

**“troubling the waters”: The Magic of Remembering the Past in Leon Forrest’s *Two Wings to Veil My Face* / “inquietando as águas”: A magia de lembrar o passado em *Two Wings to Veil My Face*, de Leon Forrest**

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**ABSTRACT**

Composed during the decades of intense debates over the possibility of retrieving an authentic African American identity, *Two Wings to Veil My face* is a reaction against the nativists who argued for and celebrated a genuine African American identity. The authors of this article illustrate that Leon Forrest has implemented magical realism to metaphorically unearth the long suppressed voices of the past in order to construct a contemporary identity. However, the ancestral past, as represented by the narrators, is neither unadulterated nor fully innocent. To this aim, the protagonists remember and relate the horrendous communal history, and thus reveal the complicity of some African Americans with the slave-owners. Through remembering the traumatic experiences of the community’s past, as this study will explicate, the hero of the novel, Nathaniel, reinvents his identity based on an uncensored communal history and accentuates the primacy of communal bonds over the illusory family lines.

**KEYWORDS:** Leon Forrest; *Two Wings to Veil my Face*; Magical elements; African American community; Memory

**RESUMO**

*Escrito durante décadas de intensos debates sobre a possibilidade de se recuperar uma autêntica identidade afro-americana, Two Wings to Veil My Face é uma reação contra os nativistas que defenderam e celebraram uma verdadeira identidade afro-americana. Os autores deste artigo ilustram a forma pela qual Leon Forrest implementou o realismo mágico para, metaforicamente, desvelar as vozes do passado há muito suprimidas, a fim de construir uma identidade contemporânea. Contudo, o passado ancestral, tal qual representado pelos narradores, não é nem adulterado, nem totalmente puro. Para tanto, os protagonistas relembram e relatam sua horrenda história coletiva e, assim, revelam a cumplicidade de alguns afro-americanos com os proprietários de escravos. Ao relembrar as experiências traumáticas do passado da comunidade, conforme este estudo explicará, o herói do romance, Nathaniel, reinventa sua identidade com base em uma história comunal não censurada e enfatiza o primado dos laços comuns em detrimento de linhas familiares ilusórias.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Leon Forrest; *Two Wings to Veil my Face*; Elementos mágicos; Comunidade afro-americana; Memória

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## Introduction

In their novels, many African American authors including Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Ernest Gaines and Gloria Naylor try to reconstruct the history of their African American heritage and show how politics of remembering the past can help their ethnicity in the process of identity-formation. In this way, as Keith Bayerman (2005) indicates, this generation of African American writers distinguish themselves from writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison who represented the Black Arts movement or the Harlem Renaissance and were, compared to the former range of authors, less historically-minded intellectuals (BAYERMAN, 2005, p.1). Leon Richard Forrest's Forest County Trilogy, which includes *Two Wings to Veil my Face* (1983), is also mostly concerned with a history of American slavery and African American mythology and how that will redirect the re-construction of a modern conception of African Americanness. Forrest's dazzlingly multi-voiced novel incorporates storytelling as a narrative style and brims over with allusions to the Bible, literary texts, and cultural phenomena. In *Two Wings*, Forrest is primarily concerned with accentuating African Americans' misery and suffering throughout history. Central to his historical perception of African Americans is his belief in African Americans' biological and cultural orphanhood. In Forrest's novel, most of the characters are either biologically or emotionally orphans. This is usually revealed to them when the characters embark on a search for their family history. The quest for identity often uncovers the tragic marks of incest, miscegenation, and rape in the past. Having recognized the state of African American's orphanhood, Forrest intends to transcend the painful past and explore the ways to re-invent identities for the African Americans in modern America.

Forrest's interest to re-define African Americans' identity rose in the context of a hot political debate in and about the 1970s between the African American nationalists and the individualists. Whereas the former stressed the importance of community and blackness, the latter emphasized the constructed-ness of African American identity. Forrest's characters are often lost between the two extreme tendencies that in a way reflect the general uncertainty among the African Americans about how to define themselves. Forrest seems to be artistically attracted to Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible*

*Man* proved to be a harsh criticism of the essentialism inherent in some African American artistic forms, as well as political and philosophical movements of the time. Nonetheless, Forrest's characters eventually prefer the haven of community and African American cultural heritage while conceding the African American's past and their history of cultural miscegenation in America. Forrest, in general, welcomes the diversity of traditions and cultures in America and accepts that they have affected African American people. Thus, he rejects the Black Arts Movement's assertion that an authentic African American culture is retrievable and desirable. In an interview with Madhu Dubey, for instance, when describing his attitudes towards African American tradition and culture, Forrest (1996, p.590) remarks:

I resist anything in this [African American] culture that has to do with purity. That's so anti-American in the first place. And yet at the same time it's a crucible on which much of race relations and white supremacy is based—the idea of purity. But there certainly aren't any pure Americans culturally, not at this time, [*sic*] that's one thing for sure. And obviously the heritage, the background of blacks is very complex, not just on color lines but lines of culture. [...].

In *Two Wings*, by means of both thematic and stylistic magical elements focalized through his fictional characters, Leon Forrest suggests the possibility of hearing long suppressed voices of the past while showing that this ancestral past is neither uncontaminated nor innocent. To this end, Leon Forrest's protagonists remember the unbearable communal history and thereby reveal the complicity of some African Americans with the system of slavery. Forrest, moreover, in this novel rejects the possibility of recovering a self-independent African American identity. Through remembering the traumatic experiences of the community's past, the young hero of the novel, Nathaniel, re-invents his modern identity based on a tragic but uncensored communal history and celebrates the supremacy of communal bonds over the illusory family lines.

A saga of the Witherspoon family, *Two Wings to Veil My Face* covers a period between the late slavery era and the year 1958. The novel is in the form of stories that the ninety-one year old Great-Momma Sweetie Reed tells to her twenty-one year old grandson, Nathaniel. He is curious to know why his Grand-Momma did not attend his grandpa Jericho W. Witherspoon's funeral ceremony fourteen years ago. To explain it,

Sweetie recalls and retells the history of her family from the “beginning time of all memory” (FORREST, 1983, p.6). Sweetie’s memories are a mixture of dialogue, incantations and sermons and she functions as an oral historian who employs all rhetorical devices at her disposal to give a picture as detailed as possible of the history of her community. Nathaniel also forms a link between the past of his black community and its present situation. The stories are interrupted by Nathaniel’s stream-of-consciousness narratives, in which he remembers his grandpa’s funeral, his family members, and his fiancé.

Sweetie narrates how her father, I.V. Reed, in his deathbed told her that Sweetie’s mother was conceived when Master Rollins Reed, the slaveholder, raped a slave woman called Jubill. Then Sweetie incarnates the mysterious Auntie Foisty, the eldest slave woman in the plantation and through her, Sweetie divulges the story of the Middle Passage, along with slaves’ grievances and their survival in America.

One of the significant episodes in the novel is the revival of Master Rollins Reed by Auntie Foisty. Rollins used to force his female slaves to have sex with him. As I.V. Reed explains, once when Rollins leaves his mansion and visits Jubill’s room at midnight, I.V. Reed, infatuated with Jubill, plans to take revenge on Shank Haywood, a black slave-driver who also desires Jubill. So I.V. Reed tells Haywood that Master Rollins has been visiting his mistress, Jubill. Infuriated, Haywood attacks Rollins at midnight when no one but I.V. Reed, who was hiding in a tree, can see them. Haywood almost strangles Rollins to death but I.V. Reed, throwing a stone at Haywood, injures him and thus makes Haywood leave Rollins and escape. I.V. Reed takes Rollins’ dead body to Auntie Foisty and fabricates a story. Auntie Foisty, through some voodoo practices, revives Rollins. A few days later, patrollers find and kill Shank Haywood.

Sweetie also tells Nathaniel about the cruel Mistress of the plantation, Sylvia Reed, who made Sweetie’s mother, Angelina, hide diamonds in her hair when the Union Army was moving deep in Southlands at the end of the Civil War. Three Union soldiers almost rape Angelina but she manages to run away once the diamonds distracted the soldiers. But again sometime later another group of white patrollers who had kidnaped and intended to enslave Angelina, rape and kill her – an incident which happens before Sweetie’s eyes and came as a severe and lasting blow to her. The patrollers also plan to kill the then seven-year-old Sweetie but Jericho Witherspoon

ransoms and frees her, planning to marry Sweetie's mother. Finding out that Angelina is dead, Jericho is disappointed but after some years, he buys Sweetie, when she is fifteen, and marries her as a substitute for her mother. Jericho is first an escaped and then a free slave, who was fifty-five when he married Sweetie. Soon after the emancipation, Jericho manages to climb up the social ladder. He becomes a successful and conscientious lawyer, remains respectable in African American communities and lives to be one hundred seventeen years old.

After the slaves are freed in the South, I.V. Reed remains in the plantation and serves Master Rollins. But Sweetie and Jericho move to the North where they have an unhappy, childless life together. When Sweetie is in her thirties and Jericho in his seventies, he brings to their house a child who is then revealed to be Arthur, Nathaniel's father. Arthur, Sweetie explains, is the illegitimate child of Jericho and a woman called Lucasta. Sweetie accepts to look after Arthur, but she refuses to continue to live with Jericho because of the adultery he had committed. Sweetie raises Arthur like her real child and treats his son like her real grandson. And the novel ends when Sweetie gives some diamonds as inheritance to Nathaniel.

Danille Taylor-Guthrie points at the dichotomization of oral and written documents in Forrest's *Two Wings* and concludes that Nathaniel travels back in time and succeeds to pass into maturity (TAYLOR-GUTHRIE, 1993, p.430). Dana Williams in *Preachin' and Singin' Just to Make it over*, contends that Leon Forrest through his novels, especially *Two Wings*, "uses the gospel impulse 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" (WILLIAMS, 2002, p.476). Also Keith Byerman, in *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*, speculates that Forrest in his novels, including *Two Wings*, speaks of "the recovery of family history, which can serve as metaphor or metonymy of group history, [which] is the most effective means of understanding and working through contemporary problems" (BYERMAN, 2005, p.137). According to Byerman, when African American scholars began to revise their history and secured an important position for it in academia and popular culture, Forrest was warning against any tendency toward narrow ideological interpretations of African American identity (BYERMAN, 2005, p.138). Dana A. Williams in her *In the Light of Likeness* –

*transformed: The Literary Art of Leon Forrest*, draws the readers' attention to how Forrest incorporates blues in *Two Wings* to highlight his concern about survival of the African American communities. "In Forrest's novel," Williams writes, "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 [...] the slave narrative and the blues" (WILLIAMS, 2005, p.92). Despite the scarcity of critical writings on Leon Forrest's *Two Wings*, the scholars who have ventured to write about this novel have addressed diverse issues in their rich critical reading of the novel. Yet, what they have almost missed is to elaborate on how Forrest has drawn upon magical elements to give an aesthetic touch to the politics of remembrance and survival as depicted in this novel. This article intends to show how Leon Forrest has employed magical realism to metaphorically unearth the long suppressed voices of the past in order to construct a contemporary (yet controversial) identity.

### **1 Look Back in Candour: Grand-Momma Sweetie Remembers the Past**

In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks writes:

Memory need not be a passive reflection, a nostalgia longing for things to be as they once were; it can function as a way of knowing and learning from the past. [...] It can serve as a catalyst for self-recovery. We are talking about collective black self-recovery" (HOOKS, 2015, p.40).

Later in the same book she explains that "our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting"; a politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as once it was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present" (HOOKS, 2015, p.147). Leon Forrest in *Two Wings* attests that the transformation of the contemporary African American generation, as represented in Nathaniel, is impossible unless the past is remembered without any useless and misguided sense of nostalgia.

*Two Wings* also between its lines takes issue with the nostalgic remembrance of the past. Forrest suggests that this family chronicle is an analogy for the history of

almost all African Americans. The voices and memories of the dead are so real in Sweetie's house that she cannot do away with objects belonging to a husband who left her some fifty years ago. "But now the young man mused," as the third person omniscient narrator in *Two Wings* informs us, "how Great-Momma Sweetie Reed had never been able to rid herself of the bed where she and Jericho Witherspoon had slept ever so long ago as one, even as she had never been able to rid herself of the warring memory of the man she loved once upon a time" (FORREST, 1983, p.20). By remembering the past and keeping the memorabilia, as Dana Williams contends, Sweetie "charts her repeated experiences of unfulfilled desires to be loved" (WILLIAMS, 2002, p.481). Sweetie narrates that neither her father nor grandfather treated her affectionately and nor did her husband who denied her marital love. She tells Nathaniel about an unfulfilled love and a sense of identity that the patriarchs of her society avoided to offer her. She tells Nathaniel:

When I. V. Reed 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 (FORREST, 1983, p.45).

She also laments the lack of love in her life and relationship with Nathaniel's grandfather, Jericho. She "[s]tarved and [was] thirsty for love" of Jericho (FORREST, 1983, p.262). But when Jericho betrays her and fathers a child out of wedlock, Sweetie feels that his affair with Lucasta "tore open that old healed-over chamber of [Sweetie's] heart. Opened up self-doubt: that vulnerable, inadequate sense. Compromised again" (FORREST, 1983, p.268). More than this, violence lurks in every part of Sweetie's life. She has witnessed her mother raped and killed in front of her eyes and has seen herself sold as a wife to an older man. Her reminiscences reflect the trauma that enslaved African Americans suffered during the period of slavery due to the atrocities they were subjected to in a racist society and sometimes within their own patriarchal families. However, instead of taking revenge on her community, she offers her love

unconditionally to others and to her community. She accepts the custody of the illegitimate child of her own husband and gives the child all her love and care that a real mother can offer. Although she has felt abandoned most of her life, by telling Nathaniel her memories/stories, she tries to teach him to use the magic of love for a final reconciliation and salvation of the entire community.

Her very old age and her old stories help to represent Sweetie Reed as an epitome of the African American community's wisdom and vision. To gain these, nonetheless, she has had to pay a high price. She underwent the horrible experience of slavery and is now facing its upshot in the form of racism, both of which according to John Cawelti "have disrupted families, destroyed many individuals, and created terrible misunderstandings and separations not only between whites and blacks, but between black parents and children, men and women" (CAWELTI, 1997, p.44). Yet, for Forrest the reconciliation seems to be uncertain. He does not believe that the deep scars of slavery are easy to recover, but the first thing to do in order to heal is to remember the traumatic memories of the "beginning time." As Jericho's ghost says to Sweetie, "they need *remembering* and *troubling* and *rekindling*" (FORREST, 1983, p.203; italics in original). This is what, in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison (2004, p.36) calls "rememory" and which Carole Boyce Davies defines as "the re-remembering or the bringing back together of the disparate members of the family in painful recall" (DAVIES, 1994, p.17). Sweetie listens to his dead husband, sets out to "trouble the waters", and painfully reveals the community/family secrets so that they all can transcend the miseries and unhappiness they are trapped in.

Sweetie remembers the past to redeem the future African American community. Jericho Witherspoon tells Sweetie that his real baptism takes place when he is "bathed in the pool of trouble-faced waters, cracking the calm" (FORREST, 1983, p.210). When Jericho's soul asks Sweetie to divulge the past, he compares the ritual of remembrance to baptism:

Sweetie, I want you to trouble the waters, this morning, with the agitation in the distress, the discord, the discomfort, the anxieties, the frustrations, the provoking, the exasperations; the lying at the building in the temples of wisdom; the torment of the defiled dreamers and the soul-sucking horrors of this life; as you bathe my body with the baptizing and the healing, bathing balms, down at the well near the river (which looks like a shallow pool to me), with *your* baptizing

waters and your singing, trying to redeem (FORREST, 1983, p.198; italics in original).

To remember the past, one is to confront the traumatic experiences of their community in history. Since telling the stories may reveal their own humiliation, impotence, and perhaps collaboration in the face of that traumatic experience, it seems easier to deny rather than to divulge the past. Opposite to the temptation to forget the past or to create a different past, there is the urge to remember it, no matter how dark it is. The survivors of a traumatic experience are persuaded to speak of the occurrences that implicate them in the horrors. Based on trauma theory, the repressed narratives of the past are remembered, the unspeakable speaks, and the un-representable is presented (BYERMAN, 2005, p.5). And as Cathy Caruth defines trauma, it includes both death and survival and in fact it “oscillate[s] between the *crisis of death* and its correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (CARUTH, 2016, pp.7-8; italics in original). The African Americans must, therefore, face this interrelation between death and life, between the pastness of an event and its significance for the reconstruction of the present.

To heal the psychic scars of slavery, one needs to confront the reality, unless one wishes to live with an unreal identity, exactly like what the nationalists and nativists did in mid-twentieth century and eulogized the past and African American tradition. Forrest, on the contrary, intends to give a multidimensional shape to the African American identity; that is, instead of retrieving an angelic personality, he aims to reinvent an African American identity with an honest interpretation of the past. This is removed from the one-sided nationalist views, which according to Forrest is dangerous “when it veers over into racism. [And] then when that happens, obviously, it does all kinds of damage to the people who are on the way up” and to that end it is necessary “to increase one’s reading so that you’re not just reading only *The Message to the Black Men* a hundred times, but you’re reading a larger library and learning techniques of political savvy that individuals from other groups have tried” (FORREST, 2007, p.53). By recovering the traumatic past, one comes across a history different from the dominant nationalist discourses. Revealed traumatic experiences render visible the marginalized and the devoiced; more to the point, by remembering the past, the psychic

wounds of the past can be diagnosed and then treated for the betterment of both the nation and the race.

Leon Forrest's *Two Wings* portrays two opposing generations after slavery. First, there is the immediate generation after slavery who underwent systemic racism and is prone to repress the past altogether. Arthur constantly tries to prevent Sweetie from recalling the old past and keeps her from telling stories. When Sweetie plans to speak about the past to Nathaniel, Arthur retorts: "Let's not wake up the dead with old-time revivals and new-time troubles of mind." Forrest externalizes Arthur's psychic suffering and resistance to remembering the past by typifying him with diabetes and showing how Arthur can just temporarily treat the insulin reaction with "candy bar, or sugar water, or orange juice" (FORREST, 1983, p.36). "[H]is unsettled feelings could mark the moment of trouble in mind and body for Arthur Witherspoon" and thus he could not listen to Sweetie's recollections of the past without becoming agitated. When Sweetie came to visit Jericho's coffin in the church to "trouble the waters", Nathaniel remembers, "Arthur Witherspoon was shuddering, saliva streaming down from the sides of his mouth" (FORREST, 1983, p.33). Forrest insinuates that Grand-Momma Sweetie is unable to pass down the knowledge and wisdom of the past to Arthur because he and his generation want to forget the old times. They wish to have a new beginning based on false grounds. Arthur endeavours to forget the miseries of the slavery, idolizes his father and creates an identity for himself and the next generations on a false understanding of the history.

But Grand-Momma tries her best to reconstruct the history through her storytelling. According to Lene Brondum, storytelling works as "an important revision of the representation of history" and it has become "a significant means of revising traditional historiography, because it gives authority to the spoken word as a historical record. In other words, storytelling disrupts the discursive history of hegemony" (BRONDUM, 1999, p.156). Nathaniel represents the second generation Forrest allegorizes in *Two Wings*. Nathaniel is about to fall into the same pitfall. But Grand-Momma Sweetie Reed invites Nathaniel to listen to her stories. Sweetie could see things that others, including Arthur, preferred to forget: "[...] lodged behind those foreknowing, deeply set, haunting eyes of Great-Momma Sweetie Reed, where she saw things other people could not see, dared not dream of seeing" (FORREST, 1983, p.6).

Sweetie, on the one hand, knows that Nathaniel is growing up to his maturity and naturally is in search of an identity to step into manhood, and on the other hand, realizes that Arthur is not a suitable man to form Nathaniel's character. Sweetie wishes to retell all sides of their history without omitting any part in favour of another. Therefore, she gives voice to almost all of the main characters in her life and lets them speak through her. Unlike Arthur, the epitome of nativist approach to identity, Sweetie deconstructs the view people have towards the patriarchs of their society. She remembers I.V. Reed and Rollins Reed and lets Nathaniel understand and accept them as they were. They are a part of the past, which ought to be remembered, though dark and gloomy they might be. Grand-Momma Sweetie takes Nathaniel so deep in the history of their community that "the room now seemed steamy with the heat of the voice, bodies and ghostly spirits of those lost souls and the dead brought to life. The room seemed almost funky. He started to open up the window but dared not" (FORREST, 1983, p.286). Nathaniel also understands that Grand-Momma's story is different from and more nightmarish than what he has already heard: Nathaniel muses, "this is completely different from the story I've always heard, Momma Sweetie. Is nothing as it seems but the visions we have in nightmares that demands that we question the easy sleeve of sleep?" (FORREST, 1983, p.282). Nathaniel understands that his father is the illegitimate son born out of a liaison between his grandfather, Jericho, and a woman called Lucasta. He also finds out that his great-grandmother was the illegitimate daughter of a slaver, Rollins, and a woman slave, Jubill. These revelations undermine the essentialist outlook on pure and unique African American identity. By the same token, perhaps for the first time, he hears about the savage brutality of and against the African Americans during slavery, and realizes how the slave-owner easily separated the African American families and sold them away to different plantations with no qualm. Nathaniel learns how the whites would find and kill the escaped African Americans and how Masters and Mistresses of the plantations mistreated African American women slaves. But more importantly, Nathaniel becomes aware of the fact that community has been more important than blood ties in keeping them together. Sweetie has received little love from her parents but gives all she has as a mother to a child that her husband has fathered with another woman out of wedlock.

Notwithstanding Sweetie's lamentation of the life she has had with Jericho, Nathaniel remembered his grandfather otherwise. Although Jericho may not have been a good husband, he has served his community well and while he worked as a lawyer, he accepted poor African American clients without charging them much. Despite the fact that he lived to be one hundred-seventeen years old, his family has to sell Jericho's house to pay for his funeral since he has donated almost all of his property to the poor. In this way, Forrest keeps fluctuating between Nathaniel's account of Jericho and Sweetie's memories of her childhood and unhappy marriage.

Besides, Forrest supplements Sweetie's oral narratives with journals, written documents and personal letters Grand-Momma Sweetie has collected. As W. B. Faris notes, the suspension between the oral discursive system and the textual history represents one of the central features of magical realist novels that instead of disqualifying the latter in favour of the former, they set out to complement both with each other (FARIS, 2002, p.103). In the same manner, by moving back and forth from the orality of Sweetie's narrative to written historical documents, Nathaniel corrects the vagaries and imperfections inherent in oral (hi)storytelling without ruling out one level of narrative or prioritizing another. Because Sweetie has to remember stories of different people in the past two centuries and because some unreliable narrators such as I.V. Reed have narrated some of the stories to her, they might be inaccurate. Additionally, Sweetie's hatred of her patrimony makes us doubt her reliability, too. After all, Forrest incorporates written documents to improve Sweetie's narrative. This quality, according to Hegerfeldt, differentiates magical realism from the romantic modes of presentation. Whereas the romantic texts often present orality, mythos and imagination as superior to textuality, *logos* and rationality, the magical realist texts find a middle ground and question the validity of each alternative when applied alone (HEGERFELDT, 2005, p.160). Nonetheless, Forrest's protagonist, Sweetie, is aware of the interplay between oral history engrained in memory and the written historical records. She knows that for the subalterns' voice to be heard, they must use both oral memory and written texts. For this reason, she requires Nathaniel to commit the tales to his memory and to jot the stories down on paper. Grand-Momma Sweetie tells Nathaniel:

*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, 1983, p.7, italics in original).

Later the tension between the orality and textuality reaches its apex when Nathaniel opens up a box belonging to Sweetie and finds a tintype in it with an inscription on it reading, “to Jerry, Lucasta – with the love from my heart, free flowing”. Sweetie believes that the picture belongs to her late husband’s mistress, Lucasta. But “for Nathaniel the picture looked exactly like the pictures Jericho Witherspoon must have drawn out upon the sleeve of his memory, and fitting those descriptions of Angelina that Great-Momma Sweetie had given” (FORREST, 1983, p.293). Whereas Sweetie urges that the tintype belongs to Lucasta, Nathaniel supposes that it is most probably an image of Angelina, Sweetie’s mother, whom Jericho loved. Thus, each of them presents his or her own interpretation of the tintype and, in this way, Forrest challenges the validity of textuality, symbolized by the tintype, to read the past indisputably.

With all conflictive arguments regarding the validity of the narrative, Leon Forrest suggests that Grand-Momma Sweetie Reed is successful in letting the silenced voices of the past speak and she is also capable of shaping the present of her community based on its past. Although Nathaniel sometimes disagrees with his grandmother’s accounts, he admits “it was easier to imagine Great-Momma Sweetie’s eyes in the back of her head seeing other worlds of long-forgotten and dead life that he could not see, that it was to see clearly how the life of the beginning time was so close to the present” (FORREST, 1983, pp.8-9). Through Grand-Momma Sweetie’s (hi)storytelling, Nathaniel travels back to his community’s history, listens to the dead and receives the required knowledge for maturation and survival. After he listens to Sweetie’s stories, he is reborn and begins to reinvent his identity based on his newly acquired wisdom.

## 2 “two wings to veil my face, two wings to fly me away”: Auntie Foisty Practices Magic to Make the Future

Grand-Momma Sweetie mostly imparts to Nathaniel stories that I.V. Reed has told her. I.V. Reed has demanded Sweetie to relate his stories to her own children and wished they would hand the stories down to their own descendants, too. Storytelling is, in fact, a curse Auntie Foisty has put on I.V. Reed. After he had taken revenge on Shank Haywood and had persuaded him to attack Rollins Reed, I.V. Reed took the dying Rollins to Auntie Foisty’s shack and asked her to treat the Master. I.V. Reed has betrayed his own community, caused Haywood’s violent death at the hands of the revengeful Rollins Reed and let Haywood’s spirit haunt the family forever. Because of his horrendous plot, I.V. Reed recalls Auntie Foisty putting a curse on him:

slaves would see me [I.V. Reed] as a bloodhound all my days yet they would never tell on me—but would whisper my name in their heart of hearts and never trust me. The sole way I could ever hope for salvation was to tell the whole story out loud before I died to each of my children and each of their children’s children unto my last dying gasp... Me personal, not through any hired third hand, but by my very own lapping tongue (FORREST, 1983, p.139).

Auntie Foisty also cast a spell on I.V. Reed, making him sleep forever under Rollins’ bed even after the abolishment of slavery in the South. Although no external visible authority monitors her imposition of punishments on I.V. Reed, he continues to live and serve Master Rollins Reed until he is dead. While in deathbed, I.V. Reed also asks his daughter Sweetie to come and listen to his confessions as Auntie Foisty has foreboded. Besides, Sweetie has to swallow the bitter pill Auntie Foisty has prescribed and narrate the story of their community to her grandson. In fact, since people believe in Auntie Foisty’s curse, they carry out what she has prophesied and interpret their destiny based on what she foretells. It is necessary, according to Anne C. Hegerfeldt, to take “non-scientific modes of thought seriously insofar as they influence people’s actions [...] people who believe in magic allow their beliefs to guide their decisions and their behaviour, meaning that magic may have very real effect indeed” (HEGERFELDT, 2005, pp.161-162). Auntie Foisty’s curse may not be scientifically compelling but it is credible so long as we see it as having a lifelong effect on I.V. Reed and Grand-Momma

Sweetie. Both believe that in order to bring salvation to their community and redeem it from ancient sins, they have to pass the stories down to their generations. As such, we should avoid examining Auntie Foisty's supernatural power within the discourse of rationality, but we ought to view it for the long-lasting impact it has on the community wherein she lives.

People so firmly believed in Auntie Foisty's magical power that even the whites spread rumours about her mysterious might. I. V. Reed tells Sweetie:

I remembered one of the stories 'bout Auntie Foisty, up from the white folks, how she was so powerful cunning and touched. She cut a trapdoor in the hole of the slave ship on the way over with her long nails, sealed it back up with her lips so as no one could tell and then outswam the sharks, the slavers and Satan (FORREST, 1983, pp.124-125).

Even though the white folks accepted the African conjure woman's magical power, they told tales indicating that her pagan magic had succumbed to Christianity and she finally had to return to America. I.V Reed continued:

[B]ut though she was on her way back to Africa – when low and behold if she ain't delivered up in a storm to the arms of a missionary off the coast of Virginia, who saw her terrible vision in the face of a huge, smooth-faced rock, while out fishing; thought she was a bastard angel, whose wings got shattered by a streak of lightning – its light brought low as one of them lost, shooting stars, from worlds, eyeballs beyond this one (FORREST, 1983, p.125)

I.V. Reed and his community believe that Auntie Foisty managed to revive their dead Master, Rollins Reed, after Shank Haywood attacked and severely injured him. I.V. Reed tells Sweetie: "Dead Man! Auntie Foisty knew your master had died, *inside*. Then wrapped in the sleeve of her long, mourning-out, caring arms; and was cradled there; reborn there but as yet an infant in the spring" (FORREST, 1983, p.143; italics in original). Foisty resurrects a man who is the prime example of evil masters in the slavery era. I.V. Reed reminisces:

My remembrance is back to when Master Reed was an unleashed bloodhound to his niggers. I recollect when he'd whip them soon up in the morning till nightfall can't stand moonlight's shadow; he'd shake down hot red peppers into their wound lashes; other times drop hot

wax from candles into their bleeding sores and scabs, left there from the master's earlier lashes... Love to go cutting after slave women... — From the soles of his feet to the temple of his crown Rollins Reed was baptized in pure meanness and cruelty (FORREST, 1983, p.86).

Auntie Foisty works to save such a fiendish slaver. But she helps him not in order to betray her community; on the contrary, she grabs the opportunity to upset the hierarchy of power in the plantations (BYERMAN, 2005, p.142). Whereas in traditional master-slave relations, the master defines and gives name as well as identity to the slave, in this story Auntie Foisty holds the position of the master, inverts the hierarchy and reinvents the master's identity. Auntie Foisty brings Rollins Reed back to life to purify his evil nature. By doing so, Auntie Foisty, who represents and preserves the African American history and culture, sets out to reshape Master's – that is the colonizer's – identity based on her cultural heritage.

Auntie Foisty is the immediate connection to the African tradition. She was transported to America during the Middle Passage and has been “midwife to the Master Rollins and half the slaves on the Reed plantation” (FORREST, 1983, p.108). Thus, she embodies the oral memory of the entire slavery time period, including both the blacks and whites. I.V. Reed points out to Auntie Foisty's magnificent memory:

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 (FORREST, 1983, pp.111-112).

As Byerman maintains, “[Auntie Foisty] 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” (BYERMAN, 1997, pp.205-206; italics in original). Even the whites rely on her memory, and hers proves to be more credible than the written records of the

whites. However, she avoids recalling the economic values of the slaves but the atrocious condition in which the Master treated the slaves or put them up for auction.

Although Auntie Foisty converted to Christianity after she was taken to America, She did not disconnect her links with the African traditional belief system. As Taylor-Guthrie contends, Auntie Foisty is a direct link between the two continents (1993, p.426). She strives to “midwife” a new generation of white men by her magical gift. For six days, she practices voodoo on Master Rollins and reshapes his body and soul. I.V. Reed recalls:

Auntie Foisty stayed out there with Master Rollins Reed for six days and every time I'd go out there and peep in I could see her lifting him up out of a deep hole in the earth by the will of those whipping long arms spread inside of her black tunic, powerful as two angels' flapping wings; up and down, up and down and Up and Down – like she's exercising his body muscles to strengthen up his soul tissues and tendencies ... as the flapping cloaklike wings made the sound of a thunderclap I heard her saying over and over again, with each motion and movement she's using to shape up his body, words of the song: Angel got two wings to veil my face, angel got two wings to fly me away (FORREST, 1983, p.124).

She makes healing potions and performs voodoo rituals to change the nature of Rollins, who is the metaphoric representation of all the white slave owners in America. “I also heard Auntie Foisty,” I.V. Reed remembers, “saying each time as she scooped Master Rollins out of the earth and up into her arms: *Why plague us wid mo woe, Massa Roddy?*” (FORREST, 1983, p.124; italics in original). And finally she succeeds. When Rollins regained his consciousness, he proved to be less harsh and strict on the slaves. I.V. Reed recollects what Rollins told people about the dreams he had while he was dead:

he [Rollins] seen two angels in a pool of light and was wrestling with one of them and how one was choking him down [...] and the other lifts his body and told the master to change his ways and stop trying to choke the niggers down so, and stop lashing them [...] and to stop drinking and fornicating [...] to surrender to the waters of Jordan; to sleep with his wife at night and read the Bible and let Stigwood Bloodworth [...] come around and preach out loud to us darkies by firelight (FORREST, 1983, pp.127-128).

After this incident, any kindness and compassion the Master showed around the plantation was indebted to Auntie Foisty's magic. Her conjuration worked not to kill but to give life. She uses her power to help the entire community, be it blacks or whites. She could have left Master Rollins and taken part in the process of antagonism but she decided to heal Rollins of his monstrosity. Yet, Auntie Foisty punished I.V. Reed for the wickedness he showed towards Shank Haywood, and thus she cursed him to sleep forever under Rollins' bed. In this fashion, she intended to remind Rollins and I.V. Reed of their past. Accordingly, Auntie Foisty defines the past by remembering the slaves' condition, reshapes the present by re-birthing Rollins Reed and maps the future by dint of a recovered past. Foisty's curse, in other words, has had double impacts. It punished I.V. Reed by making him confess to his sins and misdeeds and more importantly, it helped to convey the memories of the slave-holding colonies to the next American generation.

Foisty's voodooism is the force behind the ever-increasing emphasis of the novel on communal bonds. Her African-American cultural heritage that involves healing practices – and which are not understood through the logicity of the Western frame of mind and therefore seen as “magic” – stimulates not the “recovery” of a fake past but the re-invention of an identity based on a clearer understanding of the history of the African American community. Grand-Momma Sweetie Reed who has inherited Auntie' Foisty powerful memory recalls – or at least pretends to recall – every single details of her life. By remembering the past, Sweetie deconstructs the ideal sense of familial ties that would idolize father figure and sets out to reconceptualise the next African American generations' perception of the past. “privately, then and now,” Nathaniel ponders, “she was still at war with her father, I.V. Reed and her estranged husband, Jericho Witherspoon ... You could save the world, at least a piece of it; but you could also lose your way and your soul in the inner circle of the family” (FORREST, 1983, p.18). However, when Grand-Momma Sweetie gives the old diamonds to Nathaniel at the end of the novel, she reveals that despite the fact that she has no blood ties with Nathaniel, she considers him to be the rightful inheritor of her African American heritage and memory and through this act inculcates into him the respect and preference for communal bonds over familial ties.

Along with this, Forrest highlights the supremacy of community over family by putting so much stress on orphanhood in *Two Wings*. Forrest uses orphanhood as a metaphor to portray African American's condition in America. He prompts historiographers and cultural scholars to create identities by retrieving all silenced voices, even if they disclose the sins the African Americans have committed or their complicity in crimes during the slavery era. In the novel, a family story that Nathaniel has received as stable and linear turns out to be replete with duplicity, criminality, cruelty and loneliness when Grand-Momma Sweetie Reed retells it. But the horrific account of the past, as Forrest suggest, should pave the way for the creation of a new Nathaniel and subsequently a new African American identity. Nathaniel, after Grand-Momma's stories, would hold himself responsible for his community rather than continue with blindfolded idolization of a fake family line, which is torn by rape and assault.

### **Conclusion: “looking in to the mirror for yourself”**

Nathaniel becomes informed and attentive to the history of his community and recognizes his true inheritance. He becomes the embodiment of a mid-twentieth century generation which is in search of an identity by dint of recovering a history of their community. On the other hand, Forrest implies that Grand-Momma Sweetie's intention to tell stories is more than just revealing the wrongs done to her in the past. She knows that she has a duty to structure the personality of the future African American community. Consequently, Sweetie's storytelling is a mutual manoeuvre that Nathaniel participates in to incorporate and reinterpret it within the context of his contemporary society. Nathaniel realizes that in “her hurts, her wrongs, and her history,” he can see all wrongs done to the entire African American community. “I looks into the mirror for yourself,” Nathaniel speculates, “and know the full of my hurts, my wrongs, my history, our history, and what went wrong, from the beginning time” (FORREST, 1983, p.21). Nathaniel “looks into the mirror” Sweetie holds before him and finds his real self and his real community. To this end, *Two Wings* as a magical realist novel blurs the boundary between magic and real, it also uses magical elements, such as communication with the dead and voodoo practices, to question the dichotomy between

the past and present. Leon Forrest's discourse in *Two Wings* dexterously subverts the pastness of the past to welcome and celebrate the presence of "past" in the consciousness and memory of the contemporary generation.

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