

## Lessons before Dying: The Contemporary Confined Character-in-Process

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In the opening essay of *The Furious Voice for Freedom: Essays on Life*, Leon Forrest writes, "I believe that in Afro-American literature, *reinvention* has been the basic hallmark of the transformation of those black novelists coming after Richard Wright."<sup>1</sup> He defines *re-creation* or *reinvention* as "the powerful use of the imagination to take a given form and make something that appears completely new of it—that creates within the reading...audience a sense of the magical meaning of life transformed."<sup>2</sup> Forrest's concept of reinvention comes, of course, in conversation with Henry L. Gates, Jr.'s idea of signifyin(g). As Gates notes, signifyin(g), like reinvention, "entails formal revision and an intertextual relation."<sup>3</sup> Because of the "formal manner in which texts seem concerned to address their antecedents," signifyin(g), which involves "repetition, with a signal difference," is indeed a viable theory through which to

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read African-American literary texts, particularly those, as Forrest suggests, following Richard Wright. If, as Gates contends, the recurrence of revisions of tropes is central to African-American literature—and, hence, its adoption of signifyin(g) as one of its fundamental features—then one of the earliest tropes that would logically be repeatedly revised is the trope of confinement. Narratives from Olaudah Equiano to Frederick Douglass to Harriet Jacobs all address the trope of confinement as it relates to their enslavement and subsequent freedom. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is also among the first of those narratives involving confinement on multiple levels. Her literal seven-year confinement within a hole above her grandmother's living quarters, which she endures as a means of rejecting the confines of slavery, arguably emerges in more contemporary literature revised as confinement underground.<sup>4</sup>

As Gates suggests, "authors produce meaning in part by revising formal patterns of representation in their fictions. This production of meaning...simultaneously involves a positioning or a critiquing both of received literary conventions and of the subject matter represented in canonical texts of the tradition."<sup>5</sup> Few texts are more canonical in African-American literature than the emancipatory narratives, and few tropes recur with more frequency than the trope of confinement in contemporary African-American literature. From Wright's *Native Son* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* to Leon Forrest's *The Bloodworth Orphans* (which aggressively engages with Ellison's *Invisible Man*) to Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying* (which is in conversation with Wright's *Native Son*),<sup>6</sup> contemporary African-American

<sup>1</sup>Leon Forrest, *The Furious Voice for Freedom: Essays on Life* (Wakefield RI: Asphodel, 1994) 28.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>3</sup>Henry L. Gates, Jr., *The Signifyin(g) Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 51.

<sup>4</sup>I am thinking here of Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" and Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where characters are literally physically underground.

<sup>5</sup>Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 113.

<sup>6</sup>On a number of occasions, Gaines has suggested that he was not influenced by Wright or by *Native Son* in his writing of *Lesson*; see interviews reprinted in John Lowe's *Conversations with Ernest Gaines* (Jackson: University

male authors use the trope of confinement to suggest that "freedom comes from human beings, rather than from laws and institutions." Arguably, their attempt to investigate this supposition in their literature adopts a pattern not that dissimilar from the development of the hero as a character-in-process.<sup>8</sup> With variation, these authors' characters-in-process all follow a specific pattern through which they ultimately transcend their confinement: first, their confinement either forces or encourages them to examine the "self"; second, following their self-examination, they (re)affirm their humanity or individuality, which, in most cases, has been denied them; third, now believers in their humanity or defenders of their individuality, they investigate strategies of survival whereby they might be able to have others acknowledge their humanity or individuality as well; fourth and finally, they either attempt to assert their (re)defined "self" in the context of the community, or they accept their fates (often death) but now as redefined men.

A close reading of "Fate," the final section of *Native Son*, reveals Bigger Thomas as the prototype for the contemporary confined character-in-process. Having been captured and beaten

Press of Mississippi, 1995). Rather, Gaines argues that his idea for writing the novel was most heavily influenced by the story of a young man on death row in Louisiana; see Gaines's collected essays in *Mozart and Leadbelly*, eds. Marcia Gaudet, Reggie Young, and Ernest Gaines (New York: Knopf, 2005). Two critical texts, in particular, however argue (perhaps too aggressively) that Wright's influence on Gaines is evident throughout *Lesson*; see Keith Clark, *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002) and Madelyn Jablon, *Black Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in African American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997).

Forrest, *Furious Voice*, 65.

<sup>8</sup>I made this recognition after reading Forrest's "Luminosity from the Lower Frequencies" in *Furious Voice*, where he notes the influence of Kenneth Burke and Lord Raglan on Ellison's character-in-process progression. He notes especially the influence of Raglan's *The Hero* and Burke's notion that a pattern could be employed to achieve character-in-process progression through the formula of purpose, passion, and perception.

by the police for the alleged rape and murder of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears, Bigger sits aimlessly in a cell at the Eleventh Street Police Station. In spite of the police's greatest attempts, Bigger refuses to speak or to eat. When he finally begins to "come out into the world again,"<sup>9</sup> he is still so disconnected from everything that he claims that they could take him to the electric chair at that moment for all he cared. He does eventually come to, and his first fully articulated words, ironically, involve communication. As one who is portrayed as and believed (by his captors) to be more animal-like than human, Bigger shifts from silence and grunting to a verbal request for a newspaper so that he can read about himself.

Isolated from the mainstream world for most of his life and, now, isolated in his cell of confinement, Bigger longs to see himself in the context of larger society. What he quickly realizes, however, is that while he has indeed become a real part of society, it is not in the context he desired. Nor does society represent him truthfully. Instead, he is portrayed as a beastly member of "a poor darky family of a shiftless and immoral variety" who avoids earlier confinement in a chain gang only because of his youth.<sup>10</sup> Angered by the comments about himself, Bigger debates returning to a conscious state of unconsciousness. But before he resolves to shut the world out once again, he is visited by Reverend Hammond, the pastor of his mother's church. And as Reverend Hammond prays for him and, again, places him in the context of a broader society—in this case, a society of religious believers—Bigger feels "a sense of guilt deeper than that which even his murder of Mary had made him feel."<sup>11</sup> Seeing Reverend Hammond's eyes and knowing that the reverend believes that he had a soul that could be saved causes

<sup>9</sup>Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993) 321.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 328.



Bigger to suspect possibilities of humanity for himself. Never having experienced this feeling in any meaningful way before, Bigger wonders: "Why should this thing rise now to plague him after he had pressed a pillow of fear and hate over its face to smother it to death? To those who wanted to kill him he was not human, not included in that picture of Creation; and that was why he had killed it. To live, he had created a new world for himself, and for that he was to die."<sup>12</sup> This brief passage reveals that Bigger's life struggle is largely with both his own and other people's acknowledgment and denial of his humanity. Innately, he had believed in it, only to realize that the world that mattered denied it. So when he sees its possibilities again through Reverend Hammond, he resolves, once again, to kill it. He imagines he can do this rather easily until he encounters Jan and Max, both of whom also claim to believe in his worth.

In spite of the fact that Bigger implicates Jan as being guilty of killing his girlfriend Mary, Jan tells Bigger that he is not angry with him and that he wants to help him. While he is confined, Jan claims to realize that it is Bigger's right to hate him and that his white face probably made Bigger feel guilty; so, on some levels, it is Jan who is the guilty one. Wondering whether Jan's offer to help him is a trap, Bigger begins to examine his self and his worth again: "He looked at Jan and saw a white face, but an honest face. This white man believed in him, and the moment he felt that belief he felt guilty again; but in a different sense now....For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him; and the reality of Jan's humanity came in a stab of remorse: he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him."<sup>13</sup> Bigger's acknowledgment of Jan's humanity foreshadows his acknowledgment of his own. While the significance of Jan's whiteness to Bigger's acceptance of the possibilities within

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 328.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 333.

himself may be problematic, it is clear that he begins to examine himself meaningfully because others, both Jan and Reverend Hammond, believe in him.

Still doubtful of the usefulness of any attempt to move beyond his self-imposed isolation, Bigger and Jan have the following exchange:

"Forget me," [Bigger] mumbled.

"I can't," Jan said.

"It's over for me," Bigger said.

"Don't you believe in yourself?"

"Naw," Bigger whispered tensely.

"You believed enough to kill. You thought you were settling something, or you wouldn't've killed," Jan said.

Bigger stared and did not answer. Did this man believe in him *that* much?<sup>14</sup>

Max, who has been waiting outside, then enters, and Bigger, still doubtful of Jan's intentions, repeatedly tells Max that he has no money. Eventually, he accepts Max's help, and it is during and after conversations he has with Max that he engages in the most beneficial self-examination and reaffirmation of his humanity. Significantly, however, thoughts of his family and his desire to accept Reverend Hammond's belief in him prepare him for full acceptance of his worth. After seeing his mother, brother, and sister, Bigger realizes that neither his life nor his actions exist in isolation after all: "He had lived and acted on the assumption that he was alone, and now he saw that he had not been. What he had done made others suffer. No matter how much he would long for them to forget him, they would not be able to. His family was a part of him, not only in blood, but in spirit."<sup>15</sup> He struggles with

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 334.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 345.

this realization, along with the hope of the cross Reverend Hammond gives him, until he sees a cross burning on the roof.

Knowing that the cross has something to do with him, he immediately thinks of the cross he now possesses, the cross of Jesus, "for him, a cross for everyone...showing how to die, how to love and live the eternal life."<sup>16</sup> Though he never admits or accepts it, he explores religion as a possible strategy of survival in a world that could deny a man of his humanity.<sup>17</sup> But then he hears the crowd yelling "Burn 'im," "Kill 'im!" and he feels betrayed that the cross of Christ and the cross of the Ku Klux Klan could be one in the same. He snatches the chain from his neck and remarks, first, that he can die without a cross and, second, that he has no soul.

Never again did he want to feel anything like hope. That was what was wrong; he had let that preacher talk to him until somewhere in him he had begun to feel that maybe something could happen. Well, something *bad* happened: the cross the preacher had hung around his throat had been turned in front of his eyes....A small hard core in him resolved never again to trust anybody or anything. Not even Jan or Max...whatever he thought or did from now on would have to come from him alone, or not at all.<sup>18</sup>

And this is, indeed, how Bigger comes to accept his fate—on his own terms.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 390.

<sup>17</sup>While Bigger has clearly abandoned religion as a real possibility for survival long before he commits his murders, his disappointment in the public's use of the cross as a symbol of hate so soon after he reluctantly accepts the cross from Rev. Hammond suggests to me that, at the very least, he briefly reconsidered religion as a possible source of comfort and survival.

<sup>18</sup>Wright, *Native Son*, 394.

After talking to Max about the things he had hoped for himself but that had been denied because of his race and class, he has a sense of peace he has not known before. He realizes that "he had spoken to Max as he had never spoken to anyone in his life; not even to himself,"<sup>19</sup> and he begins to get angry and to believe that Max has tricked him. But he quickly realizes that "Max had not compelled him to talk; he had talked of his own accord, prodded by...a curiosity about his own feelings."<sup>20</sup> Although Max's questioning is indeed the catalyst for Bigger's self-revelation, he achieves it largely by himself. Notably, this is frequently a point of contention for critics of the novel. But as James A. Miller notes in "Bigger Thomas's Quest for Voice and Audience in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," Bigger is articulate even before he encounters Max. And while Bigger's voice "falters in the presence of white people,"<sup>21</sup> ultimately it is Bigger, not Max, who is concerned with Bigger's personal fate and who finally articulates the truth of Bigger's life since, even at the novel's end, "there is a question of whether Max finally understands Bigger Thomas."<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, Bigger blends the final two stages of the contemporary confined character-in-process almost seamlessly. In his assertion of his redefined "self," he accepts his fate while he simultaneously realizes the possibilities for survival. "He wondered if it were possible that after all everybody in the world felt alike? ...For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of. If that white looming mountain of hate were not a mountain at all, but people, people like himself...then

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 417.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 417.

<sup>21</sup>James A. Miller, "Bigger Thomas's Quest for Voice and Audience in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Callaloo* 28/3 (Summer 1986): 504.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 505.



he was faced with a high hope the like of which he had never thought could be."<sup>23</sup> Having outright rejected religion as a viable strategy of survival for himself, he instead embraces the one truth that his oppressors were most unwilling to admit—that people are more alike than they are different. Once he realizes and accepts this, he has no need for Max's lengthy speech, though, at times, it echoes Bigger's revelation. He accepts the fact that he was unconscious of his belief in his own humanity for far too long. Ultimately, he realizes that deep down that belief was always there—so much so that it prompted him to kill. Thus, he willingly confesses to Max that "What I killed for, I am!"<sup>24</sup>—and he is, subsequently, able to walk to his death like a man.

While Bigger's prison confinement, like the physical confinement of slavery, is involuntary, Ellison revises the trope of confinement and has his protagonist in *Invisible Man* choose to imprison himself. Initially, the Invisible Man is indeed hiding from pursuers, but eventually he openly chooses to stay underground and to write his story. Even so, he loosely follows the pattern of the confined character-in-process and uses his confinement to examine the "self," to affirm his individuality, to formulate survival strategies to ensure his success upon reemergence, and to prepare to reassert his re-defined self in the context of the community. Logically, it is a sub-plot of confinement, the infamous Golden Day scene that occurs in chapter 3, that foreshadows all that the Invisible Man will experience, particularly as these experiences relate to his quest for identity and to others' denial of it.

As one of the naïve acts that initiates the Invisible Man's dismissal from the college and thus thwarts his plan to become the next Booker T. Washington, the narrator's choice to take

<sup>23</sup>Wright, *Native Son*, 418.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 501.

Mr. Norton, the trustee left to his care, inside the Golden Day while the patients from the mental hospital are making their weekly visit to the bar is one that he comes to regret but one that he must also acknowledge as informative. While inside the bar, Norton and the narrator encounter a group of veterans who have been institutionalized because they dared to exceed the narrow limits of success society has for them. After he rather effortlessly diagnoses Norton's rare condition—one that only the finest specialist in the country has previously been able to diagnose—one of the vets who is a former doctor informs Norton that he too was a specialist, though now he is "an inmate of a semi-madhouse."<sup>25</sup> Like his fellow vets who are also confined to a quasi-mental institution for their unwillingness to comply with Jim Crow laws after they return to the United States from France, the doctor serves as a source of confusion for the narrator. While he thinks it is their weekly presence at the Golden Day that makes him feel uncomfortable, it is really the vets' confinement as prisoners, not as patients, that disturbs the narrator: "They were supposed to be members of the professions toward which at various times [he] vaguely aspired [him]self.... Sometimes it appeared as though they played some vast and complicated game with [him] and the rest of the school folk, a game whose goal was laughter and whose rules and subtleties [he] could never grasp."<sup>26</sup> The rules and subtleties he can never grasp are arguably those of confinement—confinement of black middle-class identity and mobility to that which white America deems appropriate.

Ellison's imagery is rich throughout the chapter—the irony of the bar's name the *Golden Day*,<sup>27</sup> the set-back clocks,

<sup>25</sup>Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1972) 88.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>27</sup>Ellison's use of The Golden Day as the name of his bar mocks the concept of a "golden day" for America as espoused by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Henry James and by Lewis Mumford's *The Golden*

Supercargo's pun on super ego and the overwhelming whiteness that accompanies his supervisory presence—but it is the vet's commentary to Norton and the narrator that proves most meaningful. After telling them that he was driven out of town by ten men in masks at midnight for saving a human life, the doctor tells the narrator that knowledge could bring him neither wealth nor dignity. When the Invisible Man fails to understand the vet's allegory of the limitations he will face as a black man, the vet looks to Norton and remarks of the narrator: "he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life....Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it....Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!"<sup>28</sup> The doctor is, of course, referring to Norton's (or white America's) misplaced control of the students' fate and to the narrator's failure to see this control. Instead, he accepts it and is thus rendered so mechanical that he is ultimately invisible as an individual.

Because he tells his story in retrospect, the narrator examines the "self" throughout the novel. But as in *Native Son*, where Bigger's compliance with the confined character-in-process pattern becomes most obvious near the end of the text, Ellison's confined protagonist uses the last few pages of the novel, especially the epilogue, to reveal his critical findings. The novel almost comes full circle, with the narrator still questioning the meaning of his dying grandfather's words about being a traitor and his command to the narrator to live with his "head in the lion's mouth."<sup>29</sup> Though he can never be sure what his

grandfather meant exactly, the narrator does come to reaffirm his humanity and to assert his individuality by contemplating both his own life and his grandfather's life. He confesses: "Once I thought my grandfather incapable of thoughts about humanity, but I was wrong. Why should an old slave use such a phrase as 'this and this or this has made me more human,' as I did in my arena speech? Hell, he never had any doubts about his humanity—that was left to his 'free' offspring."<sup>30</sup> This realization prompts the Invisible Man to end his hibernation and to return to the world with the resolve that perhaps "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play."<sup>31</sup>

But he can only return to the world with sufficient confidence because he has investigated a number of potential survival strategies. Ultimately, again, it is thoughts of his grandfather's words that free him, though he first tries the old reliables, including flight, music, liquor, and education: "I hibernated. I got away from it all. But that wasn't enough. I couldn't be still even in hibernation. Because, damn it, there's the mind, the *mind*. It wouldn't let me rest. Gin, jazz and dreams were not enough. Books were not enough. My belated appreciation of the crude joke that kept me running was not enough. And my mind revolved again and again back to my grandfather."<sup>32</sup> When he realizes that the "cream of the joke" (his grandfather's admonition) is that people are all connected, even as all men are different and divided, he asserts that the fate of humanity is "to become one, and yet many."<sup>33</sup> Thus, he accepts his fate as one who might be, at times, rendered invisible and also as one who must, nevertheless, return to the world and be socially responsible.

Day: *A Study of American Experience and Culture* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926).

<sup>28</sup>Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 92.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 567.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 568.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 560.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 564.



Leon Forrest has his protagonist, Nathaniel Witherspoon, be similarly influenced by an ancestral presence in *The Bloodworth Orphans* as the novel's ancestral figure, Noah Grandberry, articulates a *truth* similar to that which the Invisible Man has come to accept as the essence of what his grandfather tries to express to him metaphorically. While Forrest's first novel, *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*, and his second, *The Bloodworth Orphans*, are both in dialogue with the magnum opus of his literary mentor (Ellison), the final chapters of *The Bloodworth Orphans* overtly expand and revise *Invisible Man's* Golden Day chapter and its epilogue. Like the Invisible Man, Noah and Nathaniel have some level of choice regarding their confinement. Both are being held captive in the Refuge Hospital for their alleged connections to Forest County's trickster W. W. Ford, but Nathaniel and Noah frequently escape and return to the isolation ward where the men are being held for experimental purposes. Nathaniel, for instance, robs two meat stores with a toy gun; he steals medicine from the ICU ward for Noah's cold; the two men lift each other up to the roof of the hospital to watch the stars at night; and they create a contraption that allows them to steal cartons of milk from nearby window sills. Yet they never try to escape, arguably because Noah must first explain his life to Nathaniel and then because they must investigate strategies of survival before they complete their reentry into the world.

Like the veterans who are institutionalized by a Jim Crow system in *Invisible Man*, the residents of Forest County's Refuge Hospital are former middle-class artists and professionals who have gone mad after being exploited for their talent and then denied dignity. One such character is the jazz great Ironwood Ramble. Ironically, before Nathaniel is captured, he would often sneak into the hospital just to hear Ironwood play. His music takes all of the residents to places otherwise unknown, and, as a survival strategy, it orders their chaos and leads them to some

semblance of wholeness. The tragedy of Ironwood's genius, however, is that he is exploited and controlled for so long on the outside—which Forrest expresses metaphorically by having Ironwood's horns turn into a visage of corroded chains that are carted off in huge money-sacks—that he may be better off literally confined than metaphorically free. Even as "three gigantic goons" come shrieking at him and place chains around his ankles, three "older trustees" inform Nathaniel that Ironwood is taken away every night to a quarantined section of rooms where at least he is peaceful and free, "not like out in the world where he is enslaved" and people slip "heroin to him to make money off of his body."<sup>14</sup> Even Ironwood, the men claim, when "he is in his best frame of mind, knows that he is better off" in the Refuge Hospital than "out in hell."<sup>15</sup> Hearing this, Noah and Nathaniel contemplate the usefulness of their plan to escape after three months of confinement and just two days before they are to be subjected to a battery of tests.

In order for them to have a reasonable chance of surviving, they must successfully navigate their journeys as confined characters-in-process. Noah's self-examination takes on the form of storytelling, while Nathaniel's occurs as he is compelled to see his and his family's likeness to Noah and his experiences. Noah's story also offers much needed insight into Forrest's recurring trickster figure Ford. Left orphaned by his mother, who hangs herself after killing his father for repeatedly mistreating and exploiting her sexually, Noah informs Nathaniel that Ford, Noah's great-grandfather, the fortuneteller who uses the young Noah to exploit clients, and the Seer who claims to allow Noah to speak to his dead mother are all one and the same. As Nathaniel bemoans Noah's tendencies toward tall-tales, one of

<sup>14</sup>Leon Forrest, *The Bloodworth Orphans* (New York: Random House, 1977) 316.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

the lessons Nathaniel learns is that the real and the imagined are sometimes interchangeable. But the larger lesson, one that adopts the Invisible Man's language and ideology, comes in the form of satire and takes ideas about whiteness and light as its theme. Nathaniel must outright reject this satirical commentary, even as the institution's administrator presents it as scientific truth, and formulate his own ideas about "the light" instead.

Transformed almost completely from the form in which confinement appears in *Invisible Man*, Forrest's confinement scenes are nearly carnivalesque. As Nathaniel and Noah are in the middle of their talks about Ford, they are interrupted by a "power explosion of sound."<sup>36</sup> A Vietnamese midget, dubbed Hoo-Chardo, appears with a police dog almost as tall as he and begins to talk to them about the definition of *light* and *whiteness*. When Nathaniel comments that he thought *whiteness* was the absence of color and not that which light serves, which is what Chardo claims, Chardo tells Nathaniel, "Well, see, that's why you are here, in order to free your mind of this misinformation. Light and truth are rather slow trickling down into the interior, or rather, shall we say the hard-core, which is part of our thesis."<sup>37</sup> He then goes on, claiming to demonstrate his thesis to them: "You see this prism; now, notice how the prism separates and divides and subdivides the light into all its different basic colors. But purely separates, fairly, clearly. Each color of course has its own autonomy, almost personality, inherent, you might say; although we do discourage...misdirected individualism. Each color is imbued with a different wavelength and frequency."<sup>38</sup> Then he tells them that if he is giving them too much information too fast, the one thing they must remember above all else is "that White Light is a cluster of all those different frequencies which

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 288.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 291.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 291.

the prism sorts out."<sup>39</sup> Strip everything down to its original form, he claims, and what you will return to is whiteness "at the dawn of creation."<sup>40</sup>

Chardo's comments stand in complete opposition to the Invisible Man's craving for individualism and his revelation about how man is at base essentially and inescapably connected. But "only in division is there true health," the Invisible Man comes to believe; "diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you'll have no tyrant states."<sup>41</sup> As he complains about man's passion toward conformity, he notes that unless he rebels, he will end up becoming white, "which is not a color but the lack of one."<sup>42</sup> If they are to avoid such a fate, Noah and Nathaniel, for whom the Invisible Man seems also to speak for on a *lower frequency*, must choose wisely as they examine the catalogue of strategies the trickster Ford uses to reinvent himself repeatedly and to avoid the traps of conformity.

One such strategy is the power of transformation. According to Noah, Ford is a serial hermaphrodite who, like the mythical Tiresias, changes back and forth from male to female every seven years as a result of seeing snakes copulate. He also transforms himself from salesman to fortuneteller to preacher to seer whenever doing so is necessary or convenient. Noah and Nathaniel adopt this imperative to transform to sustain and to entertain themselves in the Refuge Hospital. When they find a closet full of children's toys, they remake them into adult games of chance. They transform straightjackets, sheets, blankets, and pillowslips into a ladder, which Nathaniel uses to scale the sixty-story building. They dip Nathaniel's hospital tunic in paint and use coloring sets they find in the closet to transform the tunic

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 292.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 292.

<sup>41</sup>Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 563.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 564.



into a bright dashiki to disguise his confined status when he escapes to get food. The more their supplies run out, the more inventive they are forced to become. So what Nathaniel, as Noah's "young rookie" apprentice, must learn from this experience is that no matter how dire the situation may seem, he must never allow himself to be so overwhelmed with his condition that he becomes consumed by it and thus rendered immobile.

To teach Nathaniel this lesson, Noah tells Nathaniel the story of how Noah successfully escaped a band of Ford's followers, only to awaken on a Mississippi border to two highway cops with their guns pointed at his eyes and bloodhounds on their sides: "that was when I discovered that the problem is not the energy crisis, nor a bankrupt blood bank, nor bloodletting, nor hardening of the arteries, in the life-prolonging nervous system, but, Spoons, how to keep that old blood circulating, no matter what blood group or bloodlines your streams shoot through...that's the best way I know to avoid a bloodbath, and a low blood count."<sup>41</sup> What Noah tells Nathaniel, in essence, is that when it comes down to it, all that matters is knowing how to stay alive. One can indeed become overwhelmed with trying to locate or to define the origins of the social, economic, and political crises; with anger and rage, hence the blood bank and the hardened arteries; or with despair about suffering, hence the low blood count. One way to avoid such failures is to move forward constantly so as not to lose the driving force of life. Constant action offers one of the few chances of survival.

And this is what Noah boldly announces near the end of the novel when the two men prepare to reenter the chaotic world of Forest County. As Nathaniel bemoans not being able to free Ironwood and complains of the loss of his friends, who turn out to

be Noah's siblings, Noah screams at Nathaniel, who is clearly too caught up in his own emotions to move forward: "You've got to stop sobbing over the past. Indeed, the only way I've found to stop the hounding voices...is through Action. And we've got to move forward now. You were prepared to move out a few minutes ago, yet the mention of the personally deceased ones always throws you into deep depression."<sup>42</sup> Even as Noah chastises Nathaniel, he forces him to contemplate the past but to move beyond it quickly rather than dwelling on it. He immediately gives him a parachute, which he has stolen from the helicopter service section, and they descend "into a cathedral of ritual warfare."<sup>43</sup> And even though there are gang wars all around them, and the body of the mayor is burning, they, like the Invisible Man, know that they must try to "give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of...certainty,"<sup>44</sup> if for no other reason than to save the sobbing babe they find in a boot box as they flee the city in a stolen police car.

Because they have access to and awareness and acceptance of more cultural strategies of survival than any of the other confined protagonists—from musical impulses to storytelling to the power of transformation—Noah and Nathaniel are perhaps better equipped to accept their fate than Bigger Thomas or the Invisible Man. They also have each other, while Bigger and the Invisible Man are ultimately isolated. Community thus holds more significance and has a more formidable presence in *The Bloodworth Orphans* than in either of the other two novels. Again, Forrest seems to be riffing on an idea espoused by the Invisible Man, who realizes that any *we* is a part of any *them* "as well as apart from *them* and subject to die when *they* died."<sup>45</sup> Highlighting

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 382.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 382.

<sup>43</sup>Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 567.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 562; emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup>Forrest, *The Bloodworth Orphans*, 338–39.

the interconnectedness of the seemingly distinct thus becomes a signal feature of Noah's lessons to Nathaniel, although connecting Noah's stories to his own family history seems to be more natural than learned for Nathaniel. Even as he listens to Noah and attempts to glean something useful from Noah's tall tales, Nathaniel constantly seeks to insert himself and to integrate his history into the stories. In a novel overly concerned with the vulnerability of orphanhood and the detriments of motherlessness, redefining oneself in the context of and in relation to the community becomes essential.

Community is similarly important in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying*. Consciously or unconsciously, Gaines's novel adopts *Native Son*'s inquiries into black humanity but allows affirmation to come through the black community. While the black community in *Native Son*—represented by Reverend Hammond and Bigger's family and friends—has a limited effect on Bigger's belief in his own humanity, in *A Lesson before Dying* the community—Grant, Jefferson's family, and the school children—ultimately offers Jefferson the courage he needs to walk to his death like a man. Bigger, of course, uses this same language about manhood and being able "to walk" to his execution, and both men are able to do so because, at the time of their deaths, they believe wholeheartedly in their humanity.

Even as the novels exhibit obvious parallels, Jefferson is drawn somewhat differently from Bigger. Jefferson, for one, is not guilty of the crimes for which he is being accused. Yet, this factor is of little significance since both authors suggest that innocence and guilt are inappropriate measures of humanity and inhumanity. Both men make bad choices under tremendous amounts of pressure, but neither should be judged as less human for his inability to reason quickly and effectively. Yet this is precisely why Jefferson's attorney argues that Jefferson should not be killed—not because he is innocent but because killing

him would offer only as much justice as one could achieve killing a hog. So, while Max argues for Bigger's life on the basis of his inaccessibility to full humanity and the denial of his manhood by a capitalist society, Jefferson's attorney claims that Jefferson's life should be spared because he is more animal than human.<sup>48</sup>

Gentlemen of the jury, look at this—this—this boy. I almost said man, but I can't say man. Oh, sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but who would call this—this—this a man? Not I... Look at the shape of [Jefferson's] skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand.... A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa—yes, yes, that he can do—but to plan...this skull here holds no plan.<sup>49</sup>

The defense does, at points, note that the jury should believe Jefferson's version of the episode for which he will be killed—that he had no idea Bear and Brother would try to rob the store (unlike Bigger and his friends, who do attempt to plan their robbery), that he did not kill the store owner, and that he took the liquor and the money because he panicked (as Bigger does when Mrs. Dalton enters Mary's room). But even as he proclaims Jefferson's innocence, the attorney denies his humanity and likens Jefferson to a hog. And it is an attempt to rectify this wrong that sets the formal *diegesis* of the novel and Jefferson's role as a confined character-in-process in motion.

<sup>48</sup>Notably, the legal strategy Max chooses to use for Bigger's trial is also heavily critiqued. See Miller, "Bigger Thomas's Quest," 505. The attorneys in both novels, in essence, argue that both protagonists' lives should be spared because, as black men, they have been denied full access to humanity.

<sup>49</sup>Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 7.



While Gaines does not go to any lengths to suggest Jefferson's confidence in his humanity before he is called a hog, it is clear that the characterization has a dramatic effect on Jefferson's idea of his "self." When Grant visits Jefferson alone for the first time, they have the following exchange:

"You hungry?" [Grant] asked.  
 "You brought some corn?" [Jefferson] said.  
 "Corn?"  
 "That's what hogs eat..."<sup>50</sup>

Grant notices that Jefferson has not washed his face or combed his hair in some days, and he is not wearing any shoes. Then, Jefferson begins to grunt like a hog, while Grant comments that the food he has brought is good:

"Your nannan can sure cook," [Grant] said.  
 "That's for youmans," [Jefferson] said.  
 "You're a human being, Jefferson..."  
 "I'm a old hog," he said. "Youmans don't stay in no stall like this. I'm a old hog they fattening up to kill."<sup>51</sup>

Even if he believed in himself and his humanity before, he does not now, so his self-examination is almost in reverse of the more typical character-in-process pattern. Instead of reaffirming his humanity, his self-examination in confinement denies it. What Grant must do, in his combination role of teacher and pupil, is to find ways to help Jefferson rediscover his humanity and to accept his fate. And it is his fulfillment of this challenge that proves to be his and the readers' lesson before dying.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 83.

While the text does not offer a foolproof method by which Grant is able to get Jefferson to believe in himself again, it does suggest the importance of man's commitment to and connectedness with his community in his assessment of "self." Thus, Jefferson's relationship with his godmother, and the possibility that people who are not related to him or people he does not know especially well nevertheless care about him, help restore his faith in himself. He stops acting like a hog and begins to eat with his visitors because Grant reminds him of his obligation to make his godmother's life easier; he apologizes for disrespecting Grant's girlfriend Vivian because he realizes that she cares about him; and his first full statement that has nothing to do with his being characterized a hog is one of thanks to the community children, who send him pecans to eat and who later come to visit him. It is through his direct and indirect interaction with the community, then, that Jefferson gains the desire to express himself, which he does most effectively through writing.

At least two significant elements are at work during the chapter titled "Jefferson's Diary." First, Gaines simultaneously accepts and mocks the Enlightenment philosophy that man's distinctive characteristic is his ability to reason. Jefferson's attorney, who might be appropriately recognized as representing well-meaning but poorly informed white America, believes wholeheartedly in this philosophy, which is why he argues that Jefferson, because he has no skills of reasoning, should not be acknowledged as a man. Gaines rejects this philosophy clearly. Yet, he has Jefferson achieve manhood by reasoning himself into humanity. The entire diary thus becomes proof of his ability to reason, even if only minimally.

His entries move from almost purely observational to thoughtful. He is able to make this transition largely because of Grant. Jefferson writes, "mr wigin you say you like what i got here but you say you stil cant give me a a just a b cause you say i

aint gone dep in me yet an you kno i can if I try hard an when i ax you what you mean deep in me you say jus say whats on my mind...sometime mr wigin i just feel like tellin you i like you but i dont know how to say this cause i aint never say it to nobody before an nobody aint never say it to me."<sup>52</sup> But after visits from the schoolchildren and other people in the community, Jefferson is able to connect, through reasoning, why he is moved to tears after their visits: "this was the firs time i cry when they lok that door bahind me the very firs time an i jus set on my bunk cryin but not let them see or yer me cause i didnt want them think rong but i was cryin cause of bok an the marble he giv me and cause o the peple com to see me cause they hadnt never done nothin like that for me befor."<sup>53</sup> And he cries again when Grant tells him that he will not be coming to see him any more, and, again, Jefferson is able to connect his emotions to his actions: "im sory i cry when you say you aint coming back tomoro...reson i cry cause you been so good to me mr wigin an nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im somebody."<sup>54</sup> Thus, Jefferson's achievement of his manhood, his acceptance of his fate, and his ability to reason seem parallel. But when read in conversation with the final section of *Native Son*, Gaines's mockery of the Enlightenment and of the second significant element of the "Jefferson's Diary" section of the novel becomes apparent. Self-expression, not reasoning, as the Enlightenment purports, becomes the distinctive feature of humanity.<sup>55</sup>

While the lateness of Jefferson's acquisition of this ability has an obvious visible effect on his life, Bigger's inability to

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 228.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 231.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 232.

<sup>55</sup>I reached many of the conclusions I assert here about Gaines's rewriting of Wright's text and both authors' use of self-expression as an assertion of humanity through conversations with Thinkwell Ngwenya. I thank him for this contribution.

express himself frequently or meaningfully is in many ways his tragic flaw. But to a large degree, he lacks control of this ability because society refuses to acknowledge his attempts to express himself until he has committed two acts of murder. By then, his death is inevitable. Like Bigger, Jefferson recognizes (even if only unconsciously) the connections between self-expression and humanity. Thus, he refuses to talk at any length after being likened to a hog. But when he does begin to express himself, even at a most basic level (which, again, mocks the Enlightenment's tendencies toward erudition), his humanity cannot be legitimately denied or even questioned. Thus, Jefferson is not only able to accept his fate and walk to the chair like a man, but he also inspires Grant to accept his responsibility to the community and empowers that same community by proving that he is as much a man as those who ultimately kill him.

The recurring trope of confinement in contemporary African-American literature offers insight into the consequences of being denied freedom in a world that claims to offer freedom as an inalienable right. Ironically and unfortunately, many of these confined characters are not all that different from characters who are not physically or literally confined but who are no less imprisoned than those protagonists who can be accurately defined as confined characters-in-process. But unlike those texts in which the protagonist struggles, more or less in figurative freedom, to exist in a society that denies his humanity, texts that adopt and revise the trope of confinement allow us as readers to see the denial of mobility literally and perhaps then to imagine how a similar but figurative denial precedes physical confinement. Making this connection may just be one great lesson before dying.



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