

## Ambiguous Tones in *Cane*: Jean Toomer's Eyes on the South

Ayumi KOBAYASHI

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### Introduction

Published in 1923, Jean Toomer's *Cane* is composed of 13 short prose pieces and 15 poems (including ballads and work songs), which make up parts one and two of the novel, with a longer piece comprising part three. The first part details the stories of women in the southern state of Georgia, the second is set in Washington, D.C., and the third, "Kabnis," is the story of a man from the North. The stories therein are based on Toomer's experiences while living and working in Georgia, specifically during his two-month teaching stint at Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute, a school established for African Americans, in 1921. Before this brief teaching appointment, the author elected to pursue a literary vocation. He wanted to be more than a writer—he aimed to be a serious artist that produced works of substance (Nowlin 207). Some scholars claim that this period awakened his literary creativity (Kodat 2) and that Toomer first heard African American folk songs and spirituals during this time (Graham 725).

In its time, *Cane* was considered emblematic of the culture of the South. Toomer's friend Waldo Frank<sup>1</sup> declared that "[t]his book *is* the South" (138). Toomer's fresh treatment of southern folk customs made *Cane* "a harbinger of the South's literary maturity" (139). Critics have described it in thematic terms as being pastoral. Bernard Bell read *Cane* as "a pastoral work, contrasting the values of uninhibited, unlettered Black rustics with those of the educated, class consciousness Black bourgeoisie" and privileges the lyrical elements of the novel and its indebtedness to an "Afro American tradition of music as a major structural device" (13). Lucinda MacKethan also posited a pastoral reading of the novel, stating that Toomer "mold[ed] [*Cane*] into a version of Southern pastoral perceived with the black man's double vision of deep

belonging and forced alienation” (425). However, these analyses focus solely on the representation of the South and overlook a discussion of Toomer himself.

The author, who was of mixed-race lineage, later reflected that his sense of African American heritage was awakened when he “heard folk songs come from the lips of Negro peasants” (Rusch 16). In his unpublished autobiography, he wrote: “Here were cabins. Here negroes and their singing. I had never heard the spirituals and work songs. They were like a part of me. At times, I identified with my whole sense so intensely that I lost my own identity” (Kerman and Eldridge 84). These insights imply that in *Cane*, Toomer used the metaphor of song to evoke life in Georgia. Notably, Lorence Birden states that tribal songs are always linked to women in *Cane*. Indeed, Toomer uses binary oppositions—such as male/female, non-singing/singing, northern/southern, and tribal/individual—to carry his structuralist analysis of the text (Birden 45). Toomer’s use of song in *Cane* has been discussed from many perspectives and is largely regarded as a structurally significant part of the novel’s narrative.<sup>2</sup>

The author also used *Cane* to discuss the ways in which histories of enslavement and oppression continued manifesting in people’s lives and bodies over 50 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. Alan Golding argues that “Toomer’s drive to make the pieces of *Cane* balance or cohere enacts on the formal level his struggle to reconcile both contradictory spirits of North and South and the black and white within himself” (Golding 198). He further proposes that “*Cane* shows Toomer in 1923 [to be] intellectually an American and emotionally a black” (Golding 200). Similarly, Frederik Rusch observes that Toomer’s work sought to “explore something that his racial ambivalence demanded be explored” (Rusch 20). In short, Toomer stands both within and outside the South—as an author and in his own lived experience. This ambivalent rhetorical approach characterizes *Cane*’s unique creative vision (Ramsey 74).<sup>3</sup>

As previously stated, existing scholarship emphasizes Toomer’s use of song and analyzes his characters. Many critics showed that Toomer attempts to preserve the moment of the Black rural experience (Kukrechtová 132). This essay investigates Toomer’s symbolic use of color, which has been overlooked in the literature, and explores its thematic and autobiographical implications in *Cane*. To this end, the essay first considers the symbolic use of color in *Cane*’s stories, then examines the dichotomy posited between natural and artificial things. Finally, the

paper discusses the context of Toomer's own experiences to reflect on the symbolic meaning of tones in this work.

### 1. Tones as Metaphors

Toomer frequently uses color to describe landscapes and buildings, and—more extensively, to describe characters' skin and bodies. This is particularly the case for women's bodies. Notably, this literary decision may be part of Toomer's strategy to describe life in the South through a lens that does not adopt a dichotomous view of race. Toomer uses shades of Black and White, often in reference to everyday objects or experiences, to describe the colors of his characters' skin. This is especially true for the women introduced in the first section of *Cane*: "Karintha," "Fern," "Esther," and "Blood-Burning Moon." Karintha's skin "is like dusk on the eastern horizon" (Toomer 3), while Fern is a "cream-colored solitary girl" (17) with a "creamy brown" (16) upper lip. Esther's face is "chalk-white" (22), and Louisa's "skin was the color of oak leaves on young trees in fall" (30). Every woman in *Cane* is residents in a rural town, and each is described with neutral colors.

The landscape plays a strong contextualizing role in "Karintha," the opening character sketch in *Cane*, and the name of the titular character: a young, beautiful woman of mixed racial heritage living in a small Georgia town. The narrator emphasizes that Karintha is primarily perceived as a sexual object, warning that "[t]his interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her" (3). Toomer's diction implies that Karintha's beauty draws men's gazes and is associated with "exotic multiracial somatic features" (Pellegrini 10). When she places the body of her baby on "a bed of pine-needles in a forest" (Toomer 4), the narrator describes smoke curling up from a nearby sawmill. Moreover, the words "Smoke is on the hills, Rise up" (4) are sung when "the sun goes down" (4). Smoke is depicted in contrast to the sun at dusk, and the color of smoke is open to interpretation<sup>4</sup>—it could be black, white, or gray. The ambiguous color is consistent with Karintha's solitariness, which stems from her mixed-race identity.

Throughout the story, the development of Karintha's unique potential is arrested and then redirected in relation to the racialized milieu around her. Caught between the realms of race,

class, and gender, she does not belong to a specific family or community. Thus, nobody cares for her during her pregnancy. Thus, nobody cares for her during her pregnancy; in this loneliness and displacement, she has an abortion. While the imagery of “solitariness and abandonment [is] representative of a collective mixed-race sensibility” (Pellegrini 11), the unstable position of mixed-race femininity is implied in Toomer’s use of the color gray.

Buildings are described with colors as well, evoking more than just their appearance to the reader. The color white is used symbolically in the second part of *Cane*. For example, the protagonist in “Theater,” a dancer named Doris, is disappointed when she finds that the manager of the theater where she works does not care for her. The theater is described as follows:

Life of nigger alleys, of pool rooms and restaurants and near-bear saloons soaks into the walls of Howard Theater and sets them throbbing jazz songs. Black-skinned, they dance and shout above the tick and trill of white-walled buildings. At night, they open doors to people who come in to stamp their feet and shout. (Toomer 52)

She falls down the stairs and into her dressing room, where “[h]er eyes, over a floor of tears, stare at the whitewashed ceiling” (55-56). The object she regards in her disappointment is painted white. This description reveals the limitations of the system, which categorizes people as biracial, Black, or White.

Stories in *Cane* utilize distinct references to racial difficulties. In “Fern,” the narrator tells the titular character that if she were to leave the South (perhaps by moving to Washington, Chicago, or New York), she would encounter a racialized milieu (17-18). However, when Fern “gaze[s] at the gray cabin on the knoll” (17), she notices her own objectification and entrapment in the eyes of her fellow citizens. It is significant that the cabin she sees is not black or white but gray—the middle ground between the two. Indeed, the color gray is made salient in this description.

The racially dichotomized system also stunts the psychosocial development of Esther, the mixed-race daughter of a grocery store owner in Georgia. She falls in love with the physically imposing, dark-skinned King Barlo—a preacher who travels through southern towns. In Esther’s town one night, she seeks out King Barlo to admit her feelings. She finds him at a house party in the so-called Black part of town late at night, where Black men and women gather around them. King Barlo asks: “Well, I’m sholy damned – skuse me, but what, what brought you here

Ambiguous Tones in *Cane*:  
Jean Toomer's Eyes on the South

lil mil-white gal?" (26). Esther hears jeers and hoots and steps outside, but upon glimpsing the 'other' side of town, she feels "no air," sees "no street," and finds that "the town has completely disappeared" (27). The story ends with her outside and alone. The loneliness and liminality of her ending indicate that, as a mixed-race woman, Esther exists in a sort of cultural limbo, belonging to neither Black nor White communities.

"Kabnis," the third part of *Cane*, compiles the implications of parts one and two. At the beginning of this short story, the protagonist's surroundings are described as follows:

Whitewashed hearth and chimney, black with sooty saw-teeth. Ceiling, patterned by fringed globe of the lamp. The wall, unpainted, are seasoned a rosin yellow. And cracks between the boards are black. (83)

Throughout *Cane*, whitewashed, black, and unpainted walls are described, to maintain the reader's focus on the environment in terms of color. The color gray is also frequently featured in "Kabnis." Concerning the home of another mixed-race character, Fred Halsey, the description notes that "[a]n open grate burns cheerily in contrast to the gray cold changed [sic] autumn weather" (87). Moreover, "Georgia hills roll off into the distance, their dreary aspect heightened by the gray spots of unpainted one- and two-rooms shanties" (88). Similarly, the gray, unpainted shanties of African Americans in the story exist in stark contrast to the houses of wealthy people: "[w]hite paint on the wealthier houses has the chill blue glitter of distant stars" (105). Beyond their white paint, the wealthier houses are illustrated with blue glitter, while the unpainted shanties are only gray.

The Black/White racial system is subverted in *Cane*, and the color gray itself—or objects associated with gray, such as smoke—are used symbolically throughout the story. Gray objects also form the landscape in the story "Bona and Paul" in the second part of *Cane*:

Gray slanting roofs of houses are tinted lavender in the setting sun. Paul follows the sun, over the stock-yards where a fresh stench is just arising, across wheat lands that are still waving above their stubble, into the sun. Paul follows the sun to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia. He sees the slanting roofs of gray unpainted cabins tinted lavender. (73)

Paul, a mixed-race man, is anxious about the racial difference between himself and his girlfriend, Bona. Grayness emerges amidst brightness (represented by the lavender tint and sunlight) as if

to draw attention to Paul's gloomy situation.

Following the dichotomous style discussed earlier, *Cane's* settings have often been divided into two parts—province and city. However, the tones pervading the stories serve as an additional metaphor. Sometimes, colors are presented to elicit a clear dichotomy as described above, while other times, they provide only a vague sense of difference. In this manner, Toomer described African American life just as he saw and felt—thriving anywhere whether in a rural province or a bustling city.

## 2. Fusion of Nature and Artificiality

As previously stated, Toomer's stint in Georgia was the first time he heard folk songs and spirituals. He reported feeling deep regret upon realizing that spirituals were dying out and being replaced by Victrolas and player pianos (Graham 725). Moved by folk songs and spirituals that focused on the natural world, he felt a coming coexistence of nature and artificiality. Here, it is necessary to consider how is his feeling toward the destiny of nature to become obsolete is represented in *Cane*.

Kodak observes that "Toomer uses nature as a 'mirror' that both critically represents and is forced into being by domination and repression, a dialectic made clear in his tendency to equate women and nature" (7).<sup>5</sup> Nature and artificiality coexist in the story "Becky." The titular character is a poor white woman who lives in a cabin with her two mixed-race sons. The narrator notes that she does not belong to any community and that both Black and White residents try to cast her out (Toomer 7). In other words, she exists between Blacks and Whites, that is, in a state of grayness. Toomer juxtaposes Becky's cabin and the nearby railroad. Her cabin is made of wood, a natural element, and contrasts with the manmade railroad. Noting that "[s]ix trains each day rumbled past and shook the ground under her cabin" (7), Toomer emphasizes the discomfort of her surroundings as follows:

Fords, and horse- and mule-drawn buggies went back and forth along the road. No one ever saw her. Trainmen, and passengers who'd heard about her, threw out papers and food. Threw out little crumples slips of paper scribbled with prayers, as they passed her eye-shaped piece of sandy ground. (7)

Ambiguous Tones in *Cane*:  
Jean Toomer's Eyes on the South

The symbol of artificiality, the railroad, bothers Becky, who eventually dies in her cabin. The railroad is a symbol of industrialization, and her death implies that her place was not in the industrial world but in the natural environment. The symbolic grayness in the story, illustrated in the relation between Becky and her cabin, indicates that she was oppressed by industrialization.

Toomer creates a contrast between nature and artificiality in another story, "Carma," which deals with a woman as well:

Over in the forest, across the swamp, a sawmill blows its closing whistle. Smoke curls up. Marvelous web spun by the spider sawdust pile. Curls up and spread itself pine-high above the branch, a single silver band along the eastern valley. (12)

Here, the sawmill is mentioned alongside the forest, and smoke appears yet again. The sawmill serves as an interface between nature and artificiality by taking in lumber (nature) and expelling smoke (industrial waste) into the air. The gray smoke is a byproduct of the forest and the sawmill and can be said to lie somewhere between the natural and artificial environments. Thus, in this story, gray symbolizes the conflict between and coexistence of the natural and the artificial.

As seen in "Becky" and "Carma," nature and artificiality are presented in the stories in Part One in antagonism with one another. This opposition is amplified in Part Two of *Cane*, which is primarily set in Washington, D.C. In "Seventh Street," the city of D.C. is described as follows:

Seventh Street is a bastard of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. (41)

Significantly, the natural wood of the buildings is whitewashed and soaked with the blood of African Americans. The various buildings described in part two—shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets—are not representative but artificial. In "Avey," on the other hand, the titular character is described against the backdrop of Washington, D.C., as follows: "I saw the dawn steal over Washington. The Capitol dome resembles a gray ghost ship that drifts from the sea. Her face was pale and her eyes were heavy. She did not have the gray crimson-splashed beauty of the dawn" (49). Here, grey is used to indicate both artificiality/constructed urbanism (the Capitol) and nature (the dawn).

As previously stated, Toomer felt saddened by the realization that a crucial element of the African American culture, spirituals, began dying out. His use of grayness represents an intermediary between nature and artificiality, highlighting Toomer's acceptance of artificiality while cherishing nature.

### 3. Jean Toomer and Grayness

Toomer's own experience of race and culture was fluid; he learned from the lives and culture of African Americans in addition to his own experiences. He lived in white neighborhoods in his early life, while his experience in Sparta, Georgia, from October to November of 1921 as substitute principal at a Black vocational school provided him insight into the rich and varied experiences of African Americans (Ramsey 74-75). In his unpublished autobiography "On Being an American," he wrote about cabins he saw in Georgia and listened to the spirituals and work songs for the first time. And he found his "own identity" (Kerman and Eldridge 84). These cabins likely informed those described many times in *Cane*, which are always described with colors, mainly gray. W. E. B. DuBois, who spent more time in Georgia than Toomer, wrote about Toomer in the *Crisis* in February 1924: "Toomer does not impress me as one who knows his Georgia but he does know human beings...he paints things that are true, not with Dutch exactness, but rather with an impressionist's sweep of color" (171). His experiences were informed by what he learned from others. To Toomer, the spirit of African Americans remained strong in daily life—even in rural Georgia, far from the richness of the city.

In addition, Toomer had grown up with a strong awareness of culture in the South as his father was from Georgia. Ramsey pointed out that family stories and social experiences taught Toomer the post-War, Black cultural infusion that added to Washington's partly southern flavor (75). In *Cane*, even the northern, urban stories have "a pervasive sub-tone which is distinctly of the South" (Jones, *Selected Essays* 14). In 1919, Toomer began to associate with Alain Locke, a leading voice in the emergent "New Negro movement," and his social circle in Washington, D.C. Toomer helped organize a study group that focused primarily on studying the history and sociology of African-American life.<sup>6</sup> He appears to have relied on the group and on Locke for much of the material about race, racism, and relationships across racial lines that eventually



Ambiguous Tones in *Cane*:  
Jean Toomer's Eyes on the South

made it into the character sketches, poems, and short stories of *Cane* (Larson 268). Pellegrini notes that Toomer saw literature and art as “the most effective means to uplift the mind of the masses and in so doing create cultural change in America” (3). Nonetheless, however noble his motivations, this endeavor was not beyond critique. Indeed, Alain Locke states that

Jean Toomer went deeper still – I should say higher – and saw for the first time the glaring paradoxes and the deeper ironies of the situation as they affected not only the Negro but the white man. He realized, too, that Negro idiom was anything but trite and derivative, and also that it was in emotional substance pagan—all of which he convincingly demonstrated, alas, all too fugitively, in *Cane*. But Toomer was not enough of a realist, or patient enough as an observer, to reproduce extensively a folk idiom. (“Sterling Brown,” 92)

In Locke's opinion, *Cane* cannot adequately describe African Americans. This is a reasonable assertion as Toomer began to deny the Black/White racial binary and identify as “American” shortly after publishing *Cane* (Beal 671). Notably, Joel William writes that by 1915, the one-drop rule was accepted by both Blacks and Whites in the North and South (109). Accordingly, those with mixed ethnicities and visible indicators of blackness, including members of the “mulatto” elite, were deemed Black by both Blacks and Whites (Pellegrini 1). This confused Toomer and reminded him that he was not African American but American.

In *Cane*, black is distinct from gray in that it symbolizes the independent and unique culture of African Americans. Gray is more than another color between black and white, having its own important role in *Cane*. This is demonstrated by its use in the final part of the story: “The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” (117). The ubiquitous and pointed use of gray tones throughout the text is a clear indication of Toomer's deliberate use of the term in this section. Thus, Toomer describes the grayness of African Americans who belong to neither black nor white categories. He uses gray as a combination of these colors, as the middle between black and white, and, thus, an indication of liminality.

Toomer's biography describes that he grew up highly aware of the racial politics of both the southern and northern United States. His father was from the south, and Toomer was raised in the north. He lived in white neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. and Brooklyn and New

Rochelle, New York, until the age of 14. When he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, he “began to define himself as a member of no one racial group but as an American amalgam” (Ramsey 75). As Toomer wrote to his friend, Waldo Frank:

The visit to Georgia last fall is the starting point of almost everything of worth I have done. I heard folksongs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I heard many false accounts about, and of which, till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly into life and responded to them. (McKay 47)

Ramsey points out that by “referring only to Georgia stories as his Southern ones, he knew by family and social experience the post-war, Black cultural infusion that added to Washington’s partly Southern flavor” (75). Toomer argued that even his stories set in northern, urban settings have “a pervasive sub-tone which is distinctly of the South” (Jones, *Prison-House of Thought* 14). That is, Toomer’s experiences were midway between Black and White culture.

*Cane* begins with scenes that unfold during sunset, and the sunrise appears only at the end of the story, which MacKethan describes as a symbol of hope and rebirth (434). However, grayness in *Cane* also characterizes the hybrid nature of this world—a hybridity that Toomer himself embodied: being mixed race and belonging to both worlds. Toomer was attracted to the culture of the South and wanted to preserve it, but this was a specific picture of the South. Indeed, it is an ambiguous picture portrayed by someone placed between social structures and expectations and forced to navigate them without being rooted within them. In these stories, grayness mixes and juxtaposes the southern and northern United States and illustrates a contrast between nature and artificiality.

#### 4. Conclusion

In addition to a pastoral reading of the text reported in previous studies, Jean Toomer’s only novel, *Cane*, can be read through the lens of color beyond race rooted in grayness in contrast to Black and White, as detailed above. Thus, there are various dimensions in which this text can be interpreted. The use of colors has implications, but they are ambiguous. This ambiguity may arise from Toomer’s own experiences of being an outsider as a mixed-race person who was not

Ambiguous Tones in *Cane*:  
Jean Toomer's Eyes on the South

deeply familiar with African American culture, particularly in the South. The repeated use of gray coloring in similar contexts—characters, buildings, and landscapes—is undoubtedly deliberate, though the author's intentions are not always clear. The differences between Parts One and Two of *Cane*, namely, the stories in Georgia and Washington D. C., are characterized by a tension between nature and artificiality. In his own life, Toomer was moved by both of them as an American, not within a solely African-American experience. These individual matters were integrated by the description of colors. Toomer used tones, and grayness specifically, to shade off the borders between American/African American and nature/artificiality.

*Cane* guides readers on a fluctuating journey between places to find customary social perceptions constantly defamiliarized; fixed, racial preconceptions dissolved; and characters vested with fresh, resonant humanity. As previous studies show, *Cane* had been considered a rich story of varied African American experiences and of numerous dichotomies characterizing the northern and southern U.S. in this period. However, it is also a description of how Toomer understood himself and was moved by African-American tradition and culture. Ambiguous tonality in *Cane* may represent the real tones coloring Toomer's life. African Americans in *Cane* are perceived as persons with a vibrant human dimension who are not restricted by the racialized perceptions of the era. Toomer knew that the racial construction of whiteness and blackness were deeply rooted, but the ambiguous tones in *Cane* dislodged these rigid cultural frames to disrupt the false essences of being simply White or Black.

In *Cane*, African-American regionalism dissolves into universality; with a mystical significance, African American culture helped Toomer forge an identity. He achieves a fertile creativity by releasing himself from the customary chains of American binary perception by utilizing grayness. He defamiliarizes rigid racial perceptions that undermine the experiences of himself and of African Americans. *Cane* embodies a dual perspective of Toomer: a person coming to identify concretely with ancestral heritage among African Americans and an outside observer without a spiritually vibrant folk culture. The African American characters in *Cane* possess a vibrant human dimension without being downtrodden. Toomer's authorial stance was both within and outside of the African American context. The bivalent rhetorical perspective makes possible *Cane*'s unique storytelling perspective. The stories that comprise *Cane* may be artifacts of Toomer's own blurring of identity lines becoming an American, not African-

American, and express the cultural fusion between Black and White.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Waldo Frank was a white northeasterner who visited the South on three occasions, while Toomer visited there twice (Ramsey 74).

<sup>2</sup> Graham writes that “playing tribute to the music of Georgia thus became one of [Toomer’s] central concerns in *Cane*, the diverse, enigmatic, and frequently Southern-themed collection of poetry, prose sketches, and drama he published two years later and upon which his reputation rests” (725).

<sup>3</sup> Kodat notes that Toomer is portrayed as a peculiarly modern incarnation of “double consciousness,” the racially alienated man (2). Meanwhile, *Cane* is seen the embodiment of wholeness: a moment of aesthetic racial truth. In addition, Baker writes that *Cane* shows how “a folk culture containing its own resonant harmonies, communal values and assumptions, and fruitful proximity to the ancestral soil offers a starting point for the journey toward black art” (80).

<sup>4</sup> Smoke appears in “Becky” as well, in Toomer’s description of Becky’s home: “Smoke curled up from her chimney; she must be there” (8). Smoke is symbolical of her existence.

<sup>5</sup> When Toomer states that Karintha’s skin is “like dusk on the eastern horizon” (3), he is not only describing its color. He may be expressing the idea that, metaphorically, she never sees the sun because her skin is like the eastern horizon, which sits in the opposite direction of the setting sun.

<sup>6</sup> The African American artist, Alain Locke, wrote: “a return to nature, not by way of the forced and worn formula of Romanticism, but through the closeness of imagination that has never broken kinship nature” (*The New Negro*, 52).

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Ambiguous Tones in *Cane*:  
Jean Toomer's Eyes on the South

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