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Boston and Urban

Figure 7 Wallace's Bostonians.

Infinite Jest spends roughly a thousand pages in the Boston area, featuring Wallace's only real attempt to capture a white urban dialect. In addition to portraying dialect features directly in the speech of the working-class Bostonians, both narrator and characters themselves comment explicitly on various dialect performances. Wallace gained familiarity with Boston dialects when he was an undergraduate at Amherst College (which is two hours away from Boston, but Wallace biographer Max¹ shows he spent at least one week with friends there). He later spent a couple of years in the Boston area, which appear to have been deeply unhappy ones, despite an early letter to his agent that claimed "Boston is *fun*."² During this time, he enrolled in and then quickly abandoned a Harvard graduate program in philosophy, taught as an adjunct at Emerson college, had stays in psychiatric hospitals and halfway houses, had an extremely unhealthy relationship with Mary Karr which became abusive when he refused to believe she wanted

¹ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 37.

² *Ibid.*, 123.

to end it—and began writing the “big thing” that would eventually become *Infinite Jest*.

Interestingly, despite the fine gradations of the Boston dialects represented in the novel, *Jest* contains only a passing reference to a “cultured Cambridge stutter,” the sort of speech Hartley³ associates with “Harvard University professors, Boston Brahmins, and . . . U.S. presidential candidate Senator John Kerry.” It is explicitly stated that Madame Psychosis’s broadcast accent has no trace of this (189), and the speech of one caller to her radio show who does have a “cultured stutter” (192) is not directly represented.

Carver⁴ identifies Boston as “a cultural hearth,” one of the “five original coastal centers from which most of the American dialects developed” (the others being Philadelphia, tidewater Virginia, Charleston, and New Orleans), which may explain why Hartley’s⁵ perceptual dialectology of the area finds that native Bostonians are as liable to label their dialect region “New England,” “Northeast,” or even “East Coast” as they are to specify “Boston” (400). Wolfram and Schilling-Estes⁶ explain that Boston is one of the centers from which the merger of low back/central vowel /ɒ/ with low back vowel /ɔ/ (the so-called *cot/caught merger*) has spread; they note that this area is not undergoing the “sweeping rotations” of the Northern Cities Vowel Shift. Laferriere⁷ compares the speech of Irish, Italian, and Jewish Bostonians, finding that “the standing of one’s ethnic group in a community may be more of a determinant of social class and self-image than one’s income and education” (603). Boston remains one of the most racially “hypersegregated” cities in the United States today.⁸

Boston’s famed r-lessness continues to be socially diagnostic in Boston⁹ and occurs only in the coda of a syllable; not only is /r/ maintained in the onset (before a vowel sound) within a word, but Boston speakers sometimes *insert* an /r/ at the end of a vowel-final word if the following word also begins

³ Laura Hartley, “The Consequences of Conflicting Stereotypes: Bostonian Perceptions of U.S. Dialects,” *American Speech* 80, no. 4 (2005): 388–405, esp. 388. https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/lang_fac/16.

⁴ Carver, *American Regional Dialects*, 7.

⁵ Hartley, “The Consequences of Conflicting Stereotypes.”

⁶ Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, *American English*, 151.

⁷ Laferriere, “Ethnicity in Phonological Variation and Change.”

⁸ Douglas S. Massey and Jonathan Tannen, “A Research Note on Trends in Black Hypersegregation,” *Demography* 52, no. 3 (2015): 1025–34.

⁹ Naomi Nagy and Patricia Irwin, “Boston (r): Neighbo(r)s Nea(r) and Fa(r),” *Language Variation and Change* 22, no. 2 (2010): 241–78; Joshua Levy, “The Social Stratification of (r) in Boston,” *Toronto Working Papers in Linguistics* 33, no. 1 (2010): 1–12; and Rebecca Day Babcock, “Folk-Linguistic Attitudes in Eastern Massachusetts,” *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics* 4, no. 3 (2014): 415.

with a vowel, as in “the idear of it!”¹⁰ (Bostonian /r/ insertion is a productive phonological pattern, as opposed to the “intrusive-r” pronunciation of “wash” as “warsh,” which affects only that single morpheme in the Midwest). Levy¹¹ found that r-lessness in Boston was more common among men, lower socioeconomic classes, and “employees in neighborhoods that claim strong local identity” (associating masculinity with nonstandardness, as with the Labovian concept of “covert prestige”). Although usage varied quantitatively, r-lessness was found among all groups. Fitzpatrick¹² describes Boston dialect as “one of the most widely recognized throughout the United States,” including in his description not just the “dropped r’s, lowered and broadened vowels,” but also “distinctive vocabulary” such as “*That’s wicked pissal*, i.e., very good.”

Hartley¹³ finds that Bostonians “have internalized two common but conflicting American stereotypes of Boston residents—the educated elite and working class descendants of immigrants” (388), sometimes relying on the former stereotype to deem the local dialect “correct,” but sometimes on the latter, leading to an unusual combination of linguistic security and insecurity. Fitzpatrick¹⁴ agrees that “the divide between the immigrant-descended working class and the descendants of the original Puritan settlers . . . is manifested linguistically even in the present day.” *Infinite Jest* captures this dichotomy perfectly with the Incandenza family and Kate Gompert representing the educated elite (despite Avril and Jim Incandenza being transplants themselves and despite all of these characters having no noticeable regional dialect features associated with their speech), and Don Gately (as well as a host of other characters) representing the working class. When the transplanted Southerner Joelle van Dyne thinks back on her first dinner with the Incandenza family, she recalls that “everybody Please-and-Thank-You’d in a way that was sheer Yankee WASP” (745); when interacting with the working-class Don Gately, however, she not only notices but mocks his r-lessness, albeit affectionately: “*Harrrd. Harrrrrrd. Sound it out*” (563).

Kate Gompert, whose hospital chart lists her address in Newton, MA (a predominantly white and white-collar area, with some of the most expensive real estate in the country), and her occupation as “data-clerical in a Wellesley

¹⁰ Jim Fitzpatrick, “Beantown Babble (Boston, MA),” in *American Voices: How Dialects Differ from Coast to Coast*, ed. Walt Wolfram and Ben Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 63–9, esp. 66.

¹¹ Levy, “The Social Stratification of (r) in Boston.”

¹² Fitzpatrick, “Beantown Babble (Boston, MA),” 64.

¹³ Hartley, “The Consequences of Conflicting Stereotypes.”

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, “Beantown Babble (Boston, MA),” 65.

Hills real estate office" (69), is clearly part of the "educated elite"; her inner thoughts and direct speech are captured more than any other female character in the novel, with no Boston dialect markers included. The sad Pamela Hoffman-Jeep, who is described by Gately as "upscale" (924) but whose extreme alcoholism has caused her to fall in with a disreputable crowd, likewise maintains unmarked speech, except that the narrator notes in endnote 374 that she pronounces *chivalrous* "with the hard-*ch* sound distinctive of North Shore pronun. of words like *Chicago* and *champagne*" (1078). The adjective "upscale" is used over forty times in the novel by a variety of focalizers and with a variety of referents, a clear indication of the permeating class-based anxiety. Johnette Foltz uses the term to describe Hal, when he comes to Ennet House seeking information about twelve-step programs, noting that he's "like Ewell and Day and snotty . . . Ken E. that knew how to long divide and say *whom* but didn't even know how to look up shit in the Yellow Pages" (786).

Freudenthal¹⁵ argues that "readers want to let Wallace off the hook for the clichéd contradictions of working-class identity defining Gately . . . because he's so dang likeable." Although it is clear (from Joelle's playful "correction") that Gately does not pronounce postvocalic /r/, neither his inner monologue nor his direct speech in the novel reflect this, other than his representing "Norm" from the sitcom "Cheers!" as "Nom" in his thoughts (834, 836, 883). Hoberek¹⁶ cites examples of "fragments of speech clearly reflective of Gately and his Boston underclass milieu" such as "He took zero in the way of shit" (55) and compares these to the "fascination with the white ethnic southern New England accent" found in Boston crime novels and films. The narrator makes this explicit in endnote 372: "Surely *skeet* and *vig*, meaning debt and bookmaker's automatic percentage (usually 10% subtracted from winnings or added to *skeet*) are not just metro Boston terms" (1078). The lexical items provide constant reminders of identity without necessarily triggering the same negative judgments that representing the r-lessness of the dialect undoubtedly would.

Warren¹⁷ discusses the pervasive use in *Infinite Jest* of what he calls "jargony argot," showing how "local" terminology that "starts out as a way of modeling community within the novel becomes a tactic for organizing community outside of the novel." As example of this, he cites the recurrence of "Storrow (Drive)" the local highway referred to by the student engineer at Madame

¹⁵ Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority," 191.

¹⁶ Andrew Hoberek, "The Novel after David Foster Wallace," in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 211–38, esp. 221.

¹⁷ Andrew Warren, "Narrative Modeling and Community Organizing in *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest*," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 389–408, esp. 397.

Psychosis's radio station (184), by Joelle van Dyne (234), Orin (289), Gately (478), Mario (769), and Rodney Tine, Sr. (877), with endnote 202 (1034) explaining Gately's use of the road's more local name "the Storrow 500." (Warren notes that Wallace does not just use local geographical and cultural referents in this way, but also more abstract concepts, like the "squeak" sound effect that recurs across "just about every register in the novel."¹⁸) This device works well on a lexical level, where meanings are easily acquired and words freely borrowed. The initial use of such local references signals shared group identity between and among characters, but their unfamiliarity to readers emphasizes readers' distance from the social milieu depicted; as repeated references become increasingly familiar, readers may begin to feel like part of the in-group. It is not clear that repeated exposure to nonstandard phonology and syntax has the same effect. If Wallace had encoded Gately's phonology directly, it would have clearly signaled his affiliation with the other working-class Bostonians so represented—but it likely would have continued to represent and emphasize his distance from most readers.

R-lessness is strongly associated with AAE as well as different regional dialects, and Wallace may have wanted to avoid any ambiguity with respect to the ethnicity of his characters. The only time Wallace has a little fun with the visual encoding of Boston phonology is in a few short lines uttered by the security guard who arrives on the scene after Gately has been shot. "Secyotty! Hold it right thaah. . . . I'm *oddering* desis until who's in chahge that I can repot the *sichation*. . . . I'm *oddering* the whole *sitchation* halt it *right* thaah *wehyaah*" (618–9). The guard is presumably white, since Gately does not mention otherwise, although he does recognize him as "one of the ex-football E.M. Security guys . . . the drunk" (618), "his name's Sidney or Stanley" (619), who "always asks Gately how it's hanging" (619). If, nonetheless, readers misidentify the guard's ethnicity, this shouldn't make any difference to their reading of that scene.

Ennet House residents Wade McDade and Gavin Diehl visit Gately in the hospital and apologize that they can't make legal depositions on his behalf "like they'd be ready to do in a fucking *hatbeat*" if it weren't "tittymount to like judicio-penal suicide" (893), but although the free indirect discourse makes it difficult to attribute the precise words and pronunciations, these seem to belong to McDade and/or Diehl rather than to Gately himself, as they also say that "the G-Man" (a name Gately never uses for himself) is "wicked missed back at the House" (894). Very little information is ever given about these two, other than that Diehl and Gately had done some time together

¹⁸ Ibid.

in prison, but they are clearly working-class Bostonians, as is the despicable Randy Lenz. Despite playing a rather pivotal role in the action of the novel, Lenz only has two lines of direct dialogue; neither represents r-lessness visually, although Bruce Green notices that “the way Lenz pronounces *brother* involves one *r*” (578). The narrator also comments in an endnote that a word used by Lenz, *mitts*, is the “Charlestown/ Southie street term for meters” (1037). “Southie” itself is not explained, as it is fairly transparent Boston slang, for South Boston, the working-class neighborhood depicted in the film *Good Will Hunting*, which came out the year after *Jest* was published.

Yrstruly

The only first-person representation of a “Boston blue collar” dialect is “yrstruly” (128–35). Some readers misidentify this character as African American, due to the “bad” English (according to Cohen,¹⁹ and according to my experience teaching the novel last year), but this performance is completely distinct from the AAE dialect representations discussed in Chapter 3. The second sentence of the monologue begins with a bit of nonstandard grammar and vocabulary that should trigger recognition of a white working-class background: “The AM” (i.e., a.m., the morning [singular]) “were wicked bright.” Although Wallace did not understand AAE verb patterns, he never put a singular *were* in the mouth of a black speaker, and he reserved the intensifier *wicked* for white Bostonians as well, along with *map* for *face*.

Alexander²⁰ considers yrstruly “gender indeterminate,” although he fits all the linguistic stereotypes of toxic masculinity, and every critic who has attempted to associate him with a recovering addict at Ennet House has pointed toward a male addict. In his truly extraordinary attempt to capture all the relationships between the different characters in *Infinite Jest* in a single diagram, Sam Potts²¹ equates yrstruly with Emil Minty, perhaps because yrstruly repeatedly refers to “nigers [*sic*],” and it is revealed that the white punk/skinhead Minty has “an amateur swastika” tattoo that says “FUCK NIGERS” (207). Wollitz²² presents additional evidence for this identification,

¹⁹ Cohen, “The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace,” 237.

²⁰ Alexander, “David Foster Wallace and Repressive Taboos,” 1.

²¹ Potts, Sam. n.d. http://sampottsync.com/ij/IJ_Diagram.pdf.

²² Michael Gibson Wollitz, “Figurant Society: Post-Postmodernity and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” 2009, 68–9. MA Thesis, Georgetown University. <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/552982/WollitzMichaelGibson.pdf?sequence=1>.

but if this was the intended association, then Wallace was quite sloppy with the representation of Minty's language: Minty only has two lines of direct dialogue in the novel, but one of them features multiple negation ("He can't go in no E.R. with a gunshot" [617]), whereas yrstruly talks nonstop for eight pages without ever using multiple negation, despite opportunities to do so, as in "He doesn't notice anything" (134), and "I didn't say anything" (135). Staes²³ believes that yrstruly might be Randy Lenz, because the narrator appears to once refer to Lenz as "yrstruly" (562), but although Lenz expresses himself crudely at times, he knows how to use an apostrophe ("I ain't got time for this shit" (271), for instance), and he "thinks of himself as a kind of hiply sexy artist-intellectual" (279), which doesn't fit yrstruly at all. In all likelihood, yrstruly is a different addict whose experience intersected with some of the more major characters—perhaps one who didn't survive long enough to make it to Ennet House. (He is perhaps also former military or the child of someone in the military, as he uses the term "rickytick" several times to mean "right away," a usage not shared by anyone else in the novel. I was unable to find any scholarly study of this term, but the online Urban Dictionary²⁴ identifies it as associated with US military, particularly the Marine Corps.) In any case, he clearly appears to represent a lower-class white Boston dialect, which Letzler²⁵ (without sound linguistic basis) deems "semi-decipherable English."

Yrstruly's performance is significant because it contains Wallace's only extended use of "eye dialect"—misspellings that trigger strong awareness of incorrectness (and therefore perceptions of ignorance and lack of education), despite encoding perfectly *standard* pronunciation. Pervasive use of abbreviations, words strung together with nonalphabetic symbols and/or without spaces in between them (2B for "to be," \$, *hicclass*, *nite*, *gosofar*, *XMas*, *aprox*, *outwego*, *sortof*, *kindof*, etc.), no doubt seemed much stranger to readers in 1996 than these conventions do now, due to pervasive abbreviation and use of nonalphabetic symbols in text messages and social media postings. The effect of these is greatly amplified by nonstandard placement of the apostrophe (which always appears word-finally in the monologue) and alterations that cannot be interpreted as intentional abbreviation, such as *Enfield* and *Central Squar*, an *arguement*, *wurse/wurst*, *materil*, *realy*, *pryor*, *avrege*, *decesed*, *dumsters*, *cryng*, and so on. The only misspelling that seems

²³ Staes, "Rewriting the Author."

²⁴ "Ricky tick." *Urban Dictionary*. <http://www.urbandictionary.com>

²⁵ David Letzler, *The Craft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 90.

motivated by dialect phonology is the repeated use of *pernt* for *point* (with an intrusive /r/, again associated with the white population).

Some solecisms were no doubt intended to evoke particular associations, such as *conversession* (129, 130, 132, 133), which seems to imply elements of planning and duration rather than brief spontaneous exchanges. *Elemonade* for *eliminate* (129, 134, 135) may trigger incongruous images of people drinking *lemonade* as they plan a murder, and perhaps planning it in an overly *elementary* way. It is implausible that yrstruly, desperately trying to score drugs, is being intentionally playful with words—he is very focused and serious in these scenes; he is not having fun. It is equally unlikely that Wallace could resist some intentional wordplay or would fail to appreciate that yrstruly's unintentional portmanteau *cusually* (133, 134) is a perfect metalinguistic commentary on how *usually* this character is *casual*. *Conceited* for *conceded* (134) seems almost Freudian.

As with *Clenette*, readers have to work to decode the nonstandard writing and to get past their own knee-jerk negative reactions to these. Wallace keeps these sections short, presumably recognizing this level of difficulty, but he doesn't let readers off the hook entirely. The extra effort required to understand what *Clenette* and yrstruly are saying may give readers some social distance from the painful events recounted, emphasizing just how different the reader is from the person thinking these thoughts. This social distance, in turn, makes the horrifying events recounted easier to digest. On the other hand, the decoding effort also slows readers down, forcing them to spend more time with these characters than they might otherwise wish to, prolonging the discomfort they feel. I believe that Wallace was attempting a repeat of the same lesson, and making the further point that this is not ethnicity or gender specific: that initial negative reactions based only on dialect are shameful; that superficialities of language differences distract us and cause us to blame the victim; that all these characters deserve our empathy. Two brief pages from *Clenette* could not achieve a lasting effect on readers, however much they engage in that section and however deeply they feel its gut-wrenching conclusion. With repeated exposure to the same lesson, involving different characters, black and white, male and female, addicted and sober, very young to fully adult, these points might eventually sink in. This is just good pedagogy, as Professor Wallace surely knew.

Jocks and Nerds

Michael Pemulis, discussed in Chapter 4 as part of a family illustrating assimilation into nonethnic default whiteness, also shows that social mobility

is possible for those of working-class background who can excel as an athlete and/or an intellectual; as both of these, he is able to aspire to the upper class. Pemulis's immigrant father worked "on the Southie docks" (683), and readers are reminded multiple times that the family lived in Allston: he is "Allston's Michael Pemulis" (322), and in case readers are not aware of the meaning of this, an endnote describes it specifically as "blue-collar Allston" (1035).

Although Pemulis maintains the stereotypical Boston area use of "wicked" as an intensifier, he is not represented as r-less in the text, and his use of language is otherwise perfectly standard, if not pedantic enough for his friend Hal (the lexical prodigy). That these very minor linguistic differences nonetheless continue to reflect real differences in socioeconomic status is made explicit during the Eschaton game (an enactment of geopolitical warfare, played with tennis balls), when Hal admits to himself that he may be "a secret snob about collar-color issues and Pemulis" (335). Hal acknowledges that his friend is "a born tech-science wienie," but emphasizes at the same time that Hal's "most valiant efforts barely get Pemulis through Mrs. I's triad of required Grammars" (154). Hal continues to comment on Pemulis's language throughout. When Pemulis refers to a "psychosensual distorter," Hal interjects, "Think you mean *psychosensory*, unless I don't know the whole story here" (211). When Pemulis talks about avoiding entrapment, endnote 55 clarifies that Hal "personally thinks the term that'd apply here would be *suborned*, not *entrapped*" (996). Endnote 123 begins, "Pemulis here, dictating to Inc, who can just sit there making a steeple out of his fingers and pressing it to his lip and not take notes and wait and like inscribe [*sic*] it anytime in the next week and get it verbatim, the smug turd" (1023). This *is* Hal's transcription, of course, and the "[*sic*]" is Hal's commentary that Pemulis has again used the wrong word. Readers are clearly meant to admire Hal's precision with language but are also likely to agree with Pemulis's judgment of Hal's unattractive smugness, the sting of which indictment is lessened somewhat by Hal's apparent good-natured willingness to own up to it by including it in the transcription.

Social categories like "jock" and "nerd" are, in theory, orthogonal to questions of age, ethnicity, social class, and gender—but in practice, there are often constraints that preclude full participation in athletics and academics, traditionally excluding members of marginalized groups from claiming these identities. Whereas the Detroit students studied by Eckert²⁶ position themselves as "jocks" versus "burnouts," and Habick's²⁷ Farmer City students

²⁶ Eckert, *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice*.

²⁷ Habick, "Farmer City, Illinois: Sound Systems Shifting South."

claim “redneck” and “burnout” identities, Bucholtz’s white California high school students label themselves “nerds,” “hip-hop fans,” and “preppies.” (Cf. Kirkham²⁸ and Drummond²⁹ for similar studies on UK youth.) In all these cases, young people do not prioritize categories they were born into but align themselves with categories they themselves help to construct. Although these group memberships may not be as enduring, they are no less real or important for the adolescents who inhabit them. Each of these groups differentiates itself not just by label or superficial in-group slang lexical items, but by (presumably less conscious) quantitative differences in pronunciations.

Bucholtz’s nerds use “a highly and sometimes exaggeratedly formal version of Standard English . . . distinguished phonetically by careful articulation and especially resistance to processes characteristic of colloquial speech, like consonant cluster simplification and the reduction of unstressed vowels.”³⁰ They exhibit “an extraordinarily playful attitude toward language,” with “a high degree of metalinguistic awareness, and they took pleasure in manipulating linguistic forms for humorous effect” (157), particularly delighting in puns. This sounds very much like a description of Hal and his ETA friends—and of Wallace. McGurl³¹ argues that being “a weenie-American—or geek American, or nerd American, in this context the subtle differences between these terms is not important—is the technomodernist’s version of having a cultural identity, a paradoxically nonethnic ethnicity, or technicity.” That is, the erasure of ethnicity discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 gives rise to a need to create new ways of belonging.

Nugent³² discusses “the relationship between nerdiness and ethnicity”—specifically, that Americans are more willing to associate whites and Asians with nerdiness, and to associate whites and African Americans with athleticism (73). As a result, whites may claim any social identity they choose, whereas Asians (and presumably unassimilated Europeans and Jews) face resistance in being accepted as athletes, and African Americans (and presumably Latinx) face resistance in claiming scholarly identities. Because the nerd identity is claimed predominantly through hyperstandard language, anyone whose speech codes as nonstandard (whether ethnic or regional/lower class) appears to disavow their claim to nerdiness; likewise,

²⁸ Sam Kirkham, “Intersectionality and the Social Meanings of Variation: Class, Ethnicity, and Social Practice,” *Language in Society* 44, no. 5 (2015): 629–52. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404515000585>.

²⁹ Drummond, *Researching Urban Youth Language and Identity*.

³⁰ Bucholtz, *White Kids*, 151.

³¹ McGurl, “The Institution of Nothing,” 44.

³² Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 9.

any working-class person or person of color who stakes a linguistic claim to nerdiness seems to reject their ethnic, regional, and class identity. This leads to a dangerous cycle, when considering how much of one's identity may be formed in response to the perception of and treatment by others, and how a lack of representation and role models within a category can lead to future exclusions.

Hal Incandenza, like his creator, serves as an archetype for both the "jock" and "nerd" identities, showing the false dichotomy of these now familiar social constructs, so often viewed as incompatibly opposed. In "Derivative Sport," Wallace describes how at Amherst "I found my identity shifting from jock to math-wienie" (*ASFTINDA* 14). Success within these categories (i.e., excelling at sports or scholarship) depends largely not on natural ability alone but a strong sense of discipline. The training regimen and curriculum at ETA both on and off the court emphasizes that there is no dichotomy between body and the mind, despite popular stereotype—indeed, there is a strong mind-body connection. Those fortunate and disciplined enough to achieve excellence as jocks or nerds receive clear social rewards, gaining them entry to the upper class, if they were not fortunate enough to be born into it. A "burnout" identity, on the other hand, requires no such discipline and receives no such reward; on the contrary, with the obvious threat of addiction, the adoption of such an identity presents particular peril. It is important that Hal, despite his penchant for "getting covertly high" (49), very much does not want to publicly identify as a "burnout." His getting "outed" as such—potentially through the mandated drug testing, or when John Wayne ("without question the best male player" (260) at ETA) reveals everyone's secrets over the campus public address system—threatens his claims to the identities that are most important to him. The threat is much more real for his working-class friend, Michael Pemulis, who was not born into wealth: success at the academy is Pemulis's only chance at joining the upper class. He may have the "street smarts" to make money on his own—to continue his lucrative career as designer and peddler of drugs ("Mrs. Pemulis raised no dewy-eyed fools" [156])—but that will not gain him status.

The taxonomy of identity that I have identified within Wallace's work makes it relatively simple to consider different aspects of identity separately: How are foreigners distinguished from Americans? How are African Americans treated differently from other US ethnicities? Why is only the white working class shown speaking regional dialects? What other social identities can people claim to raise themselves out of the working class? This approach has, I hope, illustrated the social hierarchies and assimilatory pressures that Wallace's work makes evident (moving left-to-right in Figure 1), although it

has mostly ignored other important dimensions of identity including age, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability. It is more difficult to try to put all these pieces back together, to consider how all the different pieces of a given person's identity intersect and contribute to a coherent "self" whose performances range and vary based on context. The next chapter nonetheless attempts to grapple with such complexity, taking a more complete look at Wallace's most important character: himself.