

**African American Review  
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Author(s): Dana Williams

Source: *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 475-485

Published by: African American Review (St. Louis University)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1512210>

Accessed: 26-10-2016 17:05 UTC

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# Preachin' and Singin' Just to Make It Over: The Gospel Impulse as Survival Strategy in Leon Forrest's Bloodworth Trilogy

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As an artist steeped in African American tradition and culture, Leon Forrest consistently drew from their wellsprings to recreate in his fiction both the horror and beauty of the African American experience as he perceived it. Among the many media through which this experience is most basically expressed is music. From the "sorrow songs" to ragtime to the spirituals and the blues to jazz and gospel, black music has provided for the African American writer a springboard into culture and the contemporary experience. This was certainly true for Forrest, who not only used music as theme and metaphor throughout his fiction but whose development as a writer was admittedly influenced by black music in general, and Mahalia Jackson's gospel music in particular. In fact, in the opening essay of *The Furious Voice for Freedom*, a critical collection inspired by Forrest's love of *Lady Day*, the author acknowledges the reinventive quality of music, which he became aware of through both his father (who was an amateur lyricist) and his mother (whom he describes as a story-telling vocalist), as one of his greatest artistic inspirations. The vocalist's attempt to get back to the purity of the instrument and the instrumentalist's attempt to get to the purity of the vocalist, he admits, became a standard for him as a writer as he tried to commit to paper the literary voices he heard in his head. And while all black music, in a general sense, possesses the transforming power he so desperately sought for his writing, it is Mahalia Jackson's "How I Got Over" and "Didn't It Rain" that taught Forrest how to release his soul-in-agony onto paper. He recalls:

It was the mid-1960s. I was down and out. Jobless. And I was trying to make one last-ditch effort at becoming a writer. But I couldn't seem to turn the corner without running into a slew of dead-end corridors. . . . The death of my mother—an anchor and a rock, a source of worship and agony—had left me riddled and confused. . . . (27)

Each evening after another failed job attempt, I'd come home, fix another can of beans or sardines, pray that I could find a way out of no way at my typewriter, and try again. And I'd listen to Mahalia Jackson on a small record player. I had friends. Intellectual friends and a few who were also trying to write. But none who cared for the life of the spirit—or the spiritual questions. . . . But in the heartless days of winter. . . . Mahalia's soul visited me on several occasions. . . . Her scripture of song was enough; she seemed to reach me in a profound way as I raced around my labyrinth of dislocation, through her song "How I Got Over" . . . . Mahalia seemed to move over mountains and reintroduce me to the motherlode and the mother tongue of folk culture. . . . Mahalia's music seemed to evolve me out of my condition. (28)

Through Mahalia, Forrest was reminded that most great literature deals with spiritual agony and the hero's attempt to transcend it.<sup>1</sup> From Mahalia he learned that if he wanted to be "born again" as

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Dana Williams is Assistant Professor of African American Literature at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. She is currently completing a book-length study on the novels of Leon Forrest.

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a writer, he would have "to die" over and over again to the worldly quest of harmony within the soul since, ultimately, the artist must constantly transform himself "again and again out of the chaos of his soul" if the "moment of miracle" is to have any meaning for the listening audience.

So while we see the influence of multiple genres of black music throughout Forrest's fiction—it is Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" that drives *There Is A Tree More Ancient Than Eden* and Lightnin' Hopkins's "I've Had My Fun" that inspires scenes from *The Bloodworth Orphans*—his thematic fascination with reinventive transformation, a technique most often associated with and approached through jazz, posits gospel music (more so than other genres) among the strongest metaphors through which to read the novels of a writer who sought to reveal survival strategies that find success in both the sacred and the secular world.<sup>2</sup> Thus, throughout the novels that make up the Bloodworth Trilogy—*There Is A Tree More Ancient Than Eden*, *The Bloodworth Orphans*, and *Two Wings to Veil My Face*—Forrest uses the gospel impulse<sup>3</sup> and its magical use of reinvention as an art form to address the theme that permeates his novels: the transformation of the self as an act essential to survival during spiritual agony.

At base, gospel music shares many of the traditions found in the spiritual, such as syncopated hand clapping, call-and-response patterns, and the use of scripture for lyrics. The most basic difference between the two is the tendency of gospel music to leave room for stylistic improvisation (a primarily secular technique), using the text of a song as a mere skeleton from which the musician may deviate at will. Gospel music is also closer to everyday life experiences of the secular world than to the spiritual—hence gospel's resemblance to the blues. As the genre's pioneering founder, Thomas A. Dorsey (and his gospel chorus) brought to the sacred world the improvisational style

of jazz and the blues, which demanded constant reinvention of life for survival. Accordingly, 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, and then to place a stamp of elegance and elan upon the reinvented mode" (Forrest, *Furious* 23), *reinvention*, as an African American art form, is best illustrated, generally, through examinations of black music and the black church—and, particularly, in Forrest's fiction, through the gospel impulse.

As it reveals itself in the Bloodworth Trilogy, the gospel impulse is most heavily concerned with spirituality and with using the language and especially the attitude of the gospel church, which has at its base a fundamental belief in survival and salvation. It differs from more traditional church thought in that the gospel congregation seeks and expects to move beyond mere survival to a point of celebration in *this* life. Thus, while salvation is the ultimate in the afterlife, an earthly resemblance of it is expected in the present. While this is undoubtedly a communal expectation, it also holds personal significance for the gospel hero or protagonist. Musically speaking, in gospel, as opposed to the spiritual, the antiphonal performance of the complete choir or congregation is frequently replaced by a lead singer/soloist from the choir, or the choir singing independently with the congregation participating only as listeners.<sup>4</sup> This structural modification translates easily into literature, particularly in Forrest's fiction, where all of his characters struggle to survive. But this communal cry for transcendence of spiritual agony is often focused through one voice which never substantially overwhelms any others yet achieves its independence.

Although it is the improvisational genius of jazz which is most frequently linked to Forrest's idea of reinvention, the gospel impulse, which I am using

primarily to describe processes of spiritual transformation which embrace the intermingling of sacred and secular African American experiences, particularly as they relate to the activity surrounding the preacher and his sermon, the gospel musician and his music, and the audience's response to it all, proves a more likely analogy than a jazz impulse since Forrest's characters search for transcendence of both worldly and spiritual agony on a soul-sustaining, divine level. While the black church, in a general sense, does, indeed, possess jazz-like powers of transformation, the gospel sermon and gospel music, in particular, more forcefully take into account the tension between the world and the Bible. This is true, perhaps, because the times out of which gospel music emerged demanded that the church address the fact that slavery had long ended, yet blacks still had not entered the "promised land." In an attempt to deal with the tension between expectations and faith, the folk preacher and the church musician, who now had been influenced by jazz and the blues, evolved accordingly.

In his examination of Forrest's relationship to the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), Craig Werner intimates the significance of the gospel impulse to understanding what Forrest is doing in his Bloodworth Trilogy, acknowledging that "what distinguishes both Forrest's fiction and the AACM's music most clearly from European-American modernism is their underlying spiritual vision" (137). Central to this vision, I contend, is the impulse of the gospel church. And while Werner, notably, deals with the gospel impulse (and the blues and jazz impulses' relationship to it) in chapter nine of *Playing the Changes: From Afro-American Modernism to the Jazz Impulse*, he limits his discussion of this impulse to the works of James Baldwin and, subsequently, glosses over the significance of the gospel impulse to Forrest's idea of reinvention, particu-

larly as it relates to self-transformation as a survival mechanism during spiritual agony. While Werner's development of the gospel impulse is somewhat Baldwin-specific, it is, nonetheless, useful to my development of the gospel impulse as a lens through which to read the idea of reinvention in Forrest's fiction.

Summarily, Werner's idea of the gospel impulse involves three constants—an insistent focus on the here-and-now, a belief in and vision of universal salvation, and a rejection of oppositional thought (in the sense of binary thinking, which automatically pits an accepted norm against an other). He also notes that a gospel sense creates a self-in-relation impulse that insists on a relationship among the cultural, the social, the political, and the personal. While this intermingling is, indeed, essential to the black church, Werner's interpretation of the influence of the gospel impulse on the gospel text too heavily subordinates the essence of the impulse—spirituality.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, much of Forrest's writing is highly influenced by his exposure to and participation in the black church experience. The son of a Catholic mother and a Baptist father, Forrest was strongly influenced by both traditions. He was impressed with the ritual aspect of Catholicism, a fascination that is frequently revealed in his novels. But he learned the art of the folk preacher from his Mississippi-born father's Protestant faith. With his father, who was an amateur lyricist and a member of the church choir, Forrest attended Chicago's Pilgrim Baptist Church, pastored by the powerful clergyman Rev. C. J. Austin, who was heralded by President Roosevelt as having "the greatest speaking voice of any public man in America." Ultimately, Forrest's association (through his father) with Pilgrim Baptist becomes most significant to his literary translation of the gospel impulse because of the church's relationship with gospel music's pioneer, Thomas A. Dorsey. Under the direction

of Austin, Pilgrim Baptist and Dorsey took the advent of gospel music to heights unthinkable in an environment that was deeply wed to tradition and, subsequently, heavily opposed to any interrelationship between the sacred and the secular. But Dorsey had himself been in and out of the church and had played piano in blues circles and composed music for the legendary Ma Rainey, so he never really abandoned the useful characteristics of either world. Instead, he married them.

Though the use of music in literature can be traced back to early African American fiction and poetry, its presence in more contemporary fiction reached its height with the publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. A trained musician himself, Ellison was among the first to acknowledge the musical impulses that were often present in black fiction. As more authors began to use music more explicitly in their works, literary critics also began to examine the use and function of music in African American literature. Like Ellison, Albert Murray wore hats of both writer and musician, and his *Stomping the Blues* and *The Hero and the Blues*, among others, highlight the inherent presence of music in the African American writer's style and language. Similarly, Houston A. Baker, Jr., in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, Stephen Henderson in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, and Gayl Jones in *Liberating Voices* each examines musical traditions of jazz and the blues which shape or influence contemporary black literature. Yet, as Werner suggests, gospel music has received limited attention as a source of literary inspiration. Forrest, however, acknowledges the gospel impulse as a springboard into his writerly imagination, and he celebrates Dorsey's transform-

ing art for its ability to bring together the sacred and the secular in order to accommodate the needs of a group of people who were experiencing spiritual agony at the hands of a non-repentant secular world.

**The gospel impulse becomes the way out of no way which allows Forrest's characters to survive just long enough to achieve new agony, while they marvel about how they got over.**

Unlike the blues aesthetic, the gospel impulse, though it privileges the sacred, combines the vocabulary and beliefs of the church with the experiences and emotion of the secular world. Wit and cunning are combined with hope and faith to ensure affirmation and salvation. No longer was the hope of salvation and the

promise of affirmation in the after-life enough. Believers wanted the good life in the present moment. Forrest acknowledges this need in the "Wakefulness" section of *There Is A Tree* and adopts the gospel impulse, which allows believers to embrace the survival strategies of the blues without abandoning their faith in Jesus Christ.

Throughout the novel, Nathaniel debates the benefits of "changing his name" to overcome his struggles. Alluding to the spiritual which claims that "Jesus told me that the world would hate me, if he changed my name," Nathaniel ponders: "knowing and not knowing that by changing my name i could not change the track, or the switch of the train, or the splattered rainbow, the fleets at sea, the bombers abreast, the camping grounds turned against us, the trade route, nor the river's rumblings, nor the wheel, nor the harness of creation . . ." And he finally comes to realize that changing his name will not allow him to escape the reality that history has created for him as a black man. He now knows that changing his name cannot "change the way [his] soul had been anchored

in the walk, the dance, the drum, [or] the shades of tongues" (*Tree* 154). Instead of running from his past, he adopts the impetus of the blues and becomes determined to endure and transcend his suffering. As he is struggling to find himself in the present moment, Nathaniel hears a voice that tells him, "chile you working on his [God's] time now, not theirs [whites]—because honey this here's a rejoicing, jordan rolling train / hush i said 'cause you are confusing the misery of my history with the glories of our imperishably rugged cross" (153). The irony of this statement is that confusing the misery of history with the glories of the cross is the essence of both gospel music and the spiritual. And Nathaniel knows this better than his Auntie Breedlove, who insists that "if your soul and spirit is anchored in the lord, you make a tower of the ground upon which you are walking and talking; you erect a wing of wisdom, delight and praise before him, so that you celebrate life, even as you feed his sheep" (155). Nathaniel does not doubt the truth of Breedlove's faith, but he seeks the transcendence that abounds after the blues confrontation. So, he adopts the gospel approach: "god i know you got the woods and the warbles in your stubby hands and long fingers, but i need a cunning jesus down here on the ground to lead me around the bends and the cycles of the mountains, wrangling with lions, then wolves and sheep grazing and frothy-mouthed dogs and hounds over the river deep and river wide yes and moaning and groaning for power and light in the grotto-cave" (159). Though he has faith, Nathaniel also possesses a sense of immediacy about his turmoil. He accepts the promise of heaven, but he wants some semblance of gratification on earth to help him cope.

Subscribing to the black theology that informs the gospel church, Nathaniel recognizes God of heaven as one who has solidarity with the wretched of the earth. He does not

view the Cross as a theological idea but as God's identification with sufferers. Thus, he expects God's presence and the fruits of his redemptive suffering in this life. Nathaniel's expectation is highly influenced by the gospel impulse and its affinity with black theology. As black theologian and cultural critic James Cone argues, black religious thought draws from both African and American influences. It is not identical to either; but, rather, it is "reinterpreted for and adopted to the life-situation of black people's struggle for justice in a nation whose social, political, and economic structures are dominated by a white racist ideology" (Cone, "Black Theology" 197). Like black theology, the gospel impulse reinterprets Christianity to make it specific to the needs of African Americans who have not abandoned their faith and belief in God but who also, for purposes of survival, take into consideration the realities that inform the secular world around them. Take, for example, "The Vision" section of the novel, in which Forrest complicates his gospel impulse with a jazz/montage-like development of the section's narrative. Arguably, the chapter that comprises "The Vision" is the best example of what Werner refers to as the jazz/modernism/gospel nexus that comes together in Forrest's narrative voice. Throughout the section, Forrest combines the racist reality of the world with biblical allusions as the unnamed man is crucified/lynched until he, ultimately, emerges, like Christ, victoriously. Thus, he completes the three-stage process of the gospel impulse: the burden, bearing witness, and the vision of salvation.<sup>6</sup>

Notably, the way Forrest fuses religion and history together in "The Vision" is in conversation with black theology's interpretation of eschatology. According to Cone, an authentic "eschatological perspective must be grounded in the historical present, thereby forcing the oppressed community to say no to unjust treatment, because its present humiliation is inconsistent with its promised future"

(*Liberation* 137). By recontextualizing race-based lynchings and suffering and likening this to Christ's oppression and the cross, Nathaniel realizes the relationship among the past, the present, and the eschatological future. In black theology, eschatology (both in spite of and because of its concentration on the final things) is related to protest against injustice in the here-and-now, and acknowledges the need for revolutionary change in the present. The reality of the resurrection and the promising future that God reveals through it are antithetical to any idea of contentment with present oppression, even in light of hope for a better after-life. Thus, his vision of the experience the unnamed soldier encounters brings Nathaniel closer to the realization that redemptive suffering also has its reward in the present. Once he transcends his agony, wisdom abounds, and he finds himself one step closer to liberating wholeness. Like the soldier who, despite being crucified, lynched, and dismembered, rises at the end of the section "TOTALLY COLLECTED INTO HIS ORIGINAL FORM," Nathaniel must reassemble fragments of history and have faith that he, too, will emerge whole from his suffering.

Once Nathaniel reconciles his nightmare, his dream, and his vision, he approaches "Wakefulness." He realizes that he cannot change who he is, his history, or his condition. But he can change his response to it at all. And though he still looks to Breedlove for love and guidance, he begins to come into his own, suggesting that transcendence is both possible and probable. His emergence from underneath the bed where he has been hiding (at the end of the novel) parallels the unnamed soldier's emergence from the sackcloth. The angels gather up the dismembered parts and presumably reunite them before Nathaniel rejects a seemingly apocalyptic ending and re-enters the present world. He narrates:

And as the form arose from the sackcloth shawl I saw the lacerations upon his body, the river-twisted mouth, the

head glorious and those EYES EYES EYES . . . . The man's wings broken, storm-blasted like limb branches torn from their plantation roots; his feet bloody, his mouth twisted, his eyes bedeviled; his glorious head bloody; but LORD FATHER HE WAS FLYING FLYING FLYING. (Forrest, *Tree* 148)

The hope of the unknown future is still present, but the angels protest injustice in the here-and-now. By the novel's end, we have taken Nathaniel's journey of agony and transcendence with him; through Forrest's innovative narrative construction, we have seen as Nathaniel has seen; and we have learned what he has learned—that history and spirituality (the essence of the gospel impulse) are the empowering forces that will allow him to reinvent his life and to make a way out of no way. And though Forrest suggests that achieving transcendence is only temporary, for agony and suffering will surely return, at least Nathaniel knows how to avoid being overwhelmed by pain, which is something too many characters in *The Bloodworth Orphans* never learn.

Take what happens to Abraham Dolphin, for example. Reminiscent of the story of Moses, Dolphin's life-story begins with his being abandoned by his parents and found in a muddy swamp by the governor's daughter. Raised as one of the governor's sons, Dolphin is keenly aware of his blackness, though he never experiences the hardships of his childhood contemporaries. After he completes medical school, he becomes a successful doctor who treats black patients. His success in the South abounds until he becomes an activist for civil rights before the movement is in full swing, and he is forced to flee to the North hidden in the casket of Chesterfield Berry, a Korean War veteran. Dolphin is so grateful for his safe passage that he sends a care package to Berry's son every Christmas for twelve years. Once he reaches Forest County, Dolphin, despite being *given* transcendence over agony twice now, still exists in a world of spiritual chaos because he has no

true satisfaction with his identity. He is convinced that his inability to have a son is God's punishment for the many abortions he has performed. His wife leaves him for a peddler, and one of his two daughters is killed by her lesbian lover. So Dolphin retreats to the mountains to seek the face of God and to have "a confrontation with God for the very resources of the inner meaning of his life" (*Bloodworth* 182). But the mountains reveal nothing to him, and they never will. What Dolphin fails to realize is that transcendence will not always be given to him as it had been previously when he was found by the governor's daughter or when he was shipped to the North at someone else's expense. And when he cannot empower himself enough to transcend his agony, even after he seeks God's face, which is, perhaps, Forrest's commentary on the insufficiency of religion alone, his fate is sealed. Finally, when Dolphin discovers that the young man he shot and killed after being attacked by a gang is Chesterfield Berry's son, he can endure the agony no more, and kills himself.

Despite his success as a doctor, Dolphin never figures out what action he needs to take in his personal life to silence the hounding voices of the past that haunt him and remind him that he has no familial identity in the traditional sense. What he fails to realize is that, just as he created and then recreated a professional identity for himself, he must create a viable personal identity that will help him transcend the spiritual agony that plagues him. But because he can never get past the mystery of his origins or his lack of biological parentage and the fears of abandonment both entail, his spiritual quest to find peace for his personal agony goes unfulfilled. As the only two surviving characters at the end of *Bloodworth Orphans*, Nathaniel and Noah, contrarily, escape the impending doom because they have learned that blood is not all important. They have mastered the art of transformation, and so are capable of transcendence.

Nathaniel learns the lesson of the insignificance of blood in *Two Wings to Veil My Face* from Sweetie Reed when she informs him that she is not his biological grandmother. Sweetie's gospel narrative serves as Nathaniel's model for transcending personal agony, though he must reinterpret it to make it his own. As she searches for personal truth and the truth of black experience, Sweetie struggles to balance her faith with the harsh reality of the world. She charts her repeated experiences of unfulfilled desires to be loved (a traditional blues theme), beginning with her relationship with her father. She tells Nathaniel:

When I. V. Reed [her father] was on his deathbed, I went back to the Rollins Reed plantation to say good-bye; 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. (*Two Wings* 45)

We hear this repeated theme of lack and lovelessness later in the novel when Sweetie tells Nathaniel about her relationship with his grandfather Jericho. "Starved and thirsty for love" (262), Sweetie is, at first, comforted by Jericho and the "kindness and sweetness, if not love," he gives her. But after she is unable to produce a child that lives beyond infancy and Jericho returns to her with an illegitimate child, Sweetie, once again, feels unloved. His affair with another woman "tore open that old healed-over chamber of [Sweetie's] heart. Opened up self-doubt: that vulnerable, inadequate sense. Compromised again" (268). Feeling unwanted and unloved

most of her childhood and adult life, Sweetie had to find a way to affirm an existence for herself where she was valued. By telling Nathaniel her story, Sweetie attempts to empower him with the truth and to show him how to move from loneliness and lack to making a way out of no way.

Notably, Sweetie's burden forces her to create a relationship between sexuality and spirituality. Since she is unable to give Jericho an heir, sexually she has failed. When he goes elsewhere to have his desires (to be a father) fulfilled, she must look to her spirituality to help her accept Jericho's son. For Forrest, the "powerful relationship between sexuality and spirituality [reveals] the glory and power of Negro gospel music. This marriage of sexuality and spirituality is at the heart of gospel music[,] which is a union between the blues and the spiritual" ("Leon" 306). The church's ambiguous response to gospel music is problematic for this very reason. But the separation between the church and the extra-church cannot last for long because the balance between the two, Forrest seems to imply, is essential to reinvention and survival. Nowhere is this clearer than in Forrest's depiction of the preacher and his sermon. In an attempt to be more reflective of contemporary culture and to move beyond earlier literary uses of the Negro preacher, Forrest creates a variety of preachers in his fiction. But two are of particular importance here because of the gospel impulse that informs their being.

In the reprint of *There Is A Tree*, Forrest introduces the sermon of Rev. Pompey c.j. Browne as the culminating event of a "Midnight Mass" which has been organized "to assess the meaning of Martin Luther King's life, upon the 12th Anniversary of the martyr's assassination" (*Tree* 204). The mass turns into a barroom potpourri of jokes, curses, tales and stories, and moments of celebration. Not until 5:15 a.m. does the six-foot seven-inch Pompey c. j. Browne rise to give "the principal homily, sermon-address-obsequies,"

which is, in essence, bar-talk couched in a sermon. The rhetoric of the sermon, appropriately titled "Oh, Jeremiah of the Dreamers," reflects the transformation in Rev. Browne's character that Nathaniel has observed over the years. Though no description could ever "adequately capture the man behind the cloth, nor the mystery and meaning of the sermon he weaves" (205), Nathaniel describes him as a mix of Adam Clayton Powell, Martin Luther King, Leon Sullivan, and Richard Pryor.

Violating all limitations of character confinement, Browne exploits his right as a gospel preacher to shift voices throughout the sermon, as his voice fluctuates among husky, vibrant, gruff, and mellow. While Powell, King, and Sullivan share a somewhat similar rhetorical or oratorical manner, Pryor, as a comedian, possesses an entirely different mode of expression. Pompey's adoption of comedic satire stands out the most, as the language Pompey uses in such instances is not very reflective of a preacher. The difference between a passage like

Oh the impermanence of paradise, oh ripped-off gallows of Gethsemane. This is my body and *this* is my blood. Oh missioned prophet in shattered temple of the merchandised Diaspora—body and soul . . . and Lord each man riddled in the chambers of iniquity and the segregated metaphor of his own madness. (206)

and a passage like

They say our politicians are whores and I believe them for I've seen them parting their asses like punk rock stars with acid in their wisdom teeth. And the patched up one-eyed cop on the beat, spreads his legs for a pound of melted down, indivisible cure. (210)

calls attention to Rev. Browne's ability to transform himself and his word. Here lies the relationship of his character to the gospel impulse and to Forrest's idea of survival through reinvention. Pompey's sermon places the sacred and the secular side by side as he parallels the contemporary moment

with the larger historical reality of African American grief and suffering.

Dolan Hubbard, in *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, argues that the "genius of the black sermon is that it transforms the discrete aspects of black expression from a system of signs, songs, and stories to an oral, expressive, unifying document that conveys a shared value system" (15). The shared value system of Pompey's audience is the lament of the struggles they have encountered as African Americans and their as yet unredeemed suffering. Throughout the sermon, Pompey's lamentation "Oh" appears more than fifty times, and becomes his theme:

... Oh what supplicant is to deliver up the Agony branded articles of sacred faith of his outraged Soul? Oh sorrowful mystery of the blood's existential sovereignty. Oh Jeremiah of the Dreamers. Oh to know God is to love Him for his gorgeous Demons and the Agony of His Angel's tormented body and soul in the chambers of His tortured clay-making imagery. Oh Martin, transcendent lover of the world soul, of the over-soul, in shackles. (Forrest, *Tree* 211; emphasis added)

The sermon and the "oh's" continue without any particular significance to any one subject. He takes the signs, songs, and stories of King's life and death and the black experience in general and transforms them into a unified lament—and, finally, a wellspring of hope. Claiming that he can hear Martin's "voice still to fight on, crying forth in the wilderness," Pompey implores each person within the sound of his voice to remember and to honor the dying lamb by taking up his cross.

Pompey c.j. Browne reappears as Forest County's charismatic preacher-man in *Two Wings*. Nathaniel recalls an excerpt of Pompey's Easter sermon as he waits for Sweetie Reed to continue her story of the trials and tribulations of her life, her family members' lives, and black life in general. As Browne chastises the congregation for their obsession with material goods, he

contrasts their ways with the simplicity of Jesus's life. While Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the members of his congregation have Cadillacs that they cannot afford. But Pompey, too, is guilty of living life far beyond simple means.

"Dressed to kill" in fine linen robes, Pompey has a flare for the spectacular. As impressive as his wardrobe is the theatrical performance that accompanies his black sermonizing. Just as the sermon comes to a close, the deacons lift him up, and he becomes the resurrected Christ:

... as Rev. Browne hit the moment of ecstasy in his chanting, he suddenly fell to his knees, sobbing and weeping, his head sweeping about in circles, then falling into a state of collapse. . . . Now dependent on the usherette at his right-hand side, the struck-down, crawling Rev. Browne's head is wobbling and rolling about on the back of his neck, as if it is about to roll off. . . . But as they reach the exit door and the usherette's fingertips touch the panel ever so lightly to open the door, Rev. Browne hurls the lily-white cape to the floor and comes up from the knee-crawling position, babbling in tongues of fire, and doing holy leaps, and somersaults in Jesus's name, with the adroitness of an acrobat half his size and age. (*Two Wings* 131)

Browne's theatrics continue, and Nathaniel and Sweetie both are somewhat shocked at Browne's spectacular but profane performance. As Danille Taylor-Guthrie suggests, Pompey's "service at Easter is closer to a James Brown performance than a religious observance. He is resurrected not as Christ, J.C., but like J.B., who in a seeming fit of exhaustion is covered by a cape only to throw it aside in a renewed outburst of energy" (229). This act, Taylor-Guthrie argues, is "evidence of the thin line that exists between the sacred and the secular in African-American culture—the Blues/Gospel dialectic where ecstasy, confession, and rebirth are taken from the confines of sacred private space to public theater and in this case returned to the church infused and there

remolded into forever changing modes and forms of African-American interpretation of the Holy" (229). Browne is, after all, a former blues man. And by combining the sacred and the secular so willingly and consciously, he adopts the gospel impulse and subverts tradition, which makes every attempt to maintain such distinctions.

Of all of Forrest's preachers, Rev. Packwood of *The Bloodworth Orphans* is probably rendered with the most authenticity. Packwood adopts the conventions and traditions of the black preacher, such as the use of refrains and repetition, the tendency of the preacher to excite himself and his audience, and the tendency of the preacher to seek the audience's participation and consent. "The preacher's call to worship," as Hubbard suggests, "is an open invitation for the congregation to participate in the *act of creation*; their collective construction has as its end result the *transformation of reality*" (15; emphasis added). In the style and language of call-and-response, Packwood's sermon is filled with rhythmic refrains like "I don't believe you see what I'm talking about this night, Church" (*Bloodworth* 30); "Help me, Church, pray with me, if you please" (36); and "Witness?" (37). In addition to giving Packwood's sermon an aesthetic and authenticating quality, Forrest's use of such repeated refrains, along with Packwood's rhetorical strategies to involve the audience, calls attention to the sermon as an act of creation and transformation.

As he attempts to convert Rachel Flowers, Packwood implores the congregation to "pray her back on home-wards, totally" (29). When he begins "chasing the evil spirit" out of Rachel and "imploring God for the victory over Lucifer," he preaches:

Come out of there, Satan, you lying wonder, and leave this Sister be. Give yourself up to God, Sister; accept; move; COME ON HOME; truly; WALK; DE-NOUNCE; RE-NOUNCE; BE-LIEVE; Help me, Church, pray with me, if you please. (36)

Packwood's requests for the church to "pray with him" are both rhetorical and overt. It is both a space-filler and a true need. He needs time to collect his next thoughts, and he also needs the audience's participation for his success. Forrest's skill at recapturing these seemingly simple nuances as he composes the sermon and its performance reconstructs, with authenticity, the preacher's power of conception, which speaks to Packwood's ability to create, to (re)create, and to transform.

Composed to render Rachel's story, Packwood's sermon calls attention to the necessary balance between the church and the extra-church, and it also functions as a source of cultural biography. The agony Rachel experiences as a motherless child who was created in an incestuous affair, as an exploited woman who mothers two children by her half-brother, and as the product of miscegenation speaks to the agony of African Americans as an exploited race. Hubbard conjectures that the preacher's symbolic significance and his speech act are revealed as "the profound cultural biography, or self-voicing, that asserts itself like a disguised figure in the social fabric of the community [and which] testifies to the community's resiliency and determination" (15). Fulfilling his preacherly duty, Packwood didactically informs the congregation

that [Rachel's] grandmother nourished [Rachel] upon the lessons of survival and how to walk and how to make food out of what was left over . . . and how to hold on. Yes, by flickering light, and no light; by making threads that bind together, with straw for burning light to see forwards and backwards, when even the candles failed; and yet how to keep her lamps trimmed and long glowing, when they were available and not available. (Forrest, *Bloodworth* 31)

Reinvention or making a way out of no way via transformation, again, becomes Forrest's preacher's mantra. Like Rachel's grandmother, the African American must balance wit with faith, or as Packwood suggests, ". . . keep

dipping your body in the icy waters of tragedy to make that old Jordan roll and keep on rolling. Witness?" (37)

Unlike the purists and traditionalists who struggle to maintain separation between the sacred and the secular, Forrest accepts and privileges the blues/spiritual dialectic that creates the gospel impulse as he exploits the tensions that exist between church and extra-church modes of expression. For Forrest, the gospel impulse is the essence of a culture which never completely abandoned the belief, hope, and promise of the Cross but which struggles to deal with the harsh realities of a

world that constantly seeks to subject and other it. Since it is through the gospel impulse that the tension between the sacred and the profane is most often resolved, when the world brings its problems to the church, instead of abandoning the world, the gospel church and its survivalist impulse seek to transcend spiritual agony and reinvent it "in the light of likeness—transformed." And in Forest County, this impulse becomes the way out of no way which allows Forrest's characters to survive just long enough to achieve new agony, while they marvel about how they got over.

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1. See Forrest's discussion of Kenneth Burke and Lord Raglan's ideas of the hero as Forrest relates them to Dostoevski and Ellison in *The Furious Voice for Freedom* 126-45.

2. This is not to imply that jazz and the blues are *purely* secular genres. However, the very essence of gospel music as a blending of the sacred and the secular renders it as the most definitive and logical allegory. Similarly, it is the tension between the sacred and the secular that separates gospel music from the spiritual, which resists the influence of the secular on the sacred. As such, gospel music is not to be confused with spirituals.

3. As Craig Werner notes, the influence of music on literature can be seen not in terms of specific forms but in terms of *impulses* "capable of generating and expressing powerful insights grounded in, but not limited to, Afro-American experience" (218).

4. See Jackson.

5. What I am suggesting here is that characters cannot achieve what Werner calls *higher innocence* and what is best described as transcendence of spiritual agony without belief and faith in a Being greater than themselves. Thus, the role of spirituality and, to some degree, religion cannot be marginalized or subordinated and still be effective as a means of achieving higher innocence or transcending spiritual agony. Here lies the primary difference between my interpretation of the gospel impulse and Werner's.

6. See Craig Werner's comparison of the blues and gospel impulses (254); Jones 32-49.

## Notes

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