
FALLING BACK INTO HISTORY
The Uncanny Trauma of Blackface Minstrelsy
in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*

by Gregory Laski

...nobody, black or white, wants to revisit this stuff. I know there'll be a resistance to this film, like, "Why is Spike bringing this stuff back? That was the last century; we're in a new century, a new frontier." I think it's important that we look at this stuff. It has to be confronted. Blackface is part of American history.

—Spike Lee, in a 2000 interview about *Bamboozled*

He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of . . . *remembering* it as something belonging to the past.

—Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.

—Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*

Late in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, the uncanny figure of Abraham Lincoln in blackface steps forward onto the stage of *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, the wildly popular, all-black cast variety television program at the center of the 2000 film. Dressed in Lincoln's traditional hat and black suit, Honeycutt (Thomas Jefferson Byrd), *The New Millennium Minstrel Show's* African American emcee, declares: "Four score and seven years ago, they was kicking our black asses. Boy, I mean, they had a whip, and they was kicking our black asses from can't see in the morning until can't see at night. But this is the new millennium!" As he sustains the final syllable of his last phrase—"this is the new millennium"—Honeycutt strikes a haunting pose: he leans backward toward the stage's rear curtain, which displays the larger-than-life image of a minstrel character, whose distorted face, twisted nose, crimson lips, and gaping mouth threaten to engulf Honeycutt and overtake the screen. Approaching the audience assembled in the studio for the show as the segment continues, the emcee extends both of his arms horizontally, tilts his head back, and assumes a cross-like posture that invokes the specter of a nearly falling body, a visual echo of Honeycutt's descent into the stage backdrop we saw a few frames earlier. From the aerial view that the camera provides as it lingers on this tableau, it seems as if we witness Honeycutt, his movement suspended in time and space, in the moment before he will fall backward.

Phantasmagorically raising Lincoln from the dead, this scene in *Bamboozled* signifies on the lines and likeness of the sixteenth president, deploying the form of entertainment he himself enjoyed. But here minstrelsy serves as a vehicle that reworks Lincoln's conventional image as the political figure who, so the official narrative goes, instituted black freedom and, instead, makes him suffer the nation's (still very much open) "wounds" of slavery, which in his Second Inaugural Address the president wanted so much to "bind up" (333).¹ In its overlaying of touchstone chapters in the racial history of the United States—the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and, most significantly, the centuries of slavery that prepared the way for these events—Honeycutt's blackface Lincoln exposes the lie of racial progress in America, rewriting the traditional narrative of black liberation in which the epoch of slavery gives way to that of freedom, and testifying that to be black in the "new millennium" is still to be subject to physical and psychological abuse, to have one's "ass kicked" and psyche wounded by the "master," who, in the case of the film, assumes the guise of the white media establishment that coerces African American actors to perform in blackface in order to earn a living in the entertainment industry. Just as Honeycutt's figure continually threatens to fall in this scene, *Bamboozled* stages what this essay terms a fall back into history: a collapsing of the temporal boundaries between the nineteenth century and the new millennium, between the eras of slavery and freedom—in short, between past and present.

That Lee's film resurrects the blackface caricatures of the putative "past" even as it presumably sets out to critique them has been the subject of significant controversy and debate.² Yet critics of *Bamboozled* largely have pursued a similar path in understanding the film's repetition of the imagery of blackface minstrelsy as subversive, contending that it is through a strategy of parodic critique that the film exposes, rather than merely repeats and replays, the distorted conceptions of blackness that the American culture industry has manufactured.³ For instance, Michael Epp argues that it is by way of satirical repetition of blackface conventions that *Bamboozled* "addresses its audience as capable of resistance and indeed required to at least consider resistance" to the racist iconography it displays (28). Similarly, according to Harry J. Elam, Jr., it is through intertextual, self-reflexive gestures, such as Lee's casting of the politically progressive hip hop group the Roots in the role of the Alabama Porch Monkeys, the on-stage house band of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, that "Lee makes apparent the satirical thrust of *Bamboozled* to subvert racist stereotypes" (352). Privileging the vantage point of the film's extra-diegetic audience, this line of interpretation suggests that *Bamboozled* provides its viewers with an opportunity to confront the visual trappings of minstrelsy that is at the same time an occasion to rework and thus resist the racist imaginings that, as Lee's film reminds us, endure.⁴

As persuasive as such readings may be when considered from the point of view of the film's audience, they are significantly less convincing, if not untenable, if we take a more intra-diegetic approach to the work.⁵ I pursue this latter, less traveled interpretive course by focusing on the perspective of Lee's characters and by trying to give an account of the conceptual narrative articulated by *Bamboozled*'s two most dominant recurring tropes: first, the images of Womack (Tommy Davidson) and Manray (Savion Glover), the stars of the television program at the center of the film, applying blackface in front of their dressing room mirrors; and second, the falling, nearly falling, or fallen bodies that pervade *Bamboozled* and visually constitute its temporal imaginary. Positing these images as the film's

privileged figures of what I call the uncanny trauma of minstrelsy, I argue that the black Americans involved in *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* possess no ability to separate, at the level of the psyche, remembering from repeating, let alone to deploy the repetition of blackface conventions toward subversive, parodic, or historically revisionist ends. For in “blacking up” both literally and metaphorically, as blackface actors or collaborators, *Bamboozled*’s characters unknowingly stage the traumatic return of the repressed history of minstrelsy—a history that is inextricably bound up with the physical and psychological violence of slavery—and thus give living testimony to the ways in which, as Sharon P. Holland has put it, “a system such as slavery might be abruptly halted” but its material and psychic effects linger (*Raising* 14).⁶

In proposing that the trajectory of the traumatic return of minstrelsy and the legacy of racial slavery in America is, in the tropology of Lee’s film, tantamount to the downward path of a falling body, this essay seeks to explicate the ways in which *Bamboozled* imagines a non-linear, non-progressive conception of history, and, more broadly, of time itself.⁷ In order to understand *Bamboozled*’s rethinking of the standard logic by which the domains of past, present, and future are sutured together, I turn to trauma theory, whose emphasis on repetition as a sign of the persistence of an ostensibly past incident helps us (but only to a point) to conceive of the temporal narrative held out by Lee’s film’s tropes of falling bodies and mirror scenes. Proposing a revision to the account of the acute traumatic event dominant in trauma studies, I attempt to imagine an uncanny conception of trauma capable of grappling with the enduring injuries engendered by an event like racial bondage. By way of conclusion, I offer some hypotheses about the challenges *Bamboozled* poses to scholars of race and slavery working in the field of American literary and cultural studies in its entreating us to look beyond the divisions of discrete historical periods and eras to witness how the past lives on in the present—indeed, how the past returns and lives again, as if it never really passed away.

Blacking Up in *The New Millennium*

At the diegetic core of *Bamboozled* is *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*. The brainchild of Lee’s protagonist, Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans), a Harvard educated, African American writer who works for CNS, one of the major networks in the white-dominated television industry, the show is the result of Pierre’s frustration at having his proposals for programming that features black middle-class family life consistently rejected by the white executives at CNS for not being “hip” enough. Seeking to prove just how racist the entertainment industry is, and, in so doing, to get fired from his job and avoid the financial penalty that he would incur if he were to resign, Pierre resolves to give his bosses precisely what he believes they want: “a coon show.” While the logic behind his plan is never fully developed, in conceiving of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* as a “satire,” Pierre strives to rationalize what ultimately is his self-serving project by imagining that the objective of the program is “to destroy” the stereotypes of blackness the show will parade. Expecting the audience to loathe and reject these images, Pierre says he hopes to “move this country to change”—as if just one more recycling of these

images is all that is needed to excise them from the nation's racial imaginary. The ironic distance from the program's racist iconography that Pierre envisions, however, is lost on both the audience and the network. *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* is wildly successful: viewers love it; corporations pay premium rates to purchase advertising time; and CNS executives celebrate Pierre's "genius."

Underlying Pierre's belief that his proposed program will serve as a progressive political project is a particular attitude toward "history" and the place of the past, specifically its relation to the film's present tense moment. At the outset, as they plan for the show, Pierre and his assistant Sloan Hopkins (Jada Pinkett-Smith) research and study the history of blackface in an attempt to achieve an accurate portrayal of the minstrel types the program will display. Pierre reviews archival footage of old minstrel performances, selecting *Mantan* as the title of the show, and requesting that Manray take this name as his television persona in order to invoke the legacy of Mantan Moreland, one of the most famous African American comedic actors of the early twentieth century.⁸ Likewise, Sloan, in an effort to make the actors appear as historically authentic as possible—to "keep the ritual the same," as she puts it—locates the formula for the blackface paint (burnt cork and water "mixed to a thick paste") used in the nineteenth century, and demands that the show's cast black up just as their counterparts did in the past.

Sloan's gesture here is significant, for, never fully comfortable with her complicity in Pierre's plan but unable, if not unwilling, to articulate an efficacious dissent, she is perhaps for this very reason especially invested in the historical dimension of the project. Indeed, later in the film, when Sloan gives Pierre a "Jolly Nigger Bank," one of the trappings of blackface entertainment that Steven Dubin has identified as a form of "symbolic slavery,"⁹ she admonishes him to keep the figurine which, she notes, is not a "repro" but "circa turn of the century," as a reminder of "a time in our history in this country when we were considered inferior, subhuman" a time we should "never forget." Heike Toewe reads this episode as evidence of Sloan's attempt to voice her "protest" of the show by implicitly situating it within the "tradition" of white Americans viewing blacks as "objects" for their "exploitation" (174). But Sloan's use of the term "history" in conjunction with her past tense verb in this exchange suggests the matter is more complicated. That is, even if Sloan seeks to articulate a kind of sub rosa critique of the program by her wielding of the "Jolly Nigger Bank," what animates Sloan's complaint is not an uncanny intuition that *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* continues the "tradition" of blackface entertainment but rather her sense that Pierre's project is an offensive anachronism—something from the past (the "time in our history" she invokes) unmoored from its proper temporal domain and inappropriately placed in the present.

Read in this way, the episode casts Sloan less as Pierre's rival than his collaborator. Both characters' actions bespeak the idea that if they treat their creation as a kind of historical research project, as something belonging to the "past" whose re-presentation they can control (even if their assessments of this re-presentation differ), they will be able to manufacture for themselves not just a public alibi that justifies their association with the show but a personal one as well, a way of ensuring against the psychological violation brought about by their participation in the endeavor. In short, via their scrupulous research into the history of blackface, as well as its preface in American slavery, Sloan and Pierre attempt to police the boundaries between memory and repetition, between remembering the past and reproducing it in the present.

The show's two main co-conspirators' conception of the presumed distance between their present position and the past betrays a severe misreading of how far the nation has (not) progressed beyond the nineteenth-century world from which the minstrel show derives. Even more significantly, however, Pierre and Sloan's unspoken contention that the past can be remembered simply as past reveals a mistaken faith in their ability to cordon off the past from the present. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, to postulate the act of remembering as the "retrieval" of content from the domain of a "fixed past" that has an "independent existence" is to assume erroneously that the past exists "independently" from the present (15). Against this view, Trouillot asserts: "The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past *as past*" (15).¹⁰ The consequence of Trouillot's insight here is crucial: only when we jettison the notion of a "fixed past" separated from the domain of the present can we recognize that the past in fact persists through time, and, more importantly, that it does so because the structures of domination—the presumed superiority of whites over blacks that was given official state sanction in slavery, for instance—have been "renewed" in subsequent eras, that is, in the series of historical "presents" that follow the "past" of legal black bondage (151).

In this regard, if, as Eric Lott has argued, minstrelsy is a cultural form that derives from the "material relations of slavery" (3), then the popularity of blackface on the stage in the nineteenth century and on the screen in the twentieth century (and beyond) was one of the basic means by which the ideology of white supremacy was perpetuated in the post-slavery era. From this vantage point, Sloan's wielding of the "Jolly Nigger Bank" as a sign to "never forget" the "time in our history" when blacks were subhuman takes on an even deeper irony: for, if in the "new millennium" in which Pierre and Sloan live and labor, what the CNS executives and audiences alike want is a neo-minstrel show, this fact gives credence not to the imperative "never forget," as Sloan would have it; rather, it testifies to the utter impossibility of forgetting the caricatures of blackness trafficked by minstrelsy precisely because they have endured through time.¹¹

Indeed, long before *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* becomes a national media phenomenon, *Bamboozled* points insistently, if at first subtly, to the ways in which, against its protagonists' beliefs, the borders between the historicity and the contemporaneity of the minstrel show utterly break down. Early in the film, when Pierre introduces his supervisor Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport) to Manray and Womack, the network executive requests an impromptu performance from the show's soon-to-be dancing star. Taking the conference table as his stage, Manray executes an impressive tap routine for Dunwitty, whose laughter and overzealous applause signal not merely his approval of Manray's casting but also something much more disturbing: his conceptualization of blackness as what Saidiya Hartman has identified as a "vehicl[e] for white enjoyment" (*Scenes of Subjection* 23). Indeed, as Pierre pitches the premise for *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* in his introduction of Manray and Womack, Dunwitty makes it clear that this is precisely what he has in mind, explaining with excitement to Pierre his vision that each week the program's characters will "make us laugh" and "make us cry."

Significantly, this tableau, in which the white Dunwitty takes in an extemporaneous, but coerced, performance by Manray, almost exactly replays the opening scene of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 bestseller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which Mr. Shelby demands that one

of his slave children, Harry Harris (or “Jim Crow” to Shelby), entertain the slave trader Haley: “Now, Jim, show this gentlemen how you can dance and sing” (3).¹² Without protest, Harry immediately responds with “one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music” (3). Haley and Shelby are delighted by Harry’s performance—“Both gentlemen laughed uproariously” (3)—as is Dunwitty by Manray’s exhibition-on-demand. Indeed, as Hartman points out, it is precisely these seemingly “innocent amusements,” these “gentler forms” of white power over blacks such as Shelby’s request for a performance from Harry or Dunwitty’s desire for an impromptu viewing of Manray’s tap dancing acumen that, by way of “euphemism and concealment,” “extended and maintained the relations of domination” more overtly on display in the scene of a slave’s whipping or sale in the marketplace (*Scenes of Subjection* 42).

These rhyming tableaux from *Bamboozled* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* demonstrate how, to recall Trouillot’s point, the material relations of slavery are renewed and perpetuated even after the institution’s official end: Dunwitty seems to step into the role of a current day Shelby, with Manray playing the part of an updated Harry Harris, working not for the “quarter of an orange” as in Stowe’s vision, but for the prospect of economic security and fame that Dunwitty promises Manray he will acquire through his role in *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* (3). Yet the historical convergence between, on the one hand, Haley, Shelby, and Harry in the nineteenth century, and Dunwitty and Manray at the dawn of the twenty-first, on the other, taking place in this scene, unsurprisingly, is lost on Pierre. No less invested in his plan to satirize and thereby expose the racism of the television industry, he steps into his boss’s chair in the segment’s closing moment as Dunwitty quickly exits his office to convey the proposal to the CNS executives upstairs, triumphantly declaring: “Well, I think he bought it.”

With this renewed appeal to satire to justify *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* in a scene that already seems to signal that the program will be received as anything but, *Bamboozled* brings into full relief a small but significant visual detail from its opening sequence, which is marked by Pierre’s voice-over definition of “satire” as “irony, derision, or caustic wit used to attack or expose folly, vice, or stupidity.” As if to undercut its protagonist’s belief that the time is ripe for a satire of blackface even before he quite literally can articulate it, the film’s opening features a shot of the massive timepiece that serves as the window of Pierre’s Manhattan clock-tower apartment. The view the camera provides is one of an inverted clock: we see its face from the inside of the wall, indeed, from the vantage point of a shot that is already markedly skewed by its oblique aerial perspective in this initial frame. Equally significant is the tracking shot used to capture Pierre as he introduces himself and continues his exposition of the film’s premise. Positioned on the dolly on which the camera is mounted, Pierre moves along the circular path the shot traces, passing by the backwards clock that looms behind him with each revolution. Time, *Bamboozled* thus suggests, is already somehow disjointed.¹³ Just as the past of racial slavery explodes into the present in Manray’s performance in Dunwitty’s office, time itself, this scene implies, does not run forward. Instead, it moves recursively, by the temporal logic of repetition and return that is at the core of Lee’s film, here given visual expression by the retracing of the already traced path of the opening tracking shot.

Womack articulates the verbal counterpoint to this visual detail in a powerful monologue late in the film, just before he resigns from *The New Millennium Minstrel Show*. Berating Manray for his continued participation, even pride, in the venture, Womack sardonically asks: “New millennium, huh?” Then, answering his own question, he continues: “It’s the same bullshit, just done over.” In this bald encapsulation of *Bamboozled*’s primary claim, Womack signals that the blackface types that he and his colleagues are enacting in the “new millennium”—that is, in both the eponymous television program and the historical era in which the film is set—are repetitions, living reproductions, of the minstrel roles that black actors performed into the 1900s. Yet, despite Womack’s insight, it is not until the final scenes of the film that the representative force of the minstrel figures deployed by *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* strikes the program’s cast and collaborators as entirely and tragically out of their control. Only then do Lee’s characters come to realize that the essentialized notions of blackness that minstrelsy embodies have persisted through time, and thus their recognition is what we might call a profoundly traumatic one.

The Uncanny Trauma of Blackface Minstrelsy

As the preceding pages suggest, at the foundation of *Bamboozled*’s narrative about race, history, and the persistence of the past is a vexed temporality: a confusion between what is being remembered and what is being repeated, between the temporal domains of past and present. Since it is precisely this breakdown of the boundaries demarcating past from present that characterizes psychoanalytic conceptions of trauma, I want to turn here to the account of this psychic phenomenon articulated by Cathy Caruth, who in her influential 1996 study *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* expands the definition of the “traumatic neuroses” that Sigmund Freud explores in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Lee’s film helps us to problematize and think beyond some of the paradigms of traumatic experience that these theorists’ works make available.¹⁴ In particular, I am interested in delineating how *Bamboozled* conceptualizes an uncanny version of trauma, one that illuminates the hauntingly familiar nature of the blackface performances that Lee’s film stages in the guise of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* and thus captures the persistence of racial slavery through time via the perpetual renewal of ostensibly archaic forms of domination in the present.¹⁵

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the veritable ur-text of trauma theory, Freud begins his somewhat tentative elaboration of trauma by distinguishing among fright, fear, and anxiety. Whereas in a state of fear the subject takes a “definite object of which to be afraid,” and in anxiety he anticipates and therefore prepares for some unknown danger, in fright the subject is bereft of any such defensive mechanism (11). As Freud explains it, fright “is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it” (11). Fright is central to the traumatic neuroses, Freud goes on to write, because it is the element of shock associated with events such as “railway disasters” and other unexpected “accidents involving a risk to life” that causes them to shatter the defensive mechanisms of the ego (10). Deploying an inside-outside spatial metaphoric to describe the relation of the psyche to the external world, Freud posits: “We describe

as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield” (33). Although it does not finally offer a fully developed account of the nature of trauma, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* does postulate that traumatic dreams, which “repeatedly brin[g] the patient back into the situation of his accident” (11), function as the psyche’s attempt to “master” the shocking “stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (37). In other words, Freud suggests a link between the failed mastery of the shocking event and the subject’s compulsion to repeat, in the form of a dream, that same incident.

Taking Freud’s meditations in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the starting point for her groundbreaking work on trauma, Cathy Caruth elaborates the consequences of traumatic shock, defining trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena,” such as flashbacks and nightmares (11). Expanding on various strains of Freud’s thought, most notably his observation that patients suffering from traumatic neuroses tend to “repeat” as a “contemporary experience” the traumatic event rather than “remembering it as something belonging to the past” (*Beyond* 19), Caruth postulates that the traumatic incident cannot be remembered as belonging to the past because it was never comprehended—never assimilated—by the subject in the first place. As she explains in an important note to her reading of Freud’s text, whereas in standard psychological functioning “what is inside the psyche is a mediation of the outside through desire, repression, and so on,” in trauma “there is an incomprehensible outside of the self that has already gone inside without the self’s mediation, hence without any relation to the self, and this consequently becomes a threat to any understanding of what a self might be in this context” (131-32 n5). While Caruth resists conceptualizing trauma as “simply that which comes from outside” in an effort not to lose sight of the fact that trauma is a structural “possibility inscribed in human experience” (115 n5), in her examples—the casualties of war, mass destruction, and other “sudden or catastrophic events” (11)—as well as in her general theoretical exposition, Caruth largely retains the spatialized conception of the psyche that differentiates between an “inside” and an “outside” we see in Freud. For Caruth, as for Freud, then, trauma results from some acute event originating from the external world that, occurring too soon to be known, gives rise to a perpetual return of the unassimilated episode.

There is, to be sure, much that is useful about the Freudian-Caruthian model of trauma, not the least of which is the fact that it brings attention to the crucial psychoanalytic insight that the past cannot be accessed simply as past but only in relation to another temporal domain, for example, insofar as the force of previous events returns in the present.¹⁶ In this regard, trauma theory provides an important underpinning for non-linear, non-chronological accounts of history as well as articulations of temporality in which the domains of past, present, and future do not neatly follow (or follow from) one another. Indeed, one of the great virtues of Caruth’s account is her foregrounding of the particularly temporal stakes of trauma, which she describes at one point as “a break in the mind’s experience of time,” that is, in the psyche’s ability to process and place events in a standard chronological order (61). It’s important to note, in this vein, that the paradigmatic traumatic moment—the above-cited scene of self-shattering Caruth describes as the intrusion of an “incomprehensible outside” into the psyche—can be cast as a confused distinction between two selves:

the pre-traumatized vs. post-traumatic self. As Robert Jay Lifton remarks in an interview with Caruth, "In trauma one moves forward into a situation that one has little capacity to imagine; and that's why it shatters whatever one had that was prospective or experiential in the past" (137). Trauma, Lifton explains, creates a "second self" which, if not totally distinct from the self extant prior to the traumatic episode, comes into being in an effort to deal with the radically new circumstances engendered by the catastrophic incident.

And yet, for all its explanatory power and suggestiveness, this account in an important sense fails to capture the force of the trauma unleashed by *The New Millennium Minstrel Show*. In *Bamboozled*, the characters' trauma derives not from "an incomprehensible outside of the self" that wounds the psyche and shatters the ego, but from their belated realization, nonetheless incomprehensible, that they are in a sense the identity that they thought they were merely performing: the historical minstrel type brought into the present such that it can no longer be properly termed "historical" at all. Put differently, as my discussion of Manray in the next section will illuminate, the trauma *Bamboozled* represents derives from the characters' untimely realization that they have become something they *already* were, something that is hauntingly familiar.

In making this claim, I am of course invoking Freud's notion of the "uncanny," which he famously defines in an essay of that name as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220): "nothing new or alien," Freud says of the *unheimlich*, "but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241). What seems to me most important in relation to the uncanny nature of the trauma that the characters of *Bamboozled* experience is the way in which Freud relates his concept of the uncanny to that of the double, a psychic phenomenon characterized by an uncertain identification between self and other: ". . . the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own" (234). Suggesting that the experience of apprehending one's double brings the individual back to an archaic state of psychic development, when the subject and the external world were still coterminous, Freud posits that when the double reappears later in the course of psychological development, it strikes the subject as a "thing of terror," an "uncanny harbinger of death" (236, 235). What previously had been part of the primordial self—indeed, Freud speculates it was "originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego"—returns as something the subject perceives as external, thereby confusing the boundaries between self and other and haunting the individual (235). The double is the self split off from the self: both the "me" and "not-me," the living image of the self and the sign of the self's death.¹⁷

If the uncanny and the traumatic event both rely, at least for their theoretical articulation, on the spatial metaphors of inside-outside, there is nonetheless an important distinction to be made between them: whereas in trauma the overwhelming episode that penetrates the psyche originates from the "outside," in the uncanny, the double that manifests itself in external form as a "thing of terror" derives from the inside, that is, from the self in the primordial psychic state, during which, as Julia Kristeva explains, the subject "projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien *double*, uncanny and demoniacal" (183). An important temporal insight is thus contained in what is ostensibly the primarily spatial formulation of the uncanny double,

for in emerging from the inside—and tracing its roots back to an earlier stage of psychic development—the double is in this way already part of the subject; as Kristeva notes, “that which *is* strangely uncanny would be that which *was* (the past tense is important) familiar . . .” (183). Indeed, Freud identifies as one of the central characteristics of the double “the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations” (234). The scene of witnessing the double is haunting, even traumatic, not merely because what seems like a disjuncture between self and other registers at the same time as a coincidence between the two, but because the double in fact also marks a repetition of what was thought to be the past in the present—a recurrence that signals the past’s persistence and reminds us that, like racial history in *Bamboozled*, though it may have been repressed, it has never quite gone away.

The concept of the double therefore brings into stark relief the uncanny nature of the trauma Lee’s film stages. For far from the class of an acute, shocking event made unassimilable by inadequate fear proposed by Caruth and Freud, the trauma at the center of *Bamboozled* derives from what we might more accurately describe as a chronic wound: the legacy of black subjugation that originates in legalized bondage and that minstrelsy embodies and has helped to perpetuate through time, thereby extending and renewing the material and psychological structures put into place in the era of slavery far beyond 1865. In this sense, if anything is shocking in the trauma the characters experience it is, paradoxically, a kind of fright that originates from an insight that is startling primarily because it is hauntingly familiar. To paraphrase Womack’s crucial line, blackface is the uncanny recurrence of the “same bullshit” through time.

“Not Playing Myself No More”: Mirror Stages, Second Selves, and Falling Bodies

Bamboozled gives visual expression to this uncanny trauma when Womack and Manray apply blackface in front of the large mirrors in their dressing rooms before taking the stage for the filming of the show’s pilot episode. Recently renamed Mantan and Sleep ‘n’ Eat at Pierre’s demand, Manray and Womack sit in front of their respective mirrors, painting their faces with burnt cork, coloring their mouths with “fire truck red” lipstick, and in the process becoming, visually and psychically, the minstrels of the past. Significantly, images of historical minstrel types decorate the walls directly behind the mirrors into which the characters gaze. In one shot that depicts Manray in the process of applying blackface, the camera captures a stunning tableau: for a brief moment, we are able to see simultaneously the image of Manray looking at himself as he paints his face and the reflection of the framed pictures of minstrel figures hanging on the wall of the dressing room. We see in the same field of vision, that is, both the anticipatory image of what Manray is becoming and the reproduction of a historical minstrel type that looks strikingly like Manray in blackface. From Manray’s perspective, the past, present, and future are hauntingly alike.

In describing this tableau, I have intentionally blurred the Freudian notion of the uncanny with Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, despite the important differences between them,¹⁸ in order to emphasize the idea that in this moment Manray experiences a

profound psychic transformation: he undergoes what we might call a primordial constitution of his self-conception that is at the same time a return to a past identity. According to Lacan, in this phase of psychic development the infant, still unable to control its own motor capacities, sees reflected in the mirror the illusory image of the unified body, the anticipatory visual form of corporeal mastery. This phantasmagoric image of wholeness not only stands in contrast to, but actually brings into being, the specter of the disjointed body that will come to characterize the infant's psychic self-conception before the mirror stage.¹⁹ Put differently, the retroactive image of the body in pieces comes about in response to the anticipatory image of the ideal self, or, as Jane Gallop explains, "the self is constituted through anticipating what it will become, and then this anticipatory model is used for gauging what was before" (81). While for Lacan these two images are dissimilar, the likeness that Manray apprehends in the mirror as he applies his makeup does not differ from the representation on the wall behind him. Rather, by virtue of their similarity, the two images seem to coalesce in such a way that the boundary between them collapses. As the minstrel types decorating the walls of his room and reflected in his mirror seem to testify, what Manray is becoming is in a sense what he already is. In the tableau this shot creates, Manray emerges as an uncanny repetition of the icon of the minstrel type that hangs behind him.

The result of this primal scene of identity re-formation is for Manray what we might call, after Lacan, a misrecognition in the strongest sense. Indeed, from this moment forward, Manray is unable to maintain a stable sense of the borders between his identity as, on the one hand, Manray and, on the other, Mantan, the blackface caricature he plays. This confusion first surfaces when Manray sees the animated opening sequence CNS producers have created for the debut of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show*. As he watches the cartoon of himself as Mantan, a figure not easily distinguishable from Manray in blackface, he remarks in shock: "Why they got to make my nose so big?" Manray's comment, particularly his use of the possessive pronoun "my," is significant because it suggests that, at least on one level, he recognizes the animated image as himself even as he attempts to hold on to the notion that a gap exists between his self-conception as Manray and his role as Mantan.

A statement that Manray makes later in the film similarly reveals the vexed self-image that his participation in the minstrel show has wrought. Finally deciding to resign, Manray confronts Pierre, first asserting that his name is Manray not Mantan, and then declaring: "I'm not playing myself no more." Manray's comment here at once holds out two meanings. In one sense, the phrase signifies that Manray will not fool himself anymore, that he will not dupe himself or be "bamboozled" by way of his performance in blackface. Yet the more literal meaning of the line is also crucial, for in declaring that he will not "play himself" Manray suggests some realization—belated and incomplete as it is—that what he has been doing all along is playing himself, that is, portraying in blackface his identity as a minstrel. In a striking confirmation of what the mirror scene suggests, Manray thus declares himself the uncanny repetition of the image of the nineteenth-century minstrel type displayed on the wall of his dressing room.²⁰

If there is any force of signifying resistance in the first, more metaphorical sense of Manray's statement that he's "not playing himself no more," *Bamboozled* undercuts it and points to the tragic implications of the literal register of his utterance in a crucial final reprisal of the mirror scene. Just before he signals to Pierre his refusal to continue in his role,

Manray stands in front of the mirror in his darkened dressing room. Pushing away the black paint on his table, he seems to want to reverse the psychological transformation that was effected earlier in the film. It is as if he seeks to reclaim, by staring at his non-blackface image in the mirror, some previous sense of himself. But no such image is reflected back to Manray; in fact, because the room is so dark, no clear image of Manray appears at all. Rather, it is the blackface figure posted on the bottom corner of the mirror that, catching the single beam of light in the room, is most fully illuminated in the shot.

The visual argument held out by this *mise-en-scène* is striking: the image of Manray as a human being has been replaced by a one-dimensional icon; the uncanny “not-me” of Mantan has supplanted the “me.” Indeed, the minstrel type hanging in the corner of the mirror marks for Manray the site of the Lacanian gaze, that object in the visual field that reminds us that “as subjects, we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as caught” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 92). Manray, this shot implies, is “called into” and “caught” by the minstrel figure in the most extreme, and most disturbing, sense of these terms; he *is* the image of the minstrel, mastered by it to the extent that he no longer exists as Manray. Irreversibly it would seem, Manray has become the minstrel type that looks back at him in place of his reflection.²¹

Bamboozled bears out the implications of this reality in a haunting final scene—haunting because it uncannily replays an earlier episode. As Manray walks onto the stage of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* for the last time—wearing no blackface and dressed in his everyday clothes—he declares: “I am sick and tired of being a nigger, and I am not going to take it anymore.” Significantly, Manray here alters the lines he utters in the pilot episode of the program when he exclaims in blackface: “I am sick and tired of *niggers*.” If the distance between Manray’s first statement and his protest at the end of the film tempts us to read his actions here as a gesture of resistance, an attempt to extricate himself from the show and distinguish himself from the character that has come to define him, Manray’s retention of the word “nigger” should give us pause, not merely because in so declaring he thus repeats and reifies the racist system that this pejorative term invokes, but because Dunwitty’s appropriation of the word in the next moment confirms this very point.²² Escorting Manray out of the studio, Dunwitty, outraged by his employee’s insubordination, shouts “niggers like you are a dime a dozen.” Dunwitty’s chilling phrase reveals his vision of an inexhaustible supply of Manrays/Mantans (surely to Dunwitty, if not the film itself, the difference between the two matters little by this point); it portends an endless series of minstrel types of which Manray himself is just one iteration—burn cork, add water, and mix, we might imagine Dunwitty’s formula for producing a replacement.

The film finally undercuts any latent revisionist force that might inhere in Manray’s attempt at a repetition with a difference, as opposed to a repetition of the same, by replaying the figure of Manray’s falling body immediately after he speaks the final word of his protest. Just after he says “nigger,” Manray falls backwards, almost exactly repeating the fall he comically performs in the pilot, when he utters the prior version of his monologue. Indeed, in an effort to emphasize that this fall is in fact a repetition, in this moment *Bamboozled* edits together three images of Manray’s falling body and replays them in quick succession. With this final montage, then, the film makes a stunning statement about the uncanny trauma of blackface minstrelsy. For, even when he is not in blackface, even when he tries to fashion a non-blackface version of himself, Manray nonetheless falls backward,

just as he does in his first performance of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show*. The uncanny force of minstrelsy is fully out of his control; he repeats the fall back into history despite his (belated) attempts at resistance.

The Show Will Go On; or, The Interminable Trauma of Blackface

Though it occurs late in the film, Manray's is not the last falling body that marks *Bamboozled's* narrative, which in its dénouement questions both the possibility of putting an end to *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* in particular and the uncanny trauma of blackface it has unleashed more generally. Indeed, Manray himself falls once again in the film's closing moments, and this time the fall leads to his death. Immediately after he is ejected from the set of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* for his refusal to perform in blackface, and just after we see him repeat the fall from the first episode of the television program, Manray is apprehended by the Mau Maus, a self-proclaimed revolutionary group of rappers who execute Manray for his perpetuation of racist stereotypes.²³ Wearing plastic blackface masks in mockery of his role as Mantan, the Mau Maus force the erstwhile star to perform what they term the "dance of death." If Manray's exhibition for Dunwitty earlier was compelled by his bid for a livelihood as an actor, then this scene literalizes the stakes of the previous one: here Manray dances for his life as the Mau Maus fire their guns at his feet. Marketing the execution as a cybervisual spectacle, the Mau Maus broadcast Manray's murder on the Internet and on television for the entire world to witness. Like *The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, it is an event that cannot be missed.

Significantly, just before it provides us with the real-time footage of the execution, the film interposes an animated image of a classic minstrel scene: the white master shooting at his slave's dancing feet. The tableau is familiar, for it recalls another that occurs earlier in *Bamboozled*. Indeed, Manray has performed this very set piece before in an episode of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* in which he and Womack, in the roles of plantation slaves, flee from the bullets of their master's gun. Thus, the image of Manray dancing for his life at once recalls and repeats two other images within the course of the film—the scene in which Manray and Womack race from the bullets of their owner's rifle and the animated version of this tableau that occurs just before the execution—even as it anticipates the historical images of slaves fleeing from their overseer that mark the film's final montage.

Having witnessed Manray's execution on television as has the rest of the world, an enraged Sloan goes to Pierre's office, bringing a gun with her. As Sloan approaches Pierre—who himself now wears blackface, a sign that the trauma of minstrelsy has overtaken even him—she declares her power over him. No longer his assistant, she is now his boss: "This is listen to Sloan day," she screams. After making this pronouncement, Sloan orders Pierre to watch the video panorama of blackface images from film and television that she has produced for him; brandishing her gun, she directs him: "Look to what you contributed to." Notwithstanding the fact that she utters it in a feverish state, Sloan's command, especially her use of the word "contributed," is significant, for it betrays her sense (conscious or otherwise) that Pierre's show is not, despite its title, a "new" creation, but rather a kind of continuation of the history of blackface media. Even more intriguing is the

causal logic implied by “contributed,” which, in standard usage, posits a relation between cause and effect, impetus and result, means and end, in which the former term in these pairings chronologically precedes and logically gives rise to the latter. In this instance, however, the images to which Sloan refers are in fact minstrel scenes that are already in circulation, footage from the historical archive, whose source could not be Pierre, at least in any conventional temporal order. Thus Pierre has, according to Sloan’s curious turn of phrase, “contributed to” something that already exists. He is, paradoxically, cause and effect, production and reproduction; and his creation is not merely grounded in the present or future of blackface, but also in its past. In this regard, he has “contributed” merely another installment to the long, unfinished history of the uncanny trauma of blackface, a history whose narrative may be impossible to write precisely by virtue of its interminability.²⁴

This is the very point Pierre is forced, quite literally, to face at the conclusion of the film. As Sloan shoots him, Pierre falls to his death, his body resting in such a position that he is physically unable to turn away from the montage of blackface minstrelsy Sloan has prepared for him. Pierre’s vantage point here soon becomes our own as the images that are displayed on his office television overtake our screen, and we witness the haunting history of racial representation in the form of rapidly transitioning clips of blackface and neo-minstrel performances culled from film and television sources dating from as early as the late-nineteenth century.²⁵

In this regard, the ultimate addressee of *Bamboozled* is, indeed, its audience. Yet, contrary to the dominant interpretive position surveyed at the outset of this essay that would locate resistance to the images the film circulates in viewers’ ability to differentiate Lee’s satirical project from the iconography recycled by *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* or the historical sources on which it draws, the structure of *Bamboozled*’s final sequence troubles this kind of response. For not only do the representations in the montage rhyme with the forms *Bamboozled* has reproduced; as Michele Wallace has noted, the clips that constitute this panorama are sutured together in a non-chronological order: a frame from turn-of-the-twentieth-century footage of a laughing man gives way to a segment from the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, which then morphs into an excerpt from D. W. Griffith’s 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* (14).²⁶

Thus, as we watch the concluding montage of images that strike us as hauntingly familiar, we are forced to consider why this is so. Do these images resonate because they are repetitions—visual echoes—of scenes we have seen throughout *Bamboozled*? Or, are they familiar by virtue of their very ubiquity, their enduring legacy in American culture, despite the particular temporal moment or historical era to which, most narrowly construed, they belong? To answer this question, it seems, we have to return to *Bamboozled*, to watch it again in order to track its repetitions—and then repeat the process again, and then once more, perhaps thereby enacting a potentially endless cycle of playing and replaying the images of blackface minstrelsy whose source, whether in the recent past of our viewing of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* or in a more distant past, is uncertain.

As if to corroborate the unsettling sense of uncanniness engendered by the visual montage that is its final scene, *Bamboozled* frames this closing segment with two comments from Pierre. Before the mosaic of minstrel images first overtakes our screen, the camera focuses on the dying Pierre, lying on the floor of his office, the television still playing the series of clips we just viewed. Speaking by way of a voice-over as the camera lingers on

his expiring body, the protagonist promises that the show will go on: "Please tune in next week for the best of *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*." As the film cuts back to the office after we watch the lengthy visual interlude on the history of blackface Sloan has prepared, Pierre, now surely dead, delivers his final line: "always keep them laughing," an imperative that the protagonist communicates just as an extreme close-up of Manray in costume as Mantan, striking the stock pose of the smiling minstrel, fills the screen.

These voice-over meditations from a dead Pierre reveal that, considered from his point of view as narrator, the whole of the film has been a retracing of something that has already happened. Thus, whether or not we take seriously Pierre's closing prediction that *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* will in fact continue, and whether it will do so in new episodes or reruns—itsself a vexed question, given that the "original" *New Millennium Minstrel Show* was, as we have seen, not "new" at all—is beside the point, for the images the program traffics have already re-circulated at least once by the time we get to the narrative's close. Our viewing of the film has, in other words, already been the show's initial repetition, and *Bamboozled* has already secured the program's first replaying even before the film's final credits—themselves superimposed over images of the trappings of blackface minstrelsy—commence.

Coda: A New Millennium?

If, as I have argued, the trauma in *Bamboozled* can be described as uncanny, then the film itself is what we might designate, following W. J. T. Mitchell, as a profoundly untimely one.²⁷ Refusing to conflate the forward movement of time—of one year giving way to another, the era of slavery giving way to that of freedom, in short, the past giving way to the present—with racial progress, *Bamboozled* entreats us to be skeptical of proclamations of "new eras" or "new beginnings." It recommends, to borrow a phrase from David Roediger, that we take a "long view in thinking about race and change," so that we don't blind ourselves to the important relations between the past and the present by focusing too narrowly on what we presume to be a fixed past, beyond which we've progressed (x).

In this regard, *Bamboozled* poses a formidable challenge to American literary and cultural studies, a field whose dominant methodologies and tools remain tied to a belief in the particularity of certain eras or sociopolitical moments inherited from the New Historicism, which invested terms like "rupture," "breakage," and "discontinuity" with significant, and abiding, critical capital. Indeed, Lee's film resists what is arguably the fundamental interpretive move associated with these historicist-critical practices: the placement of a text in its historical context, which is to say the synchronic cultural system in which the work was produced (Montrose 17).²⁸ Russ Castronovo has observed that in conceiving of "history" as tantamount to the contemporaneous moment of a text's creation, not only does this mode of reading tend to posit an overly rigid distinction between the past and the present in which the past almost becomes the "other" of the present; it also effectively restricts the scope of a work's temporal vision and, Castronovo explains, thereby polices "what texts mean by limiting how far back—or forward—they can mean" (183).²⁹ What, after all, is the appropriate "historical context" for *Bamboozled*: the nineteenth century, the

twentieth, or the twenty-first? If we recall here, once again, Womack's statement that the so-called "new millennium" is in fact the "same bullshit, just done over," the answer, it would seem, is each one, and all three.

Taking seriously Womack's refrain, we might recognize that *Bamboozled* issues an even stronger imperative for the ways in which scholars of American literature and culture, especially those interested in the study of race and racial slavery, ought to imagine the relations between past and present. Lee's film implies not merely that the past has an effect on the present—for this would be, at best, a rather unremarkable insight—but that the past returns in the present, repeating and replaying the material and psychological structures of black bondage in such a way that to speak of a past and a present as distinct temporal domains becomes difficult. To heed Womack's call, what is needed is not, to be sure, a jettisoning of historically minded work but rather a less narrow historical vision, which is to say, a broader conception of what "history" means and what counts as historical contextualizing.

As Wendy Brown has rightly noted, no "materialist or empirical history" can adequately account for the ways in which the legacy of slavery endures in the present (141). Rather, to begin to come to terms with this afterlife, we need to attune ourselves to the complexities of the relations between past and present, to realize that the former does not always give way to the latter, and to understand that the racial past persists through time precisely because the past is not the opposite of the present, nor does history follow an exclusively linear or progressive path.³⁰ Already in 1880, nearly two decades after the legal abolition of racial servitude in the United States, Frederick Douglass seemed to grasp precisely this point, when, lamenting the impossibility of celebrating emancipation as a fully realized event, he declared that "no man can tell just when" the "foul spirit" of slavery "departed from our land, if, indeed, it has yet departed . . ." (930). Underwriting Douglass's claim here is a skepticism surrounding the very possibility of (perhaps ever) marking the "end" of slavery in a single date, not merely for fear that to do so would reduce the horror of the institution, but out of an awareness that, as Dana Luciano has put it, the termination of an event like slavery does not necessarily signal its conclusion (211).

The works that would give credence to this vision of slavery's slow death, issued by Douglass back in the old millennium, are many and reach far beyond (and before) *Bamboozled*. In theorizing that the past of racial slavery repeats and replays itself through time, here in the form of blackface, *Bamboozled* should be understood not, as some would have it, as an excessive expression of its director's warped political agenda,³¹ but more accurately as a contribution to the long tradition of African American intellectual and literary discourse dedicated to thinking about how race, particularly the category of blackness in the United States, has in fact *not* changed over time. Consider, for instance, W. E. B. Du Bois's deployment of the phrase "second slavery" to describe African Americans' status at the dawn of the twentieth century in *The Souls of Black Folk* (15). Or, take the example of Pauline E. Hopkins, who in her 1900 novel *Contending Forces* declared that the "difference" between the "then" of slavery and the "now" of the so-called era of freedom is "so slight as to be scarcely worth mentioning" (15). Du Bois and Hopkins purposefully sought to conceive of the problems facing them not as new phenomena but as repetitions of the past that call for old strategies—indeed, in the case of Hopkins, even for the very same terms used in the anti-slavery struggle. As the American Colored League speaker advises in his

address to a group of black Americans in a remarkable scene at the center of *Contending Forces*: “Agitation and eternal vigilance in the formation of public opinion were the weapons which broke the power of the slaveholder and gave us emancipation. I recommend these methods to you today, knowing their value in the past” (Hopkins 245). If, to recall Douglass’s phrase, the “foul spirit” of racial servitude remains, Hopkins’s character would seem to suggest that it is best to proceed as if slavery has not ended at all, not knowing what, finally, this “end” will look like, or if it ever will come.

Might we say that *Bamboozled* continues this untimely approach to American racial history given voice at the dawn of the twentieth century by Douglass, Du Bois, and Hopkins? This question is in fact quite timely in light of our present historical situation, in which the election of Barack Obama to the presidency has been widely described as a “new day,” and has prompted (once again) questions about whether America is now finally “post-racial.”³² Strikingly, one such proclamation came from the creator of *Bamboozled*, Spike Lee himself, when he declared in an interview with MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough, on the morning after the 2008 presidential election, that we are now in a “new day” and a “new America.” Significantly, neither Lee nor Scarborough made reference to *Bamboozled*, even though Lee seems to have lifted his proclamation about the nation’s “new dawn” almost directly from the script of his film, muting the irony that inflects the term in that context, if not also implicitly inserting the nation’s first black president into the narrative of steady racial progress so potently exposed as a lie through the figure of Honeycutt’s blackface Lincoln.³³ Whether Spike Lee’s remark that the United States has truly entered a “new era” with the election of Obama will prove prophetic, or whether in making this pronouncement Lee was “bamboozling” Scarborough, us, or himself, is, perhaps, only something time will tell. But if *Bamboozled* is any indication, in order to avoid repeating the errors of Pierre and Sloan, if not also their creator, we would do well to train our critical eye to remain aware, even—indeed, especially—in this so-called “new millennium,” of the ways in which the past of racial slavery lives on and recurs in the present.³⁴

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NOTES

1. In “Racial Camp in *The Producers* and *Bamboozled*,” Susan Gubar also remarks that Honeycutt’s performance as Lincoln in this scene emphasizes that the “repercussions of slavery have continued to reverberate” (34). For accounts of the history of the figure of Lincoln as deployed in blackface productions into the twentieth century that have influenced my reading of this scene, see Gubar, *Racechanges* 53–54 and Rogin 177–78. On Lincoln’s enjoyment of blackface minstrelsy, see Lott 4.
2. See, for instance, *Cineaste’s* “Race, Media, and Money: A Critical Symposium on Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*,” which collects short position pieces on the film by Saul Landau, Michael Rogin, Greg Tate, and others. See also “Minding the Messenger: A Symposium on *Bamboozled*,” a transcript of a November 2000 panel discussion of Lee’s work held at New York University featuring Stanley Crouch, Margo Jefferson, Eric Lott, and Michele Wallace.

3. Critics of the film have thus followed the lead of its creator, who has consistently emphasized the centrality of satire to *Bamboozled*'s representational strategies. See, for instance, Spike Lee's comments in an interview published in *Cineaste* in 2001. Tellingly, Lee's insistence that *Bamboozled* is satire implies that he is more willing to imagine himself as a viewer of his film than as a character within its narrative, where satire fails. In making these claims, I am of course underscoring the need to differentiate what Lee suggests about *Bamboozled* from what *Bamboozled* suggests about itself. For an incisive analysis of the ways in which the film unleashes images that exceed its creator's grasp, see Mitchell. For a skeptical account of the politics of race in *Bamboozled*, see White. On this topic in the context of Lee's oeuvre more generally, see Lubiano.
4. In addition to Epp and Elam, see Barlowe, who argues that the film "confronts its audiences with the continuing but unacknowledged consequences of minstrelsy and mimicry in the United States as a postcolonialist slave society," providing the "intervention, the space of translation, the moment of politics, and the possibility of political change . . ." (1, 12). See also Morris, who contends that the film "relies on the effectiveness of indirection, making parodic repetitions . . . with complicated political implications, rather than clearly staking a claim" (74). Running through all of these readings is some form of the argument that *Bamboozled* does not merely interpellate its audience as capable of resisting the images it presents, but that this viewership's capacity for resistance and recognition of satirical critique exists in a kind of inverse relationship to that of the intra-diegetic audience of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show*. Epp contends, for instance, that "satire for *Mantan*'s promoters is the cynical tool of profit and hegemony, while satire for *Bamboozled* is the genuine means by which racist American mass entertainment traditions can be resisted" (28). For a brief reading of *Bamboozled* as exemplary of postmodern racial performance, see Nowatzki.
5. I stress *may* here, since making these kinds of assumptions about an audience's reception of a film as invested in the manipulation of imagery as is *Bamboozled* seems problematic. For an empirical analysis of divergent audience reactions to Lee's film, see Brooks and Daniels.
6. A full account of the complex history of blackface in American culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is beyond the scope of this essay, but suffice it to say that I take as axiomatic Eric Lott's assertion in *Love and Theft* that, at its most basic level, blackface minstrelsy was "organized around the quite explicit 'borrowing' of black cultural materials for white dissemination, a borrowing that ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery . . ." (3). I treat similarly Michael Rogin's thesis in *Blackface, White Noise* that "African slavery is the material base of blackface," and that "[b]lackface staged the return of what [the Declaration of Independence] repressed—slavery—by displaying the racialized body whited out beneath the Declaration's universalist claims" (19, 17). The literature that treats blackface minstrelsy is vast, but for some foundational studies on the topic, see, in addition to Lott and Rogin, Gubar, *Racechanges*, esp. 53–94; Knight; and Lhamon. For an essay that places *Bamboozled* alongside the return of blackface performance in the New York theater scene in the 1980s and 1990s, see Garrett.
7. Although the argument below directly engages Cathy Caruth's work on trauma in *Unclaimed Experience*, my attention to the figure of the falling body in *Bamboozled* does not draw on her discussion of the trope of falling, which, as she explains in her chapter on "The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference," illuminates the dilemma of referentiality in the theory of Paul de Man. For an important account of the relationship between blackness and falling from the perspective of performance theory that more closely aligns with my thinking in this essay, see King.
8. On the significance of this renaming, see Knight 247.
9. Dubin describes these objects as vehicles through which the dominant social set articulates the "inferior position" of nonwhites and "attempts to delimit their collective action for change" (138).
10. On this point, see also Certeau, who explains that Western historiography in general holds as its fundamental tenet the absolute distinction between the past and the present in which the past becomes the "other" of the present (2–3). In organizing socio-historical events into chronological periods, Certeau contends, this mode of writing "history" relies on notions of "breakage," rupture, and discontinuity (4). Certeau posits that "history," on this model, is more an *a priori* methodological imperative that "furnishes the empty frame of a linear succession" into which the historian fits particular events than it is "the result obtained from research" (12).
11. Keeling makes a similar point about Sloan's comments in this scene (245–46).
12. On the relation between minstrel tableaux and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Lhamon 96–99. This scene in *Bamboozled* also recalls D. W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*, when, early in the film, Ben Cameron, conducting a tour of his Piedmont, South Carolina, family plantation for his Northern guests, makes a visit to the slave quarters, where he and his friends delight in a spontaneous performance put on by Cameron's bound blacks.

13. Morris also comments on the opening shot of the clock, but reads the image in relation to her argument about *Bamboozled*'s parodying of the documentary form (75). Mitchell understands the clock not in temporal terms but as a sign of Pierre's "entrapment inside a mechanical system, like the windup figures and automatons he gathers around him" (304).
14. The conception of trauma I develop in this section is influenced by Kai Erikson's work on the traumatic effects of disasters, specifically his emphasis on the chronic nature of trauma. As Erikson contends, trauma ought to be "understood as resulting from a *constellation of life experiences* as well as from a discrete happening, from a *persisting condition* as well as from an acute event" (229). I am likewise influenced by bell hooks's assertion that for black Americans, "living in a white supremacist society and being the constant targets of racist assault and abuse are fundamentally psychologically traumatic" (134).

In a recent essay, Greg Forter also voices concerns about the privileging of what he calls "punctual traumas" at the expense of "those forms of trauma" such as "the trauma induced by patriarchal identity formation" and "everyday racism" (260). I am of course in sympathy with Forter's general premise that more attention to chronic varieties of trauma is in order; however, I take issue with the resolution he proposes to redress this limitation of trauma studies, particularly his rejection of the model Freud proposes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in favor of Freud's earlier account of sexual traumas, which are governed by the logic of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), based on the claim that Freud's later theory effectively functions to structuralize trauma via the concept of the death drive and thereby ignores the specific socio-historical causes of trauma (261). As Forter describes Freud's conception of the traumatic neuroses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

We are here dealing with a repetition of *the same*: a demonic impulse that turns development into reprisal, change into recurrence, temporal movement into the static circularity of myth. As a local description of a contingent and extraordinary phenomenon called traumatic neurosis, this may be accurate enough; when yoked to Freud's universalizing proclivities—to the idea that we're all 'structurally' traumatized—it becomes not just ahistorical in its tendency toward abstract universals, but *antihistorical* in its emphasis upon the atemporal structure of human time. (269)

Yet to assert that a particular trauma persists through time, insistently returning and replaying itself, is not necessarily to take an "atemporal" or "antihistorical" stance, nor is it to "dehistoriciz[e] the experience of time itself" (269). Indeed, Forter's position here curiously seems to betray an unvoiced assumption that "human time" and "history" are finally and exclusively linear and progressive; otherwise, his opposing of "development" to "reprisal," "change" to "recurrence," and "temporal movement" to "the static circularity of myth" would make little sense. To my mind, one of the virtues of the Freudian-Caruthian model of trauma is precisely its recognition that time and history need not follow such a straightforward path, and that, relatedly, certain social phenomena—slavery, the racism to which it gives rise, or blackface minstrelsy, for instance—may not resolve themselves at the close of one historical era but persist, endure, and repeat themselves through time. To conceive of the history of an injury like slavery in this manner is not necessarily a "way of evading historical responsibility," as Forter would have it (281); rather, to do so is to come to terms with a crucial starting point for the work of redressing an event like slavery—an event, as Saidiya Hartman observes, that has yet to cease ("Time" 758).

15. In proposing that *Bamboozled* asks us to theorize an uncanny version of trauma, I am expanding on the important work of Gubar, Keeling, and Knight, all of whom perceptively note the complex ways in which past and present interact in *Bamboozled*. But none of these critics in any systematic way addresses the question of how we might think about these issues from the perspective of the film's main characters and according to its recurring tropes; and none employs the theoretical tools of psychoanalysis to think through the problems of trauma and temporality that the film presents.

In "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," which I encountered only after I had formulated my argument about Lee's film, Bill Brown offers a brilliant account of the material trappings of blackface minstrelsy that pervade *Bamboozled*. While Brown's contention in the concluding section of his essay that Lee's work depicts "the incapacity to differentiate the present from the past" comes close to my own thesis, and although he shares a theoretical interest in reading *Bamboozled* alongside Freud's conception of the uncanny, his primary focus remains on the human/thing binary, rather than the temporal dilemmas that the repetition of blackface forms in Lee's film engenders (204).

16. On this point, see Freud's "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through." Essential to Freud's thinking in this piece is the notion that the subject can only ever grapple with the past insofar as it manifests itself in the present; the past can never be accessed as such, that is, simply as past. For incisive readings of the central place of temporality in Freud's work, see Johnston; Talero.
17. My phrasing here draws on Borch-Jacobsen 45.
18. Foremost among these distinctions is, as Borch-Jacobsen notes, while Freud's theory presumes the existence of the ego in a primordial stage of psychic development prior to the "representational split introduced by the specular image," for Lacan "far from preceding the image, the ego is outside itself from the start, transported into its image" (46). In blending Lacan with Freud here, I am less interested in tracking the intricate chronologies of each of these thinkers' respective models of psychic self-constitution than I am in drawing together the temporal sophistication offered by Lacan's account of the mirror stage with the haunting familiarity that marks Freud's concept of the double in order to capture the temporal and psychic complexities of this key scene. On the complicated, and at times unclear, relation between these dimensions of Freud and Lacan, see Laplanche and Pontalis 251.
19. For details, see Lacan, "The Mirror Stage." See also Laplanche and Pontalis 250–52.
20. Of course, if we consider that it is Savion Glover, himself a black dancer, who is cast in the role of Manray/Mantan, then the line "I'm not playing myself no more" seems to signify on yet another—even more literal—level, raising the troubling question of what differentiates Glover's own identity as a performer from his part in the film. On the way in which the history of minstrelsy perhaps inevitably pollutes any black performance in public, see Eric Lott's comments in "Minding the Messenger" 12–13.
21. For an incisive account of the Lacanian gaze to which my thinking here is indebted, see McGowan, who also offers a brief analysis of *Bamboozled* in the context of his treatment of the politics of racial fantasy in Lee's work more generally (49–55).
22. My reading here is influenced by Goldberg, who analyzes the paradoxical manner by which the "terms of racial fabrication are . . . reproduced in the expression of resistance" (53).
23. To be sure, the Mau Maus' politics and violent actions are not valorized by the film; as Elam aptly characterizes them, the Mau Maus "represent a vacuous activism, an oppositionality gone awry" (358–59).
24. As Berlant contends, "A traumatic story is always interminable—that is what makes it traumatic" (32). See also Laub.
25. On the archive on which Lee draws in this montage, see Wallace.
26. For Wallace this montage is a significant shortcoming of the film. As she argues, "All of these images which show black people in a comedic light are absolutely interchangeable as long as we're looking ridiculous in some way" ("Minding the Messenger" 16).
27. As Mitchell puts it, in questioning "anyone's right to blackface by applying it to the wrong faces at the wrong time," the film is "either far too late or too early for its audience" (307).
28. In adopting the label "New Historicism" as shorthand for a diverse set of reading practices that share an attention to the cultural and material dimensions of the production and circulation of texts, I realize it would be reductive to posit a single definition of this mode of reading. Nonetheless, I think my generalization about the centrality of synchronic historical contextualization to this methodology is fair. For the various ways of defining, and debates surrounding, the New Historicism, see Veerer.
29. Similarly, Jeffrey Insko notes that, by virtue of its insistence upon "the proposition that texts 'belong' to particular moments in time," this manner of historicizing "must also posit that moment's individuality, its difference—its 'otherness'—in relation to earlier or later moments in time" (182). For further interrogations of the synchronic premises of New Historicism, see Coviello; Dimock.
30. For important treatments of the relationship between temporality and blackness in the United States that have informed my thinking, see Hanchard; Johnson; and Reichardt.
31. White's critique of *Bamboozled* is exemplary of this kind of charge against Lee's film. On complaints about Lee's "excess" more generally, see McGowan 49–50.
32. On the question of the future of race in America as it manifested itself in the 1990s, see Berlant 175–220. For more recent treatments of the topic, see Eng, and, from a slightly different perspective, Hollinger.
33. To be fair, amidst his repeated proclamations that America has achieved a "new beginning" with the election of Obama, Lee does remark that we must remind ourselves that "400 years of slavery" "built this country," and if we haven't adequately worked through that reality, Lee asks, "how are we going to be able to deal with everything that came behind it"? It is not clear, however, how Lee squares these comments with his other statements in the interview, particularly his proposal that history should now be conceived in terms of a "BB/AB" divide (Before Barack/After Barack).

34. For some important works that have already begun to take up this task, see Farley; Hartman, "The Time of Slavery"; Holland, "The Last Word on Racism"; and McCarthy.

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