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Ethnicity and Segregation

Readers have mostly accepted Wallace's exaggerated sketches of foreigners' speech, understanding these as archetypes of the nations those foreigners represent; his depictions of US ethnic dialects, however, have met with greater unease. Race and ethnicity are even more fraught issues in the United States now than when Wallace was writing, with the marked rise in white supremacy, nationalism, and hate crimes associated with the Trump presidency, which makes it even more important to deconstruct the way these are presented in literature and other media. The current generation of sociolinguists tends to avoid pre-categorizing speakers into supposed identities, not assuming that any particular perceived identity will correspond to a speaker's internal self-perception, not assuming that any particular category will explain someone's linguistic behavior, seeing identity as both more performative and more fluid.¹ Fiction, however, is not real life; authors do often label characters' identities or encode identities via identifiable dialects. Wallace did both.

Platt and Upstone² place Wallace's treatment of race in context as "heir to an earlier generation of white postmodern writers, attempting to speak about race as part of a broader commitment to ending postmodern cynicism in favor of a reworked 'humanism,'" wondering "whether postmodern fiction might play a role in gesturing towards a displacement of racial categories." Witzling³ notes that "a certain ambivalent critique of the privilege accorded to white masculinity is part of the appeal of the sometimes cool, sometimes incoherent, and sometimes seemingly

¹ Norma Mendoza-Denton, *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008); Mary Bucholtz, *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Rob Drummond, *Researching Urban Youth Language and Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); inter alia.

² Len Platt and Sara Upstone, *Postmodern Literature and Race* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 8.

³ David Witzling, "Postmodern Prose and the Discourse of the 'Cultural Jew': The Cases of Mailer and Foer," in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 160–76, esp. 387.

atonal affect of postmodernist writing." Engles⁴ posits that in the fiction of Don DeLillo, one of Wallace's acknowledged influences, "the subsumed white collective commonly seeks an illusory redemption in self-serving, identity-bolstering nostalgia." Thomas Pynchon, to whom Wallace has also been frequently compared, portrays white men recognizing their own complicity in a system that has privileged them at the expense of others: "Unquestioned in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the need for white guys to change."⁵ Wallace's work may be read in some ways as a sad acknowledgment that not much *has* changed with respect to race since the 1950s setting of *Gravity's Rainbow*, nor since its 1973 publication. "The Man" *still* "has a branch office in each of our brains."⁶

Wallace, who described himself in A&AU as "resoundingly and in all ways white" (CTL 102) was too young to have directly experienced most of the civil rights movement or the race riots that occurred in inner cities far from Bloomington, or the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but like all Americans, he bore some of the psychic scars of these events. In "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," he admits that "I'm always suddenly conscious of being white every time I'm around non-white people" (310). His limited attempt to get inside the heads of a few African American characters may represent a compromise between his linguistic abilities and his anxiety over cultural appropriation, but it was most certainly a conscious attempt to challenge and provoke his (imagined white) readers.

Citizenship is an objective and verifiable fact, but ethnicity is more abstract, based on both self-identification and identities projected by others due to perceived physical characteristics, including one's speech. It is often intertwined in US discourse with more essential/biological conceptions of race, which remains a stark dividing line in many areas of American life, despite so many Americans' blended heritage. As Wolfram and Schilling-Estes⁷ point out, regional dialect markers may be seen as quaint or charming, but "the stakes are much higher when it comes to socially and ethnically related differences. On the basis of these differences, speakers may be judged on capabilities ranging from innate intelligence to employability and on personal attributes ranging from sense of humor to morality." Charged with drafting a statement on language and race for the Linguistic Society of

⁴ Tim Engles, "White Male Nostalgia in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 195–210, esp. 208.

⁵ Patrick McHugh, "Cultural Politics, Postmodernism, and White Guys: Affect in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *College Literature* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 1–28, esp. 11.

⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), 172.

⁷ Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, *American English*, 2006.

America, Charity Hudley et al.⁸ note that “while language can be somewhat predictive,” predicting culture is “a slippery slope that leads into stereotyping.”

The Terminology for Ethnicity and Ethnic Dialects

Americans’ discomfort with race and ethnicity is reflected in the inadequate vocabulary used to address these topics, especially as the “minority” population approaches the demographic majority. The linguistic designation “Hispanic” has fallen out of favor; “Latino” and “Latina” now seem unnecessarily gendered, and the gender-neutral “Latinx” has not yet gained wide currency. And people aren’t sure of the proper referents of these terms: Are they interchangeable? If someone tells you they prefer the term “Mexican-American” to “Chicano,” are they just correcting your terminology, or are they making a different identity claim? Is there any commonality among Mexican-Americans and Cuban-Americans and Puerto Rican-Americans (and so on) that warrants the use of an umbrella term rather than a more specific designation of cultural heritage? White people know they can’t say anything that even sounds like “the N-word,” but is it okay to call African Americans *black*? (Or should that be *Black*?) Frequent change in terminology about race and ethnicity is not superficial linguistic fashion—although like fashion, not everybody buys it, and trends may cycle back around—but rather a symptom that racism is still a powerful force in the United States. Any word that becomes attached to a stigmatized community itself becomes stigmatized over time, leading the group to either claim a new label which allies adopt to show respect or to reclaim the stigmatized term for its own purposes, as some African Americans have adopted an AAE pronunciation of the “N-word” as a term of in-group solidarity, although its use across group lines remains an act of provocation.

It is difficult to have a national conversation about race and ethnicity in the United States without general agreement of which terms are acceptable and to whom they refer. The white California high school students studied by Bucholtz⁹ talked “around rather than about race,” lest they be thought racist, alluding instead to unspecified “difference.” Avoidance strategies may be well

⁸ Anne H. Charity Hudley, Christine Mallinson, Mary Bucholtz, Nelson Flores, Nicole Holliday, Elaine Chun, and Arthur Spears, “Linguistics and Race: An Interdisciplinary Approach Towards an LSA Statement on Race,” *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America* 3 (2018): 8:1–14, esp. 2. <https://journals.linguisticsociety.org/proceedings/index.php/PLSA/article/view/4303>. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3765/plsa.v3i1.4303>.

⁹ Bucholtz, *White Kids*.

intentioned, but they “do not in fact serve to diminish racial awareness, as the colorblind ideology advocates. On the contrary, because these strategies are so highly marked in interaction they call greater attention to race and to the speaker’s hyperawareness of racial topics.”¹⁰ For an author, using ethnic labels not only activates stereotypes in the reader’s mind but also dates the fiction rather rapidly. The term “Hispanic” appears five times in *Infinite Jest*, mostly in sections focalized by Hal, who doesn’t seem to know any people in that category; Kate Gompert refers in passing to “Latino males” (699). The narrator, summarizing and universalizing “exotic new facts” that “you may find out” if you ever spend time in (any) recovery halfway house notes both that “black and Hispanic people can be as big or bigger racists than white people, and then can get even more hostile and unpleasant when this realization seems to surprise you” (200) and that “female chicanos are not called chicanas” (202). This latter point, of course, depends on which “female chicano” you ask.¹¹

Hal’s foregrounding of racial and ethnic descriptions—“the black girl” (633), “so black she’s got a bluish cast” (527), and “the tired Cuban orderly” (17)—illustrates how uncomfortable he is with anybody outside his own limited and fairly homogeneous social circles. Thompson¹² points out that although Wallace puts racist epithets in the mouths and minds of his characters, the author distances himself from this overtly. After one use of “nigger” in *Infinite Jest* (857), the associated endnote says (in its entirety) “*Sic*” (1026). Gately’s use of this as a “private term” is explicitly disparaged as a sign of ignorance: “unfortunately still all he knows” (1026). He also refers to an “Oriental kid” as a “Chink” in his thoughts, and even describes him “squatting chinkishly” (977), which the narrator does not comment on.

As the terminology for races and ethnicities keeps changing in the United States, there have likewise been many names for what I call AAE here, following Green,¹³ whose textbook remains the most complete descriptive source for the common traits that can be abstracted from “the varieties of AAE spoken in the United States” [1]). Wallace called the abstraction “Standard Black English (SBE)” in A&AU, a term that has also been used in

¹⁰ Ibid., 174–5.

¹¹ Diane Rios, “Chicana: A Negative Connotation?” *La Prensa San Diego*, October 13, 2000. <http://www.laprensa-sandiego.org/archieve/october13/chicana.htm>; Karen Wisel and Joel Zapata, “Why I Call Myself Chicana.” Video clip from oral history interview with Lilia Escajeda. Amarillo, TX: Civil Rights in Black and Brown Interview Database July 6, 2016. <https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/2533/why-i-call-myself-chicana>; inter alia.

¹² Thompson, “Wallace and Race.”

¹³ Green, *African American English*.

academic descriptions,¹⁴ emphasizing that it is rule-based.¹⁵ A footnote that made it into the second round of typeset proofs for A&AU before it got cut (apparently just for length) was attached to Wallace's use of the term "SBE" with the parenthetical comment "(this SNOOT can't yet stomach Ebonics)" (HRC Wallace Papers, container 30.7). (Note that this refers to Wallace's distaste for that particular *name*, not a comment on the palatability of the dialect itself.)

Erasure versus Evocation of Difference

An effort to bring one aspect of identity into focus may have the effect of "erasing" other aspects—at least temporarily. As Irvine¹⁶ discusses, this is at the heart of the very definition of "style": In order for a style to be meaningful, it must be distinctive (otherwise it would not be noticed, and no meaning could be attached). Once a meaning has been attached to a style, it becomes very easy for anybody perceiving that style to overlook other, competing identities that may simultaneously be indexed.

Thompson¹⁷ finds that it is now "a critical commonplace" that "Wallace had serious blind spots and failings when addressing matters of race," and posits that that Wallace's "problematic representations of race and culture speak to a deeper strain of American insularity underlying [his] writing" (205). Hayes-Brady¹⁸ agrees that "Wallace's engagement with diversity is (at best) mostly implicit." I respectfully disagree with both of these formulations; Wallace explicitly engaged with diversity in his linguistic representations, and these often serve as explicit critiques of insularity. Thompson also argues that Wallace's "reluctance to explore the specific racial positions

¹⁴ Arthur K. Spears, "The Black English Semi-Auxiliary *Come*," *Language* 58 (1982): 850–72, for example.

¹⁵ AAE has also been called "Black English Vernacular" (Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*), "Black Vernacular English" (Baugh, "Steady: Progressive Aspect in Black Vernacular English."), "African American Language" (Geneva Smitherman, "Language and African Americans: Movin On Up a Lil Higher," *Journal of English Linguistics* 32, no. 3 (2004): 186–96; Laneheart 2015), "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE) (Walt Wolfram, "The Grammar of Urban African American Vernacular English," *Handbook of Varieties of English* 2 (2004): 111–32.), "Black Street Speech" (Baugh, 1983), and many other names.

¹⁶ Judith T. Irvine, "'Style' as Distinctiveness: The Culture and Ideology of Linguistic Differentiation," in *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation*, ed. Penelope Eckert and John R. Rickford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21–43.

¹⁷ Thompson, "Wallace and Race," 204.

¹⁸ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 12.

occupied by various characters" was due to his desire to erase differences—that the "attempt to address broadly defined human problems—boredom for instance, along with suffering and solipsism" (216) made him take a somewhat utopian view that race was irrelevant, echoing Aubry,¹⁹ who says that "Wallace underscores problems that afflict individuals across class and racial boundaries, thus furthering a desire, which he voices in multiple essays and interviews, to portray universal forms of suffering." This comforting interpretation is bolstered by Wallace's praise of Cynthia Ozick's "utter erasure of difference, which does not happen to me with a lot of writers from different cultural backgrounds. I can appreciate the peering across the chasm at another culture, but with Ozick that chasm just vanishes."²⁰ As Toni Morrison²¹ points out, however, "A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist." Wallace's choice to encode different ethnic dialects shows that he was still "peering across the chasm," but that he had no desire to lobotomize his fiction by ignoring painful social rifts.

It is not very surprising if *Broom* and TPK, both set in the Midwest, are dominated by white characters. When Lipsky commented that he hadn't seen any black people in Bloomington, Wallace explained, "The racism here is very quiet, very systematic."²² Peoria's lack of ethnic diversity is one of the first things Claude Sylvanshine notices when he arrives; the irony is that the very terminology he uses in observing the absence of "any sort of black or Latin person" (49) shows that he "isn't very acquainted with the people he refers to."²³ Characters in these novels are less obviously racist, as they aren't often confronted with racial or ethnic differences, with the notable exception of *Broom*'s patriarch Stonecipher Beadsman, who refers to his daughter's supervisor, Walinda Peahen, as "a charming negress" to her face. Joffe²⁴ says that "no one in the room flinches" at this, but in fact, as will be seen later, Walinda responds forcefully, as anybody who knew her would predict. (It is a particularly chaotic scene, however, and it has already been established that

¹⁹ Timothy Aubry, "Infinite Jest and the Recovery of Feeling," Chapter 3 of *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 97–126, esp. 102.

²⁰ Mark Schechner, "Behind the Watchful Eyes of Author David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 104–9, esp. 108.

²¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 12.

²² Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, 45.

²³ Araya, "Why the Whiteness?" 238.

²⁴ Joffe, "In the Shadows," 59.

Lenore is ignoring much of what her father says.) Araya²⁵ outlines several examples of characters in TPK approaching race in a “seemingly unintentional insensitive or offhand way” (249). As Bucholtz²⁶ notes, “the hegemony of whiteness” in American literature, television and film is “typically exerted not by calling attention to white racial dominance but instead by treating whiteness as unremarkable—even unnoticeable.”

When, in the title essay of *A Supposedly Funny Thing I'll Never Do Again*, Wallace observes that some people standing near him “look Jewish to me,” he reports feeling “ashamed to catch myself thinking that I can determine Jewishness from people’s appearance” (272). Thompson²⁷ attributes Wallace’s sharing of this “racist moment in flagrante delicto” to his desire “to lay bare one’s own cognitive processes in an honest exchange with the reader,” suggesting that “Wallace’s dramatization of such moments—in both his fiction and nonfiction—[has] the potential to prompt similar self-examinations on the part of his readers . . . by making whiteness visible and thus raising it as an object for analysis” (208). In his 1998 essay “The Nature of the Fun,” Wallace explains that writing fiction is “a way to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don’t want to see or let anyone else see, and this stuff usually turns out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all writers and readers share and respond to, feel” (*BFAN*, 198). Internalized racism—even by those who consciously disavow it—may be one of those private points of shame that all Americans share, regardless of skin color or ethnic heritage. “The most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about,” Wallace later reiterated (*Water* 8), urging this for everyone, not just writers.

Wallace was less successful at exploring implicit, unconscious racism in his description of the cloggers at the Illinois State Fair: “There’s an atmosphere in the room—not racist, but aggressively white. . . . It’s not like if a black person came in he’d be ill-treated; it’s more like it would just never occur to a black person to come in here” (*ASFTINDA* 125). It was, of course, sheer speculation on Wallace’s part that black people stayed away by choice, and that they would not be “ill-treated” if they attempted to join; this borders on every attempt to justify all-white or all-male (or other such exclusionary) spaces. He would have done better here to appreciate his own advice on the goals of a liberal arts education: “to be just a little less arrogant, to have some ‘critical awareness’ about myself and my certainties . . . because a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong

²⁵ Araya, “Why the Whiteness?”

²⁶ Bucholtz, *White Kids*, 15.

²⁷ Thompson, “Wallace and Race,” 207.

and deluded" (*Water* 35). Coughlan²⁸ argues that "Wallace's desire to make us aware of, and question, who and why we are judging is part of what makes him such an ethical writer." It is not surprising that someone who had very lofty goals occasionally fell short of them.

"Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open" has a somewhat similar anecdote to the ASFTINDA one recounted earlier, in which Wallace mistakenly guesses the ethnicity of a well-dressed Greek-American man after chatting with him. Seeing his name on his business card, Wallace realizes (with no apparent shame) that "he's not Italian after all" (BFAN 162). It is left ambiguous whether this latter story is a commentary on his not-so-perfect-after-all ear for how people speak or on the tendency of white populations to assimilate linguistically, losing the markers that facilitate ethnic identification. Apparently, he did not deem it shamefully racist to stereotype people based on accent.

Wallace's representations of African American speech have received more condemnation than anything else that he wrote. Clearly, he was not just identifying speakers as African American, which he could have done in a variety of other ways; equally certainly, he was not mocking them, as many nineteenth-century authors did in their dialect depictions. Nor was he trying to encode "physical signals of 'substandard' morals," as Twain did by differentiating Jim's speech from the other "Negro" characters in *Huckleberry Finn*.²⁹

Signifying Rappers, the book Wallace wrote with his friend Mark Costello, "vividly displays Wallace's anxieties over assuming an identity that is not his own," according to Hayes-Brady.³⁰ The book directly interrogates what right two white guys have to explore an art form invented by and dominated by African Americans, great fans or not. Cohen³¹ describes that work as characterized by "two main emotional tones, . . . enthusiasm and apology," adding that Wallace "wrote out of an anxiety surrounding race that despite its best intentions may have expressed itself in his work." McGurl³² agrees, and

²⁸ David Coughlan, "'Sappy Or No, It's True': Affect and Expression in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*," in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Philip Coleman (New York: Grey House Publishing/ Salem Press, 2015), 160–75, esp. 173.

²⁹ David Carkeet, "The Dialects in *Huckleberry Finn*," *American Literature* 51, no. 3 (1979): 315–32, esp. 332.

³⁰ Clare Hayes-Brady, "'Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point': David Foster Wallace and Gender," in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Philip Coleman (New York: Grey House Publishing/Salem Press, 2015), 63–77, esp. 65.

³¹ Samuel Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace," in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 228–43, esp. 234.

³² McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing," 43.

adds, perhaps as a direct consequence of this anxiety, that Wallace “did not feel empowered to ground his fiction in the cultural capital of ethnically or racially marked experience.”

In A&AU, Wallace offers a hypothetical scenario in which he, a white guy, were to approach a group of black guys using AAE terms of address (“yo,” calling them “brother,” asking “s’up, s’goi’o’n, pronouncing *on* with that NYCish . . . diphthong that Young Urban Black English deploys for a standard *o*.” In such an instance, Wallace rightfully argues, he would be seen as mocking them or “simply out of my mind” (192). Nonetheless, aware of these risks, he *did* slip into the “voice” of African Americans in his fiction, just as he attempted to inhabit the minds and hearts of foreigners, of Jewish Americans, and of speakers of multiple regional dialects other than his own. Morrissey and Thompson³³ discuss “Wallace’s often curious depictions of race and racial issues” (12), and three years later, Thompson is still “coming to terms with the racial content of Wallace’s work.”³⁴ He asks, “Do we give Wallace the benefit of the doubt, . . . as the product of a certain cultural moment . . . ? Or do we instead take a harder line, wondering why Wallace . . . never seemed to devote a great deal of thought to the racial politics of contemporary U.S. culture?”

Although default whiteness is the norm in Wallace’s work, it is clear that he in no way saw this whiteness as any kind of superiority. BIHM is almost all direct dialogue—Boswell³⁵ says the book “positively brims with talk and more talk”—but Wallace did not take the opportunity to play with dialect in that work, leaving readers to read all the hideous men as “(likely white).”³⁶ In the absence of an overt narrator who could have described the men either physically or shared details about them that the men themselves would not have chosen to reveal, in the absence of speech from the redacted interviewer (whose questions might have been likewise revelatory), the use of dialect would have helped trigger all kinds of implicit social knowledge about these men. Yet Wallace (who loved playing with language) did not saliently differentiate the language of the nineteen men interviewed in terms of dialect; they are designated by number and location (all over the United States), but it is unclear whether the interviewees are natives of these areas or merely incarcerated there. Each of the interviews “conjures up an individual

³³ Tara Morrissey and Lucas Thompson, “‘The Rare White at the Window’: A Reappraisal of Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace’s *Signifying Rappers*,” *Journal of American Studies*, 49, no. 1 (2015): 77–97.

³⁴ Thompson, “Wallace and Race,” 206.

³⁵ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 184.

³⁶ Coughlan, “Sappy Or No, It’s True,” 163.

speaker through distinctive speech patterns and verbal tics,"³⁷ but nothing about their speech is regionally or ethnically marked, apart from one hideous man in Roswell GA calling his interviewer "darlin," and another in Nutley NJ who begins a couple of sentences with "Alls I'm saying [*sic*]." Nor do the vignettes sandwiched between the interviews contain any overt dialect markers. Coughlan³⁸ refers to "the seemingly unvarying pitch of the writing." This absence of dialect features was clearly intentional and motivated: The psychopathy that makes such men hideous has nothing to do with heritage, race, ethnicity, social class, native language, ethnic or regional dialect; the hideousness derives, as Frantzen³⁹ points out, from their "zero sense of empathy."

Wallace's teaching materials (HRC Wallace Papers, container 32.8) contain his handwritten notes on a photocopy of an essay by Willie Morris ("The Ghosts of Ole Miss," *Inside Sports*, May 1980). By the end of the opening paragraph, which ends with a direct quote, Wallace wrote "Why put this in other guy's voice?" He comments, too, on the use of dialect ("Who dat . . . who dat . . ."), circling the /d/s and asking: "?! What year?" He seems to have used the Morris piece both as an example of bad writing in general (as evidenced by further marginal notes: "Lame," "Weak," "Low Point," "Bad prose," "Who cares?"), but also to focus on the inappropriateness of the writer making assumptions about the women and African Americans discussed in the essay ("How does he know this?"). Ironically, Wallace didn't seem to have a lot of empathy for Morris, even though he faced many of the same challenges in his writing.

Wallace's Misunderstanding of AAE Grammatical Rules

In A&AU, Wallace discusses the regularization of the AAE present tense verb paradigm: "Using 'He don't' makes me a little more uncomfortable. . . . Standard Black English is way out on the cutting edge of English with its abandonment of the 3-S present in 'to do' and 'to go' and 'to say'" (CTL 100). Almost all of his African American characters feature leveled third-person

³⁷ Simon de Bourcier, "'They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace': Syntax and Narrative in *Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1–30, esp. 12–13. <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.207>.

³⁸ Coughlan, "Sappy Or No, It's True," 163.

³⁹ Mikkel Krause Frantzen, "Finding the Unlovable Object Lovable: Empathy and Depression in David Foster Wallace," *Studies in American Fiction* 45, no. 2 (2018): 259–79, esp. 265.

singular present tense verb forms, although some of them are realistically inconsistent with respect to this feature. It is also common for Wallace's African American characters to use "narrative present," to recount past stories as if they are happening now, giving him more opportunity to use this feature and to emphasize the nonstandardness of the speaker.

Even though he acknowledged that "SBE and SWE conjugate certain verbs in totally different ways" (CTL 108), Wallace clearly did not have command of AAE's complex verbal morphology. He never had an AAE speaker use near future (*finna*), future perfective (*be done*), *I'ma* for first-person singular future tense, or *had* + *V-ed* (*had finished*, *had ate*) with a simple past tense interpretation, showing a lack of familiarity with AAE verb tenses. With verb aspect he fared worse still, not just failing to represent, but actually misrepresenting the use of invariant (unconjugated) *be*, the function of which he apparently continued to misunderstand years after his fictional portrayals of AAE were published. In the same "interpolation" to A&AU mentioned earlier, Wallace "praised" SBE for "its marvellously streamlined six identical present-tense inflections of 'to be.' (Granted, 'he be' always sounds weird to me, but then SBE is not one of my dialects)" (CTL 100). This is an erroneous description of AAE grammar, in which *be* does *not* function as a present tense verb, neither as grammatical copula (in constructions expressing identity or description such as "X is Y") nor as auxiliary verb for progressive aspect (e.g., *he was thinking* vs. *he thought*), but rather as a marker of habitual action. For example, "he be working" would mean that he works regularly, that he has a regular job, as opposed to the zero-copula construction "he (Ø)⁴⁰ working" (right now). Both Ronkin and Karn⁴¹ and Rickford and Rickford⁴² discuss the frequent misunderstanding of this feature of AAE, and its incorrect inclusion (in nonhabitual grammatical contexts) in many representations that mock "Ebonics." Wallace's intent was not to mock, and he would likely have been mortified to discover his error—which makes it all the more ironic that he did not read any linguistic studies of AAE (which would not have been difficult to access, even before the days of easy computer searches, for instance Labov's 1972 *Language in the Inner City*⁴³ or Baugh's 1983 *Black Street Speech*).⁴⁴

⁴⁰ A null sign is used to show that an expected element does not occur.

⁴¹ Maggi Ronkin and Helen E. Karn, "Mock Ebonics: Linguistic Racism in Parodies of Ebonics on the Internet," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 360–80.

⁴² John R. Rickford and Russell John Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York: Wiley, 2000).

⁴³ William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, Vol. 3 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

⁴⁴ John Baugh, *Black Street Speech* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1983).

AAE has a more complex system of verbal aspect than SWE (which only explicitly marks progressive and perfect aspects), but these are examples of what Wolfram and Schilling-Estes⁴⁵ call “camouflaged forms,” as they “bear surface resemblance to constructions found in other varieties of English even though they are used differently.” Apparently, Wallace was able to listen obsessively to AAE in the lyrics of rap songs without understanding these forms; it is inconceivable that he would not have included at least some of the aspect markers if he had been even passingly familiar with them. When Roy Tony refers to himself “coming over feeling comfortable” (*Jest* 506) he is apparently not using the AAE aspectual *come* (which would indicate speaker indignation over an unwarranted action),⁴⁶ just using the verb as SWE would. Nor does Wallace ever use the remote past *been* (which is always stressed and not equivalent in meaning to the similar SWE verb form, so many scholars of AAE prefer to write it in all-caps (*BIN*) or with an accent mark (*bín*) to avoid potential confusion), which would apply to an action or state that began a long time ago, but also continues into the present.⁴⁷ Baugh⁴⁸ details the use of *steady* for progressive aspect, and Wolfram and Schilling-Estes⁴⁹ cite also the AAE construction *call X-self +ing* (as in “He call himself dancing”) “to indicate that someone is attributing qualities or skills to themselves which they do not really possess.” AAE use of *it* as existential pronoun (vs. SWE *there*) is conceptually very simple yet is “little recognized by nonspeakers of AAVE”⁵⁰ because unlike the more complex verb aspect markers, it is unstressed in normal discourse. Wallace does not include any of these forms in his representations.

Wallace perceived that relative clauses without a relative pronoun (or what Green⁵¹ calls “zero relative pronoun”) are allowed in a greater number of syntactic environments in AAE than in SWE, but he was clearly fuzzy on the details. In SWE, the relative pronoun is required when it is the subject of the relative clause, but AAE does not require it when the relative clause modifies a noun in object position or in the predicate nominative position.⁵²

⁴⁵ Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, *American English*, 216–7.

⁴⁶ Lisa J. Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); cf. Spears, “The Black English Semi-Auxiliary *Come*.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁸ John Baugh, “Steady: Progressive Aspect in Black Vernacular English,” *American Speech* 59, no. 1 (1984): 3–12.

⁴⁹ Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, *American English*, 217.

⁵⁰ Bucholtz, *White Kids*, 134.

⁵¹ Green, *African American English*, 89.

⁵² Gunnel Tottie and Dawn Harvie, “It’s All Relative: Relativization Strategies in Early African American English,” *Language In Society-Oxford* 28 (2000): 198–232; *Ibid.*

So sentences like “I have a manager (Ø) don’t share the needle” and “He a manager (Ø) don’t share the needle” would be grammatical in AAE, but when Too Pretty uses “a manager (Ø) don’t share the needle” (94) as the subject of a larger sentence, this violates the AAE rule. Again, it would seem that Wallace simply got this wrong.

It is not surprising that someone who immersed himself in rap music would nonetheless be unable to produce original strings of grammatical AAE. In addition to the issue of “camouflage,” Preston⁵³ explains that people who display detailed awareness of other dialects may still lack imitative control over those dialects (and some who are able to mimic them perfectly have little to no ability to describe them). Bucholtz’s⁵⁴ study of white high school students in California who consider themselves members of the “hip-hop” community finds that they routinely incorporated only the most salient morphosyntactic marker of AAE, multiple negation (a sociolinguistic marker shared by many white working-class dialects), although they freely borrow AAE lexical items and prosody. Of course, they are not attempting to *pass* as African American, just to signal affiliation. (Cf. Pichler and Williams,⁵⁵ who find similar behavior in London hip-hop fans.)

Wallace once famously admitted that he imagined his readers as “pretty much like myself . . . mostly white upper middle class or upper class, *obscenely* well-educated.”⁵⁶ This would come as no surprise to Toni Morrison,⁵⁷ who observes that “until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white” (xii). It is hard to determine now whether Wallace’s lack of linguistic research when crafting his AAE passages was due to overconfidence in his ability to mimic other dialects, or whether his disregard for potential African American readers was such that he did not care whether or not these were plausibly realistic performances. As Mura⁵⁸ points out, “White writers can and do remain unconscious of readers of color; writers of color must be conscious of white readers, even if, ultimately, they decide not to write to accommodate white readers.”

⁵³ Preston, “Language with an Attitude,” 50–1.

⁵⁴ Bucholtz, *White Kids*.

⁵⁵ Pia Pichler and Nathanael Williams, “Hipsters in the Hood: Authenticating Indexicalities in Young Men’s Hip-Hop Talk,” *Language in Society* 45, no. 4 (2016): 557–81.

⁵⁶ Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, 82.

⁵⁷ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*.

⁵⁸ David Mura, “White Writing Teachers (or David Foster Wallace vs. James Baldwin),” *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–7, esp. 4, footnote 2. <http://scholarwrit.rit.edu/jcws/vol1/iss1/7>.

Wallace's African American Dialect Depictions

Very seldom, in Wallace's works, do people of color play major roles or even have the opportunity speak for themselves—but that makes the rare dialect performances I discuss next stand out against a very white background. Although I do not agree with McGurl⁵⁹ that the depictions in *Jest* “have difficulty differentiating themselves from the long tradition of disrespectful racial mimicry in US culture,” it is important to recognize that such a tradition exists, and that its “most obvious victim of misrepresentation was black language.”⁶⁰ Morrison⁶¹ identifies a pattern of representation of dialect in American literature featuring “patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language. These indicate a loss of control in the text that is attributed to the objects of its attention rather than to the text's own dynamics.” Yet it is precisely in the amount of “control” that Clenette Henderson's traumatized internal monologue differs from the confident self-expression and swagger of the character Londell (“Too Pretty”) Tyson in the early short story “Solomon Silverfish.” Walinda Peahen, despite some shouting, is seen to be clearly in control of her (well-justified) anger, and Yolanda exhibits control over her language by style-shifting.

It is unlikely, given the anxieties Wallace expressed elsewhere, that he was naïve about how negatively these dialect sketches would be received; these must be viewed as part of his strategy of frequently making readers uncomfortable and self-conscious, to make them interrogate their own reactions to questions (and people) they might prefer to ignore. The way Wallace distinguished the speech of his African American characters shows that he recognized AAE as a continuum, not a single uniform dialect. Even though individual performances are flawed by Wallace's misunderstanding of particular aspects of AAE, they still serve to showcase linguistic variation among African Americans and—most importantly—to show that there is no isomorphism between the use of African American dialect features and any particular social or moral attribute.

Not included in this chapter's brief survey is a story shared by an African American member of Cocaine Anonymous in *Jest* (707–11), because it is recounted from the perspective of Joelle van Dyne, who (as endnote 293 points out) “was acculturated in a part of the U.S.A. where verbal attitudes toward black people are dated and derisive” (1054). The narrator adds that Joelle “is doing pretty much the best she can,” but where Gately seemed to

⁵⁹ McGurl, “The Institution of Nothing,” 43.

⁶⁰ Jones, *Strange Talk*, 11.

⁶¹ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 69.

exaggerate the unnamed Irishman's dialect features in his thoughts, Joelle largely uses her own voice to re-tell this man's tale of his wife and child going hungry because he spent their food money on drugs, and how he then abandons them, honestly believing they will be better off without him. As Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts⁶² note, the passage "arguably never develops an extended relationship between the voice of the speaker and the narrator without an interjection from Joelle." Araya⁶³ nevertheless deems this story one of the most moving in the novel, although he is under the misapprehension that the man's name is Jim, rather than understanding that this name is used generically, like "Holmes," which Joelle notes is "apparently the current colored word for other coloreds" (1054). Ennet House staffer Johnette Foltz shows her knowledge of this, using every term of address she can think of to get Roy Tony's attention (and deflect it from Erdedy): "Yo Roy T., man, easy there Dude, Man, Esse, Bro, Posse, Crew, Homes, Jim, Brother" (507). Like *Jack* before it (more common in the 1970s), *Jim* appears to be a "form of address among black males (used emphatically or as verbal punctuation)."⁶⁴ Although *Holmes* and *Homes* likely have different etymologies, with the former coming from a Sherlock reference and the latter coming from *homeboy/homegirl*,⁶⁵ the difference between these would likely have been opaque to Wallace as well as Joelle.

Walinda Peahen (The Broom of the System)

Though she remains somewhat two-dimensional, Walinda Peahen is Wallace's only middle-class African American character. She is a working mother with two jobs, one of which is a supervisory position. She takes no crap from anyone, but rather than being just a stereotype of "an angry black woman" (as Joffe⁶⁶ calls her), Walinda is described as "the kind of woman whose bad moods tended to be made worse by people around her behaving as if she were in a bad mood" (*Broom* 403). Thus, she, like protagonist Lenore, is something of a "linguistic construct," although in her case, it's less innocuous, reflecting a destructive cycle of social and racial stereotyping: she's specifically a black

⁶² Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts, "White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest's* New Sincerity," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1–28, esp. 21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.182>.

⁶³ Araya, "Why the Whiteness?," 245.

⁶⁴ Edith A. Folb, *Runnin' Down Some Lines: The Language and Culture of Black Teenagers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 243.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 253, 242.

⁶⁶ Joffe, "In the Shadows," 59.

women who is always angry because the white people who surround her always assume that a black woman will be angry.

Walinda has a variety of other good reasons to be angry, reasons why she might have “put her hands on her hips and glared” (515): she was kept overtime at her other job, her “subordinate” showed up to work hours late, but Walinda knows she can’t do much about it other than fume, as Lenore is the lover of one of the named partners of the firm and daughter of an even more powerful executive. Walinda *says* “you gone, you done” (90) but her words have no illocutionary force—as opposed to when Lenore says “I quit” later in the novel, which does have real-world effect. Walinda is in an impossible situation: a supervisor who has no power of enforcement, a woman who, no matter how forcefully she expresses herself, will not be able to make the world conform to her words, yet she stubbornly refuses to cave to the pressure to make her words conform to the unjust world around her. This is a different kind of strength—an admirable resilience, persistence against all odds, self-assertion in the face of power. Despite all her legitimate grievances, Walinda is able to enjoy her conversations with white co-worker Candy Mandible, to listen to Candy’s stories and laugh.

When Lenore’s father calls Walinda a “perfectly charming negress” (515), it’s clear that he’s being ironic about the charming part and apparently deliberately provocative (not just tone-deaf) in his choice of terminology. Walinda, who knows that he is the most powerful man in town (her boss’s boss, the CEO of the largest industry in the area, and the son of the man who literally built the town), responds, “Boy, I’m gonna kill you for that” (515), using the informal, but non-ethnically marked future tense. Everybody, including Walinda and the readers, knows that she will not, that her words are exaggerated because she understands the emptiness of her threat—yet it is important that she responds with strong protest, that she doesn’t simply accept such blatant disrespect.

Walinda does not overtly attempt to assimilate to the white language around her. She uses *ain’t*, perfective *done* (“you done played the last time” [90]), counterfactual *like to* (“he like to die” [403]), null copula and auxiliary (“what [Ø] these messages for you?” [89], “if I think somebody [Ø] workin’ and they [Ø] not” [90]). Alim⁶⁷ argues that the null copula, one of the most extensively studied sociolinguistic variables for AAE, has become a conscious marker of identity for black Americans. As noted earlier,

⁶⁷ H. Samy Alim, *You Know My Steez: An Ethnographic and Sociolinguistic Study of Styleshifting in a Black American Speech Community* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press/The American Dialect Society, 2004).

Wallace was apparently unaware of AAE existential *it*, so Walinda uses the SWE existential *there*, and maintains the copula after it: "There's messages for you" (89). Walinda has a couple of utterances that could plausibly be interpreted as habitual aspect ("that crap be *nasty*" [403], "you (Ø) the chump be makin' that nasty food" [515]), but he presumably intended these as present tense. Walinda has a past tense *give* (403), and always pronounces *-ing* verb suffixes with the alveolar nasal (*workin'*, *talkin'*, *makin'*, etc.), though the *"-ing"* spelling in the gerund *"writing"* (89) and the noun *"Building"* (404) presumably indicates the velar pronunciation prescribed by SWE. She frequently uses mild profanity (*goddamn* [90], *crap* [403], *foul* [403], *damn* [511]), addresses subordinates and superiors alike with infantilizing terms of address (*boy* [515], *girl* [406, 511], *child* [405]), or (when angry) derogatory ones implying lesser intelligence (*fool* [513], *chump* [516]). Apart from terms of address, the only salient AAE lexical item is the verb *"play"* to signify posing, making unjustified claims, perpetuating a fraud (as exemplified in Morgan⁶⁸), which Walinda repeats: "You can't play. You done played the last time" (90).

Notably, however, Walinda has no multiple negation (despite frequent use of negation), no nonstandard relative clauses or unmarked possession, even though Wallace used all of these features with other African American characters. Even more extraordinarily, all of her third-person singular present tense verbs are marked with the *-s* suffix, as SWE prescribes. African American speakers studied by Rickford and Rickford⁶⁹ used the suffix in as few as 3 to 4 percent of their third-person singular verb forms. It is perhaps significant that Walinda is shown interacting only with white characters, enacting her professional role, circumstances in which many African Americans would use fewer AAE variants. Alim⁷⁰ found that "third-person singular *-s* variability appears to be fundamental in Black American styleshifting," echoing findings from Baugh.⁷¹ Despite her apparent responsiveness to these circumstances (avoiding certain stereotypical features of AAE), however, she maintains a number of distinctive AAE features, as if she is drawing a line in the sand, meeting white interlocutors only partway.

⁶⁸ Marcyliena Morgan, "'Nuthin' But a G Thang': Grammar and Language Ideology in Hip Hop Identity," in *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English*, ed. Sonja L. Laneheart (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2001), 187–210, esp. 204.

⁶⁹ Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*.

⁷⁰ Alim, *You Know My Steez*, 161.

⁷¹ Baugh, *Black Street Speech*.

Londell "Too Pretty" Tyson ("Solomon Silverfish")

Too Pretty is initially presented (through the eyes of Solomon Silverfish's brother-in-law) as "the loathsome and very lowlife Londell 'Too Pretty' Tyson, a young shvartzer of the pimping profession" (72). A few pages later, Solomon's wife Sophie thinks more kindly of him: "Such a nice and deep-down polite young man, you could tell, even if he did wear a purple hat with a pink feather from an ostrich and use language who a mother of a son who talked that way would cut her heart out from her body" (75). Although nonspecific, Sophie's complaint about language appears to refer to his frequent unmarked swearing—not in anger, but as part of his regular means of self-expression—rather than his grammar per se. "Too Pretty" is the name the character uses for himself in his internal monologue; he is amused when Solomon refers to him as "Schwartz" (93), undoubtedly recognizing this as a Jewish name, but oblivious to its Yiddish meaning, *black*. That he is destined to play a larger role in the story is foreshadowed when a section is headed "Everyone Except Too Pretty/" (79), even though the scene at the police station includes only Solomon, his two brothers-in-law, and the district attorney. It is nonetheless surprising when the narration later switches to Too Pretty's point of view and remains there for the rest of the story (92–6).

Thompson⁷² calls Too Pretty's narration "flamboyantly ungrammatical," which says as much about his own views of AAE as it does about Too Pretty's speech, though this is certainly the Wallace character who incorporates the greatest quantity of AAE features. According to Hayes-Brady,⁷³ he "speaks in the kind of argot associated with stereotyped black characters"—adding that "this vernacular also appears at times in *Infinite Jest*," and that it is "problematically rendered," which is somewhat ironic, given her assertion that "small slippages of language are never accidental in Wallace's writing" (152). Too Pretty, Walinda, and the African American characters in *Infinite Jest* do share a few linguistic features used to signal African American identity, but they do not speak at all alike, differing in both morphosyntax and tone. The comparison Hayes-Brady and others have made between Too Pretty and *Jest*'s Clenette Henderson may have been influenced by the recurring character names Wardine and Reginald. It is unlikely that Wallace meant to refer to the same characters, as Skokie is quite some distance from Boston, and Too Pretty would probably have mentioned if one of his "bitches" had serious back scars, as *Jest*'s Wardine would. Wallace particularly liked the name Wardine, which he also used in "Lyndon" for the "black servant in

⁷² Thompson, "Wallace and Race," 213.

⁷³ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 171.

black stockings and a doiled apron" (81) in the Johnson White House, clearly a different person in a different era.

From the first line of his internal monologue, Too Pretty is confident and intentionally humorous, expressing an unlikely sympathy for and appreciation of the title character (who, among other things, brought Too Pretty to dinner at his country club): "Yall want to play, just don't play with my man S.S." Unlike Walinda (who is also quite confident), Too Pretty tends to be amused by everything he sees, although he is also rather philosophical, making several general abstract pronouncements as well as reflecting on his own thought processes: "This set my ass thinkin" (93). One of the reasons that Too Pretty "be likin the big honky bastard" (92) is because "my man know some shit" (93); he appreciates not just Solomon's sincerity, but the rightness and rareness of Solomon's wisdom: "He open his mouth to say shit no white bastard got no right to know" (96). The "Everyone Except Too Pretty" scene was the accusation and interrogation of Solomon; Too Pretty is clearly a character witness for the defense, although his testimony (unlike Sophie's passionate defense of her husband) is made known only to the readers. Despite the fact that half of Too Pretty's monologue is narrated under the effect of heroin, with the last few pages a single, increasingly chaotic paragraph, he comes across as a very credible witness. (I will return to this dynamic in the discussion of "Solomon Silverfish" in the next chapter.)

Too Pretty uses stereotyped vocabulary (*my man*, *honky*, *crib*, use of *jim* and *jack* as generic terms of address), and frequent but inconsistent use of unmarked third-person present tense verbs (*he get*, [*he*] *like*, [*he*] *look* (all 92), and so on, but *dude knows*, [*it*] *slides*, [*it*] *melts* [all 94]). There are a couple of uses of modal *gots to* (which Morgan⁷⁴ argues highlights necessity) with an implied second-person subject: "Gots to do it to see" (93), "Gots to see" (94), and although he is mostly recounting past events, does use one future verb complex with auxiliary *gone* (which AAE scholars Smitherman,⁷⁵ Green,⁷⁶ Alim,⁷⁷ *inter alia* render as *gon*, to avoid confusion with the SWE/AAE past participle). He uses a null copula (*He* [Ø] *wild*, *his bitch* [Ø] *his life*), except after presentational pronouns (e.g., *heres* [92]), and sometimes Wallace has him incorrectly use invariant *be* in that same context ("Name be Sophie. Bitch be pretty, too" [93]). Folb⁷⁸ argues that in AAE, "bitch" is a "designation for female (positive or negative)," not implying disrespect.

⁷⁴ Morgan, "Nuthin' But a G Thang," 204.

⁷⁵ Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black Americans* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977).

⁷⁶ Green, *African American English*.

⁷⁷ Alim, *You Know My Steez*.

⁷⁸ Folb, *Runnin' Down Some Lines*, 229.

Wallace also has Too Pretty incorrectly use invariant *be* to express narrative present tense, not habitual aspect, as in the narrated sequence of events “I be thinkin . . . Solomon Silverfish be there . . . I be waitin” [96]). His use of apostrophes is inconsistent, but he does consistently use the -(‘)s marker on possessors (*folks ass*, *Wardine’s high ass*, *the bitches tourniquet*). Unmarked second-person pronominal possession (*you ass* [92 et seq], *you head*, *you balloon* [94]) may indicate some r-lessness, although this is not seen in other lexical items. Too Pretty prefers reflexives formed with *-ass* rather than *-self*: *my ass*, *you ass*, *his ass*, except when using the intensifying infix *-own-*,⁷⁹ as in “my own self” (93, 94), “you own self” (94), and “her own self” (95).

Too Pretty frequently (but not consistently) uses multiple negation (for instance, “I aint never seen” [93]) and one instance of negative inversion with a negative indefinite subject, although this is embedded in a relative clause: “That what his lady really be cant no sickness lay its cold white hand on” (93). (To “translate” to SWE: no sickness can lay its cold white hand on [the essence of] what Solomon’s wife really is. Too Pretty is ostensibly paraphrasing Solomon’s explanation of why he still finds his wife attractive; the “cold white hand” phrase is presumably Solomon’s.) One instance of a double modal seems out of place (“they might could earl” (93), where *earl* is presumably based on *hurl* as a synonym for *vomit*. Phonologically, he almost always has alveolar pronunciation of *-ing* suffixes (*gettin*, *likin*, *walkin*, etc. vs. *flying* [92]), and even uses the alveolar pronunciation in the compound noun *somethin*. He drops the unstressed initial syllable of (*be*)*fore* (92) and (*ap*)*prove* (94).

Wallace put almost every AAE feature he was familiar with into Too Pretty’s speech, and this may well coincide with readers’ worst stereotypical notions of a pimp in a ghetto, although I would argue that the main effect is to show Too Pretty’s freedom. He is unapologetic, unafraid, unconcerned about the image he projects—he is one of Wallace’s most joyful creations. As he asks rhetorically, “whose black ass I gone love if not Too Pretty?” (93). Even if Wallace lacks the familiarity with AAE grammar to pull it off, the intention is clearly for Too Pretty to be seen as “keepin’ it real.”

Clenette Henderson (*Infinite Jest*)

Wallace’s representation of the stream of consciousness of a very young Clenette Henderson (37–8) has received harsh criticism, although Thompson⁸⁰ points out that “Wallace was extraordinarily proud of this extract,” which

⁷⁹ Green, *African American English*, 22–3.

⁸⁰ Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 204.

he asked his agent to send to various literary magazines. Clenette is mostly thinking about her friend Wardine, so this brief section is sometimes misleadingly referred to as “the Wardine section.” For instance, the “Infinite Summer” website (which was originally put together in the summer of 2009 by a group of Wallace fans reading *Infinite Jest* together, posting their questions, comments and discoveries, but which has continued to expand over the last decade) has a list of tips on “How to Read *Infinite Jest*.”⁸¹ Tip #3 mentions “several popular way stations on the road to abandoning *Infinite Jest*,” but mentions only the “Wardine” section specifically, saying that it is written in “a tortured, faux-Ebonics type dialect. . . . Potentially offensive (if one wants to be offended), and generally hard to get through.”

Clenette’s disordered and strange internal monologue has been almost universally vilified, but seldom placed in context with the language depicted for other African American characters later in the novel. Cohen⁸² says this section is “badly done in a particularly simplistic way,” but adds that it “is no proof of racism. It may only be evidence of a flaw in the technique of a still-young writer, and maybe an inherent absence of *sprachgefühl* or innate feeling for a language, or in this case a dialect.” Araya⁸³ concedes that “Wallace may have stumbled in the Wardine section.” Alexander⁸⁴ nevertheless finds purpose in the section’s disruption of the novel’s flow, “providing a moment of discontinuity for us to analyse,” in order to force readers to confront taboo topics they are otherwise loath to consider, specifically the sexual assault and emotional traumatization of young girls.

Clenette’s unique voice jumps out of the text, demanding attention, with no other focalizing character to describe her, about six years and hundreds of pages before she appears again as a recovering addict living at Ennet House, with a job up the hill at the tennis academy. The earlier section is interior monologue; although a lot of speech is reported in this section (“Wardine say,” “Reginald say”), Clenette does not speak. She reports Wardine asking her a question, but does not reveal if she answered. Wardine begs Clenette not to tell Clenette’s mother of her abuse, and Clenette keeps the secret (“I aint tell”). Later in the novel, Clenette appears only as a background character, and readers are not privy to her thoughts. In fact, she speaks only two words in the entire novel (albeit each several times). When Gately notes

⁸¹ Matt Bucher, Nick Maniatism, and Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “How to Read *Infinite Jest*,” Infinite Summer website. June 17, 2009. <http://infinitesummer.org/archives/215>.

⁸² Cohen, “The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,” 237.

⁸³ Araya, “Why the Whiteness?,” 245.

⁸⁴ Matthew Alexander, “David Foster Wallace and Repressive Taboos: Clenette Henderson, Yrstruly and the Identity Politics of Representation,” *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts*, no. 24 (2017): 1–10, esp. 2.

that “most of the residents [of the halfway house] are mingling satisfactorily,” he specifies that “the couple of residents that are black are mingling with other blacks. . . . Clenette Henderson clutches another black girl and laughs and says “Girl!” several times” (363). Later, when Canadian attackers come for Randy Lenz, only Gately is willing to intervene; once Gately has been shot, however, all the Ennet House residents join the fight. This is a particularly powerful moment in the novel, and one in which readers rejoice to see the recovering addicts coming together across all the social fault lines that normally divide them. During the fight, Clenette and Yolanda (or, as Erdedy thinks of them, “the Afro-American girls” [614] or “the black ladies” [615]) repeatedly say “mutha-fucka,” “landing solid high-heel kicks. . . each time they get to *fu*” (614). The obscenity is gleefully cathartic for both the speakers and the readers. In her earlier interior monologue, Clenette had no hope for her future, and readers had no hope for her—which makes her reappearance later in the novel so heartening, as she is then sober, employed, owns a car, has a good friend and a supportive community. She has not just found her voice, she has developed full agency—she is literally fighting back, and working together, the community prevails.

Joffe⁸⁵ argues that Wallace intended readers to see parallels between Hal and Wardine (that he frames the emotional “abuse” of Hal as the equivalent of the physical abuse of Wardine), but I read this as Wallace honestly trying to work through how white people may sincerely believe they are “victims.” The equation of emotional and physical abuse (most overtly propounded by Marlon Bain as proxy for his friend Orin Incandenza) is not mocked, but readers are surely meant to understand that statements equating horrific physical abuse with “excessive criticism or disinterest” (1050) are patently absurd. The more realistic and important association would appear to be the contrast between Hal and Clenette. Hal, who was given so much, falls prey to narcissism, solipsism, and ends up lost and silenced; Clenette’s trajectory is exactly the reverse.

Readers are certainly meant to quickly recognize that the mind encountered in this section is African American. Her thoughts include stereotypically AAE lexical items (i.e., *crib*, *double dutch*, as well as the more local reference to an urban housing development, the *Brighton Projects*), and unmarked third-person present tense verbs forms (*Wardine say, he live*, etc.). Other recognizably AAE features of Clenette’s monologue are unmarked possessors (as in *Wardine momma*, *Reginald crib*), *gone* as future tense auxiliary (as opposed to the more widespread and non-ethnically marked *gonna*), and multiple negation with

⁸⁵ Joffe, “*In the Shadows*,” 76.

and without *aint* (lack of apostrophe in the original, as in *Wardine aint never let . . .*). Although she has one negative indefinite subject in the last line, she avoids the AAE negative inverted structure (“don’t nobody know”) in favor of the non-inverted (SWE) structure “nobody know except me” (38). She uses only one relative clause, and it follows the AAE rule discussed earlier, using zero-relative pronoun in a clause that modifies the object of the sentence: “He got some thing on his ankle [Ø] send radio signals to Parole” (38).

Thomas and Bailey⁸⁶ note that the “putative metathesis” of /sk/ > /ks/ in “ask” (pronounced [æks]) which occurs in so many mocking depictions of AAE is not specific to that dialect, and in fact is presumably a preservation of the original consonant order from the Old English verb *acsian*. Interestingly, although “Too Pretty” alternates between *ax* and *ask*, Wallace’s other AAE representations do not use the nonstandard variant; in fact, in Clenette’s interior monologue, this verb form is the only example in which a third-person singular verb occurs with the standard suffix: “asks” (38).

The typed manuscript which Wallace asked his agent to submit for publication as an independent story titled “Las Meninas” shows that he at least considered representing additional phonological differences to the Clenette section. A couple of *-ing* forms without the final *g* are corrected by hand, and Wallace changed the typed “close” back to “clothes” (HRC Wallace Papers, container 15.7), although the published version in *Jest* avoids that term altogether, referring instead to “shirts.” It’s possible these were simple typos, but they would have been prompted by his familiarity with AAE phonology, and upon seeing them, he made the conscious choice not to let them stand.

Staes⁸⁷ suggests that the Clenette section gets AAE wrong because it is channeled through the perspective of Hal Incandenza, assuming that he may have heard her recount her story at Ennet House or at a twelve-step meeting after the timeline of the novel ends. Not only is there no evidence to support such an interpretation, but it also requires readers to believe that Hal was interested enough in Clenette to remember her story in great detail, but not interested enough to remember the actual words she used, although he is portrayed as a language prodigy with an impressive memory. It certainly doesn’t explain why he would represent *aint* without an apostrophe—the one bit of “eye dialect” Wallace incorporates into this representation.

⁸⁶ Erik R. Thomas and Guy Bailey, “Segmental Phonology of African American English,” in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*, ed. Sonja Lanehart (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 403–19, esp. 409.

⁸⁷ Toon Staes, “Rewriting the Author: A Narrative Approach to Empathy in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*,” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 49, 409–27.

Although readers identify Clenette as African American, her ethnicity is less important than her evident panic and despair. Neither Hal (whose consciousness dominates the first sixteen pages of the novel) nor Ken Erdedy (whose internal monologue occupies the next ten) seems as helpless or as trapped as Clenette, whose world is so much smaller and whose problems (unlike those of the white male characters) are clearly not of her own making. Hal and Erdedy have squandered the privileges they were born into, but Clenette had no such advantages to begin with. Wallace presents depression (in Kate Gompert, among others) as characterized not just by obsessive loops of thought, but as a loss of “any sense of the other.”⁸⁸ Clenette’s empathy for Wardine is a clear illustration that she is not depressed; that objective hardship and trauma do not necessarily result in clinical depression. Clenette would have “better” reasons to be depressed and suicidal than Kate Gompert or Joelle van Dyne did, but her internal monologue is a cry in the dark from someone who very much wants to live and be heard. A clinically depressed person “is incapable of empathy with any other living thing” (*Jest* 696), but Clenette is terrified not for herself, but for Wardine and Reginald.

Wallace sets readers up to think that Clenette is simply witness to Wardine’s physical abuse. Readers such as those represented on the “Infinite Summer” website who have negative knee-jerk reactions to this young girl due to her “bad” language but who nevertheless push through it to understand what she is saying should feel ashamed of their feelings being triggered by what Cameron⁸⁹ dubbed “verbal hygiene” concerns when they *should* be horrified by the details of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. If they are not already floored by this, there’s a final “sucker-punch” in the revelation that closes the section, “And I am gone have a child,” which forces the realization that Clenette herself has been *equally* victimized, though she appears to have much less concern for herself than she does for her friend.

This section would seem to be part of the same project Boswell⁹⁰ identified for BIHM, testing “the boundaries of our willingness to empathize.” Wallace knew that Clenette’s use of language would trigger negative judgments accompanied by a reflexive lack of empathy on the part of white readers, and attempted to nevertheless jar them into it, in the space of two short pages. Young Clenette is a total innocent—there is no way even the most racist readers can blame her for the terrible things happening around her and to her. White readers presumably do not compare themselves to Clenette—they compare what their reaction was to what it should have been.

⁸⁸ Frantzen, “Finding the Unlovable Object Lovable,” 260.

⁸⁹ Deborah Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁹⁰ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 196.

African American readers—and anyone else who recognizes the misrepresentation of AAE—must read the Clenette passage differently. The errors in representation would trigger negative judgment, but as this would be of the author rather than the character, Clenette's story would not then lead to re-evaluation of that response. Realizing that Wallace was trying to evoke empathy for Clenette might somewhat mitigate readers' impression of him as racist or simply ignorant, but would not necessarily reverse the initial reaction, and would not impel such readers to interrogate their own internalized racism.

Yolanda Willis (*Infinite Jest*)

An unattributed piece of dialogue on page 180 that features multiple negation with negative inversion and epenthetic pronoun ("they didn't none of them start till 11," in which both the indefinite noun phrase and auxiliary are obligatorily marked for negation as described by Green⁹¹) and the invariant negative auxiliary *ain't* ("if I ain't been trying") might come from either Yolanda Willis or Didi Neaves, both identified as "black girls" at Ennet House. Didi does not have any dialogue attributed directly to her in the novel. The short speech cites Clenette as a potential source for confirmation ("Go on and ask Clenette"), ruling her out as speaker. Contrastive stress is marked with italics, but this does not seem to be dialect-specific; it does not indicate nonstandard placement of stress within words, for instance.

Yolanda has a short conversation with Don Gately (565), shown in medias res, complaining about the inappropriate behavior of her Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor. At first, Yolanda's speech has no ethnic markers ("I didn't even tell you yet how he suggested I should thank the Higher Power at night"), but when Gately asks her to reveal the sponsor's identity, she code switches abruptly into AAE ("I ain't use no names in here. All I say . . ."), expressing heightened emotion. She finds sexual harassment unsurprising, but the implication that she is snitching triggers strong indignation.

Another AAE feature in this speech is relativization with null relative pronoun, when Yolanda refers back to "this dude [Ø] I ain't say no name." Her pronunciation of "anonymous" as "nomonous," may be a solecism, but could also be intended as a deliberate reference to AAE phonology (dropping an unstressed initial syllable) and therefore another sign of her indignation. One of her past tense verbs drops the final *-ed* suffix (i.e., *say* for *said*), which may be interpreted either as a morphological feature (the narrative present

⁹¹ Green, *African American English*, 78.

tense, although other verbs in the same sentence have past tense suffixes) or as phonological, as pronunciation of the past tense *-ed* suffix is more variable in AAE than SWE.⁹²

Yolanda expresses herself clearly and confidently in both SWE and AAE. Code-switching the way she does, at the precise moment she does, is very plausible—a beautiful illustration of Bucholtz's observation that "individuals do not passively inhabit identity categories to which they have been assigned; rather, they negotiate and navigate these categories in a variety of ways within social interaction."⁹³ Yolanda is, in Giaimo's⁹⁴ terms, "talking back through 'talking Black.'" None of the critics who panned Wallace's representation of Clenette have found any fault with his treatment of Yolanda. They might, in fact, wonder why Gately refers to her in passing as "the deeply whacked-out Yolanda W" (601), when readers have only seen her sober and completely sane. If the earlier unattributed speech is interpreted as coming from Yolanda, it reinforces the impression of her as someone who speaks up for herself, and who will use more AAE when doing so. If readers do not associate that snippet with Yolanda, they nonetheless interpret it as another African American speaker showing resilience as well as warranted emotion.

Roy Tony (*Infinite Jest*)

Roy Tony is identified early in *Jest* as a particularly vile character. He is labeled a murderer and would-be incestuous child molester by Clenette (37–8), and appears in the narrative of yrstruly (129–31) as the leader of a gang of drug-dealing "nigers." It would have been easy (and lazy) for Wallace to trigger negative evaluation of him by giving him the broadest, most fully developed AAE dialect, but Roy Tony does not speak directly until years (and hundreds of pages) later, when he is sincerely invested in his recovery and sobriety (505–6). Despite his despicable past, Roy Tony is more likeable in this scene than the insincere white middle-class recovering addict Ken Erdedy.

Although his "What it is" greeting (already dated when the book was published in the 1990s) is ethnically marked and stereotypical so there can be no confusion as to his ethnicity, his speech contains fewer dialect markers than Clenette's or Walinda's. His speech is all first and second person, so he has no opportunity to display unmarked third-person possessors or

⁹² Green, *African American English*, 110.

⁹³ Bucholtz, *White Kids*, 1.

⁹⁴ Genie Giaimo, "Talking Back Through 'Talking Black': African American English and Agency in Walter Mosley's Devil in a Blue Dress," *Language and Literature* 19, no. 3 (2010): 235–47, esp. 235.

unmarked third-person singular present tense verbs. (Of course, Wallace *could* have given him such opportunities, if he had wanted to emphasize the nonstandardness of his speech.) As with Yolanda, though, the use of AAE features seems to increase when he gets angry. In this case, the trigger for emotion is Erdedy's refusal to engage in the Narcotics Anonymous ritual of members hugging one another at the end of a meeting. In addition to frequent italics marking stress shifts, there are nonstandard verb complexes, including use of completive *done* ("We done motherfucking *surrendered* our wills in here"), and future tense with *gone*. Roy Tony's speech is affirmed as righteous by "one of the Afro-American women who was looking on," who claps her hands and shouts "*Talk* about it!"(506). Although Wallace didn't show any real familiarity with AAE speech events and verbal genres, this evokes the well-known pattern of call-and-response in which the members of the traditional black church respond to the preacher, falling specifically into Smitherman's⁹⁵ "co-signing" category, affirming what Roy Tony has said.

The upshot of the story is that Roy Tony terrifies Erdedy into complying with the ritual. Like the unattributed dialogue on page 180 which I have associated with Yolanda, Roy Tony's speech contains some italics to indicate unusually heavy stress, but it is marked on entire words or on the syllable for which SWE prescribes primary stress in any case, so this doesn't seem to be dialect-specific, just an expression of his emotion. It is remarkable that Roy Tony's criminal, anti-social, and immoral behavior early in the novel is entirely divorced from his use of AAE, indeed from his use of language at all; like Clenette, he only speaks directly when he is working for a greater good. In this case, he is not only teaching Erdedy a much-needed lesson but also reinforcing the group norms for the good of the larger community (including across ethnic and class divisions).

Individuation of Characters vs. the (Missing) African American Community

Morrison's study of the treatment of race in American literature⁹⁶ described and decried how the dialogue of black characters "is construed as an alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to disfamiliarize it." For the most part, Wallace did not attempt to capture AAE phonology, except where he could use visual conventions already familiar to his audience (such as Walinda's *-in'* suffixes or the use of italics to indicate

⁹⁵ Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*, 106.

⁹⁶ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 52.

stress added to a syllable). Wallace's decision not to engage in such visual "disfamiliarization" may have been an attempt to avoid the scathing critiques he nonetheless received for these dialect sketches.

As noted earlier, Wallace does indulge in one small piece of visual manipulation in Clenette's internal monologue, consistently using *aint* without an apostrophe. Presumably, this is meant to reinforce the "strangeness" of her speech, and her lack of education (although she uses commas in the standard way). Even this allows for differentiation, however: Too Pretty uses apostrophes inconsistently, and they appear according to SWE conventions in the represented speech of both Yolanda and Roy Tony. Although Ives⁹⁷ deemed some use of eye dialect "inevitable, even in the most carefully done literary dialect," Wallace seems to have been particularly sparing of it—certainly using it less for his ethnic characters than for a couple of regional dialect speakers.

As a longtime fan of rap music with a supposedly good ear for mimicry, Wallace should have been on more familiar ground with the sound of the dialect, even if he occasionally misunderstood (or at least lost some meaning from) the lyrics. Green⁹⁸ and Thomas and Bailey,⁹⁹ among others, detail how AAE phonology is distinct in many ways from SWE: speakers use monophthongal *ai* in words like *I*, *high*, typically devoice final /d/ (as in *wicket* for "wicked"), put primary stress on the initial syllable of polysyllabic words (either performing stress shifts as in *pólíce*, or by deleting unstressed initial syllables as in [a]'*bout* or [re]'*member*), do not allow word-final consonant clusters (as in *jus*'[t] or *min*'[d]), substitute stop consonants (/t,d/) or labiodental fricatives /f,v/ for interdental fricatives (/θ,ð/ both spelled "th" in SWE) in particular phonetic environments (as in *toof* and *mouf*), while retaining *θ* word-initially, substitute [skr] for [str] word-initially, and vocalize liquids after vowels /r,l/ (as in *mo*' for "more" and *ba*' for "ball"), especially in unstressed syllables. As illustrated in this (admittedly incomplete) list, these features are numerous and complex, but not difficult to represent on the page, nor would they render the writing particularly difficult to read. Not only does Wallace not include any visual indication of such pronunciations, he even avoids switching *-ing* suffixes to *-in'* for the African American addicts and former addicts in *Infinite Jest*, even though Green¹⁰⁰ says the phonetic realization of the suffix as (n) in AAE occurs "in most contexts." Niedzielski

⁹⁷ Ives, "A Theory of Literary Dialect," 147.

⁹⁸ Green, *African American English*.

⁹⁹ Thomas and Bailey, "Segmental Phonology of African American English," 403–19.

¹⁰⁰ Green, *African American English*, 121.

and Preston¹⁰¹ discuss “the loss of g in -ing endings” as “a common folk preoccupation . . . attributed to laziness.” This perception is demonstrably incorrect, since one sound is simply substituted for the other—there is no “savings” in time or effort—but it may have been a factor in Wallace’s choice to avoid this judgment for Clenette, Yolanda, and Roy Tony.

As Table 1 shows, Wallace chose different constellations of mostly grammatical features for each of his African American speakers, with just a few lexical and phonological items included. Of course, the choice of grammatical structures, like the choice of particular words, very much depends on what meanings a speaker is trying to express. It cannot be asserted whether Yolanda, who never expresses a future intention, would use future *gone*, *gonna*, *going to*, *will*, or *I’m a*. Likewise, Roy Tony uses little negation, so it is unclear whether he would have consistently used single negation, consistently used multiple negation, or varied. What is clear is that Wallace did not assume that ethnic identity would erase other forms of difference between these characters (although many critics have failed to see the differences that he encoded), and that he viewed both identity and associated use of dialect(s) as more complex than he has been given credit for. Roy Tony in recovery is terrifyingly earnest (and just plain terrifying), Walinda is justifiably angry, Yolanda is more quietly pragmatic—and all are depicted only talking to white people. Not only is there no access to their interior monologue, but readers understand that they are constrained both linguistically and socially. Direct access to Clenette’s and Too Pretty’s thoughts allows more AAE features to emerge, but Wallace took care to distinguish those performances, as the personalities and circumstances were completely different (Table 1).

Wallace’s inability to deploy African American aspectual markers significantly detracts from the realism of the speech of his African American characters—but only in ways that those who have (at least receptive) command of AAE would recognize. Many critics were, in fact, misled into thinking Wallace was more knowledgeable about AAE than he really was. Thompson¹⁰² refers to Wallace’s “extensive knowledge of what he labelled ‘Standard Black English’ and its dialectal variants.” In Wallace’s “spiel” to black students (discussed in A&AU) about why he expected them to use SWE in their essays, he offered to recommend and discuss with a student “great books by scholars of Black English” (CTL 109). Notably, however, the scholars he actually named and praised are those who use what he called

¹⁰¹ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 261.

¹⁰² Thompson, “Wallace and Race,” 201.

Table 1 Features of AAE in Wallace’s Dialect Representations

	Roy Tony (<i>Jest</i>)	Yolanda (<i>Jest</i>) + unattributed	Walinda (<i>Broom</i>)	Clenette (<i>Jest</i>)	Too Pretty ("Solomon Silverfish")
<i>Ain't</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Null copula/auxiliary	+	+	+	+	+
Invariant <i>be</i>			+	+	+
Counterfactual <i>like to</i>			+	+	+
Nonstandard relativization		+		+	+
Future <i>gone</i>	+		Ø	+	+
AAE lexicon (<i>crib, to play, etc.</i>)	Ø	Ø	+	+	+
Multiple negation	Ø	+	Ø	+	+
<i>Yall</i>			+		+
Perfective <i>done</i>	+		+		
Unmarked 3-S present verbs			Ø	+	+
Negative inversion		+		Ø	+
Deletion of unstressed syllables	Ø	+	Ø		+
<i>-in'</i>	Ø	Ø	+	Ø	+
Intensifying <i>-own-</i> in reflexives					+
<i>Gots</i> (narrative present <i>-s</i>)					+
<i>Ax</i> (vs. <i>ask</i>)		Ø		Ø	+
Unmarked possessors			Ø	+	Ø

KEY: + AAE variant attested; Ø AAE variant avoided (despite opportunity to use); left blank (no opportunity to use, meaning not expressed).

“totally ass-kicking SWE [‘standard white English’]” (109). His observation that “some of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair, and that pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever really changing them” (109) presupposes that everyone shares in that project of changing racist linguistic ideologies. Wallace may sincerely have believed that he did share that goal, but there’s little evidence that he did much to advance the cause. Mura¹⁰³ has a particularly trenchant response to Wallace’s tone-deaf “spiel”: “He’s the type of white guy who thinks he’s thought it all out in terms of race, and there’s nothing I could say to him about what I know or my experiences that would ever cause him to doubt . . . Deep inside, I know he’s not on my side; he doesn’t want the best for me.”

The “Dave Wallace” narrator in TPK observes “the way two unconnected black people will often go out of their way to nod at or otherwise specially acknowledge each other if everyone else around them is white” (305–6). As Araya¹⁰⁴ points out, although this comment “might seem to point out the community *between* African Americans, it is one that only exists *in opposition to* ‘everyone else around.’” The “evidence notebook” Wallace was keeping for that novel puts the chasm between black and white even more starkly: “Why black kids scare white kids just with their presence: it was their otherness and the force with which they asserted it” (HRC Wallace Papers, container 43.1, p. 39 of the notebook).

Clenette, Roy Tony, and Too Pretty are from “the Projects,” but Walinda and Yolanda may well have come from more comfortable backgrounds. (It is, of course, possible that they too came from poverty, but that Walinda managed to work her way into the middle class.) There is no blame attached to Too Pretty or Roy Tony for their criminal behaviors, just as there is no judgment of those who succumb to addiction. Forming communities in opposition to whiteness (including criminal gangs, but also the more prosaic tendency to stick to “one’s own kind”) may provide some degree of protection and comfort, but Wallace implies that it is healthier to form larger communities that transcend race and ethnicity, as the recovering addicts at Ennet House eventually manage to do.

In Martínez’s¹⁰⁵ terms, Wallace does not offer African American readers many available inputs for blended “self-schema storyworld possible selves.”

¹⁰³ Mura, “White Writing Teachers,” 9.

¹⁰⁴ Araya, “Why the Whiteness?” 240.

¹⁰⁵ María-Ángeles Martínez, *Storyworld Possible Selves: Applications of Cognitive Linguistics*, Vol. 37 (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2018), 124.

In this sense, he undoubtedly falls into the tradition Morrison¹⁰⁶ identifies of using “Africanist language practices . . . to reinforce class distinctions and otherness as well as to assert privilege and power.” Clearly sensitive to all of these dimensions, Wallace may have been asserting that privilege and power distinctions continue to exist, but it would appear that he was (perhaps clumsily) trying to show the unfairness of the systems that continue to segregate and disadvantage people like Clenette. Wallace’s white characters are in no way more virtuous or intelligent or successful than his racial others.

When Hal repeatedly notices Clenette working at the tennis academy, but never feels comfortable engaging directly with her, it is not simply a personal failing, it is a societal failure. Had Wallace not let her speak for herself, he would have appeared to validate and endorse that segregation. His anxiety about writing African American voices may have limited his ability to dip into some characters’ perspectives, but it is also quite possible that he was limiting his attempts at this in order to illustrate the very limited opportunity that many Americans have to actually get to know people of different ethnicities. Wallace’s belief that it should be possible for his white readers to empathize across racial lines, even when given very limited glimpses into racial and ethnic others’ experiences, can be read as optimism and confidence in a shared sense of humanity, despite the social structures that continue to keep populations separate.

It is valid to criticize Wallace for featuring so few African Americans and for so seldom letting them speak for themselves (not to mention making them all drug users and/or dealers, although to be fair, this is true of most of the white characters in *Jest* as well); it is not accurate, however, to say that they all sound alike. Although the color of someone’s skin may be the first thing that the white focalizing character notices, it is, in fact, their voices that readers will recall. An explicitly raciolinguistic reading of Wallace’s work—that is, a sociolinguistic study that does not just describe ethnic dialects, but actively pushes back on the hegemony of white linguistic practices being imposed on nonwhite communities, rejecting the “melting pot” goal¹⁰⁷—should be less concerned with the individual dialect depictions (which *should* contain a lot of individual variation) and more concerned with the absence, in Wallace’s writing, of any healthy African American or multiethnic communities.

¹⁰⁶ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 52.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. H. Samy Alim, “Introducing Raciolinguistics: Racing Language and Linguaging Race in Hyperracial Times,” in *Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas about Race*, ed. H. Samy Alim, John R. Rickford, and Arnetta F. Ball (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–30; Jonathan Rosa, *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

With the exception of the *Clenette* section of *Jest* (which is a horror show of poverty, addiction, physical and sexual violence), black people are only seen hovering around the fringes of white America, unable to be integrated. There are no depictions, in Wallace's work, of black people talking to each other; only trying (and usually failing) to be heard by white people. (The white characters *see* *Clenette* and *Yolanda* talking to each other, but all readers *hear* is the occasional "Girl!") Part of the misapprehension that Wallace's African American characters sound alike may be due to reflexive reactions to any use of language perceived as nonstandard, but some may be an unconscious perception of salient absences in their speech: African Americans in Wallace's work are not given access to the regional identities that white people may use to gain a sense of working-class community, nor are they granted access to the social identities ("jock," "nerd") that would provide a pathway for upward mobility.