

# New Jersey Real Estate and the Postsouthern "Sense of Place": Richard Ford's *Independence Day*

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In a 1977 review-essay, "Walker Percy: Not Just Whistling Dixie," Richard Ford seconded the subject of his article by asserting that "southern regionalism as a factor in the impulse that makes us write novels ... has had its day."<sup>1</sup> At the time, Ford must have felt especially strongly about taking such a stand. He had recently published *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), a debut novel in which, as Ford later observed, "I thought I was writing about the South in a way that nobody would ever recognize as being southern." "The heartbreaking thing," he recalled, was that critics still wrote about *A Piece of My Heart* "as a piece of, if not Gothic, at least southern writing."<sup>2</sup> In *The New York Times Book Review*, Larry McMurtry cited Ford's "neo-Faulknerism" and opined that "The South – dadgummit – has struck again, marring what might have been an 'excellent first novel.'<sup>3</sup>

Pace McMurtry's review, *A Piece of My Heart* can in fact be seen as the opening salvo in Ford's ongoing fictional interrogation of "the South," especially as the region has been represented in "southern literature." Towards the end of *A Piece of My Heart*, the reader bears witness

1. Richard Ford, "Walker Percy: Not Just Whistling Dixie," *National Review* 29 (13 May 1977), 561-562.

2. R.J. Ellis and Graham Thompson, "Interview with Richard Ford," *Over Here: A European Journal of American Culture*, 16:2 (Winter 1996), 114.

3. Larry McMurtry, review of *A Piece of My Heart*, *New York Times Book Review*, 24 October 1976, 16.

to the bathetic epiphany of Sam Newel, who has returned home to Mississippi from Chicago with the idea of confronting his southern past. Newel suddenly realizes that his past has little bearing on his present, and that Mississippi itself was and is "boring as shit." Newel's fellow southern expatriate, Robard Hewes, helps him to see just how much his homeplace has been transformed: "Down in Jackson there ain't nothing but a bunch of empty lots and people ... looking for some way to make themselves rich. It wouldn't feel like nothing at all anymore, to *you*."<sup>4</sup>

Robard Hewes' resolutely unromantic image of Jackson chimes with Richard Ford's own view of his birthplace. In 1992, Ford wryly noted that "Place ... is supposed to be important to us Southerners" before offering his own more skeptical view: "But where I grew up was a bland, unadhesive place – Jackson, Mississippi – a city in love with the suburban Zeitgeist the way Mill was in love with utility, a city whose inert character I could never get much interested in."<sup>5</sup> When McMurry sarcastically observed that Newel and Robard seemed to be "carrying the burden of Southern history" (18), the Texan novelist failed to see that Ford was (already, in 1976) sending up such familiar, "neo-Faulknerian" figures of "southern" identity – "place" as well as "history." To this degree, *A Piece of My Heart* is what Michael Kreyling defines as postsouthern parody: the self-conscious narrative performance of "southernness" through which the text "adjusts or lightens the burden of southern literariness it must necessarily carry in the presence of "Faulkner" triumphant."<sup>6</sup>

If not altogether successful – Ford later came to feel that, for all his best intentions, *A Piece of My Heart* remained "indebted to Faulkner ... to Flannery O'Connor" (Ellis and Thompson 114) – the debut novel anticipates the more sophisticated and successful postsouthernism played out in *The Sportswriter* (1986). I have argued elsewhere that *The Sportswriter* expresses Ford's skepticism – mediated through another displaced Mississippian, the narrator Frank Bascombe – towards outmoded conceptions of "the South" and its oft-cited "sense of place."<sup>7</sup> Frank's sportswriterly text reveals the postmodern, capitalist geographies that

4. Richard Ford, *A Piece of My Heart* [1976] (London: Harvill, 1996), 229-230.

5. Ford, "An Urge for Going: Why I Don't Live Where I Used to Live," *Harper's* 284 (February 1992), 61.

6. Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 161.

7. Martyn Bone, "The Postsouthern 'Sense of Place' in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*," *Critical Survey* 12:1 (Spring 2000), 64-81.

characterize what Lewis Simpson was the first to call "postsouthern America." In this essay, I suggest that the sequel to *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day* (1995), continues Ford's interrogation of the "sense of place" and another, related southern literary shibboleth, the "sense of community," by focusing upon the contemporary capitalist production of suburban real estate.

The manner in which the terms "place" and "community" have been employed in southern literary criticism largely derives from the Nashville Agrarians' image of "the South," most famously in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), as a family-centered society which is historically, even "organically" rooted in specific rural or "natural" loci. But as Paul Conkin has pointed out, by 1933 Agrarianism had converged upon the "proprietary ideal," in which "land or other means of production [came] under the full managerial control of the individual owners."<sup>8</sup> In particular, the Agrarian proprietary ideal was expressed in the vision of a pre- or non-capitalist South of subsistence farms. During the 1930s, John Crowe Ransom, Andrew Lytle, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren all argued (with varying degrees of conviction) that this self-sufficient, traditional, agricultural society must resist modern finance capitalism, particularly as it was expressed through land speculation and large-scale real estate development. Even as early as *I'll Take My Stand*, Lytle advocated subsistence farming as the South's last, best hope of remaining independent of a "money economy" which threatened to transform farmers into mere tenants, "abstract selves" ripe for exploitation by the "absentee-landlordism of capitalism."<sup>9</sup> In *Who Owns America?* (1936), Tate joined Lytle in emphasizing the small farm as "real property" guaranteeing what Warren called "the relation of man to place." "Tangible" and "genuine" real property was contrasted with the "abstract property" relations of finance capitalism, which uprooted and alienated the individual from his "stable basis" in agriculture.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Davidson articulated an image

8. Paul Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 106. Conkin pertinently notes that the Agrarians' focus on the proprietary ideal "has received scant attention from historians and literary critics" (89-90).

9. Andrew Lytle, "The Hind Tit", *I'll Take My Stand* [1930] (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 214,243.

10. Lytle, "The Small Farm Secures the State," 238; Tate, "Notes on Liberty and Property," 82-85; Warren, "Literature as a Symptom," 273; in Herbert Agar and Tate, eds., *Who Owns America?* [1936] (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1970).

of "the family in its traditional role, securely established on the land" in a "stable community which is really a community, not a mere real estate development."<sup>11</sup> It might be said that the Agrarians represented rural "real property" as more "natural," more "real," than capitalist "real estate."

But of course, the socio-spatial reality of the South, even in the 1930s, was that this pre-capitalist, rural model had all but disappeared. By 1977, Warren could but pithily observe how the traditional South had given way under the pressure of capitalist property speculation so intense that the region had acquired a new moniker: "this term 'Sun Belt' is a realtor's term, and that captures the whole story."<sup>12</sup> In the same year, in his essay on Percy, Ford similarly remarked that: "the South is not a place any more: it's a Belt, a business proposition, which is the nearest thing to anonymity the economy recognizes" (562). However, as Robard's hard-headed view of the post-South suggests, Ford's fiction has never subscribed to the nostalgic, "neo-Agrarian" perspective that Walker Percy once identified in some southern literature of the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Rather, as Frank Bascombe's narrative gradually reveals the relationship between capitalist real estate, "community" and "place," so *Independence Day* can be seen as the culmination of the postsouthern project Ford initiated in *A Piece of My Heart*. As we shall see, the ex-sportswriter's new job as a realtor brings an understanding of capitalist spatial production that causes him to reject traditional, anachronistic (and implicitly "southern") conceptions of community and place. Instead, Frank's revised sense of "independence" as a social practice enables him to achieve Percyan "Self-Placement" in post-Agrarian, postsouthern America.

Whatever Frank Bascombe's impious views on the South in *The Sportswriter*, it is important to recognize that he fails to see, much less critique, the uneven geographical development and postindustrial blight that characterizes the non-Southern loci in which he lives and works. He

11. Donald Davidson quoted in Virginia Rock, "Twelve Southerners: Biographical Essays," *I'll Take My Stand*, LSUP, 1997, 373-374.

12. "The South: Distance and Change: A Conversation with Robert Penn Warren, William Styron, and Louis D. Rubin, Jr.," in Rubin, ed., *The American South: Portrait of a Culture* (Washington: United States International Agency, 1979), 327.

13. Walker Percy, "Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time" [1986] in Patrick Samway, ed., *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 166-167.

blithely refers to the "diverting and readable landscape" of New Jersey, and initially depicts Detroit as a "place of wintry snuggle-up" populated by happy-go-lucky "Negroes and Polacks."<sup>14</sup> Only gradually does Frank perceive the existential and social alienation he still feels despite resolving his "predicament of placement vis-à-vis the world" through what Percy would call an "immanence of consumption."<sup>15</sup> At the end of *The Sportswriter*, Frank has fled from his New Jersey hometown, Haddam, to Florida, where he vaguely identifies his "responsibility to a somewhat larger world" (372).

I refer back to *The Sportswriter* because, in *Independence Day*, it quickly becomes apparent that Frank has rethought his predicament of placement. As Jeffrey Folks has noted, in comparison to *The Sportswriter*, the sequel's narrative "is considerably less focused on the inner self" because Frank becomes "more entangled in a web of social responsibilities" as he moves "from solitude back to society."<sup>16</sup> We learn that, after leaving Florida, Frank took an extended vacation to France before returning to Haddam "with a feeling of great purpose and a fury to suddenly do something serious for my own good and possibly even others'." We thus join Frank in *Independence Day* as he begins to work through that sense of social "responsibility" within a "larger world which he intuited in Florida: his larger yet local world being "Haddam itself."<sup>17</sup>

At this early point in *Independence Day*, we also encounter the kind of sly but clearly disparaging reference to the South that Frank frequently made in *The Sportswriter*. It is evident that Frank favors New Jersey's "sense of place" over that found in Mississippi when he states: "Of course, having come first to life in a true place, and one as monotonously, blankly itself as the Mississippi Gulf Coast, I couldn't be truly surprised that a simple setting such as Haddam – willing to be so Little itself – would seem, on second look, a great relief and damned easy to cozy up to" (93). Though apparently offhand, this remark obliquely introduces two central tenets of Frank's philosophy of "place." The first point is that it takes human, social relations to produce a "sense of place"; the (insepa-

14. Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* [1986] (London: Harvill, 1996), 58, 119, 121.

15. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), 113, 120.

16. Jeffrey J. Folks, "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*," *Mississippi Quarterly*, LII: 1 (Winter 1998-1999), 86-87.

17. Ford, *Independence Day* [1995] (London: Harvill, 1996), 93.

able) second point is that one should not fetishize the physical locus in "itself," as if material space has some intrinsic power or meaning independent of human action. Frank's view that Mississippi's celebrated, supposedly "natural" sense of place simply subsumes the identity of the native individual echoes Julius Rowan Raper's theory that "in the South, the people (ethnos) and the place (edos) tend to become one." As Raper notes, this leads to a troubling situation in which the "sense of place takes on a role better played by a sense of self."<sup>18</sup>

Frank's own theory of the individual's relation to "place" and "community" in postsouthern society becomes more explicit once he becomes a real estate agent in Haddam. During the sale of the family home on Hoving Road (his wife has remarried and moved to Connecticut, thereby producing "the geography of divorce" (103)) the acting agent, Rolly Mounger, offers the ex-sportswriter the chance to become a "Residential Specialist." When Frank accepts, Rolly offers his new colleague the platitudinous advice that: "This is realty. Reality's something else." However, unlike the complacent Mounger – and *pace* the Southern Agrarians, with their opposition between authentic, 'concrete "real property" and capitalistic, abstract "real estate" – Frank becomes acutely aware that realty is the socio-economic reality underlying Haddam's "sense of place." Hence the aside, "my personal take on the job probably wouldn't be just like Rolly's" (115).

In *The Sportswriter*, we learn that Haddam is an affluent, suburban small town largely populated by wealthy, white-collar professionals: "entertainment lawyers, business analysts, plus the presidents of great corporations that mold opinion" (56). In the opening lines of *Independence Day*, the economic privilege prevalent throughout Haddam appears nigh-on "natural": "In Haddam, summer floats over tree-softened streets like a sweet lotion balm from a careless, languorous god, and the world falls in tune with its own mysterious anthems" (3). It could be construed that the town is an inherently ordered, even "organic" community. However, Frank's current clients, Phyllis and Joe Markham, have discovered the extent to which Haddam's "local esprit" is mediated by "real estate prices." Having lived in Vermont since the early 1970s, the Markhams are comically ignorant of how much their ideal house with "mysterious-won-

18. Julius Rowan Raper, "Inventing Modern Southern Fiction: A Postmodern View," *Southern Literary Journal*, 22:2 (Spring 1990), 3, 9-10.

drous home possibilities" would cost. The population of Haddam may have "ballooned from twelve to twenty thousand" (23) during the early 1980s, but in terms of market value and social status, the newer properties built during the boom are regarded as inferior to Haddam's coveted older houses. While the original eighteenth-century settlement has been tellingly "rechristened 'Haddam the Pleasant' by the village council," local "realty lingo" signifies the newer developments as "the Haddam-area." Inevitably, the Markhams are unable to afford a house in "Haddam the Pleasant." When Frank takes the couple to see a property in Penns Neck, an expanding part of "the Haddam-area," Joe bemoans the lack of any personal "relation of man to place": "I don't want to live in an area ... Nobody ever said the Vermont area ... They just said the places" (59).

Frank endures a trying time as agent to the insufferable Markhams, but he sees beyond his clients' numerous neuroses to identify the economic production of place as the root of the couple's frustrations. Frank observes that the Markhams "have failed to intuit the one gnostic truth of real estate ... that people never find or buy the house they say they want." Going beyond mystical rhetoric, Frank identifies the "gnostic truth of real estate" as the material reality of "a market economy." This market economy of place "is not even remotely premised on anybody getting what he wants. The premise is that you're presented with what you might've thought you didn't want, but what's available, whereupon you give in and start finding ways to feel good about it and yourself" (41). Frank subsequently reiterates his realtor's understanding of the spatial (il)logic of capitalism, and its impact upon the individual's search for a "sense of place." When it becomes clear that Joe seeks a "nice house he could both afford and fall in love with ... perfect sanction, a sign some community recognizes him," Frank rather brutally observes that "the only way communities ever recognize anything [is]: financially (tactfully expressed as a matter of compatibility)" (51-52). Frank here echoes the point made by Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *Habits of the Heart*: that so-called "communities" are usually "lifestyle enclaves" where people live because "the housing prices there happen to fit their budgets."<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, for all Frank's scathing irony concerning the inequities of

19. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* [1985] (New York: Perennial, 1986), 11, 72.

capitalist spatial production, his role as the Markhams' realtor allows him to put into practice the desire "to suddenly *do* something serious for ... others." He strives to help the couple avert "spatial dislocation" and "a potentially calamitous careen down a slippery socio-emotio-economic slope" (44) by emphasizing that it *is* possible to live a fulfilling everyday life *outside* a privileged site like "Haddam the Pleasant." To cite spatial philosopher Michel de Certeau, Ford's narrator insists that consumers can "reappropriate the space organized by the techniques of socio-cultural production" (amongst which capitalist techniques de Certeau includes "urban development").<sup>20</sup>

Hereafter, Frank's skeptical philosophy of "place" comes to the fore. During a trip to his girlfriend Sally Caldwell's house in South Mantoloking, Frank is briefly overcome by a need to feel nostalgic for this particular locus. However, he soon banishes such thoughts by recalling "a patent lesson of the realty profession, to cease sanctifying places – houses, beaches, hometowns." Frank insists that: "We may feel they [places] *ought* to, *should* confer something – sanction, again ... But they don't ... as the Markhams found out in Vermont and now New Jersey" (151-152). In Southern letters' seminal definition of "sense of place," Eudora Welty famously revered Mississippi River Country for "a sense of place as powerful as if it were visible and walking and could touch me."<sup>21</sup> Even Walker Percy's cynical, suburban property speculator Binx Bolling could still invoke a metaphysical "thronging spirit-presence of ... place" at the derelict site of his father's duck club in rural Louisiana.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, Frank Bascombe insists that "Place means nothing" (152). In postsouthern America, both the Agrarians' proprietary ideal *and* the Weltyan "sense of place" (which approaches the pathetic fallacy of romantic pantheism) have been superseded by the capitalist fetishization of "place" as a commodity. Hence, Frank refuses to attribute "mysterious-wondrous home possibilities" to mass-produced "Haddam-area" houses because, as geographer David Harvey suggests, to talk or "write of 'the power of place' as if places ... possess causal powers is to

20. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiii-xiv.

21. Eudora Welty, "Some Notes on River Country" [1944] in *The Eye of the Story* (New York, Random House, 1978), 286.

22. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* [1961], (London: Minerva, 1995), 85. See also Bone, 66-67.



engage in the grossest of fetishisms.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, to fetishize the “power” or “sense” of place is to risk reproducing the commodity logic of capitalism itself. Instead, Frank once again emphasizes human, socio-spatial relations rather than “place” in and of “itself.” As he tells Phyllis: “You *are* best off coming as close as you can and trying to bring life to a place, not just depending on the place to supply it for you” (76).

Frank offers one more house to the beleaguered Markhams: one of his own rental properties in a black neighborhood named Wallace Hill. Frank purchased the two houses upon returning from France and feeling that he had “probably contributed as little to the commonweal as it was possible for a busy man to contribute without being plain evil” – particularly having “lived in Haddam [for] fifteen years [and] ridden the prosperity curve through the roof” (25-6). The Residential Specialist admits his own economic self-interest: “I hadn’t been in the realty business long and was happy to think about diversifying my assets and stashing money where it’d be hard to get at” (27). To this degree, Frank is himself a finance capitalist speculator in abstract “property values”; he is, as he admits, “looking after Number One” (112).

But Frank also wants to “do for others.” He hopes his personal intervention in Wallace Hill will help prevent more predatory property speculators from drastically redeveloping the neighborhood. Despite the fact that Wallace Hill appears to be a (Davidsonian) “stable community” – “reliable, relatively prosperous middle-aged and older Negro families have lived here for decades” (24) – the residents have never had a corresponding “sense of belonging and permanence.” This is largely because Haddam’s social geography has been defined by racial segregation, and Wallace Hill’s residents have had a subordinate role in the town’s social and labor relations. As Frank ruefully recognizes, Wallace Hill’s current denizens “and their relatives might’ve been here a hundred years and never done anything but make us white late-arrivers feel welcome at their own expense” (28). Now, black Haddamites’ ability to achieve a “sense of belonging and permanence” is further imperiled by real estate developers eyeing Wallace Hill as a prime location within “Haddam the Pleasant.” Frank believes he can “at least help two families feel at home” (28) by “providing affordable housing options.”

23. David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996), 320.

As we have seen, Frank acknowledges that he will gain financially from investing in the "integrity" of Wallace Hill. What is really interesting, though, is the suggestion that he will not be alone in making a profit. Frank comments that "as in-town property becomes more valuable ... all the families here will realize big profits and move away to Arizona or down South, where their ancestors were once property themselves, and the whole area will be gentrified by incoming whites and rich blacks, after which my small investment ... will turn into a gold mine" (25). If we feel uneasy about Frank's personal ownership of two houses in a historically black neighborhood, I would argue that the narrative here raises a larger issue: the extent to which Wallace Hill's black residents can really be said to constitute a "community."

*In The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau argues that "as local stabilities break down," people are "no longer fixed by a circumscribed community." Instead, they become "immigrants in a system," albeit one which is "too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape it" (xx). In contrast to their ancestors, it appears that the black residents of Wallace Hill do not necessarily seek a "sense of belonging and permanence." There is an alternative, postmodern option: to become mobile "immigrants" within the national "system" of capitalist space stretching from New Jersey through the South to Arizona. Homeowning and renting become "spatial practices" (de Certeau 91) through which (some) Afro-American consumers can manipulate the postmodern market economy of real estate to escape the traditional segregated geography, the "circumscribed community," of Wallace Hill. We thus arrive at a notable irony, and a contradiction of capitalism: whereas land speculation produces characteristically uneven development elsewhere in "the Haddam area," gentrification promises to reduce, even erase, the racial segregation of Wallace Hill.

To suggest that there is no longer a "circumscribed" or "stable community" in Wallace Hill is not to say that there are no social relations between the residents. One might expect that the arrival of the Markhams would destroy the "integrity" of an established Afro-American neighborhood – after all, Frank originally planned to rent his properties to blacks. However, Frank is optimistic that the white couple will "join the PTA, give pottery and papermaking demonstrations at the block association mixers, become active in the ACLU or the Urban League" (416) and "find common ground regarding in-law problems with Negro neighbors"

(423). He hopes that the Markhams can find "a sense of belonging," if not necessarily "permanence," through "the satisfactions of optional community involvement" (431). But in the end they, like their black neighbors, might also transform themselves into migrants within the capitalist geographies of postmodern America, able to "arrive and depart" to, say, Siesta Key. Eventually, Wallace Hill will be transformed from a "stable," "circumscribed" (i.e., segregated) community, into a liminal, "optional community" – if we still want to call it a "community" at all.

Frank is provided with one further opportunity to elucidate his theory that so-called "community" has become inextricable from economic "compatibility." This situation arises after his son Paul is injured in a baseball cage in Cooperstown. A passer-by offering assistance turns out to be Irv Ornstein, Frank's stepbrother. The two men have not seen one another in years and Irv, having recently felt "detached from his own personal history," now experiences a transcendent sense of continuity in his life. This leads him to suggest that Frank, being "in the realty business," must constantly encounter people's desire for "continuity ... in the community sense." Awaiting the diagnosis of Paul's eye injury outside a hospital in Oneonta, Frank takes this incongruous opportunity to recapitulate his realtor's sense that, like "place," "community" has become contingent upon the market economy: "I don't really think communities are continuous, Irv ... I think of them – and I've got a lot of proof – as isolated, contingent groups trying to improve on an illusion of permanence, which they fully accept as an illusion ... Buying power is the instrumentality. But continuity, if I understand it at all, doesn't really have much to do with it" (386).

Recognizing that "sense of place" and "sense of community" have been rendered redundant, or at least highly contingent, by capitalism, Frank instead formulates his own sense of "independence." In an interview with Salon, Ford stated that, in Independence Day, he wanted to redefine the "conventional sense" of independence as "putting distance between yourself and other people." Ford wondered "if independence could in fact mean a freedom to make contact with others, rather than just the freedom to sever oneself from others."<sup>24</sup> Through his revisionary con-

24. Sophie Majeski, "Richard Ford: The Salon Interview," <http://www.salon1999.com/weekly/interview960708.html>

ception of independence, Frank hopes to "make contact with others," and to achieve semi-autonomy from the everyday, economic immanence of buying and selling real estate. Frank puts his theory into practice during the final section of the novel, in which he (eventually) joins in Haddam's holiday celebrations.

Initially, Frank is doubtful about the meaning of Fourth of July, feeling "as though independence were *only* private and too crucial to celebrate with others." Furthermore, Haddam's Fourth of July festivities are more commercialized than carnivalesque, located as they are in Haddam's Central Business District (CBD), transitory home of Benetton/Foot Locker and Laura Ashley/The Gap. Frank believes that this privatized space should be put to more public use: "I, in fact, wouldn't be sad or consider myself an antidevelopment traitor to see the whole shebang fold its tents and leave the business to our own merchants in town; turn the land into a people's park or a public vegetable garden; make friends in a new way" (425).

Feeling alienated by the holiday's commodification, Frank leaves the CBD and drives towards his old family home on Hoving Road. This return to the site of his \$1 million-plus home nearly causes Frank to regress into nostalgia: "Do I sense ... The same scent of loss I sniffed three nights ago at Sally's ...?" Even for a critic of capitalist property relations like the Residential Specialist, the familiar, fetishistic fantasy of place remains tempting: "it's worth asking again: is there any cause to think a place – any place – within its plaster and joists, its trees and plantings, in its putative essence *ever* shelters some spirit ghost of us as proof of its significance and ours?" Finally, though, the brief diversion to Hoving Road *helps* Frank to recover his faith in the social practice of everyday life. Refusing the alluring "sanction," the mystical "essence" of place, Frank concludes that interaction with "other humans" is what makes existential meaning: "We just have to be smart enough to quit asking places for what they can't provide, and begin to invent other options ... as gestures of our ... independence" (442).

Frank is reoriented to social relations with "other humans" when he encounters his old associate Carter Knott (in *The Sportswriter*, a fellow member of the Divorced Mens' Club). "By using Carter's presence," Frank staves off the sense of "displacement" provoked by his yearning for the Hoving Road house. Though Carter is not a close friend, their

brief encounter gives Frank the will to rejoin the festivities in Haddam CBD, where he makes a significant "gesture" towards his revised sense of independence. In the last lines of *Independence Day*, we witness Frank "narrow that space ... that separates people"<sup>25</sup> and "make contact with others" in the middle of the Fourth of July crowd: "The trumpets go again. My heartbreak quickens. I feel the push, pull, the weave and sway of others." (451)

In *The Southern Writer and the Postmodern World* (1991), Fred Hobson ingeniously but, I think, misguidedly tries to recover *The Sportswriter* as a "southern" novel. Hobson attempts this recovery partly on the premise that Frank Bascombe "has a great desire, nearly a compulsion, to link with place, whether the place is suburban New Jersey or Detroit." Hence, despite having acknowledged that Ford's work reveals no "particular allegiance to geographical place, southern or otherwise," and that Frank "professes little faith in traditional ideas of place," Hobson finally perpetrates the fallacy that being "keenly attuned to place" – in whatever fashion – is somehow essentially "southern."<sup>26</sup>

However, Frank's peripatetic "immanence of consumption" (during *The Sportswriter*) in the capitalist landscape of postsouthern America differs from almost anything in the "southern literary tradition" to which Hobson refers – a tradition that has emphasized the rural, small-town "stable community." To apply John Crowe Ransom's disapproving words, the sportswriter exhibits "the character of our urbanized, anti-provincial, progressive and mobile American life that it is in a condition of external flux."<sup>27</sup> In *Independence Day*, Frank's socio-spatial experiences are once again outside the (neo-Agrarian) "southern literary tradition." But the second Bascombe book goes further by showing just how completely Agrarian, precapitalist "real property" has been displaced by finance capitalist "real estate." In the Residential Specialist's post-southern America, such "southern" meta-concepts as "place" and "community," to the extent that they mean anything, are contingent upon land speculation and development. And yet, *Independence Day* is finally more

25. I am borrowing Ford's own quotation of Emerson in the Salon interview.

26. Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 50, 42.

27. John Crowe Ransom, "Reconstructed But Unregenerate," *I'll Take My Stand*, 5.

hopeful than *The Sportswriter* for, even as Frank gains a genuine understanding of the flux and inequality which characterize capitalist geographies, he still resolves (however temporarily) his own "predicament of placement."

If Hobson's critical approach to *The Sportswriter* is flawed, it cannot hold when transferred to *Independence Day*. Imitating Hobson's approach to the first Bascombe novel – trying to identify a subterranean "southern" sense of place or community in the sequel – proves very problematic. As we have already seen, Frank dismisses Mississippi's supposedly essential "sense of place" by comparing it to Haddam's "simple setting." Later, Frank does claim that Wallace Hill "could be a neighborhood in the Mississippi Delta." However, he adds the qualification that "the local cars at the curb are all snazzy van conversions and late-model Fords and Chevys" (119). Hence, this casual, comparative reference to "the South" subtly implies that, however much Wallace Hill has been segregated from the rest of Haddam, it remains a more prosperous black "community" than those found in Mississippi. It is true that Frank believes Wallace Hill's black residents may yet move "down South," thereby suggesting that the region yet retains a powerful pull for *black* Americans (and an attraction stronger than anything our narrator feels for his home state). But again, by adding that the South is "where their ancestors were once property themselves," Frank reminds us that, for all the Agrarian emphasis on "real property," the peculiar institutional identity of "the Old South" was premised upon the *human* property relations of slavery. In the end, Frank's very few "southern" citations serve to remind us that, as Charles Reagan Wilson observes, "place" has often been a code word "to indicate the status of blacks" in a hierarchical society.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, it is impossible to excavate some positive, absent presence of "the South and its "sense of place" from *Independence Day*. Indeed, it is perhaps only within the context of *A Piece of My Heart*, *The Sportswriter* and some of Ford's essays that we can even perceive how *Independence Day* obliquely extends the author's postsouthern critique of "the South" and the "southern literary tradition."

Having said that, *Independence Day*'s final reference to "the South" is

28. Charles Reagan Wilson, "Place, Sense of" in Wilson and William Ferris, eds., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 1137.

a somewhat clearer case of postsouthern, intertextual parody. Frank reveals that he is considering being buried in Cut Off, Louisiana, because it is a place that has "minimum earthly history." Larry McMurtry might be surprised, but Frank is hardly burdened by this Deep South site; it is, in fact, even more of a non-place than "Esperance, New York" (439). What is more, by slyly evoking Shut Off, Louisiana, as featured in Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman* (1966), Richard Ford reacts against the anti-Northern prejudice which is sometimes apparent in Percy's texts. Ford has explained that *The Sportswriter's* scathing criticism of New Orleans was "an answering knell" to *The Last Gentleman's* suggestion that Ann Arbor (where Ford taught and wrote *A Piece of My Heart*) is a "non-place."<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, for all that Ford critiques the production of postmodern capitalist geographies, his fiction shares none of the nostalgia that Warren, Welty, and even Percy sometimes felt for "the South" as it was before the advent of the Sun Belt and its "real estate people." In his 1977 review-essay of *Lancelot*, Ford observed that: "For Percy, the south is simply the landscape he knows ... firm, if temporary, ground from which to see and speak to the rest of the country" (561). Since he published *A Piece of My Heart*, Ford himself has rejected "the South" on even those limited terms, indicting the "indefensible restrictions of an outdated geography" imposed by "Southern literature or [the] Southern ethos."<sup>30</sup> Instead, in *Independence Day*, Frank Bascombe – born in Mississippi, but realtor-resident of New Jersey – speaks to us from the late capitalist landscape of postsouthern America.

29. For Shut Off, Louisiana, see Percy, *The Last Gentleman* [1966] (New York: Ivy, 1989), 273. Huey Guagliardo, "A Conversation with Richard Ford," *Southern Review*, 34:3 (Summer 1998), 617. See also Bone, 74, cf. n. 7 above.

30. Richard Ford *et al.*, "A Stubborn Sense of Place," *Harper's*, August 1986, 43.