“A Struggle of Contending Stories”: Race, Gender, and Political Memory in Forrest Gump

by Jennifer Hyland Wang

Forrest Gump revises popular memories of the 1960s through its representations of gender and race and its visualization of postwar history. This essay examines how political conservatives used the film to articulate a traditional version of recent American history and to define their political ground in the 1994 congressional elections.

The cold war’s end gave Americans only a kind of abstract triumph—and left a void. The collapse of communism and the Soviet empire suddenly removed the dark moral counterweight by which Americans measured their own virtue. Chronic recession, the rise of Japanese and European economic competitors, the vast inflow of immigrants from non-European sources (strangers to the older American tradition), the shrinking of the buffering Atlantic and Pacific oceans (jet travel, satellites, global distribution of goods), all these have eaten away at the long American smugness, the postwar sense of superiority, of grace.

—Lance Morrow, “Folklore in a Box”

“Littered with the unorganized and unassimilated marvels and griefs of recent years,” Lance Morrow argues, the United States has increasingly become a “nation that has lost many of its defining ideas about itself.” In the politically and culturally turbulent final decades of the twentieth century, America has sought to “restock its repertoire of folklore and self-images and archetypes.” Thus, Americans began to comb through the events of the decades after World War II to find the point, the historical moment, at which the course of U.S. history went awry. Yet the wide-scale effort to “redefine America” is itself defined not by consensus but by conflict. American popular culture has become the battleground on which the “war of American myths, a struggle of contending stories” is fought. Providing a map through uncharted cultural territory, narratives about American history in popular culture are instrumental in constructing popular political sense. The 1994 film Forrest Gump, about a man with an I.Q. of 75 who narrates his journey through the last four decades of American history, tells such a story.

Since the transformation of Forrest Gump from film to phenomenon, several scholars have tried to explain the overwhelming popularity, cultural resonance, and ideological impact of the film’s visualization of postwar history. Peter Chomo discusses in detail the main character’s role as a social mediator and as an agent of redemption in divided times. Robert Burgoyne examines Forrest Gump in his book Film Nation, to illustrate the role that mediated memory plays in

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constructing concepts of nationhood. Thomas Byers provides an excellent analysis of the “re-membering” of patriarchy in the film’s narrative and points to its potential political influence as an “aggressively conservative film.” These essays feature insightful, theoretically informed textual analyses that serve as the primary basis for their conclusions on the power of the film to influence national politics or rewrite recent history.

What is absent from these discussions is an understanding of how and why the film came to be appropriated by political conservatives and the uses to which it was put to further the Republican “revolution.” This essay examines the process through which Forrest Gump became a resonant cultural and political image in the right-wing effort to “redefine America.” In addition to studying the text, I analyze specific sites of critical, popular, and political discourse about the film and its themes to document the cross-articulations among the political climate of 1990s America, the film, and the ideological agenda of the Republican right. Furthermore, I investigate how meanings about the film’s text (i.e., its conservative nature) were circulated in the context of the 1994 congressional elections. Such a varied approach, I believe, does justice both to the complexities of the production and dissemination of cultural discourse about the film and to the character of Forrest Gump.

I will use John Fiske’s analysis of Murphy Brown, Dan Quayle, and the family values campaign in his text, Media Matters, as an interpretive model. Fiske analyzes the importance of “figures,” both fictional and nonfictional, in embodying and energizing cultural politics in a media-saturated world. He theorizes that figures often operate as “discursive relay stations” in contemporary cultural struggles—drawing in already circulating social discourses, highlighting certain discursive threads, and relaying powerful messages out again into the culture. A figure such as Murphy Brown, Anita Hill, or Forrest Gump “is always a body of discourse, a point where circulating meanings are made visibly and audibly public, where they are energized, their momentum increased.” Fiske’s conception of a figure—as a site of “circulation and contestation” in American culture and as an “agent” in the production of meaning—reveals the process by which powerful social interests and subordinated meanings struggle for cultural visibility and exposes the power of mediated figures to reshape preexisting discourses in particular ways to particular effects. The Gump phenomenon, then, is not simply a fad; it is a “discourse event,” a continual cultural struggle over the meanings ascribed to Forrest Gump and his story.

The conceptualization of Forrest Gump as a “discursive relay station” informs both the theoretical framework and the chronology of this essay. To explore the power of the film to alter popular memories of the sixties, I first detail the contours of the mediated cultural landscape in the years preceding its release, particularly how Forrest Gump served as a lightning rod for certain political and cultural discussions. Then, I examine the ways in which the narrative attempts to make sense of the postwar era to explore how the film highlights or redirects cultural discourse like a “discursive relay station.” Finally, I look at how the currents of cultural “meanings” circulated about and by the film flowed into current streams of conservative political thought in 1994 America. Like any piece of popular culture, Gump could have been taken up by those who espouse left or centrist politics; the absence of
these voices prompts my focus on the way in which political and cultural conservatives fashioned Gump into a key figure in the current cultural wars over values.11

As the political pendulum swung toward a “new conservatism,” Forrest Gump played a critical role in the rearticulation of a traditional version of the American story. Through its representation of gender and race and its re-presentation of the 1960s, the movie effectively revised popular memories of the era. Keeping in mind how Gump both produces history and is a product of history, I examine how conservatives invoked this film and its reconstructed memories of the post–World War II era during the 1994 congressional elections to highlight their ideological agenda. Accomplishing more than the articulation of a conservative legislative agenda, I suggest, the right’s discursive victory in this case spotlights the potentially dangerous way that Forrest Gump and the “politics of virtue” make political and cultural sense.12

Contours of the Cultural Landscape: The Cartography of the Family Values Campaign and Gump’s Repackaging of History. Political conservatives first posited an answer to the crisis of meaning in American culture; the cause was “the poverty of values” of certain members of our society.13 As part of the 1992 election campaign, the New York Times reported that the Republican presidential ticket of George Bush and Dan Quayle had “advertised for months that Mr. Bush would try to make the decline of American morals and family values a major campaign issue.”14 On May 17, 1992, George Bush delivered a speech at the University of Notre Dame on the disintegration of the two-parent family; two days later, Dan Quayle gave a talk in front of the Commonwealth Club of California on the same subject.15 Quayle’s speech, “Restoring Basic Values: Strengthening the Family,” focused on the 1992 uprising in South Central Los Angeles and its connection to the disintegration of the American family. He stated that the “lawless social anarchy [exhibited by the L.A. uprising was] . . . directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order in too many areas of our society.” “When families fail,” he asserted, “society fails.”16 Only when we return to the values of “family, hard work, integrity and personal responsibility,” Quayle suggested, will we enrich our culture and our society.17

As exemplified by Quayle’s attack on the television character Murphy Brown in his Commonwealth Club speech, conservative politicians laid the blame for the uprising and for the disintegration of the nuclear family at the feet of “lawless” blacks and feminists.18 Quayle “specifically linked [Murphy Brown’s] purported lapse in basic family values to the riotous social collapse in South Central Los Angeles in the wake of the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King.”19 More specifically, he semiotically linked the presence of an autonomous white female body—a famous independent, career woman (or in code “a feminist”)—with the threat of an uncontrollable black social body. Our cultural crisis, he implied, is a result of the presence and proliferation of both unruly blacks and unruly women. Just as “the underclass is disconnected from the rules of American soci-
ety,” Quayle insisted, women like Murphy Brown, Anita Hill, Hillary Clinton, and black single mothers who make “lifestyle choices” other than those dictated by dominant society are “corrupt by virtue of their autonomy, their uncontrollability.”

The “mocking [of] the importance of fathers” as a result of these women’s “lifestyle choices” was identified as the central component of this feminine and feminized chaos. In Republican Party discourse, the reestablishment of the male patriarch in nuclear families and the reinstatement of a preferably white and male social order were deemed the only routes to social renewal.

As identified by conservatives, the historical origin of this gendered and racially inflected crisis was the era in which both African Americans and women made their most significant political and cultural gains—the 1960s. Although “the evil of slavery has left a long legacy,” Quayle asserted in his “Murphy Brown” speech, “the landmark civil rights bills of the 1960s removed legal barriers to allow full participation by blacks in the economic, social and political life of the nation.” Americans have, he suggested, done enough via civil rights bills, affirmative action, and welfare—perhaps too much—to make up for the country’s racist (and sexist) past. The Dan Quayle-Murphy Brown media battle over family values was one of the first national cultural events to connect implicitly the political and cultural movements of the 1960s with the crisis of meaning in 1990s America.

Although the “family values” campaign did not garner the votes Republicans hoped it would, the proliferation of support for Quayle and his “family values” messages in political culture suggested that conservatives may have lost the initial skirmish, but they had not yet lost the war. As the debates about “values” reverberated throughout the cultural landscape, political pundits and consultants of various political leanings echoed Quayle’s call for a restoration of family values. Suddenly, politicians as diverse as Bill Clinton and Pat Robertson raced to espouse a “politics of virtue,” arguing that a system of traditional values and virtues needed to inform U.S. public policies and guide personal behavior. Political battles raged not over whether there were common American values but over whose values would shape public policy.

Opening in theaters on July 6, 1994, Gump was buoyed by these discursive currents. Earning more than $300 million at the domestic box office and attracting millions of American moviegoers, Gump clearly profited from and contributed to the unsettled political climate. Billed by its creators as “the romantic, rollicking tale of an innocent at large in America that is losing its innocence,” Gump formulated a response to the questions of when and where the U.S. as a nation went wrong and, most important, who was to be blamed.

The film’s method of answering these questions—its technological reconstruction of postwar history—plays a critical role in its articulation of historical myths. The episodic narrative, almost completely presented in flashbacks, is composed of familiar media images of postwar history. However, as depicted here, postwar history is fragmented and one-dimensional, separated from personal, political, and social contexts. The images are then recombined and repackaged to create a new, recycled visual history. In addition to actively tampering with historical memories,
special effects teams digitally altered archival footage, inserting the character of Forrest Gump into documentary footage of actual events. Forrest’s immersion in visual postwar history is thus so seamless that by the end of the film several critics predicted that “viewers will have lost all ability to distinguish real images from clever counterfeits.”

The implications of this reconstruction are twofold. First, as Edward Morgan argues, such a rearrangement of representative images and sound bites “not only obscures reality but in some critical way reverses it.” For instance, the film features an account of the on-air composition of John Lennon’s antiwar song Imagine, a plea for peace that decries the power of materialism, nationalism, and religion. In the hands of the film’s producers, the song is transformed into a definitive statement about Americanness. As composed by Forrest Gump in a televised interview with Dick Cavett, Imagine denigrates atheism and antimaterialism in China and extols Gump’s love of American consumerism and Christianity. In Gump’s hands, a revolutionary message becomes a celebration of conformity to dominant values.

Second, in the film, the historical memories are recontextualized and reframed so that they are all part of Gump’s tale. The audience is invited to share in the production of cultural meaning engendered by this new arrangement of visual memory. As such, the audience may perceive Forrest Gump not just as a story of one man’s life but, as one audience member asserted, as a tale “about everybody’s life.” Through its manipulation of postwar culture, Gump thereby becomes a site at which a new, shared experience of modern history is written.