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RELOCATIONS OF THE SPIRIT

By Leon Forrest

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America's myth structure is like no other. Having severed roots in exchange for hope, those who left old worlds for this new one mortgaged their past to buy a future. They traded habitual views of the limits of their prospects for the gift of adaptiveness. New Americans abandoned the old gods of tradition and stability in favor of Proteus, the personification of change that fits any new condition.

Facing the enforced redefinition of their human spirit by those who'd forged their chains, no newcomers brought less hope or developed a greater capacity for reinventing themselves than those dragged from Africa.

A focus on that aptitude for transformation links the 27 essays in Leon Forrest's engaging new collection. Chair of Northwestern University's African-American Studies Department, novelist Forrest subdivides these pieces into four groups, dealing in turn with Chicago, authors, athletes and entertainers. Unifying all the essays is Forrest's homage to reinvention, both personal and societal: "We must be a people forever remaking our country, if we are to conserve consistently what's best and valid in the Democratic spirit and use our rich angularity of character as a springboard for new initiatives of cultural and intellectual fulfillment."

Within his guiding concept, Forrest employs a broad variety of voices, as these occasional writings include book reviews, articles from *Muhammad Speaks* (for which Forrest was associate editor), speeches before scholarly gatherings and previously unpublished think pieces. His tone ranges from the coolly analytical when assessing James Baldwin and Elijah Muhammad to the reverential when discussing Ralph Ellison and Jackie Robinson to the rhapsodic when celebrating Michael Jordan and Billie Holiday.

The Chicago south side Forrest was raised in offered perhaps greater diversity of role models than it does today, as housing segregation kept middle-class and professional class blacks from leaving the community. He recognized early the eclectic keys to self-transformation: a bit of the hustler's initiative, the guts and discipline of the athlete, the imaginative soaring of the jazz musician. Chicago was "a hustlers' town, where there weren't the rigid restrictions on who you were and what you were.... You could get busted, broken down, and defeated, but not necessarily destroyed—you could always get off the canvas and make a come-back."

Of his confessed "love-hate relationship" with Chicago, Forrest shares here mostly what he loves, especially Chicago's black preachers, "the Bards of the race," whose sermons became "a seminal source" of his own writing. He recalls Rev. J.C.

Austin of Pilgrim Baptist Church, whom Franklin Roosevelt himself said had "the greatest speaking voice of any public man in America." He recreates the call-and-response "throb of rapture and confirmation" in Rev. Carroll J. Thompson's West Point Baptist Church, how Thompson inspired the literal sublimation of "the furious rhythms of body and soul" into shared spiritual experience. He pays a possibly hyperbolic tribute to Rev. Joseph Wells of Mount Pisgah, with his voice "husky, vibrant and gruff one moment and mellow the next, like the combined voices of Jimmy Rushing, Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles and James Brown."

Forrest's literary observations, in these latter days of self-referential critical rhetoric, are cogent and illuminating. He justly elevates some writers above the limited recognition they've received, such as the enigmatic Jean Toomer whose hauntingly lyrical *Cane* Forrest calls "the finest novel to come out of the Harlem Renaissance," an estimate more debatable for its use of "novel" than "finest." Of more recent icons Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, Forrest draws this provocative distinction: "Wright's black male and female characters were often empty of substance and humanity and, like the author, were dominated by self-hatred and by a vicious, racist caste system....Ralph Ellison is one of the most river-deep militant race men I have ever met. His very soul is anchored to black pride and excellence."

At all points, Forrest's literary remarks are astute and "old-fashioned" in the best sense, recalling a time when "criticism" meant public teaching written to deepen appreciation.

Forrest offers essays on only two sports figures—Michael Jordan and Jackie Robinson—but he chooses two of the most electrifying athletes of this half-century. That he includes none on the third member of this exalted trinity, Muhammad Ali, seems a palpable gap, for Ali's lighting within boxing's world of thunder, like Robinson's mongoose quickness on the base paths, most often provided what Forrest says we observed in Michael Jordan: the "miracle of momentary self-transformation, in which the soul celebrates the possibilities of the body." And while his Jordan essay pays appropriate dues to superstars Bill Russell, Elgin Baylor, Jerry West, Dr. J, Magic and Bird, Forrest inexplicably scants Wilt Chamberlain and omits the nearly perfect Oscar Robertson. Despite regrettable omissions, however, Forrest captures the kinetic art of sport, the majesty and Van Gogh-like swirl of color and line that was Air Jordan, the "epic odyssey of Jackie Robinson's swift but significant half-century of living."

Forrest never seems more inspired by his subject than when describing his "romance" with Billie Holiday's singing. He wears Lady Day's voice like a coat of many colors whose spectrum includes Ray Charles's synthesis of Gospel and blues, the "cutting edge of the bitch's tongue," Lester Young's "absolute attention to lyrical phraseology," the "borderline of madness...the furious yeast of personal chaos," and mostly the blues singer's "eternal search for...true words to capture the ever-changing conditions of life upon the highly vulnerable heart." Not only poetic in herself, Lady Day is the cause of poetry in Forrest: her voice was "a small incandescent lyrical light, reedy and fragile as candlelight illuminating an echo chamber into the solitude and secret prisms of the soul";

her listeners were "made privy to the unburdening of grief on an individual basis, as expressed and revealed by one's best girlfriend, seated next to you at your favorite bar."

There's no end of opportunities to quarrel with any mix of polemical, discursive and appreciative essays. There are gaps and arguable judgments here, as well as repetitiveness and a grating addiction to the adjective "keening." But Leon Forrest's erudite commentaries provide an engrossing blend of wisdom and wonder, like a delightfully long fireside evening with a perceptive friend who's spent a lifetime reinventing himself, and now offers you the chance.