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SLAVERY AS NATIONAL TRAUMA IN RICHARD FORD'S "EVERYTHING COULD BE WORSE"

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ABSTRACT:
This article explores slavery as a national trauma in Richard Ford's 2014 novella "Everything Could Be Worse." First, slavery is conceptualized as trauma, emphasizing its role in the formation of contemporary Black identity in the United States. The categories of 'postmemory' (Marianne Hirsch), 'phantom' and 'crypt' (Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok) are presented, as they facilitate the study of multigenerational oppression and the transmission of trauma. Then, a brief discussion of the race question in Ford's fiction and nonfiction contextualizes the analysis of the novella. In "Everything Could Be Worse," which resembles a ghost story as well as a session of psychoanalysis, the intergenerational effects of trauma affect the descendants of both victims and perpetrators of slavery. Finally, it is concluded that, despite certain shortcomings, Ford's approach to racial difference is becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Este artículo explora la esclavitud como trauma nacional en "Everything Could Be Worse" (2014), de Richard Ford. En primer lugar, se lleva a cabo la conceptualización de la esclavitud como trauma, prestando atención a su papel en la formación de la identidad negra estadounidense contemporánea. Las categorías de 'posmemoria' (Marianne Hirsch), 'fantasma' y 'cripta' (Nicolas Abraham y Maria Torok) se presentan para facilitar el estudio de la

opresión multigeneracional y la trasmisión del trauma. A continuación, una breve discusión de la cuestión racial en la ficción y no ficción de Ford contextualiza el análisis de "Everything Could Be Worse." En esta novela corta, los efectos del trauma intergeneracional se perciben en los descendientes tanto de las víctimas como de los perpetradores de la esclavitud. Por último, se concluye que, a pesar de ciertas limitaciones, resulta evidente la creciente sofisticación con la que Ford trata la diferencia racial.

Every nation has its own ghosts. Britain's is the Great War—in Ted Hughes's famous formulation. Spain's is the Civil War—or so its ubiquity in artistic and political discourse seems to suggest. In the United States, there are reasons to label slavery and its legacy as the number one national ghost. Within the last few years, the Black Lives Matter movement has kept the momentum going in response to police brutality and racial profiling regularly hitting the headlines. Meanwhile, journalistic initiatives such as the *New York Times* 1619 Project and the *Atlantic* Inheritance Project are born with ambitious goals: "to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country" (Silverstein 5) and "to fill in the blank pages of Black history" (Goldberg), respectively. Unsurprisingly, literature in the new millennium has actively contributed to this reappraisal of national identity. In the 2010s, authors as different as Claudia Rankine, Colson Whitehead, Ta-Nehisi Coates, or Jesmyn Ward have been the recipients of a number of prestigious awards for their exploration of the Black experience in the United States and their celebration of African American culture. However, as the rotten fruits of slavery still determine the way US citizens function and interact with one another in the present, both Black and White writers struggle with racial difference and its consequences in their fiction and nonfiction.

This article aims to analyze the ghost of slavery as cultural trauma in the novella of an author who, for almost half a century, has relentlessly explored what it means to be American. Richard Ford's "Everything Could Be Worse," included in the last Frank Bascombe book to date, *Let Me Be Frank with You* (2014), centers on the typical Fordian Black-White encounter in order to turn racial tension into a productive force for national reconciliation. Although both the author and the first-person narrator of "Everything Could Be Worse" are White, it is by no means the intention of this article to

exclusively focus on the effects of slavery on White America or to conflate the suffering of the descendants of victims and perpetrators; quite the contrary, it attempts to explore a work of fiction where "both victims and perpetrators pass on the ineradicable legacies of violent histories" (Graff, "Aftermath" 193) without erasing the fundamental differences in suffering and responsibilities. Two preliminary steps will lead to the close reading of Ford's novella: the conceptualization of slavery as trauma and the overview of the race question in Ford's fiction and nonfiction.

SLAVERY AS CULTURAL TRAUMA

The end of legally sanctioned, race-based human chattel slavery in the United States in the aftermath of the Civil War was followed by another process of disenfranchisement of Black Americans. As the title of Douglas Blackmon's 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning book suggests, *Slavery by Another Name* continued to prevent African American people from becoming full citizens. A similar approach urges Sabine Broeck to coin 'enslavism' in order to highlight the ongoing legacy of slavery. According to her, this term better conveys what is "a structure-generative systematic practice" (114) that explains the current subjugation of Black people, from the discrimination of African Americans to the massive deaths of African migrants trying to reach the Southern coasts of Europe—instead of simply a circumscribed event in a certain time and place. In an analysis restricted to the US context, we see that in recent years a number of researchers and therapists have convincingly argued for the dramatic importance of slavery in the formation of contemporary African American identity from the point of view of psychoanalysis and trauma studies.

Janice P. Gump explores the intergenerational transmission of trauma that determines African American subjectivity ("Reality" 42). Drawing upon the influential work of Ira Berlin, Gump claims that, in the United States, the slave-master relation—with its cycle of resistance and subjugation—offered the template for all social relations ("Reality" 47). Trauma marks African American subjectivity due to slavery's dependence on subjugation as a means to annihilate the self ("Reality" 48). Rather than producing traumatic events, "the state of slavery in and of itself was traumatic," based as it was on "the contention that blacks were inferior to whites, inadequate, and defective" ("Presence" 162). Her work is devoted to an examination of

the principles of subjectivity of slaves—i.e. the principles defining who they are in a world that negates their selfhood—and how "such principles have been transmitted to descendants," all the while crucially acknowledging that Whites have also been determined by "culture's treatment of African Americans" ("Presence" 161). In the clinical cases she discusses, Gump establishes "links between slavery and familial patterns of behavior" ("Reality" 52), before concluding that the effects of slavery persist, that subjectivity presents "an historical and cultural determinacy," and that the past will be manifest in the future ("Reality" 52).

In a similar vein, Gilda Graff, in a series of articles over the last years, has conscientiously traced social and psychological maladies affecting Black America back to the time of chattel slavery. Criticizing that only recently has psychoanalysis started to pay attention to slavery and racism as trauma, and insistently making the case for reparations ("Reparations"), she focuses on the transgenerational haunting of slavery. Her analysis covers a wide range of topics and phenomena, including the unawareness of White privilege; the disproportionate incidence of unemployment, imprisonment, chronic stress and infant mortality in African American communities ("Aftermath"; "Shame" 156), and the individual and collective shame weaponized by Donald Trump in the 2016 election ("Shame").

Meanwhile, with an eye to improving the practice of marriage and family therapists, Erica Wilkins et al. discuss the residual effects of slavery (RES), i.e. "the ways in which the racist treatment of African Americans, during and after slavery, has impacted multiple generations of African Americans" (15). The authors review the literature on the term, comment on the incidence of RES in both African American and non-African American communities, and highlight the resilience of African American families, before concluding with a case vignette aimed at convincing modern-day therapists of the need to enhance their knowledge of historical traumas and multigenerational oppression.

The collective psychology implied by this last notion urges us to establish an important distinction for the discussion of race and trauma—that between psychic trauma, which affects the individual, and cultural trauma, which marks the memories and changes the future identity of a collectivity (Alexander 1). No character from the novella to be analyzed has directly experienced the evils of slavery. Rather, they experience slavery as a cultural trauma. As Ron

Eyerman puts it, "slavery is traumatic for those who share a common fate, not necessarily a common experience" (14-5). Eyerman approaches slavery as the primal scene that unites all African Americans, a "collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people" (1). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s marks the entrance of slavery into the national collective memory—the moment when the cultural trauma of a group becomes a national trauma, the impact of which reaches across time and country, as Ford's text will aptly prove.

Although not directly concerned with slavery, the work of Marianne Hirsch and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok proves invaluable for understanding the intricacies of the intergenerational transmission of trauma in Ford's novella. Hirsch coined "postmemory" to define "the familial inheritance and transmission of cultural trauma" ("Surviving" 9); this term conveys "its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary, or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness" ("Surviving" 9). Rather than strictly an identity position, Hirsch prefers to see postmemory "as an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma" ("Surviving" 10). Although originally used to address the plight of children of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch contends that "it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or traumatic events and experiences" (*Family* 22), such as chattel slavery.

For their part, Abraham and Torok approach the intergenerational effects of trauma through the notions of the "phantom" and the "crypt." The former is a gap, "a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason" (Abraham 173), and its haunting originates from the secrets of others. The latter is the sealed-off psychic place where the unspeakable memory is entombed (Abraham and Torok 141). Both phantom and crypt represent two obstacles to introjection, i.e. the process that allows us "to remember the past, recall what was taken from us, understand and grieve over what we have lost to trauma, and so find and renew ourselves" (Rand, "Introduction" 13). In this model, repressed memories of violence inevitably return to later generations in the form of ghostly presences, giving way to a tension between revealing and concealing. In Jacques Derrida's formulation, the key to resolve this tension is offered by cryptographic language: a set of "words buried alive" that provide access to the crypt within the

self (Derrida, "*Fors*" xxxv). The fact that Abraham and Torok's "phantom" and the idea of the dead's unfinished business being handed down to their descendants derive from folklore (Rand, "Editor's Note" 166-7) is particularly fitting for our analysis, as Ford's novella resorts to the conventions of gothic fiction.

Needless to say, the study of slavery as trauma has not been limited to the fields of clinical psychology, psychiatry, sociology, or criminal justice; scholars such as Vivien Green Fryd utilize the categories of trauma, slavery, and haunting to examine artistic creation. Fryd relies both on Hirsch's "postmemory" and Joy DeGruy's "post-traumatic slave syndrome" (PTSS) in order to explore "the 'intergenerational transmission of trauma' as postmemory" in the art of Kara Walker (146). Dominated by ghostly presences, Walker's installations force the viewer to perceive trauma "as relentlessly and continuously invading upon the present as PTSS, disturbing the process of recovery, healing, or closure" (156). The present article will follow a similar path, applying the key concepts advanced in this literature review to the analysis of Richard Ford's "Everything Could Be Worse," for which the following brief discussion of the race question in Ford provides the necessary context.

RICHARD FORD AND THE RACE QUESTION

A key text to understand race as a source of anxiety in Ford's writing is his 1999 essay for the *New York Times*, "In the Same Boat." The complexity of race relations, guilt, and responsibility permeate this essay, where Ford acknowledges how difficult he finds it "to have a genuine conversation about race." On the one hand, he has no qualms about admitting the wrongs caused by Whites, the consequences of which still determine the worth of Black lives in the United States. On the other hand, he also establishes a clear distinction between individual and social responsibility: "I don't understand why anybody might think I would personally apologize for the abomination of slavery when I never caused it." Ford makes a case for his right to explore race in his writing: "Most of us still act as if race is 'a black issue,' that in essence blacks own race, and we decidedly don't own it." Not only is this a veiled criticism on certain White *and* Black attitudes, but also the basis for Ford's rejection of race as a binary opposition: "[Race] may be the most important public issue I've faced in my personal life, but as a drama of opposites, it poses a dulling, unresolvable dilemma" ("Boat").

"In the Same Boat" becomes an act of confession in which Ford discusses his careless use of 'the N-word'[1]–a term he surprised himself having used in letters to friends even as a well-established writer in his thirties. He defends, nonetheless, his innocence when charged with racism, which brings to mind Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's notion of "racism without racists" as the key for maintaining the contemporary racial order. Contentious as it is, Ford's essay helps us understand the current value of the race question both in his fiction and in American social relationships. What is more, a reading of "In the Same Boat" *vis-à-vis* his latest fiction—of which "Everything Could Be Worse" is a prime example—exemplifies the increasing sophistication of Ford's approach to racial difference.

Ford's arguably most accomplished body of work to date—the Frank Bascombe saga: *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), *The Lay of the Land* (2006) and *Let Me Be Frank with You*—encompasses three decades of middle-class, male, White life in the United States while intimating the need to reassess certain national values, with every succeeding book revealing a growing preoccupation with racial interactions and processes. *The Sportswriter*, which barely addresses the obvious implications of narrating from the point of view of a White male, portrayed a homogenous society in which only a small number of apparently innocent details and slips of the tongue threatened to expose hidden racial dynamics and the resulting power imbalance in the fictional New Jersey suburb of Haddam. Black and White relations became central to its sequel, to the extent that Ford "wanted *Independence Day* to be about race" (Duffy 68). At this stage of his work, a conversation about race largely meant an exploration of Black-White relationships, and race became a relevant topic in the few episodes where Black characters were introduced, which fits the common belief to which Whiteness Studies has given the lie: "Other people are raced, we are just people" (Dyer 1). The second Bascombe novel shows that, in a heavily racialized nation, White and Black individuals "are condemned to function within their oppositional historical identities" even if they belong to the same country, society and generation (Duffy 69). In other words, social functions are defined in racial terms. The unsurpassable divide that hinders Black and White relations in *Independence Day* is identified in Bascombe's

[1] For the avoidance of doubt, Ford uses the actual slur but I have opted for the euphemism 'the N-word.'

vividly described chance meeting with an African American removal man, Mr. Tanks, embodiment of a Black masculinity historically constructed as subordinate. As the episode suggests, this fact alone proves stronger than any common ground or similar life experiences between men about the same age, divorced, and with children.

The impossibility of a significant exchange across racial boundaries informs later non-Bascombe stories such as "Leaving for Kenosha," included in *Sorry for Your Trouble* (2020), where a crucial distinction is introduced. Now, the younger generations—exemplified by the story's narrator's daughter, Louise, and her friend, Ginny—seem to be oblivious to the gulf preventing their parents from any meaningful relationship, thus projecting an auspicious image of understanding and communion that points to Ford's statement: "Only actual interracial contact can hope to bring about a bettering of our shared lives" ("Boat"). Ginny herself, the child of a mixed-race relationship, provides a rare instance of the female body as a site for national reconciliation—all the more unusual for a literary production such as Ford's, largely characterized by male focal characters and narrators. With its depiction of New Orleans after Katrina, "Leaving for Kenosha" is paradigmatic of Ford's interest in the social geographies of race, as are the discussions of gentrification as a new form of segregation that enrich the last two Bascombe books.

Both *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You* address the displacement of racialized communities and the deterritorialization of African American residents. The wider scope of the former, as well as its attention to the role and plight of Asian American and Latino characters in the endless process of national formation, facilitates the portrayal of a multicultural America that transcends the binary opposition of some of Ford's other narratives. Particular attention is paid to the narrator's Tibetan American sidekick and business partner, Mike Mahoney, a cultural hybrid whose process of Americanization brings forth a redefinition of mainstream notions of Americanness while challenging the "perpetual foreigner" mythology faced by Asian Americans. The last installment of the saga to date, the collection of four novellas *Let Me Be Frank with You*, set in New Jersey in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, is paradigmatic of the Bascombe books' ambivalent racial politics. As in the three previous novels, the central character is presented as the quintessential White liberal, less progressive than he would like to admit. Almost in the same breath, he is able to

present himself as a staunch supporter of Obama who disdains Republican bigots and to describe the dwindling African American population of Haddam as "vestigial Negroes" ("Everything" 66).

Taken as a whole, the Bascombe quartet projects the vision of a country where its idiosyncratic optimism and faith in progress are constantly challenged by racial disharmony. Like his signature character, Ford grew up in the Mississippi of the 1950s and 1960s, and therefore his approach to race reflects the ambiguities, contradictions, and struggles of the national experience before and after the Civil Rights movement. In a 2017 interview, Ford denounces the toxic, "apartheid environment" of his formative years in Jackson: "I felt lucky to be able to get out of Mississippi in 1962 and most of what I have done with myself intellectually since then has been to try to cure myself of that" ("New America"). The novella "Everything Could Be Worse"—where he subtly addresses the ongoing legacy of slavery, perceived to be a national trauma within the collective memory of the United States—represents a significant step in Ford's attempt to come to terms with his—and his nation's—past.

"EVERYTHING COULD BE WORSE"

As in most Bascombe stories, the setting is Haddam, New Jersey. The date: ten days before Christmas 2012. Within the last two months, Superstorm Sandy has become one of the deadliest hurricanes to hit the United States and Obama has been re-elected to a second term. In Haddam, the racial divide remains present. For one thing, certain residential practices still suggest the newest incarnations of segregation are at full throttle. As Bascombe, the autodiegetic narrator, explains, racialized communities that could not afford sky-rocketing taxes have been displaced by "white young-marrieds who work two jobs, are never home, wouldn't think of having children, and pride themselves on living in a 'heritage' neighborhood instead of in a dreary townhouse where everything works but isn't 'historic'" ("Everything" 66). Issues of cultural appropriation materialize in a demographic change that erodes the neighborhood's sense of community and turns Black history into a commodity for the pleasure of White America.

This is the setting for "Everything Could Be Worse," whose plot can be summarized as follows: Bascombe is unexpectedly visited by Ms. Pines, a Black woman in her fifties who had lived as a teenager in the house now owned by him. She last entered the place

in 1969, when it became the site of a terrible deed: her dissatisfied father, a rare example of a brilliant African American engineer living in Haddam, had killed his Italian-born wife and their son before taking his own life, while Ms. Pines was out in debate club practice. The climax of the story is the unfolding of the phantasmatic family secret. This tragically unsuccessful "mixed-race family unit" ("Everything" 103), as the narrator describes it, may read as a metaphor for the failed melting-pot society of the United States. Unlike many other female figures in Ford's fiction, Ms. Pines—despite the bewildering experience—is an articulate character with a voice of her own. Although the narrative is filtered through Bascombe's consciousness, Ms. Pines is given the opportunity to tell her own story, which in Ford's narrative signifies an act of consolation. Discussing his novel *Wildlife*, Ford explains: "If loneliness is the disease, then the story is the cure" (Walker 143). In the case of Ms. Pines, her malady has wider historical and personal implications than mere loneliness. Her trauma resists narrative, and she struggles for closure after decades of repressed silence. It remains to be seen whether story will also be the cure for her.

In order to properly apply the concepts of postmemory, intergenerational trauma, the phantom and the crypt to the study of this novella, it is necessary to account for the ways in which narratives of the nation and the family work as secrets in the text. In Ms. Pines's story, Ford rewrites what Ashraf Rushdy labels as the "family secret of America" (2): slavery and, particularly, mixed genealogies. In "Everything Could Be Worse," it is the father of Ms. Pines who was a Black man married to a White woman. Of course, the configuration of Ms. Pines's family is no secret to her, but it is worth remembering that Rushdy does not define a secret exclusively in the sense of unknown information. To explain why slavery represents a national secret, he resorts to the work of W. J. T. Mitchell, for whom the position occupied by slavery in the imaginary of the United States is akin to that of the Holocaust in Germany: "that which we think we know about, what we can never forget, and which seems continually to elude our understanding" (Mitchell 184).

Mitchell's discussion of memory as a mixed blessing sheds light on Bascombe and Ms. Pines's experience at the former's house, which she has felt impelled to visit four decades later. Mitchell articulates the need to forget while remembering:

> What if the materials of memory are overwhelming, so traumatic that the remembering of them threatens identity rather than reconstituting it? What if identity had to be constituted out of a strategic amnesia, a selective remembering, and thus a selective *dis*(re)membering of experience? What if the technology of memory, the composite visual-verbal architecture of the memory palace becomes a haunted house? (Mitchell 200)

For obvious reasons, this last image—a memory palace becoming a haunted house—is of particular relevance for us. In the novella, the house becomes a metaphor for the whole edifice of American society, built upon African American blood, much like the Indian burial ground trope in horror film and television. More tellingly, the crime takes place in the basement, which, similar to the actual crypt in Poe's House of Usher, represents the tomb where the unspeakable remains hidden—one of those "cultural and national crypts [that] harbor the repressed or denied memories of violence" (Schwab 84). With such a reading, the image of the cracks of the American edifice—recurring throughout the collection as a reflection of Bascombe's long experience as a realtor—gains new meaning.

When Rushdy evokes James Baldwin's description of "the blacks [as] the despised and slaughtered children of the great western house—nameless and unnamable bastards," he shows that this is "a family secret in every sense of that term—a secret within a family, a secret about family, and a secret denying the possibility of family" (Rushdy 29). With this in mind, it is possible to understand Mr. Pines's crime as a family secret for Bascombe too, since they are members of the same family: the American nation, haunted by the trauma of slavery. Textual clues support this interpretation: for instance, upon first catching sight of her, Bascombe thinks for a moment the woman might be the daughter of his former house-keeper, who recently ran into him and "threw her arms around [him] like a lost relation" ("Everything" 69-70). What the story tries to do is what, according to Hans Loewald (29), the therapeutic work of psychoanalysis intends to achieve: to turn ghosts into ancestors—a metaphor that reinforces the notion of the US as a family. Instead of a bastard child or an incestuous relationship, the secret that is transmitted in "Everything Could Be Worse," the one buried within the text, is the (national) sin of slavery (and the subsequent racial inequality not yet overcome).

Ford adds an extra layer to the transgenerational trauma—which is the trauma of racism or, more broadly, of being Black in America—embodied by Ms. Pines: the trauma of the perpetrators and their descendants. To begin with, Bascombe is the narrator and focal character of the story and, consequently, the reader experiences Ms. Pines's suffering through his perception. An unidentified power makes her "shudder" ("Everything" 99), but when confronted with the legacy of slavery, we may ask, with Derrida, how not to tremble? ("Temblar"). In one of his last lectures, Derrida claims: "A secret always *makes* one tremble" ("Temblar" 28, my translation), and indeed, Bascombe also feels "breathless" ("Everything" 71) and experiences "a sudden, *ghostly* whoosh of vertigo" before Ms. Pines has even entered the house ("Everything" 75, my italics). Nevertheless, the different epistemological and ontological dimensions inhabited by Bascombe and Ms. Pines—who, in fact, first communicate "as if [...] out of separate life realms" ("Everything" 86)—allow us to understand their radically different unspeakable experiences. The former, who as a young man renounced his southern "privileges to treat [a Black person] as a subhuman" ("Everything" 69), is haunted by the complicity of White America; the latter, by the racial inequality made concrete in the tragedy of her family. Mitchell's metaphor of the haunted house is relevant again, as in Ford's story "the phantom figures in the landscape or memory palace threaten to come alive, to be re-membered and resurrected from the dead as ghosts who act upon the material world and the body of the narrator" (Mitchell 202). To Bascombe's vertigo and Ms. Pines's shudder can be added the "distant murmur" and "creaking noise" emitted by the house itself ("Everything" 81, 99)—all of it, as Bascombe realizes, as a consequence of "the brief séance she'd induced in herself, in my house, in me" ("Everything" 108).

The characters are confronted with the violent past entombed in Bascombe's basement, where the event perceived as traumatic took place. Down there is "black as coal" and "full of spooks" ("Everything" 87), warns Bascombe. Such an unfortunate turn of phrase represents only one of several linguistic traces that can be carried back to the central enigma—in other words, instances of the 'cryptonymic' or secret-bearing language examined by Derrida in his foreword to Abraham and Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (1986). If looking for cryptonyms and other examples of what Gabriele Schwab calls 'haunted language'—a combination of "concealment and revelation" (54)—is the work of both the therapist and the

literary scholar, a close reading of the text forces us to ponder the meaning of the "pair of enormous, self-important crows" ("Everything" 91)—black animals par excellence—witnessing from the back yard the exchange taking place in the house. Or whether the O. J. ("Everything" 81) offered by the host to his visitor stands only for innocuous orange juice or is a veiled reference to O. J. Simpson—not for nothing is Ms. Pines about to tell the story of a White woman murdered by her Black husband.

Her speech thinly veils the phantasmatic nature of the experience when she mentions "how *ghastly* it all was" ("Everything" 105, my italics). The etymological connection with 'ghost' conveys in the reader one of several processes of haunting taking place in the text. The most obvious is related to the effect of the crime on Ms. Pines. She is haunted by the returning event she has not been able to process—at least, until this visit. In Bascombe's house, she is "light-headed," "transfixed," enters "a dream state," and behaves "as if she'd heard something—her name spoken, someone entering the room" ("Everything" 80, 81, 86, 102). As Ms. Pines gathers her courage to confront her past, Bascombe bears witness to her testimony. Lauren Berlant points to "an impersonal intimate letter to a stranger" as the quintessential testimonial form (46); and that is, to a significant extent, what "Everything Could Be Worse" offers. It is tempting to read the whole text as a session of psychoanalysis, which in the words of Nicholas Rand, "converts silence into speech, displaying the secret in its initial openness, conjuring up the concealed lives of the dead whose undetected machinations unhinge the mind of the living" ("Introduction" 22). Within this interpretation of the novella, countertransferential responses can be identified. Ms. Pines's/The analysand's vivid recollection has so strong an impact on her host/analyst that he can

> feature the lot of them—all four Pines—breathing in these rooms, climbing the stairs, trading in and out the single humid bathroom, congregating in what was then the "dining room," talking over school matters, eating PB&J's, all of them satellites of one another in empty space, trying, trying, trying to portray a cohesive, prototype, mixed-race family unit, and not succeeding. (Ford, "Everything" 103)

The paratactic juxtaposition of gerund phrases evoking the everyday actions of these specters, as well as the obsessive repetition of "trying"—half plea, half lament—hint at Bascombe's emotional

entanglement with the woman. It is little wonder that the session leaves him feeling "muted, grief counselor-ish" ("Everything" 107).

At the same time, Ms. Pines herself is depicted as a ghostly vision. She unexpectedly interrupts Bascombe's quiet life—she "simply *appeared*," as he puts it ("Everything" 71)—as the uncanny reminder of conflicting racial relations. Once inside the house, she is repeatedly perceived by Bascombe as an apparition, an entity that pinches her cheeks "as if her presence needed certifying," with a "body [that] seemed to be about to rise" ("Everything" 101, 102). At some point, Bascombe wonders whether "in fact she wasn't a *figment*—my personal-private phantasm for wrongs I'd committed, never atoned for, and now had to pay off" ("Everything" 104). An inevitable question—the one that brings this analysis to its final stage—ensues: are those wrongs the horror of slavery and racism?

FROM INNOCENCE TO RESPONSIBILITY

While the Richard Ford who wrote "In the Same Boat" in 1999 would probably reject any notion of personal responsibility—"I don't understand why anybody might think I would personally apologize for the abomination of slavery when I never caused it" was, as already stated, his main argument back then ("Boat")—, there is ample evidence of the narrative voice in "Everything Could Be Worse" being aware not only of lingering racial injustice—"Black people bear a heavy burden trying to be normal. It's no wonder they hate us. I'd hate us, too" ("Everything" 69)—but also of the fact that we are not "really the same under the skin" ("Everything" 66), and that claiming the contrary is just "phony, race-neutral natter" ("Everything" 86).[2] In his old age, Bascombe fully understands the words of Rushdy, who claims that individual innocence and refusing to accept responsibility are

> symptoms of a malaise, if not an actual illness, that comes of an inability to comprehend the function of the past. What does the past mean in the formation of what we call the present? What can the past mean for a contemporary society founded upon or the product

[2] Although one could rightly argue that the essay as a form conveys the writer's opinions and worldview in a way narrative fiction does not—should not—have to, the fact remains that Bascombe's increasing sensibility towards racial difference as a social issue is nowhere as explicit as in the last book of the saga—regardless of his status as Ford's mouthpiece.

> of the horrors of slaughter and dehumanization in the effort to exploit labor, torture people, and recreate race? [...] What is this past that made possible the present, that gave form and structure to the society we live in, that produced the inequities we either recreate or try to amend, that, in fact, created our sensibility to be alert to a past and our epistemology to understand it *as* past? (Rushdy 3)

Even if he does not have a simple answer to them, Bascombe—relentless scrutinizer of self and others—seems to have addressed these questions.

Reading "Everything Could Be Worse" can be a disconcerting experience. The underlying sense of a haunted national memory, surprisingly materialized in the unpleasant "cloudy little gut bubbles" against which Bascombe fights throughout the story ("Everything" 95), contrasts with a rather optimistic ending. As the story comes to a close, characters sense something has changed for the best. They are closer to Ford's ideal for White-Black relations, to the interracial contact that "can hope to bring about a bettering of our shared lives" ("Boat"). To a certain extent, mutual profit and reconciliation have been achieved. At the very least, the visit has managed to neutralize "the murderous basement" ("Everything" 109). The story invites us to accept that this call for hope is triggered by the historic election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, which took place before the publication of *Let Me Be Frank with You*. For Bascombe, a staunch Democrat, Obama's election prefigures a crucial step towards racial understanding. In fact, after certain significant exchange has been achieved between the only two characters of the story, he says: "This was the grainy, human, non-race based contact our President has in mind for us" ("Everything" 104), fulfilling a possibility of communication, "our perplexing races notwithstanding" ("Everything" 92). However, the optimism of such an encounter contrasts with Ford's acknowledgement that,

> when you have as many decades as we had in the United States in which again human beings were imported against their will as chattels and then an enormous civil war was fought to keep them as chattel, that just doesn't heal up. Certainly not in my lifetime—probably not in anybody's foreseeable lifetime—is the issue of race going to be solved in the United States. Even with as wonderful a man as Obama has been... ("New America")

Bascombe's final ruminations point to that long process of national reconciliation. When on the very last page of the novella he contends that at the heart of his encounter with Ms. Pines was "a family tragedy of epic proportion, requiring years to face, impossible to reconcile, with much left to accomplish and not much time to do it" ("Everything" 111), it is difficult not to hear in his words the reverberation of a larger story—one that goes beyond the four members of a family to reach millions of Americans over 400 years. After all, the history of the United States proves that, as Janice Gump puts it, "no single event can alter a construct as elemental as race, not even one as momentous as the election of an African American President. Race permeates the culture too much and too unconsciously to so readily yield" ("Reality" 45).

In any case, it is no surprise that Trump's election lies between Bascombe's optimism in 2015 and Ford's pessimism in 2017. Some would reject such a notion as too simplistic, arguing that Obama did not (could not?) deliver what he promised. This is the bone of contention between notable public intellectuals such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Cornell West (West, "Neoliberal Face"; Sharma, "One-Sided War"). Interestingly, "Everything Could Be Worse" plays with the idea of Obama as arbiter of racism, much to the ease of mind of his White voters, when Bascombe worries about projecting an image of himself as a racist: "It wouldn't have been racist, would it, to let Ms. Pines leave [before she discloses the climax of the story]? President Obama would've understood" ("Everything" 103). The reader may wonder whether Bascombe's yearning for a "non-race based contact" and the subsequent advocacy of the blurring of racial lines project a well-intentioned, White-liberal agenda which is in fact devoid of political substance. Nevertheless, the older Bascombe gets, the more he is willing to confront what Eve Sedgwick would describe as his 'privilege of unknowing'—the White entitlement that minimizes the effects of the US racial hierarchy, in contrast with the burden of knowledge born by the structural subordinate. Without doubt, in a society where racism keeps staining the socio-political landscape, more African American voices are needed. However, along with this necessity comes the one expressed by Schwab: "both the descendants of victims and the descendants of perpetrators need to break the silence. They also need to escape their mutual isolation and begin talking about their different traumatic histories together" (82). Indeed, Richard Ford's fiction could be read as a valuable

attempt, from the descendants of perpetrators, to advance such a dialogue.

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