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Between Nostalgia and History in the US South: Fictions of the Black Waiter on Film

In this essay, I examine frictions between the past, present and future which, in the tension between them, generate fictions which conflate not only Southern nostalgia with history but undergird American exceptionalism more broadly. These fictions generated by the rubbing together of past and present are not only nostalgic for a past that never existed but actively anti-historical, supplanting discrete periods in the history of the U.S. South (such as slavery, the Jim Crow Era, and the present day) with an intentionally confounded "temporal estrangement". To trace the fault-lines at which nostalgia and history chafe against each other, I focus on the figure of the black waiter.[1] *My primary case study is Paula Deen's legal deposition, taken in Savannah in 2013 after almost three years of legal proceedings. But in order to situate Deen's fictions more fully within and beyond the context of the U.S. South, I read this deposition through and against two films, one largely-forgotten documentary,* Mississippi: An Inside Story *and one blockbuster,* Forrest Gump.

> I went to the dresser and took up the watch, with the face still down. I tapped the crystal on the corner of the dresser and caught the fragments of class in my hand and put them into the ashtray and twisted the hands off and put them in the tray. The watch ticked on. (William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*)

> [Dora Charles] said Ms. Deen used racial slurs. Once she wanted Mrs. Charles to ring a dinner bell in front of the restaurant, hollering for people to come and get it. "I said, 'I'm not ringing no bell,' " Mrs. Charles said. "That's a symbol to me of what we used to do back in the day." (Kim Severson, "Deen's Cook Tells of Slights, Steeped in History," *The New York Times*)

Paula Deen, the American celebrity chef, restaurateur, and pop culture personality has been surrounded by conflict in recent years. One such conflict, between Deen and her long-time chef, Dora Charles, was the subject of a *New York Times* feature in 2013: Mrs. Charles came forward to the press to announce that, after twenty years working alongside Deen, she was still living in a trailer on her $10 an hour salary, unable to afford medications. Deen's camp suggests that the conflict is

1 As to my choice of the word black instead of African-American: as this article focuses explicitly on racial divides in American Southern history, I have chosen to use the word black rather than African-American. I see this move as a way to emphasize the lived consequences of racial difference for black Americans in the time period I analyze here – effects which, like the murder of Booker Wright, do not live in the hybrid space of the hyphen.

merely about money. Much media, of course, suggests that the conflict is racial; Charles, who is black, developed many of the recipes for which Deen became famous. For the purposes of this paper, I argue that the heart of this conflict is also and importantly temporal: between the contemporary and what Charles refers to as "back in the day".

To put it in the terms of this volume, there is friction at work between the past and the present, and that friction generates fictions which then circulate not only as narratives of Southernness but of American exceptionalism. These fictions generated by the rubbing together of past and present are not only nostalgic for a past that never existed but actively anti-historical, supplanting discrete periods in the history of the U.S. South (such as slavery, the Jim Crow Era, and the present day) with an intentionally confounded "temporal estrangement". To trace the fault-lines at which nostalgia and history chafe against each other, I focus on the figure of the black waiter. My primary case study is Paula Deen's legal deposition, taken in Savannah in 2013 after almost three years of legal proceedings. But in order to situate Deen's fictions more fully within and beyond the context of the U.S. South, I read this deposition through and against two films, one largely-forgotten documentary, *Mississippi: An Inside Story* and one blockbuster, *Forrest Gump*.

Through a comparison between a 1990s conservative allegory about American optimism and a 1960s documentary film that candidly marked the nadir of the false, liberatory promises of the Civil Rights Act, I characterize Deen's nostalgia as exemplar of a re-orientation in time, one that I argue is marked by an iterative and regressive logic. Thus, by referring to this nostalgia as antihistorical, I mean specifically that nostalgia located in the contemporary South erases particular histories of oppression and violence. These films, like Deen's deposition, move through time from the past to the present, generating friction as they bump and snag along the way. This friction between nostalgic pasts, historical pasts, and the present, an unstable triangle I call "temporal estrangement," creates anti-historical fictions about the good old days of the U.S. South that remain dangerous and pervasive to this day.[2]

"A Plantation Wedding": On Temporal Estrangement

In early 2013, Paula Deen was sued by the manager of one of her restaurants, Uncle Bubba's Shrimp and Oyster House. Lisa Jackson claimed that Deen's brother, Bubba Hiers, who owned the restaurant, was guilty of racial discrimination and sexual harassment. As owner of the Deen Corporation, Paula Deen was called in to testify. Her admission that she had used the n--- word ("Of course") made headlines: but so too did her statement that she wanted a "plantation themed wedding" for her brother.

2 C.f. African-American actor Marlon Wayan's response to Donald Trump's intensely nostalgic presidential campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again": "When I hear that, it scares me. It depends on what 'Great America' we're talking about. Because if it's pre-1964 or pre-1865, I don't know if I want to be part of that America" ("Panel – Is Donald Trump Unstoppable?" 2016).

Deen's slippery use of history is at the heart of this challenging and problematic statement. Indeed, I argue that this temporal estrangement is the engine that generates friction between nostalgia and history, creating new and dangerous narratives of Southern and American identity. This temporal estrangement is marked by iterative movement through time without ever addressing histories of oppression and violence in the South. The deposition figures Deen's nostalgia as both ahistorical (Deen cannot place certain events in a historical timeline) but also anti-historical, actively and performatively creating alternate pasts and futures.

In an examination by the plaintiff's lawyer, Matthew Billips, Deen contextualizes the comment for which she is being charged:

A: And I remember telling them about a restaurant that my husband and I had recently visited. And I'm wanting to think it was in Tennessee or North Carolina or somewhere, and it was so impressive. The whole entire wait staff was middle-aged black men, and they had on beautiful white jackets with a black bow tie. I mean, it was really impressive. And I remember saying I would love to have servers like that, I said, but I would be afraid somebody would misinterpret.
Q: White jackets?
A: Dinner jackets.
Q: And a bow tie?
A: And a bow tie and black trousers, and they were incredible.
Q: Okay. And you said something –
A: These were men that had made their living off of service and people in a restaurant.
Q: Okay. And they were all black men?
A: Yes. Professional servers and waiters.
Q: And when you described it to Miss Jackson, did you mention the race of – well, you had to have mentioned the race of the servers –
A: Of course I would –
Q: Okay. So is there any reason that you could not have done something just like that but with people of different races?
A: Well, that's what made it.
Franklin: *[Objection]*
A: That's what made it so impressive. These were professional. I'm not talking about somebody that's been a waiter for two weeks. I'm talking about these were professional middle-aged men, that probably made a very, very good living –
Q: Okay.
A: They were trained. The – it – it was the whole picture, the setting of the restaurant, the servers, their professionalism.
Q: Is there any possibility, in your mind, that you slipped and used the word "n----r"?
A: No, because that's not what these men were. They were professional black men doing a fabulous job. (Deen 2013)

This moment of the deposition comes before the moment at which Deen suggests a "plantation-style wedding" and was often included in media reportage as evidence of Deen's racism. I argue, here and below, that the description of this restaurant with professional black waiters and Deen's fantasy of an antebellum-themed wed-

ding with slaves remain importantly distinct. I would like to first dwell on this particular image: middle-aged black waiters, in white dinner jackets with black bow ties, serving dinner with "professionalism". Deen is emphatic that she is not referring to a "plantation theme" wedding: in her own words, these waiters are not "n--s," not slaves.[3]

Old South antebellum fantasias certainly exist, but this image should not be so quickly folded among them.[4] The restaurant that Deen describes here marks a confusion not between slavery and the present but between the contemporary and more recent Jim Crow South, from which the images of black waiters wearing white dinner jackets and black bow ties serving white patrons in segregated restaurants directly stems. The dining experience she describes marks an insistent holdover, a pathological longing for the site of segregation.[5] This, in turn, marks an insistent return to the antebellum South within even contemporary Southern food discourse, marking the antebellum South as a site of return. The Jim Crow South blurs with the contemporary South in Deen's imagination, and the antebellum South is seamlessly intertwined with the Jim Crow South from the vantage of the prosecution.

Booker Wright: On History

As Deen fondly thinks backwards to the segregated South in describing a contemporary scene of segregated food service, one image in particular stuck in my mind, an image from a documentary film aired on NBC in 1966. My own point of reference for a black waiter in a white dinner jacket is Booker Wright, who worked at a restaurant in Greenwood, Mississippi called Lusco's. Unlike the contemporary restaurant Deen describes and unlike "Old South theme restaurants," like Pittypat's Porch in Atlanta, Lusco's does not actively attempt to keep the past alive in the present.[6] Lusco's has never purported to represent the "Old South": it is an upscale Italian restaurant that has used white wait staff of mixed genders for several decades. Yet the 1966 image of waiter Booker Wright, standing behind the counter of Lusco's, is representative of exactly the performance of servitude Deen describes. I

3 A distinction misquoted at large in the popular press. Deen's comment "I would say they were slaves" was in response to a question not about her chosen wait staff, but to the question, "before the Civil War, those black men and women who were waiting on white people were slaves, right?"

4 The entire *Gone with the Wind* industry supports this: the privately-owned for-profit Maria Mitchell house museum, as well as theme restaurants and plantation tourism that purport to allow the tourist to "travel through time" (Smith 1982; Hoelscher 2006; Bowman 1998; Adams 2007).

5 Through the phrase "pathological longing" I am indeed referring to the psychoanalytical and literary-critical concept of melancholia. One certainly might frame the way in which Deen clings to a damaged (segregated) Southern past rather than acknowledging and moving past trauma within Freud's paradigm of mourning and melancholy. One might even connect this reading to the work done on racial melancholia by David Eng and Anne Cheng (Cheng 1997; Eng/Han 2000; Cheng 2001). But such a reading is outside the scope of this paper.

6 Rather, as I explain below, the Pinkstons have actively tried to foreclose discussions of their restaurant's segregated history and the potential suffering of their black wait staff during that period.

read this image of Booker Wright as indicative of Deen's idealized black waiter. He is one of Deen's "middle-aged black men, [who] had on beautiful white jackets with a black bow tie" (Deen). Wright was a "professional black m[a]n doing a fabulous job" (Deen).

But the resonances between the documentary film image of Wright and Deen's conjured image of an ideal waiter are not only visual. Wright's professionalism and close relationship with Lusco's' owners obscure the historical structures – in his case segregation in the Jim Crow South – that created this apparently "close and supportive" relationship. Just as Deen avows that the professionalism and fair wages of the waiters in the restaurant she mentions in her deposition separates these waiters from "n--s," Karen Pinkston, wife of Lusco's' owner Andy Pinkston, claimed in an oral history interview that Andy and Booker were "best friends" (Pinkston 2003). So it is clearly difficult, for Deen and the Pinkstons, to separate the friendship that these white Southerners may have felt towards their staff from the structural inequality, racial violence, and fear that has haunted the South since the beginnings of slavery.[7]

The image itself, Wright's white dinner jacket and black bow tie, costumes Wright as professional. Yet this word, repeated by Deen, might be glossed much more negatively: to call Wright a professional marks him as the opposite of what he is not: an (uppity, uncontrollable) "n--". Rather, Wright is dressed and marked as professional (subservient, docile). By hearkening back to this image of a black waiter like Wright, Deen strains at the limits of legal racial equality in her deposition by pining for an image so strongly connected to the Jim Crow South. That she did not use "n--" to describe these waiters falls beside the point when one realizes the inherent violence in the temporal conflation of the present and the past which her nostalgia for the violent South of the 1950s and 60s creates. In her desire "for servers like that," Deen uses nostalgia to bring the Jim Crow past into the *present*: a far more troubling scenario that figures the segregated South as an inevitable site of return.

Documentation of the segregated South of the 1960s has, then, the potential to speak specifically about the traumatic history of violence during this period without eliding it further into the past or forward into the present. Put another way, what is remarkable about the figure of Booker Wright is that through this documentary film Wright is able to set Deen's record straight. Without suggesting that

7 A full examination of this phenomenon is outside the scope of this paper; however, a body of scholarship has addressed the myths of friendship between white patrons and the black service industry in the Jim Crow period, most recently Rebecca Sharpless' *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens* (Tucker 2002; Jones 2010; Palmer 1989; Clark-Lewis 1996; Sharpless 2013). No study, to my knowledge, has turned to the ideology of the black waiter in particular; here, I draw on Wright's act of speaking out behind the smile as analogous to the acts of resistance that Sharpless attributes to *cooks* in particular in the pre-Civil Rights era. The afterlife of these relationships is still complicated. Indeed, when I visited Lusco's in the spring of 2013, proprietor Pinkston employed the same rhetoric of friendship, good will, and support cited above, speaking of Wright and her other former waiters with what seemed genuinely well-meaning, if deeply troubling and paternalistic, language.

documentary practice is in any sense objective or purely historical, films like *Mississippi: An Inside Story* allow a different perspective than Deen's anti-historical testimony. Wright's testimony in the film creates cracks and fissures that expose the very fiction of Deen's narrative of happy, professionalized black waiters and friendly, non-oppressive interracial relations in the Jim Crow era.

In 1966, waiter Booker Wright described his experience of waiting tables to documentary filmmaker Ray de Felitta, who visited Mississippi to film a feature on behalf of NBC:

> Now as for what my customers, I say my customers, be expecting of me, when I come in, this is the way they want me to dress. Some people are nice. Some not. Some call me Booker. Some call me John. Some call me Jim. Some call me n--! All of that hurt, but you got to smile. There are some nice people: "Don't talk to Booker like that, his name is Booker." The meaner the man be, the more you smile, although you're crying on the inside. (de Felitta 1966)

Wright was later pistol-whipped, forced to leave Lusco's, and eventually murdered in his own restaurant, Booker's Place. The consequences of Wright "breaking the frame" within the tumult of the 1960s are clear: the stakes for Wright were life and death. But the footage, importantly, remains – and the stakes of telling Wright's story, a truer story about the violent history of these "professional men doing a fabulous job," remain critical to the historiography of the U.S. South.

Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. and the Afterlife of the Spoken Menu Minstrel Show

In this section, I further demonstrate the ways in which the friction between past and present creates new fictions of the US South, setting nostalgia against history. Wright was originally included on NBC filmmaker de Felitta's broadcast because his performance of the ideal black waiter (a performance cited by Deen) was described to visiting filmmaker de Felitta by those in the region as "a minstrel scene," "a sing-song of the menu" (40 Years 2012). By connecting this documentary image to a later, filmic one from *Forrest Gump*, I suggest that not only Wright's image but also performance of servitude live on in Deen's imaginary and much more deeply-seated structurally racist ideologies. That is, I suggest that Wright's "minstrel scene" at Lusco's is not safely in the past but is alive in our contemporary present, making it an available trope for Deen and others to use to stir mass sentiment. In doing so, I explore the ways in which time distorts and bends around the image of the Southern black waiter, a figure who is both rooted in the racial violence of 1966 Mississippi and carries troublingly into the present day to create ongoing fictions of black servitude.

The "minstrel scene" that de Felitta encountered is as follows:

> [Voiceover] He tells how an evening goes with white folks who think they know him so well--
> Wright: We don't have a written menu, I'd be glad to tell you everything we're going to serve tonight. Everything we serve is à la carte. We have fresh shrimp cocktail, Lusco's shrimp, fresh oysters on the half shell, baked oysters, oysters Rockefeller, oysters amadine, stewed oysters, fried oysters, French mackerel broil with the sirloin steak, club steak, T bone steak, porterhouse steak, ribeye steak [...] broiled mushrooms, flavored [?] salad, plain spaghetti meatballs, soft-shell crab, french-fried onions--- (de Felitta 1966)

This historical performance practice – the minstrel-like performance of a menu for white customers – is in fact at the heart of the most famous cinematic depiction of the American South after *Gone with the Wind* – *Forrest Gump*. Forrest's friend, black Alabaman Bubba Blue's list of shrimp preparations is, like the Lusco's menu, vertiginous:

> Shrimp is the fruit of the sea. You can barbecue it, boil it, broil it, bake it, sautee it. There's, um, shrimp kebabs, shrimp creole, shrimp gumbo, pan fried, deep fried, stir fried. There's pineapple shrimp and lemon shrimp, coconut shrimp, pepper shrimp, shrimp soup, shrimp stew, shrimp salad, shrimp and potatoes, shrimp burger, shrimp sandwich ... That's, that's about it. (Zemeckis 2001)

While Bubba Blue delivers this list, the film jumps scenes three times. First, Gump and Blue are checking their guns, then polishing shoes, then scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush. These jump cuts emphasize the length of Blue's list, creating the effect that he is droning on endlessly, perhaps for hours, about the different ways he knows to cook shrimp. It is as Sisyphean to scrub a warehouse floor to military-inspection cleanliness as it is to enumerate the ways in which shrimp can be cooked. Gump, like the white customer at Lusco's, might free Blue from the ceaseless task of listing dishes by calling out: "Stop!" The performative power of this sort of list lies in the ability of the white listener to call it off, while the Wright and Blue can and must go on, it seems, forever.[8]

This same trope of a black waiter dishing up countless variations of seafood is served, daily, at the hundred Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. restaurants that cater to tourists from Daytona Beach, Florida to Kuala Lumpur. Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. restaurants reinforce the ideologies of the film and quite literally reinscribe them in the bodies of those who patronize these restaurants. As visitors eat "Mama Blue's Southern Charmed Fried Shrimp," they internalize these homespun images of African-American servitude. Moreover, through the play on the phrase "Southern charm," Mama Blue's culinary labor is figured as magical, "charmed," further

8 Even *Forrest Gump* itself might not be "contemporary" but rather provide a dated and naïve 1990s version of nostalgia, closely allied with the 1990s particular neoconservative politics. Newt Gingrich, for example, used the film to denigrate 1960s countercultural movements such as women's liberation and the Black Power movement during his 1994 election campaign (Wang). I argue, through the Paula Deen deposition and through the afterlife of Booker Wright's interview, that *Forrest Gump*'s ideological impact on narratives of American self-making continues.

downplaying the labor involved in shrimp preparation by insinuating that the shrimp have been conjured rather than cooked.[9] Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., dotting vacation destinations across America with its smiling image of a top-hatted shrimp, is another space in which food substantiates ideologies of American exceptionalism. As the waiter verbally explains the menu to the Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. diner, this nostalgic vision of Southern food is instantiated and performed again, again, again: a paean both to fried shellfish and to the subservient image of Bubba Blue reciting twenty-two kinds of shrimp.

The ongoing popularity of the film *Forrest Gump* and the embodied consumption of this spoken menu at Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. restaurants both refuse the placement of this image of the black waiter in the past. Although Booker Wright was murdered, his smiling image – and powerful testimony – live on. When Deen capitalized on the image of the formal black waiter in a white dinner jacket, news media swiftly cried "racism". By looking closely at the ways in which Deen's clear nostalgia for Jim Crow-era "minstrel scenes" of black waiters listing menu items speak to the present, rather than the past, one can see the afterlife of paternalistic attitudes about the black service industry: a fiction generated by the slippage between past and present. In *Forrest Gump*, every day at Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., this image of a black waiter mellifluously listing types of shellfish preparations still goes unnoticed and unmarked. This nostalgia is perhaps most clearly seen in the rhetorical performances of Paula Deen's recent deposition, but is perhaps far more mundane, widespread, and dangerous.

The Regressive Logic of Temporal Estrangement

Here, I turn to what I am calling *Forrest Gump*'s "regressive logic" to characterize the anti-history of Southern nostalgia more generally and the performative tactics of Deen's deposition in particular. In *Forrest Gump*, the scene in which Gump meets Blue uses a series of jump-cuts that mark history as both regressive – moving back into the past – and iterative, repeating the same set piece while moving backwards in order to count the backwards passage of time. As soon as Blue launches into his love of shrimp, Gump narrates that Blue's mother and grandmother cooked shrimp before him. The film cuts rapidly at the first mention of Blue's mother, a black domestic worker, cooking shrimp for a white man in a jacket and bow tie seated at the table. Mama Blue wears a domestic worker's uniform, a white turban hiding her hair and white apron over a starched, neutral shirtdress. Outside the picture window, a black worker holding a tool, presumably a sharecrop farmer, stands under a tree. Though the scene is short, it is ominous that racialized labor slips ever into the past. In *Forrest Gump*, the Ku Klux Klan and armed resistance to desegregation recede behind Forrest, who runs ever forward.

9 Of course, this rhetorical maneuver also perpetuates the problematic trope of the "magical Negro," an ostensibly antiracist cinematic convention that ultimately undermines notions of black self-determination (Hughey 2009; Glenn/Cunningham 2009).

In this scene, we see how the film's dramaturgy contrasts Forrest's story, which moves forward, with Bubba Blue's, which moves backwards. As Gump continues, "and her mama before her cooked shrimp," the scene again rapidly cuts to the same scene – a large black woman opening the door to the kitchen and placing a tureen in front of a seated white man with muttonchops and an ascot. This scene is clearly antebellum, and this mama is a slave. She is dressed in a simple brown dress with a white apron, and a colored red handkerchief tied on her head as a turban. Aunt Jemima, make no mistake. Outside the window, a black laborer, presumably a field slave, rests his hands on his knees, apparently exhausted.

Zemeckis' filmic technique of cutting ever backwards forms a regressive fantasy, in which a contemporary scene slips effortless back and back into the past, resting on the scene of subjection that is slave labor.[10] As Gump's story triumphantly moves forward throughout the course of the film, these backwards moves mark Blue's timeline as backwards-facing, ultimately moored in the scene of slavery.

Deen's deposition performs this same gesture in the excerpt below:

> Q: Did you describe it as a – that that would be a true southern wedding, words to that effect?
> A: I don't know.
> Q: Do you recall using the words "really southern plantation wedding"?
> A: Yes, I did say I would love for Bubba to experience a very southern style wedding, and we did that. We did that.
> Q: Okay. You would love for him to experience a southern style plantation wedding?
> A: Yes. (Deen 2013)

As Deen and the prosecution ring the changes between these phrases, the regressive and iterative logic of the argumentation echoes the regressive and iterative storytelling that characterizes *Forrest Gump*. Here, the slippage from Southern culture to plantation culture occurs through a series of questions and answers. The image of the professional Jim Crow waiter explored above is now condensed into a "true Southern wedding". "A true Southern wedding" becomes a "Southern plantation wedding" becomes a "Southern-style plantation wedding." Deen's monosyllabic response ends this regressive and iterative argumentation. At this point in the deposition, Deen no longer has the tools to separate the contemporary ("Southern"), Jim Crow ("professional"), and antebellum ("plantation") South. As Deen's apparent aporia suggests, the differences in the cultural imaginary may be minimal.

The prosecution may be attempting to clarify, but later it seems that they are leading Deen to admit that she is nostalgic for slavery:

10 While I am discussing here the ideological work done by the film editing, the images themselves also bear consideration, particularly the image of Grandma Blue as a slave. I am particularly interested in the way in which field slave labor is visible only through the frame of the master's house. Images of laboring slaves are indeed rare and it seems fitting that this scene of subjection only be visible refracted through the lens of the Big House window. On the relationship between photography, slavery, and erasure, see Best 2011.

Q: Why did that make it a – if you would have had servers like that, why would that have made it a really southern plantation wedding?
Franklin: *[Objection]*
A: Well, it – to me, of course I'm old but I ain't that old, I didn't live back in those days but I've seen the pictures, and the pictures that I've seen, that restaurant represented a certain era in America.
Q: Okay.
A: And I was in the south when I went to this restaurant. It was located in the south.
Q: Okay. What era in America are you referring to?
A: Well, I don't know. After the Civil War, during the Civil War, before the Civil War. (Deen 2013)

At first, Deen seems to be referring to the Jim Crow South, straining to remember her childhood in the South before the civil rights movement and *de jure* desegregation. Thus, Deen's eventual ambivalence is staggering. While she can locate this restaurant in the South, repeat the costume in careful detail, and speak clearly an established script in which white patrons "meant no disrespect" to black waiters or domestic staff, Deen cannot locate or place Jim Crow segregation in time. Her inability to distinguish between time periods in the South speaks to the power of temporal estrangement within Southern nostalgia. That is, Deen's testimony exists in a performative space of iterative regression toward the antebellum past in which any temporal distinction seems impossible. The historical stages of the past and present have interwoven into a new narrative, a new fiction, so completely that it becomes impossible for Deen to pick apart the strands.

Deen cannot temporally locate the figure of the Jim Crow-era black waiter, and thus winds up, at the coaching of the prosecution, back at the romanticized ideal of the Old South plantation. I argue that this slippage enacts a distinctly Southern regressive logic: the kind that allows Forrest to transport back to the scene of domestic Mama Blue and slave Grandma Blue's cooking.

Conclusion

To return again to the regressive "shrimp soup" scene in *Forrest Gump*, the imaginary quality of this iterative regression is emphasized by the inversion of this trope toward the end of the film. When Gump gives Mrs. Blue the proceeds of his Apple investments, she faints. Gump then narrates that she has now hired a white servant to serve her, in a fantasy inversion of the established trope. The small scale of this scene places the onus for racial reconciliation and structural economic redress on the individual: "In this parable of the economics of contemporary black-white relations, the debt to be paid by Gump to Bubba's family – half the profits of the shrimp business – is defined not by hierarchy or history but as an honor to intimate male friendship" (Wiegman 1999). Moreover, such a social inversion requires the death of Bubba Blue – the whole film seems to point to his death as inevitable, even an act of martyrdom that enables Gump's story to go on. That Gump survives

the war while his black buddy dies, that Gump's boat survives while the predominantly black shrimping fleet is wiped out – these are not accidents of history that lead to Mama Blue's change in social position. To borrow from Robyn Wiegman, they "are crucial to Gump's simultaneous claim to and transcendence of injury, and they do so within a context that disaffiliates white masculinity from the historical power and privilege of its social and economic position" (Wiegman 1999, 150).

I argue that director Zemeckis' attempt to move past Bubba Blue's endless regression into the past by substituting a post-racial fantasy of inverted domestic labor merely recreates the temporal estrangements that allow Deen to conceal real histories of oppression and violence through a nostalgic slip backwards through time. Simply reversing the skin color of the maid is a chimerical act of redress; it is a white fantasy of individual redress rather than a structural re-ordering of race relations. Such is the problem with fiction. By rubbing images of Bubba Blue against Booker Wright one might expose cracks and fault-lines not only in Paula Deen's legal rhetoric but in American culture and ideology more broadly. By looking to these sites of friction between history and nostalgia (between historical documentary and nostalgic blockbusters), we might see American exceptionalism which relies on regression and iteration – "Make America Great Again" – for the fiction it is.

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