**Self-Aware, Self-Reliant, Self-Imposed:**

**The Isolating Effects of White Masculinity in Richard Ford's Bascombe Trilogy**

by

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**Abstract**

Richard Ford's Bascombe trilogy has been lauded by critics and scholars alike for its unique observational perspective on humanity and existence, which is delivered through the voice and thoughts of narrator Frank Bascombe. Much of the scholarly discourse on the Bascombe trilogy, regarding its narrator, focuses on analyzing Frank's pragmatic philosophy on life and existence as a coping mechanism, or dissecting his feelings of isolation and alienation, while largely ignoring the underlying cause of both. In this paper I will argue that Ford uses his narrator to illuminate the self-imposed isolation from modern society of middle-age and middle-class white men like Frank Bascombe, men who find themselves lost in a world where whiteness is slowly shifting from the default. I will examine how Bascombe avoids forming connections with the people he encounters, and especially people of color, by crafting fictional narratives about their lives and backgrounds—narratives which are often rife with stereotypes—instead of actually communicating with them. Through close reading of Ford's texts, and applying concepts from sociology and gender studies to his narrator, I will assert that Bascombe's isolation is the result of clinging to an emotionally-crippling model of masculinity and delve into its causal relationship to Bascombe's failings as a friend, father, and husband.

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**Self-Aware, Self-Reliant, Self-Imposed: The Isolating Effects of White Masculinity in Richard Ford's Bascombe Trilogy**

Richard Ford's Bascombe trilogy[1] catapulted the esteemed short-story writer into the American literary limelight, and garnered comparisons to literary titans such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The first novel in the series, *The Sportswriter,* was published in 1986, and was named to *Time Magazine*'s list of the one hundred best English-language novels published since the magazine's inception in 1923. The sequel, 1995's *Independence Day,* became the first novel to win both the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner awards while entrenching Ford's place as one of the preeminent American writers. The trilogy's final novel, Ford's 2006 offering *The Lay of the Land,* closes the trilogy in satisfying, if not spectacular fashion, but failed to receive the critical recognition of the previous two books.

The Bascombe trilogy spans eighteen years in the life of narrator Frank Bascombe, with each book focusing on the events of a singly holiday. In these novels, Frank carries on the lengthy lineage of American literary protagonists commonly referred to as the everyman. The everyman is a character with whom the audience is supposed to be able to connect, or relate with. And, as is the case with Frank and most other everyman characters in the American literary tradition—especially true in suburban literature—Ford's everyman is male, middle to upper class, and white. As Kathy Knapp states in her book *American Unexceptionalism,* "There is no question that Frank Bascombe begins as

[1] Technically a tetralogy, following the 2016 publication of the punningly titled, and Pulitzer nominated, *Let Me Be Frank With You.* This paper, however, will focus solely upon the first three novels.

a card-carrying member of a group of seminal suburbanites that includes Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt and John Updike's Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom. . . . the Bascombe we encounter in *The Sportswriter* is likewise isolated and adrift in a hostile environment" (3).

Isolation and alienation are hallmark characteristics of the white suburban everyman, and critics have offered up a litany of reasons for Frank's isolation. Knapp, for instance, attributes Frank's isolation to grief, "Frank's is indeed a story of personal illness: after the death of his oldest son, unwilling to confront his own grief or console his wife and remaining two children in theirs, he is lost in a solipsistic state he calls "dreaminess" but which might more aptly be called selfish indifference" (9). In contrast, Scholar Jeffrey J. Folks posits that Frank's isolation "result[s] from the disjointedness of his cultural roots; due to his transient and disjunctive family history and the national history of dramatic social change during his lifetime, Frank is alienated from home, family, and local culture" (Folks 128). There is certainly merit to both readings, especially the former, as the loss of his first child is the defining moment in Frank's life. I agree that the texts certainly support Ralph's death, and Frank's inability to deal with the resultant grief, as the impetus of Frank's isolating behaviors. However, I would assert that Ford portrays the root of Frank's problems as stemming from a much deeper source: the obsolete model of white masculinity he strictly adheres to throughout the novels.

In this paper, I will argue that Richard Ford uses the character of Frank Bascombe to portray the isolating effects of traditional white masculinity in the modern American social landscape. I will examine how Ford depicts isolation by having Frank, the self-professed failed writer, create narrative backstories as a means of avoiding emotional connections with the people in his life. These narratives, which are often

shown to be completely without truth, illustrate Frank's disconnect from modern society, and especially people of color. Finally, I will demonstrate how Ford depicts Frank's self-reliant brand of traditional white masculinity as the driving force behind the narrator's profound sense of isolation. Ford's writing is a master class in the use of ambiguity, and it often seems as if he vacillates between lamenting the deterioration of traditional masculinity and condemning it. Ultimately, I propose that the Bascombe trilogy is a cautionary tale of the emotionally crippling ramifications of clinging to the traditional model of white masculinity in the modern world.

## Isolation Through Narration

Throughout the trilogy, Frank tends to craft narrative backstories for nearly everybody he encounters. Brian Duffy, the first literary scholar to publish a monograph on the Bascombe trilogy, posits that narrative is a central theme of the Bascombe trilogy, and states that by telling his story "Frank has 'put order' on his past by 'recounting what has been,' and has '[preserved] the meaning' of what happened, thus allowing him to face into the future with the wisdom and lessons these meanings have brought to light"[2] (56-7). I would assert that Frank's proclivity for assigning a fictional background to those he meets serves a similar function. Ford depicts his character as constantly trying to order his present by creating a false connection with a person whom he seems incapable of otherwise connecting with. These false connections may help Frank to put order to a changing world he finds himself increasingly isolated from, but they are also a driving force for that very isolation. I suggest that Ford reveals the dangers of imposing imagined identities on others through Frank, who ultimately used his imaginary backstories to protect himself from interpersonal interactions and ensures that he remains unencumbered by the emotional burdens of relationships.

As his ex-wife Ann notes in *Independence Day* "Everything's in quotes with you Frank. Nothing's really solid. Every time I talk to you, I feel everything's being written by you, even my lines.... You just want everything to seem perfect and everybody to seem pleased. And you're willing to let *seem* equal *be*" (184). The implication is that

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[2] Here Duffy is analyzing Frank through the lens of French philosopher Paul Ricouer, whom he is quoting, to make a connection between narrative and identity.

Frank, the ex-writer, is rewriting the world into the image he wants, instead of living in the world which actually exists. Through his observations, ruminations, and narratives Frank crafts the world around him into something which more closely resembles the world he longs for. Ian Maguire characterizes Frank as "a much diluted and ironized… version of [Harold] Bloom's 'strong poet'—the man or woman who is able to remake the world and the self through an act of will or imagination" (271). But I would suggest that Frank's efforts to remake the world are not necessarily diluted or ironized but rather a willful, almost aggressive act of solipsism—that Ford's trilogy, in other words, suggests that Frank's persistent reimagination of people and events as other than they really are is one of the leading causes of his isolation and, by extension, one of the leading sources of white male discontent.

For instance, in *The Sportswriter*, Frank travels on assignment to the suburbs of Detroit to interview Herb Wallagher, a former professional football player confined to a wheelchair after a devastating injury. Immediately upon meeting Herb and his wife Clarice, Frank observes a brief interaction between the two and his narrative instincts take over:

> Herb growls, then grins. It is their little burlesque, though it's an odd thing to see in people of two different races, and so young. Herb couldn't be thirty-four yet, though he looks fifty. And Clarice has entered that long, pale, uncertain middle existence in which years behind you is not a faithful measure of life. Possibly she is thirty, but she is Herb's wife, and that fact has made everything else—race, age, hopes—fade. They are like retirees, and neither has gotten what he or she bargained for. (155)

Despite having only a brief encounter with the couple, Frank presumes to have intimate knowledge of their marriage dynamics, and feels qualified to evaluate their happiness based on a few moments of observation. This passage demonstrates a pattern which persists throughout the novels. First, Frank identifies an "other," in this case being the interracial marriage between Herb and Clarice, which he distinguishes by noting that their cozy interactions are odd for people of different races. Following this distinguishing of an "other," he crafts a story for them which adheres to his view of what such a relationship should be, based upon little actual evidence.

The continuing scene, in which Frank interviews Herb, encapsulates Frank's need to create narratives, and applies it to the overall narrative of the book. This is illustrated by Frank's style of sports writing, which as Duffy points out, is predicated upon "optimistic reports of disadvantage and adversity overcome" (43). Frank has every intention of writing a fluff piece about how "Herb has become an inspiration to his former teammates by demonstrating courage and determination" (5). Herb, however, does not fit into the comfortable narrative Frank has pre-assigned to him. Herb is bitter, and perhaps slightly unhinged, preferring to focus on his past life instead of conforming to the inspirational image Frank wants him to represent. When Frank continues to attempt to steer him in the direction he wants the story to go, the former football player calls him out, "'Oh Frank, you're really full of shit.' Herb shakes his head in complete amazement" (*Sportswriter* 160). It's hard to argue with Herb's acerbic assessment of Frank. When the reality of Herb's life fails to conform to the story Frank wants to tell, Frank retreats from the reality and ends up scrapping the story entirely.

As Frank prepares to leave Herb's house after the conclusion of the unsuccessful interview, there is a moment when Herb is on the verge of breaking down which epitomizes Frank's disconnect from the world around him:

> Herb's sad blue eyes suddenly fill with hot tears, and he shakes his big head to dash them away. It is the sadness of elusive life glimpsed and unfairly lost, and the following, lifelong contest with bitter facts. Pity in other words, for himself, and as justly earned as a game ball. Only I do not want to feel it and won't. It is too close to regret to play fast and loose with. And the only thing worse than terrible regret is unearned terrible regret. And for that reason I will not bend to it, will, in fact, go on to the bottom with my own ship. (*Sportswriter* 164)

In this passage Ford portrays Frank's isolation as self-imposed. Frank does not lack empathy; rather, he voluntarily chooses to ignore it to maintain his distance from the world at large. In this passage, and several others throughout the novels, Ford depicts Frank as having the opportunity to connect with somebody in desperate need of connection, but choosing to remain aloof. He puts on a performative veneer of optimism as he backs away saying "I'm glad I met you, Herb" (*Sportswriter* 164). In this moment, Frank fully lives up to Herb's aforementioned assessment of him: he is indeed "full of shit."

In fact, Frank—in one of his numerous parenthetical ruminations—rejects the very notion of connecting with anybody. This is shown when he reminisces on his brief romance with the much younger Catherine Flaherty "(There's nothing like spending eight weeks alone with a woman two decades your junior to make you wise to the fact that you'll someday disappear … and dismally aware how impossible it is to ever be "with"

another human being)" (*Independence Day 93).* For Frank, the very notion of connecting with another human being is a futile endeavor, and one to be avoided—something he accomplishes through his repeated crafting of narrative backstories.

Frank's isolating backstories continue into the trilogy's second installment, *Independence Day.* Frank's inability to connect with people is again on display, with the wife of his tenant Larry Mcleod, Betty. Again, there is a racial component at work in this scenario, as Betty is white, and Larry is not, a situation which Frank repeatedly seems to find difficult to accept, even when he is involved. Frank struggles to communicate with Betty, observing, "If Betty happens to answer the door she simply stares out at me as if she's never seen me before, and has in any case stopped communicating with words. Sometimes neither of us speaks. I just stand on the porch trying to look pleasant, while she peers silently out" (30). Here Frank finds conventional conversation impossible, but despite his lack of communication with Betty, he has no problem crafting a story to fit his preconceived notions of her:

> To my notice she's always worn a perpetually disappointed look that says she regrets all her major life choices yet feels absolutely certain she made the right moral decision in every instance, and is better than you because of it. It's the typical three-way liberal paradox: anxiety mingled with pride and self-loathing. (122)

In this passage Frank extrapolates his description of Betty, despite a dearth of data caused by his failure to communicate with her. Additionally, Frank seems to be projecting some of his own shortcomings onto her. His feeling that Betty thinks of herself as better for making the right moral choices, suggests that he does not feel that he has always made

the right moral choices himself. Frank, the self-professed failed writer, often seems to treat the people he meets as exercises from a creative writing classroom, as if their story and character is his to develop as he sees fit.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this scene with the Mcleods is that Frank's narrative flights of fancy extend beyond the past and present, and into a prospective future. Frank says of the family, "The Mcleods are also, I'm afraid, the kind of family who could someday go paranoid and barricade themselves in their (my) house, issue confused manifestos, fire shots at the police and eventually torch everything, killing all within. (This, of course, is no reason to evict them.)" (*Independence Day* 122). This passage is the culmination of Frank's inability to connect with either of the Mcleods. He does not understand them, so he perceives them as potentially dangerous. Duffy notes that "Frank's relationship with Larry is marked by an utter inability to connect with each other" and this is certainly true. However, the inability to connect with Betty is equally important, as it shows that Frank's isolation is all-encompassing and not exclusionary in nature.

This is further evidenced near the end of *Independence Day,* when Carter Page—an old friend of Frank's from his time with the Divorced Men's Club in *The Sportswriter*—startles Frank as he's staring at the house where he once lived with his family. Carter, who Frank says is "arguably my best friend in town" (443*),* is about as similar to Frank as is possible, yet there still seems to be little sense of connection between the two. Frank again seeks to foster a better understanding of somebody through his imagination, saying as the extended small talk of their conversation begins to falter that Carson "is now inventorying his day's thoughts, jokes, headlines, sports scores,

trying to determine if there's anything he can say to interest me that won't take over thirty more seconds yet still provide him an exit line. . . . I, of course, am doing the same" (446). Perhaps the most interesting bit of this particular example of Frank's narrative tendencies, is that when he tries to imagine what Carter is thinking, he assumes that Carter thinks the same way he does. No doubt, this is due to their perceived similarities, as both are white upper-middle class men, and a sense of familiarity from having known one another for years. Yet Carter proves Frank's observations wrong, as it becomes evident that he is not looking for a way out of the conversation, as Frank is. He asks several thoughtful questions, offers empathy for Frank's divorce, and seems genuinely interested in how his friend is coping with "life's travails" (*Independence Day 449).* Frank, by contrast, further elucidates his views on the value of communication by saying of his conversation with Carter, "Save when tragedies strike, there's little that really needs to be said to most people you know" (447). Contrarily, there seems to be a suggestion that Frank does value the conversation with his friend, as when it ends Frank feels "slightly embarrassed" and states in closing that "I motor off into my day, smiling" (450). Despite his desire to isolate himself from society, his embarrassment suggests that he realizes his ruminations about his friend may have been incorrect, and it seems that—despite his reservations—the encounter has bolstered his spirits.

Frank's doubts about the veracity of the narratives he creates for people comes to a forefront in the trilogy's final book *The Lay of the Land.* After the window of his truck is vandalized, he stops for repairs at a small mechanic's shop, where he encounters Chris—a seemingly young mechanic reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* behind the counter. True to form, he immediately "others" Chris, noting his Greek

heritage. Following the "othering," Frank proceeds to craft a narrative backstory for Chris, noting that "Likely he's a Monmouth College student on Thanksgiving break, the first off his immigrant family to blub, blub, blub" (Lay of the Land 327). The "blubs" at the end of the sentence suggest that Frank may not be entirely interested in the backstory he crafts for Chris, or at least not as interested as he seems to be about Chris's views on Fitzgerald's titular protagonist: "I'm tempted to poll his views about Jay Gatz. Victim? Ill-starred innocent? Gray-tinged antihero? Or all three at once, vividly registering Fitzgerald's glum assessment of our century's plight—now blessedly at an end" (*Lay* 327). This illustrates the height of Frank's disconnect from society; he is more interested in the abstract than connecting with Chris. While it could be argued that his interest in Chris's thoughts on *The Great Gatsby* may signal a desire to connect with him, Frank never succumbs to the temptation to ask the question. Once again, he chooses isolation over connection.

Frank recognizes the folly in his system of treating people as characters when Chris finds him huddling in his car, after having a potential nervous breakdown in the bar next door—a scene which will be visited in more detail near this paper's conclusion. When Frank views his mechanic turned savior, he sees a vastly different version of the Chris whose backstory he had earlier concocted, noting "Chris doesn't act like a struggling American Existentialist scholarship boy at Monmouth, but a sweet, knuckleheaded grease monkey weighing a stint in trade school or the Navy" (352). Frank's story changes as he views Chris in the new light of headlights in a dark, New Jersey parking lot. Frank's moment of revelation truly occurs when Chris mentions that he has a wife, "Wife! Chris has one of those *already*? Possibly he's older than he looks.

Possibly he's not even Greek. Possibly he's a father himself. Why do we think we know anything?" (352). William Chernecky notes of Frank that "for the narrator, people and events become less events experienced and more objects of speculation. But Frank's ability to abstract patterns from people and events only adds to his solipsistic worldview and inevitably alienates him from the world around him" (159). Frank lives the vast majority of his life inside of his own head, and by doing so remains effectively isolated from both the many people he does not care about, and the few that he does.

## Whiteness and Isolation

While Frank's isolation seems to encompass nearly every segment of society, the disconnect between Frank and people of color seems to be the most pronounced. And yet, with only a couple of exceptions, there is a dearth of literary discourse centered on race in Richard Ford's writing, despite Ford himself saying that he "wanted Independence Day to be about race" and that it is "absolutely impossible in American culture. . . for whites to talk about race" (qtd. in Duffy 68). Despite this lack of critical commentary on the subject, it is apparent that race is an important theme in the Bascombe trilogy. Ford's trilogy is, at its core, about not just masculinity, but masculine whiteness. At times the novels feel like a dirge to the slow decline of whiteness from its long-standing place as the default, in which—as Ruth Frankenberg, a sociologist and pioneer in the field of whiteness studies, points out—cultural practices incorporated into whiteness are "often not named as 'white' by white folks, but looked on instead as 'American' or 'normal'" (qtd.in Anderson 54).

Frank presents his idealized vision of whiteness, and especially white masculinity, through the relatively minor character of Lloyd Mangum, Haddam's preeminent purveyor of funerary services, and a man he describes by stating,

> Lloyd is a man not much made in America now, though once there were plenty: men without preconditions or sharp angles the world has to contend with, men who go to work, entertain important, unsensational duties, get home on time, mix

> a hefty brown drink after six, enjoy the company of the Mrs. Till ten, catch the early news, then trudge off to bed and blissful sleep. (*Lay* 95)

Here Frank, and Ford by extension, is presenting the paradigmatic model of white male masculinity associated with a pre-Civil Rights Act America, as something Frank, and all men, should aspire to attain. By bemoaning the lack of men like Lloyd, Frank is essentially invalidating modern models of masculinity—models which have changed over time as other races have struggled to get a foothold and challenge the white default. The novels are rife with moments like this, in which Ford seems to be pining for a return to traditional masculinity. However, he is careful to strike a balance by also pointing out its flaws—one of which being an inability to connect with people of color.

Ford depicts this inability for Frank to connect with minorities, especially African-Americans, through his internal and external dialogue during two of Frank's encounters with people of color in *Independence Day*. The first encounter involves Frank's near-manic obsession with collecting his rent money from black tenant Larry McLeod. Frank owns two rental properties in the predominantly black section of Haddam known as Wallace Hill, which he describes by stating, "The two houses I own, side by side, are on a quiet-well treed street . . .Reliable, relatively prosperous middle-aged and older Negro families have lived here for decades in small, close-set homes they keep in much better than average condition. . . . It's America like it used to be, only blacker" (24). This description is of particular interest because, on the one hand, it relates this black community with the bygone era Frank seems to be longing for in his description of Lloyd. On the other hand, it also shows Frank's propensity to isolate himself from people of color, and suggests that in Frank's mind the ideal version of America would be one

which is significantly whiter. Despite his seemingly fond description, this is not a neighborhood Frank would ever choose to live in, and his use of the word Negro—the usage of which persists throughout the novels—is an offensive relic of the pre-Civil Rights Act America Frank so fondly reminisces about. As Rubén Peinado Abarrio notes "'Frank as a white Mississippian from the forties' prevails over 'Frank as a liberal' in several moments of the trilogy" (83), and this is one such moment.

When Frank is thwarted on his first attempt to collect the rent, he returns the next day and is met with similar results—although he manages to harass Betty McLeod (Larry's wife) and nearly gets himself arrested in the process. Frank's propensity to create fictional events is in full effect after he repeatedly calls for Larry from the front door: "I hear what sounds like a drawer opening and shutting … then a door slams. What would a panel of eight blacks and four whites—a jury of my peers—say if because of wishing to collect my rent I turned out to be a pre-holiday homicide statistic? I'm sure I'd be found at fault" (*Independence Day* 121). Ford uses this narrative of Frank's to illustrate a lack of awareness of the current racial climate in America, which permeates many segments of white culture. Frank's imagined scenario paints himself as a victim, and implies that a court of law would be stacked against him, when the opposite would seem more likely to be true, especially in an affluent suburb like the fictional Haddam.

Ford uses the power struggle between Frank and Larry to demonstrate how racial tension is often linked to financial inequality. As Abbario points out, "Larry's contesting nature . . . probably disguises a certain sense of emasculation. Frank is the white landlord, and his wealth corroborates his success in the modern male battlefield: the business world" (83). I agree with Abbario's assertion, although I would also argue that Frank's

attempts to emasculate Larry are driven by his own racial insecurities. Frank seems distinctly threatened by Larry from the onset, noting his "long arms and bulging venous biceps, as if he might've been an athlete once (a kickboxer, I decided)" (*Independence Day 28),* and his surly attitude. Frank is plainly intimidated by Larry's masculine physicality, and Frank's desire to be "'the perfect modern landlord'" (27), in a black neighborhood, hints at a plantation mentality. As Abbario states, "the white master / black slave dynamics have left an indelible imprint on racial relations within the United States" (78), and Frank is ill-suited to serve as a figurative ambassador for improving those relations. Duffy sums up the situation by noting, "Ford underlines the difficulties of 'getting beyond' racial barriers 'in a personal way' by having his own remedy [open discourse] founder against the accumulated mistrust of centuries of inequality and resentment—Frank's relationship with Larry is marked by an utter inability to connect with each other" (69). Breaking down racial barriers requires intense communication about uncomfortable subjects, something which the isolated Frank seems to be incapable of doing with anybody.

Ford presents a second racially-charged encounter later in *Independence Day*, as Frank is travelling to pick up his son Paul for their holiday road trip bonding experience. While spending the night at a motel, Frank learns that a murder has occurred, and meets a black man, who identifies himself as Tanks, while gawking at the crime scene. Much like his previous meeting with Larry McLeod, Frank focuses on the sheer physicality of Tanks, remarking that "it's no chore to feature him bear-hugging an armoire or a new Amana down several flights of stairs" (200). Again, Frank seems to be threatened by black masculinity, and he slips into his performative and ingratiating realtor's persona in

hopes of facilitating conversation between the two of them. While standing vigil to the unfolding of events at the crime scene would seem an ideal time for a meaningful conversation to occur, especially for somebody as prone to ruminating on the peculiarities of life as Frank, they are unable to discuss anything of consequence. Their inability to cross the racial divide is alluded to by Frank noting that, "We aren't socializing here, I realize, only bearing brief dual witness to the perilous character of life and our uncertain presences in it. Otherwise there's no reason for us to stand here together" (202). This is another moment in the trilogy where Frank acknowledges the perceived impossibility of connecting with somebody and chooses to remain isolated instead.

Unlike the situation with Frank and Larry, which is fraught with financial tensions, Tanks and Frank meet on relatively even footing and are still unable to establish a connection. Any chance of a connection is irrevocably damaged when Tanks asks Frank a loaded question:

> He turns, to notice I'm farther away now. "You got any niggers down there in your part of New Jersey?"
>
> "Plenty of 'em," I say.
>
> Mr. Tanks looks at me steadily, and of course, even as sleepy as I am, I'm awfully sorry to have said that, yet have no way to yank the words back, I just stop. . . and look helpless to the world and fate. (209)

This bit of dialogue encapsulates the lingering racial strife in modern America. Despite his regrets after the fact, Frank's impulsive embracing of the racial epithet shows the hard-wired effects of institutionalized racism, and is another example of Mississippian

trumping liberal. Furthermore, Frank realizes that despite his regrets, there is no way to undo the damage that is already done in that moment.

Ford portrays Frank's remorse as genuine, but he suggests that Frank cannot divest from his idealized version of manhood, and his inability to express his emotions and feelings to anybody but the reader. Frank contemplates his failed encounter while lying in bed after his talk with Tanks:

> I try to find solace against the way… the night's events make me feel, which is: bracketed, limbo'd, unable to budge, as illustrated amply by Mr. Tanks and me standing side by side in the murderous night, unable to strike a spark, utter a convincingly encouraging word to the other, be of assistance, shout halloo, dip a wing; unable at the sad passage of another human to the barren beyond to share a hope for the future, Whereas, had we but been able, out spirits might've lightened. (216-17)

Abarrio points out that this passage can be read as an acknowledgment of racial frustration (79), and I certainly agree that is the case. However, I would add that Frank's frustration is as much with himself as it is with the challenging racial dynamics of modern America. When faced with any dilemma which requires an emotional outlaying on his behalf, Frank finds himself in a figurative stasis, unable to express himself and instead suppresses his emotions. If he had been able to articulate these feelings from his mattress meditations to Tanks, perhaps they could have overcome Frank's unfortunate embrasure of the racial epithet and lightened one another's spirits. Instead the gulf between them endures, and Frank remains in his perpetual state of isolation.

## Self-Reliance and the Self-Made Man

Ford plants an important clue that masculinity is the source of Frank's isolationism, in the form of a dog-eared and heavily underlined copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance*. In *Independence Day*, Frank takes his son Paul—a troubled teenager on the cusp of manhood at this point in the novels' chronology—on a trip to the baseball and basketball halls of fame. This trip is less about reveling in the past glories of American sports, and more about Frank attempting to usher his wayward son into manhood. Frank's plan for accomplishing this revolves around two texts, ". . .I'd already slept for an hour, waked up twice . . . fretting about Paul's and my journey, . . . then settled back to read a chapter of *The Declaration of Independence* —Carl Becker's classic, which, along with *Self-Reliance*, I plan to use as key 'texts' for communicating with my troubled son and thereby transmitting to him important info. . ." (8). This portrayal by Ford is indicative of a man who does not have the slightest clue how to connect with his son, and there is a certain amount of irony inherent in Frank feeling reliant upon *Self-Reliance* to do so.

Michael Kimmel cites Ralph Waldo Emerson as one of the driving forces behind what became the dominant model of American masculinity: the Self-Made Man, citing literary critic T. Walter Herbert's view that Emerson "enshrined psychic self-sovereignty as the essential manly virtue" (qtd. in Kimmel 28). Ford's inclusion of *Self-Reliance* is certainly a deliberate one, as he calls Emerson the "reigning spirit of *Independence Day*" (qtd. in McGuire 261). Of particular interest is the passage from *Self-Reliance* which Ford chooses to have Paul read as he thumbs through his father's copy: "'The great

man,'" Paul reads in a pseudo-reverent Charlton Heston voice, "'is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude'" (*Independence Day* 291). If Emerson is the reigning spirit, then this passage of his is the trilogy's reigning concept, and the basis for Frank's self-imposed isolation and his desire to avoid societal entanglements. Frank isolates himself from the crowd as a means of comforting himself and this isolation is a distinctive characteristic of Self-Made Manhood, which Kimmel notes is rife with "anxiety, restlessness, loneliness" (23).

Frank's solution for his son's troubles is for Paul to solve them for himself, to become self-reliant, with a nudge in the right direction from himself and Emerson. Frank says of the two texts he sends Paul before their trip, "These are not your ordinary fatherly offerings, I admit; yet I believe his instincts are sound and he will help himself if he can, and that independence is, in fact, what he lacks—independence from whatever holds him captive: memory, history, bad events he struggles with, can't control, but feels he should" (*Independence Day* 16). Frank's diagnosis of Paul's problems is, not surprisingly, symptomatic of his own problems. As McGuire notes, "The action of all three Bascombe novels thus involves Frank in a repeated movement away from, then back towards, the experience of grief or mourning. It involves him, in other words, in a continual effort of pragmatic forgetting that continually fails, yet to which he returns repeatedly as the best or only available option" (274). Frank is essentially pushing Paul towards becoming a younger version of himself. Instead of discussing the bad events he feels hold Paul captive—the death of his brother and his parent's subsequent divorce—he once again eschews connecting with somebody in dire need of connection because doing so makes

him uncomfortable. By avoiding discussion of the past, Frank denies them both the independence they so desperately need.

Ford distinctly portrays his narrator as self-aware of his inability to connect with others and have meaningful conversations. As he thinks ahead to the trip with Paul, Frank recognizes how his self-imposed isolation contributes to his faults as a father:

> I, of course, would like to tell him how to live life and do better in a hundred engaging ways, just as I tell myself that nothing ever neatly "fits," that mistakes must be made, bad things forgotten. But in our short exposures I seem only able to talk glancingly, skittishly before shying away, cautious not to be wrong, not to quiz or fight him, not to be his therapist but his Dad. So that in all likelihood I will never provide good cure for his disease, will never even imagine correctly what his disease is, but will only suffer it with him for a time and then depart. (*Independence Day* 16)

This inability to connect with others, and especially his own son, is a lingering problem, and one which Frank is acutely aware of. Furthermore, Frank considers any attempt at an emotional connection with his son to be a futile endeavor. Once again, Ford places the concept of forgetting the past as an integral aspect of Frank's self-reliant philosophy, and again it prevents him from connecting with his son. This disavowal of the past comes straight from *Self-Reliance*, in which Emerson states "In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred" (Emerson 24). Instead of having the conversation he needs to have with his son, he places his hopes for his son's future in the hands of Emerson, and the results are not surprising, even if the events leading up to those results are.

Ford ultimately renders Frank's inability to connect with his son through the use of what is undoubtedly one of the most quintessential symbols of White American masculinity: baseball. When they arrive at the baseball hall of fame in Cooperstown, Frank has given up on connecting with his son through a shared Emersonian connection, noting that "possibly I could borrow a baseball metaphor having to do with some things that happen inside the white lines and those that happen out" (*Independence Day* 352). Instead of forgetting the past, Frank instead focuses on creating new memories, although this too seems destined for failure. Frank posits that Cooperstown is "still a potentially perfect setting in which to woo one's son away from his problems and bestow good counsel—if one's son weren't an asshole" (293).

Frank's last-ditch effort to connect with his son starts, and ends, at the Cooperstown batting cages. When all else fails, Frank resorts to two time-honored traits of masculinity: intimidation and violence. When Paul rebukes his attempts to cajole him into the batting cages, Frank proceeds to grapple with him in an ill-fated attempt to force his son into submission:

> I don't know what I'm doing, or what I want him to do: change, promise, concede guarantee me something important will be better or pan out, all expressed in language for which there are no words. 'And why are you such a little prick?' I say with difficulty. I may be hurting him, but it's a father's right not to be pushed, so that I squeeze him even harder, intent on keeping him till he gives up the demon, renounces all, collapses into hot tears only I can minister to. Dad. His. (*Independence Day* 359)

In this passage Ford presents one of the failings of traditional masculinity, as when words fail Frank he resorts to the language of violence. His invocation of father's rights as justification for his actions reeks of antiquated notions of masculinity. It becomes clear that what he wants from his son is not connection, but compliance. His model of masculinity revolves around being needed, a condition he tries to coerce by choking his son to tears. Not surprisingly, his actions have the opposite effect. When Paul breaks free and steps into the batting cages, he proceeds to step in front of a pitch and is hit in the eye. Any hope of a connection is severed, by Frank's refusal to deviate from an obsolete model of manhood; their relationship, and Paul's vision, never fully recovers.

Paul is not the only victim of Frank's rigid adherence to traditional white masculinity. There is, perhaps, no more poignant example of Frank's inability to connect with those around him than his tragically short-lived "friendship" with Walter Luckett in *The Sportswriter*. One night, a clearly troubled Walter discloses to Frank that he "went to a bar in New York two nights ago, and I let a man pick me up. . . . Then I went to a hotel—the Americana, as a matter of fact—and slept with him" (92). Walter, in the midst of a crisis, is in dire need of a connection, but Frank's concept of masculinity prohibits the establishment of such connections; as Elinor A. Walker points out, "confessions of feeling are of course off limits between men such as Frank and Walter, who should be instead talking about the weather, sports, politics, anything but emotion" (87). Throughout the novels, Frank avoids connections, preferring to isolate himself from the emotional entanglements they require. I have attributed this isolation to Frank's concept of masculinity, and in the case of Walter Luckett, Armengol agrees, "Above all, his encounter with Walter illustrates how Frank's emotional disengagement is not only the

result of his former traumatic personal experiences but also derives, as we shall see, from his traditional gender(ed) conceptions of masculinity and male homosexuality as a heterosexual man" (*Sportswriter* 49). Ford's depiction of the relationship between Frank and Walter further elucidates Frank's inability to connect with anybody, and how he prefers to isolate himself, even from the people who need him the most.

Walter later tells Frank he was never closer to anybody than he was to Warren,[3] and Armengol points out that "the only really close friendship between two men in Ford's novel—namely, that between Walter and Warren—seems to demand a homosexual rather than homosocial relationship" (51). When Walter is unable to recreate even a facsimile of that closeness, with Frank or anybody else, he chooses to take his own life.

While most critics absolve Frank of responsibility, I do not think it possible to definitively declare Frank free of any culpability. When Frank is exploring Walter's apartment with his ex-wife, he callously states to her that Walter "should've helped himself" (334). Moments later however, Frank reveals a twinge of conscience: "And for a moment a sudden unwanted grief sweeps up in me; a grief, I suppose, for possibilities misconstrued, for consolations not taken (which is what grief is all about)" (335). These moments present the stark contrast between Frank's exteriority and interiority. His callous performance of masculinity belies the fact that Frank is capable of emotional depth, but he is incapable of connecting and sharing that part of himself. If he had been able to put aside his masculine veneer, if only for a moment, and offered emotional support to his friend in need, it is entirely possible Walter could have made it through his crisis unscathed.

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[3] The man with whom Walter has an affair.

Ford acknowledges this by having Frank declare, "In a way, if it weren't for me being his friend, he'd be alive" (*Sportswriter* 350). The entire incident with Walter illustrates the dangers of isolation and emotional distance. Frank's regrets over his failure to connect with Walter and his subsequent death seem to linger into the trilogy's final novel *The Lay of the Land.* Taking place eighteen years after Walter's death, Frank now spends a parcel of his time as a member of the Sponsors, a "network of mostly central New Jersey citizens—men and women—whose goal is nothing more than to help people. The idea of Sponsoring is that many people with problems need nothing more than a little sound advice from time to time" (14). Frank's membership in this group suggests that he has not absolved himself for his part in Walter's suicide, as small or large as that part may be. Listening to the problems of his fellow New Jerseyans, and offering them much-needed advice, is Frank's self-imposed penance for not doing the same for Walter in his hour of need.

Ford's harshest condemnation of traditional masculinity is portrayed through Frank's inability to cope with the debilitating grief which overwhelms him in the wake of his son's death. While this is doubtless an unspeakable loss, it is a loss which is exacerbated by Frank's refusal to speak about it. Early in *The Sportswriter,* Frank meets his ex-wife at their son's grave on Ralph's birthday—an annual tradition of theirs:

> These pre-dawn meetings were my idea, and in the abstract they seem like a good way for two people like us to share a remaining intimacy. In practice they are as uncomfortable as a hanging. . . . It is simply that I don't know how to mourn and neither does X [his ex-wife]. Neither of us has the vocabulary or temperament for

it, and so we are more prone to pass the time chatting, which isn't always wise. (11)

Despite Frank's insistence that the avoidance of mourning is a communal effort between them, his ex-wife attempts to steer their chatting towards the topic of their son's loss on several occasions—all of which are quickly thwarted by Frank. His vision of self-reliant masculinity does not allow for the emotional outpouring such a conversation requires, and thus his grief lingers, waiting to consume him.

That consumption occurs near the trilogy's end, when Frank stops at the Manasquan bar—which, not coincidentally, happens to be the bar where Walter disclosed his crisis to Frank seventeen years earlier—while his truck is being repaired. In between highballs, Frank, a successful realtor at this point, finds a real-estate pamphlet on the bar and proceeds to read it. The pamphlet includes a lengthy story about a realtor named Frog Frantal, who turns out to be the perfect foil for Frank. The story details how Frog recently lost his son, but has become a motivational speaker who counsels groups on how to deal with grief. Instead of repressing his grief like Frank, Frog has embraced it, and the story goes on to detail the strength of the Frantals' marriage. This is in stark contrast to Frank's own experience as he notes, "Of course, Ralph's death was why Ann and I couldn't stay married. . . . Death became all we had in common, a common jail" (Lay 344). Frank's inability to communicate his feelings to his wife weakened and eventually destroyed his marriage; Frog's willingness to share his feelings strengthened his.

Not surprisingly, Frog's story stirs up memories of Frank's losses, and he is forced to confront his repressed feelings. It is a confrontation which his traditional model

of masculinity has not equipped him to deal with. When the bartender asks what's wrong with him, Ford offers the reader a rare glimpse of Frank's emotional distress:

> Unexpectedly, my eyes flood with tears, my hot cheeks taking the runoff. I've known about them for the better part of a minute but have been stuck here, unable to blink or wipe my nose with my sleeve or think about a trip to the gents or about seeking a breath of rescue in the out-of-doors. . . . "I. I—" My old stammer, not heard from in years, but always lurking . . . now revisits my glottus. (Lay 345)

When Frank is forced to confront the painful memories he has fought for so long to relegate to the past, he is stricken with a brief bout of paralysis in the present. The pragmatic masculine persona he has cultivated for years to hold in his grief cracks under the pressure, and his stutter—which, like his grief, Frank also tried to hide away—returns. While Frank may subscribe to Emerson's belief that the past is best forgotten, Ford seems to be advocating his fellow Mississippian William Faulkner's notion that "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (43). As Chernecky concludes, "Frank Bascombe realizes that achieving personal independence and the ability to exercise self-reliance is a task that now involves great personal cost and consequence" (176). For Frank the cost of maintaining his self-reliant model of masculinity has been an enduring isolation and unhappiness.

## Conclusion

In the epilogue of his seminal work on masculinity, *Manhood in America,* Kimmel eloquently explains the perceived plight of the modern middle-class white male:

> As we face a new century, American men remain bewildered by the sea of changes in our culture, besieged by the forces of reform, and bereft by the emotional impoverishment of our lives. For straight white middle-class men a virtual siege mentality has set in. . . . The Self-Made Man, that model of manhood we have inherited as the only marker of our success as men, leads more than ever before to chronic anxiety and insecurity. (330)

Kimmel's diagnosis of traditional white masculinity's maladies in modern society can certainly be applied to Frank Bascombe. He struggles with the social upheaval which has occurred in his life and longs for the simpler days of his youth. For Frank, chronic anxiety and insecurity manifests itself in his isolation and avoidance of establishing emotional connections. Ford's trilogy illuminates the numerous pitfalls of traditional white masculinity and the dangers of clinging to it. Huey Guagliardo, editor of multiple Ford-related anthologies, explains that "the characters in Ford's novels are relegated to the shadowy margins of existence where much is uncertain and uncontrollable" (4). In the case of Frank Bascombe, it is Frank who marginalizes himself through his unwillingness to connect to the ever-changing world around him, and, more importantly, the people who inhabit it.

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