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Texan Pride and Southern Shame

Figure 5 Wallace’s Southerners.

Wallace did not spend much time in the South (in his life or in his art), but his differential treatment of characters Joelle van Dyne (*Jest*), Andy Lang (*Broom*), and John Billy (in the story of the same name) reveals a good deal about Wallace’s view of the performative nature of regional identity. These characters’ lived experience, the reactions their dialects inspire from others, and the linguistic choices the characters subsequently make are all presented as understandable and natural. Joelle’s attempt to completely lose her stigmatized Southern accent is the diametric opposite of the way that Lang uses his Texan-ness as a form of social capital; in neither case, however, do they have complete control over the way that their use of language projects their identities. The “Texan” dialect portraits are especially interesting in that they are the only cases in which Wallace represented regional dialects for characters born into comfortable circumstances.

There is a long tradition of literary representations of Southern dialects. Skaggs¹ compared Southern dialect representations in the work of Joel Chandler Harris, claiming that he was the only Southern writer of his time beside Mark Twain “who could make subtle social distinctions between two characters by using two different dialects.” Such portraits, however, were

¹ Skaggs, *The Folk of Southern Fiction*, 211.

often mocking, as discussed in the Chapter 1. William Faulkner said in a lecture that he would not portray "the false heartiness of 'slang and our "hard" colloquialisms,' since that was to ape the poverty of the inarticulate."² Mair³ points out that in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, the dialect of the Okies "connotes honesty and human worth, not poverty, backwardness, and lack of education," although this may still allow the reader to feel "doubly smug," as discussed in Chapter 1.

Flannery O'Connor was the Southern author apparently most important to Wallace; he kept her books on his shelf, annotated with his characteristic marginalia, brought her up (unasked) in multiple interviews,⁴ and assigned her stories to his students. Her influence on his fiction has been traced by Thompson.⁵ It is all the more interesting, then, that Wallace's Southerners do not sound like O'Connor's. According to Rubin,⁶ O'Connor "draws upon one of the oldest devices of southern humor: the contrast of the literary language of culture and the vernacular language of uneducated speech." Wallace turns the joke around on the reader, not laughing at the "vernacular" speakers, but at readers' expectations of them. As with the depictions of AAE, readers are confronted with their own (in at least some cases unconscious) prejudices, not just to make them squirm, but to force some recognition of how ridiculous and unfair these prejudices are, how they interfere with the human connection we crave and should be capable of.

Bailey and Tillery⁷ recognize that Southern American English is "the regional dialect that is most negatively evaluated" across the country, perhaps a lasting echo of the Civil War that still resonates today. Perceptual dialectology studies have shown that the connection between salience and harsh judgment is not coincidental: "Areas perceived as least correct have greatest distinctiveness."⁸ In Fought's⁹ perceptual dialectology study of California college students, students labeled Southern areas "country sounding" as well

² Louis D. Rubin, Jr., *A Gallery of Southerners* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 22.

³ Mair, "Literary Sociolinguistics," 11.

⁴ Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, 81; McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," 50; and Miller, "The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace," 62.

⁵ Thompson, *Global Wallace*.

⁶ Rubin, *A Gallery of Southerners*, 116.

⁷ Guy Bailey and Jan Tillery, "The Lone Star State of Speech (Texas)," in *American Voices: How Dialects Differ from Coast to Coast*, ed. Walt Wolfram and Ben Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 11, 36–41.

⁸ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 57.

⁹ Carmen Fought, "California Students' Perceptions of, You Know, Regions and Dialects?" in *Handbook of Perceptual Dialectology*, vol. 2, ed. Dennis Preston and Daniel Long (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 113–34, esp. 128.

as “redneck, rancher, hillbilly, crude, unsophisticated, terrible, and lazy.” While stereotypes of the upper-class Southern belle and Southern gentleman are still occasionally invoked, associated with gentility and courtliness, the more common stereotype is of poverty, ignorance, and belligerence, a tradition that McIlwaine¹⁰ demonstrates goes back in American literature to the eighteenth century. McWhiney¹¹ cites the observation of a British woman traveling through the south in the nineteenth century that “however violent may be the discussion, the courtesy of the ‘sir’ is never omitted.” In an experimental study, Kinzler and DeJesus¹² found that linguistic prejudices are already fully formed by ages nine to ten, with children in both Illinois and Tennessee evaluating the “Northern-accented” Illinoisans as sounding “smarter” and “in charge,” and the Southern-accented Tennesseans as sounding “nicer.” It may seem somewhat paradoxical that Southern speech is associated both with “ignorance and belligerence” and with “exaggerated courtesy” or “being nice,” but as Johnstone¹³ points out, “the presence of the kinds of elaborate deferential politeness we have seen indicates the need for them.”

Outsiders may understand a speaker despite a stigmatized accent (and in the case of Wallace’s fiction, the phonology of the dialect may not be represented on the page at all), but they may find unfamiliar lexical items completely opaque in meaning, even with some context clues. Carver¹⁴ notes that the “relative insularity” of the South led to the preservation of a high number of relic terms (words that come from older dialects of English but are no longer used in the same form in other dialects of modern English) and “an unusually high number of regionalized terms.”

The notion of a uniform Southern dialect is recognized by dialectologists as a “convenient fiction”; it is, rather “a quilt-work of dialects,”¹⁵ not surprising for such a large geographical region. Pederson¹⁶ names eighteen different

¹⁰ Shields McIlwaine, *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939).

¹¹ Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 163.

¹² Katherine D. Kinzler and Jasmine M. DeJesus, “Northern = Smart and Southern = Nice: The Development of Accent Attitudes in the U.S.,” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 66, no. 6 (2013): 1146–58, esp. 1146. doi: 10.1080/17470218.2012.731695

¹³ Barbara Johnstone, “Features and Uses of Southern Style,” in *English in the Southern United States*, ed. Stephen J. Nagle and Sara L. Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 189–207, esp. 196.

¹⁴ Craig Carver, *American Regional Dialects* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), 94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁶ Lee Pederson, “Dialects,” in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. 6: *English in North America*, ed. John Algeo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 253–90.

Southern varieties. Wallace was aware of this in the abstract, though he was undoubtedly fuzzy on the distinctions. The only reference to a generic "Southern accent" in Wallace's work is when Mario Incandenza (who is characterized as innocent of spirit, but not particularly intelligent) is "trying to fake" one in *Jest* (122). The acknowledged linguistic diversity in the region may make an author's job a bit easier, if (like Wallace) the intention is to use dialect more symbolically than realistically: A vague "Southernness" can be evoked by using of one or more of the features common across Southern dialects. Schneider¹⁷ provides several options: "The pronoun *y'all*, the use of double modals like *might could* . . . the use of perfective *done*, counterfactual *like to*" (indicating that an event could have, but did not actually, occur). Bailey and Tillery¹⁸ also include the near future intentional *fixin' to*.

Ironically, although most people believe they know it when they hear it and it is the most salient and stereotyped feature of Southern speech in the United States, "neither laypeople nor linguists have a clear, unified notion" of what constitutes a "Southern drawl."¹⁹ Carver²⁰ observes that "the so-called Southern drawl and the much parodied 'y'all' are features on most of our 'mental' dialect maps." Vowel systems are also literally moving targets, changing more quickly over time than consonants. For decades, linguists have been tracking the "Northern Cities Chain Shift," a series of six different vowel changes (each change triggering the next in the chain) that has affected the large cities of the Inland North around the Great Lakes, from Chicago to upstate New York. There is an even more complicated but entirely distinct series of changes known as the "Southern Vowel Shift," and large parts of the country are participating in neither set of changes.²¹ All the different pronunciations that result from these changes would be very difficult to capture using the English alphabet, which has only five vowel letters with which to encode dozens of different dialectal variant vowel pronunciations. Next to the Southern vowel shift, the most salient part of a "Southern" accent (to more Northern ears) is its traditional "r-lessness," although Davies²²

¹⁷ Edgar Schneider, "Shakespeare in the Coves and Hollows? Toward a History of Southern English," in *English in the Southern United States*, ed. Stephen J. Nagle and Sara L. Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17–35, 29.

¹⁸ Bailey and Tillery, "The Lone Star State of Speech (Texas)."

¹⁹ Rachael Meghan Allbritten, *Sounding Southern: Phonetic Features and Dialect Perceptions*. PhD Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2011, iii.

²⁰ Carver, *American Regional Dialects*, 93.

²¹ William Labov, *Principles of Linguistic Change: Internal Factors* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

²² Catherine Evans Davies, "'We Digress': Kathryn Tucker Windham and Southern Storytelling Style," *Storytelling, Self, Society* 4, no. 3 (2008): 167–84, esp. 179.

points out that “as younger Southern speakers adopt r-fulness, this accent is fading into Southern history.”

The “Porousness” of Regional Borders

Although no geographical setting is specified for “Incarnations of Burned Children,”²³ and the speech of the narrator does not directly encode Southern phonology, Wallace apparently wrote it with some variety of Southern dialect in mind. His letter to a translator dated June 20, 2001, urges her to “keep in mind that the story’s narrated in something like the rural ‘voice’ of a semiliterate Southern US male,” and explains *twangy* as “an adjective that both connotes the ‘twangy’ guitars Country music uses and the ‘twang’ of a Southern accent—most Country musicians are Southern and their accent has a ‘twang’” (HRC Wallace Papers, container 31.8).

The story, the letter says, “while short, seems to me almost impossible to translate, mostly because of the very large number of non-standard and very English-specific punctuation and syntax devices.” It is “the non-standard English stuff that (in my opinion) gives the story its power,” Wallace added. The non-standardness of the (default white) rural narrator is much more subtle than his attempt at AAE in Clenette’s internal monologue, although the frequent repetition of very simple vocabulary and names is reminiscent. The story is one long paragraph, with a couple of very short sentences (“If you’ve never wept and want to, have a child”) mixed in with extremely long sentences that trap the reader as witness to a seemingly inescapable and increasingly horrible sequence of events that inflicts excruciating pain and suffering on a baby. That the narrator is both wise and poetic (e.g., “its self’s soul so much vapor aloft”) is in no way seen as incongruous with Wallace’s characterization of him as “semiliterate.”

Wallace often gave real geographical reference points but generally preferred fictional settings and hometowns, playing with regional boundaries, stressing the allegiance of characters (other than his Texans) to particular towns, not States or larger abstract regions. Thus, for example, *Jest*’s Ortho Stice hails from Partridge, Kansas, a fact that is repeated over a half dozen times. The real Partridge is not “a part of southwest Kansas that might as well be Oklahoma” (100), nor is it “just outside Liberal KS on the Oklahoma border” (628); it is much closer to Wichita, in the center of the state. My

²³ “Incarnations of Burned Children,” *Esquire* (April 20, 2009). <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a500/incarnations-burned-children-david-foster-wallace-0900/>.

guess is that Wallace couldn't resist being "just outside Liberal," and was playing with the "porousness of borders" with respect to regions. It's possible that the name is an homage to lexicographer Eric Partridge, whose famous *Usage and Abusage* (1942) Wallace praised in A&AU for its "mordant pith" (CTL 80). That Wallace may have been playing with the name of the town is made more likely by the obvious playfulness in the naming of the character: *Ortho* meaning *straight* or *upright*, and *Stice* evoking *interstice*, a small place in-between. (Note that *Ortho* is the character's given name, as his nickname is "(The) Dark(ness).")

In the minds of most Americans, Kansas is quintessentially (flatly) Midwestern, "a reservoir of middle-class, Midwestern rural values," and "one of the more typical parts of the region."²⁴ Yet the description of Stice's accent as "flat and twangy" (189) necessarily evokes Southernness. He also pronounces *tired* "tard" (99, 100), uses adverbial *real* ("It's real short-sighted" 104), and "drops the G" in "studyin'" (101). "The Darkness" is a liminal character, both quintessentially Midwestern, yet Southern at the same time, just as the young people of ETA can be both jock and nerd. The social categories that we impose on ourselves and others are not fixed and immutable; some people are trapped in between, and some people may manage to transcend them.

Joelle van Dyne

Joelle van Dyne is the only Wallace character who intentionally loses a native accent. Earlier typescript drafts of *Infinite Jest* had Joelle's hometown as "Meyer, Arkansas," with Joelle being asked (by her boyfriend's mother) "to describe rural Arkansas"—with the correction "Kentucky" handwritten in the margin (HRC Wallace Papers, container 16.7). Another early draft fragment (container 16.6) shows some inconsistency about her origin, with her father described as "Mr. van Dyne of Shiny Prize Kentucky," but with Joelle saying to Gately, "In Arkansas? Meyer, where I'm from, originally?" In this latter draft, Joelle uses *y'all* and the verb *scudge*, but neither of these lexical items makes it into the final draft. Wallace didn't have to change much about the way Joelle speaks, despite his decision to change her home state, since what stands out about her speech is her avoidance of markers of Southernness.

²⁴ Leo E. Oliva, "Kansas: A Hard Land in the Heartland," in *Heart Land: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*, ed. James H. Madison (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 248–75, esp. 253.

On the radio as “Madame Psychosis,” Joelle has “the accent of someone who’s spent time either losing a southern lilt or cultivating one,” in the opinion of Hal (who is always interested in and extraordinarily sensitive to language). He adds that “it’s not flat and twangy like Stice’s, and it’s not a drawl like the people at Gainesville’s academy” (189). Joelle’s pre-suicide-attempt confessional monologue (“I want to tell you everything”) includes the boast that “I now have no accent except under stress” (234). The narrator, however, contradicts this claim, observing that she has “the elisions and apical lapses of a mid-Southern accent” (299), and later further specifying “a strange and it turns out Kentuckian lapse in the pronunciation of all apicals except *s*” (366). (“Apicals” are sounds articulated with the tip of the tongue, including /t,d,n,l,s,z/. Wallace does not explain this to readers, not even deeming it worthy of an endnote, although it is hardly part of the popular language-related terminology wielded by nonlinguists.) Gately also finds her accent “just barely Southern” (366), “slightly Southern” (368).

Ironically, although Joelle has apparently gone to some effort to lose the accent, the hint that remains (unbeknownst to her) is generally approved of and found attractive. Joelle is described by her former boyfriend Orin as the “Prettiest Girl of All Time,” so it is possible that people meeting her in person would be so overwhelmed by her physical attractiveness (despite her appearing only veiled later in the novel) that they would find her attractive regardless, but as the radio personality Madame Psychosis, her voice can be judged on its own merits. Although Joelle is proud of *not* having a southern accent, her self-consciousness about this may keep her silenced her to some degree. She is able to speak fluently and comfortably as Madame Psychosis, but not as Joelle van Dyne. Hayes-Brady²⁵ attributes Wallace’s “silencing” of women to a “lack of engagement with female characters . . . palpable throughout his work,” but it seems entirely plausible that Joelle’s linguistic insecurity is the culprit of her silencing, much as she has consciously chosen to hide her face.

Later in the novel, after Gately has been wounded, Joelle has a clearly symbolic dream, in which she finds herself physically unable to speak as Gately performs a dental exam on her, and assures her that her teeth (which she fears destroyed by cocaine) can be saved. In the dream, Gately is “unhurt and mid-South-accented” (724). Despite the unpleasantness and discomfort many people associate with dental exams, Joelle is clearly comforting herself that Gately himself “can be saved,” that he will help her in *her* recovery, and that the meaningful connection they have already

²⁵ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 167.

begun to forge will grow, which her unconscious frames as him speaking with her native dialect. Speech convergence is in fact one of the ways we show solidarity and affiliation, even love, although it would be surprising for someone to switch regional dialects quite so dramatically. Gately, who has never left the Boston area, cannot realistically adopt a Southern dialect; the dream may illustrate her fantasy that he could accept *her* speaking in her native dialect, accept her in all her identities. Consciously, she believes she can change her identity by changing the way she speaks; unconsciously, she recognizes that she has not achieved the desired change, that there are some boundaries on such performative identity construction, that she is—at least temporarily, like a dental patient—unable to speak freely. Gately's reciprocal dream of Joelle pictures the two of them about to have sex “in a Southern motel . . . in the U.S. South” (846), again illustrating both that she has not really lost her accent, and that Gately does, indeed, find the accent attractive. She “whispers” to him in the dream, rather than speaking aloud, “promising him a P.M. of near-terminal pleasures” (847). She must actually have said “P.M.,” too, as the dream has her finally removing her veil to reveal the face of former British prime minister Winston Churchill. (This is a good candidate for an instance in which Wallace simply could not resist a pun.)

Although Joelle teases Gately about his accent, he never mocks hers. This asymmetry may be due to their mutual awareness of class issues—Gately's Boston-blue-collar dialect being unmistakably working class, while Joelle's effaced accent could pass for an upper-class Southerner—but it may also be a subtle reminder of her linguistic insecurity and therefore also proof of his sensitivity toward and protectiveness of her.

“Texan”: Andy Lang and LBJ

Despite popular stereotype (and “evidence” from TV and film), there isn't actually a distinct Texas dialect. As Bailey and Tillery²⁶ note, “The uniqueness of TXE [Texas English] is probably more an artefact of the presence of Texas in the popular imagination than a reflection of linguistic circumstances.” Only a few features of Texas speech are unique to the state; they cite specifically local lexical items and the use of /ar/ for /or/ in *horse*, *for*, and so on. Johnstone²⁷ notes that “Anglo-Texans tend to think of themselves primarily as Texans and Americans, and as Southerners only incidentally.” But the state of which they

²⁶ Bailey, and Tillery. “The Lone Star State of Speech (Texas).”

²⁷ Johnstone, “Features and Uses of Southern Style,” 200.

are so proud is not at all uniform, linguistically, even among just the Anglo-Texans. Atwood²⁸ shows that a major dialect boundary runs longitudinally through the state, dividing East Texas from West Texas; nor is there uniformity within each half, even ignoring the differences associated with the ethnic segregation in the state, with North Texas dominated by Anglo-Americans and South Texas by Mexican-Americans.

Wallace's general lack of familiarity with Texas and the South did not discourage him from taking a stab at what he thought might sound like a realistic central, Anglo "Texas" dialect in his first novel. Wallace also mimicked the speech of President Lyndon Baines Johnson in "Lyndon" (*GWCH*), but there he had an historical Texan figure and actual idiolectal patterns to use as a target. It may be that he already had that model in mind when writing *Broom*; the main difference between Wallace's portrayals of Andy Lang and President Johnson is that Wallace attributed a great deal more profanity and general vulgarity to the latter. Wallace did not meet Texan poet Mary Karr (with whom he became obsessed) until several years after his literary representations of Texan speech had been published; his familiarity with her speech patterns, and whatever feelings he may have had about her, could have no influence on these, although it has been suggested that Joelle's character is based on her²⁹ and that his desire to impress her was a driving force behind the creation of *Jest*.³⁰

Andy Lang, Wallace's first extended dialect portrait, was born into wealth in "Nugget Bluff, Texas," another fictional town. He does not feel any pressure to change the way he speaks; on the contrary, he is able to leverage his dialect to support his privilege, proudly identifying as "the Texan" when he goes to a private East Coast college. When he is first introduced, it is not clear if he has a regional dialect or is just slurring his words because he is drunk. Lenore (who is from Ohio) notes that "Lang's [voice] is soft and smooth and nice, although he does seem to fall in and out of some sort of accent, at times" (15). The "although" is telling: in her view, at least, "an accent" would work against a voice being "nice." Andy's nickname at college is "Wang-Dang," a ridiculous rhyme, but also a constant reminder of his maleness, evoking crudeness but also a modicum of polite restraint (as "dang" is a mild, minced oath, and "wang" is a fairly gentle euphemism for a penis).

²⁸ E. Bagby Atwood, *The Regional Vocabulary of Texas* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1962).

²⁹ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 177.

³⁰ Megan Garber, "David Foster Wallace and the Dangerous Romance of Male Genius," *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 9, 2018). <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/the-world-still-spins-around-male-genius/559925/>.

Wallace signals Lang's "Texan-ness" so frequently that it is by far the most important feature of this character. Not only does the narrator refer to him in passing as "the Texan" (259), and a character (who is a stranger to Lang) call him "Tex" (512), but practically every word that comes out of Lang's mouth is also intended to remind us. Nonstandard spelling is consistently used to show monophthongization of *ai* (*high* as "hah" [14], *might* as "maht" [16], "requahred" [19], "fahv" [19], etc.) in a way that Wallace seldom indulges in again with other dialect portrayals—capturing one of the two phonological traits that most Southern US dialects have in common.³¹ The other is the "pen"/"pin" merger (neutralizing the difference between lax vowels *ɛ*/*ɪ* before nasals), which Wallace does not capture, although he does include a few other "folksy" pronunciations such as *naw* (259) and *figger* for "figure" (19). There is also orthographical encoding of deletion of unstressed syllables—*spiritchul* (14), *unfortchnit* (18) 'initiation (19), *more'n that* (306), 'fore (472)—and substitution of alveolar nasal for velar not just in *-ing* suffixes (*sayin'* [478], *goin'* [491], *makin'* [510], *hopin'* [515]), but also in the compound indefinite noun *somethin'* (508). These casual pronunciations are fairly common in all US dialects, but Hall-Lew and Stephens³² observe that "features that index informality in general may simultaneously index layered meanings of both Southernness and rurality." Encoding such informal features visually allows Wallace to enhance the perception of Lang's speech as nonstandard, despite also giving him the chance to show some variation within the character's speech—for example, occasional velar pronunciation of the suffix *-ing* as in *getting* (477, 491).

Lang's phonology is matched by his nonstandard morphology and syntax. He frequently uses adverbial *real*, *good*, *awful*, and *easy* (*real sorry* [15, 455], *real nice* [257], *didn't get along too good* [261], *I know her pretty good* [262] *take them awful seriously* [451], *like a chainsaw, that could cut you up as easy as some tree* [451]), and nonstandard superlatives (*doublest chin I ever did see* (345), *beautifulest* [267, 293]). Several other nonstandard features—unmarked third-person singular negative auxiliary *don't* (*she don't remember me* [295]), use of *ain't* (*ain't she?* [295]), nonstandard *wh*-question formation (*why'n't you*) . . . (515), and coordinate subject *me* (*Sometimes me and Daddy just take a while to see eye to eye* [437])—appear only once each in his dialogue, but work with the more frequently used features to cumulative effect.

³¹ Bailey and Tillery, "Sounds of the South," 13.

³² Lauren Hall-Lew and Nola Stephens, "Country Talk," *Journal of English Linguistics* 40, no. 3 (2012): 256–80, esp. 266.

Lang's frequent use of the phrase *little lady* is certainly intended to register as sexist (he also calls Lenore *sugar doll* [500]), but he also refers (as a grown man) to his *Daddy* (throughout), and calls a minister *padre* (315, 346). There is some exaggerated politeness, as when he calls Lenore's father *Sir* and refers to her as *Miss Lenore* (515), and calls two young women *Ma'am* (15, 312). He says he would *be obliged* (15, 18), and euphemizes swearing in some instances, as in *shoot* (436) and the use of *dung beetle* as insult (439). In other contexts, he is happy to curse more openly, as in *Sheeit* (257, 262), *Shit on fire* (304, 346, 449), and *Christ on a Kawasaki* (305).

Naturally, there are also words and phrases that are also intended to signal down-home/folksy/ Texan identity: *Yes indeedy* (296), *just a tinch* (297), *can't say as . . .* (305), *hold up . . . whoa there* (458). He frequently ends clauses with *and all*, calls a male stranger *bud* (508, 512), uses the verb *to git* (*You better just git!* (511), *Let's just git. . . . Let's git* [439, 513]). His expressions of surprise are *I will be dipped and fried and completely goddamned* (262) and *I will be slapped, pinched, and rolled* (267).

Of the nonstandard grammatical features that Bailey and Tillery³³ claim "remain robust" in Southern dialects, generally, Lang uses only *y'all*. Double modals, *fixin' to*, perfective *done*, and counterfactual *like to* do not appear. Presumably, Wallace was simply unfamiliar with these and, even from the start of his writing career, saw the use of dialect as symbolic rather than mimetic. In this, his first extended portrayal of nonstandard dialect (and one of the very few to use altered spellings to encode nonstandard phonology) the dialect demonstrates and reinforces the speaker's pride and privilege and is called out explicitly in the novel as a self-conscious performance. After they've finally succumbed (somewhat) to a mutual attraction, Lenore asks Lang, "What happened to the way you talk all of a sudden? Why aren't you saying stuff like, 'Well, strap me to the hind end of a sow and sell me to Oscar Meyer?'" (464). Lang laughs at Lenore's imitation of his speech, and acknowledges in his most extended *standard* utterance, "I guess maybe we all talk differently with different people. The good old boy stuff is what I grew up on, and then at school I was from Texas and so everybody expected this sort of talking, and so it kind of became my thing, at school" (465). (Note here not just the *absence* of supposedly Texan lexical items and exaggerated politeness, but the use of the velar pronunciation of the *-ing* suffix and the derivational adverbial *-ly* suffix.)

Lang's "Texan" is inauthentic, not just because Wallace didn't know enough about central Texas speech to mimic the dialect realistically, but because

³³ Bailey and Tillery, "The Lone Star State of Speech (Texas)."

Lang, a member of the mobile upper class, is self-consciously exaggerating regional features to perform the voice of the white working class. At the same time, readers can believe his explanation, since readers also quickly come to “expect this sort of talking.” Thus, his motivations appear pure: he is trying to perform the identity that others want from him, trying to please his audience. His ability to drop the act with Lenore is a sign of their new intimacy, as is the fact that she notices the change before any reader could. (There is no apparent change in his way of speaking until Lenore points out her perception of it.)

John Billy

Wallace's only extended first-person narrator with a regional dialect is in the story “John Billy,” one of Wallace's favorites in the GWCH collection.³⁴ The story is labeled a “faux mythic narrative” by Thompson,³⁵ and is seen as “inflating lyric voices found in the literature of the American South, from William Faulkner to Cormac McCarthy.”³⁶ Boswell³⁷ judges it “a serious attempt . . . to explore the role of myth and the metaphysics of identity” (86).

Wallace's friend Gale Walden recounted how on their road trip to Tucson,

Wallace listened to the southwestern accents. . . . “He started to talk out ‘John Billy’ at rest stops,” Walden remembers. “He was trying to get the cadences of the dialogue down.” . . . That the story was not easy to read mattered not at all to Wallace; all he cared about was the sentences.³⁸

As noted in Chapter 1, Walden also reminisces that “John Billy” was inspired by William Gass's *Omensetter's Luck*. In that novel, Gass employs free indirect discourse with three different narrators, and also avoids respelling to indicate phonology. Gass's fictional 1890s rural Ohio town is clearly supposed to be Appalachian, and readers can infer that Wallace's fictional “Minogue, Oklahoma” is set in the Ozark dialect area (on the Eastern side of Oklahoma, near the Osage Reservation, to which the story obliquely refers). Similarities

³⁴ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 131.

³⁵ Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 208.

³⁶ Ellerhoff, “Proteus Bound,” 120.

³⁷ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 85.

³⁸ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 74.

between Appalachian English and Ozark English are well known.³⁹ But if Wallace was inspired by Gass, he certainly was not mimicking him; the dialect in “John Billy” is like the dialect of *Omensetter’s Luck* on steroids. Gass’s novel has many fewer dialect markers, and those that are incorporated (notably adverbial *real*, preference for past tense *was* for all person/number combinations of subject, items that are marked but not highly stigmatized) occur with far less frequency. Situating this story in the Ozarks allows Wallace some fuzziness with respect to regions (and the dialects and stereotypes one might associate with them). The Ozarks are usually deemed “Southern” (the “Upper South” rather than the “Lower South” in Schneider’s⁴⁰ terms), although the largest part of the mountain range is in Southern Missouri, which is considered by some (including by many of my Missouri students) as “Midwestern.”

Wallace undoubtedly greatly enjoyed refining the distinct idiosyncratic voice he created for the story, but he was also aware of and responding to a tradition of Southern storytelling, which Davies⁴¹ claims to be characterized by digression: “Associations of thought are encouraged.” Boswell⁴² also points out the parodying of John Barth’s stylistic tic, in *Lost in the Funhouse*, of using “etc.” over and over again.

The eponymous narrator in “John Billy,” who claims a white identity by distinguishing himself from both the “neighboring reservation’s Native Americans” (125) and a “nigra” on the visiting team (126), has an enormous and erudite lexicon and a very strong regional dialect. Nor is this combination seen as extraordinary in the context of the story: one of his friends, Glory Joy, likewise juxtaposes lofty vocabulary such as *recalcitrant* with the regularized reflexive pronoun *hissself*, and another, T-Rex, casually specifies “macrocosmic speculation” as the intended direct object of “We done some together” (143). The point is not that this is an “authentic” Oklahoman performance, but that there is no reason that highly intelligent and educated people shouldn’t continue to use the dialect that best encodes their personal identity and feels most comfortable to them. If the juxtaposition of “highbrow” words with “lowbrow” grammar and vulgarity strikes readers as incongruous or funny at first, challenging their stereotypes, the consistency of the presentation over twenty-six pages should undermine that response.

³⁹ Donna Christian, Walt Wolfram, and Nanjo Dube, “Variation and Change in Geographically Isolated Communities: Appalachian English and Ozark English,” National Science Foundation Report, 1984. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED246682.pdf>

⁴⁰ Schneider, “Shakespeare in the Coves and Hollows?” 20.

⁴¹ Davies, “We Digress” 175.

⁴² Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 87.

O'Connor featured "narration from outside and above, in which an educated, sophisticated storyteller writes about simple vernacular characters for the edification of readers who are not simple rustics but likewise persons of education and sophistication";⁴³ Wallace, on the other hand, lets the vernacular speaker speak for himself, to prove that *he* is a person of education and sophistication. Boswell⁴⁴ says that this story "employs the full range of Wallace's linguistic virtuosity," referring specifically to the title character's "more than a little syntactical inventiveness," but also notes that "the gag here is that neither Glory Joy nor John Billy would be aware of such terms as 'mythopoeic'" (87). In part, I disagree, this is only *part* of the gag, which works on several levels (and like many of Wallace's jokes is simultaneously deep and dark). The sad underlying truth is that people are routinely discouraged from higher education because of their dialect; Wallace understood that there is no reason other than social pressure that these linguistic features should not co-exist. So the rest of the joke is on the reader who *assumes* that the local population of Minogue, Oklahoma wouldn't know such terms. As with other dialect portrayals, Wallace triggers readers' sense of superiority and negative judgment only to pull the carpet out from under them.

The opening line of the story contains multiple prescriptive "errors," pretty much guaranteeing a strong knee-jerk reaction from SNOOTs: "Was me supposed to tell Simple Ranger how Chuck Nunn Junior done wronged the man that wronged him and fleen to parts unguessed." The same narrative framing device ("Was X (did Y)") is used seventeen times throughout the story, seeming quite familiar by the end. *Ain't* is used several times, but more noticeable is the frequent use of auxiliary and copular *was* with plural subjects, for example, "We was on exhibit to animals" (142), or "after they was busted" (143)). Wallace winks a bit at readers with "things was dark and singular" (145)—because *things* is plural, though the agreement is, indeed, singular.

Ozark English does have a preference for past tense *was* with all person/number combinations of subject, as illustrated in Christian, Wolfram, and Dube,⁴⁵ although again, there is no evidence that Wallace did any linguistic research for this story. John Billy's dialect also includes verb aspect markers such as completive *done* + *V-ed* (in addition to the example given earlier, *done nodded* [140], *done gone* [144], *done gave* [144]) and inchoative *commence to*

⁴³ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., *A Gallery of Southerners* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 128.

⁴⁴ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 85.

⁴⁵ Christian, Wolfram and Dube, "Variation and Change in Geographically Isolated Communities," 198.

(+ infinitive) or *got to* (+ verbal noun), showing the beginning of an action ("Upright citizens commenced to lift too," [139], "T-Rex commenced to hand up jars" [146], "Shed got to caressing" [132]), past tense *come* ("She come back over, toting menace" [134], "when Chuck Nunn Jr. come three days past" [139]), other nonstandard (often regularized) verb conjugations (simple past *seen* [137] or past perfect *'d swore* [134], *'d growed* [144]). In addition to the regularized reflexive pronoun (*hissself*), John Billy uses *ever* as determiner ("ever time" [132], "ever month" [140]), and frequently has the indefinite article *a* followed by vowel (with no use of *an*, as in "a analogy" [125], "a ambulance" [130], "a eternity" [134], etc.). He also frequently uses the preposition-final locative Wallace repeatedly claimed as part of his own Midwestern dialect (the "where X is at" construction, also found in this story as "where X lives at"). Multiple negation occurs with and without *ain't* ("never got seen no more" [136], "ain't no" + noun [144, 145]), and use of preposition *out* without *of* to indicate movement, as in "how Nunn's eyes got busted out his head" (130), "hanging right out his head" (130), and so on. A relative pronoun is omitted when subject of the relative clause ("was the first saw the rich orange of the jelly jars" [137]). There are nonstandard comparative forms "peculiarer" (133), and "hostiler" (137). There is a single use of the *a*-prefix, which is a commonly known feature of both Appalachian and Ozark English, but is here rather humorously attached to a verb borrowed from Yiddish to describe sexual intercourse: "Chuck Junior, who was, remember, a-shtuppin' the little lady" (126). (This relates back to the discussion in Chapter 4 of Yiddish borrowings as a common cultural resource, available to all; the usage could not be more "nativized" than it is here.)

Taken in isolation, any one of these stigmatized features would stand out from a standard text, triggering negative judgments. In this story, however, they are so commonly used that the reader quickly becomes accustomed to the dialect; in that context, it is the lofty, learned vocabulary that pops out as unexpected. Readers are not expecting someone who speaks this way to have access to words such as *vicissitudes* (121), *limpid* and *Euclidean* (125), *diarrhetic* (132), or to Latin phrases such as *ex officio* (124). Not only is the narrator comfortable with such language but he is also able to use it creatively: there are frequent neologisms—mainly verbs created via functional shift from other parts of speech, such as *angstified* (125), *emergencying* (129), *smithered* (131), *vameesed* (134), *proned* (137), *incredulized* (142). He even puns on the Latin phrase *prima facie* ("at first impression") by using "prime face" (130) to describe how Chuck Junior's face had healed after his car accident. His "prime face" was just a first impression; he continues to suffer the effects long after, as the narrator makes clear. On the other hand, there is one instance of faux German in *vengeancelüst* (139), and John Billy spells the Latinate derivational suffix *-esque* as *-esk* (138).

Along with Latin and the Yiddish borrowings, the narrator uses words from Greek, German, French, Arabic, and Chinese in his list of "Nunn's putative virtuous qualities" (140). Wallace wrote in the Arabic and Chinese by hand on his typescript manuscript of the story (HRC Wallace Papers, container 28.7). John Billy uses metalinguistic terms playfully (if not entirely correctly): he compares "the noun T-Rex Minogue" to "the near-gerunds confrontation, reparation, possibly even reciprocation (i.e. detonation)" (127). Like gerunds, these nouns are derived from verbs—and the narrator brings our attention to this, to stress these as actions Nunn might soon be taking. Not only does John Billy use language in these creative and self-aware ways, but he points out that his friend Glory Joy does the same. "Focus in on that verb *lose*, S.R.," John Billy tells Simple Ranger, "The lady means it special" (132).

Readers start out feeling superior to this nonstandard speaker, are soon amazed that he knows such terminology, find themselves honestly amused (not condescendingly) by his playfulness with descriptions and words themselves, and eventually realize that they are struggling to keep up with this "simple" story, that it's much more complicated than they had initially realized. Readers are *meant* to wonder whether John Billy is "for real," and the punch line to the joke is that, like a stage magician, Wallace has misdirected readers' attention; they were asking the right question about the wrong character. The narrator is 100 percent "for real" in the context of the story; it is "Simple Ranger" (the ostensible audience for John Billy's story) who turns out to not be who John Billy (and by proxy, readers) thought he was. He is, in fact, not "simple" at all, although his performance does indeed "range." (There are no native American Indians in Wallace's work—one of the gaps in his simplification of ethnicity, as discussed in Chapter 3.) Part of the shock of the revelation in "John Billy" (similar to the effect of the Scooby Doo gang peeling the mask off the villain at the end of the episode) is that if identity is so easily assumed, then the narrator must be *choosing* (in almost every utterance) to be both "hick" and deep thinker, both regional and global. Readers who think themselves superior to John Billy may believe that he grew up in "waist-deep shit," but he argues that that experience is universal, not exclusive to Minogue, Oklahoma, the South, or just rural locations in general: "The waist-deep shit *we all grew up in*" (143, emphasis added).

For T. Rex, who took Chuck Nunn, Jr., to the window and forced him to look out, where you're from is your destiny. It's not coincidental that T. Rex's surname is also the name of the town. "Fore I die . . . I need to know where y'all think you live," T. Rex challenges his friends (145). "I need to know where y'all think you *live at*" (146) he repeats, adding emphasis to the regional construction, and then again a third time: "Tell me where y'all

think you live at" (146). He may be "king" of his small town, but he is also a dinosaur, doomed to extinction, literally on the verge of death. Chuck Nunn, Jr., whose abbreviated name "C. Nunn" (136), Boswell⁴⁶ points out, is a pun for "see none," cannot see what T. Rex wants to show him, because his eyes have literally fallen out; another example of Wallace's trademark of "literalizing difficult questions and working them out in a living context."⁴⁷

John Billy has his own answer to T. Rex's repeated question, which he does not give before T-Rex dies: "A point in time, which is where we lived at" (146). The landscape disappears, melts away, as the survivors get drunk, "levitating" around "the seated form of Minogue Oklahoma's expired T. Rex Minogue" (146). This story is not just about identity, but about mortality, a memento mori; not just about Chuck Nunn, Jr., or John Billy, but about the readers, too. "Was me supposed to tell Simple Ranger" (the opening line of the opening section) turns into the opening line of the closing section: "Was me supposed to tell you" (146). John Billy challenges readers directly to "go on and ask me" (147). Like Simple Ranger, the reader may be anybody. It is not John Billy who embodies "chaotic unboundedness," as Hayes-Brady⁴⁸ argues—it is the unknown readers. Wallace has been criticized for imagining readers much like himself, but what is the alternative? How does one tell a coherent story—the *same* story—to radically different audiences?

Wallace deliberately blurred distinctions between regions, problematizing the "convenient fictions," not just of the South, but also of the Midwest, as the next chapter will detail. He understood that dialects are not all alike (nor should be), but that our gross stereotypes about regions and their associated dialects are easily falsified. Wallace's dialect portrayals show awareness of and sensitivity to the additional stigma that rural and impoverished speakers everywhere bear for their dialects, although these dialects are in no way inferior to the dialects of upper-class speakers in those or other regions; the message that these speakers also deserve our empathy and respect is implicit, but so often repeated as to be unmistakable.

⁴⁶ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 88.

⁴⁷ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.