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Reading and the Representation of Ambiguity in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

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Abstract

When Jean Toomer's modernist experimental novel *Cane* was published in 1923, both he and the text were taken to be representative voices of African American life, even though Toomer explicitly renounced these labels during *Cane*'s pre-publication promotion. The larger project of the Harlem Renaissance, during which Toomer lived and wrote *Cane*, was to validate and celebrate African American artists and their work. As a result, the author's claims of racial ambiguity and multiracial identification, and their expression in his work, were poorly received. This paper looks at the tension between the aesthetically ambiguous qualities of the text as well as its role as a cultural artifact that can be explored and interpreted against different backdrops. *Cane*'s aesthetic elements work primarily through the text's structural and linguistic ambiguity, a blurring of various themes that allow for readers to search for and conceive of their own meanings and experiences. To that end, I examine interpretations of racial identity in *Cane* during three significant cultural periods: *Cane*'s initial publication in 1923 during the Harlem Renaissance, its re-publication at the cusp of the modern Civil Rights movement in 1951, and our current age of supposed "post-raciality" in which the modern reader first discovers the text.

The lyric epigraph of Jean Toomer's *Cane* reads:

Oracular.
Redolent of fermenting syrup,
Purple of the dusk,
Deep-rooted cane.

Prophetic and authoritative. Suggestive and reminiscent. In its first two words, *Cane*'s epigraph reveals the novel's dual mission: to be both oracular like a prophet and redolent like a poet.¹ This contrast immediately creates ambiguity between the literary authority of *Cane* to tell a story, and the ambiguous construction of this story, which evokes rather than dictates meaning to its reader. By placing these two words together, the opening of the epigraph forces us to consider tension. Specifically, it questions how we pick apart tension, or the conflict of interpretation, an issue central to the history of literary criticism on *Cane*. What is the correct way to look at the text? What is *Cane* meant to tell us? What is it meant to suggest? For a novel that defies all types of boundaries, specifically that of normative perceptions of identity, "purple of the dusk" evokes the brief moment of the sky's color as day fades to night, representative of the transience and limitation of time. Toomer equated this transience to the promise and eventual end of his literary art: the intent for *Cane* to be a "swan song," an expression he used to describe the failures within the text as well as of racial notions during his time [6, p. 2]. Finally, the phrase "deep-rooted" produces an image of fixed placement, one that stands in direct contrast to what the text illustrates: the impossibility of a consistent racial portrayal.

When I first read *Cane* in an African American literature class at UC Berkeley, I was immediately struck by the experimental qualities of the text. Written in 1923, *Cane* has a significantly ambitious and nontraditional form, structured as a series of vignettes that alternate between lyric poetry and narrative prose. Although some characters and phrases reappear between these vignettes, they are mostly freestanding and imagistic rather than driven by a linear narrative. There is no sequential plot, but the novel does fall into three distinct sections, with the first and last beginning and ending in Georgia.² *Cane*'s unusual form leaves readers with an overall impression rather than an experience of having followed a unified story.

At Berkeley, Professor Bryan Wagner taught *Cane* as pre-eminently representative of "Negro America," which is the standard interpretation of the text.³ However, when Toomer was writing in the early 1920s, he explicitly renounced both himself and his work to be representative of African American culture and life. The larger project of the Harlem Renaissance, in which Toomer lived and wrote *Cane* in, was to validate and celebrate African American artists and their work. The reissuing of *Cane* during the Civil Rights movement also had a similar purpose in reviving the power of African American artists against institutional racism. As a result, these time periods did not allow for the kind of racial ambiguity or multiracial identification that Toomer recognized himself and his work to possess.⁴

My aim is to look at the tension between the aesthetically ambiguous qualities of the text as well as of *Cane*'s role as a cultural artifact that can be interpreted against different backdrops. *Cane*'s aesthetic elements work primarily through the text's structural and linguistic ambiguity, a blurring of various themes and poetic forms that allow for readers to search for and conceive of

their own meanings and experiences. To that end, I look at interpretations of racial identity in *Cane* during three significant time-periods: *Cane*'s initial publication in 1923 during the Harlem Renaissance, its re-publication at the cusp of the modern Civil Rights movement in 1951, and our current age of supposed "post-raciality"—the age of Obama in which the modern reader first discovers the text.

I focus directly on what is at stake in looking at these three periods and juxtaposing them against one another, since reading *Cane* in these distinct moments sheds light on the different ways in which race was and can be understood. While *Cane* once performed a political and cultural function through an arguably authentic portrayal of racial identity, it now performs this function through the ambiguity, not the authenticity, of racial identity.⁵ The novel itself sketches ambiguous themes as well as mixed race protagonists that reveal how the binary system of race of Toomer's time marked racial difference and limited, blocked, or confused the people who embodied such differences.⁶

The publication of *Cane* in 1923 set off a strangely conflicted success for Jean Toomer. The first printing consisted of only 500 copies, sales were low, and *Cane* was not widely read in either black or white literary circles. However, the reception *Cane* did receive from critics was general praise, marked by a substantial ignorance of Toomer's uneasiness in being categorized as black. The majority of criticism took advantage of the ambiguous nature of the text to champion black literary power and to position Toomer as a black writer with a literary masterpiece among the likes of Nella Larson's *Passing* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*.⁷ Only decades later, after Toomer's reaction to *Cane*'s initial reception became known in small literary circles, did critics gain a new perspective and sensitivity to Toomer's ambivalence toward having both himself and *Cane* classified as strictly "Negro."⁸ In this sense, the very fact that *Cane* prompted a misunderstanding of Toomer and of the ambiguous tensions within the work requires a look at the author—and of the indeterminacy and restlessness that characterized his early life—to add clarity and richness to understanding *Cane* itself.

Jean Toomer was born Nathan Eugene Toomer on December 16, 1894 in D.C. to Nina Pinchback and farmer Nathan Toomer, who were both of mixed ethnic descent. Toomer's awareness of the complexities of racial difference as well as his ambiguity toward race itself began during his childhood and had significant impacts on his literary aspirations. Toomer's father abandoned the family when Toomer was an infant, and as a result, he grew up in Washington D.C. with his mother and her parents in a predominately white middle- and upper-class area. Toomer's maternal grandfather, P. B. S. Pinchback, was a famous and powerful politician—the first so-called "non-white" person to become governor of a U.S. state. Pinchback could have passed for white but claimed that he was black and created his political career off this claim.⁹ He insisted that Toomer attend a Negro school because it was important to him that Toomer have personal and direct contact with the black community while living in a predominantly white community. Pinchback believed that this educational exposure would instill racial tolerance in his grandson. As literary critic Nellie McKay writes in her essay "Jean Toomer": "Toomer often said he had an advantage over most people in knowing the truth about race, for he had lived in both the white and black worlds as a member of each group" [9, p. 1].

The issue of race, for Toomer, was heightened in 1914 when he was decid-

ing on a college to attend. At this point, adopting a nonracial or ambiguous identity became Toomer's means of resisting potential backlash if he decided to attend a white college.¹⁰ For the next four years, Toomer embarked on a trek from college to college, never staying at one place long enough to earn a degree. Interestingly, he primarily chose agriculture as one of the many majors he dabbled in, suggestive perhaps of his desire for a connection with his farmer father as well as his longing for figurative or literal stability.¹¹ After short stints at nearly eight colleges and rejections from both the army and the Red Cross, Toomer briefly returned to Washington in 1919, renaming himself "Jean."¹² Later that year, he moved to Harlem, immersing himself in both an African American world and in a world of literature.

While living in New York City in 1920, Toomer attended many social gatherings, which is how he met Waldo Frank, a man who would turn out to be an important friend and influence during Toomer's writing career.¹³ Frank's novel, *Our America*, had a significant influence on Toomer, offering him the inspiration to illustrate hybrid racial identities in his new novel.¹⁴ In the months that passed after Frank's letters to Toomer in October 1920, Toomer wanted to launch his own literary work that would be modeled after *Our America*.¹⁵ The opportunity to begin this project came in 1921 when Toomer received a temporary position to replace a principal at an African American school in Georgia. On the train back to Washington D.C., Toomer composed the narratives that would become the first section in *Cane*.

While approximately half of the pieces that appear in *Cane* were originally published in significant periodicals connected to the Harlem Renaissance, Toomer also chose avant-garde magazines such as "The Little Review" and "Broom" to showcase parts of *Cane* prior to its publication as a novel. Modernist writers such as Marianne Moore, Virginia Woolf, and William Carlos Williams were also featured in these magazines, placing Toomer's work in conversation with these leading Modernist luminaries and positioning him in a unique space between Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.

As a cultural movement, Modernism is associated temporally with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and is defined by literary scholar Peter Nicholls as a movement of resistance against the conservative traditions of realism. In *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, Nicholls traces the beginnings of Modernism to ideas of the social in works by Charles Baudelaire, Herman Melville, and Fyodor Dostoevsky—interestingly, all were writers Toomer read and was significantly influenced by. During the late nineteenth century in Europe and the Americas, the surge of economic growth and the gospel of social and technological progress became equated with cultural stagnation. For Baudelaire, modern society after 1850 was "wholly worn-out—worse than worn-out—brutalised and greedy, wholly repelled by fiction, adoring only material possession" [11, p. 7]. Here, too, begins the modernist preoccupation with time, for as Baudelaire suggests, the melding of greed and stagnation implies that the being becomes frozen in movement, oppressed by the mechanical. As critic Robert Jones mentions, Toomer was fascinated with the French Symbolists, listing his "literary mentor as Charles Baudelaire," whose *Le Spleen de Paris* inspired many of the prose poems and lyrical sketches in *Cane* [8, p. 253].

When Toomer started to experiment with several forms of narrative and poetry in 1919, the other major Modernist influence on his development during this period, aside from French Symbolism, was Imagism. As he described in his

autobiography, Toomer was impressed to the greatest degree by the aesthetics of the Imagists: "Their insistence on fresh vision and perfect clean economical line was just what I had been looking for. I began feeling that I had in my hands the tools for my own creation" [17, p. 120]. Imagism was a movement in early twentieth century Anglo-American poetry (though it was also prominent in forms other than poetry) that is an attempt to recover a stylistic purity and directness that contrasts the Symbolist indirectness. Characterized most notably by the works of Ezra Pound, Imagism is a means to equate the imagery of a poem with a mood, shifting attention away from the object.

Nowhere is Imagism more significant in *Cane* than in "Her Lips are Copper Wire," a poem about a lover who carries contradictions between idealism and reality.¹⁶ Critic Barbara Bowen calls it "*Cane's* most stunning single piece" [3, p. 14] and Robert Jones refers to it as "the only illuminated moment of vision" in *Cane* [8, p. 256]. Imagery is both the ambiguous medium and obstacle of sentiment as the narrator sensuously beckons to the lover: "and let your breath be moist against me / like bright beads on yellow globes." The series of apostrophe commands, following the phrases "telephone the power-house" and "with your tongue remove the tape / and press your lips to mine," suggests a gendered speech in which the narrator is a male, seeking to seduce his female lover with the intimate act of a kiss. The electrical imagery as equated to sexual desire also references the idea of modern technology. While the first command seems to connote something natural about this union of the being with technology—"and let your breath be moist against me / like bright beads on yellow globes"—the next command shatters this romanticized ideal: "telephone the power-house / that the main wires are insulate." Finally, there is the ambiguous nature of the wire. The lips of the beloved are not merely copper, depicting a rich skin color, but copper *wire*, a word that can suggest the cold, mechanical nature of the modern being as easily as it can hint at the connection between desire and the actual act of sex. The wire also illustrates the role of communication in modern society. The command "remove the tape," therefore, can be seen both as a call to free expression between the lovers and conversely to the admission that the lovers cannot get past words. This contrast questions how to exceed the imagery of the diction to communicate with the meanings of the poem itself.

Not only is *Cane* redolent of Imagism, but contextually Toomer was situated amongst an explosion of African American intellectual and artistic life occurring in Harlem in the 1920s through the form of writing, painting and music, radiating globally to French-speaking black writers from African and Caribbean colonies. African American historian David Lewis explains the role of the Harlem Renaissance within Modernism as unique because it took the philosophies born out of Anglo-American, British, and Irish moderns and readapted them for the advocacy of black arts against white supremacy. He states:

African Americans turned to art in the twenties precisely because there was no conceivable chance of their assuming patria—or anything else in white America. Art seemed to offer the only means of advancement because it was the only area in America—from the Afro-American perspective—where the color line had not been rigidly drawn. [1, p. 11]

In many ways, Toomer's literary tendency to utilize the forms of Anglo-American and Anglo-Saxon traditions, even though he was writing in Harlem during the

1920s, constitutes his liminal position within Afro-American modernism and Afro-American artistic circles.¹⁷

Nonetheless, Toomer lived and worked in Harlem intermittently from 1920 to 1922, experiencing the climate of black pride and finishing *Cane* in 1922 after approximately a year of writing. When Boni and Liveright accepted it for publication, Toomer was ecstatic: "My words have become a book. . . I have actually finished something" [9, p. 184]. However, Toomer's hope of pursuing a literary career collapsed even before *Cane* was published in 1923. The story is well-known in certain literary circles: Toomer was angered that Waldo Frank, in his introduction to the book, and Horace Liveright, in his defense of Frank, made an issue of his racial identity and of the presentation of African identity in the text.

In a letter to Waldo Frank on March 24, 1922, Toomer explains the connection between the preoccupation with his ambiguous ideas of race and the transference of this preoccupation to the classification of his literary work: "My own life has been about equally divided between the two racial groups. . . between the two worlds, now dipping into the Negro, now into the white" [9, p. 183]. He details his racial identity, claiming that the culture, history, and tradition of five bloodlines in his family—French, English, Dutch, Indian, and Jewish—were well-known and discussed "with an approximation of truth" [9, p. 183]. He told Frank, however, that the sixth, his African bloodline, was becoming subject to perversion for "purposes of propaganda," the reason why Toomer was extremely hesitant to be featured as a Negro during the marketing of *Cane* [9, p. 183].

In August 1923, Toomer received a letter from his publisher Horace Liveright asking for a revision on the bibliographic statement Toomer submitted for promotion of the novel. Liveright supported Frank's introduction by requesting that Toomer feature himself as black: "I feel that right at the very start there should be a definite note sounded about your colored blood. To me this is the real human interest of your story and I don't see why you should dodge it" [9, p. 182]. Toomer was angered and disappointed after reading Liveright's letter, explaining in his rejoinder: ". . . my racial composition and my position in the world are realities that I alone may determine. . . I do not expect to be told what I should consider myself to be" [9, p. 182].¹⁸ Toomer's convictions about this issue went so far as his willingness to cancel the publication of *Cane* following Liveright's letter.¹⁹ To him, being labeled a Negro writer and having *Cane* labeled a Negro work created restrictions that he could not tolerate. The correspondence had such an effect on Toomer that after *Cane*'s publication, Toomer ceased to create any literary art.

Horace Liveright and Waldo Frank were the first of many critics who viewed *Cane* in strictly racial terms. In his 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Langston Hughes addressed the poor reception *Cane* received upon its publication and classified both the work and Toomer to be Negro:

The colored people did not praise [*Cane*]. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read *Cane* hate it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews, the public remained indifferent. Yet *Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial. [2, p. 93]

Cane's limited success upon its initial release as well as the fact that Toomer

made a conscious decision to stop creating literary art after 1923 caused both the work and Toomer's name to slowly slip away from the attention of the literary community.²⁰

Toomer's reputation stands where it is today because *Cane* was rediscovered by a number of scholars and students in the 1950s and republished in 1951 during the start of the modern Civil Rights movement,²¹ when many Americans sought out black literary treasures amidst a wave of black empowerment.²² By the early 1960s, Toomer was ranked among the finest artists in the history of Afro-American literature, a title which carries a significant amount of irony considering how Toomer resisted being identified with any race besides the new one he was creating—the American race. In addition, the multi-vocal nature of the text, which grants a large freedom to interpret particular themes or symbols as desired, was appropriated by readers seeking their own story of black life in *Cane*. For example, nearly all poems and sketches in *Cane* present characters that are racially ambiguous or challenge socially acceptable interracial relationships. In my reading, even pieces that seem to portray black protagonists such as “Karintha” and “Portrait in Georgia” depict the complexity of understanding race beyond physical features and suggest the tensions of racialization. Therefore, the blackness of these characters becomes woven into Toomer's writing and into the larger questioning of what it means to be human.

“Portrait in Georgia” is the most disturbing and moving piece in *Cane* that portrays the ambiguities of racial categorization. At first glance, “Portrait in Georgia” seems to be a poem of female African American oppression.²³ The opening line “Hair—braided chestnut” materializes dark hair and beauty, but this picture is immediately destroyed when the hair is likened to “a lyncher's rope.” Lynching, set against the allusion to the South in the poem's title, would remind a reader in the 1950s of the very real phenomena of state and social oppression against African Americans; in one word, the female immediately becomes both palpable and racialized. The poem's creation of the tangible is further marked through the physicality of the woman's “hair,” “eyes,” “lips,” and “slim body.” This visual is contrasted only once by her immaterial “breath,” which evokes the unseen. Each description culminates into a distressing and powerful vision of a beautiful woman slowly laid to waste, eaten away by the violence of racial oppression—her hair “coiled like a lyncher's rope,” the “old scars” on her lips, the likening of her eyes to “fagots,” her “last” breath. In the poem's final lines, the woman is burned in a lynching and her skin turns to whiteness from the fire: “And her slim body, white as the ash / of black flesh after flame.” The particular move to have the female's skin turn white not only recalls the contrast between the seen and unseen and but also implies the superficiality of external classification. In addition, this surface transformation awakens the ambiguity of the woman's race, for her skin is never explicitly stated as “black” but merely likened to “black flesh after flame.” Suddenly, the dangers attending physical features in an African American context are horribly explicit.

The way that “Portrait in Georgia” challenges racial perceptions was most likely foreign to a scholar or student reading the poem in the context of the 1950s. Metaphorically ambiguous language would have been replaced by the reality of violence against African Americans, particularly in the South. In this sense, *Cane* was revived in the 1950s precisely because Toomer's writing could speak to the seriousness of racial conditions surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. However, what was once a literal experience of racial violence during the

culture of the 1950s has now become either unfamiliar or a matter of historical memory for modern readers. Here lies the crux in reading and understanding *Cane*: an awareness of the various racial climates of the text's history. *Cane* does not exist in a vacuum, confined to particular meanings in moments of time; instead, its readings continue to evolve alongside collective perceptions of race and identity in America.

One's reading of mixed-race characters in *Cane* is informed, first and foremost, by one's position in the twenty-first century and experiences of living in an era where the presence and the un-stereotypical blackness of President Barack Obama has forced the country to confront issues of race.²⁴ This is not to claim that we have moved past conditions of race or of racism itself. Rather, there exists a more fluid construct of identity as compared to the 1920s and 1950s, as seen in the recent rise of movements such as multiracialism.²⁵ In essence, *Cane* implores an understanding of previous racial attitudes; reading the novel as racially ambiguous is perhaps made more readily available to twenty-first century readers than to early or mid twentieth century readers due to the distinctness of these respective racial climates.

My interpretation of *Cane* supports the tendencies of the text to alter racial expectations by rejecting the burden of representation. The conclusion of each prose narrative in *Cane* reveals its mixed-race or racially ambiguous characters to be misunderstood by the binary racial system of Jim Crow; they hold a marginal and isolating position that gives them no place to go.²⁶ For the female characters that occupy the entirety of part one, their marginality is gendered and marked by the impediment and redirection of their sexuality: Karintha has a miscarriage; Carma sleeps with several men only to be caught by her husband; Fern is lusted after and objectified by men in Georgia. Toomer fills the first section of *Cane* with narratives of women primarily because their reproductive power aligns with the creative power of art and conversely, with Toomer's intent to foil this creation through the birth of a "swan-song," or a story of failure.

"Esther" is a thwarted love story broken into three parts and structured by time, beginning with Esther at the age of nine and ending with her at twenty-seven. Without delay, the narrative's first line racializes the nine-year-old Esther: "Esther's hair falls in soft curls about her high-cheek-boned chalk-white face" [16, p. 20]. The image of "chalk-white face" implies that Esther is white but this notion is soon complicated with the phrase, "Esther looks like a little white child. . ." [16, p. 20]. The word "like" establishes a comparison, a simile which reveals Esther's true identity, meaning that although Esther can pass for white she is really mixed-race. "White and black men loafing on the corner hold no interest for her" indicates that Esther is indifferent to men on the street but this idea is challenged in the subsequent sentence, "Then a strange thing happens. A clean-muscled, magnificent, black-skinned Negro. . . suddenly drops to his knees on a spot called the Spittoon" [16, p. 20]. While passing from her father's shop, Esther happens upon the religious trance of the dark-skinned "prophet," King Barlo, a man who claims divine inspiration and passes through the South to preach. Barlo and his religious reverie transfix Esther's attention on the street, and when he finally leaves town, "the outlines of his visioned African" cannot escape her mind [16, p. 21].

Esther's preoccupation with race begins at age sixteen, when she dreams of a "black, singed, woolly" baby abandoned during a fire [16, p. 22]. Though the baby is described to be "ugly as sin," Esther recognizes it as human—"its

breath is sweet and its lips can nibble”—and “she loves it frantically” [16, p. 22]. Thus, Esther experiences a symbolic sexual awakening by embodying the role of a mother, of a woman who has the potential to create life through the act of sex. More specifically, because the baby is “singed” with blackness, it symbolizes Esther’s embracement of her black sexuality, of the part of herself “the town folks jeer” at [16, p. 22]. Yet this jeer, in Esther’s dream, soon turns to jealousy and the townspeople leave Esther alone with the baby. Esther’s isolation at this moment suggests that accepting her black sexuality, as one who can pass for white, leaves her straddling two worlds. Though Esther occupies a mixed-race position, she desires monoraciality; to claim the black baby as her own is to claim the part of herself that is also black.

When Esther is reintroduced at age 22, she is priming herself for the desire of a black man. “She thinks about men” and then, without delay, of Barlo’s image [16, p. 22]. The first thing Esther uses to thrill her desire for Barlo is his race: “Black. Magnetically so” [16, p. 23]. Thus, the religious experience Esther witnessed as a child has now been converted into a racially sexual experience, one in which she finds herself eroticizing Barlo based solely on his outward appearance and the blackness of his figure. Esther then “decides that she loves [Barlo]” and “resolves that she will tell him so...the next time he comes to town” [16, p. 23]. Her love is so resolute that it awakens thoughts of a wedding, specifically the image of a “wedding cake,” a symbol of Esther’s desire that she buries under her pillow [16, p. 23]. The pillow, a representation of dreaming, links Esther’s love for Barlo to a world disconnected from reality.

Esther’s marginality is reinforced for the final time when Barlo returns to town and Esther, now 27 and determined to confess her love for him, finds him drunk in a house. Barlo refers to her as a “lil milk-white gal” and tells her “this aint th place fer y” as the black women in the room laugh at Esther, realizing what she has come to do [16, p. 25]. This laughing recalls Esther’s dream at age sixteen. While the townspeople had at one point ceased their jeering, it is only now, at age 27, that Esther realizes how far her dreams are from reality. She becomes frozen; Barlo, drunk and oblivious to her feelings, is nothing like Esther imagined him to be: “She steps out. There is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared” [16, p. 25]. The narrative ends with Esther outside and with no place to go, confirming her ambiguous social position between the black and white communities.

An accumulated knowledge of *Cane*’s narratives demonstrates how “Esther” can be read as symbolic of the novel as a whole. Though it is not the only prose narrative that features a mixed-race figure struggling with issues of identity, “Esther” is a prime example of how we trace representations of race throughout *Cane*. To consider the ambiguous figures of Esther, Karinthia or Fern is to come to terms with our tendency to convert the meanings of particular narratives to the entirety of the text itself. Esther could have easily been interpreted in the past as a tragic mulatto figure, yet reading her in the present day has transposed a whole new set of modern notions that allow for us, like Toomer, to be suspicious of a social system that designated light-skinned or mixed race people as black and to see past the social construction of race.

In the aftermath of *Cane*’s original publication, Toomer finally came to realize the incommunicable gap that existed between his aspiration for *Cane* to transcend racial labels and the reality of what his audience made of the text. In light of Toomer’s social ambitions to change racial politics in America

through art, to “withdraw from all things which emphasize. . . racial or cultural divisions. . . [and to] align with things that stress the experiences. . . we have in common” [4, p. 173], *Cane* was, at one time, in the words of Toomer, “a swan song. . . a song of ends” [6, p. 2]. Yet there persists an irony in terms of Toomer not announcing his racial identity in the forward to *Cane* and of the subsequent presumptions that followed regarding the racial classification of his book, yielding *Cane* as a supposed failure. For a novel that was so obscure during its time and had an initial printing of only 500 copies, it is clear how Toomer would view his first and last piece of fiction as a disappointment. However, *Cane* is anything but a failure. Here, I return to the notion that in order to understand the novel, we must bridge the divide between history and the aesthetic; we must explore its richness as tied to innumerable personal events in Toomer’s life and writing as well as to cultural events spanning the twentieth century. *Cane* has the power to be relevant both in the century in which it was originally produced and reissued as well as in the next century that we find ourselves in—a time when we assume racial categories and mixed-race issues will continue to evolve. Although the text has finally reached a period when Toomer’s vision to merge art with the complexities of race can exist in all of its ambiguity, its interpretation will undoubtedly change in future readings. Despite Toomer’s frustrations, his “swan song” has gone on to transcend the boundaries of time, carrying along the way glimpses of its past which render it today as one of the finest works in American literature.

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Notes

¹Redolent is reflective of suggestion but more so it is evocative of lyricism, aromatic of “fermenting syrup.” A poet is redolent in the sense of evoking lyrical expression.

²As Toomer noted in his completed manuscript, this was a structural move he used to evoke a sense of circular progression within the text.

³The word “Negro” is used contextually in the way Professor Wagner taught the novel as well as in the broader context of the language of this period—it should not be confused with being a contemporary descriptor for African Americans.

⁴Toomer lived during a time when, in addition to Jim Crow laws, the One-drop Rule, a social classification that deemed a person with any degree of African ancestry to be black, was legally codified in most ex-Confederate states and upheld socially as de facto law most everywhere else in the United States.

⁵I recognize that the concept of race is constantly evolving. Therefore, the way in which I talk about racial processes is not meant to connote a sense of finality.

⁶Any mention of “biracial system of race” or “binary system of race” is a direct reference to the Jim Crow laws enacted in the United States from 1876 to 1965, which led to a systematic inferior treatment of black Americans as opposed to their white counterparts. This is not to claim that racial segregation ended immediately after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or that other ethnic minorities were not also deemed inferior, but to illustrate America’s tendency and practice to dichotomize society into black and white during the Jim Crow period.

⁷W. E. B. DuBois’ 1924 review of the novel mentions the ambiguity of Toomer’s impressionist lyric style in trying to achieve a new portrayal of black people: “I cannot, for the life of me, for instance, see why Toomer could not have made the tragedy of Carma something that I could understand instead of vaguely guess at” [12, p. 282]. William Stanley Braithwaite in his 1925 review locates the subject-matter of *Cane* to be Negro, commenting on Toomer’s ability to “write about the Negro without the surrender or the compromise of the author’s vision” [6, p. 10] and John Armstrong’s 1923 review claimed: “. . . the Negro, at least, has found an authentic lyric voice in Jean Toomer. . . there is nothing of the theatrical coon-strutting high-brown. . . chicken-stealing nigger of musical comedy and burlesque in the pages of *Cane*” [12, p. 280].

⁸In Langston Hughes’ 1940 article on Toomer, he reflects on the issue *Cane* caused with regards to racial classification: “[Toomer] put all the critics, white and colored, in a great dilemma. How should they class the author of *Cane* in their lists and summaries? . . . it being a case of black blood and white blood having met and the individual deciding to be merely American. . . Harlem is sorry he stopped writing” [4, p. 195].

⁹The Pinchback family moved to Washington D.C after Reconstruction and were seen as part of the “mulatto elite” even though P. B. S. Pinchback attempted to fight against this reputation by claiming that he was black. Scholar Charles Scruggs argues in “Jean Toomer: Fugitive” that P. B. S. Pinchback’s choice to racially classify himself was Toomer’s first encounter with the potential ambivalence of racial categories: “As a young boy, Jean Toomer attended a dinner party during which someone asked his famous grandfather, P. B. S. Pinchback, if he indeed had ‘colored’ blood. The light-skinned former lieutenant governor of Louisiana answered enigmatically, ‘That is what I have claimed.’” [14, p. 1].

¹⁰Later in his life, however, Toomer insisted that he wanted to stay close to his biological heritage and did not want to deny any part of his bloodline, claiming that he was an “American.” His contention was that most people in America were of mixed race bloodlines and that racial issues were detrimental to the development of the human race as a whole.

¹¹This stability failed, and characteristic of his restlessness, Toomer enrolled in the summer of 1914 at the University of Washington only to drop out by the fall of 1916 to register for biology courses at the University of Chicago in preparation for a medical career. The schedule incurred by years of Toomer jumping from interest to interest caused a severe breakdown for him in 1918. It was during this time that Toomer turned to literature to resolve his indecisiveness toward a career, covering material from Fyodor Dostoevsky and Charles Baudelaire to Robert Frost and George Bernard Shaw.

¹²Toomer renamed himself “Jean” after the main protagonist of Romain Rolland’s *Jean-Christophe*, a novel that records the struggles of a fugitive-figure artist with society and himself. Letters record that Toomer identified entirely with the protagonist: “his trials and problems are mine” [14, p. 87]. In Toomer’s autobiography, he said he also identified with another “fugitive” figure, Melville’s Ishmael, whom Toomer regarded to live “in opposition to his surroundings” [14, p. 86].

¹³Frank would later give direction to the writing of *Cane* and would also persuade its publisher, Boni and Liveright, to accept it for publication.

¹⁴*Our America* is a novel that attacks Puritan American from a psychologically Freudian approach, arguing for a heterogeneous America to lift the country out of social oppression.

¹⁵The book's ending, which calls to "...begin to generate within ourselves the energy which is love of life" and claims that "[the act of energy] is creation" impressed Toomer greatly [4, p. 232]. For additional information on *Our America*'s influence on Toomer see, Charles Scruggs' "Jean Toomer: Fugitive," especially Part II.

¹⁶All references to the poem "Her Lips are Copper Wire" appear on page 54 of *Cane* [16].

¹⁷The term Afro-American is the preferred manner to refer to African Americans in Houston Bakers' *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. The twentieth century saw a succession of preferred terms, from Negro to colored to black, with increasing emphasis on heritage rather than color toward the 1960s and 1970s with Afro-American and African American. I use the term synonymously with African American.

¹⁸In a 1930 letter to poet and early civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson, Toomer revealed what he considered himself to be: "I do not see things in terms of Negro, Anglo-Saxon, Jewish, and so on. As for me personally, I see myself as an American, simply an American" [4, p. 173].

¹⁹This issue was resolved to some extent when Liveright and Toomer reached an agreement in September 1923 as to how the Boni and Liveright publicity department would feature Toomer's position to reviewers. However, once this agreement was reached, Toomer had no input in the final decisions the publicity department made, which ended up featuring him as Negro [4, p. 170–171].

²⁰Toomer expressed why he turned away from literary art in the same 1930 letter to James Johnson: "I see art and literature as primarily American art and literature. I do not see it as Negro, Anglo-Saxon, and so on. Accordingly, I must withdraw from all things which emphasize or tend to emphasize racial or cultural divisions. I must align myself with things which stress the experiences, forms, and spirit we have in common" [4, p. 173].

²¹Scholar Nellie McKay, in her article "Jean Toomer," as well as the section pertaining to Jean Toomer in *The Harlem Renaissance: A Gale Critical Companion, Vol. 3* both identify the initial re-publication of *Cane* to be 1951. The *Norton Critical Edition* for *Cane* specifies the reissuing date of 1969 because it was in paperback, indicating that the first reissue in 1951 was in hardback.

²²I recognize the modern Civil Rights movement as the period from 1954–1968 starting with the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954. However, I do realize that the struggle to attain African American civil rights was a long movement that can be traced back to African slave origins in America during the sixteenth century.

²³All references to the poem "Portrait in Georgia" appear on page 27 of *Cane* [16].

²⁴Though the idea of a "post-racial" America was sprung from the reality of electing the first non-white President, one has to only look at the recent controversy of Obama's birth certificate and of the unusual quality of his full name to reveal the discomfort our society feels with ideas of difference. However, I also recognize that the American media plays the dominant role in propagating controversies surrounding Obama's race.

²⁵Multiracialism is a fairly recent ideology and movement that promotes a society composed of multi-ethnic or diverse peoples. Multiracialism exists in our present culture through the form of interracial marriages, which have tripled in the past thirty years, and a resistance on the part of some multiracial people to be racially labeled. Toomer, whose ideas of race were quite ahead of his time, has drawn connections to this movement primarily because of his defiance of racial labels and his two marriages to white women.

²⁶At the end of these narratives, the characters appear to be symbolically and literally without home, both in the sense of being left physically alone and in not having a fixed racial identity with which they can feel secure.

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