Shapiro, Mary. "Midwestern and Rural." *Wallace's Dialects*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 135–158. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501348501.0011>>.

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Midwestern and Rural

Figure 6 Wallace's Midwesterners.

In “Host,” Wallace challenges readers “to try seeing things from the perspective of, say, a God-fearing, hard-working rural-Midwestern military vet” (CTL 288–9). An arrow, from the word “directly” (which Wallace puts in the mouth of this hypothetical construct), leads to a box with a parenthetical side note: “(In the real Midwest, this word is pronounced with a long *i*)” (289). Neither the accent nor the conservative point of view is mocked; nor is there any implication that a person who speaks this way must have this attitude; the implication is simply that readers can’t really imagine this person, can’t really understand his point of view, unless they *hear* the words coming out of his mouth.

The very concept of a “Middle West” is an early twentieth-century construct, whose borders continue to be disputed (or perhaps continue to evolve). The Midwest is “generally considered the most American and the most amorphous of regions.”¹ Several critics have explored Wallace’s relationship with the Midwest, but almost none have included consideration

¹ Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, eds. *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1.

of dialect features, specifically. Although Wallace-the-author and "Wallace"-the-narrator and several alter ego protagonists acknowledge their history with/in and appreciation for the Midwest, they very sparingly incorporate linguistic features of Midwestern dialects. Joffe² discusses how (particularly after 9/11), Wallace "homes in on the white working-class Midwest, rendering this population with extraordinary complexity and richness." She offers a thorough exposition of the rhetorical strategies with which Wallace positions male Midwesterners as a symbol for all Americans in both TPK and "The View from Mrs. Thompson's." Daalder³ refers to the latter essay, along with "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley" and "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" as Wallace's "autogeographies" or "geographic metafiction," saying that they offer "a clear sense of place, but one that can only be known from its geographic intertexts" (221)—that is, myths and symbols of the region.

As the dialect map in Chapter 5 illustrates, major dialect boundaries separate the "Upper Midwest" (including northern Wisconsin, Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Minnesota, northern Iowa, and most of the Dakotas) from the "Inland North" (including NE Illinois, Michigan, the northern edges of Indiana and Ohio) from the "Midland." Of course, the real boundaries of each are quite fuzzy, as is the distinction between North and South Midland, and the dividing line between South Midland and "Southern."

It is a common myth that the Midwestern United States is "home to 'General American,' a bland, deregionalized variety of English spoken by everyone in the region."⁴ In fact, the geographical region currently called the "Midwest" does not entirely fall within a single dialect area (or vice versa). There is a definite mismatch between the idealized geographical "Midwest" and the dialect areas defined by linguists, as well as the stereotypes associated with each. Do rural identities all over the United States have more in common with each other than they do with nearby urban areas in their own region? Are the stereotyped images of "redneck" or "hillbilly" even associated with region? According to Ferrence,⁵ "People expect rural Americans to

² Joffe, "In the Shadows," 143.

³ Jurrit Daalder, "Wallace's Geographical Metafiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 220–34.

⁴ Timothy C. Frazer, "An Introduction to Midwest English," in *American Voices: How Dialects Differ from Coast to Coast*, ed. Walt Wolfram and Ben Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 101–5, esp. 102.

⁵ Matthew J. Ferrence, *All-American Redneck: Variations on an Icon, from James Fenimore Cooper to the Dixie Chicks* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 162.

be Redneck” regardless of their geographical region, although Fox⁶ points out that “redneck identity is ambivalent,” and “relational,” “an appealingly rebellious yet conservative political ideology for American’s modern white working class.”

Wallace did not include the Upper Midwest (also known as the North Central dialect area) in his “travelogue” of the country; none of his major characters hail from there, and he never attempted to represent the dialects found there, although I imagine he would have had a lot of fun with some of the Scandinavian influences. Many immigrants to the Upper Midwest sought “the freedom not to become American, but to retain European ways and values.”⁷ As such, these ethnic pockets might have fit into Wallace’s examination of ethnicity and assimilation, but they would not further the exploration of the default white working class that his regional dialect portraits typically index.

Most of Wallace’s portrayals of Midwestern speech are specifically varieties of “South Midland,” a dialect area that is often caricatured “as rustic, poorly-educated, and the like.”⁸ Wallace’s depictions of rural, working-class speakers in Southern Indiana and Southern Illinois would more likely signal Southern identity to readers than trigger associations with the “rural nostalgia” Americans seem to feel for “formerly white, Anglo-Saxon, and Scandinavian origin communities” built around family farms.⁹ “Nostalgia for the Midwest,” Daalder¹⁰ agrees, “runs deep in the American grain: for generations, the country’s heartland has been the home of all Americans, even those who have never lived there but miss it all the same.”

It is the “North Midland” that is recognized in folklore as “the seat of the fictional home of Standard American English (where national radio and television announcers and newsmen are supposed to come from)” according to Niedzielski and Preston,¹¹ who point out that it is “an area little caricatured,” and “an area of high linguistic security.” As Gordon¹² points out, “Even Midwesterners think they speak without an accent.” Perceptual dialectology studies have repeatedly shown that speakers all over the country

⁶ Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 25.

⁷ Cayton and Gray, *The American Midwest*, 2.

⁸ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 28.

⁹ Katherine Fennelly, “Prejudice Toward Immigrants in the Midwest,” in *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration*, ed. Douglas S. Massey (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 151–78, esp. 152.

¹⁰ Daalder, “Wallace’s Geographical Metafiction,” 220.

¹¹ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 17.

¹² Matthew J. Gordon, “Straight Talking from the Heartland (Midwest),” in *American Voices: How Dialects Differ from Coast to Coast*, ed. Walt Wolfram and Ben Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 106–11, esp. 107.

rate "Midwestern" dialects highly on scales of correctness and pleasantness (categories that clearly correlate in the popular imagination).

Daalder¹³ associates Wallace's Midwestern fiction with two classics he dubs the "ur-texts" of the Midwest (222): Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (whose author Wallace lauds in TPK) and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, although Daalder does not detail any real connections between Lewis and Wallace, other than Wallace's explicit labeling of the opening paragraph of "A View from Mrs. Thompson's" as synecdoche (as "main street" has come to symbolize all of small-town America). Daalder also points to an essay by Michael Martone, "The Flatness," which appears to have particularly resonated with Wallace, noting Wallace's marginal note "Not object but medium" by the following underlined sentences: "I grew up in a landscape not often painted or photographed. The place is more like the materials of the art itself—the stretched canvas and paper."¹⁴ Another version of the essay was included in Wallace's teaching materials, and on this copy, he wrote: "Q: Is there a point? Or is this just an excuse for some cool descriptions? Q: Does it need to have a point? Q: Who is this for? Non-natives, or natives (to appreciate the beauty of their own land), or both?" (HRC Wallace Papers, container 32.8).

In the *Harvard Book Review*, Wallace called Martone's *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List* (1990)¹⁵ "way better than good" (13), citing particularly its "study of the Midwest in all its self-conscious averageness, a place that understands itself as always origin and never end," and its "full and accurate evocation of Indiana as place." Wallace acknowledged that "the reviewer, who's from rural Illinois, might be prejudiced by sentiment." All the stories in *Fort Wayne* are monologues, and Wallace noted that "Martone's voices are superb." Notably, however, Martone does not incorporate many nonstandard dialect features into those voices, with most differentiated only by personality, except for the final story, which is written from the point of view of the bank robber John Dillinger (who uses *ain't*, some double negation, and the non-interrogative discourse marker *why*).

According to Martone,¹⁶ he and Wallace "were to each other, each other's footnotes." Their "casual . . . informal, trivial" relationship began when Martone asked "a passel of Midwestern writers" to contribute to a book of

¹³ Daalder, "Wallace's Geographical Metafiction."

¹⁴ Michael Martone, ed. *A Place of Sense: Essays in Search of the Midwest* (Iowa City: Iowa Humanities Board, 1988), 33.

¹⁵ Michael Martone, *Fort Wayne Is Seventh on Hitler's List: Indiana Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); "Review of *Fort Wayne Is Seventh on Hitler's List: Indiana Stories* by Michael Martone," *Harvard Book Review* 15/16 (Winter–Spring, 1990): 12–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27545484>.

¹⁶ Michael Martone, "Footnotes & Endnotes," *Sonora Review* 55 (2009): 51–8, esp. 53.

essays called *Townships*; Wallace's response was "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley." It was Martone's thesis that "only in the Midwest did the grid of the township take hold as a telling geographic feature," and Wallace took this one step further, "subdividing the squares within squares down to the boxes within boxes of the tennis court."¹⁷ Martone notes that Wallace's text featured all sorts of "goofy graphic geometry" at a time when writers were just "beginning to understand that our Macintoshes were not typewriters . . . that a writer now had also at his fingertips this material edge, the book-ness of the book, as an aesthetic strategy."¹⁸

Wallace would later contribute "Another Pioneer" to a special issue Martone edited of the *Colorado Review* entitled "Trying Fiction," pun intended—both attempting to do new things, and difficult, a perfect fit for Wallace. After Wallace included the description of *Jest's* Hugh Steeply's television-addicted father becoming obsessed with and writing letters to the fictional Dr. Frank Burns of M*A*S*H, Martone claimed in a footnote in his fictional travel guide *The Blue Guide to Indiana* (2001)¹⁹ that Dr. Frank Burns had both delivered him as a baby and attended his (still living) mother's death. A footnote to a letter Wallace wrote to Martone asks "Really? Dr. Frank Burns?"²⁰

According to Hering,²¹ "In Wallace's fiction the Midwest is rarely, if ever, afforded the chance to exist as an unmediated environment." The "mediation" comes via Wallace's portrayals of institutional spaces—but most Americans, regardless of region, spend the majority of their lives navigating various institutional spaces, schools, businesses, churches, and the like. Wallace was not a nature writer; his treatment of the Midwest is no more "mediated" than his exploration of the Boston area in *Infinite Jest*, and his ambivalence over his regional identity was no greater than his ambivalence and self-consciousness over every other aspect of life. Hering is more on point with his observation that Wallace's treatment of the Midwest evolved over the years: "In 1997 Wallace is somewhat archly asking *What Is Peoria For?* but in the post-2005 *Pale King* material his description of the Midwest has become more attuned to economic and social problems in the region."²² What remains unchanged is Wallace's blurring of the boundaries of the region, and his rejection of the conflation of "region" and "dialect." How one speaks is, to a large extent, a

¹⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Michael Martone, *The Blue Guide to Indiana* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001).

²⁰ Martone, "Footnotes & Endnotes," 52.

²¹ Hering, *David Foster Wallace*, 41.

²² Ibid., 148.

reflection of who one is (or aspires to be)—but who one is does not have to be determined or dominated by a regional identity, if such an identity even exists, beyond allegiance to a more specific place.

When Wallace characters sound “Midwestern,” they use not only Wallace’s own North Midland speech patterns but also the more stigmatized South Midland variants. Habick²³ details the dialect of Farmer City, Illinois (an actual location, not a metaphor, only twenty miles from Champaign-Urbana), perhaps the best linguistic description of what Wallace would have seen as “the hard-earned Rural Midwestern of most of my peers” (CTL 99). Habick’s study contrasts the speech of “rednecks” and “burnouts” at the Farmer City high school (each group named by the other, the former more conservative and the latter made up of marijuana smokers). He describes the local dialect as “predominantly Northern,” but “with strong Southern influence” (107). The most common shared Southern feature in Farmer City is /uw/ fronting, in which the vowel of *coop*, *soup* has moved toward the front of the vowel tract. (I have seen this reflected in writing, for instance, *kewl* for *cool*.) Wallace can be heard performing this in the word “shoot,” in his recorded reading of “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s,” in the line “Well shoot, boy, get over here,” in which he also flattens the diphthong in “boy,” with the distance between the starting and ending tongue positions notably reduced, compared to his usual articulation. He is quoting a hypothetical neighbor in this sentence, not speaking in his own voice, thus positioning himself as distinct and separate from the “good people” of Bloomington. Joffe²⁴ points out that “despite his easy belonging among the white Midwestern community, he positions himself as a marginal, marginalised figure.”

North Midlanders may like to think they have the “default” American speech, a non-accent, but there are certainly features that non-Midwesterners can identify as dialectal. Hurt²⁵ recounts a stranger who overheard his conversation with a friend in a hotel lobby telling them “You talk funny. . . . You have a flat ‘a.’” Morphosyntactically, “elliptical verbal constructions with verbs of desire,” are common (e.g., *the baby wants fed*, *the car needs washing*, *I want off*).²⁶ Positive *anymore* (as in “we go to the movies a lot anymore”) began

²³ Timothy Habick, “Farmer City, Illinois: Sound Systems Shifting South,” in *Heartland English: Variation and Transition in the American Midwest*, ed. Timothy C. Frazier (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 97–124.

²⁴ Joffe, “*In the Shadows*,” 108.

²⁵ R. Douglas Hurt, “Midwestern Distinctiveness,” in *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, ed. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 160–79, esp. 161.

²⁶ Frazer, “An Introduction to Midwest English,” 103.

in the Midlands, but according to Murray²⁷ “continues to spread outward.” Midland speakers commonly substitute the alveolar stop (d) for the fricative (z) before nasals (as in *wudn’t*, *idn’t*), prefer the alveolar pronunciation of *-ing* suffixes, use *ain’t* with multiple negation, and use deictic *them* as determiner (as in “leave them kids alone”).

South Midland commonly features perfective *done* and shares other features with AAE, as detailed by Riney.²⁸ *Pin/pen* are merged, but also *feel/ fill* and *pool/pull*.²⁹ Whereas in the South, *ai* is generally monophthongized, in the South Midland, it is merely “flattened” somewhat,³⁰ with less distance between the tongue’s starting position and ending position than would be found in, say, an East Coast dialect. Wallace’s Midwestern speakers display very few of these features, despite his ongoing collection of “Midwesternisms” in research notebooks (which will be discussed later in this chapter). A&AU strongly defends the “Rural Midwestern construction ‘Where’s it at?’” saying that its “apparent redundancy” is “offset by its metrical logic.” Wallace’s command of the linguistic terminology (“What the *at* really does is license the contraction of *is* after the interrogative adverb”) and of the terminology describing traditional poetic meter (“a strong anapest” vs. “a clunky monosyllabic foot + trochee” (CTL 99) lends a sense of objective analysis and authority to what might otherwise be seen as merely a quirky individual preference.

Midwesternism in Wallace’s Own Speech

An idealized, bland “accentless” speech is not what Wallace was referring to when he claimed a fondness for rural Midwestern English. As a childhood SNOOT born in Ithaca, New York, but quickly transplanted to Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, Wallace internalized more of “the SWE of my hyper-educated parents” (CTL 99) than any stigmatized features of working-class rural classmates, but would certainly have had ample opportunity to observe these. In an interview with Paul Quinn,³¹ Wallace’s sister Amy said that the

²⁷ Thomas E. Murray, “Positive *anymore* in the Midwest,” in “*Heartland English*: Variation and Transition in the American Midwest,” ed. Timothy C. Frazier (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 173–86, esp. 175.

²⁸ Timothy J. Riney, “Linguistic Controversies, VBE Structures, and Midwest Attitudes.” In “*Heartland English*: Variation and Transition in the American Midwest,” ed. Timothy C. Frazier (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 81–93, 84.

²⁹ Frazier, “An Introduction to Midwest English,” 102.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Quinn, “‘Location’s Location’: Placing David Foster Wallace.”

Midwestern kids they grew up with “treated us as if we were East-Coasters,” while the people on the East Coast treated her brother “like a hayseed,” causing Wallace to realize “he was from a place no one else was. *Somewhere in the middle*, I think that was David’s Midwest, *the neither here nor there*” (95, emphasis original). Cohen³² echoed this, saying that he “was and was not from Illinois,” that it was “a home to which he was in some ways alien”—hence his need for a “Native Companion” to guide him through the State Fair in “Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All.”

Hering³³ calls Wallace “a putatively Midwestern but effectively transregional writer” (60), finding a “performative Midwestern persona” (76) only in his nonfiction (76), and positing that this “performative regionalism” is an outgrowth of his “deep ambivalence over his own sense of regional identity.”³⁴ If he was ambivalent, he was not alone: Cayton and Gray’s³⁵ collection of essays on Midwestern history explains that Midwesterners have never been consciously regional (in comparison to Southerners, Westerners, and New Englanders), and questions whether regional identity is even a valid way to approach Midwestern history. Nonetheless, persistent stereotypes about “Midwestern” character pervade popular culture. Booth Tarkington, for instance, observed over a century ago that Midwesterners are “pleasant,” “easy-going, yet not happy-go-lucky,” and “hospitable without exertion,”³⁶ stereotypes that endure even today. Hurt³⁷ summarizes Midwestern character as “friendly,” but “disciplined.” He notes that “most people still identify the Midwest with rural America, to which they attribute traditional American values such as self-reliance, democracy, and moral decency” (175). Linguistic stereotypes, as Gordon³⁸ points out, “have less to do with the actual speech of a region than with popular perceptions of the region’s people.” For the Midwest, this means that the dialect will be seen as “average, boring or nondescript”³⁹ as the people who supposedly speak this way.

A&AU presents evidence that Wallace code-switched when talking to rural Midwesterners (although it doesn’t use that term) out of “a naked desire to fit in”: “I tend to use constructions like ‘Where’s it at?’ for ‘Where is it?’ and sometimes ‘He don’t’ instead of ‘He doesn’t’” (CTL 99). Code-switching

³² Cohen, “The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,” 235.

³³ Hering, *David Foster Wallace*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁵ Cayton and Gray, *The American Midwest*.

³⁶ Booth Tarkington, “The Middle West,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 106 (1902): 75–83, esp. 76.

³⁷ Hurt, “Midwestern Distinctiveness,” 161.

³⁸ Gordon, “Straight Talking from the Heartland (Midwest),” 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

is not necessarily a sign of ambivalence or inauthenticity; it may reflect an unconscious indexing of one aspect of identity over another in a given situation, although it can also be consciously and strategically deployed to signal a particular aspect of one's identity within a particular interaction when it becomes relevant, to converge with or diverge from another's speech.⁴⁰ Well-known "Midwestern Expatriate" writer (or "ExMid," as he coined it) Calvin Trillin⁴¹ argues that "continuing to think of oneself as a Midwesterner despite all geographical evidence to the contrary is not necessarily an 'act' or a 'number,' and thinking that it is, I keep telling my wife, is merely a manifestation of her fancy Eastern ways. (She says phrases like 'fancy Eastern ways' are part of my Kansas City act.)"

In most of the public readings that are available commercially or online, Wallace adheres more to prescriptive standard pronunciations than to regional Midwestern ones. In his most "standard" public performances, there are only intermittent (and perhaps inadvertent) Midwestern pronunciations, such as articulating an /l/ in "folk" (which is not recognized as standard pronunciation by the *American Heritage Dictionary*, on whose usage panel he served). Wallace's casual speech with interlocutors was predictably less "correct." Lipsky⁴² refers to Wallace's "universal sportsman's accent: the disappearing Gs, 'wudn't,' 'dudn't,' and 'idn't' and 'sumpin.'" The dialogue in that book, memorializing their five-day road trip at the end of Wallace's publicity tour for *Infinite Jest*, was recorded and transcribed. Lipsky quotes Wallace alternating between adverbial *really* and *real* (the latter often used when intensifying adjectives), for example, "I'm real embarrassed" (215), "That stuff's rhetorically real interesting" (215), and "makin' real sure" (218). He also uses adverbial *near* ("I wasn't near as smart as I thought I was" (214)). These features can be clearly heard in the audio,⁴³ and are faithfully captured by Jason Segel's performance of Wallace in *The End of the Tour* (2015), based on Lipsky's book.

On the air with Terry Gross for National Public Radio's *Fresh Air*,⁴⁴ Wallace maintained "standard" (i.e., prescriptive) pronunciations for almost the entire seventeen-minute interview, even when clearly speaking spontaneously, quickly, and passionately, except once toward the end, when he said "sumpin"

⁴⁰ Robert Le Page and Andrée Tabouret-Keller, *Acts of Identity: Creole-Based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁴¹ Calvin Trillin, "The Midwest Is What's Left Over," *The New York Times*, September 9, 1974, 35.

⁴² Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, iv.

⁴³ Ryan Walsh and Jordyn Bonds, *The David Foster Wallace Audio Project*, n.d. <http://www.dfwaudioproject.org/>

⁴⁴ Gross, "Fresh Air Interview with David Foster Wallace."

(although I might represent it as *sump'm*, phonetically [sʌ̃ʔm]). Quite a few of his sentences begin with *Boy*, *Oh boy*, or *Well*, although I do not read these as Midwestern per se—these seem to echo a more innocent *era*, a 1950s fantasy of white America, like the TV show “Leave it to Beaver” (which could have taken place in any suburb of the United States). I disagree with Dettmar,⁴⁵ who reads the voice in Wallace’s earliest known story (“The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing,” originally published in an undergraduate journal and now collected in the *David Foster Wallace Reader* [5–19]) as Midwestern, mostly on the basis of such “faux-yokel Midwestern interjections that pepper the character’s speech,”⁴⁶ although he also finds “Midwestern, too, the narrator’s reticence: ‘I really don’t wish to go into a gigantic amount of detail’ (following which, he goes into a gigantic amount of detail).”⁴⁷

Minced oaths and “wholesome” expressions of surprise or emotion are not confined to any region, and the first-person narrator of the story says specifically that he lives in New Hampshire. I include this mischaracterization to show how much of literary dialectology is in the eye of the beholder, how much people assume that if there is “no accent,” the speaker must be Midwestern, and also how much of an autobiographical lens readers can unwittingly bring to a text. Knowing that Wallace was from the Midwest, they anticipate a Midwestern voice in his fiction.

Wallace did not remain an ExMid, returning to Bloomington to teach at Illinois State University for a decade of his adult life. He repeatedly returns to the region in his writing as well—in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” “Getting Away From Already Pretty Much Being Away From It All,” “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s,” “The Suffering Channel,” TPK, and in passing elsewhere.

The “Dave Wallace” narrator falsely claims (in both “Derivative Sport” and TPK) to be from Philo, Illinois, and Coughlan⁴⁸ accepts Wallace’s father’s interpretation that this was because “Wallace wanted a home in ‘Love.’” It would also appear to be an unabashed declaration of his love for Illinois, a formulation akin to the bumper sticker slogan “I ♥ NY.” His appreciation for this region was apparently sincere, if somewhat sheepish. Wallace took a bit of a potshot at his own attempts to allegorize the region in “Derivative Sport,” when discussing his move to Massachusetts to attend

⁴⁵ Kevin J. H. Dettmar, “Afterword,” in *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, ed. Bonnie Nadell et al. (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 20–1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Coughlan, “Sappy Or No, It’s True,” 174.

college: “Alienation-from-Midwest-as-fertility-grid might be a little on the overmetaphysical side, not to mention self-pitying” (ASFTINDA 14). He only designated the region as “the Heartland” once, perhaps thinking this too obvious a metaphor; the exception occurs when he imagines that the “swanky East Coast magazine” that commissioned his coverage of the Illinois State Fair will find it “rural and heartlandish” (83).

GWCH is “much more directly focused on the Midwest as a problematized cultural territory,” according to Hering,⁴⁹ but there is little to no use of a “Midwestern” dialect in that volume. Bruce in “Here and There” describes himself as “a hulking pigeon-toed, blond, pale, red-lipped Midwestern boy” (GWCH 153) who graduated from an elite college in Massachusetts before returning to his home town of Bloomington. He now wants to be a writer, “the first really great poet of technology” (155). Although details are tweaked such as hair color, college (MIT, rather than Amherst), major (engineering, rather than English and Philosophy), and home state (Bloomington, Indiana, rather than Illinois), Wallace could hardly deny Bruce as an alter ego; in a letter to Jonathan Franzen, he calls the story “sentimental pseudo-autobiographical crap.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Bruce’s voice is familiar as Wallace’s “Dave Wallace” persona, engaging here in an extended bit of “fiction therapy.” Neither one has the characteristics that Wallace attributes to his “Midwestern” (i.e., South Midland) speakers; the “Dave Wallace” persona and alter egos will therefore not be further discussed in this chapter, although I shall return to them in the penultimate chapter, in an exploration of the “default” dialect with which Wallace’s dialect representations are implicitly but unavoidably contrasted.

Cleveland, Ohio

Wallace’s set his first novel in Cleveland—which at the time he had never visited⁵¹ and might as well have picked out of a hat to represent the Midwest. There are no noticeable dialect markers in the speech of the main character, Lenore Beadsman, or her family members, who are supposed to be native to the region, but are notably upper class. (Her father is CEO of a corporation that has kept the family in wealth for generations.) In reality, Cleveland has been at the forefront of a fairly significant sequence of vowel shifts (known

⁴⁹ Hering, *David Foster Wallace*, 55.

⁵⁰ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 131.

⁵¹ Helen Dudar, “A Whiz Kid and His Wacky First Novel,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 8–10, esp. 10.

collectively as the Northern Cities Vowel Shift), which would be tricky to capture orthographically. (For instance, the initial change resulted in the low vowel in words like “bad” rising dramatically and developing an off-glide, to sound more like the second vowel in “idea.” This was followed by the low back vowel in “pot” moving forward to occupy the space in the vocal tract formerly held by the vowel of “bad.”)

Wallace said in an interview that Lenore's speech was mostly patterned after his own, and that “one of the weaknesses in this book is that a lot of the characters seem to have the same voice.”⁵² Lenore's mockery of Andy Lang's “Texan” dialect was mentioned in the previous chapter, but the only apparent “regional linguistic clash” (229) between Lenore and her New Yorker lover Rick Vigorous is that he refers to “hamburg pizzas” and she says “hamburger” (229). (Vigorous does not reflect New York usage on this—at least not in the 1960s–1980s when I lived there.)

Lenore's great grandmother (also named Lenore Beadsman) studied under Wittgenstein, is “obsessed with words,” and “believes she is in possession of some words of tremendous power” (82). Others have already detailed at great length Wittgenstein's philosophy of language at work in this novel (especially Ramal⁵³ and Hayes-Brady⁵⁴), so I'm not going to re-tread that ground, other than to point out that Wittgenstein doesn't even mention dialects or sociolinguistic variation in either his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*⁵⁵ or his *Philosophical Investigations*,⁵⁶ which may explain why these critics likewise ignored these issues in Wallace's work. As explored in earlier chapters, the novel represents Walinda's ethnic dialect and Lang's regional one, so it is not simply that Wallace was so focused on his “poststructural gag” that he didn't consider dialect issues. Rather, Lenore's lack of evident regional dialect not only underlines her wealth and privilege, it also contributes to her fear that she is “nothing but a linguistic construct.” While Lenore is the central character, there is nothing memorable about her voice, compared to her grandmother (who remains missing for most of the novel, but is eminently quotable), compared to Andy and Walinda, whose performances are simultaneously

⁵² Ibid., 13.

⁵³ Randy Ramal, “Beyond Philosophy: David Foster Wallace on Philosophy, Wittgenstein, and the Dangers of Theorizing,” in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 177–98.

⁵⁴ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*.

⁵⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 2013 [1921]).

⁵⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 [1953]).

“real,” yet constructed to accommodate their audience, compared even (or perhaps especially) to the talking parrot.

Bloomington and Central Illinois (Ag-People, Carnies, Kmart People)

“The View From Mrs. Thompson’s” (originally published in *Rolling Stone* as “9/11: The View from the Midwest”) includes several comments about language, showing how important Wallace believed language to be, even or perhaps especially at the most terrible of times, how it can bring people together yet simultaneously reinforce social divisions. The opening passage, as mentioned earlier, is labeled “SYNECDOCHE” (caps *sic*, CTL 128):

In true Midwest fashion, Bloomingtonians aren’t unfriendly but do tend to be reserved. A stranger will smile warmly at you, but there normally won’t be any of that strangerly chitchat in waiting areas or checkout lines. But now there’s something to talk about that outweighs all reserve, like we were somehow all standing right there and just saw the same traffic accident.

The “prototypical working-class Bloomington” people (134) with whom Wallace watches the news unfold “are not stupid, or ignorant” (139). The implication that he needs to assert this is a sad commentary on US attitudes toward the working class, generally, and it is characteristic that his evidence for the assertion is entirely linguistic: “Mrs. Thompson can read both Latin and Spanish, and Ms. Voigtlander is a certified speech therapist who once explained to me that the strange gulping sound that makes Tom Brokaw so distracting to listen to is an actual speech impediment called a ‘glottal L’” (139). A footnote explaining that “*Pace* some people’s impression, the native accent isn’t Southern simply rural, whereas corporate transplants have no accent at all (in Mrs. Bracero’s phrase, State Farm people ‘sound like the folks on TV’)” (133). There is a single instance of multiple negation (also in a footnote), but no other direct representations of regional dialect markers which would detract from the image of language as a unifying force, bringing all Americans together.

“Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” is set in Central Illinois, but focalized by visitors from “the East Chesapeake Tradeschool Writing Program” (which Boswell 2014 identifies as a fictional version of the Johns Hopkins Writing Program, based on the pervasive Barth references, as

discussed in Chapter 4). As both outsiders and as people especially interested in language, the visitors might be expected to comment directly on the local dialect, yet they remain fairly oblivious to any differences: The only nonstandard usage represented is “Hibbego,” used three times (238, 299, 342), which Wallace seems to have invented himself, though the speaker explicitly labels it Midwestern: “as we say in the nation’s flat green gut” (238). It is possible that the speaker, DeHaven, is doing some performative Midwesternism of his own, to pre-empt anticipated mockery from the visitors. The only metalinguistic commentary the visitors make is eighty pages into the story, when “for the first time Mark can hear a Midwestern twang in DeHaven’s sullen voice” (315). “Twang” is generally associated with the South, as Wallace himself told the translator of “Incarnations,” and it is significant that Mark only hears it when DeHaven more explicitly claims a Midwestern identity, distancing himself from the visitors, whom he deems “Yuffies,” defined as “Young Urban Foppish Farts”—that is, “Yuppies without the taste for quality that’s maybe a Yuppie’s one redeeming quality.” According to DeHaven, this term “is what we call them out here” (315).

Wallace’s essay about the Illinois State Fair (“Getting Away,” published three years earlier as “Ticket to the Fair” in *Harper’s*) contains a particularly unflattering paragraph about “Kmart People” that Ribbat⁵⁷ views as exemplifying “a distinct kind of disgust with everyday Americans.”

Kmart People tend to be overweight, polyestered, grim-faced, toting glazed unhappy children. Toupees are the movingly obvious shiny square-cut kind, and the women’s makeup is garish and often asymmetrically applied, giving many of the female faces a kind of demented look. They are sharp-voiced and snap at their families. They’re the type you see slapping their kids in supermarket checkouts. . . . I’m sorry, but this is all true. I went to high school with Kmart People. I know them. (*ASFTINDA* 120–1)

This paragraph certainly does not claim that all Midwesterners are “Kmart People,” but the harshness and the inherent classism are nonetheless jarring. Cohen labels Wallace’s attitude in this article as “distaste for the Kmart people and the carnies, . . . condescension for the rural ag-people,” but also “self-mockery.”⁵⁸ When Ann Fadiman assigned that essay to her creative writing

⁵⁷ Christoph Ribbat, “Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Group Press, 2010), 187–98, esp. 194.

⁵⁸ Cohen, “The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,” 235.

class at Yale, a student asked Wallace how a writer can “find a balance between mocking one’s target and mocking oneself.” In his reply, Wallace acknowledged “stuff about clinically fat people engaged in peripatetic eating that made them look bovine,” but also recalled

a certain tenderness for the Midwesterners there (of whom I was, by origin and upbringing, one) and an attempt to explain, for the mainly cosmopolitan readers of *Harper’s*, some of the effects rurality, physical distance, lack of stimulation, etc. have on people. Still, I must also admit that I got some pissed-off letters indeed from Midwesterners, along with some aggrieved press mentions in the Midwest.⁵⁹

Wallace was joined on his trip to the Fair by a “Native Companion” from his hometown who “likes to put on a parodic hick accent whenever I utter a term like ‘peripatetic,’” giving as examples of this: “She’s ‘storvin,’ she says, ‘to daith’” (ASFTINDA 102). He later admitted that “it’s not really her voice, it’s somebody else’s voice.”⁶⁰ There was no particular need for an article about a Fair to focus so extensively on language, but Wallace couldn’t seem to help himself, making both lexical and phonological observations: “Midwesterners say *tomato*” (103); “Illinois farmers call their farms ‘operations,’ rarely ‘farms’ and never ‘spreads’” (106). “There’s a Midwestern term, ‘drape,’ for the kind of girl who hangs on to her boyfriend in public like he’s a tree in a hurricane” (133). It’s not surprising that Wallace would notice and mention particular usages—he did that throughout his career, in almost every work, wherever it was situated—but how would he know what Illinois farmers *never* say? This isn’t just a bid to appear authoritative; it contributes to the fictionalization of the narrative persona, who could not logically be omniscient.

Wallace took some pains with his representation of the speech of the local “ag-people” and the itinerant (but presumably still Midwestern) carnies. On a copy-editing draft, he marked “Stet syntax” twice (on both the left and right margins) of one quote, and wrote it in large letters vertically down the page for the duration of the speech of the “old withered guy in an Illinois Poultry Association cap” to make sure the nonstandard speech survived copy editing (HRC Wallace Papers, container 1.5). Specifically, the carnies make comments like “Git on over and git some if she’s a mind to” (98), “Ain’t no sweat off my balls” (98), “Ever last thing” (102), and “the fuck you talking bout” (135). The “old withered” Ag-person calls the carnies “*Traish* . . . Lowlifes.” He is

⁵⁹ Ann Fadiman, “Afterword,” in *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, ed. Bonnie Nadell et al. (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 759–62, esp. 761.

⁶⁰ Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, 243.

uninterested in any part of the fair, other than the livestock competitions: "Swindle you nekked, them games. Traish. Me I ever year we drive up, why, I carry my wallet like this here." When Wallace ask if his kids would want to "ride the rides, eat, . . . mingle a little," he replies "*Hail* no. . . . Shows're over Tuesday, why, we go on home" (110). He says the "rest of all this here's for city people" (which Wallace glosses for readers: "He means Springfield, Decatur, Champaign"), who buy "soovners" (110). Wallace thinks he's referring to his kids when he says, "Ain't no folks they know down there," and "we all stayin' up to the *motel*" (111).

The Fair, Wallace explains, is "rural IL's moment of maximum community," but "Us's entail Them," and "carnies make an excellent Them" (110). It is hard to imagine that Wallace was not thinking about the "Us" of supposedly sophisticated *Harper's* readers (who would presumably *not* think of natives of Decatur as "real city people") and the "Them" (supposed hicks) portrayed in the story as he wrote this. The "old withered" guy may hate carnies, but he seems almost as dismissive of the "city people." The joke here is that Wallace depicts both "Ag-people" and "carnies" with similar South Midland features, including *git* for *get*, multiple negation with *ain't*, *ever* and *them* used as determiners; without him explaining who is who to "Us," readers would be unable to distinguish any of "Them."

Southern Indiana

Wallace's most extended fictional portrait of rural Midwestern speech is Amber Moltke of Mount Carmel, Indiana, in "The Suffering Channel" (*Oblivion*). Amber's speech is contrasted with that of Skip Atwater (native but longtime expatriate of the region) and the de-regionalized speech of the staffers at *Style* magazine (which is headquartered in New York City, although most of the staffers do not appear to be native New Yorkers).

Skip arrives to interview Amber's husband, Brint, who has bowel movements that emerge, fully formed, as detailed, recognizable statues, veritable works of art. Ribbat,⁶¹ Quinn,⁶² and Hering⁶³ all see Skip as a transparent alter ego for Wallace, and there are plenty of apparent similarities to support this: he is white heterosexual male writer, a native Midwestern transplant to the East Coast, excruciatingly self-conscious at all times, and

⁶¹ Ribbat, "Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism."

⁶² Quinn, "'Location's Location': Placing David Foster Wallace."

⁶³ Hering, *David Foster Wallace*.

especially awkward with women, who seeks to interpret the Midwest in his writing. Hering finds significance in Skip's real name, Virgil, emphasizing "his role as guide to a disturbing topographic space";⁶⁴ the nickname also seems significant in more than one sense: He has attempted to "skip" out of the Midwest, and has missed some things. If one is inclined to read autobiographically, though, it is also possible that Wallace saw himself as much in Brint Moltke, producing works of art in private, experiencing tremendous anxiety about revealing these works to the world, afraid that his work is shit, trapped by his peculiar talents and his need to please others.

Mount Carmel is a real town of under a hundred people in Southern Indiana, close to the Kentucky border. It is closer still to Ohio (only a half hour from Cincinnati), but the linguistic influence is from the South, as Niedzielski and Preston⁶⁵ point out. The speech of Southern Indiana is considered "caricaturistic South Midland ['hillbilly'] speech."⁶⁶ "Hoosiers have their own peculiar way of speaking," Hurt⁶⁷ notes, "half-Southern and yet not Southern." This is therefore an area of notable linguistic insecurity. Skip resembles the "redneck academic" narrator of Chappell's (1996) *Look Back All the Green Valley*, Jess Kirkman, who "finds himself conflicted, distanced from his geographical home and similarly distanced from his regional identity. He is resident and tourist at the same time."⁶⁸

For page after page of the story, "seated together in the standard Midwest attitude of besotted amiability" (247), the Moltkes hardly speak at all, but this doesn't seem to be due to linguistic insecurity, at least not on Amber's part. When she finally gets going, she is completely unselfconscious about her dialect. Indeed, she finds it "peculiar" that Skip does not sound *more* regional, commenting that "sometimes I can hear it and then other times not. . . . [Y]ou said up to home you were from back here, and sometimes I can hear it and then other times you sound more . . . all business, and I can't hear it in you at all" (277). Skip doesn't hear any regionality in his own voice (which Wallace represents as entirely standard on the page); he is as unaware of any "slippage" in dialect as he is that his preference for "navy blazer and catalogue slacks ensembles" is "the number one thing that betrayed his Midwest origins" (239) to his *Style* co-workers.

Skip wonders if Amber is "playing up to a certain stereotype of provincial naivete" (276), as his own linguistic insecurity makes him

⁶⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁵ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 66.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁷ Hurt, "Midwestern Distinctiveness," 161.

⁶⁸ Ferrence, *All-American Redneck*, 150.

think that her dialect is inconsistent with her knowledge of legal terms like “conferral” and “serial right,” and especially the Latin phrase “*sic vos non vobis*, which latter Skip did not even know” (255). (It is a quote from the Roman poet Vergil, meaning “for you, but not yours.”) Here, as in “John Billy,” Wallace seems to insist that it is the linguistic prejudice that is absurd, not the regional speaker. Amber is Midwestern *and* smart, feminine *and* powerful; there is no contradiction. She not only overwhelms the reporter, she also speaks for her husband: “He’ll do it,” she says three times (278–9) without consulting him. “He will because he’ll do it for me, Skip. Because I say” (279).

Brint hardly ever speaks for himself. When Skip asks him how he produces the statues, Brint is silent until Amber physically hits him, at which point he offers only “I’m not sure” (252). He shares his “first person account of how his strange and ambivalent gift had first come to light” (255) only after more extended coercion: Amber takes her husband into another room “where they took inaudible counsel together” (255). Skip’s transcript of the brief account is shown, but it does not contain a single sentence without the reporter’s own interjected explanations and interpretations, and his conclusion that the anecdote was “more or less pointless, but could foreseeably be edited out or massaged” (256). The only words Brint offers (apparently) voluntarily in the story are not spoken aloud; he excretes them and leaves them in a bucket outside the reporter’s hotel door, “ornate and calligraphic, quotation marks sic”: “HELP ME” (314)—a plea that is entirely disregarded, perhaps because he cannot speak the words aloud, emphasizing again the performative nature of spoken language. Things do indeed happen “because I say.”

Hayes-Brady⁶⁹ discusses Wallace’s “apparent reluctance or inability to write strong female characters,” which contributes to “the silence and silencing of the female voice”⁷⁰ in his work, but Amber Moltke ranks among Wallace’s strongest characters, using every resource available to her (her body, her speech, her husband, Skip, *Style*) to achieve the celebrity she wants, without much concern for what happens to the men she manipulates. (Skip gets off easy with a knee injury and wounded self-pride; her husband is sure to have a much more tortured existence.) She’ll fit in with the celebrities Atwater has known, “not, in his experience, very friendly or considerate people . . . not actually functioning as real people at all, but as something more like symbols of themselves” (285).

⁶⁹ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 19.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

The only South Midland linguistic features Amber shares with the “ag-people” and “carnies” at the Illinois State Fair are the sentence-initial “Why” and *ain’t*, although unlike them, she does not use multiple negation. Nor does she sound like the more Ozarkian Oklahoman John Billy—both use nonstandard past tense conjugations of “to be,” but where John Billy uses plural *was*, Amber uses singular *were*: “It surely weren’t like that at my house growing up, I can tell you” (268). Both Amber and John Billy have nonstandard preposition usage, but not the same ones. (In addition to the “up to home” already cited, Amber says her husband’s parents “whipped on him with electric cords and burnt on him”). She uses Wallace’s preferred “Where X is at” construction once (“David Letterman on the TV talks about Ball State all the time, that he was at” [278]). Her reference to people as “bodies” (“I don’t bet there’s a body in town that. . .”) registers as a folksy part of her dialect, but in a story that is very preoccupied with the functioning of actual human bodies, this usage also has deeper resonance. (Cf. Derdeyn’s⁷¹ observation that in a bit of “Wittgensteinian language game/name play,” Wallace gave the narrator of “Lyndon” the surname Boyd, an anagram for *body*.)

Language is not just used symbolically in this story to show identity and affiliation (and how these can slip and shift); Wallace crafted a specific way of speaking that works with the themes of this particular story, as he did with “John Billy.” Amber is particularly fond of structures with *all*, repeatedly using *and all*, *is all*, *what all*, *you all*, *them all*, together with use of *all* as adverb in *all through*, *all right*, *all business*, *at all*, and several uses of *whole*. She overwhelms Atwater, not just physically with her body, but linguistically as well. “Her voice was a dulcet alto with something almost hypnotic in the timbre” (283). To be fair, she takes advantage of him before he can take advantage of her; together, they conspire to manipulate her husband.

The power of language is not one of the main points of this story, but for Wallace, language is inextricably intertwined with both identity and art, and is the key to human interaction. It is important for Amber not just to have a voice in this story, but to have one that dominates, that represents not just a stereotype of a manipulative woman (although she definitely is one), and not just a stereotype of the Midwest (although she is described at one point as “less a person than a vista, a quarter ton of sheer Midwest pulchritude” [250]). In order for the story to work, readers have to not just understand Amber, but empathize with her. If she is a monster (which she is), so is Skip (if less honest with himself about it), and so is every reader who would seek the empty prize of fame.

⁷¹ Derdeyn, “Love the Jackalope,” 763.

Hering⁷² sees in this story “a simulacra of all the cultural tropes of the ‘Midwest’ generated within the American coastal media,” later specifying these tropes as “obesity, corn, vast space, sincerity” (75). In his view, the “authentic, non-mediated Midwest” has been replaced with “a culturally encoded ‘Midwest.’”⁷³ Of course, a “non-mediated literary representation” is an oxymoron; there are only different degrees to which the representation itself mediates, and the methods it uses to do so. Wallace took liberties with Amber’s South Midland dialect not to express any sense of inauthenticity—on the contrary, she is recognized as sincere, if wrongheaded—but to underline her agency and ambition as much as her regionality. Her desire for fame is monstrous (as she is willing to exploit her husband’s suffering to gain it), and the irony is that such fame will ultimately be unfulfilling.

Amber is driven by her memory of once “getting to stand near” a daytime television star, which made her realize that her own “deepest and most life informing wish” (287) was to have the same effect on others. Amber did not achieve any meaningful connection with the star, even temporarily, and achieving the fame she seeks would be equally isolating for her. She does not desire connection with others, but for them to “get quiet when her and Brint came in, and to feel people’s eyes, the weight of their gaze” (283). Skip recognizes the sincerity of her desire, if not the futility of it. For him, the anecdote of her brush with fame and the ambition it inspired is “a completely perfect representative statement of what it was like to be one of the people to and for whom he wished his work in *Style* to try to speak” (287); it provides “objective dignification of his work” (288). Her ultimate desire is not just to be one voice among many; it is not enough for her to be heard—others need to “get quiet”; similarly, Skip wants to “speak for” the common people. He is able to empathize with her, because he is no different: he exploits people for his own ends, to achieve equally futile goals.

This story is focused on consumer culture, how global patterns of consumption affect everyone locally, seducing people with the shiny false prize of isolating fame rather than soul-nourishing human relationships or the uplifting pursuit of art. It’s notable that Brint, who has an inexplicable ability to turn the most ordinary, universal, and disgusting of acts into art has no desire for fame. More of the story revolves around the offices and staffers of *Style* magazine than around the Moltkes; yet it is the scenes in Mount Carmel that are memorable, that feel real and important, because readers are given the chance to get to know and understand Amber and Skip. Most of the *Style* staffers have titles rather than names, and when they are named, both first and

⁷² Hering, *David Foster Wallace*, 73.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 75.

last names are used, which isn't just to distinguish interns Laurel Manderley and Laurel Rodde, since Ellen Bactrian is also always fully named. The full-naming serves only to create a sense of social distance: they're never on a first-name basis with each other, which also prevents readers from feeling any sense of intimacy with them. It's not even clear whether the chief executives of *Style* and the cable "Suffering Channel," Mrs. Anger and R. Vaughn Corliss, even have first names. All the staffers at *Style* (largely women who went to "Seven Sisters" schools) sound alike, adding to the sense of impersonality. Konstantinou⁷⁴ criticizes Wallace's "inability to represent a genuine cosmopolitanism" in this story, but that would seem to be part of the point. Wallace's readers are likely more cosmopolitan—they would be expected to have more in common, at least aspirationally, with New York sophisticates than with Amber Moltke—but Wallace's carefully crafted portrait of Amber, including her distinctive use of language, makes them sympathize with her despite themselves (much as Skip is attracted to her in spite of himself).

The story is set in June 2001, and the address of *Style* magazine is 1 World Trade Center, forcing readers to evaluate everything in this story in light of the 9/11/2001 attack on America "by which *Style* would enter history two months hence" (245). It was the *Style* magazines and "Suffering Channels" of the world that were under direct attack, not the Amber Moltkes, but Wallace understood that this was a false distinction. The greed and exploitation of the corporations cannot exist without the existential emptiness of people who yearn for a different identity; they are flip sides of the same coin. Some Americans, like Skip, may cut themselves off from a sense of community by rejecting their regional identity, but are never fully able to fit in anywhere else. Others, like Amber, accept their regional identity, but are still lured into empty pursuits (fame and/or money) that cannot make them happy. Wallace's America has an inexhaustible supply of Amber Moltkes and Skip Atwaters, and not just in the Midwest. The "South Midland" dialect's simultaneous evocation of Southernness and Midwesternness was a perfect choice to illustrate that it is not just the Midwest that is spiritually empty—it transcends regionality.

Midwesternisms

McGurl⁷⁵ sees Wallace's final unfinished novel, TPK, set in Peoria, as "belated midwestern regionalism," and "a strategic embrace of rooted provinciality,"

⁷⁴ Konstantinou, "The World of David Foster Wallace," 77.

⁷⁵ McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing," 28.

arguing that Wallace “never fully cut loose from its defiantly ‘normal’ cultural moorings.” TPK does characterize what Burn⁷⁶ calls “the empty, flat land of the Midwest,” as “a vista with nothing really particular to hold the eye” (123), but it does not include any salient or extended portrayals of Midwestern dialects, with the exception of the very little bit of rural eastern Missouri dialect that Toni Ware overhears and unconsciously echoes when passing through, as discussed in Chapter 5, which also argued that the assimilation of IRS agents into the corporate identity cost them whatever local previous identities they might have had.

Wallace made numerous notes on “Midwesternisms” in the “evidence notebook” that he kept during the time that he wrote TPK, but it is unlikely that he intended them for that particular work, as comparison between his handwritten drafts of other works with the final published versions shows little evidence that he ever significantly changed the way characters spoke in subsequent revisions. On the contrary, he appears to have *started* with voices and built stories around them. Wallace’s collection of “Midwesternisms” was ongoing: the Harry Ransom Center collection includes both this notebook of 300 pages (container 43.1) and a different (black, wide-ruled, 70-sheet, one-subject) notebook devoted entirely to “Midwesternisms” (container 31.12). It is not practical to catalog these completely, let alone discuss all of them, (although he did quite often repeat some observations on multiple different pages, sometimes with different illustrative example sentences), but this chapter will conclude with some general observations and examples for those who do not have the luxury of visiting the Ransom Center themselves.

Phonologically, Wallace showed awareness of specific pronunciations, including “theater like it had a y in it—theayter, theyater,” “Hundred as ‘hunnerd,’” “Picture as ‘pitcher,’” “Excetera, expecially,” and “Rural MW—Eenihilated. ‘I got enihilated.’” “Pronouncing the h in ‘vehicle’” would also undoubtedly involve shifting the primary stress to the second syllable (as would also occur in the newly tri-syllabic *theyater*), though Wallace does not make this explicit. Some of the pronunciations would no doubt be highly stigmatized, as for example “wash as ‘warsh,’” yet despite his awareness of such associated stigma, Wallace also had a note characterizing the “MW accent”: it “makes you think of freckles and creased jeans.”

Wallace’s observations included just two morphological features: infixation of *you know* (“In-ya know-consistent”), and suffixation of -s (“Alls,” “Alls I have is twenty,” “Alls I’m saying is . . .,” “Alls I want is . . .,” “Anyways,”

⁷⁶ Stephen J. Burn, “Toward a General Theory of Vision in Wallace’s Fiction,” *English Studies* 95, no. 1 (2014): 85–93, esp. 87. DOI: 10.1080/0013838X.2013.857858.

“Nowadays,” “Somewhere along the lines,” “Many a times.” (The *Oxford English Dictionary* does list an -s suffix, distinct from the plural, genitive, and third-person singular present tense agreement markers, that evolved from the Old English genitive to form adverbs like “anyways” in Middle English. The Midwestern usage observed by Wallace therefore has a rather long pedigree.)

In terms of syntax, Wallace noted the use of “except for w /complete sentence ‘Except for I could also see him standing there,’” and the doubled conjunction “but yet.” He noted the use of positive *anymore* (without the downward entailing environment that would license its use in other dialects): “I used to do it all the time, but anymore I only do it once, twice a week.”

The bulk of Wallace’s attention was devoted to the lexicon—particular words and phrases: “That irks my feelings,” “It just got all scrrassled up in my head,” “Whatnot,” “and whatnot,” “set’ for ‘sit,” “Howmuchever,” “Off of,” “Run off’ for ‘made to leave’ ‘She run him off,” “breasts = ‘ninnies’ (Rural slang.),” “lay’ for ‘lie,” “Referring to a vacuum cleaner as a ‘sweeper,” “Ref to ‘laundry’ as ‘wash,” “‘Humorous’ for ‘funny.’ ‘He’s just so humorous,” “‘Moreso’ for ‘more.’ ‘The moreso I do it, the happier I get,” “‘I intend on . . . ,’ ‘I intend to working as hard as I can, see,” “‘Big of a’ ‘It’s not that big of a deal,” “‘work ethics’—‘He’s got good work ethics,” “‘A little inkling’ ‘I started to get a little inkling of what all this is about.” One of the few entries in the notebooks that I can track to Wallace’s publications is “‘Visit’ for ‘talk.’ ‘You two can sit and visit.” In the *Harper’s* article “9/11: The View from the Midwest” (but edited out of the version collected in *CTL*), there is a footnote that “the native term for a conversation is *visit*.”

Wallace explicitly labeled some items in these notebooks as “Solecisms,” including “‘Itty-tiny,” “‘Involved’ for ‘evolved.’ ‘And it involved into a bad situation.” “‘Take ‘er easy’ instead of ‘take it easy.” “Expand/Expound—‘Let me expound on this point a little bit,” “‘I had a circumstance happen,” “MW Solecism: ‘I’ve never really enforced my point of view on anybody,’ ‘I don’t want to suscum to temptation.” “‘Indefaggotable’ for ‘indefatigable.”

He also noted the use of “among” (as opposed to “between”) to refer to two people, specifically: “You two settle this among yourselves.”

Other observations relate more to discourse conventions, spanning more than one category of grammar, for instance the following entry, which appears to start with an observation of pronunciation, but then extends into response tokens and turn-initiations: “Ahkay. (for OK) ‘Aaaahkay,’ when dubious. ‘Okeydoke then.’ ‘And along the same vein, I want to say also . . .”

Also of interest are putatively Midwestern swear words and insults: “Midwest mobile home curse: ‘You scagmaggot.’ ‘Fucking scagmaggot.’ ‘Turdsurper,” “‘Shitchess’ for ‘Shit yes.’ ‘Fuck you with a table leg.’ ‘Shitsucker’

'Megafop'—pretentious artiste," "To get really mad at X, go off on X—to eat his ass." "His wife really ate his ass about it."

There are also a couple of nonlinguistic observations, including "Rural IN + MO—men with big belt buckles and down vests; men who spit in mid-sentence," and "A kind of grace among ~~hard-working~~ Midwest people: they are WASPS who do not know they're Wasps."

It is impossible to read these notebooks without wondering how Wallace would have used these words and snippets of dialogue, without regretting the novels Wallace did not live to write, the Midwestern characters whose voices we will not get to hear.