"In the Light of Likeness - Transformed"

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Leon Forrest was born January 8, 1937, in Chicago’s Cook County Hospital to Leon and Adeline (Green) Forrest. Both his formative and adult years as a writer were heavily influenced by his parents, who were talented amateur artists in their own rights. Though he was primarily a bartender for the Santa Fe Railroad, the elder Leon was also a musician/songwriter who had a number of his songs recorded, while Forrest’s mother wrote short stories, though she never had any of them published. Their greatest influence on Forrest in terms of his writing, however, has more to do with their religious and ancestral backgrounds than their creative desires.

A Mississippi-born mulatto who never knew his white father, the elder Leon seemed to the younger constantly in search of something to fill the void left in his life by the absence of his father. And while most of Forrest’s characters suffer from motherlessness, not fatherlessness, the issue of familial connections or the lack thereof nonetheless dominates his works. His father’s family was Protestant, as was typical of the Mississippi Negro. And the influence of the Protestant faith, particularly the folk preacher and gospel music, is evidenced throughout Forrest’s fiction. As a choir member at Chicago’s Pilgrim Baptist Church and director of its youth choir, the elder Leon was a part of black church history—quite probably without being aware of it. The church’s pastor, C. J. Austin, went on to become one of the most renowned preachers in the black Baptist tradition, and Thomas Dorsey, who served as the church’s musical director, is easily recognizable as one of the premier gospel songwriters and composers of his time. As gospel music was not widely accepted in black Baptist traditions upon its inception, particularly in churches with a large middle-class population, the fact that Dorsey was welcomed in Pilgrim Baptist speaks to the church’s willingness to accept change, transformation, and growth. Undoubtedly, its liberalism and its awareness of the need to find ways to
blend the sacred and the secular for the purpose of salvation had some impact on both father and son, since much of the younger Forrest's fiction makes a similarly liberal attempt.

Forrest's mother, Adeline Green Forrest, was a New Orleans Creole whose family was Catholic and whose Creole background exposed Forrest to the interracial tension that existed between darker- and lighter-skinned blacks. He explores this tension briefly in *There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden*, in his depiction of the character Uncle Dupont, who passes for white on occasion and who refuses to allow darker-skinned Negroes such as Jamestown Fishbond to attend what Nathaniel mockingly refers to as a *mulatto-purity party*. Unlike most of his maternal relatives, Forrest did not attend Catholic school. However, he did attend weekly catechism classes in order to receive his confirmation. And as much as the preaching and music of his father's Baptist faith later influenced his writing, the ritualism of his mother's Catholic faith had a similar effect. Thus, from two different denominations, Forrest garnered religious influence and utilized it throughout his writing.

Forrest's "aunt," Lenora Bell, also lived with the family during his early years, and her "magical" ability to transform ordinary pieces of cloth into extraordinary garments influenced Forrest as well. Recognizing transformation and reinvention as an African American cultural attribute, Forrest adopted from his seamstress aunt the ability to add creative imagination to an object and, subsequently, to transform it into something more spectacular than the original. Forrest also recognized Lenora Bell's love of reading and her storytelling abilities as an influence on him as a writer, and he recreated her character in the form of Bella-Lenore Boltwood in *The Bloodworth Orphans*. Notably, Lenora Bell was not actually a blood relative of the family, but she had raised Adeline Green and helped to raise Forrest. So Nathaniel's discovery that he is not actually a blood relative of Sweetie Reed in *Two Wings to Veil My Face* and the pattern of orphans that recurs throughout the sagas was also at least partially influenced by Forrest's relationship with Lenora Bell.

Similarly, Forrest's maternal aunt, Maude White, took in orphans from time to time through the Catholic Home Bureau, and he cites this familial compassion as one that forced him to think about the crisis of the American family. Forrest's paternal great-aunt, Maude Richardson, was influential in Forrest's life and in his writing as well. He frequently spent weekends with Maude Richardson, who taught Bible classes and who reinforced in him his father's Protestant faith. Though she and her husband migrated from Greenville, Mississippi, to Chicago during the Great
Migration, they took with them a southern ethos with which they combined urban Chicago life. She also blended with this her Baptist and Methodist faith to create for herself an ideology that ensured her survival. Many of Forrest’s characters privilege this idea of integration, and he recreates Maude and her husband in *Meteor in the Madhouse* as Forrester and Gussie Mae Jones, the couple who had migrated to Chicago from Mississippi many years earlier but who still keep their southern patch of vegetables in the backyard and beds of flowers in the front yard in spite of the fact that they are surrounded by Forest County slums. Though they are uneducated, they know how to tap into a number of different sources to maintain their sanity, and they know how to reinvent themselves to make a way out of no way.

As a child, Forrest attended the all-black Wendell Phillips Elementary School, where he gained a sense of pride for his culture from teachers who exposed him to black history and black writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Richard Wright, and W. E. B. DuBois. In an interview with Kenneth Warren, Forrest acknowledges the significance of attending an all-black public school—not just because he learned to be proud of his heritage but also because it kept him from being limited to and by an indoctrinated Catholic-school perspective. From 1951 to 1955, Forrest attended the newly integrated Hyde Park High School near the University of Chicago. This transition—from an all-black grade school experience to one where he was one of only a few black students in a predominantly white high school in his freshman year—was one he seemed to make fairly well. During this time, a number of his teachers at Hyde Park High, along with members of his family, encouraged him to write. And his ability to function well and competitively in an interracial environment undoubtedly enhanced both his view of the world and his confidence.

Following high school, Forrest attended Wilson Junior College from 1955 to 1956, and from 1956 to 1957 he attended Roosevelt University. In 1960, he enrolled in the University of Chicago, but he was drafted into the U.S. Army later that year. After completing basic training, he became a public information specialist while touring in Germany, where he served for two years. He returned to Chicago in 1962 and reenrolled at the University of Chicago, where he began taking creative writing courses and occasionally sat in on Ralph Ellison’s lectures. At the University of Chicago, Forrest met Perrin Lowrey, a liberal white southerner who was an authority on Faulkner. It is Lowrey, in fact, whom Forrest credits with exposing him to the limitless possibilities of the folk preacher. And it was also around this time and under Lowrey’s influence that Forrest moved
away from his desire to be a poet and a playwright and moved toward focusing on being a novelist.

While taking classes at the University of Chicago, Forrest also worked at 408 Liquors, his mother's bar and liquor store. He re-created and transformed many of the voices, people, and stories from this experience in Divine Days. Like Forrest, Joubert, the novel's focalizer, has just returned home after a two-year military tour of duty, and he works in a bar while pursuing a career as a journalist to please his family, but he also pursues his dream of becoming a writer to fulfill his passion. But Forrest's world—like Nathaniel's in There Is a Tree—was shaken completely when his mother died of cancer in August 1964. She was only forty-five years old. One month after her death, Forrest moved to the Avon, a rooming house occupied by different kinds of artists, and began to pursue his writing career much more seriously. Months later, Forrest experienced another devastating loss when Lowrey, now his friend and mentor, was killed in an automobile accident. And though Forrest did not meet Ellison, who was a friend of Lowrey's, until some years later, a eulogy Forrest published upon Lowrey's death caught Ellison's attention.

From 1964 to 1968, Forrest wrote for local community weekly newspapers including the Woodlawn Booster, the Englewood Bulletin, and the Woodlawn Observer. The last was the voice of the Woodlawn Organization, which was one of Saul Alinsky's community action groups headed by Leon Finney Jr. This experience kept him aware of the racial tension that plagued the city but allowed him to release himself from it through newspaper articles rather than in his fiction. Similarly, his experience as a contributor to and editor of Muhammad Speaks, the official news organ of the Nation of Islam, allowed him to write about racial injustices as nonfiction by day while he explored the spiritual agony of man through fiction by night.

In 1966 Forrest's first short story, “That's Your Little Red Wagon,” was published in Blackbird, a literary magazine that published only a few issues. Ultimately, the piece became a part of There Is a Tree, which was not published in its first form until some years later in 1973. It was also in 1966 that Forrest met noted University of Chicago anthropologist Allison Davis, whose work on black youth and on class disparities between races was seminal in sociology circles. Davis's awareness of the nuances of race and culture certainly had an impact on Forrest as an observer of culture and as a writer. This is evidenced in his eulogy to Davis, where Forrest writes of his friend's “epiphanies of eloquent insight,” and of how, even when he disagreed with Davis, he “often found [him]self, months, or years later, hearing the echo of
Allison’s voice, and seeing the truth of his wisdom; reflecting an especially clear-eyed focus, an oracle-like rendering of a dreaded truth, or a delicately renewing perception” (Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 255).

In November 1967 Forrest’s three-act play *Theatre of the Soul* was performed at Parkway Community House in Chicago, but it was never published or reviewed. Because he began to focus on fiction in the years that followed, it was not until he wrote *Re-Creation*, a one-act verse play, which T. J. Anderson set to music, that playwriting resurfaced publicly in Forrest’s career. *Re-Creation* was presented at Richard Hunt’s studio in Chicago in June 1978. In 1982 Forrest again collaborated with Anderson, writing the libretto for *Soldier Boy, Soldier*, an opera composed by Anderson. *Soldier Boy, Soldier* was produced at the University of Indiana at Bloomington from October to November, receiving unfavorable reviews, though most criticism of the libretto commended its underlying focus on the forgotten black Vietnam veteran while condemning its subplot of the love triangle, which allegedly overshadowed the former and more important theme.

As he worked to hone his talents as a creative writer, Forrest continued to contribute articles to *Muhammad Speaks*, where he was an associate editor under Richard Durham, a non-Muslim Marxist thinker who expanded Forrest’s ideological base, if only marginally, from 1969 to 1972, when Forrest became managing editor of the weekly after Durham’s retirement. It was, in fact, through *Muhammad Speaks* that Forrest met Ellison in 1972, when he interviewed the author for the paper, and it was also through a contact at *Muhammad Speaks* that he was introduced to an editor at Holt, Rinehart, which had just published Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. Ultimately, the editor at Holt, Rinehart referred Forrest to Morrison, who was then an editor at Random House.

Just weeks after he married the former Marianne Duncan on September 25, 1971, Forrest met with Morrison in New York while reviewing a play by Mario van Peebles for *Muhammad Speaks*. Under Morrison’s editorship and through her recommendation to the other editors at Random House, Forrest’s first novel was published in May 1973. Endorsed by Saul Bellow and introduced by Ralph Ellison, *There Is a Tree* gave Forrest the confidence he needed to finally pursue creative writing full time, so he resigned as managing editor of *Muhammad Speaks* on the eve of the novel’s publication. In June of the same year, after his friend Jan Carew introduced him to the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University in Evanston, Forrest accepted an associate professorship at the university. In 1985 he became chair of the Department of African American Studies there, a post he held until 1994.
During his tenure at Northwestern, Forrest, of course, continued to publish novels that examined contemporary African American life and to teach courses that examined themes ranging from families in American literature to spiritual agony in world literature and which, inevitably, influenced his writing. But even as he “read the broadest library” to master and reshape the techniques he found useful, his ultimate desire, he tells Charles Rowell, was to take them “back to the story” of his people (Forrest and Rowell, 353). Thus, even as Forrest acknowledges the influence of other traditions on his fiction, he often reinvented them in terms of black culture. This attraction to other cultures and traditions as sources he could reinterpret in terms of black experiences is perhaps why Forrest found little about the black aesthetic useful. To Forrest, the black arts movement, which argued for the black aesthetic, seemed segregationist. And because his writing escaped the bounds of the aesthetic in the broadest kinds of ways, “[s]elling Random House on Forrest’s novels,” according to Morrison, “was very hard at a time when the ‘dumbing down’ of novels was taking hold” (quoted in Dodge, 17).

Even so, Forrest was careful not to downgrade the black arts movement, despite its obvious limitations, because it created the need for a middle ground between a black aesthetic and a white aesthetic, which is where his works rests. And he also greatly admired the work of Sterling Plumpp, who came out of the Chicago black aesthetic. Yet Forrest was very clear that he was ideologically opposed to the black aesthetic and that he would never have gained acceptance into the movement even if he had tried. Instead, he attempted to do that which the aesthetic too often avoided—to use black cultural traditions to connect the racial, ideological, and political reality of African American life with other traditions of soul-searching fiction both as a reflection of the African American tendency to make things anew and as an attempt to infuse African American experiences into American and broader literary traditions.

Interestingly, during much of the period that constituted the black arts movement, Forrest was writing politically oriented articles for community weeklies and for *Muhammad Speaks*. Under Durham’s editorship, *Muhammad Speaks* catered to a largely non-Muslim readership and gave priority to “the crisis of black America, the economic tragedies facing the Third World, and [. . .] the ways of dealing with the vestiges of colonialism around the globe” (Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 88) rather than to exclusively Muslim or Nation of Islam issues. Thus, Forrest’s awareness of the racial implications of the period’s politics—both locally and globally—was keen, and as a journalist, he had the freedom to talk about the hard
issues in a way that was, perhaps, unavailable to other fiction writers. He tells Rowell of the relevance of his experience as a journalist to his career as an author:

I had the advantage of working at papers where I could get out a certain type of heat and protest and anger, and I could come home to write at night and think more in terms as a fiction writer [. . . .] Then there was a benefit of just learning how to write a good sentence or a good paragraph at a paper. One of my chores at Muhammad Speaks was to put the whole paper together each week, and organize it [. . . .] I found that organizing principle also helps with my own writing and fiction. How am I going to put this story together? How am I going to put this paper to bed? All these things were a benefit to me that I’ve used over the years. Also to be around Muslims, and yet not be a Muslim. I’ve written about Muslims in my novels as well. (Forrest and Rowell, 355)

Notably, his depictions of Muslims in the novels range from straightforward, like Saltport X in The Bloodworth Orphans, to allusive like W. W. W. Ford, who appears more or less as a trickster in the Bloodworth trilogy but who is clearly a mocking spoof of W. D. Fard of the black Muslim tradition in Divine Days. In an interview with Keith Byerman, he confesses why he blatantly mocked and used Fard as a base on which to build his own comic and demonic trickster figure Ford:

There’s the actual closeness in both stories, both the story that we know of Fard and my Ford, to manipulation and mystery—the intrigue and perhaps even a sense of the closeness that so many religious figures have to the magician and to the trickster. . . . So then I take Ford (and the tradition) a step further and have him a hermaphrodite who keeps coming back again and again. Of course, we only see manifestations of his maleness. He’s a stud. He’s wearing all these different masks, and actually what we have left of Fard is a series of masks of interpretations. (Forrest and Byerman, 444)

In the essay “Elijah” in The Furious Voice for Freedom (a reprint of Relocations of the Spirit), it also becomes clear that at least part of Ford’s character is also inspired by Elijah Muhammad, who referred to himself as the Messenger of Allah and who was, for years, the leader of the black Muslims in the Nation of Islam. Clearly, the idea of the “lost-founds,”
which Forrest re-created in the form of literal and figurative orphans in the Forest County sagas, was inspired by Muhammad’s concept of the “spiritually famished flock of lost/found” Africans who lived in America. A masterful storyteller and myth creator, Muhammad, according to Forrest, was always aware of his target audience’s beliefs, limitations, possibilities, vulnerabilities, and tendencies; thus, he manipulated this sharp sense of awareness to make his re-creation as plausible as possible. Muhammad knew that “the way to create the new was really through a cunning transformation of the old” (Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 67), a technique Forrest and his characters adopt. Like Ford in *Divine Days*, Elijah, according to Forrest, played all roles in the creation of [his] nation. He was a trickster both in the sense of the magician, and in the spirit of the trickster as demon. He took on the role of playwright of his own play, “The Recreation of the Blackman,” raiding the Bible and the Koran, like Shakespeare raiding Ovid, and Joyce soaking up the *Odyssey*. (96)

Subsequently, Forrest raided Muhammad’s myths and re-created both character and concept as Ford.

In spite of his apparent mockery of Elijah Muhammad and his disdain for Muhammad’s shameless manipulation of his followers, especially Malcolm X, Forrest frequently commended Muhammad for the discipline he instilled in his flock, particularly as it related to the group’s abstinence from drugs and violence, and for Muhammad’s ability, however misplaced, to create a mythology that validated black humanity. This mythology, however, had its shortcomings in Forrest’s opinion, especially its denial of all things *Negro*. Although the African American had been stripped of his African culture during the early years of slavery, Muhammad advocated that he be stripped again, but this time of his newly adopted Western cultural tendencies. Thus, all forms of *Negro* culture, including those the African American had created himself, were repudiated. This narrowness was as unappealing to Forrest as the narrowness of the black aesthetic, and he makes this clear throughout his culturally integrative fiction but especially in *Divine Days*, where a character repeatedly proclaims that “it is the *Negro* that saves us.” And it is the *Negro* that saves Forrest as a writer, for as he notes, it is African American culture that serves as the springboard for his imagination and for his fiction.

Easily one of the most profound *Negro* influences on Forrest’s writing is black music. From the spiritual to the blues and from jazz to gospel music,
black music provided Forrest with inspiration, form, and style. Two vocalists who were perhaps the greatest inspiration to him were Mahalia Jackson and Billie Holiday. Because he believed that part of what was missing in African American literature during the time he was struggling to become a writer was the spiritual agony the African American faced, Mahalia Jackson's incantations were artistically inspiring to him. Writing on the cusp of the black arts movement, where blackness was celebrated and glorified, Forrest found himself struggling with ways to articulate the less celebration-worthy and glorious aspects of African American life until he heard Mahalia singing “Didn’t It Rain?” He confesses:

Mahalia was saying that I was lucky to have a spiritual embattlement to write about... to sing about. But how did she know that I wanted to be a singer of the language—in the tradition of her majestic self and the Negro Preacher. Had she read a draft of one of my ranting revisions—in a language not even a mother could love. (29)

He goes on to write that Mahalia’s singing told him that “the world would hate him if Jesus changed his name.” In essence, he had to be who he was and who he wanted to be, even if that meant departing from the more popular, more dominant, and more commercially successful black aesthetic. What he was interested in more than anything was expressing the spiritual agony of the soul. It was the same personal agony he experienced upon his mother’s death at a young age and the same communal agony that destroyed so many artistic geniuses, such as Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday. It is through Mahalia’s art, then, that he realized and accepted that “the only way to get to heaven is to die.” He, too, would have to pay his dues:

She showed me one meaning of a mountain I’m still trying to climb.
Told me I would have to stand all alone by myself; for in the end the artist is constantly transforming himself again and again out of the chaos of his soul. . . . My one problem was—to find a brand new way of singing. (30)

On the stage appears Billie Holiday, singing “Strange Fruit.” Forrest’s love for Billie Holiday’s art is best exemplified in his “Solo Long-Song: For Lady Day,” where he expresses not only admiration for her work but a very clear understanding of what it is she does with her voice, her band, and her audience. There Is a Tree, in fact, takes as one of its
epigraphs lyrics from Lady Day’s “Strange Fruit.” Forrest frequently acknowledged that he was “artistically bred more on music than books” and that he was “weaned on Billie Holiday’s music” (344). So it is not surprising, then, that his first novel was his own “attempt to play out Lady Day’s most haunting and memorable long-song [. . .] in narrative form” (345). The lynching/dismemberment ritual in the section “The Vision” is obviously inspired by the song. But, as Forrest notes,

the character of Jamestown reveals a keening, haunting, engagement with Holiday’s song, in the early days of his own evolvement. And Jamestown’s sister, Madge Ann Fishbond renders up a monologue about her life, which seems, upon reflection, pitched out of the muted memory of Holiday’s remembering art. (395)

Holiday’s influence on Forrest as writer is not, however, limited to that of inspiration; it transcends to the point of artistry. The eloquence she achieved on stage, the mesmerizing effect she had on her audience, he desired to achieve on paper. And one of the ways to accomplish this was to borrow from Lady Day the art form that shaped her vocalization—jazz and its tendency to transform and to revise all with which it comes in contact. When referring to Lady Day, Forrest calls her transformative powers her “reading of a lyric,” which she acknowledges in Lady Sings the Blues as her sustaining life force. The freedom—the demand—to reinterpret a song from night to night, from year to year was, to her, the difference between an exercise or a drill and music. From Lady Day and from black music generally, Forrest adopts this tendency toward reinvention or transformation.

As Forrest was acutely aware, all black music, not just jazz, embraced some level of reinvention or reinterpretation, and he drew upon all of these traditions to enhance his writing. In his unpublished lecture notes he writes that the spiritual or the sorrow song is perhaps the New World African’s first artistic attempt at reinvention. Displaced from their homeland, these Africans in America recast biblical events to place themselves within a new tradition that acknowledged their humanity and their worth. Even in its simplest form, the spiritual is reinventive in that it is a retelling of a biblical story in the vernacular so that it gains social and religious—literal and figurative—significance. To enhance its dramatic form, Forrest notes, creators of the spirituals drew from whatever sources they found useful, both the Old and the New Testament. Consequently, “Job and Joshua and Jesus and Ezekiel may be found in the same song, along with a twentieth-century train that carries the sanctified home” (Forrest, unpublished
notes). In this same tradition, Forrest retells stories, draws from whatever sources are available (to increase his dramatic form), and uses vernacular experiences and expressions to lead his reader to the point where he or she can offer a response to his literary call.

Eventually, even reinvention of the spiritual takes place, and gospel music emerges. Gospel shares the tradition of religion with spirituals, but it gains distinction through what Forrest acknowledges as style improvisation. Ironically, many traditionalists objected to gospel music’s tendency toward improvisation, though it shares this tendency, even if only at a basic level, with the spiritual. In gospel music, the traditional spiritual is the mere skeleton of a song that may be improvised on. What was probably most attractive about this impulse to Forrest is its sometimes indefinable blend of the sacred and the secular. Forrest’s exposure (even if only vicariously through his father) to gospel great Thomas Dorsey likely had some impact on him as an artist. Throughout his lecture notes and even in The Furious Voice, Forrest speaks of Dorsey’s genius with reverence and admiration with Dorsey. As the piano player at Forrest’s father’s church, Forrest almost certainly saw traditional spirituals being transformed into gospel music, and he heard the influence of the blues in this emerging tradition.

In fact, Forrest notes that gospel music emerges out of the constant reengagement of men like Dorsey with the secular or blues world and their use of this influence on their music when they returned to the church:

Rev. Dorsey [. . .] was a blues pianist and a composer for a long time; and this base enriched and deepened the kind of music he composed, and he transformed the refinements of the spiritual into a music that fitted the more angular needs of an awakening people, hungry-hearted for a dialogue in song which captured both their secular and their spiritual sense of life, as agony and wonder. (Forrest, Furious Voice, 13)

Gospel music’s greatest influence on Forrest as a writer, then, has to do with this very integration, since, as he tells John Cawelti, it was the only music that could express the “growing complexity of black American life in the North” after the Great Migration (Forrest and Cawelti, 307). And for a writer interested in expressing the experiences of his Chicago/Forest County–based characters—particularly their racial experiences, which are heavily informed by southern traditions and a southern past and in finding a way to articulate the tension between the sacred and the secular, the sexual and the spiritual, the past and the present—gospel music offers an
adequate impulse to do so. It did the very thing Forrest was attempting to do with his fiction: It found a way to bring together, in peaceful harmony, the secular and the spiritual African American experience.

A number of Forrest’s characters, however, find little, if any, affinity with religious traditions. For them, the blues carries the impulse that best sustains them. As Forrest notes, in the blues, there is no faith in Jesus to get you through; instead, you get through by your “wit and your wiles,” through bravery and humor, and with your sexual skills. Recognizing the blues as a metaphor for “a condition of the heart, of pain visited upon body and soul,” Forrest taps into this art form to create a blues voice in *Two Wings to Veil My Face*; he uses its humor to create the comedic and satirical aspects of *Divine Days*; and he confesses that a number of blues songs and artists inform both plot and characters in *The Bloodworth Orphans*.

The very first scene that I wrote for the novel *The Bloodworth Orphans* evolved a blues man—Carl Rae. I was quite swept up with the lines from Lightnin’ Hopkins’s blues song “I’ve Had My Fun.” I found particularly haunting the lines “On the next train sound/You can look for my clothes home. . . . But if you don’t see my body, Mama, all you can do is mourn.” These lines unleashed within me the saga of an aimless drifter who gains a species of honor on his deathbed, wailing his monologue as odyssey home: this becomes his attempt at transformation of the self, as it were, even as it is rendered up from a garbage heap. (Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 26–27)

Like Carl-Rae in *The Bloodworth Orphans*, Hopkins Golightly, who appears in *Meteor in the Madhouse*, pays homage to Lightnin’ Hopkins and his transforming powers. Joubert’s fascination with Golightly, in fact, is that he expresses his agony and the racial discrimination against him through his music by reinterpreting “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which, ironically, celebrates the very American freedom he is denied because of race. Like the blues singer, Forrest searches for “words to express the condition of life and perhaps to change the landscape of it” (Forrest, unpublished notes).

While it is the blues singer whose “eternal search . . . is quite similar to that of the working novelist: to try to find true words to capture the ever-changing condition of life upon the highly vulnerable heart . . . a life which is essentially tied to rupture, chaos, celebration, agony, humor, and always trouble” (Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 25), it is the ordering power of jazz that has the most influence on the way Forrest structures his novels. Because so
many of his characters are orphaned and fragmented, the tendency of jazz to give order to otherwise unorderable chaos is a particularly appealing impulse. Presumably, Forrest lectured as effectively on black music as he did on creative writing; more than half of the lecture notes included in his papers archived at Northwestern are on black music. Granted, he drew his information from other sources, but he was no less personally knowledgeable of the historical, stylistic, and technical aspects of black music, particularly jazz. After detailing the evolution of jazz as it is known today, he notes its “certain salient elements”:

There is the element of melody. . . . In Western tradition there is the major scale and the minor scale. . . . Jazz is based on a version of the major scale. . . . But in jazz the variation goes this way, in the seven note scale—the third, fifth, and seven notes are lowered; then the scale becomes a jazz scale . . . and these notes are called Blue notes . . . (Modified three different times). . . .

Underneath the harmony of the song remains the same [ . . . ] The effect of the sound created when the modified melody of Blues Notes in combination with the harmony which is not changed, all of this goes to create this dissonant sound . . . which is the sound of jazz [ . . . ] They are searching for a sound in between which is a quarter-tone . . . the quarter sound appears to fall somewhere between the flatted-note, the blue-note and the traditional note underneath . . . this appears to be a hold-over from Africa. . . . (Forrest, unpublished notes)

He then notes, parenthetically, to read a passage from Ellison’s then unpublished *juneteenth*. Clearly, Forrest was aware of the possibility of transforming a musical impulse and its oral eloquence to fiction. Achieving that transformation is certainly among the most admirable features of his writing.

At least two factors are at play in this regard—his use of poetic language to recreate musical impulses on paper and the style with which he presents this language. The “magic of [his] writing,” Forrest tells Rowell, has to do with the poetry of language: “[ . . . ] I suppose that in the subterranean regions of my own psyche [ . . . ] I’ve wanted to create a poem on each page of my prose, and if I can do that then I’m close to this magic” (Forrest and Rowell, 342). As an author who literally read his prose aloud as he composed it, Forrest was overtly concerned with creating lyrical and musical phrasings. Thus, he borrows from a variety of oral traditions to achieve
such effects. As Bruce A. Rosenberg notes in “Forrest Spirits: Oral Echoes in Leon Forrest’s Prose,”

Forrest’s prose is multigeneric, more thoroughly so than that of most of his novelist contemporaries; it incorporates several generically stylistic levels of social and intellectual modes simultaneously. The novels are a salad of conventional narrative, black folk sermon, popular song and Spiritual, street slang, and idiom. [ . . . ] By this technique, he manages to tap into the varied strengths of several forms, extracting from each of those components what will reinforce the whole. His novels are thus more than novels. Part song, part spiritual, part record of oral performances, part sermon, part street speech—they exceed all of these constituents. (317)

This combination of “oral echoes” is then presented as the experiences of characters who speak everyday language and through a narrative style that is equally attracted to oral styles. The narrative style of There Is a Tree, for example, adopts the nonlinear and improvisational style of jazz, while Two Wings is structured in terms of Sweetie Reed’s blueslike storytelling of her family’s history. Forrest’s experiment with musical impulses to structure his narrative reaches its climax, however, with Divine Days. When Madhu Dubey questions whether Divine Days is modeled on “a jazz method of composition [ . . . ] to give shape to chaos without imposing a kind of reductive order on it,” he responds:

It is. Chaos is a great driving force in all life [ . . . ] I guess though that for me the first connection with jazz is that I will take just a fragment of a story, or a fragment of a character, or a confrontation, and then build on it, [ . . . ] riff on it like a jazz musician or a solo performer. So in fact a lot of scenes just start off with me working a little riff, and then that develops into a scene. As far as the larger thing goes, I always try to orchestrate a scene so that it starts off in one way, gets involved with some other things, and then comes back to that—a little fugue-like method. But I’m always trying both to orchestrate a scene and orchestrate the novel really, as well as do those individual solos. (Forrest and Dubey, 589)

Forrest also uses the jazz method of composition in a more specialized way in a number of scenes where he adopts Ellison’s idea of antagonistic cooperation. He likens the concept to multiple musicians participating in simulta-
neous improvisation where they “celebrate as they battle, cooperate as they harmonize, signify as they quarrel” (unpublished notes). He calls attention to two such scenes from *Divine Days* in the interview with Dubey:

One is the scene between Joubert and Reverend Roper [. . . ] they go back and forth like two jazz musicians trying to outblow each other or duel each other. Ultimately it would appear that this is what Ellison was talking about—there’s a lot of fun between the two men as they try to outdo each other in storytelling and these storytelling riffs are really like aspects of jazz. And the other scene that comes to mind is in the barbershop between Williemain and Joubert [. . . ] ultimately the reader will want to decide how these two set pieces, between Joubert and Roper, and between Joubert and Williemain, are similar and yet different. Those are two different jazz sets, you see. (599)

He acknowledges that this antagonistic cooperation occurs between texts as well, admitting that his quest is to outplay the masters he riffs on, quarrels with, and celebrates as he invokes their work and their artistry.

In addition to using jazz to structure his narrative (a technique I will examine later in this chapter, particularly as the idea of a jazz narrative relates to Forrest’s adaptation of Ellisonian modernism), Forrest uses two of its most basic concepts—improvisation and syncopation—to reflect the cultural attributes of his characters and to bring their experiences to the center of the American literary experience. Like jazz musicians, Forrest’s improvising characters are searching for a voice to articulate their experience and to promote their survival. Their use of syncopation—the absence of an expected beat or the stress upon a beat that is usually unaccented—created openings for new voices (unpublished notes). Similarly, Forrest’s voicing of Nathaniel’s agony in *There Is a Tree*, his return to a slave past and its articulation in a female voice in *Two Wings*, his investigation into the lives of orphans and “lost-founds” in *The Bloodworth Orphans*, and his inquiry into the complexity of the African American hustler in *Divine Days* all express elements of syncopation as Forrest gives voice to unexpected sources, placing stress upon lives and experiences that typically go unaccented. Ultimately, he captures these characters’ tendencies to improvise, to make a way out of no way, and then to find a voice that can articulate their experiences. Easily one of the figures in African American culture who best utilizes this technique is the folk preacher, a character who influences Forrest’s writing almost as much as black music does.
Notably, there need not be a large degree of distinction between these two influences. To re-create the oral eloquence of the preacher in the written word, Forrest frequently highlights how the folk preacher uses musical techniques, especially call and response, when rendering his sermon. As Forrest suggests, the “role of the congregation during a sermon is similar to that of a good audience at a jazz set—driving, responding, adding to the ever-rising level of emotion and intelligence. Ultimately, the preacher and the congregation reach one purifying moment, and a furious catharsis is fulfilled” (Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 36). In the same way, Forrest’s narratives, as recontextualized sermons, demand participatory responses from the reader, who must bring to the texts recollections of group memory and knowledge of Negro folklore, of biblical episodes, and of spirituals if he or she is to experience the narratives fully. Without this knowledge, one can still encounter the novels successfully, but ultimate appreciation of Forrest’s artistry requires that one be willing to participate in the texts and capable of connecting the masterful allusions and the numerous puns that he subtly deposits in the texts.

Aesthetically, one of the most attractive features of the sermon is its oratorical strength. But appealing as it may be, that strength is also the most challenging to replicate in the written word. No formatting specifications, regardless of detail and precision, can reveal the rhythms, the intonation, or the vibrancy of an oral performance. Yet Forrest openly accepts the challenge. He tells Cawelti:

> Throughout my work I’ve been fascinated with the eloquence of the preacher and with the idea of working my way from oral eloquence to written eloquence, linking that to the problems of identity, of religion, of politics, and culture in society and making it a springboard within my own culture. (Forrest and Cawelti, 302)

Without this springboard, Forrest tells Warren, his artistic life may not have survived since it was the folk preacher, the “bard of the race,” who “gave [him] voice into the conscience of the race” (Forrest and Warren, 77). Invocations of the folk preacher also provided for Forrest the opportunity to integrate religion into his fiction, which was central to his contention that “true literature is often profoundly religious” and to his artistic vision to add an essential though absent element to contemporary black fiction. Here again, Forrest’s mixed Catholic and Protestant background played a crucial role in his intellectual development. As a child, he grew up hearing the sermons of Rev. C. J. Austin, who was heralded by President Franklin
Delano Roosevelt as having “the greatest speaking voice of any public man in America” (Forrest and Cawelti, 310). So, Forrest’s ear for the nuances of the folk sermon had been trained since early boyhood. Add to this his frequent listening to tapes of the legendary Rev. C. L. Franklin (father of Aretha Franklin), and Forrest needed only to access his memory of those preacherly voices to transform them into the written word.

Forrest admits that just before he began to pursue his writing seriously, he was overwhelmed by so many art forms of performance and celebration within the black community that he questioned his ability to articulate in an innovative way the voices that plagued his imagination. It was not until Lowrey, who was fascinated by the art of the folk sermon, called his attention to the folk preacher that he realized that the Negro sermon was an ideal medium through which he could simultaneously investigate culture and distinguish himself as a writer. He replays to Rowell a hypothetical conversation about the significance of preachers to his writing:

“Look, I can’t be a preacher. I have no desire to be a preacher, but I know if I’m going to be a writer, an African American writer, I’ve got to deal with that black preacher; and to some degree, no one has dealt with it the way I want to.” So I’ve got to say, “I love Ellison because I knew him personally and loved his book, and was very much influenced by Faulkner; but I’ve got to beat those guys. I’ve got to go beyond them. And here’s an avenue to do it.” No one has really done very much, when you think about it, with the art of the folk preacher in our novels or on the stage. So I said, “ah, here’s a chance to make my way,” and of course it fit wonderfully well for me because I wanted to find avenues into the culture that had not been explored very much by other black writers. (Forrest and Rowell, 349)

Much in the same manner that he uses reinventive and improvisational techniques akin to black music, Forrest celebrates the preacher and his sermon for their ability to liberate a text from time-bound and authoritative restrictions and to transform the sermon from its limitations as oral biblical text to the lived contemporary African American experience. Both his narrators and his preachers appropriate larger historical truths as group memory to show their relevance to the contemporary moment. And when his ancestor-guided characters encounter values, beliefs, or experiences that threaten their survival, they act in the same manner as the musician or the folk preacher—they improvise. Joubert, for instance, in Divine Days, adopts from the folk preacher his rhetorical eloquence, the freedom
of narrative development, and a license to teach via reflection. Like the sermon, each of Joubert’s journal entries, which make up the structure of the novel, is open-ended. And like the preacher, who abandons ideas mid-sermon if they prove ineffective, Joubert abates many stories he deems irrelevant. Because they are presented as thoughts written spontaneously and in real time, the entries assume the position of speech acts; hence Joubert’s preacherly freedom to ramble throughout the novel’s 1,135 pages.

For Forrest, the preacher’s voice is an instrument of power that restores value to a people struggling to create and to structure the meaning of blackness. The sermon liberates the text of life that devalues blackness and recovers the vision and the voice of the ancestor to resist and to survive. The sermon, as a speech act, shapes history and restructures cultural memory. “The challenge before the black prose fiction writer”—a challenge Forrest accepts—“is to transform historical consciousness into art, to use it as a strategy for representation, and to merge it with the political as he or she presents the emergence of a self” (Hubbard, 19). The preacher and his sermon allow Forrest to achieve this end, and his characters who are in search of self are liberated from the despotism of everyday life through the language and the transforming power of religion. But the supreme achievement the preacher and the sermon afford Forrest is the provision of a vehicle to render the kind of thing he wanted so much for his own work—transformation from oral eloquence into literary eloquence.

Notably, Forrest’s invocation of both black music and the sermon contribute to an accurate characterization of the author as a modernist writer. As Cynthia Dobbs notes in her reading of Morrison’s Beloved as modernism revisited, the folk sermon—in this case, Baby Suggs’s—“displays central constitutive elements of [ . . . ] modernist poetics: a lyricism both constituted and disrupted by an attention to the historical ‘brokenness’ of human psyches, bodies, and stories” (565). Because of this “brokenness,” traditional language has limitations that can be compensated for only through unspoken utterances and, in some cases, through music.

More important than Dobbs’s analysis of the role of music and the sermon in modernism, however, is her articulation and application of what Paul Gilroy calls black modernism, which “can be defined precisely through its imaginative proximity to forms of terror that surpass understanding and lead back from contemporary racial violence, through lynching, towards the temporal and ontological rupture of the middle passage” (222). In short, for the diasporic African, slavery, not World War I, initiates modernism and its demand for a new ideology. Forrest makes a similar obser-
vation when he writes of slavery as the African American’s “Genesis Saga” (unpublished notes). Thus his characters, who are interested in reconstructing postslavery stability for themselves and their communities, must create strategies of survival that are inherently both modern and postmodern. And as Dobbs notes,

The radical new epistemologies of psychology and sociology necessitated by the nearly unthinkable atrocities of slavery [. . .] gave birth in African American culture to a radical suspicion of the normative modes of bourgeois realism, to a corresponding subversion of and play with aesthetic form, and to a thematic preoccupation with personal and cultural madness—the very stuff of what we call modernism. (563–64)

Craig Werner makes a similar assertion in Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse, where he seeks to extend the vocabulary of (post)modernism to better accommodate African American cultural traditions. Recalling W. E. B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk (1903) and its commentary on double-consciousness, Werner, like Gilroy, notes that African American culture explicitly addressed the concerns of modernism even before the advent of modernism as a theoretical tradition. As early as Charles Chestnut, Werner argues, the African American created expressive practices as intricate adjustments to a world fragmented by the communal experience of slavery and racial oppression. Understood from a DuBoisean perspective, then, the central problem confronted by Afro-American culture closely resembles that confronted by mainstream modernism. (186–87)

Forrest, following authors such as Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison, continues in that tradition of African American authors who utilize traditional modernism’s stylistic techniques but who modify its ideology to fit their artistic agendas and to accommodate their affinity with African American history and culture, both of which reflect the “expressive practices” and “intricate adjustments” African Americans made to a world fragmented by slavery and oppression.

To posit Forrest in the dual traditions of the African American modernists (Toomer, Hurston, Ellison, and Morrison) and the more traditional modernists (Joyce and Faulkner) whom he frequently acknowledged as either having influenced his writing or as attempting to achieve in their
fiction similar goals as he attempted to achieve in his, a review of these authors' interpretations of and attraction to modernism is in order, particularly as they relate to Forrest's representation of and affinity to modernism. As recent reexaminations of the literary movement suggest, modernism is today perhaps more indefinable than it has ever been. In terms of its approach to narrative, it is equally varied, though a number of techniques have come to be associated largely if not exclusively with modernism. Among them, nonexhaustively, are: the use of stream of consciousness in narratives; the abandonment of chronological or linear time and a subsequent adoption of spatialized and/or psychological time; a frequently corresponding abandonment of realist meaning and subsequent adoption of spatialized meaning, which is best articulated through juxtaposition, collage, or montage; a focus on language and an affinity with lofty language and difficult syntax; and the use of a central consciousness in lieu of an omniscient narrator. Modernism's (nonnarrative-specific) tendencies include (though are not limited to): an emphasis on archetypal characters (oftentimes as artists); a desire for its archetypal character/artist to fulfill himself as a moral being; an attraction to myth, often as an escape from history; a privileging of the primitive or natural over the cultivated or cultured; a view of the world as fragmented and devastated and of man as alienated by modernity; a desire for a heightened sense of consciousness or awareness; and a focus on expression rather than on unity, order, or coherence. At different points, each of the aforementioned authors characterized here as modernist adopts select combinations of the techniques and tendencies of modernism listed above.

As the most traditional modernist of these authors, Joyce has perhaps the greatest influence on Forrest's narrative style, particularly Forrest's first two novels. Influenced by the shift in narrative conception in Dickens's and Zola's novels, Joyce's modernism emerges in part as an attempt to move the novel beyond a naturalistic context to one that viewed sensibility as more important than sentiment (Lehan, 87). Joyce thus adopts the modernist commitment to aestheticism and seeks new ways to present modernist tendencies in narrative terms. Two of the techniques he uses to achieve this end are the superimposition of symbolism onto modernism and the spatialization of time. Believing that objects in nature unfold their meaning and that man achieves higher consciousness by experiencing epiphanies, Joyce preferred the use of symbols over literal objects to express his view of human nature and, conceivably, to encourage his reading audience to have similar experiences of self-discovery. He then complicates this symbolism by allowing the cyclical and/or simultaneous to preempt the
sequential or chronological. Add to this Joyce’s use of myth to layer his narrative, his highly stylized structure and difficult syntax, and the created form of consciousness that shapes *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, and we have high modernism at its best. Both of these texts especially influence *There Is a Tree* and *The Bloodworth Orphans*.

From modernism in general but Joyce’s *Portrait* especially, for example, Forrest adopts a central consciousness as protagonist or archetypal character. Nathaniel Witherspoon is the central consciousness who serves as the would-be protagonist of *There Is a Tree*. Much of what the reader experiences as events in the novel concerns Nathaniel’s attempt to come to grips with his mother’s death and is focalized through his consciousness. In a manner similar to the flow that characterizes *Ulysses*, *There Is a Tree* intertwines myth, folklore, and biblical stories and assumes a distinctly Joycean modernist posture. As Richard Lehan notes in “James Joyce: The Limits of Modernism and the Realms of the Literary Text,” “[t]he turn toward symbolic myth, cyclical history, primitive awareness, organic reality, and an aesthetic sensibility,” which Joyce helps initiate as modernist literature, “resulted in a shared belief of what a literary text should include” (99). Inseparable from modernism, especially as Joyce renders it, “were the twin beliefs in the power of human consciousness [. . .] to illuminate reality and to find in nature and natural process the meaning, symbolic and literal, that explains the nature of human existence” (99). *There Is a Tree* embraces both the literary technique of Joyce’s modernism—its difficult syntax, its obsession with language, and its use of psychological time and dreams to suggest the cyclical nature of life—and its ideology—a belief in human consciousness’ ability to illuminate reality and in man’s ability to find meaning in human existence through natural processes. The latter is perhaps why it is death, a most natural occurrence, that is the catalyst for Nathaniel’s journey toward self-discovery and why he is privy to others’ consciousness as sources of illumination of reality.

*The Bloodworth Orphans* is similarly influenced by Joycean modernism. As Lehan notes, in *Ulysses*, “a realistic plane of reference is symbolically held in place once a mythic structure has been superimposed upon it” (90). Like *Ulysses*, *Bloodworth Orphans* is shaped by myth, then layered with reality and governed by the supposition that the past and the present and different historical layers are superimposed on each other. As Cawelti points out in his introduction to the novel,

Forrest’s fictional world, like that of James Joyce, is a highly allusive one. Words and action continually allude to the legends and myths
of the Bible, to ancient Greeks, as well as to many other mythical sources [. . . .] Forrest’s novels not only frequently allude to legend and myth; their structures echo the archetypal patterns of ancient myth [. . . .] In *The Bloodworth Orphans* we find a recurrent use of the classical myths of Oedipus and Orpheus as well as the biblical legends of the flood and the crucifixion. (xii)

Even as this use of myth to structure the novel is especially influenced by Forrest’s study of Joyce, it has its own function and attraction to Forrest, and, notably, he moves beyond Joyce’s use of myth. First, by connecting contemporary African American experiences with ancient myths, Forrest highlights the relationship between the past and the present and returns to the theme of origins, which he invokes not only in the title of his first novel—*There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden*—but with its fictional interrogation of origins and beginnings. He then moves beyond Joyce’s use of myth as a structuring device by combining myth with folk culture and using jazz as the structuring device at the end of the novel to investigate survival techniques for his now mythic and archetypal characters.5 Ultimately, the result of organizing the novel structurally is the same for *Bloodworth Orphans* as it was for *Finnegans Wake*, which Joyce also organized structurally; as readers, “we lose our sense of foreground and are left with almost only background [. . . .] and what is abstractable from the events becomes more important than the events themselves” (Lehan, 98).6 Thus, even as *Bloodworth Orphans* is chock full of characters, we are not meant to identify as much with the characters as with what we learn from their experiences.

Like Joyce, Faulkner offered modernist inspiration to Forrest. In the sense that his fiction embraces many of the narrative techniques of modernism (including using difficult syntax, multiple perspectives, nonlinear narrative time, and principles of montage) and in the sense that it is critical of the social contexts out of which it emerges and about which it comments, Faulkner can be considered, among other things, a modernist writer.7 The cultural self-doubts characteristic of modernism become especially attractive to Faulkner as a white southerner, Richard Moreland argues, because of the South’s “history of defeat, poverty, and disillusionment” (21).

Like Forrest, Faulkner was deeply interested in the quest for origins, the relationship between family and personal identity, and the role of history in the contemporary moment. But the two authors differ in their approach to history as a meaningful way of negotiating the present. As Patrick
O’Donnell argues in “Faulkner and Postmodernism,” high-modernism tendencies reflect authors’ attempts to construct a world that will replace the lost world. Faulkner’s and Joyce’s modernism, O’Donnell contends, “partially resides in the negotiation of an essential contradiction between a rejection of the past and the inevitable repetition of the past in that very rejection” (33–34). Forrest’s characters, however, like most characters in African American modernist situations, are not at liberty to reject their pasts. The past too heavily influences their being for them to reject it successfully or for them to achieve transcendence of their agony, which, ironically, is caused largely by their personal and communal experiences with historical (and ongoing) oppression and discrimination. Instead of rejecting history and the past, they must move beyond it.

Because of this accepting approach to history, Forrest, as writer, moves beyond the critical limits modernism imposed on Faulkner’s fiction. Inevitably, Faulkner’s attempt to replace the lost world with a fictional or linguistic world reproduces the very world it attempts to abandon. Moreland articulates this thusly:

In performing [its] profoundly critical function [. . . ] Faulkner’s work also inhabits and represents much of the force, extent, and subtlety of the very same cultural and psychological currents it criticizes. It thereby represents the difficulties and limitations of its critique [. . . . The] realist dimension of Faulkner’s work also represents the limitations of critique by registering the power of dominant cultural currents to circumscribe, to shape, and even to motivate such cultural criticisms. Such critique, then, cannot simply replace, outflank, undercut, or frame representation [. . . . The] past may well be dead to belief, but it retains its haunting power. (22; italics in original)

This realization that the past retains its “haunting power” even when history is suppressed is one a number of African American modernist writers make and use to move traditional modernism beyond its limits of critique. I will return to this argument later in my discussion of the African American modernist writers (especially Morrison) who reinterpret modernism in ways similar to Forrest. But let us first take a closer look at the elements of Faulkner’s fiction Forrest adopts with much less modification.

As is characteristic of modernist writers, Faulkner uses biblical titles like Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses to suggest the mythical status of his narratives. Similarly, Forrest adopts biblical and cosmic titles for each of his narratives except one—The Bloodworth Orphans. There Is a Tree More
Ancient Than Eden, Two Wings to Veil My Face (referential also of a black spiritual), Divine Days, and Meteor in the Madhouse all, through their titles, illuminate the narratives’ tendencies to position African American experiences amongst broader biblical and mythical traditions. Faulkner makes a similar attempt to mythologize southern traditions as he combines southern folklore and myth. In doing so, he “retrieves the residual value of realism—its folklore, myth, and oral narrative epistemology” (Mellard, 475) and creates an innovative modernism of his own, one which “yoke[s] a traditional folk content to modernist technique” (477). Forrest’s selective use of realist and naturalist conventional devices—especially mimetic representation, which he uses to capture oral eloquence on the written page—similarly combines folk culture and modernist technique.

In an interview at the University of Kentucky with Cawelti’s students, Forrest speaks of Faulkner’s influence on his writing in terms of both style and content. A student comments: “I was very impressed by the sentence structure of your prose. I have noticed that it is more or less similar to Faulkner. Did you find yourself consciously using Faulkner’s style as a model?” (Forrest and Cawelti, 305). Forrest responds:

[ . . . ] Faulkner was certainly a strong influence, in general. [He] showed me a way of breaking open the sentence structure and opening it up so you could go for broke in it [ . . . ] Also, Faulkner’s sensitivity to black life in a general way and his understanding of some aspects of the complexity of these relationships [ . . . ] I think the best of Faulkner is involved with black life [ . . . ] Faulkner also is very helpful in terms of clues. You can mention what he did with Rev. Shegog’s sermon, for example. I have to go beyond that. There’s certainly this competition as Faulkner himself said, “The young writer if he is worth his salt, he wants to be the old guy.” (305–6)

In addition to all Forrest cites above, Faulkner’s use of the principles of montage also informs Forrest’s ability to “break open” a sentence and to create his jazz narratives.

In “The Montage Element in Faulkner’s Fiction,” Bruce Kawin willingly concedes that Faulkner probably used the principles of montage unknowingly. I similarly concede that Forrest was probably unaware of how film’s principles informed his narratives. But as Kawin notes, elements of montage were inevitably attractive to modernist writers not only because of film’s relationship to modernity but because montage represents the central anxiety of modernism—the belief “that the old, harmonious
world lay busted into fragments” (106). And while modernism did not search for tangible connections to restore these fragments to wholeness, it did search for a “conceptual space in which the fragments might cohere” (106). Faulkner was especially attracted to montage and its principles of juxtaposition, Kawin argues, because, among other things, it allowed for oxymorons, dynamic unresolution, rapid shifts in time and space, a continuous present, a dominant visual sense and photographic imagery, multiple narration, and a means of dealing with the ineffable (109, 124).

Montage is especially useful for the latter, since “[w]hen description A fails, and description B fails, one can hope that their juxtaposition will point toward C, the thing itself” (124).

In all of Forrest’s fiction, but especially in There Is a Tree and Two Wings, the ineffable plays a crucial thematic role. That he cannot find the words to express his agony and his confusion is a large part of what frustrates Nathaniel in There Is a Tree. Thus, his narrating consciousness adopts a visual sensibility and uses principles of juxtaposition to attempt to point to that which he cannot find words to express. The result is the jumbled syntax that informs the narrative and alienates the reader, but which is necessary to achieve the linguistic equivalent of experiences and emotions that are equally inconceivable and ineffable. Take the following passage from There Is a Tree, for example:

Lady day’s echo entering, revealing, telling, an instrument working out the burden of hypodermic death . . . strange . . . strange fruit and a long-denied ways from home. . . . or was it a caesarean creation in the furnace? or rebirth and why me/us . . . ? lady: you are my rock . . . prophetess . . . celebrant on ash-faced street ain’t no such thing as a shelter unshaken, or a crib untouched by raping death potent only its capacity to crumble, as we are thrown out of the world into the garbage can of the world, after the best is taken, sold, branded, taking our names along with our eyes, tongue, eyeteeth; hair; music; mothers; sisters; and sold for blood merchandise . . . brooding down billie’s strange fruit back back back, before it there in the basement/bar, as the needle resurrected her searching, tormented echo—echoing the blood upon the ocean of constant middle passage. . . .

This excerpted passage is one of the best examples of montage as used in Forrest’s fiction. The relationship between the similar and dissimilar juxtaposed shots, which fade in and out of the narration, is linked only through
the allusions Forrest seeks to present as representations of that which he is otherwise unable to articulate. But these connections are logically visible only after the source of the allusion is established. Just before the passage opens, Jamestown, Nathaniel's mentor of sorts, recalls the time he was accused of raping a woman (a crime that almost always resulted in lynching) when he was “potent only in [his] capacity to crumble.” Ironically, he is impotent because he has not yet recovered from a previous racist incident in which he was held under water until he nearly drowned. As this racial prejudice on an individual level fades out, racial prejudice, which invokes the Middle Passage, on a grander scale, fades in.

The narrating consciousness is listening to or contemplating Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” which is a song about the lynching of black men in the South. The song and the experience puts Jamestown in the mind of struggles, first his own and, eventually, those of the race. The idea of lynched black bodies hanging from trees in full bloom causes Jamestown to shiver and to wonder why the African American, a cesarean creation “birthed in the furnace of slavery,” is denied the natural process of blooming. He thinks first of the cruelty of the slave trade, where the best slaves are taken first, and all others are parcelled out into the “garbage can of the world.” This discarding of innocent souls again leads him to the Middle Passage, where humans were thrown out to sea because they were viewed simply as excess cargo. Without the benefit of montage and symbolism, Forrest would be unable to express the fullness of the feelings of oppression and discrimination Jamestown experiences both as an individual and as an African American. He cannot articulate description C, so he juxtaposes images and emotions as descriptions A and B in hopes of making C more expressive.

As one of the best examples of how Forrest's narrative structure enacts the act it is narrating, the structure of this passage adopts the intensity of violence it describes. Sentences end abruptly; the punctuation respects no rules of traditional mechanics; the subjects of sentences change with rapid violence. In other words, the sentence structure lacks the fluidity that Jamestown lacks. The passage also reflects the tension Jamestown must feel and shows how Forrest turns words into clashes of sensory images. We feel, we imagine, we experience the acts that cannot be narrated through realist description and must thus be expressed through images and symbols. Sweetie Reed in *Two Wings* and Joubert Jones in *Divine Days* encounter similar problems of linguistic limitation, though to a degree far less stifling than Nathaniel and Jamestown experience in *There Is a Tree*. But like Nathaniel and Jamestown, Sweetie and Joubert adopt principles of mon-
tage to accommodate their storytelling and to express symbolically that which they struggle to articulate verbally.

This use of montage and other modernist literary techniques, however, creates a distance between the reader and the text that is sometimes insurmountable for the less ardent reader. Even as he claims that his ideal audience consists of any reader who enjoys serious literature, Forrest must have known how alienating his approach to narrative would be to readers and critics alike. He repeatedly referred to and seriously considered himself as “race man.” Thus, his alienation from more popular literary movements and his isolation as an African American writer had to be all the more poignant. In his choice to embrace a Faulknerian style, Forrest also embraced an accompanying degree of alienation and critical neglect.9 I contend, however, that assessments of Forrest’s fiction that cannot move beyond his literary style to appreciate both his skillful use of African American culture and folk traditions to investigate African American life and his invocation of other traditions to posit African American experiences in the context of world traditions miss the very essence of his literary art—which is to celebrate and to explore African American life and culture. At least part of what I hope to achieve in the chapters that follow is, thus, to make clear the cultural connections that (re)establish Forrest’s affinity with African American life and its literary tradition.

In addition to taking a culturalist approach to readings of the novels, one of the ways to achieve this is to show Forrest’s relationship to other select African American modernist writers with whom he is frequently associated and who make significant modifications to traditional modernism. Among these authors is Jean Toomer, whose *Cane* Forrest describes as the “finest novel to come out of the Harlem Renaissance” (*Furious Voice*, 24). In his attempt to filter “through cycles of baseness and refinement within Negro culture” (24), Toomer adopts modernism’s form for a number of reasons. First, he needed a form that could accommodate his mixture of prose and poems and would allow him to place the varied sketches in one collection. Second, modernism encouraged acknowledgment of the complexity of African American life. Thus, it complicated racial categories, which was most important to Toomer, who saw himself as belonging only to the American race and not to any specific ethnic category.10 Finally, he was attracted to modernism because it helped to facilitate his new vision of life, which would acknowledge the past but which sought to move forward in a fragmented world because of the inevitability of change. More important here, however, than his adoption of modernism as form is his critique of it.11
By invoking African American life and rural folk culture, Toomer is able both to show the devastating effects of slavery and modernity on the contemporary African American and to highlight the richness of black culture modernists were so attracted to, in part because of its alleged “primitivism.” By using modernism as the form through which to critique modernity and to present this folk culture that modernity was allegedly destroying, Toomer also shows how modernism ultimately assumes the objectifying posture of modernity. As Henry L. Gates Jr. suggests in his reading of *Cane* and Catherine Gunther Kodat notes in her interpretation of Gates,

Toomer explodes notions of privileged consciousness by deploying a privileged voice [. . . . ] That [he] accomplishes this through a recognizably African American idiom provides the political point that distinguishes *Cane* among modernist works; Toomer shows how *Cane’s* modernist autonomy is rooted in, and indebted to, repressive social power structures. (Kodat, “To ‘Flash White Light . . . ,’” 5)

*Cane* thus manipulates its modernist aesthetic to perform a self-critique of the dialectic between liberation and domination. And it is through this critique and this struggle that Toomer makes clear the tension inherent in modernist art and its tendency to enact the forces it critiques.

But even in its recognition of this problem of modernism, at different points *Cane* enacts the terms of its modernist social critique and struggles to find an aesthetic approach through which to articulate the history of exploitation and domination it is trying to represent without enacting that same domination in terms of its aesthetics. The difficulty, as exhibited in a number of *Cane’s* sketches, has to do with finding a position from which to speak. The form that is most representative of the characters’ broken lives—modernism—will not relent in its tendency to exact what Kodat calls the violence of aesthetic dominance where the aesthetics take over the text. Arguably, Toomer’s choice to use folk culture overtly and to use black life as a driving theme attempts to reject the modernist mandate to dominate his subject and, instead, to critique high modernism even as he acknowledges and uses its power and form. That he is somewhat successful is evidenced in the ultimate freedom he gives the characters in his longer sketches. Paul, Avey, and Kabnis, rather than imposing their will (or their aesthetics) on their foils, allow others simply to be.

Forrest makes a similar attempt to equalize nature and culture with form in his fiction, which fails in *There Is a Tree* and is perhaps most successful
in *Divine Days*. Even in its use of African American folk culture and a distinctly African American theme of oppression and suffering, *There Is a Tree* leaves the reader feeling more dominated and oppressed than liberated. *Divine Days*, however, uses black life and survival so heavily as a theme that culture, not aesthetics, takes center stage. As an aspiring artist and the novel’s central consciousness, Joubert, in fact, makes it clear how difficult it is to articulate the complexity of black life and folk culture through traditional forms and aesthetics, which ignore folk culture. His desire is to write a play that captures the essence of two of Forest County’s most complex characters—the trickster Ford, who appears throughout the Forest County Sagas, and his biggest rival, Sugar-Groove, who makes his first appearance in *Divine Days*. Throughout the novel, Joubert seeks ways to dramatize the two men’s lives, and his struggle mirrors Forrest’s and other authors’ difficulty in finding an aesthetic approach that adequately captures African American life and culture. But unlike *There Is a Tree*, where Nathaniel is in too much pain to order his thoughts and, subsequently, to avoid oppressing and alienating the reader, *Divine Days* is structured as a jazzlike rendering of Joubert’s journal entries and is much more inviting to the reader.

In the sense that it rejects the omniscience of realism and has the narrator involved in the narrative situation, *Divine Days* can be likened especially to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, among other modernist texts. This use of an intradiegetic narrator, one in which the narrator is involved in the narrative situation, helps to dissolve the barrier between the reader and the narrative. It also helps create what Philip Goldstein describes as *critical realism* or *black modernism* in his reading of *Their Eyes*. Blending realism and modernism, Hurston’s text, Goldstein argues, adopts many of the rhetorical devices of modernism and, to some degree, fosters modernist absurdity, but it still engages social life and historical reality. While Goldstein sees this as one of the novel’s supreme achievements (since, despite being a modernist text, it avoids the withdrawal from social and historical reality which Georg Lukacs viewed as inherent to modernist texts), Brian Carr and Tova Cooper suggest that Hurston’s achievement as a modernist writer rests in her ability to exploit a critical misrecognition within modernism (commodification of the marginal) and her corresponding willingness to undercut “modernism’s elite and heroic self-fashioning” (303). In doing so, she shows modernism’s critical limit and modifies it by participating in modernism’s internal critique, “but only to the extent that [she] revises modernism’s most routine self-fashioning as willfully non-complicit” (305). As I have suggested earlier,
both Toomer and Faulkner (particularly in his racially driven texts) similarly highlight modernism’s critical limit. Race, then, it would seem, is one of the critical factors that encourages the internal critique of modernism.

The relationship of the Harlem Renaissance and modernism is especially telling in this regard. As Carr and Cooper note,

> While the self-fashioned modernists aspired to exist outside of commodified circuits, Harlem Renaissance writers, because of the commodification of African-American bodies and cultural forms persisting as slavery’s legacy, were acutely aware of the inevitable cooptation of their self-representations within a system of capitalist exchange and racialized patronage. (288)

Thus, modernism as rendered by African American and other ethnic authors (and some authors whose texts are driven by highly racialized situations) is inevitably and necessarily modified to accommodate these authors’ sociopolitical and aesthetic agendas. In this regard, Forrest is no different. He adopts techniques from modernism’s form, but he invokes pertinent African American experiences to authenticate its content. After making its internal critique, this invocation helps move modernism beyond its critical limit.

Like a number of the Harlem Renaissance artists, Ralph Ellison could see the relationship between modernism and black aesthetics and culture, particularly jazz. And it is from Ellison that Forrest learns, among other things, to use black music, especially jazz, as an aesthetic through which to reshape modernism. Jazz is a distinctly modernist art form, particularly its obsession with “making it new.” Yet it draws from a largely black American experience. Thus, it allowed Ellison, and later Forrest, to balance his attraction to modernism’s principles of high literary art with his awareness of the many aesthetic possibilities of jazz. Like the juxtaposition characteristic of montage, swing and the improvisational techniques of riffing and voicing offered the would-be modernist writer an alternative aesthetic through which to express the ineffable. Additionally, for Forrest, “the improvisational genius of jazz” was the metaphor that best captured the “the cultural attribute of black Americans to take what is left over, or conversely, given to them [. . .] and make it work for them, as a source of personal or group survival” (Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 23). Thus, a jazz narrative—which by definition would be highly innovative, experimental, and improvisational—would be the functional equivalent of a modernist one but would have the added benefit of signifying upon rather than distancing itself from black culture.
In many ways, modernism and black folk culture have always been related, since the latter emerged in large part in response to forces similar to those modernism critiqued and claimed to abhor. Berndt Ostendorf suggests the following of Ellison’s awareness of the survivalist tendencies of black folk culture and its relationship to modernism:

Whereas Eliot and Joyce achieved poetic complexity by using myth as a structural scaffolding and as a way of ordering the “chaos of modern history,” Ellison mockingly invites the country cousin of myth, black folklore, into the salon of Modernist intertextuality. For him the black vernacular holds a store of repressed values that need to be made conscious through literacy. (109)

Though Ostendorf is clearly referring to Ellison, the statement could as easily and accurately reference Forrest and his fiction. For Ellison and Forrest alike, the therapy modernism seeks to offer for the fragmentation caused by modernity is simply an aesthetic attempt to do through narrative what black folk culture—black religion, signifying, masking—had done earlier as a means of practical survival, with black music—jazz, the spirituals, gospel, and the blues—as its aesthetic equivalent. Thus, for many African American authors, making these traditions literate has its own survivalist tendencies. And modernism’s attempt to use literature to construct new ways of being that might offer alternatives to a failing system by using exploratory language and narrative forms offered authors such as Toomer, Hurston, Ellison, and Forrest the freedom to investigate racialized identities and corresponding techniques that might be useful in helping their characters survive the highly charged racial experiences they encounter. But, again, the problems inherent to modernism, which are especially heightened for African American authors, plague these modernist narratives. Oftentimes, the reading audience is so consumed with the authors’ literary technique that the form covers the narratives’ rich cultural tradition; it isolates and alienates the reader and makes the narratives prone to misunderstanding. Yet for authors who saw writing as a means of participating in “high art” and who were similarly committed to writing what they considered “serious literature,” a modified version of modernism, one which overtly invoked black cultural traditions, was a compromise that allowed them to be inspired as artists by modernism but also to draw from black folk culture and its traditions.

Few authors achieve this balance of simultaneously critiquing modernism and using it to investigate distinctly black experiences with greater
success than Forrest’s former editor and contemporary Toni Morrison, who completed her master’s thesis on the modernist writers William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. As her work on Faulkner and Woolf indicates, Morrison is well aware of what modernists were doing in their writing, and she adopts any number of these techniques in her own narratives. But what is of special interest here is her critique of modernity in _Beloved_ and her adoption of modernism as a form to do so. Kodat astutely observes:

In writing _Beloved_, Morrison was faced with a choice: to creatively deploy a “realist” narrative discourse so that its complicity with racial terror became clear, or to enter into a dialogue with “psychological” modernism [ . . . ] by exploring the ways in which modernism simultaneously inscribes and unmasks its complicity in social justice. In fact, Morrison does both: revising realism through _Beloved_’s content (especially through the figure of Schoolteacher, the sadistic scientific racist) and modernism in its technique and form. (“A Postmodern,” 193)

That her attempt to combine realism (as primarily historical) and modernism (as primarily aesthetic and ahistorical) is successful is a significant literary achievement, one that is facilitated by the novel’s content. The driving force of the narrative, a mother’s choice to kill her child rather than allow the child to be returned to slavery, simply cannot be consumed by an aesthetic form. Rather, Beloved’s resistance to commodification and her desire for _being_ all but justify the novel’s strategies of indirection, its ruptures in narrative, and its difficult syntax.

But, as Kodat indicates, the novel critiques modernism even as it uses its form. Among the most significant parts of this critique is of modernism’s and modernity’s failure to acknowledge the influence of black _being_ in any meaningful way. Thus, both _Beloved_ as novel and Beloved as character offer

a historical perspective on the importance of African-American forms in the emergence of American literary modernism. (“Forms” here has a double charge, indicating both those African-American aesthetic practices that have influenced American modernism, and the bodies of African-American themselves, so often invoked as characters or symbols in modernist works). (184)

That Morrison is purposeful in her critique of modernity and modernism
in *Beloved* is made clear in her collection of essays *Playing in the Dark*, where she notes the significance of slavery and an *Africanist* presence to the initiation of modernity. Beloved, then, can be read as an incarnation of the *Africanist* presence that is at the center of modernity and modernism but has been denied being and form.

While Forrest is not as overt as Morrison in his critique of modernism and modernity in *Two Wings*, he similarly uses an interpretation of the neoslave narrative as a form through which to (re)present slave history through the eyes of Sweetie Reed, who is only a few years removed from slavery. The novel opens with Nathaniel responding to Sweetie’s summons to act as the amanuensis who will write their family’s history onto legal pads. Adopting modernism as its form, Sweetie’s narrative is “[t]old in slivers of recollection, [using] voices-within-voices, pauses for enquiry and recapitulation, [with] one time frame held in abeyance in order to complete the events of another (Lee, 111). But even as the narrative adopts modernist tendencies, it is critical of modernism’s flight from history into myth. Like Morrison, who also uses modernism’s literary techniques to recover lost history despite its traditional flight from history, Forrest adopts the form in part to critique it.

Despite its claimed disassociation from modernity, in truth, modernism too often mirrors its nemesis in its desire to forget. And while Sweetie suppresses the horror of her experiences as the daughter of a former slave who chose to stay in the house with his master rather than live with his family even after slavery had ended and who, later, contracted her to be married at fifteen to a fifty-five-year-old judge who saw her only as a replacement for her mother, whom she had seen be brutally raped and killed by patrollers, she temporarily “forgets” history as a means of surviving. But she knows how important it is for her to tell her story from memory and then to have it written down, instead of allowing it to remain buried and forgotten. Failing to remember and then to tell her story would have been tantamount to modernity’s and modernism’s attempt to escape history in an effort to naturalize it. Under such circumstances, the negative experiences she is forced to overcome would simply be par for the course based purely on her existence as a black woman. But by simultaneously using modernism’s form and critiquing its ideology, the narrative encourages history to acknowledge its role in Sweetie’s suffering and in her being doubly negated by race and gender. Thus, central to the narrative is her insistence that (her)story, too, is written down and given its rightful place in history.

As is the case with Sweetie in *Two Wings*, literary modernism as Forrest most often interprets it makes room for history and attempts to avoid
enacting the domination it critiques. Thus, throughout his fiction he embraces select modernist tendencies and modifies others, depending on their sociological and political implications. While these modernist narrative situations oftentimes leave his novels unread or misunderstood, modernism is one of the few literary forms that can accommodate the complexity of African American life as Forrest saw it—its failings and its fragmentation, its tragedies and its triumphs. But modernism alone is not enough to facilitate his investigations. The cultural underpinnings that serve as springboards for his novels, when coupled with modernism, help Forrest achieve that which he wanted most—to be a writer who could sing in the language of African American cultural, oral, and vernacular traditions.