

Towards the Politics of Difference: Mobility and Ethnic Identity in Richard Ford's Bascombe Novels

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Abstract

Mobility holds profound ethnic, class, and cultural significance in the fiction of the contemporary American writer Richard Ford. Through an analysis of his representative works, including *Independence Day*, *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You*, it becomes evident that Ford portrays the “negative mobility” of African Americans under spatial isolation, the transnational mobility of a Chinese immigrant, and the upward social mobility of both groups. In doing so, Ford illuminates disparities in mobility rights, routes, and friction among different ethnic groups, while also revealing shifts in their social status, values, and sense of identity. Furthermore, Ford reflects upon the social reality wherein ethnic minority groups encounter othering and marginalization upon integration into mainstream American society. This exposure lays bare the widespread systemic racial discrimination and deficiencies within the American political and economic system. Additionally, Ford's depiction of upward social mobility among ethnic minorities underscores the effectiveness of the politics of difference as a means to resist authority and construct ethnic identity. Focusing on the mobility of ethnic minorities deepens our understanding of the survival dilemma and identity crisis faced by them.

Keywords: Richard Ford, mobility, ethnicity, identity, the politics of difference

1. Introduction

In his early literary creation, the contemporary American writer Richard Ford (1944–) was influenced by Southern writers such as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor. This influence is evident in his exploration of classic themes of Southern literature such as history, sense of place, and family values, leading to his association with “neo-Faulknerism”. In 1996, Ford received the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Prize for his novel *Independence Day* (1995). This work, along with its sequels, *The Lay of the Land* (2006) and *Let Me Be Frank with You* (2014), collectively known as the Bascombe novels, showcase Ford's innovative writing style and creative concepts. These novels feature the recurring protagonist Frank Bascombe as the narrator, delving into his life experiences, the social milieu, and the political landscape, presenting a fragmented, fluid, and uncertain postmodern tableau. Current research on Ford's works predominantly centers on themes of historical consciousness, sense of place, and postmodern artistic characteristics. Notably, Christina Faber, in her work *The Unsettled State of America: Contemporary Narratives of Home and Mobility in Times of Crisis* (2022), focuses on *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You*, analyzing notions of home and mobility in times of crisis. In her view, the mobility of Americans reflects contradictory twin desires: they pursue change, progress, and dislocation while longing for roots, stability, and domesticity (Faber, 2022, p. 10). Faber also uncovers the survival dilemmas faced by individuals amidst insecurity, contingency, and uncertainty. However, Faber's analysis primarily revolves around the mobility characteristics of Frank as a middle-class white man, neglecting to delve into the mobility experiences of other ethnic minorities and their implications for identity. Thus, this essay aims to fill this gap by examining Ford's representative works, including *Independence Day*, *The Lay of the Land*, and *Let Me Be Frank with You*, to elucidate the disparities in mobility among African Americans, Chinese-Americans, and white individuals, and to explore the inherent connection between ethnic identity and mobility experiences.

Since John Urry proposed ‘mobility turn’ in *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century* (2000), mobility has become a central focus of research across disciplines such as sociology, human geography, tourism, and literature. In *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (2006), Tim Cresswell conceptualizes mobility as an intricate interplay of movement, representation, and practice, and explains the

politics of bodily mobility, the role of mobility in the historiography and ideology of USA and the citizenship rights of mobility and migration, etc. According to Cresswell (2006), mobility transcends mere physical movement between locations, encompassing social and ideological connotations (p. 2). He breaks mobility down into six of its constituent parts, including motive force, velocity, rhythm, route, experience, and friction, in order to comprehensively interpret the politics of mobility (2010, p. 17).

Guided by Cresswell's framework, this essay examines the mobility experiences of ethnic minorities in Ford's Bascombe novels. These narratives not only depict changes in geographical location but also shifts in social status, values, and ethnic consciousness. This essay points out that in the process of upward social mobility, ethnic minorities such as African-American residents of Wallace Hill, Hartwick Pines, and the Chinese American Mike Mahoney, not only encounter resistance from the white group but also grapple with identity crises. This dual negation of self and others imbues the implications of mobility with a dual tone, signifying both growth and progress, as well as despair and escape. By portraying the "negative mobility" of African-American residents under spatial segregation, the transnational mobility of the Chinese-American immigrant Mike, and the upward mobility of both groups, Ford underscores the disparities in mobility rights, routes, and friction among different ethnicities. Moreover, Ford's portrayal highlights the societal realities wherein ethnic minority groups face othering and marginalization upon integration into mainstream American society. By depicting the challenges faced by ethnic minorities in terms of mobility and immobility, habitation and displacement, Ford exposes the deficiencies of the American political and economic system, as well as systemic racial discrimination. Furthermore, he demonstrates that embracing the politics of difference serves as an effective means of challenging authority and constructing ethnic identity.

2. "Negative Mobility": The Identity of the Other under Spatial Isolation

In *American Mobilities: Geographies of Class, Race and Gender in US Culture* (2016), Julia Leyda introduces the term "negative mobility" to describe the plight of millions of unemployed Americans who were compelled to relocate in search of work, food, and shelter during the Great Depression of the 1930s. This economic collapse precipitated a significant ideological shift in the public perception of mobility, transitioning from notions of territorial expansion and nation-building progress to themes of displacement, homelessness, and existential threat (Leyda, 2016, p. 12). Geographic mobility ceased to be the primary avenue for class mobility and personal security that immigrants once aspired to. Richard Ford's novels, particularly *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*, depict this phenomenon of negative mobility. The ancestors of the African-American residents of Wallace Hill seek to evade the harsh realities of discrimination and oppression in the South, prompting their relocation to Haddam, New Jersey. However, their descendants find themselves uprooted once more, this time due to land speculation and gentrification. This narrative unveils the perpetual struggle faced by the black residents, highlighting their subordinate status and hinting at the shortcomings of the American real estate economy in the 1990s, as well as the government's indifference towards the living conditions of African Americans.

In *Independence Day*, Wallace Hill appears as a seemingly cohesive community but is, in reality, relegated to the status of the Other under spatial segregation. Frank Bascombe, the protagonist, observes that "it could be a neighborhood in the Mississippi Delta, though the local cars at the curb are all snazzy van conversions and late model Fords and Chevys" (Ford, 2006, p. 119). It indicates that even though Wallace Hill is a backward black neighborhood, it is relatively prosperity compared to its Mississippi counterparts. This suggests that African Americans have benefited from capitalist economic development and their living conditions have significantly improved. In fact, they reside in a geographically delineated community separate from the white community of Haddam. As Martyn Bone (2014) contends, "Wallace Hill's residents are becoming mobile 'immigrants' within a national 'system' of capitalist space, a 'larger world' stretching from New Jersey through the South to Arizona" (p. 127). Apparently, the ancestors of these black residents experienced a form of negative mobility, as they were compelled to leave Mississippi for eastern cities out of sheer necessity, striving for upward mobility in terms of class and social status. However, in the end, both the residents and their descendants find themselves ensnared in the confines of Clio Street, struggling to establish "a sense of belonging and permanence" (Ford, 2006, p. 27). Frank concludes that the residents of Haddam's black neighborhood "had possibly never felt at home where they were either, even though they and their relatives might've been here a hundred years and had never done anything but make us white late-arrivers feel welcome at their own expense" (Ford, 2006, p. 28). Despite settling in Haddam before whites, black residents are treated as subordinate dissidents and confined to closed enclaves.

Ford's narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the burgeoning real estate market economy of 1988, which offers Frank Bascombe an opportunity to become a realtor. This profession provides him with "the perfect position from which to observe the 'dislocatedness' (Ford, 2006, p. 55) so prevalent in modern suburban life"

(Guagliardo, 2000, p. 23). It is the black residents of Wallace Hill who are in a state of dislocatedness, fraught with a sense of insecurity and rootlessness. Frank envisions a scenario where rising property prices could potentially benefit the black residents of Wallace Hill, facilitating their economic advancement and eventual relocation. In addition, Frank intends to invest in properties on Clio Street by purchasing houses to rent out to others. "I could assure a comfortable existence in the face of housing costs going sky-high and until such time as they could move into a perpetual-care facility or buy a starter home of their own" (Ford, 2006, p. 27). Frank believes that investing in the community would not only improve the living conditions of African-American residents but also benefit himself. However, not all residents have the means to participate in the real estate market. As a result, the situation for those with low income and those without housing worsens, exacerbating disparities in wealth and racial tensions. In this way, Ford exposes the shortcomings and contradictions of economic policies: while the growth of the real estate economy benefits residents who own property, it also leads to uneven development in other areas of Haddam.

Wallace Hill is a social space shaped by political power, "generated out of a rationalized and theorized form serving as an instrument for the violation of an existing space" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 222). The unequal distribution of rights and capital leads to spatial disparities, characterized by inequalities in wealth, resources, and living environments. The black residents of Wallace Hill are confined to specific areas and are unable to fully integrate into the predominantly white community. The poverty within the community is not accidental but rather a consequence of systemic violence driven by economic motives, necessitating spatial isolation. This highlights the social and political implications of space as a product of capitalist principles. The existence of Wallace Hill underscores the spatial dynamics shaped by capitalist ideology. Similarly, Deep River in *Independence Day* serves as another example of how space is shaped by social forces and ideologies. It is an enclave gathered by the "self-contented, pseudo-reclusive riches" (Ford, 2006, p. 229). "An atmosphere of exclusive, possibly less than welcoming habitation greets whoever wanders past: people live here, but you don't know them" (Ford, 2006, p. 230). The affluent inhabitants of Deep River prefer to maintain a secluded existence and therefore enlist the police to ascertain the identities of unfamiliar individuals traversing through their domain, aiming to quell any disruptions to their tranquility. Nowadays, the new points of friction are not the city walls but newly strengthened local boundaries, the resistance to mobility is no longer but constantly reinforced local boundaries. For example, security, access control and surveillance cameras are all means of demarcating boundaries (Cresswell, 2010, p. 26). Consequently, the frequency of movement between locations diminished, accentuating the delineation of racial and class boundaries. As Bauman (2007) explains, "For the insiders of the voluntary ghetto, the other ghettos are spaces where 'we won't go'. For the insiders of the involuntary ones, the area to which they are confined (by being excluded from elsewhere) is the space 'we are not allowed to get out'" (p. 76). In contrast to the passive segregation experienced by African-American residents in Wallace Hill, the financial means and social standing of the inhabitants in Deep River empower them to actively segregate themselves and opt for immobility. It can be seen that the enclave of Deep River, inhabited by upper-class residents seeking seclusion from the outside world, exemplifies how economic and racial disparities shape community spaces under capitalism.

In *The Lay of the Land*, the black residents of Wallace Hill experience yet another form of negative mobility as they transition from immobility to forced relocation. This kind of mobility does not guarantee their ability to independently overcome the plight of spatial isolation and improve their social status. Instead, the black residents remain marginalized as the Other, subjected to the dominance of the white group and compelled to abandon their homes due to unjust policy directives. In the 1990s, the American government implemented gentrification in Haddam and planned to renovate and rebuild old communities and public infrastructure. Ford reveals its serious consequences in the novel: "Real estate went nuts, and realtors even nuttier[...] Topping-price wars, cutthroat bidding, forced compliance, broken lease and realty shenanigans took their place. The grimmest, barely habitable shotgun houses in the previously marginal Negro neighborhoods became prime, then untouchable in an afternoon" (Ford, 2007, p. 84). Speculators and developers exploit the policy loophole by purchasing old properties at discounted rates, refurbishing them, and subsequently selling them at inflated prices. This sets off a chain reaction of detrimental consequences, such as soaring housing and rental costs, as well as increased prices of goods and services. Contrary to Frank's expectations, the surge in housing prices does not yield substantial benefits for the residents. Instead, it plunges the community into a turbulent vortex, disrupting its once-stable way of life. Wallace Hill "was designated a Heritage Neighborhood, which guaranteed all the black folks had to leave because of taxes (many fled down south, though they'd been born in Haddam)" (Ford, 2007, pp. 84-85). This implementation of gentrification policies led to the expulsion of low-income groups and black inhabitants, leaving them marginalized and silenced in mainstream discourse.

When explaining the “politics of mobility”, Cresswell (2010) indicates that “politics means social relations that involve the production and distribution of power while a politics of mobility means the ways in which mobilities are both productive of such social relations and produced by them. Social relations include relations between classes, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and religious groups as well as a host of other forms of group identity”(p. 21). Indeed, mobility carries profound ideological implications, as the rights, routes, and friction of individual movement are intricately tied to the groups they identify with. The persistent racism stemming from the legacy of slavery has significantly contributed to the subordinate status of African Americans within the social hierarchy. According to David A. Harris, African Americans are far more likely to be stopped by police in Western cities for the offense of “driving while black” and racial profiling (Harris, 1997). The racially biased nature of traffic stops highlights the racial disparities in individual mobility, with African Americans facing greater obstacles and a higher likelihood of being detained, resulting in a state of immobility. This parallels the experiences of black residents depicted in Ford’s novels. Racial discrimination serves as a means to constrain the mobility of African Americans, confining them to such marginalized spaces as Clio Street in Haddam, thereby significantly limiting their living areas. Clearly, African American groups, designated as the Other, encounter resistance and isolation from the white group. Whether experiencing mobility or immobility, their circumstances are not a result of independent choice but rather a forced outcome imposed by the authoritative power of the dominant group and the government. In summary, Ford’s portrayal of negative mobility in Bascombe novels underscores the enduring legacy of racial inequality and economic injustice in American society. The mobility and immobility experiences of African Americans reflect not only individual struggles but also systemic inequities perpetuated by structures of power and privilege.

3. Transnational Mobility: Identity Resistance of a Chinese Immigrant

In the Bascombe novels, Richard Ford not only illuminates the harsh realities of marginalization experienced by African-American residents of Wallace Hill but also portrays the journey of transnational mobility undertaken by a Chinese immigrant. Contrasted with the struggles of the black residents, the Chinese-American Mike navigates a path of relative independence, freely seeking job opportunities across various locales. However, Mike grapples with a profound conflict of values as he endeavors to reconcile his cultural heritage with the dominant norms of mainstream American society. His wavering religious beliefs, political affiliations, and evolving values all underscore his struggle to assert his Chinese identity amidst the pressure to assimilate and improve his economic standing. Mike hails from Gyangze, Tibet, originally known as Lobsang Dhargey. Upon arriving in the United States and securing his first job, he adopts the American name Mike Mahoney. Continuously seeking upward mobility, Mike transitions between various workplaces, spanning from India to Newark, Carteret, and South Amboy, all in pursuit of what he terms “the success ladder” (Ford, 2007, p. 33). Ultimately, he lands a position as a realty associate at Realty-Wise Associates, a company founded by Frank. Over fifteen years, Mike undergoes a transformation, embracing his newfound status as “a full-blooded, naturalized American” (Ford, 2007, p. 15). This metamorphosis, however, is not merely physical but also psychological, as Mike’s shifting physical displacement mirrors his evolving sense of identity.

As a Buddhist, Mike advocates that the belief “is not a luxury, but still needs to keep pace with known facts and established authority—in his case, the economy. It’s the theory-versus-practice rub that all religions” (Ford, 2007, p. 194). While Buddhism prioritizes the well-being of individuals, business often prioritizes financial interests, leading to an inherent contradiction between the two belief systems. Mike’s endorsement of aligning religious beliefs with economic imperatives reflects his accommodation of mainstream cultural values. Whether it’s changing his name or adjusting his religious beliefs, Mike is striving to construct a new identity that aligns with the prevailing ethos of American society. “Identity is never ‘complete’; rather, it is always under construction. To put it more explicitly, identity is not an object but a process.” Irvin Cemil Schick also emphasizes that “this process is not even: times of crisis or transition are often periods of particularly intensive identity construction” (Wolfreys, 2004, p. 98). Mike’s identity construction is significantly influenced by an identity crisis, which is exacerbated by the fluidity of modern life, leaving him with feelings of rootlessness and instability. This existential uncertainty drives him to seek integration into the mainstream white group as a means of finding a sense of belonging.

Mike’s political allegiance further underscores his ambiguous relationship with his ethnic identity. In *The Lay of the Land*, set against the backdrop of the 2000 presidential election between Republican candidate George W. Bush and Democratic candidate Albert Gore, Mike’s voting choice for Bush, even though the Republican party’s lack of support for minority rights, is ironic. Despite being a member of minority groups, Mike prioritizes his interests over ethnic rights. He acknowledges the potential consequences, realizing that “when Bush gets in, the minority program’ll dry up”. However, he also anticipates favorable conditions for the real estate industry under

Bush's policies, acknowledging the potential for economic growth. "I think it's time to get serious about real estate, Frank. Bush is going to win Florida, I'm sure. We'll see a turn-around by fiscal '01" (Ford, 2007, p. 421). This dilemma reflects Mike's conflicting priorities between personal career advancement and ethnic solidarity. Frank sharply comments on Mike, highlighting the contradictions in his choices:

He's like many of our citizens, including the ones who go back to the Pilgrims: He's armed himself with just enough information, even if it's wrong, to make him believe that what he wants he deserves, that bafflement is a form of curiosity and that these two together form an inner strength that should let him pick all the low-hanging fruit. And who's to say he's wrong? He may already be as assimilated as he'll ever need to be (Ford, 2007, pp. 21–22).

Frank underscores that Mike, much like many American citizens, has assimilated mainstream cultural values. Despite being aware of the potential consequences of his decision, Mike chooses to prioritize his interests over the collective rights of his minority group. This reflects his desire for upward mobility, particularly through the opportunities provided by the real estate policies of the Bush administration, as well as his aspiration for acceptance within the dominant social order.

Furthermore, Mike's shifting values manifest in his professional conduct as a real estate agent, which reflects his resistance to Chinese ethnicity. Like most immigrants to the United States, Mike believes in the American Dream and measures his achievement materially. As a real estate agent, he is driven by economic interests, follows the laws of the capitalist market, and gradually falls into a situation of alienation. Mike claims that a realtor can help immigrants like him find a safe haven, but in reality, he uses his business beliefs to guide his practice. When selling a house to a Chinese family, even though Mike has dinner with them, he still only regards the client as an object of earning money. It implies that he hardly has any sense of identity for his ethnic group. The same thing happened to Mike in a relationship with another client, Bagosh, leading Frank to comment, "Despite being a Buddhist—full of human compassion for all that lives, and who views real estate as a means of helping others—when it comes to clinching deals, Mike sees clients as rolls of cash that happen to be able to talk" (Ford, 2007, p. 411). Despite Mike's professed compassion for his clients, his transactions ultimately prioritize financial gain over genuine human connection. In Erich Fromm's views, "In contemporary Western culture this polarity has given way to an almost exclusive reference to the abstract qualities of things and people, and to a neglect of relating oneself to their concreteness and uniqueness" (Fromm, 2002, p. 111). In other words, when referring to a thing, one is not primarily concerned with its concrete qualities, but its exchange value. And also, one may measure his relationships with others through value, rather than their concrete feelings. The specific characteristics of people and things are replaced with exchange value or monetary amounts, and eventually, this relationship becomes alienated. This is the case with Mike, whose ways of interacting confuses Frank, "I've never felt exactly that way in the fifteen years of selling houses. But I'm not an immigrant, either" (Ford, 2007, p. 411). As a white man, Frank could not understand the disappearance of Mike's religious beliefs or his extreme focus on business interests. For Mike, it seems that only by gradually weakening the consciousness of Chinese cultural values can he improve his economic status, and realize his American Dream. Thus, this alienation from his cultural roots signifies his assimilation into mainstream American business practices but further blurs the boundaries of his ethnic identity.

As Stuart Hall (2003) puts it, "Identities are never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (p. 4). In postmodern times, identities are becoming increasingly fragmented and fractured. In navigating the complexities of identity construction, Mike grapples with a fragmented sense of self, shaped by intersecting discourses and social positions. In the process of transnational mobility, Mike breaks away from the past, transformed from a Tibetan into a "naturalized American", in which his identity is split into fragments. Instead of resisting capitalist values and weakening its power as the dominant force, Mike readily embraced it, shed his Chinese identity, and became an identical member of American society. It can be seen that Mike's journey reflects the broader postmodern condition, wherein identities are fluid, multifaceted, and subject to constant negotiation and transformation.

However, the reduction of the diversity of ethnic identity does not mean the disappearance of differences. Despite his efforts to assimilate, Mike's physical appearance continues to mark him as an outsider. Mike "is a five-foot-three-inch, forty-three-year-old realty dynamo with the standard Tibetan's flat, bony-checked, beamy Chinaman's face, gun-slit eyes, abbreviated arm length" (Ford, 2007, p. 14). Even though he has business acumen and outstanding sales ability, clients will be skeptical of Mike because of his Chinese identity and shout perplexedly, "Wait. I'm being shown a beach bungalow by a fucking Tibetan!" Amid depression and upheaval, the mobility of the Chinese to an American has more often been seen as a threat of instability, and a danger to the

moral and physical well-being of established American citizens (Cresswell, 2006, p. 180). While the situation seems to have improved in Ford's novel—the clients “get over his unexpected Asian-ness as I have, to the point they can treat him like any other biped” (Ford, 2007, p. 15), the mobility of the Chinese-American Mike still is considered as transgressive. No matter how successful and assimilated Mike has become, his Chinese ethnicity remains a persistent barrier to full acceptance within mainstream groups, underscoring the enduring marginalization experienced by ethnic minorities. Therefore, the dilemma faced by Mike is how to retain his Chinese ethnicity and accept the differences while integrating into American society.

4. Upward Social Mobility: Sameness and Differences in Ethnic Identity

In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young criticizes the assimilationist ideal that defines freedom as transcending group differences, and advocates instead for a politics of difference, that is, various races, genders, and ethnic groups actively define group differences, which are not rooted in nature but in social processes. However, in Ford's novels, for ethnic minorities like Chinese immigrant Mike and African-American Hartwick Pines, sameness and difference are not binary oppositions but are in a process of transformation. Specifically, these ethnic minorities have experienced a process from assimilating to defining differences when integrating into society and striving for upward mobility, that is, from eliminating self-differences and taking the values set by the mainstream groups as the benchmark, to actively defining their ethnic identities.

Compared with the negative mobility of black residents in Wallace Hill, Hartwick Pines in *Let Me Be Frank with You* relies on his own strength to cross the boundaries and move into a white community, and thus achieve socioeconomic mobility. Pines is extremely talented and joined Bell Laboratories after obtaining a doctorate in engineering, becoming the first black man to work at a high level at the company. Personal advancement did not free him from racial problems. Therefore, Pines decides to move to Haddam with his family in 1959 and becomes “the first Negroes in a white suburban neighborhood with a boy-genius father and a high-strung temperamental operatic white mother” (Ford, 2015, p. 94). This upward mobility fails to bring any improvement to Pines's situation, nor realize his dream to move from the “margin” to the “center,” instead, it exacerbates his spiritual crisis. Since then, Pines has become estranged from his family, and after a rift with his wife, he moves into the basement and converts it into his workshop. “He brought his instruments and testing gauges and computer prototypes. He'd turned it into a private laboratory” (Ford, 2015, p. 100). Pines's intention to improve social status and identity is shattered by the reality of racial discrimination. As a result, he becomes anxious and isolated from the outside world, and is unable to carry out a normal life.

Even though Pines has achieved a leap in economic status, he eventually becomes the Other under spatial segregation like the black residents of Wallace Hill. The behavior of denying ethnic differences and maintaining identity with the white group does not enable Pines to escape the quagmire of racial discrimination. Instead, it leads to a family tragedy: after his wife decided to leave because of an affair with a choral music teacher, Pines killed her, and then killed their son. While waiting for his daughter to come home from school, he realized the crime he had committed and chose to commit suicide. Pines's daughter concludes, “His life was a losing war against ambiguity” (Ford, 2015, p. 105). She reflects on his struggle, lamenting how he prioritized an abstract ideal of assimilation over his humanity, ultimately leading to his downfall.

Although Pines stays away from the African-American neighborhood and moves into the white neighborhood, he fails to integrate into the white group and obtain an ideal life. The uncertainty of ethnic identity, family affection, and community life completely overwhelm Pines. “Everyone in this social order has been constructed in our political imagination as a racialised subject” (as cited in Carby 1993, p. 193), but the level of racial representation, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race (Dyer, 2017, p. 3). In this sense, the white group is placed outside the scope of racialized constructs and becomes the judge setting standards. In this closed system, Pines's upward social mobility is an act of transgression. He can not escape the fate of being discriminated against and oppressed, and in the end, he is despair to end his life. This narrative challenges the assimilationist ideal and illustrates the futility of seeking acceptance within a racialized social hierarchy.

Ethnicity, as Min Zhou (2013) indicates, undergoes a dynamic interactive process, that is, the inherent cultural values and behavioral patterns of ethnic groups are constantly affected by external structural factors, which in turn strengthens the ethnic group's social status in the structure (p. 42). The Chinese immigrant Mike undergoes a similar process of ethnic identity construction. He initially assimilates to mainstream cultural values, resulting in his lack of identification with the Chinese ethnicity, but eventually asserts his own identity due to socioeconomic mobility, which brings him a sense of self-belonging and direction. Through his real estate career, Mike seeks economic empowerment and autonomy, symbolized by his decision to buy out his business partner. He informs Frank unexpectedly, “I want to buy you out” (Ford, 2007, p. 421). He suggests that Frank transfer

ownership of the real estate company and permit him to establish a new business. Despite Frank's rejection, he continues to offer advice: "But if I make a good business proposal and pay you a lot of money, you can transfer ownership, and everything will stay the same" (Ford, 2007, p. 422). Apparently, everything will be changed when Mike takes over the company. This action symbolizes Mike's resistance to conforming to mainstream norms and his endeavor to attain economic autonomy as a means of asserting his agency. Frank, taken aback by this proposal, laments that "one hardly knows how or when or by what subtle mechanics the old values give way to new. It just happens" (Ford, 2007, p. 423). This remark reflects Frank's realization that societal norms and values can evolve in unpredictable ways, sometimes challenging established conventions. The ethnic minorities, embodied by Mike, seize the opportunities presented by the shifting times, declaring that "I think now's the right time to make a change" (Ford, 2007, p. 421). By venturing into entrepreneurship and establishing his own real estate business, Mike enhances his economic standing, shedding the identity of the Other, and reaffirming his sense of self-awareness and subjectivity. "By asserting a positive meaning for their own identity, oppressed groups seek to seize the power of naming difference itself, and explode the implicit definition of difference as deviance in relation to a norm, which freezes some groups into a self-enclosed nature" (Young, 2011, p. 171). Unlike Pines, Mike isn't confined within a self-contained system where white standards prevail. Instead, he actively challenges the existing model and takes initiative, advocating for self-determination. In this way, difference no longer marks otherness and opposition, but declares uniqueness and plurality. Mike's physical and psychological mobility highlights the inherent contradictions and the complexity of ethnic identity, and the importance of agency in shaping one's subjectivity.

As Linda Hutcheon (2004) suggests, "The contradictions that characterize postmodernism reject any neat binary opposition that might conceal a secret hierarchy of values. The elements of these contradictions are usually multiple; the focus is on differences, not single otherness" (pp. 42–43). In the Bascombe novels, Ford not only portrays the experiences of the middle- and upper-class white population but also sheds light on the struggles of immigrants, Chinese-Americans, African Americans, and other minority groups. The stark contrast between these groups exposes the inequality in mobility rights among ethnic minorities. While Frank's mobility represents an unexpected and diverse journey, the mobility experienced by black residents like Mike and Pines is fraught with unease, transgression, and even tragedy. Frank enjoys unrestricted mobility, freely navigating between urban and suburban areas and transitioning between various identities, such as writer, college teacher, sportswriter, and real estate agent. His mobility is characterized by its frequency and breadth. In contrast, the mobility of black residents in Wallace Hill is constrained, occurring infrequently and within a limited scope. Since settling in Haddam, they have been confined to the areas where they "are not allowed to get out", eventually facing expulsion due to unjust policies. The challenges of mobility and immobility, as well as the experiences of immigration and displacement, reflect the shared realities of existence for this group.

As members of marginalized groups, both African-American Pines and Chinese-American Mike have experienced upward social mobility. However, their journeys differ significantly. Pines struggles with the process of aligning his identity with mainstream group, finding it challenging to accept the differences in his ethnic characteristics. This struggle ultimately leads to a family tragedy. In contrast, Mike embarks on a journey of continuous ethnic identity construction, and eventually, develops a strong sense of ethnic identity consciousness. This highlights the complexity of ethnic identity, which is not uniform, fixed, or complete, but rather diverse, unstable, and fragmented. Homi K. Bhabha advocates the construction of a hybrid cultural space that "can accept and regulate the differential structure of the moment of intervention without rushing to produce a unity of the social antagonism or contradiction" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). This concept involves the colonized population assimilating into the dominant culture while retaining their cultural characteristics, resulting in a blending of ethnic traits that simultaneously showcase similarities and differences. Through this process, individuals can resist or even subvert authority by constructing a political entity that is neither wholly one nor the other, thereby altering the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. In Ford's novels, Mike navigates such a hybrid cultural space, balancing assimilation with resistance to forge new identities that challenge established norms.

Born in Mississippi, Ford had experienced racial conflict and segregation in the South at an early age. In an interview with Huey Guagliardo, he expressed concerns about immigration and racial issues:

because of our geographic size, because of the inevitability of greater and greater degrees of multiculturalism, because of immigration, because of economic disparity, because of racial strife, racial inequality, the country will basically balkanize along lines which are not now completely visible, but other than in terms of the states [...] The people on the other side are often immigrants who have not been served well by this society's economy, who are on the low end of the socioeconomic scale (Guagliardo, 2001, p.

157).

Ford emphasizes that immigrants, low-income and minority groups are integral parts of the United States and deserve attention from the public. The politics of difference also suggests that “equality as the participation and inclusion of all groups sometimes requires different treatment for oppressed or disadvantaged groups” (Young, 2011, p. 158). In *Let Me Be Frank with You*, Frank said to Pines’s daughter at the end of their conversation, “We just have so much chance to make an impression. It seems fair. It’s the new normal”. This “new normal” signifies a shared understanding between different ethnic groups, “what I hadn’t had words for before, but believed we felt together” (Ford, 2015, p. 111). Ford’s portrayal of ethnic minorities underscores the necessity of a politics of difference that acknowledges and celebrates diversity. Through the struggles of different characters, he highlights the significance of mutual understanding and inclusivity in fostering a more just society. Ultimately, Ford’s novels present a vision of reconciliation and solidarity among diverse ethnic groups, challenging readers to confront their biases and embrace the complexities of identity in contemporary America.

5. Conclusion

The mobility described by Ford carries complex and profound ethnic, class, and cultural meanings. Ford himself explains, “I’ve written a lot about race in my life, because racial strife was a big part of my life ” (Wiener, 2007). In *Independence Day*, *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You*, Ford portrays vastly different experiences of mobility among ethnic minorities. Frank, symbolizing middle-class whites, enjoys the freedom to relocate, whereas the African-American residents of Wallace Hill are either segregated on Clio Street or compelled to relocate. Consequently, Ford unveils a social reality where the African-American community is ostracized and marginalized within a hierarchically spatial order, alongside a political and economic system that prioritizes white interests. The tragedy befalling the Pines further underscores the dire consequences of the racial stratification system. Moreover, the despair of Pines and the resistance of Mike in the novel starkly contrast, reflecting the ethnic identity crisis stemming from the cultural hegemony of white supremacy and satirizing its mechanism of rejecting differences while pursuing homogeneity. Simultaneously, Mike’s upward social mobility illustrates that the politics of difference constitutes an effective means for ethnic minorities to challenge authority and construct ethnic identity. In essence, by portraying the survival challenges and identity crises encountered by ethnic minority groups upon assimilating into mainstream society, Ford exposes the pervasive systemic racial discrimination and deficiencies within the political and economic framework of American society. He also conveys the aspiration for the construction of an ideal society that embraces diversity while fostering harmonious coexistence.

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