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Epilogue

Leon Forrest’s contemporary Toni Cade Bambara once noted that she wrote stories that saved lives. In her fiction, she proclaimed, “[s]alvation is the issue.” And although Forrest never made a similar proclamation overtly, he, too—feeling that salvation was a real issue for the contemporary African American, who still struggled to negotiate his racist past to function successfully in the present—wrote stories that saved lives. He recognized that fiction that dealt with the soul’s agony and its desire to transcend this agony was what was missing in contemporary African American literature when he began writing seriously (Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 29). In response to this void, he wrote novels that aggressively dealt with the soul’s condition and, subsequently, helped to create a tradition in contemporary African American literature I have come to refer to as healing narratives.

Around the same time that she was an editor for both Forrest and Bambara, Toni Morrison issued a call for the African American writer to facilitate healing. She wrote:

For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer exclusively ours [. . . ] so another form has to take that place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that was not needed before [. . . . ] We don’t live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those [. . . ] stories that we heard years ago. But the new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel. (“Rootedness,” 340)

What Forrest offers in his fiction, I contend, is the novel as an art form that borrows from oral traditions to tell those stories we don’t hear anymore and, thus, the novel as an agent of healing.

The healing narrative, as Forrest and a number of his contemporaries present it, is a modern text that engages the historical past, particularly as
it relates to racial oppression, in an attempt to show the reader, through the characters, ways to negotiate the legacy of a racist past without being trapped in it. In its acknowledgment of an oppressive past, the healing narrative also acknowledges that the African American created and used cultural traditions to survive this past. Thus, Forrest’s narratives investigate the cultural traditions the African American has used in the past and questions their viability as techniques of survival of this legacy of oppression in the contemporary moment.2

To a large degree, the effectiveness of Forrest’s narratives as agents of healing rests in the author’s adaptation of oral and musical traditions within his texts. Storytelling is paramount throughout Forrest’s fiction. But in *Two Wings* especially, the act of storytelling as a pathway to healing is particularly pronounced. Both Sweetie Reed and her father, I. V., believe completely that they *must* tell their stories before they die if they are to die peacefully. Their salvation literally depends on their willingness to participate in the act of storytelling, not only for themselves but also to advance the healing of their listeners. Hearing her father’s story offers Sweetie an otherwise inaccessible balm, so she feels compelled to share her father’s and her own story with her adopted grandson, with the hope that through storytelling he, too, can be healed.

As much as he loved storytelling and sought to translate it into fiction, Leon Forrest loved music. He frequently commented that he “was bred more on music than books” and that he was “weaned on Billie Holiday’s music” (Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 344), and his fiction supports this claim. For Forrest, it is black music that served as the “railroad tracks and the wings for [his] imagination and the migrating train of [his] Southern-turned-Yankee sagas” (21). The tendency of music to heal and to mirror the social, political, and religious aspects of culture had incredible appeal for a writer interested not only in realistically depicting culture but in presenting it with the eloquence of orality. From the blues and the spiritual he took agony and hope; from jazz and gospel he took freedom and improvisation.

Throughout the Forest County Sagas, the interplay of music and narrative as storytelling holds both aesthetic and structural value. He uses the jazz-spiritual motif in *There Is a Tree* as metaphor and as form to present the complex layers of Nathaniel’s representative journey of the African American experience. In *Two Wings*, he complements one oral form—storytelling—with another—the blues—to chronicle Sweetie’s trials and tribulations, which, like the blues song, laments but shows no signs of surrender. Jazz functions as both theme and structure to complicate *The Bloodworth Orphans*, and *Divine Days* is influenced by the blues, jazz,
gospel, and the spiritual alike, with Sugar-Groove ultimately emerging as the jazz hero whose story Joubert so desperately seeks to tell. Thus, for Forrest, black music has almost always has a dual function—for him as writer, it provides a path into the complexity of the contemporary moment. Subsequently, for his characters, it offers a path to healing.

In the figurative sense, the novels are way stations of black survival with black cultural traditions offering characters sustenance. Whether it is Nathaniel trying to transform himself from a motherless child to a man in There Is a Tree, Sweetie Reed transforming herself from object to subject in Two Wings, or Nathaniel and Joubert transforming themselves into myth-makers and culture-keepers in The Bloodworth Orphans, Divine Days, and Meteor, in Forrest’s fiction, salvation is always the issue. Leon Forrest transcribed oral forms into fiction and wrote stories to save lives.