickpocket trade by her lover, transported to the penal colony by the King's law, and condemned to death by hanging by the colony's tribunal (Weeks 153). In the scene she has with Wisehammer and Black Ceasar, which involves the issue of nationality and identity, she insists that "[you] have to think English. I hate England. But I think English." Later in the scene when Arscott yells: "There is no escape," then Liz confirms: "That is English. You know things" (2.1. 241, 242). That is, Liz argues that "English" or "English-ness" has always been used by men of the state to suppress and to

exploit groups of the minority, such as women and people of lower class origin or who come from different countries. In the play, English is the signifier of the majority, which is characteristically oppressive, steadfast, and diehard. However, in "The Question of Liz" Liz starts to recognize the regenerative or subversive power of language in the burrow space of the minor theatre. By becoming fluent in the major language ("Your Excellency, I will endeavour to speak Mr. Farquhar's lines with the elegance and clarity their own worth commands"), by "speaking English," Liz transforms Farquhar and his drama, which is as less the emblem of the major literature and more as pure material, and which is susceptible to the incessant appropriations or corrosions of meaning by the actor or audience.

Towards a Minor Theatre

Take the final scene as an example. Indeed, the last scene may be regarded as the crown of Wertenbaker's minor-theatrical politics. Critics such as Stephen Weeks notice a curious imperative—"the show must go on"—in the last scene, which is entitled "Backstage" (152). Weeks then labels the scene as a "backstage comedy," which is pregnant with elements of self-reflexivity, such as the pre-show nervousness, the adjusting of costumes, the revising/cutting of the prologue, the role-playing, audience appeal, and so on (152). Or, as some reviewers complain, within a few lines, Farquhar's play begins, and Wertenbaker's concludes, and "one ends up feeling cheated out of enjoying the full version of *The Recruiting Officer*" in that the audience only sees rehearsal snippets (Brustein 30). Indeed, throughout the play, key lines or phrases from Farquhar are often repeated with variations. What Wertenbaker aims to do is not to reproduce Keneally's *The Playmaker*, or to restage the performance of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* in the penal colony. Instead, by using "backstage" to end *Our Country's Good*, the playwright tries to emphasize that the convict theatre as the minor theatre not only ceases to represent or reproduce dominant ideology and power structure, but also contributes to the becoming of a minor consciousness (Fortier 6). The backstage is the assemblage of previously blocked desires of the outside, of rhizomes, and of immanence. The "Backstage" scene actualizes a Nomadology, which is an alternative to and the opposite of the authorized

staged History.[5] Wertenbaker's backstage is not a world to reproduce, but a burrow space in which to assemble in nomadic heterogeneity to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities of lines of flight (*Kafka* 13).

Indeed, Wertenbaker's backstage dramaturgy is much more complex than critics have perceived. In terms of Deleuze's and Guattari's theory, this backstage scene actualizes an immanent process of desire, a continuum made up of contiguities. Above all, the contiguous is not opposed to the continuous, instead, it is a "local" and "indefinitely prolongable" version of the continuous (*Kafka* 51). First, it is seen when Ralph Clark prevails upon Wisehammer to cut his satirical prologue, because it is too "political," too "provocative":

> From distant climes o'er wide-spread seas we come,
> Though not with much éclat or beat of drum,
> True patriots all; for be it understood,
> We left our country for our country's good;
> No private views disgraced our generous zeal,
> What urg'd our travels was our country's weal,
> And none will doubt but that our emigration
> Has prov'd most useful to the British nation. (2.11. 279)[6]

Initially, when Wisehammer first shows Clark his working prologue in the scene of "The Meaning of Plays" (2.7.), the comment in response from Clark is that: "I do like it. Perhaps it needs a little more work. It's not Farquhar" (2.7. 259). In the face of Clark's objections, Wisehammer can only emphasize the local, the diasporic appropriateness of his prologue: "It would mean more to convicts" than something out-of-tune, out-of-date like "In ancient times, when Helen's fatal charms" (2.7. 259, 258). Eventually, the prologue will not be

[5] Here in my discussion of the "Backstage" scene, I am applying Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of the rhizome in the introductory chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* (3-25).

[6] Some critics attribute the above famous prologue to George Barrington, a pickpocket who was sentenced in 1790 to seven years transportation to Australia, and who was believed to have written the prologue to the first production in Sydney. However, some consider that the prologue was composed by another person named Henry Carter, a hack journalist in London, well after he had heard that the play had been performed (Hughes 340). According to Peter Buse, the prologue was initially written for a metropolitan audience as a satirical broadside aimed at the "inferior denizens of the far-off colony." Buse further claims that, by recycling the doggerel written by Carter the London journalist to serve its purpose of the sentimental self-expression of the convicts, *Our Country's Good* re-appropriates "the language of the colonizers on behalf of the colonized" (165).

used in that night's performance. However, as Sideway proposes, Wisehammer's prologue will be used in the Sideway Theatre which he is going to establish, and which will recruit the convict players in the next day's auditions (2.11. 275). The convict performance is no longer a question of the convicts' becoming major (their subjugation to the majority by means of coercion or redemption), but a collaborative enterprise of a new "haecceity," and a new becoming. And this becoming is not presented as a simple imitation or adoption of the elite culture of the dominant community, but as an assemblage of the minor consciousness through transversals; it is not a physical escape of trajectory, or movements in "extension," but as movements in "intensities" or "intension," or as lines of flight in "becoming" (Bogue 171).

According to Deleuze and Guattari, fleeing is useless movement in space, a movement of false liberty; while in contrast, flight is affirmed when it is a stationary flight, a flight of intensity, or a way out (*Kafka* 13). Let us examine the change, the becoming of John Arscott. Arscott, who planned his "renegade escapade" with other prisoners in vain, is seen "in chains," "bent over, facing away" at the very beginning of Act Two (2.1. 240). He is afflicted by the impossibility of escaping this Australian penal colony which is a "foreign upside-down desert." Tortured with perceptions of barrenness, entrapment, and disorientation, Arscott keeps yelling: "There's no escape!" "There's no escape I tell you" (2.1. 242). The process of becoming minor and the trajectory of flight can be identified in the monologue uttered by Arscott in Act II, scene 7, who is playing Sergeant Kite. Curiously and ambiguously, here Arscott seems to draw on the stationary flight in the convict theatre more than on the useless fleeing in geographical space: "I don't want to play myself. When I say Kite's lines I forget everything else. … I don't have to think about what happened to Kable, I don't have to remember the things I've done, when I speak Kite's lines I don't hate any more. I'm Kite. I'm in Shrewsbury" (2.7. 261-62). Arguably, Arscott presses on, trying to forget his past errors as he aims to find a home and function within the world of the convict theatre. And according to Arscott himself, his acting is characteristic of the solipsistic "I" slipping away, hiding, or disappearing into an absence, an illusion to ward off the evil past, the troubled present, and the uncertain future. Here at this stage, the convict theatre bespeaks for Arscott an escape, a kind of thoughtful awareness of an absence rather than a promising and joyful line of flight. The

true sense of becoming minor, of an immanent process of desire, and of a continuum of contiguities has to be postponed to be realized until the last scene of the whole play, "Backstage."

Backstage, we can sense the change/becoming of Arscott as well as the assemblage of the minor consciousness. Mary Brenham tries to comfort Arscott that there shall be "[no] more violence," and Ralph Clark also advises Arscott to stay "calm," to which Arscott admits that he has been "used to danger" (2.11.276, 278). However, Arscott, the one who has been used to violent challenges and physical escapades, is heard persuading Dabby to give up plans of escape and to be committed to the convict theatre: "When I say my lines, I think of nothing else. Why can't you do the same?" (2.11. 274). Arscott's proposal is further seconded by Wisehammer and Sideway:

> WISEHAMMER. I don't want to go back to England now. It's too small and they don't like Jews. Here, no one has more of a right than anyone else to call you a foreigner. I want to become the first famous writer.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> SIDEWAY. I'm going to start a theatre company. Who wants to be in it?
>
> WISEHAMMER. I will write you a play about justice.
>
> SIDEWAY. Only comedies, my boy, only comedies.
>
> WISEHAMMER. What about a comedy about unrequited love?
>
> LIZ. I'll be in your company, Mr. Sideway.
>
> KETCH. And so will I. I'll play all the parts that have dignity and gravity.
>
> SIDEWAY. I'll hold auditions tomorrow.
>
> DABBY. Tomorrow.
>
> DUCKLING. Tomorrow.
>
> MARRY. Tomorrow.
>
> LIZ. Tomorrow. (2.11. 274-75)

"Tomorrow" carries with it a sense of prolongable, contiguous continuum of desires and possibilities: individual ambition, cruelly suppressed in England, will blossom in the new colony, the new minor theatre (Buse 169). Wertenbaker's convict theatre never refers to a real theatrical performance,

but corresponds to new zones of movements, vibrations, and thresholds in the deserted penal colony. By means of the particular underground tunnel in the rhizome and the burrow space of the convict theatre, the future Australian Sideway Theatre Company is seen burgeoning to displace all the transcendental and the major (such as law and justice) with the celebration of the continuum of desires ("Only comedies, my boy, only comedies"). Arguably, Wisehammer's writing and Sideway's dramaturgy will function together as the literary machine to generate new lines of flight. Like a fertilized ovum, this literary machine will split, divide, and grow into being; another new open network of burrows, tunnels, and passages will be constructed to spread indefinitely; a process of division and multiplication is felt to be evolving virtually interminably.

When Black Caesar's drunkenness, his stage fright, and his fear of displeasing his Madagascan ancestors threatens to ruin the forthcoming performance, Ralph tries to coerce him into performing by reminding that "our ancestors are thousands of miles away," and Mary encourages Caesar to "[think] of us as your family" (2.11. 276). In this "we," this universal, intimate ("us as your family") collectivity, Wertenbaker displays not only the assemblage of the dislocated outcast/outsiders, but also the functioning of this assemblage. In the last moments of the play, Arscott (who plays Sergeant Kite with a mission to recruit new membership) successfully recruits Black Caesar to go up on stage with him, when "*to the triumphant music of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the sound of applause and laughter from the First Fleet audience, the first Australian performance of The Recruiting Officer begins*" (2.11. 281; emphasis mine). This final stage direction, with its ambivalent overtone of happy ending and "triumph,"[7] remains the final word of the play. For Wertenbaker and for the remaining actors backstage who "listen with trepidation to Kite's first speech" (2.11. 280), this on/offstage represents a line of flight away from the world of the familiar and the conventional towards a pure encounter with the world of sheer variation and becoming. At the point when the play ends, it is an activity of life in which one is held outside oneself, a movement of translation which involves not so much the transposition of material bodies in space, as a movement of vital inner transformation. The end

[7] In his examination of post-war British drama, Buse maintains that the ending of Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* is strikingly different in its resolution. See Buse's discussion under the section title of "For Happy Endings Go to Australia" (166-69).

of the play shall not be interpreted as the successful pacification of an underclass by the ruling class of New South Wales (Wilson 33; Sullivan 143). In fact, the play ends with a beginning (Buse 167).

At this point, we the audience/reader are reminded of Wertenbaker's public statement of celebration of the humanizing force of theatre: the social function of theatre is not to legitimize or complot with the dominant ideology of the master, but to affirm individual human value and experience, that is, to place the interests of the convicts before those of the colony and the empire. Wertenbaker's writing machine is a massive machine whose components are conjoined through transversals to form another community and country. By means of an indefinite and open production of dramatic and performance text in the future, a process in perpetual motion, which is less a completed burrow than a ceaseless burrowing, is thus rendered possible (Bogue 188). The end of the play anticipates lines of flight that manifest the rhizomatic direction of detour/retour, of deterritorialization/reterritorialization.

Conclusion

The protean nature of the play and of Wertenbaker's dramaturgy as a whole can be best described by Max Stafford-Clark, who has directed many of Wertenbaker's plays, including *Our Country's Good*: "there is usually a reluctance to see events through the eyes of one person . . . Timberlake Wertenbaker's plays are also sometimes criticized for lacking a narrative line, for lacking a principal character. And sometimes those criticisms are also a critic's limitations to come to grips with a new form which is a strength as well as a weakness" (Calvalho 38). I maintain that this new form is a dramaturgy of the minor theatre which celebrates the cultural translation of history and the minorization of hegemonic structures of identity. It is a project of becoming minor that puts forward a new paradigm for literature, for theatre, which is open to multiplicity, difference, and variation (Fortier 2). Wertenbaker's strategy of "becoming minor" is reflected in both the content and form of *Our Country's Good*. Through subtle reminders of the existence of the oppressed cultures, of the palimpsests of cross-cultural contextuality, the play interrogates the issues of (post-)colonial identity together with concomitant themes of loss of home and belonging, spiritual displacement and reterritorialization. Framed in between the spatiality of offstage and backstage, the play is always in the middle, "between things, interbeing, intermezzo,"

and it is characterized by a relationship of alliances rather than filiation, by a logic of "and . . . and . . . and . . ." rather than "to be" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 25). Arguably, instead of bespeaking an abiding anxiety of fluidity in identity as a result of physical displacement in a complex web of cultural dislocation, Wertenbaker, as well as her characters, is fully aware of "the indeterminate nature of experience" (Carlson 146), recognizing the concept and practice of the "cross-border" politics of identity. In her series of play-making, from page to stage, in her series of the dynamic process of translation/adaptation, of transposition/transcreation, Wertenbaker has carved out a significant minor theatrical space for the indeterminate, unfinalizing dialogism between the subjectivity and textuality, between the text and the world. What is expected is the recurrence of difference in theatrical performances which aim not to repeat, reproduce the same and the dominant, not to master the simple and straightforward difference, but instead to induce a series of differences with variations.

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