Shapiro, Mary. "Regionality and the White Working Class." *Wallace's Dialects*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 101–116. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501348501.0009>>.

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Regionality and the White Working Class

Figure 4 Wallace's Regional Dialects, Situated on the University of Pennsylvania's National Map of US Dialects (Labov, William, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg. "A National Map of the Regional Dialects of American English" 1997. https://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/NationalMap/NationalMap.html).

Quinn¹ and Foster² explored geographical locations in Wallace's work (both real and man-made), making it clear that "the environmental landscape is reflective of the cultural landscape,"³ but neither includes a discussion of the

¹ Paul Quinn, "Location's Location: Placing David Foster Wallace," in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 87–106.

² Graham Foster, "A Blasted Region: David Foster Wallace's Man-Made Landscapes," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 37–48.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

linguistic landscape. The speech of Wallace's regional dialect speakers is, like that of the ethnic dialect speakers, differentiated, so that they are never just monolithic representations of some abstract idea, but appear to be real people whose suffering is put on display. At the same time, there is again reductive simplification, with just a few categories illustrating and exemplifying regionality. The Boston setting of *Infinite Jest* essentially stands in for the East Coast (with no prominent characters specifically from New York, New Jersey, etc.), and the main contrast for this is a geographically fuzzy concept of the South Midland dialect area, with a couple of brief forays into the heart of Texas. "The porousness of borders" of named regions is illustrated by Midwestern characters whose speech is more apt to trigger stereotypes of Southernness, and with characters who live on a border, fighting any easy characterization of their regional identity.

The use of actual, specific linguistic dialect features does sometimes evoke real places (as with Wallace's use of Boston-area words and references), rooting characters and stories within a familiar linguistic and semiotic framework, not just adding to the Big-R realism of his fiction, but also—and most interestingly—allowing him to explore many different ideas about individual versus group identity. Wallace's idiolect portrayals are informed not just by ethnicity and region but also by social class and aspirational social roles. The quirky and individual nature of these "not-me" voices stand out contrastively from the pervasive domination of his sound-alike alter ego characters and narrators. Even when brief, they are salient and memorable.

In Wallace's work, ethnicity effectively erases the perception of regional identity and vice versa, as clearly demonstrated through the depiction of characters' dialects. Like some of his characters, Wallace understood that the relationship between ethnic and regional identity is only partially a matter of individual psychology and conscious, deliberate affiliation. The system is also realized and reinforced (if not imposed) at the societal level, as a strategy to ignore and erase "problematic realities," in order to support a dominant ideology.⁴ Wallace's portrayal of default, hegemonic whiteness does not appear to celebrate this, but rather points to problematic rifts in US society, illustrating how institutional structures as well as internalized belief systems keep African Americans trapped in ghettos and excluded. His occasional brief sketches are painful reminders of this—periodically poking at wounds that one should not ignore, which will not heal on their own.

⁴ Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal, "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation," in *Regimes of Language Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*, ed. Paul V. Kroskrity (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2000), 35–84.

Social Class and the Possibility of Upward Mobility

White characters do not have an ethnic identity to claim, having given up their specific heritages in order to blend into a more default whiteness, but of course they are not all alike. Quite a few regional dialects appear in Wallace's fiction, but it is clear that regional identity is largely a proxy for socioeconomic class in his work. Having regional identity always co-occur with whiteness may have been a deliberate strategy on Wallace's part, but it may also have been influenced by an unconscious internalization of US stereotypes. The disentangling of region and ethnicity has always been difficult for observers. Laferriere⁵ finds that Bostonians attribute a phonological feature used most often by Italian-Americans in the region to an Irish accent, hypothesizing that this happens because they have a stereotype of "Boston Irish," but have no equivalent stereotype of "Boston Italians." As Niedzielski and Preston⁶ argue, it doesn't really matter what linguists can demonstrate in terms of actual speech production: "What nonlinguists believe constitutes precisely that cognitive reality which needs to be described—one which takes speech community attitudes and perception (as well as performance) into account." In fact, the very idea of a "speech community" was defined by Labov⁷ as a group of people who do not necessarily share a particular way of speaking, but who share a set of norms for how various ways of speaking should be judged.

Apart from a very few exceptions, regional dialect tends to be associated in popular culture with the working class, and all the stereotypes associated with poverty. Haugen⁸ observes that "it is less customary to speak of 'London dialect' or 'Boston dialect,' except in reference to the lower-class speech of those cities." Fictional representations have bolstered this stereotype, mostly ignoring the regional norms to which the speech of educated characters conform. In the absence of marked dialect patterns, the typical writer "would assume that a reader would take his conventional spelling to mean only that the character spoke according to the commonly accepted standards for educated persons of his own region."⁹

⁵ Martha Laferriere, "Ethnicity in Phonological Variation and Change," *Language* 55, no. 3 (1979): 603–17.

⁶ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 43.

⁷ Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, 158.

⁸ Einar Haugen, "Dialect, Language, Nation," *American Anthropologist* 68, no. 4 (1966): 922–35, esp. 924.

⁹ Ives, "A Theory of Literary Dialect," 152.

Matched-guise experiments, developed by Lambert et al.¹⁰ and replicated many times in different locations with very consistent results (e.g., Ryan and Giles,¹¹ Campbell-Kibler,¹² and others discussed by Niedzielski and Preston¹³) have shown that in general, speakers of regional varieties find speakers of their own varieties warm, friendly, honest, sympathetic, and trustworthy (high marks for solidarity), but also as slow, unintelligent, uneducated, and unsuccessful (low marks for social status and prestige). “Standard” speakers, not surprisingly, are judged as cold, dishonest, and unsympathetic (low on solidarity), but quick, intelligent, and ambitious (high on status). These judgments are made on the basis of voice alone, from audio recordings, where what is said is held constant, and with some of the same voices judged under different dialect guises, controlling for physical qualities of the voices. Wallace was certainly aware of the kinds of judgments that get attached to regional dialects, but often, as he did with ethnic dialect representations, deliberately subverted them. In his work, regional dialect is typically associated with lower socioeconomic status, but more often signals rural identity. It is usually associated with a lack of education, but never with lack of intelligence.

That working-class speakers incorporate a higher proportion of stigmatized local features into their speech has long been a staple of regional dialectology; more recent work in quantitative/variationist sociolinguistics has only served to confirm this. This is not a failure of the educational system (as has often been decried) but a predictable consequence of the systems of rewards available to rational speakers. The rewards average people receive from sounding like those around them—social solidarity, in-group acceptance—far outweigh any “status” they would receive from sounding more standard. On the contrary, by orienting toward a presumed “standard” (i.e., an upper-class sociolect), working-class speakers would seem to reject affiliation with friends and family, thus losing the social capital they don’t just value but often need to survive. The concept of social class isn’t merely “the objective, economic measures of property ownership and the power and control it confers on its possessor,” it is also shaped by “the subjective measures of prestige, reputation, and status.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Wallace E. Lambert, Richard C. Hodgson, Robert C. Gardner, and Samuel Fillenbaum, “Evaluational Reactions to Spoken Languages,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 60, no. 1 (1960): 44.

¹¹ Ellen Bouchard Ryan and Howard Giles, eds. *Attitudes Towards Language Variation: Social and Applied Contexts* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982).

¹² Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, “Accent, (ING), and the Social Logic of Listener Perceptions,” *American Speech* 82, no. 1 (2007): 32–64.

¹³ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 43–4.

¹⁴ Sharon Ash, “Social Class,” in *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, ed. J. K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Natalie Schilling-Estes (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 402–22, esp. 403.

Wallace underlined the “Class Distinctions” section of Garner’s *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (124–6), in which Garner quotes American writer Paul Fussell saying that “proles . . . unselfconsciously engage in poor usage such as double negatives (*I don’t have no butter*) and subject-verb disagreements (*he don’t have no butter*).” The upper-middle and upper classes, Fussell claims, have “a plain-speaking style.” It is the “insecure middle class” whose “language is often inflated.” Garner comments that “most usage books are silent on the subject of class,” but “typically reflect upper-middle-class preferences, as this book generally does.” His rationale for this preference is that “that is the class into which most even modestly intellectual achievers fall, and the class to which the ambitious members of the middle class most aspire.”

The linguistic insecurity of the middle class has been amply documented in sociolinguistic literature for the last fifty years (with Labov¹⁵ prescribing research methods that would be used in hundreds of subsequent studies), with research demonstrating not just socioeconomically stratified use of stigmatized dialect variables, but clear patterns of hypercorrection of these among middle-class speakers. (That is, because the actual difference between middle and upper classes is typically a small quantitative difference, middle-class speakers aiming for an upper-class pronunciation will typically overshoot the mark.) Niedzielski and Preston¹⁶ attribute the linguistic insecurity to awareness “that the local variety will not serve extra-regionally”—specifically, it “will not convince some outside listeners that the intelligence, education, and authority of the speaker or writer are high, and it will not, therefore, inspire confidence in the content of some messages.”

Araya¹⁷ points to Wallace’s “sincere effort to engage with” economic inequality in the contemporary United States, saying this is “perhaps portrayed most painfully in descriptions of Toni Ware’s childhood in a trailer park.” Cohen¹⁸ refers to this same section of TPK and to the inner dialogue of Lane A. Dean, Jr., in that same novel, saying that “both characters are also arguably as distant from Wallace’s own experience as rappers and other speakers of AAVE are. Neither, however, is subject to reproduction of their dialect.” Lane appears to come from a middle-class background and is orienting himself toward upward mobility, majoring in business and accounting in college; his language (in so far as it is “heard” in the free indirect discourse narration of sections six and thirty-three) reflects this. (He also quotes from scriptures; the language of religion dominates his thoughts in these sections.) The

¹⁵ Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*.

¹⁶ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 44.

¹⁷ Araya, “Why the Whiteness?” 249.

¹⁸ Cohen, “The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,” 240.

choice not to directly represent the dialects of these characters may reflect Wallace's "increasing inclination to use a more subtle free indirect discourse in his fiction,"¹⁹ although it seems more symbolic of Dean's assimilation into corporate upper-class blandness. Eckert²⁰ notes that the suppression of regional features (and local slang) is commonplace in people aspiring to upward mobility, to positions of the middle-class establishment.

In two different sections of the novel, Toni Ware recounts events from her youth that occurred in Missouri as she and her mother were traveling back to Peoria, after her mother's "succession of bad-news men in the US Southwest" (439). Wallace may have deliberately chosen Missouri in order to focus more on class than regionality per se; Missourians themselves argue about whether the state is Midwestern or Southern. Toni digresses, "somewhere in eastern Missouri" (440), to explain that the word "holler" is used "in the rural sense . . ., which is almost a special kind of art form; it used to be the way that people who lived way out in hill country out of sight of each other would communicate" (440). Section eight of the novel ends with Toni recalling being in a diner "in Plepler MO," overhearing direct dialogue from the waitress and "the workingmen whose names she knew." Apparently, the fictional Plepler (a distinctly uneuphonious name) falls into the "South Midland" dialect region Wallace felt most comfortable with, with the verb "set" for "sit," and sentence-initial *why* (as non-interrogative discourse marker): "What are you settin' in a dirty booth for? . . . Why you could have set over right there and been closer yet" (65). When the woman behind the counter comments on the weather ("Still tootin' out there I see"), Ware responds with the common Southern counterfactual *like to*, indicating something that almost, but did not, occur: "Like to blow me right off the road comin' in" (513). The "counter woman," it is noted, "seemed unaware that Toni Ware was affecting the exact accent and cadence of her own speech" (513–4). Again, it is important to realize that Toni was not local to this area—the younger woman is able to connect with the older one because of their shared *working-class* identities. Williams²¹ points to other examples of "Toni's literal embodiment of polyglossia" in the novel, astutely noting that this "seems to perfectly encapsulate and validate Wallace's own attempts at polyphony, and his belief that it was constituent of authentic art."

Both Toni and Lane become IRS agents, and as noted previously, the linguistic assimilation of all the IRS agents is purposeful. Joining this powerful

¹⁹ Ibid., 240.

²⁰ Penelope Eckert, *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice: The Linguistic Construction of Identity in Belton High* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

²¹ Iain Williams, "Something Real American": *David Foster Wallace and Authenticity*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2016, 198. <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/31007/Williams2016.pdf>.

organization has allowed these characters upward mobility, but it has come at the cost of their individual identities, preserved only in the flashbacks to their youth. The often-invoked “American dream” is a rags-to-riches story, but part of the magical transformation necessarily involves speech: someone who sounds “lower class” (i.e., whose speech incorporates regional nonstandard features) will not receive the same respect and acceptance. And thus the hierarchy of identities illustrated in Figure 1 is complete: (1) There are Americans and not-Americans (who can become American); (2) Americans are divided into African American, European and/or Jewish Americans (who can become white), and white; (3) whites are divided into upper class and working class; (4) the working class is divided into regional identities. There is a possibility, however, for upward mobility: the children of the working class who can excel as jocks or nerds can use those identities to recreate themselves, and can do so at an early enough age to easily acquire the upper-class ways of speaking, so that they can “fit in,” moving at least from blue collar to white collar, if not to stardom.

The most important caveat about this system of categorization is that none of these distinctions is a moral one in Wallace’s work. All of the categories represent the human, and all are worthy of respect and empathy; belonging to one social category as opposed to another is primarily an accident of birth. Social pressures push people from the left side of the diagram to the right side, but the people who are born on the right side or who end up there via assimilation are in no way presented as superior to those on the left side, who may choose to resist the significant assimilatory pressures. In fact, characters who refuse to relinquish their identity (Gerhardt Schtitt, Yolanda Willis, Mr. Labov, and some of the working-class regional speakers discussed in the following chapters) may be seen as more successful (more purposeful, more fulfilled) than others in Wallace’s fiction.

The US society is set up so that upper-class white people never have to acknowledge or interact with people from any other categories. Wallace’s narrators are limited in their interactions to those who share the same small demographic; as Thompson²² points out, they “rarely if ever move beyond the confines of their own narrow cultural sphere.” It is only through assimilatory pressure that some others come into Wallace’s world—and in so doing, they erase their previous other identity. Thus, although there are kids of various ethnic and regional backgrounds at *Jest’s* Enfield Tennis Academy, the “jock” and “nerd” identities embodied simultaneously there are so strong, they appear to erase the possibility of any projection of ethnicity, national, or regional origin.

²² Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 14.

Tennis is and traditionally has been a white-dominated sport (requiring expensive specialized facilities, and therefore not as commonly accessible to poorer communities). By having an elite sports academy also be extremely challenging academically—with students doing at least college-level work in all their classes—Wallace played with both the “jock” and the “nerd” stereotypes. It may be surprising to some readers that one can be both a “mindless” athlete (a “machine”) and a brilliant scholar—but it is not at all surprising that both scholarship and tennis are associated with whiteness. In her ethnographic study of a California high school, Bucholtz²³ notes that “nerdiness was ideologically viewed as an extreme version of whiteness, one in which African American culture and language did not play even a covert role.” Sadly, she feels the need to add an endnote explaining that “as a result of this ideology, youth of color who engaged in nerdy practices were often understood by other students to be aligned with whiteness or ‘acting white,’ although they did not view themselves in this way” (253). The double bind is apparent for regional speakers as well, who may also feel pressure to maintain “nonstandard” usages as a mark of identity, even as they feel insecure about those ways of speaking. Niedzielski and Preston²⁴ document in various different communities “folk sensitivity to the use of status-related speech which may be taken as ‘showing off’ or ‘putting on airs.’”

It is not surprising that regional voices typically occupy the associated regional space—but in a mobile United States, this is not necessarily the case. Can people still be “Southern” if they *sound* Southern, even if they’re living in Boston? Can they be authentically “Midwestern” if they don’t *sound* Midwestern, even if they live in rural Illinois? As with ethnicity, Wallace sometimes encoded regional identity in direct dialogue; more often, with regional dialects, he had characters or the narrator comment on someone’s dialect. Just as his African Americans code-switch, his regional characters turn up or down their dialect features based on the situation, especially based on whether they’re speaking within group or across group lines.

Salient Absences

Gender and Sexuality

The social categorizations in Figure 1 are purportedly gender neutral, but Wallace’s characters are not: he tended to default to a male identity the same

²³ Bucholtz, *White Kids*, 161–2.

²⁴ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 147.

way he defaulted to white and American identities. In looking at the quilt of voices Wallace created as symbolic of the larger system, his default maleness makes as much sense as his default whiteness. Obviously, there are men and women within each social category at every level, but Wallace overwhelmingly privileged male perspectives. Hayes-Brady²⁵ points out that Wallace's "notably few" female characters "are, almost uniformly, engaged in struggles to tell their own stories, either because they have difficulty with language or because someone else is trying to tell their story for them." (Thus, although Lane Dean's girlfriend Sheri is the one faced with the difficult decision of whether or not to bear their child, abandoning her own professional ambitions, her story is filtered entirely through Lane's perspective.) The girls at ETA and the women IRS agents show that it is also possible for women to avail themselves of this same upward-mobility loop in claiming jock or nerd identities, even if their stories are not showcased as often.

Sociolinguistic reality is itself strongly gendered: not only have male voices been privileged in public discourse but quantitative/variationist research has also consistently shown men using higher levels of stigmatized variables in their speech than women in the same region and social class.²⁶ The ideal respondent of traditional dialectologists is the "N.O.R.M.," the Nonmobile Older Rural Male,²⁷ as women are believed to be more subjected to and, therefore, more sensitive to social pressures and judgments, and, therefore, less forthcoming with stigmatized speech. When asked to describe their own speech, men will not just admit greater levels of nonstandardness than women will (which might just reflect the greater pressure put on women to conform to social expectations), but men will claim greater levels of nonstandardness than they are demonstrated to use. That is, they boast of breaking the "rules" more than they actually do break them. Trudgill²⁸ attributes this to "covert prestige"—the solidarity rewards that men give other men for behaving in a way that society overtly says is "bad."

The large body of research into the intersection of language and gender has (until very recently) almost entirely assumed a binary system of gender (as well as a corresponding binary system of biological sex),²⁹ and for its

²⁵ Hayes-Brady, "Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point," 65.

²⁶ Jenny Cheshire, "Sex and Gender in Variationist Research," in *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, ed. J. K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Natalie Schilling-Estes (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 423–43, esp. 426.

²⁷ Jack K. Chambers and Peter Trudgill, *Dialectology* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 29.

²⁸ Peter Trudgill, "Sex, Covert Prestige and Linguistic Change in the Urban British English of Norwich," *Language in Society* 1, no. 2 (1972): 179–95.

²⁹ Cheshire, "Sex and Gender in Variationist Research," 244.

first several decades also largely ignored questions of sexual identity.³⁰ Wallace was no more advanced in his understanding of those issues than the academics of his time. Despite a few sympathetic portraits of homosexual relationships—David and René in “Lyndon,” Julie and Faye in “Little Expressionless Animals”—Wallace defaulted to heterosexual identities as much as he did to stereotypically male ones. Although *Jest*’s Hugh Steeply seems to be discovering many new things about himself as he maintains his cover as a female journalist, this is not explicitly presented as a coming out story or a discovery of trans identity. When endnote 31 of *Jest* reveals that Schtitt refers to deLint as his “*Lebensgefährtin*,” (which according to the endnote “means technically ‘soulmate’ or ‘spouse’” (994), though the literal translation is “life companion”), the idea of the two men being lovers is immediately and emphatically refuted: “But isn’t meant at all sexually w/r/t deLint, we can rest assured”). The projection of traditional heterosexual (if not toxic) masculinity in Wallace’s own narrative voice will be explored more in Chapter 9.

Age

Wallace’s characters tend to have a default age as well, ranging only from adolescent to young adult, leaving salient gaps in this category of identity also. Younger children, the middle-aged, and the elderly are more like “figurants” (nonspeaking background roles in films), seldom speaking for themselves, despite a couple of notable exceptions. Wallace’s adolescents, such as Hal and his ETA cohort in *Jest*, but also Lenore and LaVache in *Broom*, Julie and Faye in “Little Expressionless Animals,” tend to be freakishly intelligent, but this doesn’t always help them to be emotionally mature. As one of the main questions explored throughout Wallace’s work is “the establishment of the self among selves,”³¹ it makes sense that he would be most interested in adolescents and young adults who would still be struggling with those questions head-on. Younger children may not yet be faced with such existential awareness, and older people have presumably survived as a result of having already established who they are in relation to others. Edilyn in “My Appearance” and Solomon Silverfish are middle-aged—but both have to grapple with some of these same questions. Edilyn, despite having a grown daughter and an established career, is just now coming into her own, just now figuring out who she is and who she wants to be. Solomon Silverfish figured

³⁰ Scott F. Kiesling, *Language, Gender, and Sexuality: An Introduction* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019).

³¹ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 93.

out the answers to those questions long before Wallace's story begins, but has to convince others of his authenticity. Mr. Labov and Mrs. Tagus are elderly, their characters long since established—which is precisely why they are not the central characters of "Say Never," even though the story begins and ends with Mr. Labov. The existential crisis there belongs to Lenny, who is in his mid-thirties.

Unvisited US Regions

Wallace did not attempt to represent every US region, including enough to create an impression of kaleidoscopic heteroglossia, but actually reduced the linguistic landscape to a few exemplars he could explore as archetypes, resulting in some surprising gaps in his representations. Perhaps because regional identity is a much less fraught topic in the contemporary United States, nobody has suggested that these gaps reflect prejudice on Wallace's part.

Although he visits Maine, the title essay of *Consider the Lobster* does not represent the dialect of anybody he spoke with there, although he does include one local lexical item in a footnote: "Midcoasters' native term for a lobster is, in fact, 'bug,' as in 'Come around on Sunday and we'll cook up some bugs'" (CTL 237). Likewise, there are no representations of New York City dialects, even when Wallace visited the city for "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open." The most prominent mention of a "New York accent" in Wallace's work comes when Wallace misidentifies a group of speakers as New Yorkers. A long footnote to the title essay of *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (281) refers to the "thick and unmistakable NYC accents" of his tablemates on a weeklong Caribbean cruise, although they "swore up and down that they'd all been born and raised in south Florida." Wallace adds parenthetically that "it did turn out that all [their] own parents had been New Yorkers, which when you think about it is compelling evidence of the durability of a good thick NYC accent." This anecdote is similar to the one in the same essay in which he was ashamed to catch himself thinking that he could identify people as Jewish by the way they look, but in this case (as with the anecdote in "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open," when he misidentifies someone's heritage as Italian), there is no sense of shame. On the contrary, Wallace would seem to be praising his own "good ear," arguing that his tablemates really *do* sound like they're from New York. There is explicit acknowledgment here that a regional-sounding accent does not necessarily correspond to the expected region, that it may be performing a different identity altogether.

As noted previously, whiteness is not associated with virtue or intelligence in Wallace's work; it is not inherently positive or negative; it is simply an

absence of ethnicity, which can lead to a loss of community, making it harder for people to connect with others. Anyone who thinks the regional dialect speakers in Wallace represent some ideal of the “real” American has missed the point. Working class regional speakers are certainly “real,” as are the black Americans who can’t assimilate, the Jewish Americans who have chosen not to assimilate, and all the others who exist in a more liminal state. They seem authentic to readers who are not familiar with their dialect, but who accept on faith that Wallace is presenting a realistic portrayal. And it is clear that these “audible” differences keep these “othered” communities as separate and as stigmatized as visible (racial) differences do. The next level of distinction is socioeconomic and geographical. In Wallace’s work, Americans are damned if they do, damned if they don’t (to echo Lakoff’s³² claim for US women). If they maintain a sense of ethnic or regional identity, they are subject to all kinds of racism and classism, persistent and harmful social and economic inequality. If they are white enough to be allowed to blend into the melting pot, they are pressured into doing so; and if they go along with this, losing their ethnic and regional markers of identity, they are then plagued by loneliness, loss of community, and imposter syndrome. This is what it means to be American—and the fact that Wallace’s works are dominated by well-off white protagonists such as Lenore Beadman and Hal Incandenza and “Dave Wallace” is as much symptomatic of the problem as are the very brief forays into the minds and mouths of Wallace’s more marginal and marginalized characters.

Wallace’s protagonists seem oblivious to the assimilatory pressures that swirl around them but do not affect them. They have inherited all the privilege of their default whiteness and upper-class status, yet feel empty and alone. Wallace told his NPR interviewer that the impetus for *Jest* was his awareness that he and his friends were “grotesquely overeducated and privileged our whole lives,” but were still “extraordinarily sad.”³³ Wallace’s protagonists try to reject the traps of narcissism and solipsism, but cannot find the community that would allow them to overcome these. This is mirrored linguistically by allowing a single voice speaking the most privileged dialect to dominate, unable to connect with (or sometimes even hear) speakers of other more stigmatized dialects.

Wallace avoided vast swaths of the country—his writing never ventured West of the Rockies, never went into the “deep South,” never spent any time in the Upper Midwest (what dialectologists would call North Central dialect

³² Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper & Row/Colophon, 1975), 6.

³³ Gross, “*Fresh Air* Interview with David Foster Wallace.”

areas). His brief forays into the “Inland North” territory (setting *Broom* in the suburbs of Cleveland, and his two stories about Jews in the Chicago/Skokie area) mostly avoided the representation of regional dialect, except for the character of Mikey Tagus, who assimilates to the default working-class white regional identity. Mikey, as well as *Broom*’s Texan Andy Lang (and the “real-life” Texans in “Lyndon”), show that a performative regional identity *can* contribute to a sense of community, although this is not very common in Wallace’s work. In the same way that ethnic dialects symbolically express internal resistance to assimilation or societal segregation preventing assimilation, regional dialects further illustrate social divisions and what an individual can (and cannot) do to overcome them.

The Underspecification of Identity

The identity of Wallace characters is often underspecified, perhaps deliberately to frustrate readers, to make them realize that the desire to know certain identity characteristics ultimately says more about a reader’s own character than it does about the character on the page. Why should it matter whether a given addict in *Infinite Jest* is male or female, black or white, Irish or Jewish, from a particular region—should readers therefore care more or less about the character’s pain?

Speakers can’t *not* have accents, but characters in stories can; “standard” words written in “standard” grammar need not reveal anything specific about the character. The primacy of face-to-face communication (which is how everybody acquires their native language) trains most people (except the visually impaired and/or neuro-atypical) to interpret visual cues about ethnicity and gender and other identity characteristics, often before interlocutors say a word; sometimes, these judgments need to be adjusted as more is learned about the interlocutors, including the way they speak. Those who overhear an unseen speaker will still automatically, if unconsciously, form impressions of the speaker’s identity, based solely on the speaker’s phonology: pitch, tone (e.g., “creaky” phonation or vocal fry), intonation, timing, and rule-governed dialect-specific articulations. Wallace’s penchant for thrusting readers into a conversation that is already underway, of letting readers “eavesdrop” on a character who is not already known and recognizable, is especially disorienting when the speech does not trigger easy identification of some of the basic identity categories. Readers may find themselves wondering “Who is this?” (What is this person’s ethnic identity? Where’s this person from? Who is this person in terms of gender, or sexuality, or age?)

Wallace seemed to take pleasure in thwarting readers’ ability to practice their accustomed unconscious categorizations, sometimes making them

“deal with” characters for hundreds of pages before they can “figure out” the social categories they belong to. Johnette Foltz, for instance, a staffer of Ennet House in *Jest*, is seen on multiple occasions, but is given direct dialogue only once; her ethnicity is never specified. (Physically, she is described only as having a partially removed tattoo and a nose pin.) It is only because the racist residents of Ennet House are able to refer to her without mentioning her race that readers can eventually infer that she is white. Perhaps Wallace was trying to make the point that caring too much about these distinctions can distract people from everyone's basic shared humanity. The more readers get frustrated at not being able to make such easy identifications, the more they should ask themselves why it matters.

In his review of Garner's *A Dictionary of American Usage* (the pretext for, though not the bulk of, *A&AU*), Wallace realizes that despite the use of “the 1-S pronoun” throughout the work, Wallace has “no idea whether Bryan A. Garner was black or white, gay or straight, Democrat or Dittohead” (*CTL* 119). Somehow, Garner had kept him engrossed without “any sort of verbal style at all.” It is this feat, as much as Garner's judgments on particular items of usage, that makes Wallace repeatedly deem Garner a genius. Wallace couldn't fail to appreciate someone who could use language effectively to connect to other people exclusively through an assumed shared love of that language—exactly the goal Wallace had adopted for himself. (Characteristically, Wallace ignored the one element of identity of which he was certainly aware, and which both men shared: their maleness and associated male verbal styles.)

“Everything is Green” (*GWCH* 229–30) is another linguistic Rorschach test for readers. No external description of the narrator, Mitch, is available, although his working-class status (emphasized by the fact that he lives in a trailer park) is revealed through multiple linguistic markers. He uses nonstandard past tense verb forms (“I have gave you,” “what I seen”), singular *is* in plural existential constructions (“there is things I know,” “in me there is needs,” “there is too many needs”), multiple negation (“the whisper is not to me no more”), *got* for *have* in both main verb and auxiliary uses, and the pseudo-reflexive construction “got him some kids.” None of these features is diagnostic with respect to regionality. Without any more localized phonological or lexical clues, this could be working-class sociolect in almost any region. It would be an interesting experiment to see if readers make assumptions about Mitch's regional identity (and whether such assumptions are affected by the readers' own identities). Interestingly, the speech of Mitch's younger lover (as presented by Mitch) does not contain any of the same working-class features, which in addition to the repeated age difference between them may be intended to show that the relationship is

doomed—although it could simply reflect the realities of “covert prestige” for nonstandard men, as discussed earlier.

Wallace understood that relevant dialect differences are not simple binary distinctions of “standard” versus “nonstandard.” Some ethnicities are more accepted into the “melting pot,” and there is similarly a hierarchy of prejudices attached to different regional dialects, from highly stigmatized Southern dialects to the rural Midwestern to the East Coast. In “The Suffering Channel,” when Skip Atwater believes that the rural Midwestern Amber Moltke is “deferring to him because he lived and worked in New York City, the cultural heart of the nation,” he is “absurdly gratified” (*Oblivion* 276). He himself clearly does defer to people with more NYC cred, insecure in his own (ex-)Midwestern identity. As it turns out, he is quite incorrect about Amber, who is considerably more secure linguistically than he is. As Skip puts it, “the whole geographical deference issue could get very complicated and abstract” (*Oblivion* 276). When he does realize that she “might be patronizing him a bit, playing up to a certain stereotype of provincial naiveté,” this is neither surprising nor disqualifying, as he recognizes the performativity of regional identity: “He did this himself in certain situations” (*Oblivion* 276).

In representing regional dialect, Wallace grapples with many of the same questions already discussed with respect to ethnic dialects: What kind of group identity can be claimed without any apparent birthright? Who feels pressure to “assimilate” to a local variety to claim in-group membership, or to a supposed “standard” variety to claim authority or status? How does the use of a marked variety vary across social classes, across social and geographical settings? How may a dialect emerge unconsciously in moments of heightened emotion, and how may it be deployed more deliberately to show authenticity and to convey social messages such as affiliation or *disaffiliation*—and how can listeners (or readers) tell the difference? Ironically, Wallace’s white rural regional speakers have more in common with his ethnic characters than either group would perhaps imagine or acknowledge.