"In the Light of Likeness - Transformed"

Williams, Dana A.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28292

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1152526
I remember the first time I heard the name Leon Forrest. It was in a graduate seminar titled Studies in the African American Novel taught by Eleanor W. Taylore at Howard University, and select novels Toni Morrison edited as senior editor at Random House focused our study. Forrest, of course, was one of only a few such novelists whose books were edited by Toni Morrison. While I was familiar with the works of two of these authors—Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara—I had never read any of Leon Forrest's fiction. On the day we were scheduled to discuss his first novel, There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden, I remember gathering a stack of notes that resembled a jigsaw puzzle. Despite having read the novel twice in less than seven days and having started over a number of times, I was convinced I had somehow missed some pages or skimmed over some crucial information that would help bring logic to this experimental text. I was also convinced that I would be forced to sit quietly through this particular session, since I knew I would be unable to articulate the text's meaning to myself or to anyone else. Quite simply, I was hopeful that after that class period, this man, Leon Forrest, and his novel would regress peacefully into the recesses of my mind, never to return with their difficulty again. But through Nathaniel-like self-discovery, disguised as guidance from a professor (who is a scholar by trade but an artist in spirit and in truth), by the end of the class period, the artistry of Leon Forrest had taken over my imagination. I did not know it then, but I now know that I was drawn to him because he wrote beautiful fiction that contributed to the sustenance and the growth of black culture and black life. The pages that follow grew out of that course and out of my appreciation for meaningful African American literature. The artistry Leon Forrest's novels exhibit is among this literature's greatest sustaining forces.

I am grateful for financial support for this project from the Ford Foundation and from the Council on Research in the College of Arts and Sciences at Louisiana State University. For their morale, encouragement, and support, I thank John Lowe, John Cawelti, Merle Drown, Sandra Richards, and Marianne Duncan Forrest. For the many conversations
about spiritual agony, religion, and black spirituality which so heavily inform my reading of *There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden*, I must thank the true Spirit people I am glad to call friends: Eric Walters, D. Stephen Lewis, Carl Lashley, and Joan McCarley, and D. Mitchell Ford, who introduced me to James Cone and black theology.

For offering fruits of the black sisterhood in the academy, I thank Saundra McGuire, Tara T. Green, Angelyn Mitchell, Cherron Barnwell, Tracey Walters, Tiwanna Simpson, and Katrice Albert. For his most astute critiques of black ideologies in this book and elsewhere and for his incredible selflessness with his ideas and his time, I am grateful for my friendship with John V. White, who is a literary and cultural critic in the disguise of a law professor. I also thank Lawrence P. Jackson for sharing with me his intellectual curiosity and for constantly raising the bar of expectation and excellence.

A number of people willingly read any number of drafts of this book. For ultimately making this a better book, I gladly thank Merle Drown, John Cawelti, Angelyn Mitchell, and James A. Miller. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my 1998 dissertation committee at Howard University for guiding me so graciously, so I thank two of the sharpest African Americanists I know, Jennifer Jordan and Eleanor W. Traylor, and Thorell Tsomondo and the late John M. Reilly, who helped shape my thought process about ways to approach great literature.

Finally and most importantly, I thank my family—my parents, Thomas and Zola Williams; my sisters, Gia, Jann, and Tommi—and my friends, especially Marc McKayle, Sonya Sims, Adeyinka Smith, and Kim Walk for their constant love and support.