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# David Foster Wallace and Repressive Taboos: Clenette Henderson, yrstruly and the identity politics of representation

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*David Foster Wallace's use of disenfranchised voices in *Infinite Jest* (1996) receives little critical attention. Clenette Henderson and yrstruly's narratives raise issues of taboo subjects: child sexual abuse, drug-addiction, and prostitution. A close reading of their voices aims to break over twenty years of critical silence by exposing such taboos.*

Two examples of first-person narration in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) that receive little critical attention are the voices of Clenette Henderson and yrstruly. Wallace writes Clenette's voice in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) while yrstruly's voice emanates from a gender indeterminate, drug-addict prostitute. Wallace's use of such voices, along with his attempt at writing in dialect, will be subjected to a close reading in order to examine the extent to which there is merit in considering them within a cross-cultural context. The critical reception of *Infinite Jest* will also be analysed to demonstrate how taboo issues are ignored/bypassed in critical circles. I suggest that these instances of first-person narration may act as a catalyst to a wider discussion of identity politics via a consideration of the taboo subjects towards which Wallace's text draws attention. Specifically, Clenette's narrative concerns the practice of sexual child abuse, while yrstruly's is one of drug addiction and prostitution. There is, however, the added complication that Wallace's efforts speak on behalf of disenfranchised minorities, which may further limit discussion around these particular taboos, especially when the texts analysed are judged as unhelpful.

Indeed, Will Self's somewhat confused attempt at drawing comparisons between issues of sexuality and race provides us with context for how attempts to speak on behalf of others can, and do, go wrong. Following the publication of his novel, *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002), Self seems perfectly at ease speaking on behalf of the disenfranchised, which my reading suggests is an act of appropriation:

The closest example to the way "gay" was turned into an ascription of pride that I can think of, is the term "nigger." With young Afro-American men, the pride enshrined in the free use of this one-time anathema is arguably a pride not worth having [... and] what [is] "queer" anyway, save for a harder-edged version of "gay," the mutha-fucka to its nigger? ("Gay: The Love that" 4-5)

In this example, Self seems to view gay and queer as interchangeable—a contentious assertion. Alex Ross notes David Halperin and Michael Warner's respective attacks on the "New Gay Normalcy," and their belief that gay assimilation by mainstream culture leaves gay lifestyles suffering from a "dullness, commonness, averageness," especially around the subject of marriage and the constraints it imposes

upon couples (*The New Yorker*). For now, at least, queer resists such “normalcy,” in that its use tends to disrupt the ability to classify one’s sexuality, and therefore queer cannot be seen as an extension or “harder-edged version” of gay (Tippet). Self’s usage of gay/queer in this case can be seen as repressive; his approach is extreme, and confused—apparent in his muddling of the terms gay and queer, which is naïve and over-simplified. Self appropriates Oscar Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, as well as the figure of the homosexual, and as such, Self’s usage is to be viewed as appropriation of a disenfranchised voice. Though Wallace is seen to use the voices of others, it will be shown that his usage need not be seen as appropriation in a negative sense, but rather that it paves the way for constructive critical analysis by shedding light on several taboo issues through Clenette’s and yrstruly’s narratives.

Examples of critical engagement around the voices of Clenette and yrstruly are few in number, and where they do exist, their voices are dismissed almost as soon as they are mentioned. Indeed, Toon Staes’ article on empathy in *Infinite Jest* manages to dismiss Clenette’s and yrstruly’s voices by stating that “the only first-person narrators with a clear identity in *Infinite Jest* either come up in embedded narratives told by addicts or recovering addicts—such as Clenette or yrstruly” (419). Staes does not expand upon this comment. Instead, Staes moves to speculate that “[t]hese [narratives] may very well be part of Hal [Incandenza’s] main narrative: [...] Hal might have heard some of the addicts’ stories after his first visit to Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House” (419). Staes rejects the voices merely as forming part of Hal’s narrative without recognising the potential for subversion in his own reasoning.

If, as Staes suggests, Clenette’s and yrstruly’s voices are channeled through Hal, then this surely adds to the sense of Hal’s character as a metaphor for a fluid identity that is almost always in transition. The fact that Hal’s is one of the main voices to influence the text adds credence to the sense that if it is important for Hal to recall the overheard stories of Clenette and yrstruly, as Staes suggests, then it must be important for the reader to pay attention to these aspects. Indeed, it is precisely because the voices filter through him that such discussion is merited. Hal’s is a decidedly white perspective’s view of those characters, shown to be experiencing taboo issues of sexual child abuse, drug-addiction, and prostitution, and is therefore contentious. However, it is clear that Staes is willing to view Clenette and yrstruly only as addicts, and while it is correct that later in the novel Clenette appears to be a resident of Ennet House, and does not influence the story directly, her narrative speaks of something else entirely when we are first introduced to her character. In context, Clenette’s distinctive first-person narration very much disrupts the flow of the novel, providing a moment of discontinuity for us to analyse.

Likewise, we have another example where a critic mentions yrstruly in passing. This time, David Letzler makes the case that Ennet House’s philosophy of living one’s life by the adoption of mantras and clichés can only “seem even remotely appealing” once one has “endured the inescapable involutions of Kate Gompert’s depression [and] the coked-up violence and semi-decipherable English in yrstruly’s monologue” (319). Letzler moves on to discuss the taxing effect that Ennet House’s “overloaded scenes” may have on academics, and states that Wallace critics are perhaps more attracted to the “baroque complexities of Marijuana Thinking” (319). Following this, and in a manner similar to that of Staes, Letzler diverts our attention away from yrstruly’s narrative: “Ennet’s clichés are nearly as meaningless

as the addicts' overthinking: they should be accepted only as a cure for the latter's greater destructiveness" (319). Both Staes' and Letzler's tactic, here, is to mention Clenette and yrstruly, respectively, only in order to dismiss them as having no worth in a critical discussion because they are written as addicts, without noting the irony of overlooking Hal's own addiction to drugs, for example. For Staes and Letzler, it seems that some addicts are of more worth than others.

Equally troubling is the fact that later in Staes' essay, there is a reference to another of Wallace's characters whose inclusion in the text provides a second example of sexual child abuse. Matty Pemulis' story is glossed over without significant comment on the thematic connection linking both Clenette's and Matty's narratives. Instead, Staes brings up the role of the narrator: "[r]eferring to the sexual abuse that Matty Pemulis suffered as a child, the narrator wonders in a footnote, "[w]here was Mrs. Pemulis all this time...is what I'd want to know" (1052 n.278)" (420). Staes makes no further comment upon the fact that Matty is repeatedly raped by his father, and instead diverts the reader's attention away by stating that "[t]hen again there are several examples that further complicate the possibility of an autonomous narrator in the novel" (420). Through his analysis, Staes raises awareness of Mrs. Pemulis' apparent complicity in the sexual abuse that her son suffers, while also making a valid point about the autonomy of the narrator needing to be questioned.

However, Staes' efforts are incomplete because he is invested only in the voice guiding the stories: Hal Incandenza's. In the examples shown, Staes and Letzler utilise the characters of Clenette and yrstruly for their own ends in order to make neat points about their hypotheses before moving on; in fact, the change in narrative voice that occurs in *Infinite Jest* is ignored as an affectation without considering the possibility of it offering more in terms of a critical analysis. Staes' and Letzler's discussions of the characters are not constructive, nor do they fully consider that Wallace adopts distinct dialects of others in order to give voice to the characters. The silences adopted by Staes and Letzler, to avoid a discussion of the events that have shaped the narratives of Clenette and yrstruly, are indicative of the presence of taboo subjects in *Infinite Jest*. However, in place of an informed critique that would result from an examination of such taboos, were Staes and Letzler to engage, there is only silence. Until this imbalance is rectified, the critical landscape around Wallace's text remains incomplete.

A fitting place to begin remedying this issue is an analysis of the voices themselves. Clenette Henderson is presented as a young, African-American female living in a housing project in Boston. Her voice is written in what Wallace describes, in an essay titled "Authority and American Usage", as a variant of "Standard Black English (SBE)" (*Lobster* 66-127; 79; 108). Wallace's first mention of this term is presented as a reaction to what he terms "Pop Prescriptivism", where journalists' "bemused irony often masks a Colonel Blimp's rage at the way the beloved English of their youth is being trashed in the decadent present" (79). He states that "some PP is offensively small-minded and knuckle-dragging, such as [John Simon's] *Paradigm's Lost's* simplistic dismissal of Standard Black English", and follows this by giving the reader an example of Simon's views on the matter, where Simon considers that Standard Written English (SWE) is the only correct option where use of language is concerned:

As for "I be", "you be", "he be", etc., which should give us all the heebie-jeebies, these may indeed be comprehensible, but they go against all accepted classical and modern grammars

and are not the product of a language with its roots in history but of ignorance of how a language works. (79-80)

Wallace's feelings on Standard Written English, or, as he refers to it later, Standard *White* English, make clear that the Prescriptivist position, such as Simon's, is largely redundant, yet he is willing to acknowledge that "SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE" (109). Clenette's dialect is not written in SWE, but rather in a form of SBE. Her narrative concerns the figure of Wardine, Clenette's half-sister, and the reader soon learns that Wardine is subjected to sexual abuse by her mother's boyfriend, Roy Tony:

Wardine say her momma aint treat her right. Reginald he come round to my blacktop at my building where me and Delores Epps jump double dutch and he say, Clenette, Wardine be down at my crib cry say her momma aint treat her right, and I go on with Reginald to his building where he live at, and Wardine be sit deep far back in a closet in Reginald crib, and she be cry. (37)

The opening to Clenette's first-person narration tells not of sexual abuse at this stage but of the domestic abuse that Wardine endures from her mother. The disruption that occurs in the text as the narrative switches from its relatively standard use of SWE, "[w]hen he settles in with the tray and cartridge, the TP viewer's digital display reads 1927h", to the more fragmented, less easy-to-read form of Clenette's SBE, indicates a moment of discontinuity in the text and acts as a mirror to the violence of the passage (37):

Wardine back all beat up and cut up. Big stripes of cut all up and down Wardine back, pink stripes and around the stripes the skin like the skin on folks lips be like. [...] Reginald say Wardine say her momma aint treat her right. Say her momma beat Wardine with a hanger. (37)

Here, the dialect that Wallace chooses for Clenette recalls Celie's narrative voice in Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, and there is a disturbing similarity between the subject matter of Clenette's narrative and that of Walker's novel, which is implied in the opening line as Celie remembers the words of her father: "[y]ou better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your Mammy" (3). Celie's first-person narration then makes explicit the sexual abuse that she suffers from the age of fourteen:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. (3).

As with Wallace's text, Walker points to sexual abuse in the supposedly safe surroundings of the familial home—yet unlike Wallace's text, Walker's use of taboos such as sexual child abuse and female genital mutilation, respectively, are open to critical discussion (Wisker; Levin). As Walker's novel progresses,

and after Celie moves out of her father's house and away from his abuse, her first-person narration (in a variant of SBE) tells of how her husband beats her, and once more the link between her voice and Clenette's voice appears uncannily alike, not only in the use of SBE dialect, but also with reference to the violence she suffers:

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. (Walker 23)

Here, Walker uses a double negative in Celie's narration: "he don't never." Double negatives are a feature of SBE that Wallace references in his "Usage" essay (*Lobster* 169), and we see that Clenette also uses the double negative: "Wardine say she do not feel nothing in her back ever since spring" (*Infinite* 38). However, unlike with Walker's narrative voice, there is the issue of cultural appropriation to consider when discussing Wallace's approach, as this constitutes an example of a white author writing in an African-American dialect, whereas with Walker, there is an implied authenticity and weight given to her writing in SBE.

Putting aside the issue of Wallace's possible appropriation of African-American dialect for a moment, it is worth noting the occasions where Staes' one-dimensional view of Clenette as an addict seems inaccurate. The first is the mention of Clenette and Delores Epps "jump[ing] double dutch" as Reginald approaches them with news of Wardine's predicament. The image called to mind here is of two young girls playing with skipping ropes that move counter to one another, rather than of two drug addicts. The second instance appears later, where Roy Tony is said to "want to lie down with Wardine," but in order to persuade Wardine to do so he "give Wardine candy and 5s" (37). Payment of sweets and low-value monetary amounts suggest that Wardine is a child, and so we may consider her half-sister, Clenette, to be a child also. In a similar manner to the way he fails to pass comment on Matty Pemulis' experience of being repeatedly raped by his father as a child, Staes also remains silent with respect to the fact that Clenette's narrative speaks of sexual child abuse, where Roy Tony "[b]e stand [...] in Wardine face and he ain't let her pass without he all the time touching her" (37). Again, a close analysis of Clenette's narrative confirms that Wardine is at this stage of the novel a minor, as she is said to sleep in the same room as her siblings, on "mattresses where [...] William and Shantell and Roy the baby sleep at, and he [Roy Tony] stand there in the dark, high, and say quiet things at her, and breathe" (37). Not only does Wardine suffer the threat of sexual abuse as a child, but it appears that her mother is complicit in the abuse because of her refusal to believe her daughter's story, instead preferring to admonish Wardine for provoking Roy Tony's actions: "Wardine momma say Wardine tempt Roy Tony into Sin. Wardine say she say Wardine try to take away Roy Tony into Evil with her young tight self" (37). Wardine's "young tight self" is a reference to her sexual inexperience and further adds to the sense that Wardine and Clenette are children, and that their story, as told through Clenette's narrative, is far from that of drug addicts at the moment of narration. The fact that there is so little critical attention paid to Wallace's inclusion of sexual child abuse is confirmation that such abuse remains a taboo subject, as exemplified through my discussion of *Infinite Jest's* reception. As an aside, it is worth noting that there is plenty of discussion of how and when to use dialect when writing, but not sexual assault.

Also to be considered are the many levels and filters that Wardine's story of sexual child abuse has to pass through, which act as barriers to subsequent discussions of the theme. For instance, when we consider that Clenette's story is accessed only via Hal's narrative, according to Staes, we realize how far removed the reader is from Wardine's experience, and the sense of the possible appropriation of another's voice is greatly heightened: Hal, like Wallace, is a privileged white male subconsciously retelling an overheard story (according to Staes' interpretation of the text) of a young, African-American girl. Not only that, but Wallace's use of SBE means that the reader must contend with the narrative's shift away from SWE—the very nature of SBE makes it difficult to understand who is saying what at any given moment: “Wardine say she say Wardine try to take [...]” (37). Whether it is the movement from SWE to SBE, or the difficulty of speaking on taboo subjects, the effect is the same: critical silence, as is shown in Staes and Letzler's approach, respectively.

Similarly problematic, in terms of possible appropriation, is Wallace's use of a character by the name of yrstruly. yrstruly belongs to a gang of extremely violent, homeless prostitutes whose gender identities are ambiguous. Other markers of yrstruly's identity are vague, and there is no evidence in the text to signal age or ethnicity. Most odd is the fact that yrstruly refers to her/his self in the third-person:

[W]e got enough \$ off the Patty type to get straightened out for true all day and crewed on him hard and C wanted we should elemonade the Patty's map for keeps [...] but Poor Tony turns white as a shit and said by no means and [...] we just left the type there in his vehicle off Mem Dr we broke the jaw for insentive not to eat no cheese and C insisted and was not 2Bdenied and took off one ear which there was a mess and everything like that and then C throws the ear away after in a dumster so yrstrulys' like so what was the exact pernt to that like. (129)

Here, Staes is correct in labeling yrstruly an addict, and Letzler correct in summing up all the “coked-up violence,” but the passage speaks to more than this. Wallace's choice of narrative voice here presents a challenge for Staes and Letzler to engage with the taboo subjects raised: drugs and prostitution. Yet there is no engagement on their part, only silence. Once more there is the issue of moving in and out of SWE dialect, for just prior to yrstruly's narrative the text reads: “He just sits there. I want to be like that [...]. His name is supposedly Lyle” (128). And following the passage concerning yrstruly: “Hal could hear the phone console ringing as he dropped his gear bag and took the room key from around his neck” (135). Again, we are alerted to a discontinuity in the text through sheer contrast in narrative style, as is also the case with Clenette's narration. Yet because of Staes and Letzler's dismissal of the characters, Wallace's possible appropriation, with respect to the dialect he uses as a tool of representation, remains unchallenged.

To consider whether Wallace's attempts at writing from the perspective of others can be viewed as having any worth, I turn once more to Will Self's direct appropriation of the figure of the homosexual. Self's *Dorian* could be accused of giving rise to homophobic sentiment as it attempts to figure issues around homosexuality without sufficient knowledge of the homosexual. In particular, a sense of homophobia is apparent in the final paragraph, where there is a graphically violent episode in which Dorian, Self's protagonist, has his throat cut and tongue pulled out to resemble a red necktie: a symbol used as an indicator of a person's homosexuality in the early part of the twentieth century:

Standing in the piss-filled runnel of the urinal, his cheek rammed hard against the wall, Dorian realised that Henry had metamorphosed back into being Ginger [...]. But by now he was also coming to terms with the fact that the beautiful new tie Ginger had just given him with his knife was a warm, sticky, fluid thing, and hardly likely to remain fashionable for very long at all. (*Dorian* 278)

For the novel's finale, Self uses a stereotype of homosexual activity, "cottaging," while also subjecting Dorian to the humiliation of standing in the waste outlet as his throat is cut. The urinal, that paradoxical place of private bodily function performed in public, is used by Self for its connotation as a meeting place for anonymous sex between men, and specifically, the setting of a public lavatory provides further exposure for the author's punishment of Dorian.

Perhaps, then, to counter such claims of homophobia, Self confesses that he "really became quite gay writing [*Dorian*]," and that he "began to have gay erotic dreams" and "had a very happy and fulfilled homosexual period in my development," though it must be noted that much of Self's blurring of his own hetero/homosexual identity appears around the promotion of *Dorian* following its publication, so it seems to be a disingenuous and self-serving move on Self's part to appropriate his own very unique form of bi/hetero/homosexuality (Burston). David Alderson also notes that "Self's main identifications [...] have tended to be [...] with the American counter-culture and especially the figure of William Burroughs," and so perhaps it is Self's fascination with his literary idol (Burroughs was openly homosexual in adult life) that led Self to claim such an interest in homosexuality (Alderson 312). In doing so, Self is able to occupy the privileged position of a straight man while claiming, conveniently, that heterosexuality is "merely to be something I do rather than what I am" ("Gay: The Love That" 5). Again, this is an example of Self asserting his divine right to appropriate from disenfranchised others, in a repressive manner, no less. It is precisely because of Self's views on homosexuality, and the responses he elicits on behalf of the disenfranchised, that an imbalance is evident when considering a cross-analysis of Self alongside the critical reception and lack of analysis to integral parts of *Infinite Jest*. A void exists with respect to Wallace's text—one that must be filled by a discussion of the taboo subjects present within.

In Will Self and David Foster Wallace, therefore, we have two examples of straight, white males using voices of the disenfranchised. In the works discussed, Self loudly tells the reader exactly what he thinks, presenting himself as an expert on the topic. On the other hand, Wallace offers his own perspective with an awareness of the fact that in doing so, he is crossing a boundary that has the potential to cause offence. In his discussion of SWE and SBE, Wallace refers to the practice of telling "students of color" that they have to learn how to write in SWE in order to follow in the footsteps of those "African-Americans who've become successful and important in US culture" (*Lobster* 109):

I should note here that a couple of the students I've said this to were offended—one lodged an Official Complaint—and that I have had more than one colleague profess to find my spiel "racially insensitive." [...] This reviewer's own humble opinion is that some of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair. (*Lobster* 109)

Here, Wallace tells of his own experience around the difficulties likely to be encountered when stepping outside of our own bounds, even if the motivation for doing so is seemingly coupled with good intentions.

Arguably, if we allow ourselves to consider the content of the chosen extracts carefully, we see the repressive effects of taboos, where a young African-American girl and her friends live in fear of sexual and physical abuse, whilst a gender-indeterminate drug addict and their associates are pushed to the margins of society, where violence, criminal activity and degradation thrive. For silence – critical and otherwise – to remain around such issues suggests that society is complicit in the maintenance of a *status quo*, and that such complicity is far from democratic as it demonstrates a tendency of hiding behind an ideology of tolerance. The shift in narrative voice that occurs in the two examples of dialect chosen from *Infinite Jest* highlights them as moments of discontinuity in the text when compared to the predominant use of SWE throughout the rest of the novel. Yet we are also able to recognise those occasions where Staes and Letzler divert our attention away from such voices, by viewing them as possessing no worth. This remains the case even though it is shown that Wallace provides many opportunities for analysis through, for example, the discontinuity that occurs around the shift from SWE to SBE. The subsequent effect of which is the reinforcement of the dominance of taboo subjects, resulting in the closing down of discourse before it has chance to flourish.

Two decades have passed without these voices being seen as having any merit with which to form meaningful critical discussion. It is clear, then, that those who are, or consider themselves to be, disenfranchised continue to suffer the effects of an imposed invisibility. This is exemplified by Staes' and Letzler's diversion tactics, which lead to an ongoing silence that avoids discussion. Wallace's use of dialect might rightly be viewed as problematic in that it has the potential to further reinforce positions of privilege, yet, unlike Self's direct appropriation, Wallace's use of dialect in the examples shown can also be viewed as an indicator of the merits of stepping outside of one's own artificially constructed – yet rarely acknowledged as such – boundaries of identity. Through Clenette's and yrstruly's voices, Wallace's narrative provides us with the potential for something to happen “off the page, outside words” (Kelly 145). With respect to Wallace's use of dialect in *Infinite Jest*, particularly in relation to Clenette and yrstruly, where issues around taboo subjects of sexual child abuse, drug addiction, and prostitution are made obvious to the reader, there exists the possibility that fiction can act as a catalyst to a wider discussion, which may lead to a breaking down of barriers around the particular taboo subjects discussed here.

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Matthew's research centres around issues of gender in the works of David Foster Wallace, with published essays on queer and transgender representation in *Infinite Jest (The Luminary)*, rape culture in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (Postgraduate English)*, and, due 2017, St. Teresa of Avila and failure in *Infinite Jest (Excursions)*.