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# Talking American in the Midwest: Linguistic Diversity and Authenticity in the Twentieth-Century United States

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During the early twentieth century – when the United States was receiving an influx of non-English-speaking immigrants, and “standardization” was a dominant, yet polarizing, concept – having a single national language that unified Americans became a controversial topic in public discourse. In *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, Ruth Suckow, like many authors at the time, used immigrant language as a foil for midwestern speech to demonstrate its “standard” Americanness. But, as this essay will show, by using other regional American dialects in a similar manner, she questioned how “Americanness” was being understood and recognized during this period in the United States.

*The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (1925), by once best-selling Iowan author Ruth Suckow, opens with a hot, dusty train ride across rural land, a beginning familiar to readers of early twentieth-century midwestern fiction. The eponymous “nice girl,” Marjorie Shoessel, and her family are going to visit Marjorie’s paternal grandparents, a journey that requires three separate trains and a buggy ride, and that always seems to take place in “the hottest weather.”<sup>1</sup> Out of all of the family, Marjorie is the least enthusiastic about the visit. Her reluctance is not only due to the journey’s discomfort, or to her disappointment in having to leave her town life for her grandparents’ country farm, but with her uneasy relationship with her father’s relatives, who are “German ... and [speak] broken English.”<sup>2</sup>

When the family finally arrives in Germantown, the cultural barriers faced by the different generations quickly manifest themselves linguistically. The

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

children find it “strange” to watch their grandmother kiss their father and to “hear her say, ‘Ja, Eddie, wie bist du denn’,” a strangeness that has as much to do with the unfamiliar language as it does with seeing their father being treated as someone’s child. Their grandmother can speak at least some English, greeting Marjorie and her brothers by saying, “Ja, den dey are all here again,” but her figure as she leads the way to the house “was alien to them.”<sup>3</sup> Marjorie herself, just two generations removed from these native German speakers, speaks unaccented English and does not understand German. She is uncomfortable in this rural environment, disliking everything from the carefully prepared dinner to the dusty barn she used to enjoy exploring as a younger child, and she does not feel that she has anything in common with her German relatives.

This opening scene is brief, and after the family leaves the farm early – at Marjorie’s provocation – and goes back to their slightly more metropolitan midwestern hometown, Marjorie’s German grandparents are quickly left behind, forgotten amongst the other adventures and challenges Marjorie faces as she grows up. In opening *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* with this episode of linguistic discomfort, however, Suckow showcases issues of linguistic diversity and corresponding familial politics that spoke to the broader linguistic situation in the United States in the 1900s.

While English has always been the most commonly spoken language in the United States, it is not, and has never been, the official national language. Without an accepted linguistic standard, debates about how, or even whether, the many languages present within American borders should be recognized and used have surfaced and resurfaced from the time of the country’s founding. Committees for regulating the use of English in the United States were formed intermittently throughout the nineteenth century, but none were able to institute any linguistic rules, and all faded out of existence quickly and quietly.<sup>4</sup> Proposals to publish federal laws and documents in both English and German, which was the most widely spoken minority language in the United States in the late eighteenth century, were brought to Congress as early as the 1780s.<sup>5</sup> The proposals were repeatedly defeated, as was an 1810 petition to translate Michigan laws into French. In explaining their position, Congress argued,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on American attempts to regulate speech and language see, for example, Allen Walker Read, “American Projects for an Academy to Regulate Speech,” *PMLA*, 51, 4 (Dec. 1936), 1141–79; Thomas Paul Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Dennis E. Baron, *The English-Only Question: An Official Language for Americans?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 87.

In a Republic, where the operations of Government are the result of the combined opinions of its citizens, it is important that the people at large should possess, not only enlightened, but similar views of the public interest; and it is not, therefore, of more consequence that information should be generally disseminated, than that the avenues to it should be common,

a statement that deftly defends excluding non-English-speaking Americans from access to governmental policies by emphasizing the United States' democratic inclusivity. While the government had long used propaganda in foreign languages to attract settlers to the sparsely populated western territories, it often made an English-speaking majority a requirement for those territories to become states.<sup>6</sup> Undergirding all of these, and many other, language debates was a common desire to define what it meant to be "American," and to determine how that American identity should be communicated.

This issue of "Americanness" came to a head linguistically and culturally in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, as the number of non-English-speaking immigrants making their way to American shores swiftly increased. By 1910, more than one in seven Americans was foreign-born, and most were non-English speakers.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to assimilate this influx, a widespread campaign to encourage immigrants to renounce their home country and culture and adopt a purely American mind-set – enacted at all scales, from the community level to the federal level – gained traction over the course of the following decade. In one of the clearest illustrations of this national movement, the National Americanization Committee, founded in 1915, held a National Conference on Immigration and Americanization in early 1916 that brought together representatives from agencies and organizations around the country for the purpose of standardizing and coordinating national "Americanization" efforts.<sup>8</sup> Various classes teaching subjects ranging from American ideals to American cooking, often culminating in patriotically themed graduation ceremonies, were organized through churches, schools, and women's groups around the country, enticing immigrants with the promise that the immigrant who commits to their Americanization will be "just as good an American as any one else."<sup>9</sup> This promise was both conditional upon adequate "Americanization" – a term lacking a distinct

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 90. Louisiana, which had a majority French-speaking population and French-language protections in place at the time of its statehood, is the one exception, and even in that case Thomas Jefferson had considered trying to settle a large number of native English speakers in the territory in an effort to spread the symbolic national language.

<sup>7</sup> Werner Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 39.

<sup>8</sup> Edward George Hartmann, *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 134–35.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "Hyphenated Americanism," speech before the Knights of Columbus, 12 Oct. 1915. For more on Roosevelt's views on Americanism see Leroy G. Dorsey, *We Are*

definition – and full of exceptions, with Southern and Eastern European immigrants, for example, having a harder time gaining acceptance in the United States than immigrants from Northern and Western Europe. But whether or not it fulfilled its goal of assimilation, Americanization made a strong and lasting impact on the lives and thinking of both immigrants and native-born Americans.<sup>10</sup>

Although Americanization programs considered many aspects of immigrants' lives, including housing, sanitation, civics, and literacy, immigrants' ability to speak English was a dominant concern both with the organizations devoted to Americanization and with the public. While overt discrimination against racial or ethnic groups was not usually condoned, discrimination and exclusion based on language were, making language a focal point for immigration debates. Proficiency in English was taken as a sign of successful "Americanization," and failure to learn English was seen by many as a rejection of American values. Many workplaces which employed non-English-speaking immigrants, such as Henry Ford's factories, tied English education to work, offering English-language classes to workers and making them semi-compulsory by listing not speaking English as grounds for termination.<sup>11</sup> Some government officials, Theodore Roosevelt among them, even suggested that not learning English within a certain time frame should be cause for deportation.<sup>12</sup> Brander Matthews, a prominent literature professor and the first chairman of the Simplified Spelling Board, which sought to eliminate the 'contradictory and difficult spelling' that made English challenging to learn, drew on immigrant language to describe the mingling of foreign words with English. Demonstrating the extent to which nation and language had become conflated, he proposed,

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*All Americans, Pure and Simple: Theodore Roosevelt and the Myth of Americanism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> For more on the lasting impact of the twentieth-century Americanization effort and its influence on modern immigration rhetoric see Maria Lauret, "Americanization Now and Then: The 'Nation of Immigrants' in the Early Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries," *Journal of American Studies*, 50, 2 (March 2016), 419–47.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the Ford Americanization program and the graduation ceremony for the Ford English School, which was rife with the symbolism of Americanization, see, for example, James R. Barrett, "Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880–1930," *Journal of American History*, 79, 3 (Dec. 1992), 996–1020; Stephen Meyer, "Adapting the Immigrant to the Line: Americanization in the Ford Factory, 1914–1921," *Journal of Social History*, 14, 1 (Autumn 1980), 67–82; and Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> For further information on the how English-language requirements were leveraged against immigrants see Baron.

Foreign words must always be allowed to land on our coasts without a passport; yet ... we must decide at last whether or not they are likely to be desirable residents of our dictionary: if we determine to naturalize them, we must fairly enough insist on their renouncing their foreign allegiance.<sup>13</sup>

Anti-immigrant rhetoric took on particular vehemence during World War I, when all things German – including the language – came under attack in the United States. Immigrants had established robust German-language education systems and founded German-language publications in their midwestern towns, but after 1914 many states quickly began passing laws targeting these German institutions, making it illegal to teach or publish in any language other than English.<sup>14</sup> Iowa, a midwestern state that had actively recruited immigrants by publishing informational pamphlets in many different languages during the 1890s, was one of the most aggressive in restricting the use of German.<sup>15</sup> As happened in many other states, the Iowa State Council of Defense outlawed the teaching of German; German-language parochial schools were forced to close, and German newspapers ceased circulation.<sup>16</sup> These anti-German restrictions culminated in the Babel Proclamation, an executive order issued by Iowa governor William Harding on 23 May 1918. Arguing that freedom of speech does not “entitle the person who cannot speak or understand the English language to employ a foreign language, when to do so tends, in time of national peril, to create discord among neighbors and citizens, or to disturb the peace and quiet of the community,” Harding established a set of wartime rules that required, among other restrictions, that all conversations in public places, on trains, and over the telephone be held in English only. Harding repealed the order shortly after the end of the war, but he maintained his opposition to the use of languages besides English in Iowa in his revocation of the proclamation, writing, “National Unity can be best maintained by the employment of a common vehicle of communication, and this vehicle, in the United States, by reason of custom and law, is the English language.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> “Carnegie Assaults the Spelling Book; To Pay the Cost of Reforming English Orthography,” *New York Times*, 12 March 1906, 1; Brander Matthews, *Parts of Speech: Essays on English* (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1901), 171.

<sup>14</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the history of the German language in the Midwest specifically see Michael T. Putman and Joseph Salmons, “Multilingualism in the Midwest: How German Has Shaped (and Still Shapes) the Midwest,” *Middle West Review*, 1, 2 (Spring 2015), 29–52.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen J. Frese, “Divided by a Common Language: The Babel Proclamation and Its Influence in Iowa History,” *History Teacher*, 39, 1 (Nov. 2005) 59–88, 59–60.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–61.

<sup>17</sup> William Harding, “Revocation of Babel Proclamation, 1918,” State Historical Society of Iowa, 4 Dec. 1918 (online).

So while using German was seen as divisive, knowledge of American English became a way to prove one's patriotism, something editor and critic H. L. Mencken learned in the years following the war. Of German ancestry himself, Mencken had made a costly social and critical misstep by writing and publishing from a pro-German stance even as the United States became involved in World War I, submitting, for example, a pro-German piece to *The Atlantic* in November 1914 only a few days after the sinking of the American ship *Lusitania* by German U-boats, and writing a positive profile of a German military leader that was published in 1917, the year the United States officially entered the war.<sup>18</sup> As a result of his pro-German views, Mencken was censored and largely silenced for the duration of the war, a suppression that rankled with him for years afterwards. With the United States and its allies emerging victorious over Germany, Mencken realized that he needed to assert his patriotism if he wanted to find a way back into the good graces of the American public. Language provided such a route.<sup>19</sup> In 1919, Mencken published *The American Language*, a study of primarily spoken language in the United States that soon became the popular foundation for linguistic study in the country.<sup>20</sup> In it, he argues that one of the defining characteristics of American English is its "general uniformity throughout the country, so that dialects, properly speaking, are confined to," among other minority groups, "recent immigrants," at once using American language as evidence of a universal American identity and excluding recent immigrants from that American identity.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, "Mencken: America's Critic," *The Atlantic*, 1 Dec. 2002, online, at [www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2002/12/mencken-americas-critic/378513](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2002/12/mencken-americas-critic/378513), accessed 15 June 2021; H. L. Mencken, "Ludendorff," *Atlantic Monthly*, 119, 6 (June 1917), 823–32.

<sup>19</sup> Mencken added an example at the end of one of the sections in *The American Language* that draws this connection between anti-German sentiment and the rehabilitating power of the American language. He wrote that during World War I, "the *Illinoiser Staats Zeitung*, no doubt trying to keep the sense of difference [between British and American English] alive, advertised that it would publish articles daily in the *American* language," a decision by the German-language newspaper that was more likely due to a desire to be seen as patriotically American than as a statement on the differences between British and American English, as Mencken surely recognized. H. L. Mencken, *The American Language: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919), 18.

<sup>20</sup> *The American Language* became a lifelong project for Mencken, and he published follow-up editions in 1923, 1927, 1944, and 1946 that incorporated additions, amendments, and suggestions sent to him by readers around the country. For further discussion of *The American Language* see, for example, Raymond Nelson, "Babylonian Frolics: H. L. Mencken and *The American Language*," *American Literary History*, 11, 4 (Winter 1999), 668–98.

<sup>21</sup> Mencken, *The American Language*, 19.

It was in this political context, when the evolution of the US identity and its expression in an American language was being closely watched, that midwesterners were confronting how to establish their own regional identity. Linguistically, as well as geographically, the Midwest has always been a difficult region to define. Linguist Beth Simon argues that the “sense ... that the continental United States has had, at each stage of its history, identifiable regions, and specifically, an identifiable sociocultural and linguistic *middle* region, has been a formative and continuously influential aspect of the American popular imagination.”<sup>22</sup> But where the geographic and linguistic borders of this middle region lie, and whether it is even a distinct region with its own dialect at all, has been a contested point throughout the twentieth century. In lieu of clear boundaries, definitions of the Midwest and of its dialect often make use of more precisely and historically defined regions, such as the South, to decide what the Midwest is not, instead of what it actually is – in other words, the Midwest starts where New England, the South, and the West end. In 1987, linguist Craig Carver used this to declare the “Midland” dialect, which is traditionally considered to be spoken throughout Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas, as well as some parts of Nebraska and Iowa, “nonexistent,” arguing that what is generally conceptualized as the Midland dialect region is in fact only a transition region between southern and northern dialects.<sup>23</sup>

This uncertainty over the validity of the midwestern regional and linguistic identity bled into its fiction. Beginning her writing career in the early 1920s, Iowan author Ruth Suckow thought carefully about the status of midwestern writing and about how authors were responding to outside perceptions of the Midwest in their work.<sup>24</sup> “A subtle strain of either protest or apology runs through most of [the Midwest’s] literature,” she wrote in a mid-1920s essay titled “Beauty in Iowa.”

Most of the middlewestern books yet written – the novels of Willa Cather are the finest exception – have served the purpose of in some way getting rid of an ancient and almost ingrained inferiority complex. Full of vigor as some of them have been,

<sup>22</sup> Beth Simon, “Introducing the Midland: What Is It, Where Is It, How Do We Know?”, in Thomas Edward Murray and Beth Lee Simon, eds., *Language Variation and Change in the American Midland: A New Look at “Heartland” English* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006), ix–xii, ix, original emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas E. Murray and Beth Simon, “What Is Dialect? Revisiting the Midland,” in Murray and Simon, *Language Variation and Change in the American Midland*, 1–29, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Although Suckow is most identified with Iowa, the state where she grew up, she spent her adult life moving around the United States, spending periods of time in places such as Denver, Boston, New York, Santa Fe, Washington, DC., and finally Claremont, California, where she died in 1960. She was buried in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

they have usually lacked the artistic courage or certainty to be, at bottom, other than social documents.<sup>25</sup>

Although Suckow praised Cather for being able to overcome the sense of inferiority she believed was endemic to midwestern authors, Cather, whose family moved to Nebraska from Virginia when she was nine years old, admitted that she felt a similar pressure to write about locations and people “more engaging” than those she had grown up in and around.<sup>26</sup> Setting her second novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), in Nebraska, was, as Cather recounted it, not a conscious literary choice – she doubted whether readers would be interested in a rural story set on the Nebraska plains – but rather a decision driven by a personal urge to write something “entirely for herself.”<sup>27</sup> Suckow, too, acknowledged a tension between “accepted” forms of art and the art stemming from her native, rural Midwest. “Modern art, poetry, is – with exceptions few and unexpected as wild flowers – city-born,” Suckow wrote while living in Earlville, Iowa during the winter of 1920–21. Yet, like Cather, she felt called to write about her native region, continuing, “Art that I have chosen – art that has chosen me – is born of a brown pasture slope in windless sunlight, where birds call like the sight of peace, where the brown creek tinkles, where a motionless tree casts one clear shadow.”<sup>28</sup>

Suckow elaborated on what drew her to writing about the Midwest in 1931, when she gave a lecture on “Middle Western Literature” at a creative-writing conference at the University of Iowa. She gave this lecture the year after her fellow midwestern writer Sinclair Lewis became the first American author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, an award that both signified international recognition of the American literary tradition and cemented the association between midwestern regional and American national culture that characterizes Lewis’s novels. Yet even in the wake of Lewis’s win, midwestern literature such as Suckow’s, which was firmly grounded in the region, faced opposition. In 1921, Carl Van Doren had published an article in *The Nation* in which he linked regional writers – and particularly those from the Midwest – who seemed to be participating in a “revolt from the village” by writing critically

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Suckow, “Beauty in Iowa,” Ruth Suckow Papers, the University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa. This essay was never published and is undated, but according to a note by Suckow’s husband, Ferner Nuhn, it was likely written in 1923 or 1924.

<sup>26</sup> Willa Cather, “My First Novels [There Were Two],” in *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 89–97, 92.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Suckow, “An Artist in Iowa,” in Ruth Suckow Papers, the University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

and derogatorily about small-town life.<sup>29</sup> The “revolt” movement quickly became the dominant critical framework through which to evaluate midwestern writers, with most critics tending to praise authors whom they saw as exposing the stultifying, oppressive, and provincial nature of American small towns.<sup>30</sup> Suckow addressed the pressure on midwestern authors to repudiate their small-town roots in her 1930 novel *The Kramer Girls*. Contrasting her college friend Jane’s views on small-town life with her own, Rose Kramer reflects on all she loves about small-town life in Valley Junction, Iowa, such as “having everybody she met on the street speak to her.” But despite loving where she comes from, she is ashamed to admit it: “She hid away her enjoyment in that secret and silent stubbornness, because she supposed it must prove that she was very inferior – inferior because she wasn’t unhappy in Valley Junction, didn’t hate it, and want to get back to the city.” Ultimately, however, Rose “loved the town all the more because she was defending it against Jane,” an attitude Suckow herself seems to take both in this novel, which presents a nuanced view of the benefits and drawbacks of small-town life, and in her 1931 address.<sup>31</sup>

In this address, Suckow praised regional literature that remained grounded in time and place. She attempted to define and identify the quality – which she labeled “middlewestishness” – that emanates from the rural Midwest and makes its literature distinct.<sup>32</sup> Suckow conceded that, compared to other American regions, the Midwest falls short in many ways: It lacks “sheer obvious picturesqueness” and “what is commonly called romance and color” in comparison to the American Southwest; it has none of the “forlorn charm” of the South; and it cannot match the “pure, stylized distinction” of New England.<sup>33</sup> Yet what the Midwest does have, Suckow insisted, is “authenticity.”<sup>34</sup>

While “authenticity,” compared to the qualities with which she described the other regions of the United States, seems elusive and indistinct, Suckow went on to define it as meaning particularly “American.” Once again using other regions as foils, Suckow argued that the Midwest has none of the urge to imitate Europe that motivates British-influenced New England and Spanish-influenced California, asserting that even the imitations found in

<sup>29</sup> Carl Van Doren, “Contemporary American Novelists: The Revolt from the Village: 1920,” *The Nation*, 113, 2936 (Oct. 1921), 407–12. See also Anthony Channell Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village, 1915–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

<sup>30</sup> Jon K. Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920–1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ruth Suckow, *The Kramer Girls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 124–25.

<sup>32</sup> Ruth Suckow, “Middle Western Literature,” *English Journal*, 41, 3 (March 1932), 175–82, 178. <sup>33</sup> Suckow, “Middle Western Literature,” 178–79. <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

the Midwest are more “American” than those found elsewhere, because they are copied from other American regions. Using the type of language that many others would echo in the following decades, she argued that the Midwest is “the solid center, the genuine *interior* of the United States.”<sup>35</sup> “What we have here in the Middle West, the particular way, the fresh way, in which the ancient stream of life manifests itself, colored and shaped by local conditions, has never been before and will never be again,” she concluded, returning to nature to describe the region’s character. “We must catch it, or its essence is eternally lost. That is the deepest reason for a middle western literature.”<sup>36</sup>

By the time Suckow gave this speech, the Midwest was already widely understood as the place from which a quintessentially “American” identity was emerging. As fear of immigrant “contamination” of American culture and language was on the rise in the early 1900s, Boston and New York, each once synecdoche for the nation, began to represent the type of cultural dilution that many Americans feared. By 1910, 75 percent of the population of the two cities comprised immigrants or the children of immigrants. This pushed those in search of a mythically “unsullied” America to focus more attention on the Midwest, a region that was still perceived as ethnically homogeneous.<sup>37</sup> In his memoir, the Indiana novelist Booth Tarkington recalled a 1911 conversation with an older Indianapolis judge that epitomizes this view. Commenting on the differences between Indianapolis and larger urban centers like New York and Chicago, the judge conflates immigrant status, race, and language, saying,

Compared to [New York and Chicago], this is still an “all-pure American” town. You go to the theater in New York and then come back and go to the theater here and the difference’ll make you gasp! In a New York theater, between the acts, you’ll hear everybody speaking our language, but you wonder why they do. Between the acts in a theater here you aren’t surprised when they talk American, because they still generally look that way.<sup>38</sup>

The judge’s clear association between a particular ethnicity and Americanness, as well as his characterization of the speech heard in the Midwest as “American” instead of English, reflects the Midwest’s growing reputation as the most ethnically, linguistically, and culturally “American” region. Yet despite this commonly held view, the Midwest did in fact have a large, thriving immigrant population. By World War I, German immigrants were the largest

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. The italics are the author’s.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>37</sup> Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Booth Tarkington, *The World Does Move* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1929), 128.

non-English-speaking immigrant group in the nation, accounting for 8.7 percent of the American population.<sup>39</sup> The majority were drawn to the Midwest: by the end of 1910, over 85 percent of the German immigrants who had arrived in the United States had chosen to settle in mid-Atlantic and midwestern states.<sup>40</sup> The effect of this German immigrant history is still felt in the Midwest today, where, in 2010, almost 20 percent of Illinois residents claimed German ancestry; in Wisconsin, that number was over 40 percent.<sup>41</sup> In spite of the language barrier between German immigrants and English-speaking residents, this wave of immigrants—who, according to a 1919 report, possessed “ideas, customs, standards of living, modes of thought, and religion of the same general tenor as those of the earlier [Anglo-Saxon] settlers,” quickly became absorbed into the standard image of an “American.”<sup>42</sup> As the judge commented, “A few years ago the ‘typical American’—or maybe what we called the ‘average American’—was a lot more old-stock Anglo-Saxon, with German and Irish traces, than he is today,” a description that places German immigrant heritage firmly into his view of an American ethnicity.<sup>43</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, increased industrial development had begun attracting a new wave of immigrants to the United States. Beginning in the 1880s, a new influx of immigrants arriving much more rapidly and in higher numbers than ever before focussed intense national attention on immigration. These new arrivals brought with them religious, political, and educational backgrounds that differed from those of earlier-wave immigrants, and tended to settle alongside other immigrants from their home countries.<sup>44</sup> To native-born Americans (even if they were themselves the children or grandchildren of immigrants), these new arrivals appeared unable or, worse, unwilling to assimilate into American society.<sup>45</sup> And as the judge’s comments suggest, discourse surrounding this wave,

<sup>39</sup> Maris R. Thompson, *Narratives of Immigration and Language Loss: Lessons from the German American Midwest* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 20. <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Howard C. Hill, “The Americanization Movement,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 24, 6 (May 1919), 609–42, 610. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that even these Northern and Western European immigrants found it easy to assimilate into American culture upon their arrival; many still faced discrimination and intolerance from some of their new American neighbors. <sup>43</sup> Tarkington, 184.

<sup>44</sup> For a more comprehensive overview of the differences between the immigrants who arrived during these two waves of immigration and the resulting tensions that arose in the United States see Hartmann, *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant*.

<sup>45</sup> Howard C. Hill’s 1919 report on the Americanization movement declares, for example, “Most serious of all perhaps was the fact that, unlike the earlier immigrants, many of the late-comers manifested no intention of making America a permanent home and no desire of becoming Americans.” Hill, 611.

which was dominated by Southern and Eastern Europeans on the East Coast and Asian immigrants on the West Coast, was highly racialized. Americanization programs led immigrants to believe they could alleviate the racial discrimination they often faced by becoming more traditionally “American,” which became associated not just with American behaviors and values, but with Northern and Eastern European whiteness. As James Barrett and David Roediger explain, “the processes of ‘becoming white’ and ‘becoming American’ were intertwined at every turn,” turning immigrant assimilation into not just a cultural issue, but a racial one.<sup>46</sup> In light of these anxieties, the rural Midwest, which was less affected by this later immigration wave and home to Western European immigrants who by now blended in easily with later-generation Americans, took on new meaning in the national consciousness as the region that best represented an Anglo-Saxon Americanness.

Although the ethnic and racial connotations have become less explicit, this association between the Midwest and the United States still exists today: while linguists continue to debate midwestern dialect borders, the popular view held by most Americans is that the Midwest is the seat of “General American” English. Today, according to sociolinguist Matthew J. Gordon, “General American” is associated with the Midwest because the speech of this region “generally lacks features that are salient markers of place to the ears of most Americans,” creating the “perception that the region is ‘accentless.’”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the region’s indistinctness – the quality that has led to its reputation as “flyover country” – is also what has allowed it to take on a quintessentially “American” identity. In the early twentieth century, however, “General American” had distinct geographic associations, which are still culturally influential today. As David Marion Holman argues in a book comparing southern and midwestern regionalist writing, “the Midwest is the region that defines itself most as nation and is accepted as such by other regions of the country. The South is a particular *place*; the Midwest is ‘the

<sup>46</sup> James R. Barrett and David Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the ‘New Immigrant’ Working Class,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 16, 3 (Spring 1997), 3–44, 6. For more on how this racialized discourse of Americanization and immigration affects twenty-first-century immigration rhetoric see J. David Cisneros, “A Nation of Immigrants and a Nation of Laws: Race, Multiculturalism, and Neoliberal Exception in Barack Obama’s Immigration Discourse,” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8, 3 (Sept. 2015), 356–75.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew J. Gordon, “The West and Midwest: Phonology,” in Edgar W. Schneider, ed., *Varieties of English: The Americas and the Caribbean* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 129–43, 129.

Heartland’,” a designation that strips the Midwest of its individuality while distinguishing it by virtue of its representativeness.<sup>48</sup>

The reputation as “quintessentially American” that was beginning to attach itself to the Midwest and its language made its way into the region’s fiction by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1892, Indiana author Edward Eggleston attached a new Preface to his 1871 novel *The Hoosier School-Master* which suggested that midwestern speech should no longer be considered regionally distinctive but nationally representative. Eggleston’s entry into the literary world was one of savvy opportunism. He began writing *The Hoosier School-Master*, his first novel, in a mercenary attempt to revitalize *Hearth and Home* magazine, a struggling weekly publication he had recently taken over as editor.<sup>49</sup> The first episode of the serial attracted more attention than Eggleston anticipated, triggering an uptick in subscriptions, so he quickly expanded the story’s length from the planned three installments to a novel-length fourteen.<sup>50</sup> Upon subsequent publication of the serial in book form, Eggleston inserted a preface attributing grander regional motivations to his novel than it seems he might have originally intended. He declared that his novel was born of a desire to “do something towards describing life in the back-country districts of the Western States,” which seemed to have “no place in literature,” despite being “not less interesting, not less romantic, and certainly not less filled with humorous and grotesque material” than life in New England.<sup>51</sup> Whether or not regional representation was Eggleston’s initial intention, *The Hoosier School-Master* is indeed notable primarily for his detailed portrayal of rural midwestern life, and particularly for accurately recording local dialect. Eggleston kept lists of local Indiana phrases that he heard in his day-to-day life and deployed them freely. Implying that his representation of the Indiana dialect is accurate enough to form the basis of a linguistic study, Eggleston explained in the original 1871 Preface to the novel that he had been “careful to preserve the true *usus loquendi* of each locution” and that he trusted his “little story may afford material for some one better qualified than I to criticize the dialect.”<sup>52</sup>

That the Midwest could linguistically and culturally represent the nation as a whole is something Eggleston seems to have begun to recognize as early as 1892, when he published a revised version of *The Hoosier School-Master*.

<sup>48</sup> David Marion Holman, *A Certain Slant of Light: Regionalism and the Form of Southern and Midwestern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 17, original emphasis.

<sup>49</sup> Ronald Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 28. <sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1883), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Weber, 29; Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (1883), 6.

Once again seeing an opportunity to attach greater significance to his novel, Eggleston wrote a new Preface that draws special attention to the many international translations that had been made of the book, emphasizing the difficulty he imagines translators would have had in coming up with foreign equivalents of the novel's regional speech. "It may be imagined that the translator found it no easy task to get equivalents in French for expressions in a dialect new and strange," he says of one translation, adding later, "What are the equivalents in High German for 'right smart' and 'dog-on' I cannot imagine."<sup>53</sup> In the novel, unfamiliarity with phrases such as these is what one Indiana woman uses to demonstrate the eponymous schoolmaster's outsider Yankee status. Using an example of the Hoosier dialect that Eggleston also drew attention to in his Preface, the woman says, "Twenty year ago, when he come to these 'ere diggings, that air Squire Hawkins was a poar Yankee school-master, that said 'pail' instead of bucket ... and that couldn't tell to save his gizzard what we meant by 'low and by *right smart*."<sup>54</sup> In this context, failing to understand the meaning of "right smart" serves to set the eastern schoolmaster apart from the native Hoosiers; in including "right smart" in his discussion of the international translations of the text, Eggleston repositions the dichotomy between native and outsider from Indianan versus easterner to American versus non-English speaker.

By making this comparison and contrasting the novel's dialect with other languages besides English, Eggleston makes the form of English found in his novel seem representatively American rather than specifically Indianan.<sup>55</sup> In one of the early footnotes added for this revised edition, he makes this point explicitly, telling his readers,

"Nough said" is more than enough said for the French translator, who takes it apparently for a sort of barbarous negative and renders it, "I don't like to speak to him." I need hardly explain to any American reader that *enough said* implies the ending of all discussion by the acceptance of the proposition or challenge.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master: A Story of Backwoods Life in Indiana* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1892), 15, 16.

<sup>54</sup> Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (1892), 70–71. The italics are the author's.

<sup>55</sup> In 1903, Mark Twain made a similar, though humorous, assertion about the challenges facing translators when he published *The Jumping Frog: In English, Then in French, Then Clawed Back into a Civilized Language Once More by Patient, Unremunerated Toil*, which he claimed would demonstrate that the French translation of his book "is no more like the Jumping Frog when [the translator] gets through with it than I am like a meridian of longitude." Mark Twain, *The Jumping Frog: In English, Then in French, Then Clawed Back into a Civilized Language Once More by Patient, Unremunerated Toil* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1903), 3.

<sup>56</sup> Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (1892), 41.

By 1892, instead of highlighting the regional aspect of his language, as he had twenty years earlier, Eggleston was emphasizing the fact that all Americans can understand the nuances of the novel's dialect, especially in comparison to non-native American English readers.

By the time Ruth Suckow published *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, the Midwest's status as nationally representative had become almost axiomatic, especially as the politics of immigration became even more complex. Suckow, a second-generation American, did not face any personal backlash due to her German heritage during World War I, but she, too, felt uncomfortable with the wave of anti-German sentiment that swept the nation.<sup>57</sup> She gave Marjorie this same experience in her novel: when a zealously patriotic neighborhood woman talks about "Hun atrocities," Marjorie looks "in rebellious wonder at her own father's mild, kindly face; remembered the old Germantown farm and Grandpa Shoessel picking out an ear of corn with red silk for a dolly ... Grandma in her dress of sprigged black lawn, her beaming smile and shy, loving touch." Consequently, when she went around town "to ask people to buy war stamps," Marjorie was silent and let her partner do the talking, not speaking up for her German family but refusing to speak against them, too.<sup>58</sup>

But in spite of Suckow's discomfort with how German Americans had been vilified during World War I, the opening of *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* takes advantage of the dichotomy between the two identities that the war had brought out to emphasize Marjorie's Americanness. During her family's visit to Germantown, her grandparents' German-inflected language makes them seem strange, unfamiliar, and "alien" to Marjorie. This is exacerbated by the seemingly uncomplicated "Americanness" of her grandparents on her mother's side, who were "native" Americans "from 'York State'."<sup>59</sup> Compared with each other, Marjorie's maternal grandparents became more familiar, and her German grandparents more "alien." Linguistically, Suckow makes a similar comparison through the language presented to readers on the page, using the German speech of the immigrants as a foil for Marjorie's speech. While her grandparents' German-influenced speech is written in dialect – Marjorie's grandparents both use "den" for "then," for example – Marjorie's speech is recorded in standard English spelling. This phonetic comparison immediately establishes Marjorie's speech as "standard" and Marjorie herself as a speaker of "General American."

<sup>57</sup> Margaret Matlack Kiesel, "Iowans in the Arts: Ruth Suckow in the Twenties," *Annals of Iowa*, 45, 4 (Spring 1980), 259–87, 261.

<sup>58</sup> Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, 297–98.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

In using immigrant language as a foil for American speech, Suckow follows Eggleston's and Mencken's examples of defining Americanness through comparisons to nonnative English speakers.<sup>60</sup> She contradicts Mencken's thesis of a unified dialect-free American, however, by using another dialect – this time a regional American one – to achieve the same effect only a few short chapters later, when she compares midwestern speech to southern speech. Just like many real American girls throughout the country at the turn of the century, Marjorie and her friends spend many afternoons pretending to be the characters found within the pages of their favorite books, Annie Fellows Johnston's Little Colonel series.<sup>61</sup> The aspect of the books that the girls are most taken with, and that Suckow focusses on in her depiction of the novels, is Johnston's romantic, nostalgic version of the antebellum South, and the way that southern identity is conveyed through the characters' speech. The girls love Little Colonel's southern accent, and they put on that accent themselves, parroting the southern dialect. Marjorie in particular enjoys speaking as the Little Colonel characters do: “‘We must practice talking Southern,’ Marjorie said, ‘the way the Little Colonel talks. You mustn’t sound your *r*’s when you’re talking Southern. You must say ‘mothuh’ and ‘fathuh’ and ‘you-all’; and you must call door ‘dough.’ That’s the way the Little Colonel does.’”<sup>62</sup> On the page, the southern words in Marjorie's instructions to her friends are isolated in quotation marks, and the southern pronunciation of “door” – “dough” – is given directly next to Marjorie's pronunciation of it, which is recorded in standard spelling. As in the Germantown opening, Suckow's focus on speech and regionally specific language in these scenes sets the midwestern speech spoken by Marjorie into relief. When Marjorie and her friends finish playacting and strip away their fake southern accents to return to their normal speech – which is almost always written in standard English – midwestern speech once again emerges as a benchmark for Americanness and “authenticity.”

These linguistic preoccupations come to a head in the middle of the novel, when Marjorie temporarily moves out of her home region. Throughout the first half of the novel, Marjorie's primary ambition is to go to Boston, a place she has never visited but that represents to her a more sophisticated

<sup>60</sup> Mencken was an early admirer and correspondent of Ruth Suckow's. As a magazine editor, he published Suckow's short stories in both the *Smart Set* and the *American Mercury*.

<sup>61</sup> Annie Fellows Johnston's fifteen-book Little Colonel series, which first began to appear in 1895, was the most popular series of books for children in the early twentieth century. The least successful book in the series had still sold an impressive 81,000 copies by the time of Annie Fellows Johnston's death in 1931. Sue Lynn McGuire, “The Little Colonel: A Phenomenon in Popular Literary Culture,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 89, 2 (Spring 1991), 121–46, 138.

<sup>62</sup> Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, 55.

way of life. “Boston stood, classic and white, in her imagination,” the narrator explains, a description that evokes images of ancient, classical Greek and Roman cities more than it does the reality of redbrick Massachusetts.<sup>63</sup> A city “classic and *white*” also suggests the racialized thinking that underpinned the Americanization campaigns of the early 1900s, associating Marjorie’s idealized vision of Boston with a place desirably Anglo-Saxon in its cultural and demographic makeup.

Marjorie’s impression of Boston as somewhere more “classic” than her native Midwest is reinforced by her attitude to eastern speech. Thinking about returning to the Midwest, she hopes that she could come back “wearing different clothes, and with her hands very slim and strong. Perhaps she would have an Eastern accent and not sound her r’s.”<sup>64</sup> In describing the eastern accent she hopes to acquire, Marjorie picks up on the same aspect of speech, the pronunciation of “r’s” that she had given particular attention to in southern speech as well. Yet while Marjorie had described the southern accent by explaining how to pronounce southern r’s, she describes the process of acquiring an eastern accent as ridding herself of an aspect of her midwestern accent—her midwestern r’s. This gives the impression that eastern speech is not simply an alternative accent that Marjorie can exchange with her midwestern one, in the same way she hopes to exchange her midwestern clothes for eastern clothes, but a standard of perfection that can only be achieved by eliminating the element that makes midwestern speech incorrect by comparison.

Following the path of Suckow’s own education, which took her from Iowa to the Curry School of Elocution and Expression in Boston for two years before she returned west, Marjorie does eventually make her way to Boston as a student of elocution and declamation, a course of study that allows Suckow to draw special attention to the difference in accepted speech in the Midwest and the East.<sup>65</sup> In Iowa, the pieces that would “do to give” were dialect pieces, such as poems by Indiana dialect poet James Whitcomb Riley, whose 1907 poem “The Raggedy Man,” for example, begins, “O the Raggedy Man / He works fer Pa / An’ he’s the goodest man ever you saw!”<sup>66</sup> In Boston, however, dialect pieces—even those “that had always

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> For a closer look at the social implications of the kind of elocution training Marjorie undertook, and the limitations imposed upon how the women who took these courses could use their qualifications once they had obtained them—something that plagues Marjorie throughout the latter part of the novel—see Marian Wilson Kimber, “The Odyssey of a Nice Girl: Elocution and Women’s Cultural Aspirations,” in Kimber, *The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 1–26.

<sup>66</sup> Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, 140.

brought encores at the lodge meetings in Wahseta” – are looked down upon, and Marjorie’s western accent and declamation training put her at a disadvantage.<sup>67</sup> She feels like an outsider among the eastern girls who recite pieces by British Victorian poets, who say words like “adorable” and “perfectly cunning,” pronounce “darling” and “marvellous” as “dahling” and “mahvellous,”<sup>68</sup> and who chatter “in an alien speech with the r’s in the wrong places.”<sup>69</sup> Marjorie’s observation that the eastern girls speak “with the r’s in the wrong places” contradicts her previous beliefs about which regional speakers pronounce their r’s correctly. Now that Marjorie is experiencing the East for herself, she sees the eastern mode of speaking as incorrect and “alien” as compared to her own. What’s more, just as the southern speech did, the speech of the eastern girls who “put their r’s in the wrong places” appears phonetically on the page, as opposed to Marjorie’s speech, making the eastern speech appear foreign to readers, just as it sounds to Marjorie.

By emphasizing the displacement Marjorie feels in Boston through the disorienting sensation of not speaking the native language, Suckow reintroduces the immigrant narrative she had evoked at the beginning of the novel through Marjorie’s German grandparents. Now, however, it is Marjorie who finds herself in the position of the outsider, and the fact that her eastern classmates “were not sure of her” because she was from somewhere else and spoke differently reflects her own childhood discomfort with her foreign grandparents.<sup>70</sup> Marjorie’s years in Boston, then, bring back the idea of immigrant language established at the beginning of the novel, once again using it to position the Midwest as the seat of standard “Americanism.” But while Mencken had used the American language to bury the memory of his German background and to promote a unified view of the American language, Suckow, in this novel, uses language to emphasize the many different types of speech present in the United States. The linguistic comparisons, and the associations Marjorie makes between various dialects and regional identities, highlight how the presence of those many dialects – foreign and regional – were contributing to the establishment of a standard American identity for the Midwest, reflecting the linguistic politics of the early twentieth-century United States. In using the eastern and southern dialects in the same way she uses the German English dialect of Marjorie’s grandparents, however, Suckow creates a more nuanced picture of 1920s American culture than the one many Americans were looking to find in the Midwest. Marjorie’s Midwest might be “standard,” but her standard speech still sounds strange and foreign to some Americans. With her representation of the many dialects and identities present in the United

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

States, Suckow suggests that her brand of “standard” Americanism is not as representative as many Americans might have wanted it to be.

In 1923, two years before the publication of Suckow’s novel, Montana Senator Washington J. McCormick proposed a bill to officially rename the predominant US language “American.”<sup>71</sup> Nationally, the bill never went beyond the committee level, but the idea of designating “American” as an official language found traction in Illinois, where similar legislation was passed into law in June of that year.<sup>72</sup> The Illinois bill relied heavily on rhetoric that drew on the American immigrant experience to explain why substituting “American” for “English” would be significant, stating, “Whereas, America has been a haven of liberty and place of opportunity for the common people of all nations; and ... Whereas, The name of the language of a country has a powerful psychological influence in stimulating and preserving the national ideal,” the official language should bear the same name as the citizens of the country.<sup>73</sup> The adoption of “American” as the official language of Illinois was more symbolic than functional – nobody was forced either to use English or to stop using any other language – but the measure’s emphasis on the United States as a destination for immigrants in order to justify the emblematic importance of language, coming after years of legislation which limited the use of German, reinforces the integral role that immigration and the idea of one unified nation played in language debates.

As the twentieth century progressed, the rhetoric surrounding immigration, American unity, and language would only become sharper and more pointed. The issue of an American national language once again became prominent during the 1980s in response to yet another wave of immigration, this time from predominantly Spanish-speaking countries in Central and South America. Official English legislation appeared for the first time in 1981, when an amendment to the Constitution that would establish English as the official language of the United States – and, in a departure from McCormick’s 1923 proposal, forbid federal officials or bodies from using any language other than English – was introduced to Congress by California Senator S. I. Hayakawa.<sup>74</sup> Like McCormick’s bill, the measure never became

<sup>71</sup> Joshua Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 96.

<sup>72</sup> Bills to make “American” the official state language have also appeared in the state legislatures of Minnesota (1923), North Dakota (1937), New Jersey (1944), and Massachusetts (1952), but all have failed. Baron, *The English-Only Question*, 128.

<sup>73</sup> H. L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 82–83.

<sup>74</sup> Hayakawa would go on to found U.S. English, an organization with the promotion and adoption of English Only legislation as its primary goal, in 1983.

law, but proposals for Official English legislation have been more successful on the state level: since 1981, twenty-five states have established English as an official language, for a current total of thirty-two states that have, or have had, some form of English-language legislation.<sup>75</sup>

Since the 1981 proposal, bills advocating for the adoption of English as the official national language have appeared every few years, all steeped in language that reveals a persistent discomfort with immigrants and their place in the country while superficially celebrating the United States' reputation as a "nation of immigrants."<sup>76</sup> Alabama Senator Richard Shelby's Language of Government Act of 1995 argued for English Only legislation by stating that though "the United States has benefited and continues to benefit" from the "rich diversity" that the country has gained from comprising people from many different cultures and backgrounds, "the common thread binding those of differing backgrounds has been a common language." Spanish, which became the second-most-spoken language in the United States during the twentieth century, is now the main target of these types of bill, not German, yet the bill's proposal that "to preserve unity in diversity, and to prevent division along linguistic lines, the United States should maintain a language common to all people" echoes arguments made during World War I, when speaking German was considered divisive and seditious.<sup>77</sup> A Constitutional amendment that proposed to designate English as the American national language was first introduced in 2005 by Iowa Congressman Steve King, who reintroduced the bill

<sup>75</sup> Louisiana is included in this total, but it is, once again, an exceptional case due to having been admitted to the Union with a majority population of non-English speakers. In order to protect the rights of the minority English speakers, Congress mandated a provision in the state's constitution that required that all official documents be published in English (although publishing documents in other languages as well was still permitted). The laws governing language use in the state have gone through many different iterations since this provision was put in place in 1812, but today Louisiana recognizes no official language, and the most recent state constitution, passed in 1974, protects the rights of all groups to preserve and promote their respective historic linguistic and cultural origins. Roger K. Ward, "The French Language in Louisiana Law and Legal Education: A Requiem," *Louisiana Law Review*, 57, 4 (Summer 1997), 1283–1324; Jake Grovum, "A Growing Divide over Official-English Laws," *Pewtrusts.org*, 8 Aug. 2014, at [www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2014/08/08/the-growing-divide-over-official-english-laws](http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2014/08/08/the-growing-divide-over-official-english-laws) (accessed 31 Jan. 2021).

<sup>76</sup> References to the "American" language disappeared in the second half of the twentieth century as the United States' position on the global stage became more secure, perhaps making America's urge to differentiate itself from other English-speaking countries less acute. The General Assembly of Illinois, the only state to use "American" as its official language, quietly passed a bill changing the official language of the state from "American" to "English" in 1969, and since then, language bills have consistently referred to the proposed national language as "English" instead of "American."

<sup>77</sup> "S. 175 – Language of Government Act of 1995," *Congress.gov*, 9 Jan. 1995, at [www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/senate-bill/175/text?r=5&cs=1](http://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/senate-bill/175/text?r=5&cs=1) (accessed 31 Jan. 2021).

as the English Unity Act in 2007, and again most recently as the English Language Unity Act in 2011.<sup>78</sup>

Opponents of this type of legislation campaign against it for various reasons, but many cite issues of discrimination against non-English speakers as one of their central arguments. In a 1987 resolution, the Linguistic Society of America officially came out against the movement to adopt English as the official national language, arguing that such measures are unnecessary because “evidence suggests that recent immigrants are overwhelmingly aware of the ... advantages of becoming proficient in English, and require no additional compulsion to learn the language” and, furthermore, that “American unity has never rested primarily on unity of language, but rather on common political and social ideals.”<sup>79</sup>

Despite the emphasis that Marjorie and Suckow herself both place on language throughout *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, this is, ultimately, the view that the novel seems to take. After years of aimlessness following her time in Boston, Marjorie ends up leaving the Midwest for good to go to Colorado, where she marries a man who plans to purchase and run a fruit farm – a decision that surprises her resolutely supportive mother, who is prompted to recall Marjorie’s intense childhood dislike of her German grandparents’ own farm. Readers are not given much insight into Marjorie’s own views on her new life in Colorado, or into whether or not this move west finally satisfies her. After Marjorie decides to leave the Midwest, which she does quickly and impulsively, the novel shifts from her point of view to that of her mother, who is back in Buena Vista to finalize her own move to Colorado to be near her daughter. When Marjorie’s voice disappears from the narrative, she loses the ability to conclude her story herself, something she has been fighting for the right to do throughout the novel. Yet Marjorie’s apparent happiness with her new husband in the West suggests that the silence the narrative has granted her is, in fact, what might allow her to finally find fulfilment.

As a girl growing up, Marjorie fixated on other regions’ speech, constructing her idea of who she wanted to become from elements of the eastern and southern accents that, to her, conveyed a sense of each region’s personality. By the time she moves to the far West, however, she seems to have outgrown this type

<sup>78</sup> Unlike some other similar legislation, this amendment would not have overturned any existing laws protecting bilingualism or require government business to be conducted in English alone.

<sup>79</sup> Geoff Nunberg, “Resolution: English Only,” *linguisticsociety.org*, adopted 1 July 1987, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20080421145728/http://www.lsadc.org/info/lsa-res-english.cfm> (accessed 31 Jan. 2021). For more on the arguments for and against Official English legislation see David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 127–140.

of linguistic identification. She does not pick out any aspects of western speech to focus on, nor does she consider how to adjust her own midwestern speech to better fit into her new environment. When talking with Len Pooley, a western boy she spends time with during her first trip to Colorado, Marjorie acknowledges that while she enjoys his running commentary, “She would not permit herself to really think about the things he was telling her,” something readers are also prevented from doing by the fact that Len’s speech never appears on the page for us to interpret.<sup>80</sup> In this depiction of the West, then, the region is defined not through shared language, but through shared experience. In finishing her story in a place where the potential for new experiences is abundant, and by limiting the recorded speech of that place, Suckow suggests that the midwestern type of linguistic “authenticity” is not, and should not be, a satisfying ending, either for her novel or for the American concept of language. In the far West, for Marjorie and Suckow, it is not the language itself, but the feeling and experience conveyed through it, that makes the difference.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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<sup>80</sup> Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, 328.