Shapiro, Mary. "Ethnicity and Assimilation." *Wallace's Dialects*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 81–100. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501348501.0008>>.

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Ethnicity and Assimilation

Figure 3 Wallace’s European and Jewish American Dialects.

Whereas African Americans remain separate from the rest of the population, denied the chance to assimilate, European and Jewish immigrant communities are swallowed whole, at the cost of losing their languages and cultures. White ethnic heritage is reduced by Wallace to an idealized memory, a catchy slogan on a button to wear at parades, words and foods that have been “Americanized” and now belong to all. There is an inverse relationship in Wallace’s work between ethnicity and regional identity: only white people are perceived as regional; anyone with a regional identity must be white. Whiteness is construed as the *absence* of ethnicity—it is the “unmarked” identity, in linguistic terms, and therefore the default, with no particular cultural or identity traits predicated upon it.

Although this is just one minor thread among many in *Jest*, where it may be overwhelmed by other themes, Wallace explored the issue of “assimilation” of immigrant populations more explicitly in some of his earlier work. There is a long tradition of American literature tracing “the evolution of European

nationals and ethnics into white Americans"¹ of which Wallace was certainly aware, mostly "written by immigrants who, though white by appearance, were still marginalized by class, language, religion, and ethnicity."²

"White" and "black" seem like fairly distinct categories in Wallace's worldview, but what of other people of color? There are very few Asian American characters in Wallace's works (or foreigners from Asia), but those who do appear tend to have "American" given names, ethnically marked family names, and no trace of ethnic dialect. LaMont Chu, who is compared directly to the real-life professional tennis player Michael Chang, does not speak directly the first dozen or so times he appears in *Jest*, but when he finally does (388–9), his speech is entirely standard. This same phenomenon is seen in "Church Not Made with Hands" (*BIHM*) in the character Eric Yang, and in TPK, with the presumably Japanese Keith Sabusawa. It is not limited to those of Asian descent, however. There is also the Kenyan (presumably black) Tony Nwangi in *Jest*. The first names of TPK's Persian F. Chahla Neti-Neti and *Jest*'s "Petropolis" Khan are not given, but the use of first initial and/or nickname are different ways of Americanizing their names. Araya³ calls Khan "charming and hilarious," which is a bit of a stretch, though his speech is certainly depicted as standard in a casual, teenage boy kind of way. Only a few of Khan's words are reported by Hal, first "asking what was all this brooha upstairs" and then reporting that "the scuttlebutt on breakfast was sausage-analog and OJ with palpable pulp, he said" (989).

Hybrid names given to people who presumably are visibly not white could be read as a sign that, no matter how standard their speech may be, they cannot assimilate entirely to a default white American identity. On the other hand, Wallace makes a more complex statement about the interrelationship of national origin, race, and ethnicity by including the white family at the heart of *Jest* in the same pattern. The surname Incandenza is recognizable as an abridged version of the Italian word for "incandescence" (*incandescenza*), but although a distant "Umbrian" ancestor is mentioned (101), the Incandenzas in no way identify as Italian. Hal's father, James, was said to take after "a great-grandmother with Pima-tribe Indian S.W. blood" (101), and Hal himself is said to "look ethnic" in the same way (101)—"radiantly dark," although his eyes are blue—and his skin color is explicitly noted as a weird genetic fluke. His brother Orin "had got the Moms's Anglo-Nordo-Canadian phenotype" with "lighter-blue eyes" (101). It is never suggested that they have any cultural

¹ Valerie Babb, *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 9.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ Araya, "Why the Whiteness?," 244.

inheritance from the more distant progenitors. If this is the “success” story of assimilation and intermarriage of European Americans, the main result appears to be emptiness and depression.

Jest, set in the Boston area, offers the greatest variety of ethnic voices, but Wallace’s main characters are all white, and there are notable ethnic gaps even in scenes that should, realistically, have more diverse populations, such as the halfway house, the twelve-step meetings, bars, crowded street scenes, and so on. In the 1990 census, black people accounted for over a quarter of the population of the city of Boston, “Hispanic origin (of any race)” just over 10 percent, with almost half of the Hispanic population Puerto Rican, and Asians just over 5 percent, with more than half of the Asian population Chinese.⁴ *Jest* contains no reference to Puerto Ricans, and although there are multiple references to Chinese restaurants and to the country of China, the only Chinese Americans who appear in the novel are the elderly ladies carrying shopping bags whom Lenz stalks and then mugs. Lenz’s racism is apparent in his use of not just “Oriental,” but the adjectival form “Orientoid” (718) and “Chinkette” (728). Although a neighborhood in Cambridge is designated “Little Lisbon” (479), and there is a “Portuguese grocery” opposite Antitoi Entertainment (483) and a “Portuguese Restaurant” (682), there are no people of Portuguese descent featured in the text—they have been completely assimilated. In a kind of postcolonial revenge, the neighborhood is now populated by Brazilian immigrants, seen only in passing, who will also presumably soon be assimilated.

Araya⁵ sees TPK as embodying whiteness. Mura’s “manifesto” (his article is so labeled)⁶ places Wallace within a tradition in which “most white fiction writers don’t ever think consciously about identifying their white characters as white; lacking a racial marker, characters are still to be regarded by default as white.” Bucholtz⁷ observes that for the European American high school students she studied in California, “whiteness was not readily available as an ethnicity or culture but rather was often viewed as an absence of culture.”

Embodying whiteness is emphatically not the same thing as celebrating it, however. Araya⁸ notes that not only are people of color relatively absent in TPK but the white characters are also relatively homogeneous (239). Wallace was certainly able to differentiate characters linguistically in terms of social

⁴ “Race and Hispanic Origin,” 1990 Massachusetts Census, Table 6: 24. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1990/cp-1/cp-1-23.pdf>.

⁵ Araya, “Why the Whiteness?”

⁶ Mura, “White Writing Teachers,” 1.

⁷ Bucholtz, *White Kids*, 234.

⁸ Araya, “Why the Whiteness?”

and regional identities when he wanted to, as will be detailed in the next few chapters. The absence of such differentiation in TPK was likely no oversight, but rather a warning. Choosing to affiliate oneself with a group that one is not born into does not have to erase the identities that one already has. The “melting pot,” as presented in TPK, reduces the humanity of all involved, making them indistinguishable cogs in a machine; their identity as IRS agents supplants all previous identities. The “stew” metaphor represented by Alcoholics Anonymous in *Jest*, on the other hand, allows everyone to retain their separate identities while also accepting a new common identity as recovering addicts.

Rosa⁹ points out that “the ethnoracial status of Latinx identity is widely debated in both scholarly and popular discourses, often from the perspective of spectrum-based racial logics that problematically imagine Latinxs as an intermediary ‘brown’ population located between Blackness at one end and Whiteness at the other, or as a phenotypically heterogeneous group that is better understood ethnically (i.e., stereotypically defined culturally or nationally) than racially (i.e., stereotypically defined physically).” Wallace acknowledges various “foreign” Hispanics (Carlina, Alfonso) as discussed in Chapter 2, but there are no extended portrayals of native-born Latinx in his work. Eugenio Martinez, a recovering addict and volunteer counselor who calls himself “Gene,” makes several appearances in *Jest*, but is never allowed to speak for himself. The (false) implication of this absence is that Latinx populations are fully “assimilated.”

More surprising still, there are virtually no blended or hybrid identities, no mention of multiracialism, no black Jews, no children of Vietnamese mothers and US GI fathers. In this, Wallace does reflect the census data of the time, as the census did not allow people to indicate more than one “race” until 2000. Neighborhoods in the Boston area are identified as “mixed” (i.e., “Watertown from east to west is Catholic, Armenian, and Mixed” [811]), but not people—except for the white-on-white “Dutch-Irish” identity Joelle van Dyne claims in her pre-suicide monologue (234), but which in no way informs her character.

Araya¹⁰ argues that the absence of multiracial characters in TPK “is not linked to a judgment about their place in society. Rather, Wallace presents the reader with a simplified, more homogeneous version of society, and traces that society’s inability to live up to the ideals on which it was founded.” Wallace undoubtedly simplifies the categorization of race and ethnicity, but does not

⁹ Rosa, *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race*, 2–3.

¹⁰ Araya, “Why the Whiteness?,” 248.

allow readers to ignore racial tensions and complex questions of identity for long. Voices pop out of the text, all the more starting against the homogeneous background. Readers are reminded that those who cannot assimilate live segregated, separate lives, resulting in a failure of empathy across group lines. The ethnicity of European and Jewish Americans that have assimilated is reduced to tropes that then belong to all Americans, as all of America can feel a bit Irish on St. Patrick's Day or feel a bit Jewish eating bagels.

Thompson¹¹ points out that in the notes for TPK, Chris Aquistipace is referred to "at various points as being of wildly different races and ethnicities, with the point being that he is racially othered, rather than occupying a particular identity position that Wallace is keen to explore" (216). Indeed, the concept of "othering" is central to understanding Wallace's representations of race and ethnicity. To what extent *are* we really different, and can we nonetheless connect with and understand one another across these differences? To what extent can ethnic groups assimilate, and is this even desirable? In addition to his African American depictions, Wallace explores these ideas via depictions of Irish Americans in *Infinite Jest*, but explored it more fully with Jewish Americans in earlier stories.

Irish Americans: *Infinite Jest*'s Pemulis Family

Although the ethnoracial landscape of *Jest*'s fictionalized then-near-future is simplified, almost literally reduced to black and white, Wallace could hardly avoid dealing with Irish Americans in the Boston-based novel. McGurl¹² talks of Wallace identifying with "his ancestor" in *Braveheart*, but he acknowledges that Wallace only seems to have considered his Celtic heritage in private, not in his writing. Even in the impressively large cast of characters of *Infinite Jest*, there are no Scottish characters.

Wallace's treatment of the anonymous Irishman discussed in the previous chapter and the Pemulis family seems to have been influenced more by his own observations of the status of the Irish Americans in Boston, perhaps particularly informed by his close friendship with Mark Costello, who is "from a large Irish-Catholic family,"¹³ than by a tradition in American literature. Fanning¹⁴ surveys 250 years of Irish American authors, but many

¹¹ Thompson, "Wallace and Race."

¹² McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing."

¹³ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 19.

¹⁴ Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

are little remembered today, and it would not appear that Wallace was particularly influenced by them, if indeed he had read some of the more successful, such as Finley Peter Dunne or James T. Farrell. Even if Wallace had not read any of Farrell's trilogy, he might still have been aware of the thuggish Chicagoan Studs Lonigan character from the 1960 film or the 1979 miniseries based on the novels (with Studs played by Frank Gorshin and Harry Hamlin, respectively). He would likely have been aware of racist portrayals of Irish Americans written by writers who were not themselves Irish American, including T. S. Eliot's awful Sweeney, or by early portrayals of Irish Americans in the media more generally.

Jest features several racist narrators, as discussed in the previous chapter, and although their attitudes toward the Boston Irish are more offhandedly racist than toward African Americans, there are multiple references to "Irish luggage" (541, 823, meaning garbage bags, with specially reinforced ones upgraded to "Irish Guccis" [542]). The "tough blue-collar Irish lads" Tiny Ewell recalls being "bussed in from the East Watertown projects" are clearly not foreigners, but Irish Americans, who are described in starkly unflattering terms: with "runny noses, home-cut hair, frayed cuffs, quick with their fists" (810). The presumably also Irish American women who are part of the tennis academy's custodial staff are described only as "thick-ankled Irish women" (152). The derogatory term "Paddy" is used multiple times in the section focalized by yrstruly (rendered there as "Patty"), and although some readers might not be aware of the etymology of the term "paddy wagons," Wallace certainly would have been.

The members of the Pemulis family illustrate the pressures to assimilate into default whiteness, as well as the obstacles inherent in this. "Matty's Da'd come over on a boat from Louth in Lenster in 1989" (683) when Matty was "three or four." (Wallace undoubtedly meant "Leinster," in the Republic of Ireland.) Pemulis, Sr., a dockworker who raped his elder son repeatedly (until his death, when Matty was seventeen), has notably accented speech in that son's memory: "A fook in t'boom" (684), for example, although his speech is much less accented than the Irish immigrant at AA discussed in the previous chapter whose every word is re-spelled. Da Pemulis only has a few words adjusted, mainly the words that index his relationship with Matty, both as father (*Da, sone*) and as abuser (*fook, fookin, boom*). He elides an occasional vowel, and has some phrasings that sound Irish-inflected, as in "what are we scared of then?," "to be scared so," "nought on his mind but a fook," "why then so I've a mind to give you just what you're thinking t'fear" (all 684).

Matty, whom we meet as a 23-year-old prostitute, came to the United States young enough to become fully nativized; he has no traces of Irish in his adult dialect, except for referring to his father as "Da." Matty's younger brother is Michael Pemulis, whom Matty always thinks of as "Micky," but

who is never called that by his classmates. Michael's ethnicity is referred to in passing—but only to make the point that it isn't accepted ("he's barred by DeLint and Nwangi from shirts that mention the Sinn Fein" [266]), or isn't normally evident. Hal comments during the Eschaton game that "the combination of several Tenuate spansules plus Eschaton-adrenaline bring his blue-collar Irish right out" (334). Hal needs to mention this for readers, because the actual utterance supposedly illustrating this does not encode any sort of ethnic dialect: "It's only real-world snow if it's already in the *scenario!*" (334). The "Irish" in him must be normally very well controlled, if it takes a combination of game-fuelled adrenaline and an amphetamine-like drug to allow it to surface. The extent of his "Irishness," linguistically, appears to be his vowel pronunciation in "*Jaysus*" (334, 338)—but there has long been a deleterious stereotype of Irish temper, as evidenced by the idiom "getting one's Irish up." When Pemulis says "*Jaysus*" with good humor during a poker game with his "Little Buddies" (117), nobody comments on his "Irishness."

Although Wallace could not avoid Irishness completely with a novel set in a town with the largest Irish American population in America, this heritage did not particularly interest him, presumably because the anti-Irish sentiments that prevailed in the nineteenth century are no longer common in the United States. Negra¹⁵ calls Irish heritage today "enriched whiteness," arguing that it has become "the ideal guilt-free white ethnicity of choice." I will nonetheless return to Michael Pemulis in Chapter 8, as he illustrates a different aspect of identity, the association of regional dialect with the white working class, and limits on opportunities for upward mobility.

The Assimilation of Jewish Americans

Although Wallace once self-identified as "the goyest gentile anybody's ever met"¹⁶, he repeatedly wrote tales featuring the assimilation of Jews into default whiteness. There may have been some personal reasons for this, based on his own relationships with and observations of Jewish people in his life, but he was undoubtedly also responding to a tradition in American literature with which he was known to be familiar, and the absorption of a part of Jewish linguistic and cultural heritage into general US culture.

Wallace's appreciation for Cynthia Ozick's ability to effect "an utter erasure of difference" was noted in Chapter 3; he called her "an immortally good

¹⁵ Diane Negra, "The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture," in *The Irish in US*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1–19, esp. 11.

¹⁶ Schechner, "Behind the Watchful Eyes of Author David Foster Wallace," 109.

pure prose writer.”¹⁷ He was a fan of Philip Roth, but thought Alan Lelchuk “embodied the clumsiness of mainstream realist fiction.”¹⁸ Wallace had a very close relationship with longtime agent Bonnie Nadell, and although they were only a few years apart in age, described her as his surrogate Jewish mother, and not the first such in his life: “I have this thing, the nearest Jewish mother, I will simply put my arms around her skirt and just attach myself.”¹⁹ The affection between Wallace and Nadell is evident in their correspondence, archived at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. With this kind of personal connection, Wallace may have trusted his ear even more than he did when attempting to capture other dialects.

“Solomon Silverfish” and “Say Never” both center around Jews in the Chicago area, but are complementary in their exploration of assimilation and the performative nature of identity. The speech of Mrs. Tagus’s two adult sons in “Say Never,” neither of whom retains their mother’s linguistic markers of Jewish identity, is portrayed without commentary, apparently as natural and unsurprising; the assimilation from Jewish immigrant to a default white identity is complete within a single generation. On the other hand, the discovery that the title character Solomon Silverfish is not “actually” Jewish comes as a shocking revelation to his longtime friends and family. Solomon, identified in the opening line of the story as a “secret Saxon, closet Celt” (67), has chosen to go against the social pressures that would find Jewishness marked, deviant, and less worthy than a default white identity. This story is more overtly about the connection between language and identity, about which identities people are allowed to claim, including who has the right to use which dialect. This makes it somewhat ironically awkward for Hayes-Brady²⁰ and Thompson²¹ to criticize the dialect portrayed as overly stereotyped, as they recognize, although Thompson nevertheless labels the dialogue in this story “like the most grotesquely stereotypical Jews from Hollywood entertainment” (213).

Witzling²² argues that “cultural Jewishness in postmodernity can only be understood in comparison to constructions of other ‘ethnic’ and ‘racial’ minority cultures subject to some complex of social prejudice and politico-

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 39.

¹⁹ David Lipsky, “The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 161–83, esp. 167.

²⁰ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*,

²¹ Thompson, “Wallace and Race.”

²² 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. 161.

legal discrimination. Many individuals of Jewish descent and Jews as a group have benefitted from the expansion of whiteness in the United States to include them during the middle decades of the twentieth century" (161). He demonstrates that Norman Mailer and Jonathan Safran Foer "articulate ways that Jewishness can disappear into invisibility or even render itself wholly absent" (162). The fictional character who bears the author's name in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*²³ is described by his Ukrainian taxi driver as "not a Jew with a large-sized letter J, but a jew, like Albert Einstein or Jerry Seinfeld" (104).

Wirth-Nesher²⁴ details "representation of accented speech" by Jewish American writers, "from the striding Yiddish-American dialect in Abraham Cahan's work to accented speech restricted to non-Jewish American characters in Saul Bellow's novels." She traces the use and portrayal of language(s) in different generations of Jewish American writers, from foreign-born, non-native-English speakers to native-born bilinguals, to members of the third generation who do not speak Yiddish or Hebrew. The next logical extension of this would logically be someone like Wallace, who has no Jewish heritage, but has absorbed part of Jewish language and culture from common cultural references. Spinner²⁵ shares an anecdote of running a book club ("a few years ago," presumably in the 2010s) focused on Yiddish literature in translation, in which most of the members were "well-educated American Jews," but "none of them knew more than a few words" in Yiddish. In that sense, Wallace was not at a linguistic disadvantage in representing a Yiddish-influenced American dialect, although he might still be at a cultural one, and still left himself open to claims of cultural appropriation and/or anti-Semitic mockery.

There are no obvious errors in the representation of Jewish American speech in these stories; it is likely the frequency with which the dialect features occur that gives rise to the perception of stereotyping. It is possible that common cultural access to Jewish American discourse instantiated in the work of (e.g., among many others) Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, and Neil Simon made Wallace think that a thick Jewish accent would feel like a "familiar friend" in Oster's²⁶ terms. When Solomon's friend Zero Kretzman accuses him of speaking "the way a person speaks when he tries to imitate a

²³ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

²⁴ Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4.

²⁵ Samuel Spinner, "Reading Jewish," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 134, no. 1 (2019): 150–6, esp. 151.

²⁶ Judith Oster, *Crossing Cultures: Creating Identity in Chinese and Jewish American Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

Jewish person" (81), it's funny not just because readers get the metalinguistic joke that Wallace was engaged in that very task as he wrote those very words (and would, like Solomon, be accused of cultural appropriation), but because there is no apparent difference between Kretzman's way of speaking and Solomon's (which passed successfully as Jewish for thirty years).

The Affirmation of Community in "Solomon Silverfish"

"Solomon Silverfish" takes place in "Skokie, a certain part of Chicago" (67). Skokie was home to thousands of Holocaust survivors and was predominantly Jewish when a Nazi march was planned there in the late 1970s, leading to a protracted and very public legal battle over freedom of speech when Wallace was still a teenager in Illinois. As the Holocaust survivors have died off, and the descendants of the immigrants have assimilated linguistically, Chicago is now much less associated with Jewish identity in popular culture, although the Jewish population of the city (and larger metropolitan area) has continued to grow.²⁷ *Ethnolinguistic Chicago*²⁸ has chapters on African Americans, Greek-, Arab-, Nigerian-, Italian-, Swedish-, Chinese-, and Japanese-Americans, but no mentions of Jewish people even in passing. Nonetheless, one of the important distinctions between this story and "Say Never" is that "Solomon Silverfish" depicts a large and vibrant Jewish community holding on to its heritage, resisting assimilation, and absorption—even presenting an appealing alternative (in Solomon's eyes at least) to a default white identity.

"Solomon Silverfish" includes direct borrowings of Yiddish words such as *klotz* (68, clumsy person),²⁹ *shaygets* (82, a derogatory term for a male who is not Jewish), *Schwartz/shvartzer* (as discussed in the previous chapter), going far beyond what Wallace might have expected average Americans to recognize. When Solomon's mother-in-law tells his wife Sophie that Solomon has "pretended" to be Jewish ever since he first met her, the mother-in-law code switches into Yiddish for an entire sentence: "a goy bleibt a goy" (82), meaning "a gentile remains a gentile," an instantiation of a common Yiddish

²⁷ Jacob B. Ukeles, Ron Miller, Peter Friedman, and David Dutwin, 2010 *Metropolitan Chicago Jewish Community Study*. Berman Jewish Databank. <https://www.jewishdatabank.k.org/databank/search-results/study/576>.

²⁸ Marcia Farr, ed. *Ethnolinguistic Chicago* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

²⁹ Yiddish words and phrases are spelled here as Wallace had them in the manuscript. Yiddish was traditionally written using the Hebrew consonantal alphabet, and different authors have chosen different transliterations, more or less phonetic. Bernstein (2006: 253) prefers "klutz." This is one of the large number of Yiddish words she cites that "have spread from Jewish English into more general American usage."

derogatory formula, as in “a chazer bleibt a chazer” (a pig remains a pig), “a nahr bleibt a nahr” (a fool remains a fool). Sophie responds to her mother incredulously, “You’re here before dawn in the morning to say my husband is a non-Jewish non-goyish demon of a Chaim Yankel?” (82), using the Yiddish equivalent of “average Joe,” but one that is often portrayed in jokes as a trickster who gets the last laugh. This level of borrowing seems appropriate for a story in which Jewish identity is sought and affirmed; it is also redundant enough with the English that a reader who doesn’t understand a word or phrase does not miss the intended meaning.

The Jewish characters in “Solomon Silverfish” all sound alike, but this is motivated by the story’s central question of whether someone can simply decide to claim Jewish identity. When Solomon is accused of having been “so identity-less in your life that you made up an identity for yourself” (84) and having spoken “so as to imitate and mislead” (85), he replies, “I spoke as friends of mine spoke. I was in Rome I spoke as the woman-who-I-love-and-who-has-made-me-me-for-thirty years spoke. I spoke like my wife” (85). Rather than manipulating orthography to represent the phonological features most commonly associated with Jewish English—the raising of pitch and emphatic pronunciation of /t,d/, slight lisp of /s,z/, pronunciation of a hard /g/ in *-ing* suffixes, and exaggerated intonation³⁰—Wallace relies more on recognizable discourse features. Jewish conversational style has been analyzed as overlapping, loud, high-pitched, fast, and featuring exaggerated gestures,³¹ sociable disagreement that is actively sought rather than avoided, and competition for turns,³² all of which are on ample display in the lively arguments in “Solomon Silverfish.”

The uniformity of Jewish American voices within the story makes the internal monologue of *Too Pretty*, the African American pimp discussed in the previous chapter, all the more startling when it takes over the narration at the end. *Too Pretty* corroborates the sincerity and extraordinary depth of Solomon’s love for Sophie, not just testifying directly (“But my man love his bitch? I see my man like to die with love” [92]), but by illustrating the social and even criminal risks Solomon was willing to take to get marijuana to ease Sophie’s nausea after her cancer treatments. *Too Pretty* serves as an unwitting character witness for Solomon, all the more credible because he is

³⁰ Cynthia Bernstein, “More Than Just Yada Yada Yada (Jewish English),” in *American Voices: How Dialects Differ from Coast to Coast*, ed. Walt Wolfram and Ben Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 252–7, esp. 254.

³¹ Deborah Tannen, “New York Jewish Conversational Style,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30 (1981): 133–50.

³² Deborah Schiffman, “Jewish Argument as Sociability,” *Language in Society* 13, no. 3 (1984): 311–35.

unaware that Solomon stands accused. Solomon's brother-in-law (who had Solomon followed by an investigator) accuses him of "carrying on" in the cemetery, "assorted kinds of shtupping. With a young woman" (86). Solomon does not dignify this with a response—but readers learn from *Too Pretty* that the "carrying on" was with Sophie (in her chemo wig), both of them high on the dope *Too Pretty* gave them.

Perhaps more importantly (since Solomon's love for Sophie was never in doubt), *Too Pretty* provides concrete evidence that Solomon can connect meaningfully with someone from another ethnic identity without changing anything about himself ("And I be likin the big honky bastard too. He wild" [92]). Even referring to Solomon as "my man" is an indication of the depth of their relationship: Folb³³ defines this as a "form of address between black males that connotes positive feelings between the two." The strength of this unlikely friendship confirms that Solomon did not need to "pretend" to be Jewish to win Sophie or to be accepted by her community; rather, he chose to be Jewish, and in making that choice, became Jewish. This included taking on all the anti-Jewish prejudice: *Too Pretty* calls him "this hebrew cracker" (94). Unlike Sophie's parents and brothers, *Too Pretty* (like Sophie) understands that Solomon can be "lots of things at one same time" (94). The most important proof of Solomon's "real" identity is that the dialect is maintained when the free indirect discourse narration dips into his thoughts. (Whether one can choose to be one of "the chosen people" is a matter for Talmudic debate; notably, the story does not deal with religion at all, as is typical for Wallace.)

Part of the critical uneasiness with "Solomon Silverfish" may come from the name of the character: both "Silverstein" and "Fishman" are common Jewish surnames (both derived historically from occupations, jeweler, and fishmonger, respectively); combining them into "Silverfish," however, inevitably conjures up images of the insect and appears to be insulting (although the term is also applied to actual silver fish). But if readers see "Silverfish" as anti-Semitic mockery, then what do they make of the revelation *in the first line of the story* that Solomon was not born Jewish? Wallace wasn't trying to be subtle, but he was having fun: "Schoenweiss," Sophie's maiden name, is hardly less markedly Jewish—and literally means "beautiful white" in German. (Wallace uses the same surname again, in passing, in "Say Never.")

During his famous road trip with David Lipsky, Wallace discusses a story he wrote "about a WASP who passes himself off as Jewish. Even with his

³³ Folb, *Runnin' Down Some Lines*, 246.

wife,”³⁴ in which he says he was trying to “show off in various technical ways. Like to do really good, a kind of really good kitschy Jewish voice and dialogue” (174). Wallace’s biography recounts that when Wallace submitted this story during his MFA program at the University of Arizona, his conservative Jewish professor was “mildly offended,” and that the other students in the program “assumed it was Wallace’s attempt to get under the skin of a professor who was not giving him the praise he expected.”³⁵ This may be true, but it does not make the story any less interesting in its own right, especially when it can be put in context of Wallace’s other dialect portraits. It appears to have intrigued Wallace that, even though the loss of religion, culture, and ethnic dialect among American Jews is perfectly commonplace, assimilation to a Jewish identity would be seen as astonishing and highly contested. Wallace’s returning to Jewish Americans in “Say Never” to further explore the concept of ethnic identity shows that this wasn’t just a private joke or a personal grudge, but a topic of genuine interest.

The Fraying of Community in “Say Never”

“Say Never”—which Ellerhoff³⁶ dubs “a Roth-or-Lelchuk ‘old-Jews pastiche’”—takes place on Chicago’s North Side and portrays many of the same dialect features. The older generation (Mr. Labov and Mrs. Tagus) continue to perform Jewish identity, but see their community shrinking as their spouses and friends die off and the younger generation moves toward complete assimilation. It may be stereotypical that the elder generation complain despite claiming not to complain and refer to people by profession (e.g., “Schoenweiss the dentist” [217]), but the elderly characters are portrayed with sympathy and dignity. They display an exaggerated politeness that evokes an old-world courtliness, as when Mr. Labov refers to his life-long friend as “Mrs. Tagus” throughout, and asks to be excused for expressing an opinion. (It may be purely serendipitous coincidence that Wallace chose the surname of the most famous sociolinguist in the United States, William Labov, to use in a story that so prominently illustrates linguistic variation. He had no books by Labov in his library nor did he cite him in A&AU, but it seems implausible, given his amateur interest in the field of linguistics that he would not have heard the name.)

³⁴ Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, 173.

³⁵ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 64.

³⁶ Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, “Proteus Bound: Pinning *Girl with Curious Hair* under Short Story Theory,” in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Philip Coleman (New York: Grey House Publishing/Salem Press, 2015), 112–27, esp. 124.

Salient features of the dialect shared by Mr. Labov and Mrs. Tagus—upon which neither Wallace nor any character in the story comments—include initial pronoun “this” to refer back to a topic expressed in the previous sentence (or sentence fragment), as in “Anger from me at her Lenny, however? This I could not manage” (217), “Lenny Tagus is a nice boy. This is a thing I know” (217); rhetorical questions embedded in relative clauses, as in “in a print so tiny who could read it?” (208); “from this girl who who would want to hurt her?” (209); nonstandard placement of adverbs and adverbial prepositional phrases, as in “who is too deaf now to converse about weather with *even*” (219); “yellow bruises I can still *with my eyes closed* see” (219); object pronouns in compound subjects, as in “Her husband and *me* were like this, we were so close” (210); “*Us* and Mike and Bonnie and this person should just sit down and talk like old friends?” (218); loan translations from Yiddish resulting in nonstandard phrasal verbs, as in “she is *making with* the fist with her hand in the air again” (211); “You *know from* warmth?” (218); and frequent use of *such* as both determiner and comparative, as in “such discomfort . . . such worry” (205), “for such a dinner” (218).

This is a long list of nonstandard features, so the judgment that Wallace overdid it here may seem reasonable, but he did not actually throw in every feature he could have. There was no use of the productive nominalizing suffix *-nik*, describing a practitioner or devotee of a particular practice,³⁷ for example, even though he was apparently familiar with this one since he was a young boy, as it features in one of the possible interpretations for his family term “SNOOT,” as mentioned earlier. (The Yiddish use is itself a borrowing from Slavic, and it’s possible that Wallace associated the suffix more with Russian, as in *Sputnik*.) Nor was there any use of the affectionate diminutives *-chik*, or *-el(e)* (which may also be combined, as in *boychikel* for a little boy).³⁸ One of the most common stereotypes of “Yinglish”³⁹ is the partial-reduplicative *shm-* (as in “fancy-shmancy”) (also mentioned in Gold⁴⁰), which minimizes the importance of whatever is referred to, but that is also notably absent in these stories.

Stereotype or no, the elderly Jews portrayed in both “Solomon Silverfish” and “Say Never” sound very much like my maternal Ashkenazi grandparents and their (dozen) siblings. As Gold⁴¹ points out, the linguistic characteristics

³⁷ Bernstein, “More Than Just Yada Yada Yada (Jewish English).”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 251.

⁴⁰ David L. Gold, “The Speech and Writing of Jews,” in *Language in the USA*, eds. Charles A. Ferguson and Shirley Brice Heath (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 273–92, esp. 290.

⁴¹ Ibid., 276.

of the Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants to the United States have largely disappeared, which may make a portrait of such speech seem less realistic to current readers. One reason the story may have struck a chord with me is because it reflects the story of my own family's linguistic and cultural assimilation so well.

With such a strong constellation of marked dialect features in the older generation, it is all the more striking that none of these is maintained by Mrs. Tagus's two sons. The originally unmistakably Jewish *Leonard Shlomith Tagus* and *Michael Arnold Tagus* have turned into the default white *Len(ny)* and *Mike(y)*. Lenny, a professor at Northwestern "who wrote a book about Germans before Hitler . . . that got called *Solid and Scholarly* in a Review" (208–9), has academic and pompous speech with no ethnic markers even in his internal monologue (e.g., "to describe, probably via the time-tested heuristic pentad" [212] and "I will wait for the arrival of those whose orbits I've decayed" [223]). Becoming a successful academic does require some assimilation into the "Academese" Wallace reviled—though for many academics, this results in bidialectalism, code-switching between the home style and school style. (As more linguistic minorities attain status within higher education, the more "pushback" there is on these linguistic gatekeeping practices.) Becoming "fluent" in Academese did not force Lenny to lose Jewish American speech patterns; he has made a choice about who he wants to be, and how he wants others to see him.

His younger brother Mikey speaks like a working-class white Chicagoan, using *ain't* and negative concord ("She just said how she didn't want to go out no more. . . . And it ain't the brakes, either" [223]). Having dropped out of college, Mikey now works for "the Softball Department of the Chicago Park District" (218–9). As a high school football player, Mikey is reported to have swallowed his tongue (211)—a rather obvious symbol of his loss of his heritage dialect. The class distinction that has opened up between the two brothers is palpable; Mikey notes that his older brother "talks down" to him (215).

The precipitating action in "Say Never" revolves around Lenny's affair with Mikey's girlfriend, Carlina Rentaria-Cruz (a South American discussed in Chapter 2). Lenny is unable to resist the "cinnamon girl" (208), as he repeatedly calls her, despite his full awareness that the relationship is not just hurting his family, but him as well: "She is *wrong* for me" (216, emphasis in the original). On the surface, this sentence is very simple—one short clause with a simple words and an obvious meaning, which the reader, along with everybody in the fictional world, already knows to be true. Yet readers are given multiple clues that the apparent simplicity is deceptive. Not only is the sentence given its own paragraph, but it's perfectly symmetrical in its structure: the five monosyllabic words begin and end with rhyming pronouns,

the second and fourth positions are occupied by grammatical function words (copula and preposition), and the adjective at the heart of the sentence, the only content word, the longest word orthographically, has italics for added emphasis, even though it would normally take primary stress in the sentence anyway. (The sentence/paragraph is also placed at the midpoint of the story, the end line of the seventh of thirteen sections, though this centrality would not be apparent in a first reading.)

Why would Wallace apparently work so hard to bring attention to this one sentence? It is certainly possible for a reader to take it at face value and to think no more about it, but any one of the earlier bits of patterning might catch a reader's attention, allowing them an extra moment to really hear those five simple words and think about them. Hayes-Brady⁴² mentions Wallace's "tactic of slowing a reader's progress through the narrative," and Shapiro⁴³ gives a detailed linguistic analysis of how Wallace does this for a phrase in another story, to underline particularly important themes. McGurl⁴⁴ reports experiencing a similar moment of pause when he encountered a short sentence amid longer, "amusingly agonized" ones whose "zigzags" take "considerable mental energy to follow," finding that the short sentence that popped out ended up being nonetheless "more obscure in its meaning" than the longer ones. Wallace applies this technique on multiple levels: lexically (establishing a certain register or tone, and then startling readers with a lexical item that distinctly does *not* belong to that register), syntactically (establishing an expectation for long, tortuous sentences, to draw attention to occasional well-placed short simple ones), and (as this monograph argues) with respect to dialects (with many similarly voiced narrators creating a default background against which his nonstandard dialects can stand out sharply).

In this particular case, a momentary pause gives readers time to register a whole host of potential ambiguities: *Wrong* can mean incorrect or mistaken (without any intention behind it, without necessarily even being aware of the mistake), but it can also mean unfair, immoral, even criminal in ways that may be intentional. The adjective primes recognition of the related verb, which would place blame on an associated subject/agent. Carlina *wronged* Mikey; Lenny *is wronging* Bonnie; Lenny knows Carlina will eventually *wrong* him. He later thinks of "that inevitable day" when she will leave him "for a man the color of a fine cigar" (224). The preposition *for* is even more ambiguous.

⁴² Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 140.

⁴³ Mary Shapiro, "The Poetic Language of David Foster Wallace," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 1 (2019): 24–33. DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2018.1441121

⁴⁴ McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing," 36.

In the most obvious idiomatic interpretation, Lenny is simply acknowledging that he and Carlina are not well-matched, that their relationship will not last. This attributes no blame, but it does seem to reduce Carlina to a described object. (Although subject of the sentence, she is not an agent, and the only important thing described about her is her effect on Lenny.) *For* can also be used to express an opinion or belief (as in “For me, I think/believe.”): Lenny views himself as unable to resist, passive, and therefore in some sense blameless. In his view, she is the one who is (doing) wrong. Similarly, *for* can mark surrogate agency, indicating someone acting instead of the expected or appropriate actor; Carlina’s very foreignness represents a level of “wrongness” (Un-Americanness) to which the fully assimilated Lenny can feel superior: she is wrong in place of him. Finally, *for* can indicate the beneficiary of an action: she is doing wrong, but it is for his benefit, his gain. For a thoughtful reader, recognition of any of these ambiguities raises questions of agency, responsibility, and blame, not just with respect to the making, keeping, and/or breaking of commitments to individual people, but also to entire cultures.

The Jews portrayed in this story have none of the “friendly dissociability” that gives “Solomon Silverfish” such a strong sense of community. In that story, characters confronted each other directly, shouting and talking over each other, accusing and counter-accusing, and finally settling on an interpretation that the entire community will accept. It is, ultimately, a joyful story of people coming together, whereas “Say Never” is a very lonely one in which already fragile ties are broken, leaving everyone estranged. Lenny sends a letter to his mother and Mr. Labov to explain the situation (which Mr. Labov does not even receive, and is not even personalized, but Xeroxed), Mikey vents to his friend Louis instead of confronting his brother, and every phone call (Bonnie to her mother-in-law, Mrs. Tagus to Lenny) is portrayed as one-sided. “She is *wrong* for me” makes it perfectly clear that there is no “us” that unites Lenny and Carlina. “She” isn’t just different from “me,” she’s literally on the other side of *wrong*, the two are not just distinct, they are distant.

Although the assimilation of both Mikey and Lenny into default whiteness is seen as natural (indeed, unremarkable), the loss of community is not yet complete. Leonard’s wife Bonnie does not get a chance to speak for herself in this story, but when quoted by her husband sounds much like the older generation (“he’s about to cry almost the poor love” [214]). Bonnie embodies the Jewishness that Lenny now finds unappealing and suffocating, even as he admires her fundamental goodness. Carlina, on the other hand, represents his total abandonment of that tradition—in fact, she represents total abandon. Readers cannot fail to find Lenny’s fetishization of the young woman creepy. He describes her as “silk in a bed of mail-order satin. Complete and seamless,

an egg of sexual muscle" (216), and claims that her lips "*manufacture their own moisture*" without help from her tongue (213, emphasis in the original). It is clear that they do not have a real and meaningful emotional connection, that he is causing everyone a great deal of pain in exchange for what can only be temporary sexual pleasure.

Despite the symbolic contrast between Bonnie and Carlina, it is not ultimately the abandonment of Jewish tradition that is presented as problematic. At no point does Mikey's assimilation cause anybody any discomfort or concern. (He has presumably found a new community, as he never appears in the story without his friend Louis.) Lenny's crime is not that he is moving away from Jewishness—it's that he has broken commitments to his wife and three children, betrayed them as well as his brother, which in turn hurts his mother, and even their old friend Mr. Labov, who feels caught in the middle. People matter more than abstract ideas. Although "Solomon Silverfish" shows assimilation *to* a Jewish identity and this story shows movement away from it, they are nevertheless both about how we define ourselves *in relation to* those to whom we have committed ourselves. (There are numerous echoes of this across Wallace's work, perhaps most prominently with Marathe, whose ultimate allegiance in *Jest* is not to any abstract nation or state, but to his wife.) Lenny recognizes that "you're bound up with people" (216). His anxiety is not prompted by abstract ethical or moral concerns, but by the fear that he can never be forgiven for this affair by people he loves. Carlina asks him "who it was who first said never say never," and Lenny replies that "it must have been someone alone" (216).

Total Assimilation

"Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" also exemplifies the "naturalness" of ethnic assimilation into default whiteness, although this is somewhat obscurely buried under the weight of the novella's metafictional playfulness and intertextuality. The story telegraphs its intention to play off Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* by quoting it as an epigraph and harking back to it in multiple comments such as "Central Illinois is, by no imaginer's stretch, a Funhouse" (242); it features young creative writing students whose teacher is *Funhouse's* own alter ego for Barth, Ambrose. Boswell⁴⁵ discusses the name of the "hero," Mark Nechtr, as containing coded references to Barth (and "nectar" may plausibly trigger associations with "ambrosia"), but it also codes as Jewish, with the common Yiddish "cht" cluster, and the reference in the

⁴⁵ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 105.

second paragraph to “health-club franchises” disrupting the “ancient Aryan order,” allowing those “who were inherently meant to be pale and weak to appear dark and strong” (233).

Mark’s traveling companion, writing program alumnus Tom Sternberg, is clearly identified as Jewish, although his name is more ambiguously Germanic. His mother’s (remembered) speech bears traces of Yiddish syntax, as well as the stereotype of the comedically put-upon Jewish mother: “Such as like for example crosses his eyes just to hurt a mother.” She has “whatever resources orthodox mothers with lapsed sons access” (280). As in “Say Never,” the next generation—in this case, Tom and Mark—is easily assimilated into whiteness, with no linguistic markers of ethnic identity.

Despite its massive size and enormous cast of characters, there are no Jews identified in *Infinite Jest*, a surprising absence in a text in which the entertainment and film industry plays a large role. It’s a bit of an uncomfortable truth that there have been few well-known Jewish tennis players (apart from Renée Richards, who was more famous for her gender realignment surgery at a time when transgender identity was seldom discussed publicly than for her tennis prowess), so the absence of Jews at the tennis academy is not so salient, but the absence of Jewish stories at all of the twelve-step meetings for addicts is less understandable. Jewish people must, logically, be there; by the same token, since we cannot distinguish them, they must be fully assimilated.

Infinite Jest features only a little bit of “lower-case jewishness,” the common cultural stereotypes that have become part of American culture, not necessarily attached to Jewish bodies or to the practice of Judaism. At a “Big Buddy’ powwow” at the tennis academy, two of the younger boys “rock and bob Hasidically” to stay alert (67). Gately, who is never shown to interact with anybody Jewish, nonetheless unselfconsciously uses *kosher* in his own thoughts (606), and *yutz* in a conversation with Yolanda (565), clearly expecting her as an African American to be equally familiar with the Yiddishism. Hal, talking to Michael Pemulis in the midst of crisis, thinks “I was trying to make my intonation Jewish-motherish, that melodic dip-rise-dip” when he says, “All week: not a call, not a card. Now I should hear this about urgency?” (908). It’s interesting that he does not project this intonation pattern onto all, or even most American Jews—it’s specifically “Jewish-motherish,” that is, an older generation fulfilling a specific social role.

In the throes of withdrawal, Poor Tony Krause is “haunted by the word *Zuckung*, a foreign and possibly Yiddish word he did not recall ever before hearing. The word kept echoing in quick-step cadence through his head without meaning anything” (302). (It is, readers learn hundreds of pages later, the sound of his heartbeat: “*zuckungzuckungzuckung*” [721]). In

fact, it the *German* word for convulsion or spasm, but it is interesting that Poor Tony is more conscious of Yiddish than German as a general cultural resource, even though he has direct access to neither. Marathe notes that Steeply's undercover assignment as a woman reporter is in keeping with his organization's "latent and sadistic" cover personae, including "casting . . . women as longshoremen or Orthodox rabbinicals" (419), among other unlikely pairings. It was perhaps the persistence of visible ultraorthodox Jewish communities that captured Wallace's imagination—the contrast between the choice to remain separate (as with the Hasidic communities in Brooklyn), the total assimilation of people of Jewish descent, and every intermediate stage in between.

In Wallace's worldview, if someone is holding on to a cultural heritage—such as Jews who have chosen not to assimilate—then by definition, they are not prioritizing membership in the local community; regional identity will therefore not be a major part of their self-identity and will not be manifested in the way they speak. This results in a deliberately blurry distinction between foreigners who have no desire to become American, immigrants who are trying to assimilate (but have not yet fully achieved this), and Americans who are trying to maintain a cultural heritage instead of blending in to a "melting pot." Apart from a couple of short stories built around them, these are minor background characters, yet that does not mean that they are unimportant to Wallace's thematic preoccupations and to his portrait of millennial America.