

The Swan Song of the South: Jean Toomer's *Cane* and an Exploration of Silence

Published in 1923, *Cane* is the hybrid-genre modernist epic that encapsulates generations of cultural anguish within the African American community, especially in regard to those who possess a complicated, mixed racial heritage. Through its amalgamation of prose, poetry, and drama, *Cane* seeks to unravel the nuanced strife that one undergoes as an African American person in the United States. It is in this sense, too, that *Cane* serves as Toomer's contribution to this ongoing discussion of race within the context of the turn of the century, "New Negro" movement¹.

One of the most powerful voices in this discussion comes from the prolific African American philosopher, theorist, and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, who not only writes about his experience as an African American man but also theorizes about the psyche of those whom the United States deems as being other. He even goes to the extent of qualifying how one is to go about discussing issues of race in his or her art in his essay "Criteria of Negro Art," wherein he posits, "Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be... I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent" (Du Bois 776). Put simply, Du Bois believes that true art must have a purpose and must be broadcasted fairly across and by all groups of people. Were one group of people to express their art or have their voice heard to a greater extent than another, then their dominion over art would deprive those lesser heard people of their propagandizing voice and render them silent.

¹ A term that Alain Locke coins in his essay "The New Negro."

Why, then, does Du Bois write of Toomer, “He is an artist with words but a conscious artist who offends often by his apparently undue striving for effect,” in his critical review of *Cane* titled “The Younger Literary Movement” (184)? Buried underneath this claim is a critique of the way in which Toomer complicates the New Negro discussion of race by publishing challenging, esoteric literature that is penetratingly dismal in content. Toomer complicates this discussion by imagining a version of United States society, its Black society specifically, that is rife with oppression, self-conscious censorship, and isolation, which contrasts with someone like Du Bois who calls for his contemporaries to write in a manner that elevates the reader’s perception of the African American community. Toomer finds such rhetoric disingenuous, which he shows through his depiction of African American society that grotesquely epitomizes a people “stripped and silent” (Du Bois 776).

In J. Peter Moore’s essay “A silence that only they understand”: Amiri Baraka and the Silent Vernacular of *The Dead Lecturer*,” he takes great interest in silence as a motif in the work of poet Amiri Baraka. He argues that Baraka employs silence to explicate certain phenomena within the Black community and ultimately compartmentalizes silence into “three distinct, yet interrelated forms. The first is silence as an effect of oppression. The second is silence as an act of tactical withholding. The final type communicates a feeling of tacit camaraderie” (794). While Moore’s first form of silence is self-explanatory, the other two demand some unpacking to understand their nuance. One might think of the second form of silence as an act of protest wherein those who are silent maintain power by denying their oppressors the ability to bear witness to, and thus possess to some extent, their voice. The third form communicates a sense of unity, for nothing needs to be said if those who are silent understand each other fully.

Just as Moore discusses silence in relation to Baraka's poetry, I posit silence as a prominent literary device in Toomer's *Cane* through which he discusses the oppression of his mixed-race characters, their strategic withholding of information, and their tacit sense of companionship.

However, Toomer's interaction with Moore's silences manifests itself both overtly and covertly within the text. While "silence as an effect of oppression" is certainly found throughout *Cane*, Toomer alters the context in which the remaining two forms function. Silence certainly indicates a tactical withholding on behalf of the book's non-White characters; however, as opposed to withholding from a second party, these characters withhold information from themselves as means to better align with socially acceptable modes of thought and action. Lastly, each of his characters are forlorn, lacking the mutual understanding one would expect of a comradely relationship. Like Moore, Toomer meets the challenge of understanding racial identification through his use of silence. At the same time, he broadens his scope from looking specifically at the African American community to giving a voice to those who strive with a mixed racial identity. His success in this endeavor is what leads poet Langston Hughes to say in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," "(excepting the work of Du Bois) *Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial" (1323).

I. "The Terror beneath the Unsaid Word"²: Oppression in *Cane*

² See the last stanza of the second part of Adrienne Rich's poem, "Cartographies of Silence": "twisting the dials to drown the terror / beneath the unsaid word."

The vignette “Fern” can be interpreted through Moore’s “silence as an effect of oppression” (794) for the reason that Fern serves as Toomer’s embodiment of marginalization that is intrinsic to what later theorists would describe as intersectionality. “Fern” tells the story of Fernie May Rosen, a Georgian woman with skin “creamy brown” whose sorrow inclines the narrator to view her as having Jewish ancestry: “If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he...made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile” (18). While the narrator never overtly names the source of her feeling of oppression, he makes constant reference to these characteristics—her mixed race, her regional distinction, her gender, and her potential Jewish ancestry—which indicates that they play, at the very least, a partial role in the oppression she suffers. It is well to keep in mind the narrator’s biases, also, when looking at Fern’s complicated description for the reason that his being “from the North” and that he speaks from the perspective of a Black³ man (19) pinpoints certain cultural distinctions between the narrator and Fern that signify the narrator’s implied participation in her stigmatization from society.

To put it another way, Toomer authors these clear differences between the narrator and Fern to showcase the way in which certain groups of society other and marginalize different groups based on subjective, arbitrary criteria. And although their races may align with one another, the narrator’s fixation on her fair skin strongly indicates an act of colorism⁴ on his behalf. Similarly, his view that Fern is somehow only enchanting within the context of the Jim Crow South, which he communicates through

³ However, it would be imprudent to disregard the speaker’s potentially complicated racial heritage given the fact that “Fern” is authored by the racially complicated Jean Toomer.

⁴ Colorism: a form of prejudice or discrimination in which people are treated differently based on the social meanings attached to skin color (Ware).

his claim that it is “Better that she listens to the folk-songs at dusk in Georgia” than come to the North (19), evidences his exoticizing Fern through these cultural distinctions. This exoticization explains, too, why both the White and Black communities “began to leave her” (18) and “let her alone” (19): they find beauty in her being different—potentially in her being marginalized, too—and other her to perpetuate her unfamiliarity, and this unfair mistreatment is what I posit to be the true source of her oppression.

Toomer conveys the oppression Fern endures by having her remain silent for the near entirety of the story. Moore argues that when Baraka treats silence as “a culturally specific symbol of oppression,” he “highlights not only instances of direct violence but also the effects of structural, or unspoken, oppression” (796); the same should be said Toomer’s writing, for Fern’s story incorporates both of these overt and covert forms of oppression in her silence. One reads the covert, structural oppression she endures in the only words that Fern speaks in the entire vignette, “Doesn’t it make you mad,” which the narrator tells the reader is in response to the gazing eyes of the “people on all the porches” as they walk down the railroad line: “She meant the row of petty gossiping people. She meant the world” (20-21). Here, Toomer exacerbates Fern’s oppression by showing how her own community others her through their presumption of her licentiousness. Their gaze generates paranoia in Fern, who must navigate according to the constructed, unspoken norms of her society. That is also to say that their silent judgement is what silences Fern, leaving her to ask the question that, as Du Bois tells his readers, victims of the veil ask themselves: “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?” (8). There is no answer to ease the oppression Fern feels, so she remains silent as a result.

The more overt and violent oppression is evident in the text via the potential sexual violence that Fern undergoes. There is a moment early in the text when the narrator talks about Fern's past, commenting most abundantly on her sexual history, using problematic assertions to signify the wrongdoing of those "few men [who] took her, but got no joy from it" (18). For instance, the narrator states that Fern possesses eyes that "gave the impression that nothing was to be denied," especially in regard to these men's sexual advances, which, he says, opposes the gender convention that women deny everyone and everything with their glance. While the narrator may be oblivious to his own misogynistic rhetoric, the reader notices it all the same and knows through the way in which these men "took her" and through the narrator's problematic assertion that her eyes never deny that it is likely Fern is the victim of sexual abuse. One might even say that Fern is the victim of long line of abuse that calls back to the narrator's claim, "That the sexes were made to mate is the practice of the South. Particularly, black folk were made to mate" (19) and evokes the traumatic legacy of rape as means to produce human chattel in United States history of slavery.

Even the narrator is culpable for his sexual mistreatment of Fern, for the entire story reads as one extended confession of this act, in reductive terms. After meeting Fern and meandering about different points of discussion, to which she minimally responds by saying "yasser or nassur," the narrator blurts out "Lets take a walk" and uses his stare to communicate that statement's unspoken implications: that he means to have sex with her. Without waiting for her response, he takes her with him and justifies his actions by saying, "I think she understood" (20). Before her moment of sexual exploitation, the narrator comments on the strange mood in the air: "I felt that things unseen to men were tangibly immediate...When one is on the soil of one's ancestors,

most anything can come to one” (21). The dreadful, violent history of the surrounding canebrake, which calls back to the history of enslaved labor that once worked these Georgian sugarcane plantations, becomes visceral to the narrator amidst the silence. Then, he tells the reader in ambiguous terms that he touches her—maliciously or not, the reader is never told—and sees her become the divine embodiment of God, the Georgian countryside, and the history of their ancestry as these powers flow into her eyes (21). Responding to being touched, she vocalizes the terror that her silent demeanor connotes:

Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Christ Jesus. And then she sang, brokenly. A Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice. A child’s voice, uncertain, or an old man’s.

(21)

Just as the canebrake evokes the violent history of slavery, so too does Fern’s outburst—especially with the narrator’s comparison of “it,” her blood, to the “boiling sap” of the sugarcane. In other words, her very being becomes composed of the very object, cane, that Toomer employs to symbolize the history of slavery’s oppression in Georgia. Even Fern’s one moment of speech is silenced by the text, which only describes her voice’s sound while keeping her, in a sense, silent.

Nevertheless, one would be remiss in failing to see sexual euphoria in her expression. Given the narrator’s touch and his fixation on her sexuality, reading this moment as an orgasm seems logical—that is, except for the fact that her euphoria also evokes terror. To reconcile this dilemma, I point to the lasting image of Fern where the narrator sees her on her porch, “head tilted a little forward where the nail” sticks out

from the porch post (21). The nail's placement forces her to look down, as if to also force her into a bodily position that enacts sadness. While the easiest solution to this issue would be to remove this nail, Fern does not and, thus, perpetuates her feeling oppressed through her inaction. Regarding the scene in the canebrake, Toomer authors Fern's expression of simultaneous pain and euphoria to diminish the pleasure she experiences. That is to say that he forces terror into the scene to prevent the reader from believing that sexual encounters, such as this, make Fern feel any less oppressed. She must first break the cycle of her perpetual state of oppression—remove the nail from her porch post—lest she, and the marginalized people she represents, eternally remain in sorrow, “head tilted a little forward.”

II. “Tasteless Sycophancy”⁵: Censorship in *Cane*

As is evident in “Fern,” Toomer's characters frequently perform certain behaviors to appease the society in which they navigate. In Fern's case, she is hyperaware of her social surroundings, “the row of petty gossiping people” (21), and of their scrutinizing observation of her. Her silence, then, reads as an extreme act of censorship, wherein she denies herself speech to not say anything that would potentially drive her further away from her community. In addition, one sees the narrator participating in self-censorship through his use of equivocation in his narrative recollection. Put simply, he speaks with rhetorical vagueness to keep the reader from knowing certain facts that might implicate him for his potential abuse of Fern. And while silence is not as overtly present in his

⁵ See page 8 of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*: “With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny: their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white...”

ensorship as it is in relation to Fern, one may think of the narrator's equivocation as him being tactically silent to certain aspects of the narrative that would paint him in a negative light.

Moore discusses a similar form of silence, "silence as an act of tactical withholding" (794), to attest to the way in which those in the Black community may choose silence as means to empower themselves by possessing information that their oppressors do not have. Moore writes, "Not only does such a silence negate, as a means of withholding information, but it also obscures, crafting a communication resistant to the technologies of capture" (801). His reading of silence mandates that one party keeps information from another, much in the way one sees Fern keeping information from her onlooking community as well as in the way the narrator silences certain facts from his audience, the reader. Toomer complicates this notion by incorporating silence in a way that not only withholds information from a second party but extends Moore's theory by having characters employ silence to withhold information from themselves. With this reading, Fern's silence keeps herself from realizing the extent of her overbearing dread, and the narrator's ambiguity prevents himself from feeling guilt for his problematic decision making.

Another piece in *Cane* that illustrates characters employing silence to censor information from themselves is the closet drama⁶ "Theater." The story is about a stage manager's "nothin doin" brother, John, who sits amongst the audience, gazes upon a stage full of dancers, and fantasizes about the women he sees (52). Although the narrator never explicitly names John's race, the light that falls onto his figure fragments

⁶ I read "Theater" as a closet drama and not a short story for the reason that it incorporates and depends so much on performance. It even employs the formal technique in drama where playwrights signal a character's line through a colon that follows a character's name ("John:").

his face into two, one glows orange and the other “is in shadow” (51), to indicate his mixed racial heritage. In “‘Song of the Son’: The Emergence and Passing of Jean Toomer,” Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. comment on *Cane*’s concern with the fragmentation of “Everybody and everything” in American culture: “For Toomer...fragmentation, or duality, is the very condition of modernity. It cannot be ‘cured,’ any more than the gap between the conscious mind and the unconscious can be obliterated. *Cane* is a book about nothing if not fragmentation...” (lxiii). Even something as commonplace as light serves as a means through which Toomer visually fractures John’s person to convey the duality of his racial identity.

Not only does Byrd and Gates’s quote speak to the duality in John’s race, but it also does the work of introducing two prevalent themes in “Theater”: Freud’s theory of a tripartite psyche and consciousness, which both help Toomer describe the inner commotion that comes with a complicated racial identity. As the drama progresses and John becomes further infatuated with the women dancing, the reader peers into John’s consciousness and sees John’s voice become fragmented into a plurality of voices. As John begins to comment on the unfolding action taking place on stage, he cuts himself off as if to keep certain thoughts from progressing in his mind and, by proxy, in the narrative. In one moment, he contemplates the dancers’ potential to become beautiful but only with the help of the director who will “herd,” “tame,” and “blunt [their] sharp thrusts”; were they to dance according to John’s desires, their “dusk faces” would appear White to the audience, thus making them beautiful (51). In addition to the obviously sexist and racially problematic thoughts that make it into the narrative, one must also keep in mind the potential for classist undertones in that John, who is seated and spectating, takes enjoyment from watching these women dance and perform for their

income. From this voice alone, it is clear that John finds enjoyment in his superior position over these dancers whom, later, he offensively calls “dancing ponies” (52), which aptly condenses all his reprehensible modes of thought into two words.

A second voice interjects in John’s mind, which Toomer signals via parenthetical text: “(O Dance!)” (51). Given that there is no context to this statement, one might read this voice as a call from John’s unconscious for the women’s sexualized bodies. The following sentence only emboldens this theory, for as John begins to speak—“Soon I...,” “I’d like...,” “I’d like to...,” “Put...,” “...and take” (51-52)—he suppresses these thoughts back into his unconscious which Toomer denotes through ellipses. Like the narrator in “Fern” who uses equivocation for self-censorship, John partakes in a literal act of ellipses to limit certain thoughts from entering his consciousness. Further, when placed in sequence as is shown above, John’s thoughts seem aggressively sexual and characteristic of what one might label John’s id. His suppression, then, would read as an act of his superego, keeping these problematic thoughts from entering his consciousness so as to align with his society’s notion of morally upright thinking. Note, too, how the narrator informs the reader that John “wills thought to rid his mind of passion,” reflecting the way in which one’s superego would combat and rid his mind of the id’s sexual desires.

When John takes an interest in one particular dancer, Dorris, he wrestles with himself over if and how he should move forward with these feelings. He looks lustfully at her “lemon-colored face” and red lips, “curiously full,” but ultimately decides through his superficial judgment of her that she is too “stuck-up” for him and that it would be better for him to “Keep her loveliness. Let her go” (52). That John prevents himself from entertaining his desire for her companionship shows an act of the superego; yet, John

complicates this notion by resolving to “Keep her loveliness,” which reads as this superego voice permitting John to fantasize about her instead. Later in the drama, he loses all sense of suppression and carries a conversation with himself wherein he reiterates his previous thoughts and gives a formal voice to his id and superego:

Touch her, I mean. To herself—in some room perhaps. Some cheap, dingy bedroom. Hell no. Cant be done. But the point is, brother John, it can be done. Get her to herself somewhere, anywhere. Go down in yourself—and she’d be calling you all sorts of asses while you were in the process of going down. Hold em, bud. Cant be done. Let her go. (Dance and I’ll love you!) And keep her loveliness. (53)

Notice how his superego commands for John to sink into himself as means to take ownership over Dorris and to “keep her loveliness.” Clearly Toomer’s language in this section shows his interest in Freudian principles.

Dorris sees John too and senses his repellent lust: “the slimness of his diluted passion” (52). She appears cognizant of his sexist, racist, and classist opinions as well and begins to entertain the idea of using her body for the gifts he might offer her. She communicates this by thinking, “Hell, he cant love...But I’d get a pair of silk stockings out of it. Red silk. I got purple” (53). Nevertheless, she censors this line of thought, “Cut it kid,” and entertains the idea of being with John to fulfil her genuine romantic desires: “You cant win him to respect you that away...I’ve heard em say that men who look like him (what does he look like?) will marry if they love. O will you love me? And give me kids, and a home, and everything?” (53). Toomer employs parenthesis to mark her unconsciousness’s voice as he did for John; yet, her unconsciousness appears more concerned with issues of race as a social construction than the sexual urges of John’s

unconsciousness. Further, her act of censorship more accurately represents Freud's superego than John, for she silences and replaces her problematic thoughts with morally upstanding ones that abstain from the need to own John for his money or for his sex.

When Dorris dances to show her desire of John's love, John foregoes the opportunity to show compassion and, instead, fantasizes about the loveliness of which he has taken ownership. The drama's form abruptly shifts as Toomer interjects the narrative with John's daydream⁷ via a drama within the drama, which other characters are not aware of because he is silent to this fact. His fantasy is a simple one: John "reaches for a manuscript of his" and creates a space wherein he and Dorris may be alone; then, he gazes upon her dancing body for what seems to be an eternity: "He comes to a dancing scene. The scene is Dorris. She dances. Dorris dances. Glorious Dorris. Dorris whirls, whirls, dances..." (54). While much could be said about this scene, one should take care to note how John's manuscript suggests that his fantasy is also written, which beautifully links John's character to Toomer; and by blurring the lines between himself and John, Toomer invites his readers to see him as possessing the same inner turmoil that plagues John. Dorris, who sees that John's only intention is to possess her for his own self-interest, runs off stage, "Falls down the steps into her dressing room," and cries (54). Just as "Fern" ends without remedying the disjunction between its two characters, so too does "Theater" with John forever remaining in a state of self-indulgence and self-sycophancy.

While the plurality of voices in John and Dorris helps communicate Toomer's

⁷ See Freud's theory of dreams serving as the manifestation of a wish in his seminal text, *Interpretation of Dreams*. Here, Dorris and her sexuality is precisely what John wishes to fulfil.

interaction with Freudian theories, Toomer also incorporates formal elements to bolster the voices' effect on the reader. In addition to his use of ellipses and parentheses, telling "Theater" through the medium of a closet drama allows for Toomer to unravel their complicated thoughts without requiring a soliloquy, monologue, or any other device that would otherwise interfere with the important matters at hand: John and Dorris's complicated thoughts. Indeed, to perform "Theater" on stage would prove an impossible task for the simple reason that it lacks a performable narrative⁸. Nevertheless, this shows the genius of Toomer who is cognizant of this fact and authors "Theater" as a closet drama to voice the commotion of Black consciousness while inherently incorporating elements of performance that reoccur throughout *Cane*.

III. "The Ice-Floe Split"⁹: Isolation in *Cane*

In terms of the three iterations of silence that Moore posits, Toomer and Baraka differ most starkly in regard to silence as the communication of "a feeling of tacit camaraderie" (794). However, given the nuances that distinguish Toomer and Baraka's respective literary movements, this should not come as a surprise. Moore focuses his attention on the poems that Baraka authors during the height of the civil rights and Black Arts movements—poems that ultimately serve as Baraka's advocative propaganda for these movements. Early in Moore's article, he comments on the "booming radicalism" that has come to define Baraka's voice by referring to him as "the blaring trumpeter of the Black Arts movement" (792-793). And while this description may seem

⁸ Toomer 81n1.

⁹ See the second stanza of the first part of Rich's "Cartographies of Silence": "speaker of the so-called common language feels / the ice-floe split, the drift apart."

counterintuitive to Moore's investigation of silence in Baraka's poetry, it highlights the extent to which Baraka's rhetoric evolves from the "quiet elitism of the early 1960s" and optimistically incites "a sense of shared group identity...among the stigmatized" (793-795). By contrast, Toomer authors *Cane* 30 years prior to Baraka's rise to fame, which complicates Toomer's writing by placing him within a starkly different social and historical contexts: The United States was reeling from the terrors of the Reconstruction era, Jim Crow laws ravished the social and political institutions, and the Ku Klux Klan was experiencing its second wave of popularity. Additionally, T. S. Eliot published *The Waste Land* in 1922, one year prior to *Cane*, which immediately defined the avant-garde literature that clearly influenced Toomer with themes of isolation and despair. Given these points and the fact that nearly four decades separate *Cane* from the social and political progress of the civil rights movement, it is clear why Toomer's outlook is so bleak and his characters are void of camaraderie.

There is, however, one exception to the uniform isolation in *Cane*, and this profound moment of mutual understanding takes place in the closet drama that composes the entirety of *Cane*'s third section: "Kabnis." "Kabnis" is a story of inadvertent racial self-discovery as Kabnis, a Northern man of mixed-race, travels to rural Georgia, works as a schoolteacher, and faces the cultural terrors of the South. In a letter Toomer sends to his publisher and patron, Waldo Frank, he writes explicitly that "Kabnis is *Me*" (167), which, notwithstanding the story's obvious similarity to Toomer's own autobiographical experiences¹⁰, indicates a closeness between the motives, biases, and character of Kabnis and his author. It is well for Toomer's audience to have this

¹⁰ See *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer* (130).

inextricable relationship in mind, for “Kabnis,” then, reads as his most telling critique of United States culture. Further, he emboldens his rhetoric by recapitulating all three forms of silence into “Kabnis.” The effect is a climactic moment, both in terms of *Cane*’s overarching narrative but also in the drama itself, as Kabnis, in the final act, instances Moore’s comradely silence for the first and only time; for, outside of this touching moment, every relationship between Kabnis and the drama’s other characters is defined by a general lack of affinity.

Most of the contention between Kabnis and the drama’s second most prominent character, Fred Halsey, arises from their differing intersections of class, regional and racial identification. For instance, in the opening line of the second act of “Kabnis,” the narrator appears to simply position the reader within “The parlor of Fred Halsey’s home”; yet, by saying that “It seems as though the fittings have given a frugal service to at least seven generations of middle-class shop-owners” with a critical tone, the narrator also reflects the way in which Kabnis others Halsey for his presentation of middle-class conventions (85). This, in turn, is why Kabnis cannot connect with those around him: he instinctively finds ways to barricade himself from those with whom he could connect. One of Toomer’s most interesting methods of conveying the distance between Kabnis from Halsey is through their respective reactions toward singing from the African American community. In one moment, Kabnis shows his visible disgust towards a woman’s swelling moans coming from the church: “Kabnis hears it. His face gives way to an expression of mingled fear, contempt, and pity” (88). For Kabnis, the woman’s voice represents the raw essence of the South’s Black heritage: something with which he is not

familiar, thus he fears and writes it off as a loud annoyance.¹¹ Halsey looks at Kabnis's face and grins because he knows that Kabnis is not privy to the meaning behind the woman's moaning due to his struggle for racial identity. He knows that Kabnis feels separate from the Black community, thus he has likely never heard such singing. This begs the question: how does Halsey understand her singing, even though Toomer describes Halsey as having "olive white" face and thus a comparable racial appearance to Kabnis (85)? Because the one-drop rule would define race in Halsey's society, he is incapable of conditioning his racial identity and, rather, would have been identified and raised as being Black. Both Halsey and the friend he is with, Layman¹², a "tall, heavy, loose-jointed Georgia Negro" (86), explain the woman's singing to Kabnis because they are insiders of the Black community and privy to the subliminal message being expressed. Where Kabnis's earlier judgement toward Halsey for their class distinctions expresses Kabnis's active effort to find ways to isolate himself from other characters, this moment highlights the way in which external events force Kabnis to feel secluded for reasons that he does not understand.

The disjunction between Kabnis and the "copper-colored" character, Lewis, arises from each of these characters serving as the other's foil, for, as the narrator informs the reader upon Lewis's entrance, "He is what a stronger Kabnis might have been, and in an odd faint way resembles him" (95). Kabnis and Lewis differ most starkly in their employment of orality: Kabnis produces noise via his literal speaking for self-fulfillment,

¹¹ Her singing, too, becomes the more audible representation of the countryside's "heaving...folk-songs" that are, as he says in the first act, "so close to me that I cannot reach them" (Toomer 83). See Toomer's sentiment toward this "back-country" singing in *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer* (130).

¹² An ironic name considering he is "by turns teacher and preacher" (Toomer 86).

whereas Lewis uses his voice to investigate the South's culture¹³ of which he is a visitor, thus effecting a pensive quietness in him as he digests their response. Put simply, Kabnis speaks to hear himself talk whereas Lewis prefers to hear what others have to say via lines of questioning, or by being silent altogether. That he asks for strong opinions, in fact, is what instigates the community's othering of him as being "damn queer" (89).

In the fourth act, Lewis reflects on a conversation between a local and him which reveals, reductively, the essence of the United States South's cultural thought to Lewis:

In half an hour he [the local] had settled everything: boll weevils, God, the World War. Weevils and wars are the pests God sends against the sinful. People are too weak to correct themselves: the Redeemer is coming back. Get ready, ye sinners, for the advent of Our Lord. Interesting, eh, Kabnis? but not exactly what we want. (99).

Note how Toomer's pronominal use, "he had settled everything," removes Lewis from the conversation and implies that this is information being dictated to Lewis rather than discussed. It is clear to both Lewis and the reader that content of his speech is somewhat terrifying, yet Lewis finds fulfilment and an odd connectiveness in its subsequent intrigue all the same—something that is completely lost on Kabnis. Lewis is aware of this fact, too, as he points out, "Life has already told [Kabnis] more than he is capable of knowing. It has given him in excess of what he can receive. I have been offered. Stuff in his stomach curdled, and he vomited me" (99). Positioning himself as the sacrificial object of the South's imparted knowledge unto Kabnis, Lewis becomes a redeeming Christlike figure—one who both is and seeks out the ugly truth that Kabnis rejects, as is

¹³ This contrasts Kabnis, who consistently fears and rejects Southern culture.

evident in the conversation Lewis has with the local, and one who is made an outsider from the society he quietly accepts, connects to, and saves.

In the fifth act, when Kabnis, Lewis, Halsey, and two women settle into Halsey's basement, "the Hole¹⁴," for a night of drinking and sex, Lewis's eyes fix onto Halsey's immobile, mute, and deaf father, to whom Lewis bestows the name Father John¹⁵(105). More so than Fern, his being mute and deaf serve as figurative manifestations of Moore's first form of silence: silence as representing oppression. The narrator tells the reader that Lewis "merges with his source and lets the pain and beauty of the South meet him there," and a pastoral scene of "cane-sweet mist," cotton-bolls, and "magnolias" finds its "Black roots" deeply embedded into Lewis's consciousness (105). Seeing Father John as a Black patriarchal "symbol, flesh, and spirit of the past" (106), Lewis is awestruck at the power that lies dormant in this vestige of a man—so much so, that he ceases his interaction with his company for a pregnant moment of silence in the drama. As Jeff Webb writes in his essay "Literature and Lynching: Identity and Lynching in Jean Toomer's *Cane*" to describe Lewis's silence, "In merging with Father John, Lewis merges not only with his past but with a symbol, necessarily mute" (224). Considering the fact that Father John is such a powerful symbol of United States enslavement, his being mute is necessary for Toomer to depict the extremity of one who is "stripped and silent" (Du Bois 776).

As Lewis receives fulfillment from Father John, Kabnis occupies Lewis's silence

¹⁴ Gino Michael Pellegrini's offers an interpretation for the significance of the Hole in his essay, "Toomer and *Cane*: "Mixed-Blood" Impossibilities": "The descent into the Hole...signifies a descent into the human psyche, that of Toomer and that of the mixed-blood collective he represents," which reinforces the connection between Toomer and Freud's writing (402).

¹⁵ "A mute John the Baptist of a new religion—or a tongue-tied shadow of an old...Father John it is from now on..." (Toomer 104).

with emotionally charged banter and even a couple brief monologues. In one moment, Kabnis rants to his audience about coming from a family of orators and shows his talent at the practice by saying, “Now. I’m here now an talkin’s just begun”; Then, he self-contemplatively monologues about his superfluity:

...I’ve been shapin words after a design that branded¹⁶ here. Know what’s here? M soul...Been shaping words t fit m soul...Th form thats burned int my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay still unless I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God Almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words...White folks feed it cause their looks are words. Niggers, black niggers feed it cause theyre evil an their looks are words. Yallar niggers feed it...I wish t God some lynchin white man ud stick his knife through it an pin it to a tree. (109)

Kabnis orates trenchant words to fill the silent noise of his irreconciled, id-like racial identity; and, by speaking, he drowns out the terror that occupies silence. To put it another way, Kabnis speaks the terrors that Lewis probes from the Southern community. Similar to the connection that “Theater” draws between John and Toomer, this moment speaks to Toomer’s method of conveying his own oppression, self-censorship, and lack of camaraderie by feeding his unreconciled soul with the “Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words” that he writes into *Cane*. Kabnis implies, though, that he can never truly reconcile his bastardized self, which differs from Lewis, who, being the Christ figure in “Kabnis,” can experience brief moments of reconciliation in his soul upon bearing witness to the terrors of the South. Lewis’s meditative silence

¹⁶ Toomer’s physical representation of Du Bois’s veil and double-conscious as a branded stigmata (Du Bois 197).

after looking at Father John aptly evidences this notion. However, one must refrain from equating this to Moore's comradely silence; while Lewis certainly comes close, the characters to whom he connects fail to reciprocate his outreach and, as the narrator tells the reader at the end of the fifth act, leave Lewis feeling "completely cut out" (110).

Several scenes in "Kabnis" instance this denial of reciprocated camaraderie, especially in relation to Lewis, for the purpose of exemplifying the way in which the South's racially complicated members of society experience ostracization from both the White and Black communities. Late in the third act, Lewis meets eyes with Kabnis and attempts to connect with him through their shared eye contact. Contrary to the pastoral scene that Father John evokes in Lewis, Kabnis becomes reimagined as "a promise of a soul soaked beauty; uprooted, thinning out," which conveys his feeling disconnected from his Black racial roots¹⁷ (96). The two near a mutual understanding of one another; yet, Kabnis's unreconciled racial identity, and potentially certain gender norms, keeps him an "Arm's length removed" from Lewis. The power contained within his complicated identity becomes a perverted super ego force in him that "mocks his impulse" for camaraderie and "strengthens him to repulse Lewis" (96) just as Kabnis does with all other characters in the drama—that is, save for one: Halsey's sister, Carrie K.

In the climactic sixth act of the drama, Carrie K. descends into the basement, and Kabnis seizes the opportunity to reiterate the condition of his soul and its need for uplift (113). In this moment, too, Kabnis lashes out at Father John, who has broken his silence and begun repeating the word "sin," by saying, "Th whole word is a conspiracy t sin,

¹⁷ Something that is most certainly not the case with Father John.

especially in America, an against me. I'm th victim of their sin. I'm what sin is¹⁸" (114). That Kabnis is a victim of a larger act of American sin appears to be something with which Father John agrees as he says, "O th sin th white folks 'mitted when they made th Bible lie" (114), which laments White society's perversion of the Bible to both justify and perpetuate their oppression over other racial groups. Carrie K. becomes aware of Kabnis's dismissal of this profound statement, so she "takes his hot cheeks in her firm cool hands," "presses his face tenderly against her," and "[draws] the fever out" of his soul to render him silent as he basks in the peace their mutual sentiment brings.¹⁹ Although the moment is short-lived, Toomer implies through the final image of the rising sun that Carrie K.'s act of unspoken love reconciles the inter-character disjunction found elsewhere in *Cane* and effects an air of optimism with the drama's conclusion.

Conclusion

At the end of "Kabnis," Toomer compliments the resolution between Kabnis and Carrie K. by authoring a sunrise. While this symbol obviously generates uplift with its presence, it also inverts the motif of dusk that dominates *Cane* to further bolster the ending's optimist effect. In Toomer's post-*Cane* book, *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer*, he reflects on *Cane* and writes, "*Cane* was a swan-song. It was a song of an end," in reference to the dying African American culture in the South (130). While one might think of Toomer's writing as the dying croak of a lost generation, he or she should also see this sunrise as bearing the potential for a new

¹⁸ Here, note how his wording portrays Kabnis as not only being the victim of racial oppression but also the product of the most egregious sin to Southern culture: interracial relations.

¹⁹ Note, too, how this scene conceptualizes Carrie K. as a redeeming Madonna figure.

generation's call: the birth-song of Baraka's generation. Where one would be correct in seeing the similarity between Baraka and Toomer's employment of silence as representative of oppression, tactical withholding, and camaraderie, he or she would also be correct in pointing out Toomer's prescience in regard to his interest in silence as a sonic element in writing—a concept that Baraka and other poets in his literary movement come to refine and perfect in the decades that follow *Cane*. Moore describes the musical ending of Baraka's poem, "Balboa, the Entertainer," as Baraka's "[conceiving] of silence as the end of the song, which signals the end of loneliness romanticized" (812). The same should be said of the silence that falls at the end of the swan-song that is *Cane*.

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