

JEAN TOOMER OR
HOW THE FAILED RACE MAN PERFORMED MODERNITY

By

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The thesis explores the intersections of the figure of the race man, prevailing notions of modernity and race and the life and work of intellectual and writer Jean Toomer. By tracing the racial politics and protocols embedded in the race man ideal, the paper exposes the necessity of Toomer's so-called "flight" to the metaphysical idealism of the Russian mystic Gurdjieff. It also demonstrates the ways in which this move mimics a performance of modernity for this great modernist writer and thinker. These claims are argued with particular attention to the racial binaries that have constituted much of U.S. racial politics and ideology.

INTRODUCTION

This project is an exploration of the impact of the figure of the race man on the multi-racial writer Jean Toomer. The purpose of the project is to first make apparent the ways in which this figure, when applied as a descriptor and a means of evaluation of Toomer, became a pathway towards invariable failure for Toomer at the very moment of his greatest success—the publication of his masterwork *Cane* in 1923.

This lack of success as a race man then provoked the necessity of Toomer's search for another, more suitable path, for fulfillment of his very modernist aspirations—both as a writer and a social leader and reformer. Toomer, like many intellectuals and artists in the 1920's, understood the world to be in a state of crisis. Like Toomer, many of them understood their function as artists and thinkers as addressing and rectifying the sense of impending doom that was the overall experience of modernity.

For the sake of this work, I define modernism as artistic and intellectual response to modernity. Modernity is the experience of modernization which often included a sense of contradictions at the very core of the relation between the human, society and the modernization process. Modernism as a period is most often dated between 1890-1930—very firmly within the time period this project explores with regard to Jean Toomer.

Toomer's well-regarded novel *Cane* is stylistically modernist in its montage of stories, poems and vignettes and functionally modernist in content and approach as Toomer illuminates the reality of modernization's impact on the dying Black folk culture

of the American South in the early part of the twentieth century. The novel is based, in part, on Toomer's own experiences in Georgia in 1921. His expressed aim in writing the pieces that make up this collection was to show the brokenness of the modern condition in comparison to the last vestiges of the rural Black south in its integrity. Ultimately, *Cane* was, in Toomer's words, a swan song. Toomer's life-long obsession then became to restore what is broken to wholeness and to make his life and work serve this purpose in a most integrated way. In the end, the failed race man Toomer did learn to perform modernity in ways ultimately supportive of his own gender and racial complexity; his wholeness. This is also, then, a story of how he did it.

ARGUMENT

It's All in the Context

I'm leaving the shining ground, brothers,
I sing because I ache,
I go because I must . . .

Jean Toomer—"The Blue Meridian"

In her book *Patterns for America—Modernism and the Concept of Culture*, Susan Hegeman chronicles how an emerging concept of culture in the early twentieth century paved the way for Black leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois to posit new models for African American participation in American life. In particular, the influence of Franz Boas' thought on DuBois helped give "credence to a significant de-emphasis on 'race' as a biological category and a corresponding new interest in developing positive descriptions of what a specifically African American 'culture' might contain."¹ This change created space "beyond and apart from" the scientific racism of the day and later evolved into the Harlem Renaissance literary strategy of highlighting and making known the profound contributions of African Americans to an expanded understanding of "America." As Hegeman notes, these Black intellectuals took "as a founding premise the idea that Black Americans possessed a particular cultural heritage."²

The writer Jean Toomer's entrance onto the stage of American literary history was governed by this type of understanding of culture and its logic of cultural contribution. In

¹ Susan Hegeman, *Patterns for America—Modernism and the Concept of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 51.

² Hegeman, 51.

particular, Toomer wrote his masterwork *Cane* in response to what he understood as his mentor Waldo Frank's omissions of Black Southern rural life in Frank's own treatment of his 1919 *Our America*. Ironically, Toomer's *success* at this enterprise and participation in the logic of these emerging cultural constructs created difficulties and obstacles for him well beyond what he could have imagined.

Before I can return to the issue of Toomer's now legendary difficulties, another contextual backdrop needs to be elucidated. It is the operating figure of the "Race Man" of which W.E. B. DuBois is the exemplar.

In her 1998 text *Race Men*, Hazel Carby proclaims "for a century, the figure of the race man has haunted black political and cultural thought."³ A key figure in this historical trajectory is W.E.B. DuBois. His success as a superior Black man, coupled with his visionary leadership, positioned DuBois as a worthy race man. His larger cultural agenda for African Americans had profound and far-reaching effects. As noted in my comments about emerging notions of cultural contribution, Carby summarizes thus: "in DuBois' genealogy of race and nation, black people are both integral to the nation-state and essential to its future."⁴ This claim is made alongside the statement of DuBois that black men are "the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness."⁵ These were new modern terms for the position of Blacks in America and DuBois set them in his seminal text *The Souls of Black Folks* published in 1903.

³ Hazel Carby. *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵ W.E.B. DuBois. (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk* (rpt. New York: New York American Library 1982), 52.

For DuBois however, it would take the significant contribution of the “talented tenth” to persuade white America of its need for the “Race Man” and his people. And for the race man himself, it would take sacrifice. In his expressed intent DuBois begins to constitute the “race man” (of whom he is the prototype) as one who “intends to limit his striving” “in so far as that strife is incompatible with others of my brothers and sisters making their lives similar . . . I am firmly convinced that my own best development is not one and the same with the best development of the world and here I am willing to sacrifice.”⁶ This sacrifice of individual desire was critical for DuBois. Again, this was a sentiment that would have costly consequences when applied to the multi-racial Toomer as his desires to have himself adequately understood chafed against much of the racial ideology of the day.ⁱ

What I wish to demonstrate here is the inevitable failure of Jean Toomer as a race man—as an exemplary man living a life of self-sacrifice for his people—even as this was the most available lens through which he was constructed. I will trace the particularities of gender and race as they specifically dwell within the race man figure as well as the ways in which they created problems for Toomer, both in his work and in his self-understanding. I will then begin to chart the course taken by the “failed-race man” who nonetheless, must perform a very modern task of making himself whole for the sake of a world in peril. He can also then, in fact, perform modernity as well. By following the solitary genius Gurdjieff and adopting and promoting his spiritual world-view and total system, the “failed-race man” can mimic a performance of the race man in a way productive of self-inclusion.

⁶ Carby, 10.

The Reception of *Cane*

I held a fair position as men rate things,
 Even enviable—
 I could taste flavors in a grain of sand,
 My eyes saw loveliness . . .
 “The Blue Meridian”

At age 28, Jean Toomer published his first literary work *Cane*. The year was 1923.

Arna Bontemps suggested that an entire generation of writers “went quietly mad” over *Cane*; but the fact is, they were not at all quiet about it. In the foreword to *Cane* the well-known novelist Waldo Frank wrote:

A poet has arisen among our American youth who has known how to turn the essences of materials of his Southland into the essences and materials of literature. . . . The fashioning of beauty is ever foremost in his inspiration. . . . He has made songs and lovely stories of his land . . . [*Cane*] is a harbinger of a literary force of whose incalculable future I believe no reader of this book will be in doubt.⁷

Sherwood Anderson proclaimed Toomer the only Negro “to have consciously the artist’s impulse.”⁸ Afro-American literary critics such as William Stanley Braithwaite also endorsed Toomer as an “artist of the race.” He was described by Alfred Kreyborg as “one of the finest artists among the dark race, if not the finest.”⁹ As literary critic Siobhan Somerville summarizes, “much of this praise emphasized Toomer’s position as a gifted voice for African American culture.”¹⁰ Toomer was believed by many to have “captured”

⁷ Jean Toomer, *Cane*, ed. Darwin Turner (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1988), 121.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁹ Rudolph Byrd, *Jean Toomer’s Years with Gurdjieff—Portrait of an Artist, 1923-1936* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁰ Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line—Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 131.

the rural Southern Black experience in a haunting and revealing way. This gift for exposing black cultural beauty put him squarely within the traditions I have been describing; that of a “race man” who performs a superior function by claiming and illuminating “the race” for his people and their national context. The problem, of course, began when Toomer said he was not a Negro.

And yet he had succeeded exceedingly well at the cultural task of bringing Black culture to positive life. This fissure between the further completion of a much needed project and the impossible possibility that this endeavor was performed by someone other than a “negro” was too much for the prevailing cultural logic. Toomer was crashing fast as a “race man,” his denials were received as betrayal. He was certainly not performing the requisite *sacrifice* required of a *true race man*. The only alternative, was to sacrifice Toomer the artist instead. It was a literary version of “kill the messenger.” Jean Toomer would attempt to “kill” himself, by way of eradicating his ego. By reconstituting himself on a higher level, Toomer could recast the messianic race man function into something capable of embracing and promoting the “first American”—his new designation.

Toomer’s Own Racial Pronouncements or the Problem of Racial Binary

It is a new America
To be spiritualized by each new American.
“The Blue Meridian”

For the purposes of my argument here—that is, to illuminate the underlying racial and cultural logic that led to Toomer’s many difficulties—it is necessary to elucidate the earliest contexts of the controversies surrounding Toomer’s racial identity. In April of 1923, six months before *Cane*’s publication, Toomer was made aware of the reason behind speculation about him from the following letter. (There had been other such

moments prior, Toomer later tells.) Claude A. Barnett, director of the Associated Negro Press wrote to Jean Toomer:

For some time we, and by we I mean a group of three friends, the other two of which are literary men, one colored the other white, have wondered who and also what you are. There have been several arguments, the literary men contending that your style and finish indicated that you were not Negroid, while I, who am but the business manager of a news service, felt certain that you were—for *how else could you interpret “us”* (my emphasis) as you do unless you had peeked behind the veil.¹¹

As Rudolph Byrd further explains, “In this racial debate, Barnett’s position was that Toomer, owing to his ability to interpret certain aspects of African-American experience and culture, was African American.”¹² The fact that no other possibility could be imagined is most revelatory of the underlying conceptual dynamics of the time. Also, it is worthy of recall to mention that to “deconstruct” these notions at the time would also be to undermine, or significantly recast, an important modern political intervention for African Americans—that of showing the worthiness of African Americans by showing their particular cultural achievements, especially in the form of gifted and talented individual men. Nevertheless, Toomer was a man of principle where his own life and ideas were concerned so he proceeded ahead—in the “fool” sense of the word, leaving the angel behind—with the following response.

The arguments you have had with your friends, the different points of view and the consequent contentions, are not at all peculiar to your group. The fact is that I have had inquires of like nature come in from New Orleans, New York, Milwaukee, and Hollywood. The true and complete answer is one of some complexity, and for this reason perhaps it will not be seen and accepted until after I am dead. (This sounds quite solemn, but I assure you that I am capable of the saving smile.) The answer involves a realistic and accurate knowledge of racial mixture, of nationality as formed by the interaction of tradition, culture and environment, of the artistic nature

¹¹ Byrd, 55.

¹² Ibid.

in relation to the racial or social group, etc. All of which is too heavy and thick to go into now. Let me state then, simply, that I am the grandson of the late P.B.S. Pinchback. From this fact it is clear that your contention is sustained. I have “peeped behind the veil.” And my deepest impulse to literature (on the side of material) is the direct result of what I saw. In so far as the old folk-songs, as these are Negro, I am, body and soul, Negroid. My style, my esthetic, is nothing more nor less than my attempt to fashion my substance into works of art. For it, I am indebted to my inherent gifts, and to the entire body of contemporary literature. *I see no reason why my style and finish could not have come from an American with Negro blood in his veins. The pure fact is that they have, and hence your friends’ contentions are thrown out of court.*¹³ (my emphasis)

Toomer’s designation of an American with Negro blood did not fit the binary constructs of his inquiring peers. Leaving aside the fact, that from my view, there are numerous anti-racist, pro-African American statements in Toomer’s response, what is more important to note here, is how the prevailing notions I have been elucidating kept these statements from being heard as such, or from being enough to counter any conception of him as a race traitor who simply wished to “pass.” (Such an assessment persisted for many *decades* to follow.) Nevertheless, Toomer continued on with further intellectual interventions that would take the former “double-binds” of the racial binary into a more inclusive, less maddening place. As Catherine Gunther Kodat so brilliantly summed up Toomer’s experiences (as well as the logic behind them), “Ordered to be black, Toomer refused, and thereby discovered that, by default, he must ‘be’ white.”¹⁴ Finally, it is certainly no accident that Toomer used metaphors of “court and trial” in response to those who were accusing him. He was standing trial within an entire system of cultural logic and racial classification.

¹³Byrd, 56-57.

¹⁴ Catherine Gunther Kodat, “To ‘Flash White Light from Ebony’: The Problem of Modernism in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 46 (2000): 2.

Toomer's interventions involved relaying something of his complex racial composition and also attempting a new schema that would include a recognition of it.

Racially, I seem to have (who knows for sure) seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian. Because of these, my position in America has been a curious one. I have lived equally amid the two race groups. Now white, now colored. From my own point of view I am naturally and inevitably an American.¹⁵

Nearly a decade later in 1931, at the time of his marriage to Margery Lattimer, Toomer was still attempting these conceptual interventions.

There is a new race in America. I am a member of a new race. It is neither white nor black nor in-between. It is the American race, differing as much from white and black as white and black differ from each other. It is possible that there are Negro and Indian bloods in my descent along with English, Spanish, Welsh, Scotch, French, Dutch, and German. This is common in America, and it is from all these strains that the American race is being born. But the old divisions into white, black, brown, red are out worn in this country. They have had their day. Now is the time of the birth of a new order, a new vision, a new ideal of man. I proclaim this order. My marriage to Margery Latimer is the marriage of two Americans.¹⁶

Yet as Werner Sollors notes, "The *World Telegram* headline read 'Negro Who Wed White Novelist Sees New Race'. Whatever Toomer saw, the newspaper failed to see."¹⁷

But ten years ahead just tells the persistence of the problem and is ahead of our story.

Jean Toomer wrote very eloquently and movingly about the social ramifications of such a racial binary system in *Cane*.

Some reviewers have characterized *Cane* as a long meditation on Toomer's personal struggle concerning his own "biracial" identity. I find this view extremely

¹⁵ Werner Sollors, "Modernism and Race," in *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Michel Feith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 33).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

reductive even as Toomer's personal experiences of race clearly did inform the view point that made this a great work of art. This view is reductive for at least two reasons: one, it ignores the great *social* commentary that the work performs, extending far beyond anyone's "personal" struggle and secondly, it ignores the equally powerful commentary *Cane* produces on *many* subjects such as the loss of a sacred world-view, the inhibiting, repressive qualities associated with so-called sexual mores (and their social and individual consequences), important geographical differences between North and South and of course, the problems of modernization and increasing urbanization and their deleterious effects. Toomer wanted his work to be received in all its complexity just as he wished his racial identity to be received as such. Nevertheless, *Cane* is an indictment of the American binary racial classification system of its day as well and performs its redress in a way characteristic of modernism's fascination with irreconcilable difference and contradiction. This places the novel in the vulnerable territory of loss and impossible history.

The Vulnerability and the Vision

But out of our past comes hell,
Rushing us, sweeping us,
Winding us, blinding us,
Mistakes and hates,
Habits, blights, and greeds,
Out of the past they come
And they are hell.

"The Blue Meridian"

As stated, the novel *Cane* is an indictment of the American binary racial classification system. The "novel" itself is really a collection of short stories and poems arranged figuratively in a circle. This circle symbolizes an original unity found in the land that is the setting of the novel as well as in Toomer's own journey of consciousness.

Yet the symbol of the broken circle found throughout the text suggests it is a circle that is in the process of searching for completion. Toomer's work in *Cane* demonstrates his deep and profound understanding of the impact of "binary logic" on an individual and on a country. It was a problem he knew intimately and he helped his readers experience the pain of it through *Cane*. This exposure and openness to pain and suffering results in a sense of vulnerability throughout the novel. Toomer also shows in this novel, new conceptions of masculinity, affect and consciousness. These are reflections of Toomer's developing vision. The types of human relating and experience found in *Cane*'s mysticism foretells the path Toomer will use to take himself and his readers away from the binds of such binaries as constituted race in America.

I wish to turn now to how this indictment of America's racial system is performed in the story of Becky in *Cane*. As Toomer begins, "Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons. She's dead; they've gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound." Thus begins a story in which Toomer will invoke the figure of Jesus and the "real" teaching of the Bible to interrupt the social arrangements that lead to Becky's ongoing and inevitable tragedy. What is less forthrightly clear from Toomer is how this tragedy is also the tragedy of the "two sons." It does appear that Toomer directs his sympathy more to white Becky, who the town hopes will secretly die. She earned the disrespect of white and black alike when she dared to intermingle her life stuff with a Negro.

Nevertheless, Toomer, of course, is not himself unaware that this situation is also the two sons' existential tragedy. He does mention briefly their terrible dilemma. "White or colored? No one knew, and least of all themselves. We, who had cast out their mother because of them, could we take them in? They answered black and white folks by

shooting up two men and leaving town. ‘Godam the white folks; godam the niggers,’ they shouted as they left town.’¹⁸ It is not a huge leap to think of these two sons as representing “white” and “black” America, especially in so far as they believe themselves to be *separate*. Nor to understand that Toomer is suggesting that the current social arrangements of race could only lead each to condemn the other while, tragically, condemning themselves.

For Toomer however, Becky is the most maligned figure because it is she herself who insists on something else, who forces the hand of the system by engaging in intimate intermingling between the races. Her flatout refusal of the prescribed prohibitions forces the “town” as civilization to find a liminal place for her. Though they wish her dead, they don’t dare do it themselves, nor do they desire to assume responsibility for the act. Instead, the people wish for an unconscious execution of Becky, so they place her at the edge of the town—where people do pass by on trains—with the equally unconscious hope that she will show them something different of themselves. The fact that Becky is suggested to be “crazy” or unstable is also a reflection of her symbolic reflection as “mother” America whose system of racial classification and its concomitant social relations do not originate in sanity. Toomer shows the current racial protocol is dangerous and highly destructive as evidenced by how violence consistently emerged from any challenges to its logic.

I believe one of the things that makes *Cane* a magnificent work of art is that Toomer crafts both his raw vulnerability and as well as his subtle vision into his complex text. However, this same artful and fruitful combination of vulnerability melded with

¹⁸ Toomer, 8.

vision is also very present in Toomer's representations and characterizations of masculinity and gender relations in *Cane*.

Engendering the Race Man

Free the sexes
From the penalties and proscriptions
That allegedly are laid on us
Because we are male and female.
"The Blue Meridian"

Hazel Carby's recent interrogation of the race man trope brings a pointed critique to its gendered nature. In referring to the DuBois quote I discussed, Carby notes

beneath the surface of this apparent sacrifice of individual desire to become an intellectual and a race leader is a conceptual framework that is gender-specific; not only does it apply exclusively to men, but it encompasses only those men who enact narrowly and rigidly determined codes of masculinity.¹⁹

She goes on to explain that DuBois

constructed particular personal, political, and social characteristics of a racialized masculinity to articulate his definition of black leadership. He was particularly concerned about the "moral uplift of a people" and felt that this was best accomplished "by planting in every community of Negroes black men with ideals of life and thrift and civilization, such as must in time filter through the masses and set examples of moral living." After weighing the political and social needs of what he imagined to be the race, *he judged the worth of black male intellectuals and would-be race leaders according to those needs*²⁰(my emphasis).

It is worthwhile now to turn to DuBois' own assessment of Toomer. After writing that "The world of black folk will some day arise and point to Jean Toomer as a writer who first dared to emancipate the colored world from the conventions of sex" and clearly designating Toomer as one of "us" by writing "Jean Toomer is the first of our writers to hurl his pen across the very face of our sex conventionality," Du Bois ends with a more cautionary endorsement of Toomer.

¹⁹ Carby, 10.

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

Toomer does not impress me as one who knows his Georgia but he does know human beings. . . . His emotion is for the most part entirely objective. One does not feel that he feels much and yet the fervor of his descriptions shows that he has felt or knows what feeling is. His art carries much that is difficult or even impossible to understand. The artist, of course, has a right deliberately to make his art a puzzle to the interpreter (the whole world is a puzzle) but on the other hand I am myself unduly irritated by this sort of thing. (he goes on to cite examples) . . . All these essays and stories . . . (are) still for me . . . partially soiled. Toomer strikes me as a man who has written a powerful book but who is still watching for the fullness of his strength and for that calm certainty of his art which will undoubtedly come with years.²¹

Besides making this rather maddening report on Toomer's artistry, DuBois makes critical *engendered* statements about Toomer in this passage. He very much assumes the role of the "elder" evaluator. He notes, perhaps significantly, that Toomer strikes him *as a man* who has written a powerful book. This is, I suppose, as opposed to a woman who might have written it. Nevertheless, he is not yet fully a "man" because he is "still watching for fullness of his strength" nor does his art yet possess the "calm certainty" of years. Toomer's art and his manhood are evaluated together—they are somehow reflective of one another. If his art is difficult or confusing, so must be his manhood.

Though these particular examples may seem minor, it is not inconsequential that DuBois attacks (albeit in contradictory ways) Toomer's relationship to affect and feeling. DuBois first notes that his "emotion is for the most part objective." It is a long-standing injunction of masculinity that if one, as a male, demonstrates "emotionality" it is imperative to insure that it is also somehow "objective" and "rational." Next DuBois states about Toomer that, "one does not feel that he feels much." Then, DuBois proclaims that the "fervor of his descriptions shows that he has felt or knows what feeling is." These later descriptions seem to be naming an inadequate or under-developed type of

²¹ Toomer, 171.

feeling in Toomer though we know that DuBois' final criticism of Toomer is that his art lacks a "calm certainty." It is nearly impossible to ascertain exactly what form of affect *would be* acceptable or desirable for DuBois. I hasten to add that this clear ambivalence is most certainly linked to gender and prevailing constructions of masculinity.

The artist, if he is male, provides many complications to the injunctions against male feeling as artists are supposed to be able to feel and express feelings in relation to their vision and commentary. Nevertheless, a work such as *Cane* that evokes *deep* feelings of loss, grief and longing appears to constellate added ambivalence about the gender of its maker. It is therefore necessary for DuBois to alternate between "man" and "artist" as a descriptor of Toomer. Each role carries differing valences and social prescriptions. Yet Toomer as artist threatens much with regards to gender, as he did similarly with race. DuBois' own commentary on Toomer's "feeling self," I believe, is reflective of the type of ambivalence many people felt about Toomer, including even Toomer himself.

Leaving the subject of affect and masculinity aside temporarily, let me return to other propositions about the cultural and social impact of a figure like W.E.B. DuBois. As Hazel Carby makes clear, "It is important not only to recognize the varied and complex ways in which DuBois developed a public persona that was crafted to embody the philosophy he espoused, but also to analyze the ideological effect of such embodiment on his philosophic judgments. My contention is that these judgments reveal highly gendered structures of intellectual and political thought and feeling; these structures are embedded in specific ways in *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903, reprinted twenty-four times by 1940, revived in the 1960s and 1970s, and now

regarded as a founding text in the study of black culture.”²² It is worthwhile to note the connections these time periods share with Jean Toomer—first, they reflect decades prior to the publication of *Cane* as well as those concurrent with the writing career of Toomer. Finally, the later periods reflect times of reprinting of *Cane* in which the ongoing critical reception of Jean Toomer and of *Cane* were highly determined by these types of ongoing constructions.

I will turn now to the highly “gendered” commentary on Toomer by contemporary African American literary critic Henry Louis Gates. In 1987, Gates offered the following analysis of Toomer’s racial “disidentification.”

In a curious and perhaps perverse sense, Toomer’s was a gesture of racial castration, which, if not silencing his voice literally, then at least transformed his deep black bass into a false soprano. Toomer did not want so much to be white as most of us . . . would have it; rather, he sought to be racially indeterminate, which [Barbara] Johnson suggests to be the nature of the castrato. Toomer’s curiously nationalistic gesture toward indeterminacy, to be “just American,” certainly helps to explain the shared reactions of (male) critics to the false soprano of his racially neutered and mystical works, such as *Essentials*.²³

So, in a curious form of logic, if the “race man” fails at his race, he simultaneously fails at his gender as well. But not only does he quiver or shake at the shores of masculinity constructions (such as we see in DuBois’ representation of Toomer where he, at least at any time, could “reconform” to masculinity), at this juncture, Toomer is understood to have “castrated” himself, to have passed out of manhood for good. This particular defection leaves no room for any later reconsideration. If Toomer understood that his proclamations about race might “e-race” him from America’s racial map, how could he have possibly understood that such a move would “dis-engender” him as well? If , as I

²² Carby, 22

²³ Somerville, 135.

suspect, Toomer had particular vulnerabilities around “manhood” and relations with women in general, it is at last a fortuitous fate that he was not alive to receive this particular type of criticism as well. Nevertheless, its extremity, as well as its persistence, affirms and congratulates Hazel Carby’s insightful observations that this sort of “race man” configuration (and its ideological effects) is fully operative one hundred years later. Indeed, Essex Hemphill said it best

I am eager to burn
 this threadbare masculinity
 this perpetual black suit
 I have outgrown.²⁴

In her book *Queering the Color Line—Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Siobhan Somerville does a close textual reading of *Cane* noting the many appearances of the word “queer” in Toomer’s text. She calls upon historical studies of the 1920’s by George Chauncey to suggest that “queer” “circulated widely in New York City during this period to describe men who engaged in same-sex sexual activity.”²⁵ While I do not dispute this analysis or the legitimacy of this particular valence of the word “queer” as applied to Toomer, I find it more cautious to use and understand its presence to signify an “unstable” or problematic masculinity in Toomer ie his experience and that of his characters. It seems a better explanation that when the character Lewis is described as “queer” that this signifies discomfort with who he is as a man. His difference may also signal homosexual desire, but it may not. What also seems clear is that Toomer’s characters are *enormously* invested in their romantic liaisons and couplings with women.ⁱⁱ

²⁴ Carby, 7.

²⁵ Somerville, 143.

It is much beyond the scope of this project to explicate the full “gender” reading of the text *Cane*. It is critical to note, however, that prevailing structures of masculinity and in particular, *racialized* masculinity are at work in both *Cane* and in Jean Toomer’s larger critical reception. I have focused here on the particular manifestations of acceptable “affect” that have determined the race man which now includes, by my argument, the successful African American writer. The particular constructions that are the precursors to Toomer’s deep interest in mysticism are the “participatory, melding, mergings” that characters in *Cane* experience with rural, black women but that also takes place between Kabnis and Lewis near the book’s end. Somerville has cited the latter as an example of homoeroticism for both Toomer and Kabnis.

[Lewis’] eyes turn to Kabnis. In the instant of their shifting, a vision of the life they are to meet. Kabnis, a promise of a soil-soaked beauty: uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him. Arm’s length removed from him whose will to help. . . . There is a swift intuitive interchange of consciousness. Kabnis has a sudden need to rush into the arms of this man. His eyes call, “Brother.” And then a savage, cynical twist-about within him mocks his impulse and strengthens him to repulse Lewis. His lips curl cruelly. His eyes laugh. They are glistening needles, stitching. With a throbbing ache they draw Lewis to.²⁶

My purpose in showing this passage here is to point out its different conceptions of affect, masculinity, consciousness and therefore, human relating. Yet indeed, the passage also partakes of the wholesale *rejection* of these alternatives that so vexed Toomer. When Toomer himself recalled his feelings while in Georgia, he wrote that “ at times I identified with the whole scene so intensely that I lost my own identity.”²⁷ Losing one’s “identity” through a participatory, affective experience of nonduality is not often a model

²⁶Somerville, 141.

²⁷Toomer, 242.

to be found in any decade's notions or conceptions of masculinity. That is, until the writer Jean Toomer met the Russian mystic George Ivan Gurdjieff in 1923.

Before a fuller exploration of this new and critical relationship, I wish to conclude my remarks about the role of stigmatized masculine affect in Toomer's life and work.

Cynthia Kerman and Richard Eldridge make the following penetrating observation about Toomer.

The genius he displayed at his best came largely from his unusual intensity of feeling and experience, which took him beyond the normal boundaries between material and non-material, between animate and inanimate, between possible and impossible.²⁸

As I have discussed here, these personal and other qualities took Toomer far beyond the binary constructions of race and gender, both in his day, and in many days and ages to come. If his next attempt, the "mystical" stage, was more than doomed to failure, it is perhaps now obvious why there was simply no other choice for Toomer but to follow the leader Gurdjieff there, to again push the boundary between possible and impossible. And lest this characterization seems too lofty, it was indeed informed as well by the vulnerable side of Toomer—the need for control and a sense of personal power that would make him comfortable with his self and less vulnerable to the assessments of others. It was something of this Toomer saw the first time his eyes met Gurdjieff.

Presently I saw an unforgettable figure of a man walking down one of the aisles, looking at people as he moved along, looking for what? His head was shaven. He wore a tuxedo. But what a monk! And I might add, as I did at the time, what a man! My first impression was of the whole body of this man, and something of the individual in the body.²⁹

²⁸ Cynthia Kerman and Richard Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer—A Hunger for Wholeness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 377.

²⁹ Somerville, 161.

He later describes other early impressions he had of Gurdjieff

Power—something more than strength of body, something in addition and other than strength of mind. Though he contained it, it came out of him, this deep, pervasive, unfathomable power. I soon became sure that I had never seen any other man with power of this kind. But how was he using it? For good, for evil? How would he use it on me should I become one of his pupils? From this time on I had no peace until I had finally settled this question so far as I was concerned.³⁰

So was the fateful meeting and joining with Gurdjieff sealed for Toomer. While it is clear that he was looking for and witnessing a different type of manhood, Toomer as intellectual also found important answers to many other Modernist quests in the Gurdjieff system.

Modernist Questing for Answers

It was a world of crying men and hard women,
A city of Goddamn and Jehovah
Baptized in finance
Without benefit of saints . . .
“The Blue Meridian”

When Toomer produced *Cane* he was working artistically with questions that faced and concerned many modernists. The rise of industrialization and urbanization had called into question many relied-upon assumptions of how the human would function securely, both within himself and with his human community. Questions of alienation, disruption, fragmentation and chaos disturbed the minds of Modernist writers and artists. There were fears that the world was in a great crisis. Toomer describes it thus

The modern world was uprooted, the modern world was breaking down, but *we couldn't go back*. There was nothing to go back to. Besides, in our hasty leaps into the future, we had burned bridges. The soil, the earth was still there, even under city pavements and congested sky scrapers.

But such peasantry as America had had—and I sang one of its swan songs in *Cain [sic]*—was swiftly disappearing, swiftly being industrialized and urbanized by machines, motor cars, phonographs, movies. “Back to nature,” even if desirable,

³⁰Byrd, 75.

was no longer possible, because industry had taken nature into itself. Even if he wanted to, a city person could not become a soil person by changing his locale and living on a farm in the woods.

So then, whether we wished to or not, we had to go on.³¹

I state this, in part, because again, I do not wish to fall into a reductive trap that suggests that Toomer's move to the Russian mystic and philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff—whom he encountered shortly after the publication of *Cane*—was *only* precipitated by a personal failure or struggle. Toomer was very much an accomplished intellectual of his time and his responses reflect this modern context out of which he originates.

It has been strongly suggested (mostly from hindsight) that the project of modernity was (is?) a search for a master narrative, an over-arching story or system that unites and explains. Toomer himself adopts such an approach in his new relationship to Gurdjieff and Gurdieff's system.

I had been, I suppose, unconsciously seeking—a man must ever seek—an intelligible scheme of things, a sort of whole into which everything fit, or seemed to fit, a body of ideas which held a consistent view of life and which enabled one to see and understand as one does when he sees a map.³²

When Toomer discovered a pamphlet describing the history and mission of Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, he states that he “read it eagerly, making happy exclamations as I came upon passage after passage that said just what I wanted said.”³³ He further attests

In it I found expressed, more completely and with more authority than with anything possible from me, just the condition of man which I myself had realized. Moreover, a method, a means of doing something about it was promised. Here was

³¹ Sollors, 20-21.

³² Byrd, 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 63.

the work that gave man direction and helped him move on the way out of the chaos of modern civilization. Here was a work that indicated what must be done in order to achieve a balanced development. Here was a work whose scope was greater and more complete than anything I had dreamed of. Here, in fine, was truth.³⁴

As critic Rudolph Byrd succinctly summarizes, “plainly, Toomer believed that the search for an ‘intelligible schema’ was at an end. It seems that in Gurdjieff Toomer had found everything he had been searching for and more.”³⁵ The next decade of Toomer’s life was spent performing this nonrace man form of modernity by dedicating his life to the work of the “solitary” genius Gurdjieff.

Frederic Jameson noted three types of aesthetic modernism in his now classic work *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. The first two periodic movements responded to the machine. He has noted, while describing types of modernisms, that a third must be added. “To these should be added the modernism of the isolated ‘genius,’ organized, unlike the two periodic movements (with their emphasis on the organic transformation of the life-world, and on the avant-garde and its social mission, respectively), around the great Work, the Book of the World-secular scripture, sacred text, ultimate ritual mass (Mallarme’s *Livre*) for an unimaginable new social order.”³⁶ This characterization is reflective of Gurdjieff, as he and his disciples undertook the “great work” of establishing a new race of man. Under Gurdjieff, the highly developed metaphysics, the ritualized movement and theater, the intended self-development through stages of sleeping to wakeful consciousness, all reflect a

³⁴ Ibid., 64.

³⁵ Ibid., 64.

³⁶ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 305.

conception of how growth would occur towards a “new social order.” The once racially conflicted and misunderstood Toomer pronounced after his immersion within the Gurdjieffian system, “ I am of no particular race. I am of the human race, a man at large in the human world, preparing a new race.”³⁷

This quest for “newness” has also been consistently described as a characteristic of modernism. However as Rita Felski suggests, “If the valorization of the new can be seen as an inescapable feature of the modern condition, it nevertheless assumes different guises and may work to diverse ends.”³⁸ This is very much so with the workings of Gurdjieffian metaphysics, a project whose complexity is too vast for this one. Nevertheless, this metaphysical project did participate in the modernist search for newness as is clearly reflected in the following description of the effects on the Gurdjieffian work on Toomer:

a body purified, energized, strengthened, a mind able, lucid, with greatly increased power to grasp and comprehend. Freed of many a constricting habit, you are ready for new experience. You feel and in some [sense] are a new man.³⁹

Gurdjieff’s Modernity

We are waiting for a new God.
For revelation in our day,
For growth towards faceless Deity.
“The Blue Meridian”

As I previously stated, the form of modernity that Gurdjieff enacted is best understood on its own terms. In fact, Gurdjieff himself would have flatly denied that his

³⁷ Byrd, 95.

³⁸ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 170.

³⁹ Byrd, 76.

project was in any sense modern. Without using the term himself, the Gurdjieff system more accurately subscribes to notions now designated under the nomenclature “Perennial Philosophy”—an esoteric doctrine and set of practices that reappears with some consistency throughout many ages and historical circumstances. This does not mean that Gurdjieff was not particularly attuned to the problems and perils of his age. In fact, he worked to devise a method and approach to conform precisely to those conditions as he both saw and experienced them. Jon Woodson makes the claim that “Gurdjieff’s first-hand experience of the Russian Revolution gave him an exaggerated perception of history.”⁴⁰ This exaggerated perception however, was finally clearly nestled in esoteric/occult conceptions of truth that never conformed to a strictly materialist or modern view of history or human process.

Nevertheless, we can see a confluence of Gurdjieffian philosophy with the problems, perils, ideas and even methodologies of other modernist intellectuals of his day. In particular, “like other modernist totalities,” the Gurdjieff system “negotiated the polarities of crisis and renovation that characterize the modern spirit.”⁴¹ As I echo Rita Felski’s emphasis on *modernities*,⁴² it is important to note that while many similarities and points of comparison exist between Gurdjieff and other modernists, their final differences may prove of more importance than any generalities. This said, I wish to further explore the very particular intersection of the two—Gurdjieff and modernism—and their relation to the writer and individual Jean Toomer.

⁴⁰ Jon Woodson, *To Make a New Race—Gurdjieff, Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴² Felski, introduction.

Frederick Karl in *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist, 1885-1925* stated, what “we must trace in the development of Modern is that set of coordinates in which different conceptions of the self emerged in different languages. The self would surface in unpredictable ways as a means of countering power and authority that also developed in unpredictable ways.”⁴³ This paper has been about tracing the impact of the “coordinates” of the race man and its subsequent ideologies upon Toomer. Toomer’s headlong trajectory into the Gurdjieff work would simulate other modernist reconstitutions of the self in the turn towards reconfigured subjectivity as a source of renewal. But it is important to add, that these forays are *always* constituted and inspired by material conditions of power. For this reason, Toomer’s move into Gurdjieffian metaphysics cannot be read as identical to those modernists who did not suffer the battle of “the color line” in the manner that he did.

Yet, as Edward M. Pavlic notes, “for modernist types of all varieties, unities gave way to multiplicities. Lived experience was proved to be a multidimensional play of nonresolving realities. The unity, stability, rationality, and autonomy of personal identity were replaced by several modernist understandings of the plurality, flux, irrational and variable nature of modern self-awareness.”⁴⁴ Gurdjieffian teaching existed as a type of understanding of this flux, in particular with regard to the person and his or her experience of subjectivity.

Gurdjieff scholar Jon Woodson notes the following:

The central insight of the system was that man is not a unified being, but is instead a being in whom the “I” (ego, identity, self) is relative and impermanent. The

⁴³ Frederick Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the artist, 1885-1925* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1985), 41.

⁴⁴ Edward Pavlic, *Crossroads Modernism—Descent and Emergence in African American Literary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5.

impermanence of the “I” is a result of “consciousness” being the compound result of consciousness, subconsciousness, and instinct (thought, feeling and organic automism). According to Gurdjieff, all the catastrophes that take place in human life, at whatever scale, arise from the fact, that, in his fragmented condition, man does not know himself for what he is and is not.⁴⁵

What humanity is, for Gurdjieff, is quite different than for most other Modernist writers and thinkers. According to Gurdjieff, the human within its normal adult development is not fully formed. When a human is “asleep” (and most human beings are), he is simply a “mechanical being.” “Gurdjieff argued that man as he is is not a complete being. Nature is responsible for only so much of man’s own development. If we wish to develop further we must do so by our own efforts.”⁴⁶

In fact, it was this “post-evolutionary” being that interested Gurdjieff most. He believed, as Toomer later did as well, that this superior being could be cultivated through rigorous training of awareness and consciousness. Gurdjieff postulated a four-stage schemata of conscious human development. In the first stage, we are merely physically asleep and we cannot even order our thoughts or physical activity. Therefore it is the lowest stage of consciousness. The second stage is “waking consciousness.” It is the ordinary life awareness of fulfilling one’s obligations. The third stage is referred to as “self-consciousness.” It is only at this stage that we possess any objective awareness of ourselves. This stage makes possible for the first time a human *will* that originates from a unified individuality that is permanent and unchangeable. The fourth possible stage of human evolution is what Gurdjieff called “objective consciousness” and Toomer referred to as “cosmic consciousness.” “In this exalted state, we can know the full truth about

⁴⁵ Woodson, 3

⁴⁶ Byrd, 79

everything” and “see the world as it is.”⁴⁷ It is important to note that this final stage is ineffable, postlinguistic and nonconceptual.⁴⁸ It was to these “coordinates” that post-*Cane* Toomer re-created his sense of self, his life’s purpose and his literary work.

The Toomer/Gurdjieffian Synthesis

The east coast is masculine
 The west coast is feminine
 The middle region is the child-
 Reconciling force
 And generator of symbols.
 “The Blue Meridian”

After his initial encounter with Gurdjieff and the Gurdjieff work in 1924, scholars assume that Toomer taught, studied and utilized Gurdjieffian ideas and systems intensely for at least fifteen years. Toomer became, in fact, a high-ranking teacher in the Gurdjieff school and was one of the few selected disciples of Gurdjieff to stay on in France after Gurdjieff decided to dismantle the headquarters there at Chateau du Prieu. Indeed, the months Toomer first spent in the French international headquarters of Gurdjieff’s Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, appear to be, by all accounts, among the happiest and most fulfilled of Toomer’s life. These two months in 1924 of lived experience of “The Work,” as it was called, set the template for much of Toomer’s adult life.

As I stated previously, the Gurdjieffian “coordinates”—of a fluctuating divided self that must be cultivated into a unified self capable of willed action—became, in large part, the Jean Toomer “coordinates” for negotiating reality and effecting needed change. Though Toomer spent many hours in many years, teaching the Gurdjieff system of ideas,

⁴⁷Byrd, 81

⁴⁸Ibid., 81.

he also continued to write with the goal of becoming an “objective artist.” Though this is an aspect of Gurdjieffian thought and work worthy of exploration in terms of a philosophy of art, all that needs to be noted for these purposes is that Toomer became, for quite some time, merely a mimic of Gurdjieff in his writing. Critics such as Rudolph Byrd and others have bemoaned the lack of quality of Toomer’s literary work at the time.⁴⁹ Gone were his once lyrical gifts for a sense of loss, pathos and mystery only to be replaced by a pedantic, metaphysical proselytizing voice masquerading as a writer of literature. (Indeed later Toomer himself, also shared this assessment.)

It was not until 1936, when the poem *The Blue Meridian* was fully written that the Toomer corpus began again to show the breathtaking poetic and literary talent of the man who composed *Cane*. Yet this work is exemplary of much else of importance to us as well. Besides being considered Toomer’s second greatest work (after *Cane*), the *Blue Meridian* embodies the use and application of Gurdjieff’s ideas to the particular contexts of American life by Toomer. It is in this work, that we can see clearly the ways in which Toomer recasts the “earlier race man” into a more inclusive, salvific figure and mediator of America’s crises and needs. This figure is the blue meridian. Before exploring this figure, we should first observe Toomer’s intention as it is so clearly stated at the onset of the poem. This opening incantation states the prophecy and the means of achieving it:

It is a new America,
to be spiritualized by each new American.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Byrd.

⁵⁰ Jean Toomer, *The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer*, ed. by Robert B. Jones and Margery Toomer Latimer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988),50.

Recall that Toomer once proclaimed himself to be the first conscious member of a new auspicious future race called “The American.” In Toomer’s view, those who can make for themselves this more inclusive identification could help re-structure the racial divisiveness of American life to date. In other words, they have the power to create a new future. Yet in Gurdjieffian thought, race is not recognized. As Jon Woodson notes, Toomer himself helped launch a “Gurdjieffian assault against American racist culture.”⁵¹ This was his peculiarly “American” contribution to the worldwide proliferation of Gurdjieff’s philosophy, in various forms. Then with the help of an inclusive, redeeming, American democracy and landscape, Toomer melded a metaphysical/esoteric world-view into his own “American epic poem,” ultimately calling it “The Blue Meridian.” The poem is as electrifying as the coming future it prophesizes, yet it also contains Toomer’s now hallmark quality of vulnerable vision as well. The poet as prophet, at his or her best, both sees the devastation and proclaims a way through the destructive darkness to, in Toomer’s words, the “Big Light!”

Yet who or what is the blue meridian? It is certainly a figure and a symbol whose color and hue is symbolic of both synthesis as well as a healing. It is also a man of blue or purple whose mediation catalyzes transformation on the American landscape. It is an amalgamation of channeled forces that Toomer the conjurer hurls into American space.

In the end, it is difficult to ascertain if the figure is a reflection of some displaced, inflated messianic fantasy of Toomer’s “self” or if it is better understood as the mediator, the effective figure and symbol Toomer and America never had and so surely needed. Gurdjieff himself clearly carried this ideal for an inestimable amount of time for Jean

⁵¹ Woodson, 4.

Toomer. But if Gurdjieff was a person who was quite easy to admire, he was also one who did not share the easy love that might make idealization more permanent. Gurdjieff, Toomer believed for some time, would map the course of how to live a redeeming life in the modern catastrophe. It was this type of new vision that inspired the “Blue Meridian Toomer,” who is now a synthesis himself of the many Toomers that came before.

Yet to give Toomer the conscious artist the final benefit of the doubt as to what the Blue Meridian symbolizes best, the Blue Meridian stands as an effective *symbol* for what Toomer called “the highway of the third.”⁵² I will let the words he crafted make the final say:

A strong yes, a strong no,
 With these we move and make drama,
 Yet may say nothing of the goal.
 Black is black, white is white,
 East is east, west is west,
 Is truth for the mind of contrasts;
 But here the high way of the third,
 The man of blue or purple,
 Beyond the little tags and small marks,
 Foretold by ancient seers who knew,
 Not the place, not the name, not the time,
 But the aim of life in men,
 The resultant of yes and no
 Struggling for birth through ages.

We are the new people,
 Born of elevated rock and lifted branches,
 Called Americans.⁵³

Toomer’s call is *not* (only) for the messianic “I” but the spiritualized “us” who are capable of traveling the highway of the third until we arrive at new humanity. Toomer’s own experiences of tragedy, as well as his vision of his country’s tragedy in the land of

⁵²Toomer, *Collected Poems*, 72.

⁵³Toomer, *Collected Poems*, 72.

dualisms that formed American racial life, created in him a deep desire for a new type of America, as well as a new American. This vision of an unexpected *third* Toomer invoked for all the new *Americans* (those truly capable of inclusion of all) to, at last, claim.

Notes

i. The “race man” trope and its prescribed ethos were in full operation by the early 1920s when Jean Toomer produced *Cane*. The “race man” figure had effects far beyond the life of Jean Toomer. The developed projects of what this trope means, as well as its history, are to be found elsewhere—see especially *Black Metropolis* and *Race Men*.

ii. Again, while this would not exclude what we would now call a bisexual orientation, it does not do justice to the text to ignore the complex relations with women and their relationship to gender construction that Toomer suggests.

CONCLUSION

And so I shall end this story, at the point in Toomer's narrative when the failed race man finds himself emerging "a new kind of man" with a new kind of vision. The story goes on (the liberation is not fully permanent nor continuous) but the "non-race" man does continue the struggle to help liberate himself and others much like—and not like—the ethos of the "race man" by which he was judged. He sheds the perpetual black suit of W.E. B. DuBois and dons the combination monk/aristocratic garb of Gurdjieff—or does he? The answer to this question is another writerly project, another role to engage, another story to tell—performing as we do within the structures, questions and inventive possibilities of our own times. Perhaps the next Toomer "story" will not be predetermined after all. For as Henry Louis Gates has suggested, "Toomer wanted all possibilities in play" and even if he "may have come up short" "the attempt compels us back to him again and again in our attempts to move forward."¹

¹ Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West, *The African American Century—How Black Americans Have Shaped our Country* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 114.

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