"In the Light of Likeness - Transformed"

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“Learn it to the Younguns”: Bearing Witness to the Blues in
Two Wings to Veil My Face

Like all of the fiction in Leon Forrest’s canon, Two Wings to Veil My Face is concerned with examining the relationship between the past and the present and, correspondingly, with suggesting means through which the contemporary African American can avoid being trapped in and by an oppressive past. In There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden, Nathaniel, through the process of (re)memory invokes his family’s ancestral past to begin to imagine how he can function successfully in the present following the death of his mother. In The Bloodworth Orphans, Nathaniel observes the various cultural traditions the title characters adopt in their attempts to survive the fragmentation they experience because of the racist past that shapes their present existence. In Two Wings, Nathaniel is both observer and participant as he prepares to take over his family’s history. Part of that history involves slavery. His great-grandfather I. V. and his great-grandmother Angelina are slaves on Rollins Reed’s plantation, and the slave experiences they have, which directly impact Nathaniel’s grandmother, Sweetie Reed, are detailed throughout the novel. Thus, at varying points, the Two Wings can be read as a neoslave narrative. Having beckoned Nathaniel to her bedside altar to bear witness to her reasons for rejecting Nathaniel’s grandfather, Jericho Witherspoon, and for initially refusing to attend his funeral, Sweetie Reed goes back to slavery, or to “the beginning times” as she calls them, to help Nathaniel understand her actions and to make him more aware of his family’s history. To a large degree, the story Sweetie tells is a blues narrative, detailing how the men in her life—her father, I. V., who neglected her to serve his former slave master, and her husband, Jericho, who fathered a child by another woman after her numerous attempts to have his child failed—did her wrong. Thus, two traditional African American expressive forms—the slave narrative and the blues—shape the novel structurally and
thematically. The combination of these traditions allows Forrest to create a freer form for the novel and, perhaps more important, it helps to facilitate successful negotiation of the tension between orality and literacy, freedom and oppression, and the past and the present. This feat gains special significance for two reasons—it allows Sweetie Reed to achieve a sense of self by reconciling her internal conflicts, and it reminds Nathaniel and the reader of the survivalist capabilities and tendencies of black cultural traditions (in this case, the slave narrative and the blues).

The blues and slave history are logical bedfellows. As Booker White explains: [. . .] the foundation of the blues is walking behind the mule in slavery times” (quoted in Oakley, 6). And, as Houston Baker suggests in Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, the blues has been of such great value in African American culture historically because the blues is capable of affirming humanity in even the most dehumanizing of circumstances (190), and no circumstance was more dehumanizing than American slavery. In its affirmation of humanity, the blues is an agent of healing. And this, in addition to its aesthetic function, is Forrest’s attraction to the blues as a structuring device in Two Wings. Sweetie must bear witness to her family’s slave history before she can assert her own self and before she can be fully healed. Because she is concerned with her self, her contemporary blues dialogue with slavery as narrative also assumes the form Angelyn Mitchell, in The Freedom to Remember, astutely dubs the liberatory narrative. Mitchell writes:

While [the] term [neo-slave narrative] suggests that contemporary writers are inventing fictional slave narratives that revisit the historical period of slavery in much the same spirit historical novels describe past lives, there is a more appropriate term for theses cultural productions [. . .] [The] focus of these narratives [. . .] is not [. . .] on the experience of enslavement but, more importantly, on the construct we call freedom. In other words, they do more than narrate movement from bondage to freedom. The narratives analyze freedom. Accordingly, these narratives are liberatory narratives. (3–4; italics in original)

She defines the liberatory narrative as “a contemporary novel that engages the historical period of chattel slavery in order to provide new models of liberation by problematizing the concept of freedom [. . .] [Its] primary function indeed is in describing how to achieve freedom” (4). In addition to describing how to achieve freedom, the liberatory narrative focuses on
the protagonist’s conception and articulation of herself as a free, autonomous, and self-authorized self” (4). While Sweetie is not a former slave, her narrative can be accurately characterized as a liberatory narrative for two reasons. First, the story she tells about her father’s neglect of her and about her mother’s rape and death at the hands of patrollers is shaped almost exclusively by these characters’ slave history. And second, her purpose for invoking the historical period is in dialogue with key functions that characterize the liberatory narrative—to articulate herself as an “autonomous self-authorized self” and to provide for Nathaniel and the reader new models of liberation that can effect a release of slavery’s historic pain and, correspondingly, to describe how the contemporary African American can achieve a reconceived and usable concept of freedom.

That the African American is unclear about exactly what freedom after slavery entails is perhaps best depicted fictionally in the prologue of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. After the old woman in the narrator’s dream tells him that she killed her master, who is also her children’s father, because she loved freedom more than she loved her master, the narrator asks her: “*Old woman, what is this freedom you love so well?*” (Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 11; italics in original). And she responds, “*I done forgot, son. It’s all mixed up. First I think it’s one thing, then I think it’s another. It gits my head to spinning. I guess now it ain’t nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head*” (11; italics in original). Though she claims to love it, she is unclear about what freedom is. The closest she can come to describing it is as the ability to articulate her blues. Then, when the narrator awakens from his dream shortly after this imagined conversation, he immediately hears Louis Armstrong singing his jazz-blues song “*(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue*.” Thus we see slavery, freedom, storytelling, and the blues intimately connected as Ellison’s attempt to construct new and useful notions of freedom. And like the woman in the Invisible Man’s dream, whose struggle with freedom involves sexuality and gender, Sweetie’s struggle in *Two Wings* with reconceptualizing freedom to achieve self involves gender and sexuality as well. Thus, she must adopt a blues impulse for her storytelling, since the blues discourse is one of the few forms that precludes gender and sexuality from limiting her attempts to subvert patriarchy and, subsequently, to be self-authorized.

At first, Nathaniel assumes that Sweetie is telling the story because, as the only grandchild, it is his turn “to take over the memories.” But he soon comes to realize that she is telling stories of the past not just for the sake of perpetuating them but also to assert her place in a narrative that has repeatedly excluded her. But her attempts to give voice to her own
gender-specific blues must wait until Nathaniel returns the narrative to her. Though Two Wings is clearly Sweetie’s tale, Nathaniel, as focalizer and part-time narrator, largely controls it until she finally and fully achieves her blues voice during the course of the novel. Thus, as she renders her song, Nathaniel as character and Forrest as author unwittingly displace her again, as Nathaniel regresses to memories of a talk he and Sweetie had when he was seven years old. But even as he interrupts her tale and begins one of his own, the memories he engages help develop her theme of female sexual exploitation. He asked his grandmother the meaning of the word rape, and Sweetie, abiding by her premise “if you were old enough to ask a question, then you were old enough to get an answer” (Forrest, Two Wings, 81), explained rape to Nathaniel in the context in which he has heard the word. He had overheard a group of men talking about a newspaper report of a woman in the South being raped while her husband was forced to watch and then was lynched. He heard the gory details of how the man was stripped naked, lifted to a platform, yoked at the neck, and bound at the stump to a poplar tree. As the men raped the hanging man’s wife, he nearly tore the tree from its roots in rage—only the more he moved, the more he hanged himself.

Unsure exactly of what rape meant, Nathaniel knew that “it was so fierce it seemed beyond murder in what it did to the mind and spirit of a woman (and a man, too, if he loved her); he also knew it was something men alone did to women; and he also knew enough not to ask the men in childish shame about what he didn’t understand” (81). So, he turned to Sweetie, who explained it to him (telling him what she wants him to know, he adds) so clearly in its articulation of betrayal and hurt that, by the time he is twenty-one, “the close, perverse connection between rape and sexual aggression tormented him body and soul” (82), and he feels guilty about engaging women sexually. Ultimately, his confusion about lovemaking, mixed with his worshipful feelings for women, frequently render him sexually inactive and the object of his friends’ amusement. They tease:

—Man, Spoons be in there working out, doing some down heavy third finger work and all of a sudden when he’s supposed to be coping his plea and popping the loaded question, his mind goes acrobat, his soul goes berserk, and his hard-on goes iceberg slim on him. . . . (82)

Though Nathaniel denies the truth of the frat boys’ story, he cannot deny the influence of his knowledge of historical exploitation on his present-day
interaction with women. He makes no attempt to; instead, he willingly admits that when he hears young girls whispering “no no no,” he translates it into the voice of a representative victimized woman. He understands their blues. He finally settles down and becomes engaged to Candy Cummings, but Sweetie’s past experience as excluded woman influences even the outcome of this situation. Though she does not tell Nathaniel until the end of her story why she dismisses Candy, who then dismisses Nathaniel, sending the engagement ring back to him by messenger, she does so because Candy reminds her of Lucasta Jones, who, as we shall see later, is a vital, though unacknowledged, part of Nathaniel’s ancestry.

Having unwittingly introduced her theme of exploitation, Nathaniel, after returning the narrative to Sweetie, learns of his grandmother’s role as a woman who has been exploited and wronged by a man. Born only two years after slavery ended, Sweetie goes back to this “beginning time” as she explains her hurts to her grandson. Though her blues themes of lack, loss, and love are repeated with variation throughout the novel, we hear it first as Sweetie tells of the lack she feels from the absence of love from her father. Almost from birth she had a strained relationship with her father, I. V. Reed, who was a house slave to Rollins Reed on a Mississippi plantation. On his deathbed, I. V. attempts to explain his life to Sweetie. Thus, again, a male narrative interrupts Sweetie’s attempt to achieve subjectivity. But because I. V.’s life as a slave is so vital to Sweetie’s identity as a displaced woman, she accepts the importance of his tale and includes it in her blues narrative.

One situation that informs I. V.’s slave experience and is particularly relevant to his deathbed confessions to Sweetie about why he neglected her as a child is his role in the death of another slave, Reece Shank Haywood. The only reason I. V. tells Sweetie this story is that he has been mandated to do so by one who knows the power of orally narrating slavery’s blues. In an attempt to gain revenge on Shank after I. V. saw him with the bonnet I. V. had given to his love interest, Minnie-Bea, I. V. told Shank that Rollins Reed, their owner, was at Jubell’s shack. Knowing that Shank would lose his temper and confront Rollins, since Jubell was Shank’s woman, I. V. hoped that Shank’s actions would warrant a beating. Instead, Shank waited until Rollins left the shack, choked him nearly to death, and left him after I. V. hit Shank with a slingshot to keep Shank from killing him. Since he knew that the death of his master would cause more trouble than good, I. V. dragged Rollins to Jubell’s African great-grand-auntie, Foisty, “who [knew] a mite of everything ’bout anything in the way of bringing people back from the dead and how to help the living to keep on
holding on” (106). She restored life to Rollins but punished I. V. for his part in the ordeal. I. V. confesses to Sweetie:

Auntie Foisty told me [ . . . t]he sole way I could ever hope for salvation was to tell the whole story out loud before I died out to each of my children and each of their children’s children unto my last breathing gasp. . . . Me personal, not through any third hand, but by my very own lapping tongue. (139)

Thus, before he dies, he confesses his sins to his daughter, much like she confesses her past to her grandson—out loud and firsthand (she even tells I. V.’s story in his own words). By requiring I. V. to “tell the whole story out loud” until his “last breathing gasp,” Foisty, from beyond the grave, asserts the power of oral history and intimates storytelling as a cultural cousin of the blues.

The only living African left on Rollins Reed’s plantation, Auntie Foisty was especially known for her memory and her uncanny ability to recall facts. I. V. marvels:

Auntie Foisty’s mind seems to get sharper, more supple, deeper with each fork-turning in the long woods of her days; so much so, Master Rollins himself bends to her for recollecting ’bout the rightness of Old Master’s records on the crop books [ . . . ] what his pappy, Old Man Rollins Reed, kept fifty-odd years before, in the beginning time. Those books partly burned in a fire, so who do they turn on, Auntie Foisty, who can’t even read or write; even asking her what each slave was sold for, hour, day and year of the auction. Most of the time she ain’t for sure about the money part of it; but knows where each and every one of ’em was sold off to [ . . . ] when they come into this world and how they went out: backwards and forwards. (111–12)

Though she is not always able to recall what is most important to the master—issues of money—Foisty is always able to recall what is most important to her—issues of humanity. As Keith Byerman notes, “[s]he knows, not the putatively neutral record of the ink marks, but the human traces behind those marks. She knows how slaves died rather than just when. She knows the whole, instead of merely its economic significance” (“The Flesh Made Word,” 205–6; italics in original). She is at once both a product and a teller of history through memory. As oral historian, she foreshadows blues
wisdom where cultural knowledge and understanding are sought in the community rather than in white power structures.

Sweetie, however, understanding the interplay between written history and orally transmitted memory, knows that success also turns on the ability to master both history and memory as modes of expressing the past. So she insists that Nathaniel commit their family’s history both to memory and to paper. When Nathaniel suggests that he bring a tape recorder to their storytelling session, Sweetie says simply:

No. Just bring along a pen and pad, not a pencil, either, because too much has been erased in time. Nor an indelible pencil. Write it all down in longhand, with blue-black ink on the pad, in your notebook, and then it all will be recorded on the tablet of your memory and in your heart, as it’s transformed from your longhand to your short memory. It’s time we moved from listening and half-hearing to listening and recording in longhand. (Forrest, Two Wings, 7; italics in original)

In the tradition of the blues, Nathaniel, as blues artist, must now sing his own version rather than a verbatim recording of Sweetie’s and his family’s song. At its base, it will be the same tale, but Sweetie bestows upon him the power of interpretation. Nathaniel recognizes this gift and embraces it as he smiles upon the legal pads that flow with his family’s history, bestowed “unto the fifth generation,” and which he desires “to spin […] into an eternal gold beyond the radiance of the here and the now of men’s eyes” (245). He knows that he must take his role as singer of his family’s history seriously, since “none of the family history was put down in books, in the way it was for the families of the Hebrew children, Great-Momma Sweetie Reed said” (8). So, at the very least, it must be sung.

Though part of the purpose of Sweetie’s oral lesson is to give Nathaniel the gift of ancestry she receives vicariously from Foisty and to make sure that future generations do not forget the “ustea be” ways of their forebears, in order to achieve her blues voice Sweetie must first deal with a number of historical betrayals—whites’ betrayal of blacks, blacks’ betrayal of blacks, and men’s betrayal of women. Her willingness to describe these betrayals to Nathaniel is what gives her narrative its ability to be liberating. By bearing witness to her blues, she frees herself from the residuals of slavery’s legacy and its shame. The betrayal that shapes Sweetie’s relationship with I. V. the most is one that does, indeed, shame I. V. and causes both Sweetie and her mother pain. After Sweetie is returned to him after being kidnapped along with her mother, Angelina, by men who plan to sell them into forced slavery, I. V.
is unable to love her. Angelina is raped and killed, and Sweetie, who witnessed these acts, becomes a living reminder to I. V. of his powerlessness to defend his wife. Since Rollins Reed does not have enough money to pay bounty hunters to return his daughter and granddaughter, he writes to Jericho Witherspoon, an affluent Negro lawyer who remembered Angelina from the time he saw her on the Reed plantation as he was escaping to the North. Jericho agrees to pay the ransom, and as punishment for I. V.’s role in Reed’s ordeal with Shank, Reed plans to betray I. V. and give his wife to Jericho. When she is killed, I. V. betrays Sweetie and allows Reed to arrange her marriage to Jericho. We soon learn that Sweetie blames I. V. for being so obsessed with Reed that I. V. was underneath his former master’s bed instead of with her and her mother when they were kidnapped. But she is powerless and all but orphaned. So she accepts her fate as her mother’s replacement and, at the age of fifteen, she marries Jericho Witherspoon, Forest County’s first Negro judge, who is fifty-five.

Her primary purpose is to produce offspring for Jericho, and when she fails to do so (after numerous miscarriages and infant deaths), he betrays her and fathers a child with his mistress, Lucasta Jones. As it turns out, Nathaniel’s father, Arthur, is this child. Much to Nathaniel’s surprise, Sweetie, the woman who was “vitally linked to everything in his world of remembrances” (244), is not his grandmother at all. She does not reveal this fact to him until the end of her narrative, because he must begin to discover who he is in relation to his communal ancestry, which has little to do with blood, before he knows the truth about his biological ancestry. Yet she also feels obliged to tell Nathaniel the “whole truth” because she does not want him to feel the pain of betrayal she felt when her father told her only a “side” of the truth. She tells Nathaniel:

[... ] to hear the satanic one’s [I. V.] voice allowed to bear witness to history was something that I had to get used to because amongst other things I had so grown used to being called upon as the counsel for the wretched. I’d forgotten how it is always a fool, or a wise fool, who gives us a quarter of the truth, turned inside out. So that out of the voice of the serpent came coiled memory but what spat from off of his tongue in its mockery was the base truth and a side of my truthful history. (91)

Out of this history, Sweetie remakes her self, and her willingness to bear witness in her liberatory narrative subsequently enables Nathaniel to use what he has learned about his family’s slave history to negotiate the con-
temporary moment more successfully. In the sense that it is based in large part on her memory of how she gained command of her life after Jericho betrayed her, Sweetie's blues narrative, even with its element of lamentation, is more importantly about her liberation.

The most logical way to acknowledge one's agony without conceding to it, of course, is to adopt a blues aesthetic, which Sweetie does hesitantly. She would much prefer the more sacred gospel aesthetic, but she knows it cannot accommodate her secular trials. Nor would it acknowledge her gender-specific hurts. The blues, however, as Angela Davis notes in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, has historically “constitute[d] a privileged discursive site” in a culture where there were “stringent taboos on representations of sexuality” and on a woman’s desire to choose her own sex partners or to determine her own sexual value (xvii). Sweetie’s conflict with Jericho is that he insists on defining her worth as a wife and as a woman exclusively in terms of her ability to give him a child. Thus, she must adopt a form that will not only allow her to express her trials as a member of an oppressed racial group but will also offer a rebellious response to the patriarchy that denies her worth based on gender. And the blues is this form.

But, again, Sweetie’s desire to articulate the wrongs she has experienced at the hands of the men in her life and, subsequently, liberation is not the only objective of her storytelling. Like the grandfather in *Invisible Man*, who, also on his deathbed, insists on the significance of passing down ancestral wisdom, Sweetie knows that, as an elder, she must structure this wisdom and “learn it to the younguns.” Thus, as Nathaniel listens to Sweetie’s liberatory narrative, he also participates in the progression of his own soul. Once he discovers that he is both editor of and participant in Sweetie’s narrative, he realizes that in listening to “her hurts, her wrongs, and her history,” he can see the hurts, the wrongs, and the history of the African American. Seeing “what went wrong, from the beginning time,” Nathaniel can “look into the mirror” and find himself (Forrest, *Two Wings*, 21). But first, having become aware of familial and communal history and discovering its relationship to his personal experience, he must now learn to order the chaos that informs black experience. Admittedly, this is a difficult task: in the ABC’s you went from A to B to C. But in these stories of the family, the boy [Nathaniel] felt he often went from A to C to E and then maybe later on learned of B. But often, maybe not. Learning to play the piano as he was now doing, the boy thought of how you skipped notes to Every Good Boy Does Fine. E G B D F. And it took perhaps forever to learn what those notes could do, when brought
together in different combinations. One day he would learn the meaning of the chords [. . .]. (11)

Sweetie intends to make the day in which *Two Wings* takes place the day that Nathaniel brings all the notes of the past together to create his own song. And he must choose what aspects of the past are vital and relevant to his success and discard all others, lest he be destroyed by an inability to free himself from those harmful aspects of the past and its chaos. Instead, he must adopt the blues aesthetic, which allows life’s inherent contradictions and ongoing problems to coexist, rather than pretending that they can be easily solved or succumbing to them.

Among the most important lessons Sweetie teaches Nathaniel with her storytelling-as-blues is the lesson that is at the heart of all of Forrest’s novels—that survival is hinged on one’s ability to reinvent the past and to transform the self. For, as Nathaniel finally realizes, in order to reestablish a working identity he would have to integrate the past and the present, and he would have to be many kinds of men brought together as one, in one flesh, and soul, and mind. Each man must re-create himself [. . .] out of all that’s given to him and placed upon his shoulders; Great-Momma Sweetie Reed had contributed to that shaping of the young man. You could not escape from the yoke of history, ancestors, lovers, and the demons and gifts of living, only transcend and remake yourself through all of it as a man. (5–6)

And by learning, through Sweetie’s narrative, the power and wisdom that evolved from African American traditions such as the blues, which not only expressed communal woes but resolved to overcome them, Nathaniel stands a chance of recovering from the horrors of the past and of functioning well in the present.

Forrest repeats this theme, suggesting the significance of transformation to survival as he has Rev. Pompey c. j. Browne discuss this characteristic of Jericho in his eulogy of Jericho. Pompey begins his eulogy testifying about the lessons he learned from his grandmother and Jericho Witherspoon. Both characters knew how to mask their true selves in the presence of threatened whites. From Grandmother Browne and Jericho, Pompey learned “[to] constantly reinvent life out of whatever material of chaos that came [his] way” (184). Pompey also points out how Jericho’s life reflected broader African American experiences. He tells the congregation of mourners:
...The very odyssey of this grand, audacious man traces the outline of our story with such vivid visage that the longevity of his preservation seems a tapestry stitched in the agony riddles and wonders and tribulations of our Great Awakening from slavery to freedom to quasi-slavery. (180)

Thus, African American group history is as much a part of Pompey’s eulogy as is Jericho’s life activity. From the brand JW on Jericho’s back, put there by his own father, to Jericho’s work on behalf of newly freed men, the former slave’s life was intricately linked to the African American and his quest for equality. As Pompey astutely recognizes, Jericho’s life was a walking, living, breathing explanation of what the African American desires:

[... ] all Mr. Asa [Philip Randolph] had to do would be to bring Jericho Witherspoon to the White House and take off his shirt and let the President of this Divided House see what a white father did to his own mulatto blood and then he’d stop asking why the Negro wants to be free to be, to work for equal pay, and yes, Lawd, to Fly. (182; italics in original)

Notably, these are many of the same desires articulated in traditional blues. But as Sweetie’s response to Pompey’s eulogizing of Jericho suggests, in many ways these blues fail to acknowledge women. So she modifies Pompey’s eulogy by offering one of her own.

Although she had vowed not to attend her estranged husband’s funeral, Sweetie enters the parlor chapel, approaches Jericho’s casket, and picks up where Pompey has left off. When Nathaniel’s father, Arthur, questions why she must disgrace Jericho’s death with this interruption, she reminds him that even still waters “don’t run deep enough” and that such waters need to be troubled to stir up “the appearance of calm” and to clear the path for healing (192–93). In other words, Sweetie needs to assert herself into this male narrative if she is to fully achieve her blues voice. After continued arguments with Arthur, who, in his patriarchal way, attempts to mute her, Sweetie responds that what she is trying to get at is “a confession, mixed up with a transformation” (21). Through Jericho, God reveals to her that a “soul can’t be rested until it’s bathed in the pool of troubled water, cracking the calm—that you got to stir up” (210). Jericho’s voice implores Sweetie: “Preach if you must, but teach and lacerate you will, into our sheer enchantment with aggravation—making us the sheer monotony of trouble” (214). Here, Forrest’s authorial voice rings out
clearly as Jericho suggests that trouble is ordering and purifying. Arguing that “spiritual agony at the core” is what was missing from contemporary writing when he began writing fiction, Forrest, commenting on the aesthetic and healing impulse of the blues, notes that “[t]rouble is always at your back door and, if you would but look, at your front door as well. Out of this you can recreate your life, by constantly crafting out new doors in the menacing mansions and old house of life” (Furious Voice, 26). Sweetie, in the tradition of the blues, crafts new doors for herself and, like Pompey, reminds her listeners that they, too, must understand the power and necessity of transformation as it relates to healing and to survival.

Though Sweetie's modification of Pompey's eulogy is, at points, in line with Pompey's representation of Jericho, the points of departure where she is critical of Jericho and, correspondingly, of patriarchy are of grave importance to the narrative. Sweetie has spent most of her life finding ways to overcome her status as a displaced woman. And though she eventually defines her self without regard to her father or to Jericho (she becomes known in the county for her mission work with Lovelady Breedlove; the two provide food, shelter, and nurturing to the needy), she still feels the need to disrupt the master narrative and to infuse her own. And she does so with the ambiguity sometimes characteristic of women's blues. Davis observes:

What gives the blues such fascinating possibilities of sustaining emergent feminist consciousness is the way [blues-women] often construct seemingly antagonistic relationships as noncontradictory oppositions. A female narrator in a women's blues song who represents herself as entirely subservient to a male desire might simultaneously express autonomous desire and a refusal to allow her mistreating lover to drive her to psychic despair. (xv)

Such is the case with Sweetie, who never denies her affection for Jericho, even after he brings home a child he has fathered by another woman. And even though she still loves him and is hurt by his mistreatment of her, she finds the strength to live her life without him rather than succumb to despair over his betrayal.

She is similarly ambiguous about her relationship with her father. Though she refuses to let her hurt destroy her, she can never completely release the theme of loneliness and lack of love the narrative repeats. She tells Nathaniel early on in her narrative:

When I. V. Reed was on his deathbed, I went back to the Rollins
Reed plantation to say goodbye; fifty-two years ago to this very day; after all, this was the father, I said to myself. I had not seen him since I left that plantation, twenty-four years before. Maybe I wanted to hear him say just simply *I tried to love you, Sweetie* [. . . . ]

Yet I knew his word would be a foundling lie, so maybe not even that; but to give me a portion of recognition as his child, that never sprang from his tongue while I was there. In turn I had pledged myself to give out a show of the daughter’s gift of feeling, even though I knew it only came from a hurt and father-cut-off heart. (Forrest, *Two Wings*, 45; italics in original)

In spite of herself, Sweetie seeks to be told that she is loved. She craves the feeling of belonging. But even as her feelings toward her father and Jericho are wrought with ambiguity, her use of the blues as a site where she can articulate her protest against male dominance is clear. As Davis notes of Bessie Smith, especially, women blues singers “countered the Christian monopolization of black spirituality” and its corresponding patriarchal ideology and established themselves as equal to the church’s patriarchs (129). The blues became scripture, and its presentation became the sermon. And Sweetie disrupts Jericho’s funeral, much to the patriarchs’ chagrin, in this tradition. She places her eulogy of Jericho side by side with Pompey’s and attempts to enforce egalitarian gender relations by asserting her self.

By the end of the narrative, it is this action and the date *June 5th* that Sweetie must ultimately explain to Nathaniel. When he notices Sweetie’s delay in explaining the date to him, he could hear “his soul commanding him if not to take charge then to charge forth with his question” (Forrest, *Two Wings*, 250). Sweetie complains that the burden of the date is still too fierce for her “to center down upon,” but he insists:

Great-Momma Sweetie, it’s not for the story alone that I need to fill out that date and what it meant to get the story right. But to get right what is missing from you and me. Between us, too. For myself and my own troubled mind within. I came upon those dates in your Bible long ago. And now I want to know what is hidden from me and what you have hidden maybe from yourself, as unspeakable in the long ago. (250)

Ultimately, Sweetie reveals that June 5th is the date Jericho brought home the son he conceived with Lucasta Jones. The child of this union, of course, is Arthur, Nathaniel’s father.

By telling Nathaniel the whole of her story, Sweetie finally achieves her
blues voice, though, ultimately, she releases her narrative, including its distinctly female aspects, to a male. The implications of this release can be read in one of two ways—either Sweetie feels empowered enough by the success with which she articulates her liberation that she is indifferent about handing this narrative over to her male descendant, or she concedes that she cannot escape patriarchy completely and thus manages only to shape rather than to control her narrative. No matter the case, she inevitably becomes a part of the feminine blues tradition of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, a tradition that allows women to speak for themselves and to create dialogue between their desire for subjectivity and their role as objects of sexual desire, even though she does so almost surreptitiously. Her lack of resistance to this rests perhaps in the fact that her purpose for telling the narrative in the first place is so that she can show Nathaniel, as representative of the contemporary African American, how to survive and how to achieve selfhood. The characterization of Sweetie’s narrative as a blues narrative then becomes only as significant as its characterization as a liberatory narrative, which, again, invokes slavery and its subsequent historical period for the express purpose of communicating to its listening/reading audience ways the contemporary African American can free the self from the residual legacy of slavery (Mitchell, 3). Thus, though Sweetie is concerned with achieving a blues voice that validates her experiences as a female, she is as concerned with using this voice to provide a model of liberation for those who are to come after her. By telling Nathaniel her story, including the fact that she is not his biological grandmother, Sweetie attempts to prepare Nathaniel for his own blues burden and, by empowering him with the truth, to show him how to transform the themes of loneliness and lack to a theme of survival by making a way out of no way.

Like its gospel namesake, *Two Wings to Veil My Face* is concerned with survival. In the traditional hymn, the singer chants: “two wings to veil my face, two wings to veil my feet, two wings to fly away, so the world can’t do me no harm.” In Forrest’s novel, Sweetie Reed seeks this angelic protection from historical and worldly hurts, but is forced to borrow from the blues tradition in order to overcome them. To ensure her healing and to encourage Nathaniel’s subsequent wellness in the contemporary moment, she combines two closely related black cultural forms of healing and sustenance—the slave narrative and the blues. The stories she tells and the blues she sings investigate ideas of freedom, provide a model of liberation for the contemporary African American, and bear witness to what she believes must be learned to the younguns. At the novel’s end, Sweetie finally removes the two wings that have veiled her face. Now the world can’t do her no harm.