Re-Presentation and Re-Memory of the Southern Landscape in *Cane*: Jean Toomer’s Memorial Minor Writing

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1 Cane is considered a masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s, and Jean Toomer is ranked among the finest artists in the history of African-American literature who inspired other black intellectuals. When Cane came out in 1923, it was the first work by a black author to be published by a white publisher. Cane was not the first black work of the Harlem Renaissance; Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson had published years before, but Cane was immediately seen as “a combination of avant-garde aesthetics with an apparently un stereotype representation of black people” [Michlin 8]. With its authentic and proud representation of blackness and its exploration of new forms, Cane was at the intersection of the Harlem Renaissance movement and modernism, “the Harlem Renaissance whose focus was on new, authentic, proud representations of blackness, and modernism which was predominantly white avant-garde exploration of new forms – gave Cane its unique place in African-American writing in the eyes of contemporary black intellectuals too” [Michlin 9, 10]. Toomer also positioned himself as a detached observer of Southern black people and black life, which led him to work on memory and re-memory of the South and of Black American history:

Stylistically too Toomer rode in the vanguard of his generation. His poetry and prose depend upon the clean, impressionistic phrasings of the Imagists. In a decade when American dramatists conspicuously rebelled against the limitations of traditional drama and its stage, he [Toomer] pioneered experiments with dramatic form [Turner Introduction, xxi].

2 Toomer pioneered many aspects of literature through the representation of black people, of the South, of black women, and through inner monologues. There is a multiplicity of goals in Cane which explains the difficulty of the text as a whole. The
difficulty of understanding is reinforced by the binary images and descriptions. The reader follows “the ritual of signifying” by decoding what the character(s) say(s) and by using his own map in an attempt to decode Toomer’s writing. The book was described as “avant-garde” in 1997 in Henry Louis Gates and Nelly McKay’s anthology of African-American literature. In that context, Cane can be understood as the harbinger of the Harlem Renaissance. The book changed African-American literature in the sense that Toomer pioneered many aspects of literature all at once. He revived the Georgian landscape through the representation of black people, of the South, of black women, and through inner monologues. The use, we may say the revolutionary use, of black dialect, is a major innovation since the reader has to decode what the character(s) say(s) and to replace this in the context of black authorship. De-coding or “de-territorialization” are crucial concepts exposed by Deleuze and Guattari in Mille Plateaux and are the basis of “minor literature”. These concepts will help us provide an understanding of Toomer’s vision of the Southern landscape and his memorial writing of the South. The tension between the descriptions of the pastoral and violent landscape of the South and its re-memory provide the dynamic of Toomer’s writing. Toomer observes and gives a particularly powerful restitution of the Southern landscape as he experienced it:

La représentation du passé paraît bien être celle d’une image. […] C’est sous le signe de l’association des idées qu’est placée cette sorte de court-circuit entre mémoire et imagination […]. La mémoire, réduite au rappel, opère ainsi dans le sillage de l’imagination [Ricœur 5].

Though the confusion between memory, re-memory, imagination and truth has always been questioned by philosophers, Toomer offers with Cane an innovative poetic and fictional work evoking past and re-membered black life and culture in the South. Toomer’s landscapes hold memories that place his writing at the border of collective and individual memory. His re-presentations subtly polarize macro and micro history to re-member the past without falling into the traps of “manipulated memory” as defined by Paul Ricoeur. The re-presentation of the trauma and of the fragmented self participates to the rehabilitation of African-Americans’ violent past and their re-inscription in history, be it local or national. With his ‘avant-garde’ aesthetics, Toomer’s rhetoric innovation uncovers the various interpretations and assessment of the violent history of African-Americans and revives it. By considering Toomer’s language and “codes” in Cane, our intent, here, is to analyze Toomer’s vision and memory of the South and to show how personal aspects are commingled to his writing.

“The ritual of signifying”, which critic Henry Louis Gates perceives as the hallmark of black literary tradition, pervades Cane. The multiplicity of goals and the contrasting images and descriptions partly explains the difficulty of the book, and readers are uncertain whether this difficulty is deliberate or controlled. We will see such a principle of “multiple entries” (a characteristic of “minor literature” as explained by Deleuze and Guattari) offers an alternative to Toomer’s personal and inner interpretation of the South, and his “re-memory” becomes a space of expression which allows asserting his “memory duty” (devoir de mémoire), to borrow from Paul Ricoeur in La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli (2000). As Homi Bhabha quotes in The Location of Culture:

The act of “rememoration” […] turns the present of narrative enunciation into the haunting memorial of what has been excluded, excised, evicted, and for that very reason becomes the unheimlich space for the negotiation of identity and history » [Bhabha 284].
“Reminding, Reminiscing, Recognizing” (which Paul Ricoeur borrows to Edward Casey) are mnemonic modes Toomer appropriates through writing and the writing of the South. Memory is thus both personal and collective and expresses the act of “remembering re-membered”. Through his writing Toomer confronts himself and his readers to phenomena implying space, body, mind, and the vision of the South, his personal and intimate vision so to speak.

Thus, by focusing on the double-voiced discourse of Cane we will show the tension between the oral and written modes of narration which is close to the jazz technique with its inventiveness and breaking of rules. The book suggests constant friction and violence to deliver contradictory messages, while the author continually produces stylistic experimentations which allow him to explore and find a voice, and to remember the past of Black Americans. We will also apply Toomer’s rhetoric innovation to the study of the Southern landscape to try to uncover the various meanings of interpretation to be deciphered in Toomer’s personal vision and (re)memory of the South. To illustrate these points, we will concentrate more particularly on the following poems and sketches: Karintha, Song of the Son, Georgia Dusk, and Portrait in Georgia (Part 1); then Calling Jesus, Seventh Street, Box Seat, and Bona and Paul, from Part 2, and Kabnis (Part 3) which closes the volume.

Toomer’s double-edged language and the variability of interpretations

The world of Cane is represented by all sorts of dualities. The movement back and forth between the signified and signifying starts with the title itself and the form of Cane. Does the word “cane” refer to sugar cane or to Abel’s brother, Cain? Or is it to be understood as the modal “can”, which is pronounced “cain/caint” in black dialect? All the poems link nature’s beauty and ugliness, harmony and disharmony, dreams of escape and man’s inability of reaching harmony.

The form of Cane has also puzzled readers and critics. Toomer did not conceive Cane as a novel, there is no plot and no definite frame. Cane, which is divided into three parts, is composed of both poetry and prose and the poems are embedded in a large narrative network. The first section takes place in the South (Georgia) and focuses on stories about women whose behavior contrasts with the expectations and demands of society. The second section, introduced by a lyric description of the major artery of Washington D.C’s black settlement, presents men and women in Washington and Chicago whose relationships are distorted and disrupted by their conditioning and their environment. The third section returns to the South through the novelette Kabnis and presents a grim vision of a Northern-educated African-American who understands the impotence of institutionalized education and religion. These recurrent contrasts are part of Toomer’s rhetorical and aesthetic innovation while they translate his attempt to come to terms with African-American literary and historical marginalization. Though misunderstood when it came out, the experimental and innovative form of the book proposed a new aesthetic and challenged a Euro-American tradition which dismissed black expression as formless.

In this light, Henry Louis Gates’s literary theory, which links the ancient African myths and poetry to African-American works of literature, is particularly useful since, by
proposing a new framework of reading, he uncovered new perspectives and understanding. Since the early nineteenth century, texts in the Afro-American canon had been analyzed in terms of content and African-American literature had been understood as the evocation of black experience. In 1988, by reinterpreting contemporary critical theory, Gates proposed to reconcile history and form through “the language of signifying” and allowed readers to grasp the meaning of the double-voice of African-American texts:

For Henry Louis Gates, signifying is an attempt to find a distinctively black method of reconciling history and form, textuality and experience, through the reappropriation of contemporary critical theory [Bucknell 67].

With his theory of the “signifying monkey”, Henry Louis Gates offered a new framework to examine major works of African-American literature. Deleuze and Guattari’s theory in Mille Plateaux provide another interesting framework to “decipher” and interpret Toomer’s writing and work. Toomer, indeed, can be compared to a craftsman who uses his own material to transform it into something else. By pioneering new stylistic aspects, Toomer evaded the dominant linguistic models of expression, a characteristic of writers writing from the margin and on the margin. As a stranger in his own language, he crafted his own tongue to forge another expression within a specific cultural context and force another sensibility. These characteristics are proper to “minor literature”:

A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language. But the primary characteristic of a minor literature involves all the ways in which the language is effected by a strong co-efficient of deterritorialization.

To explore this aspect of the book, we will focus our analysis on Karintha (part one), which opens the volume, and on Kabnis (part three), which closes the volume. Both texts, where the land fuses with people, present a split in the narrative and are built on binary images and descriptions, while the language is territorialized and deterreritorialized to escape codification. Anti-theses and similarities, literal and figurative oppositions, the movements between past and present, the fragmentation of meaning, bodies and souls fill the texts with tensions and unsaid truths that leave the reader with a sense of frustration as clear-cut conclusions can never be grasped. These aspects are typical of the processes of “territorialization” and “de-territorialization” theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. The process of “territorialization” implies the desire to “de-code” to escape the familiar space one inhabits, while the second process means to “de-code” a space at the margin to conquer a new space of freedom. Toomer’s writing typifies such alternative which is, as a matter of fact, simultaneously un-interpretable but also deeply personal. Indeed, during a trip to Georgia in 1921, Toomer unearthed the substance of his work to come. In a letter to The Liberator magazine in the mid-1920s, he evoked Georgia in the following terms:

A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accents about, and of which till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them. Now I cannot conceive of myself as aloof and separated. My point of view has not changed; it has deepened, it has widened [Turner xvi].

Following this letter, Toomer began to meditate on his experience in Georgia and to write stories and poems. This letter partly explains his aesthetic choice and how he
entangled his impression of place with his impression of people, how he merged the personal to his writing, land and people, black bodies and voices. This excerpt shows how the life of the writer and his creation are tightly linked and combined.

Karintha illustrates these points; it is a sketch devoted to the depiction of rural life in Georgia (as perceived by Toomer). First, Toomer proposes a new vision of black beauty against the backdrop of the rural landscape of Georgia, which is not the pastoral setting the reader might expect: “Karintha is a woman. She who carries beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down [3].” Karintha epitomizes black beauty and desirable blackness. To reassert black identity and cultural heritage Toomer describes black beauty by inscribing the black woman’s body within an African frame of reference: “At sunset, when there was no wind, and the pine-smoke from over by the sawmill hugged the earth, and you couldn’t see more than a few feet in front, her sudden darting past you was a bit of vivid color, like a black bird that flashes in light [1].” Karintha personifies nature. Yet, by using stereotypes of black femininity and primitivism, which appealed to the white idea of exoticism during the Harlem Renaissance, and by contrasting them to black women’s endurance, the sketch questions the very notion of primitivism. Such ambiguity allows a reflection on the dominant ideology and questions the contradictions of the white Puritan society. At the same time, by proceeding this way, Toomer proposes a change in the exploration and conception of blackness: “But Karintha is a woman, and she has had a child. A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest [2].” Karintha is the image of black beauty and also the recognition of body exploitation. She evolves from innocence to “experience”, namely prostitution, which is never directly uttered or evoked in the text. Forced prostitution and the degradation of black women are subsumed in Karintha’s story. The character is neither given speech nor thought. She is reduced to a mere sexual object just like during slavery, which is remembered through the character. Her description contrasts life and death while her story is rooted in deep and painful lyricism as she remains misunderstood and cannot be deciphered: “Karintha is a woman. Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon. They will bring their money; they will die not having found it out [2].” The story remains open-ended. The choice of words and images creates deep ambivalence; the doubleness of signifying leads to endless layers of interpretations and meanings while a form of memory reverberates in this act of writing. This participates to the “creation of historical agency [which] produces the subject from out of the temporality of the contingent […]. […] Those histories of cultural difference produce a community-in-discontinuity, historical revision in diaspora”[Bhabha 284-285].

Karintha also epitomizes the Georgian land; she is intimately linked to the land. The form of the text creates, indeed, a poetic fusion of the black woman and the Georgian landscape through its inclusion of song. Its repetition (three times) gives its shape to the text and offers a call and response pattern:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
O cant you see it, O cant you see it,
Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon
... When the sun goes down [1].

Metaphors link the woman and the land; Karintha is the product of the Georgian soil: “the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon [2].” She is likened to nature: in turn, she is the dusk [“Her skin is like dusk”], a bird [“her sudden darting (…) like a black bird”], and a flower [“She was as innocently lovely as a November cotton
flower”]. But she is a flower “ripened too soon”. Karintha totally harmonizes with the setting. Interestingly enough, Toomer who challenged a Euro-American tradition with his new aesthetic form, certainly borrowed from it by linking the land to the female body. Toomer’s aesthetic resolution allows to progress from highly poetic images to highly dramatic symbols and to move back and forth from “major” to “minor literature” while subtly restituting black history and the history of the South. In Karintha, the opposition between life and death is both literal and figurative and permeates the text. There are several occurrences of images of death through the sun, through the use of the word “ripen” and through the expression “a November cotton flower”. Like a November cotton flower, Karintha is not in full bloom anymore though she is twenty; she is already symbolically dead: “Karintha is a woman. Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon.” Karintha has lost her innocence and something ominous is looming for her. The repetition of the sentence “the sun goes down” conveys this idea. The omnipresence of dusk and therefore of darkness provides the setting with a strange, even gothic atmosphere. The sentence “the sun goes down” can be read and interpreted differently. It can translate the fall of the white race and also Karintha’s fall from grace, in other words her fall from innocence to “experience” since forced sexual relations between white men and black women are made clear. Karintha is nothing else than a sexual object and she pays a high price for her freedom and sexual freedom. She epitomizes black beauty abused by white men and forced to prostitution because of poverty: “The young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them. This interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her.” Taken literally, “the sun goes down” translates the end of the day. It can also be understood as the end of slavery or as the end of the rural black culture, and at large as the end of the entire race which may fall into oblivion since its culture is essentially an oral one. Through the lyricism and tragedy of the character Toomer denounces aspects that had never been denounced before him. Karintha is, after all, the paradigm of beauty and of endurance. Her connection to the Georgian land bonds her to her black heritage and to White men’s stereotyped visions. The lyricism of Karintha in particular and of Cane in general can also be understood as Toomer’s attempt “to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called Black Experience” [Gates, TSM 111].

16 The same pattern appears in Kabnis and though the main character bears the burden of his racial heritage and rejects his ancestry, the recurrent jazz imagery shows the character’s inner duality and bonds him to his blackness and black culture. The jazz variation appears three times and its repetition reinforces the call and response pattern of the whole text. It is a way for Toomer to remember and assert the Black oral tradition:

White-man’s land.
Niggers, sing.
Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground [81, 85, 103].

17 Toomer mixed the broken syntax of jazz with the broken voice of lyricism found in the spirituals to portray ordinary black life: Black men work and sing on the “White man’s land”. Blaks invoke nature in their songs to claim their privileged relation to the land.
By applying the jazz technique to writing, Toomer inscribes his text in modernism and tears down conventions. The different forms of expression he uses, and crafts provide an escape which allows Toomer to conquer new spaces between otherness and uniqueness. As Michael North puts it:

Those critics who see Cane as a musical composition are of course quick to point out that the choice of broken forms, of short short-stories, juxtaposed to poems, in varying levels of language, styles and techniques are all a conscious reproduction of a jazz aesthetic of rearrangement, disarrangement, reinterpretation, and variation. But it would be more accurate to say that there is a constant shuttling back and forth between literary forms such as lyric in a simple state and complex variations on them or mixtures of them [North 167].

Interestingly enough, Toomer both cites and breaks with traditional literary forms. He creates a call and response pattern by moving back and forth between the interior monologue and the omniscient narrator; such pattern reinforces the idea of anti-theses that split Kabnis. This is Toomer’s escape, “line of flight” (or ligne de fuite to quote a vocabulary developed by Deleuze and Guattari in Mille Plateaux) which evolves in creative mutations. Such process is a way for Toomer to connect things to escape the dominant system, the dominant codes, and to propose his own assemblage:

A ‘line of flight’ is a path of mutation precipitated through the actualisation of connections among bodies that were previously only implicit (or ‘virtual’) that releases new powers in the capacities of those bodies to act and respond. Every assemblage is territorial in that it sustains connections that define it, but every assemblage is also composed of lines of deterritorialization that run through it and carry it away from its current form (D&G 1987:14) [Tamsin, 147].

The oral voice thus becomes the plot itself; “the oral voice in Cane is a motivated sign of duality, of opposition, which Toomer thematizes in each section of his fiction, and specifically in this passage”: [Gates, TSM 178]

Kabnis : Aint much difference between blue an black.
Lewis : Enough to draw a denial from you. Cant hold them, can you ? Master ; slave.
Soil ; and the overarching heavens. Dusk ; dawn. They fight and bastardize you. The sun tint of your cheeks, flame of the great season’s multi-colored leaves, tarnished, burned. Split, shredded ; easily burned. No use...
His gaze shifts to Stella. Stella’s face draws back, her breasts come towards him.
Stella : I aint got nothing f y, mister. Taint no use t look at me [107].

This example corroborates the black concept of signifying15. Binary images are part of the world and of nature and also of Toomer’s world, but do they mean Kabnis is to be placed in harmonious relation with the Georgian landscape? Is he the very expression of the Southern landscape? Metaphors, layers of meanings and interpretations are disseminated throughout the text; they create a sense of constant floating meaning in all the stories of Cane. As stated by Monica Michlin, “Cane teaches the reader to read it. It spells out the process of subconscious association of words” [Michlin, 217-18]. In connecting the characters to the landscape Toomer endows his imagery with multiple significations. For instance in Kabnis, the word “insane” [line 19, p. 83] echoes the word “sane” [17]; the word “adoration” immediately follows the word “curses” [17, p. 83]. Opposite dimensions are constantly involved, as it is finally made clear from the start when the narrator addresses himself to both God and Jesus: “Dear God, Dear Jesus” [83]. By complicating the process of signification, Toomer totally involves the reader in the deciphering of the text. According to Deleuze’s theory, this is typical of a “minor” language:
Major and minor are two different usages of the same language. A minor language opens a passage in the order word that constitutes any of the operative redundancies of the major language. The problem is not the distinction between major and minor language but one of becoming. A person (a subject, but also a creative and active individual) has to deterritorialize the major language rather than reterritorialize herself within an inherited dialect. Recourse to a minor language puts the major language into flight. Minoritarian authors are those who are foreigners in their own tongue. A minority is not defined by the paucity of its numbers but by its capacity to become or, in its subjective geography, to draw for itself lines of fluctuation that open up a gap and separate it from the axiom constituting a redundant majority [Conley 167].

At the same time, by entering his characters’ psyches, to describe their motivation and thoughts, the writer asks the reader to interpret the images and symbols of his own mystical theory of life:

The vocabulary of the texts is often polysemous, or ambiguous; many sketches end in midair; all of the stories and poems are swept through with voices which inhabit the text somewhat wildly – outbursts of songs, the disconnected thoughts of the protagonists, parentheses of unascribable origin. These voices seem to be the chorus of the cane [Michlin 221].

The description of the landscape also contributes to the dualities of the texts. The rural setting of Georgia is pitted against the city landscape of Washington and New York. The reader constantly reads the contrary of what he might expect: the countryside is not pastoral; it provides disharmony and violence while the city landscape offers soothing comfort and harmony as we shall see in the next part.

**Duality in the Georgian landscape: “codification”, “de-codification”, and “re-codification”**

According to Deleuze and Guattari the concepts of “codification”, “de-codification”, and “re-codification” are inherent to the processes of “territorialization”, “de-territorialization”, and “re-territorialization”, which all involve the creation and perpetuation of a cultural space, the dissolution of that space, and its recreation. These concepts and formulations are particularly appropriate to describe Toomer’s narrative in *Cane*, which is mobile. Such mobility allowed Toomer to escape the literary canon and to propose another alternative, a personal one. Through his personal description of the Georgian land, Toomer wanted to question the harmony and values of his society. In the 1920s, Toomer engrossed himself with racial matters. “To deepen his understanding, he read books on race and the race problem; but he decided that most taught a nonsense that merely reflected the author’s prejudices and preferences” [Turner xv]. In response to a national literature justifying white ownership of the land, Toomer claimed the land for the dispossessed. Thereby, *Cane* binds Georgia’s red earth and its blazing sun to black bodies and voices.

In *Cane*, the red land of Georgia is a recurrent image. After Toomer and Langston Hughes, who grounded this imagery in their writings, the red earth of the Deep South became a hallmark and a recognizable sign of black writing and memory but also of “minor literature”. Deleuze saw “repetition” as a positive process and the symbol of “difference” (“puissance de la différence”)17:

For Deleuze, repetition is not a matter of the same thing occurring over and over again. That is to say, repetition is connected to the power of difference in terms of a
productive process that produces variation in and through every repetition. In this way, repetition is best understood in terms of discovery and experimentation; it allows new experiences, affects and expressions to emerge. To repeat is to begin again; to affirm the power of the new and the unforeseeable [Parr 225].

25 The recurring images, which ground part one in Georgia, are minimal: cane, cotton, pine trees, red dust, the moon, the purple of dusk constitute significant and powerful images attached to black history and the memory of this history. The pastoral imagery of the Georgian landscape is first celebrated in Song of the Son and in the poem Georgia Dusk. In Song of the Son [12] the pastoral landscape is magic. The images are all sensual:

Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along.
O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,
So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,
Now just before an epoch's sun declines.

26 The poem is an invocation or an apostrophe, calling for African-American singers to send out their voices on the Georgia air, thereby mingling their breath and their souls with the “sawdust glow” and the “velvet pine-smoke.” The spondee (red soil / gum tree) creates a form of spell. The caress of the word “velvet” and the “V” alliteration with “velvet/ valley” (repeated twice) conveys the texture of words; the repetition of the word “valley” also suggests an echo, which is typical of Negro spirituals. The euphonic rhyme (ABBA) of each stanza as in (song/ night/ to-night/ along/ along) reinforces the idea of building the poem as a spiritual; and the mention of the “plaintive soul” (stanza 3) further reinforces this idea. The speaker calls on environment to aid the singers: “Let the valley carry it along”. But if the openings lines suggest sweetness and cooperation, the claim that “the epoch’s sun declines” introduces the antithetical aspects of the red soil: danger, pain and destruction are looming, and they appear in the last stanzas:

For though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set:
Through late, O soil, it is not too late yet
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul son gone.
O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes
An everlasting song, a singing tree,
Carolimg softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Carolimg softly souls of slavery.

27 The third stanza sounds like a funeral elegy and raises several questions: is the black race indistinguishable from slave status? Is the last remnant of slavery dying out? Will the slaves’ sweet music disappear with the institution and will their privileged relation to the land be broken? Toomer celebrates the permanence of the soil and the beauty of nature. The song of the poet and that of the trees become one, the poet becomes the “singing tree” and the wind sings in the real pines. The imagery of the seed that does not die (stanza four) allows the song to be both funeral elegy for the dying race of slaves and celebration of the permanence of the soil, and of beauty. This song is an
unequivocal celebration and re-memory of the land, the Georgian land and of the black culture that its soil produced.

The poem that follows Song of the Son is Georgia Dusk [13]. This poem belongs to part one and can be read as a pastoral elegy as well as the hallucination of the past by the poetic voice. The pastoral scenes of night-time are developed through the lexical field of passivity in the first stanza:

The sky, lazily disdaining to pursue
The setting sun, too indolent to hold
A lengthened tournament for flashing gold,
Passively darkens for night’s barbecue,
A feast of moon and men and barking hounds [...] 

The bountiful landscape of Georgia is celebrated through the adjectives of the timeless, lazy South (“lazily, indolent”), the imagery of abundance (“flashing gold, feast”), and of peacefulness (“silence”, “soft settling”, “resinous and soft”, stanza three). The poem is a pagan chorus rising from nature and climbing to the stars as the pine trees become guitars (“Their voices rise... the pine trees are guitars”). The iambic rhythm gives fluidity to this tranquil, pastoral world only tinted by the ambiguous meaning of the “barbecue” and the barking hounds heard from a distance. Suddenly, the setting becomes the backdrop of violence, as the memory of lynching is subtly suggested. The gentle climate of the pastoral landscape is transformed into that of violence. This is the irony of Toomer’s Georgian land. He reverses cultural clichés by representing the darkness of the night that provides cover to white vigilantes for their barbarous acts. This poem must be read like a palimpsest; several layers of meanings are superimposed to force us change our interpretation of the land and of Georgia while Toomer’s aesthetic resolution takes the reader from a highly poetic form to a highly dramatic one.

Portrait in Georgia is another poem which translates, through images the reader does not expect, the violence of lynching and which Toomer wants to be remembered:

Hair – braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher’s rope,
Eyes – fagots,
Lips- old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath – the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame

This is no conventional portrayal of the environment. The white woman body, which could have been the very image of sensuality, is the image of Southern violence and of the horror of lynching. The white woman embodies the corrupt racist culture and the oppressive social structure of the South. She symbolizes the impossibility for a black man and a white woman to be together, to fall in love. The way the words are presented on the page is evocative of disruption and of the fragmentation of body and soul which is allowed precisely by the Georgian landscape itself, which is far from being pastoral, soothing and reassuring. The deforming use of the pastoral imagery is Toomer’s hallmark. Through Toomer’s expression and remembrance, Georgia represents a dark spell. Toomer captures the ambivalence of Georgia and of the black experience: Georgia is the embodiment of the pastoral that could be but is impossible because of hatred and violence.
The urban landscape only appears in the second part of Cane. The violence of the urban landscape of Washington appears in the poem Seventh Street [39]: the blood imagery contaminates the vocabulary of the city landscape. Subconscious images of black blood being spilled in the wood of the white city permeate the text. We can read: “Black reddish blood”, “flowing”, “pouring”, “eddying”, “swirling”. The victimization of black bodies glares out of the text in the vampire-like imagery of the “blood-suckers” of the first War:

Blood suckers of the War would spin in a frenzy of dizziness if they drank your blood. [...] Who set you flowing? White and whitewash disappear in blood. Who set you flowing? Flowing down the smooth asphalt of Seventh Street, in shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets? [...] God would not dare to suck black red blood [Seventh Street, 39].

At times, the Southern landscape is romanticized by the characters who have settled in the city. It is precisely because they have left the South, that they romanticize it when remembering it. In Bona and Paul [70-78] when the character looks out the window in his room in Chicago, he sees Georgia:

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 [71].

This is nostalgia for home, the haunting presence of the South, that is expressed here; but we can also interpret it as nostalgia for the roots of Black American culture. As a matter of fact, the re-inscription of pastoral imagery in the urban setting of part two shows that it is a spiritual and physical necessity for the characters and perhaps for the writer himself. The return to the pastoral means rejuvenation for city dwellers. In Box Seat [56-67] the urban landscape is turned into the organic, pastoral landscape which has been left behind through metaphorical metamorphosis: “Dan Moore walks southward on Thirteenth Street. The low limbs of budding chestnut trees recede above his head. Chestnut buds and blossoms are wool he walks upon [56].” Recovering the Southern roots seems a spiritual necessity. The character visualizes his roots and the roots of his culture by metaphorically and literally going back South. This is no coincidence if he walks “southward” on Thirteenth Street.

Interestingly enough, Dan Moore’s urban landscape is not only naturalized, it is also sexualized: “Houses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street. Upon the gleaming limbs and asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger” and also, “Dark swaying forms of Negroes are street songs that woo virginal houses.” The sexual imagery of the city landscape relates both to the root of life and to violence. Violence can be understood as the violence of the prejudiced relation between Blacks and Whites in the South, but also as a violent sexual intercourse:

Dan turns into a side-street, opens an iron gate, bangs it to. Mounts the steps, and searches for the bell. Funny, he can’t find it. He fumbles around. [...] Dan: Break in. Get an ax and smash in. Smash in their faces. I’ll show them [...]. Cut em up. Jack the Ripper. Baboon from the zoo. And the cops come. “No, I ain’t a baboon. I ain’t Jack the Ripper. I’m a poor man out of work. Take your hands off me, you bullnecked bears. Look into my eyes. I am Dan Moore. I was born in a canefield [56].

The house can be interpreted as a woman, a woman assaulted by the black man. The metaphor points at the most stereotyped racist images of Blacks. Both beauty and horror emanate from the city streets. The seemingly peaceful harmony which rises from the streets where Dan Moore walks gradually takes the character and the reader
from quiet images to images of violence and terror. The metaphorical metamorphosis of the city streets indicates different interpretations: is the black man insane and is this the story of his delusions and the delusions of Blacks? Can the black man be in harmony with the environment, be it urban or rural? Is this the result of Southern violence and of the Georgian experience? The dark sides of the landscape lurk behind the pastoral imagery; this is the dark spell and the contradictions of the Georgian landscape which Toomer’s writing and memory put to the fore.

37 In the novelette Kabnis, both the rural and urban landscapes are pitted against each other. Toomer uses the language of beauty, the beauty of the Georgian landscape, to show the terror which hides behind such beauty and which is allowed by God:

There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and... tortures me. Ugh. Hell. Get up, you damn yards. Dirty red mud. Stinking outhouse. What’s beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you? God, he doesn’t exist, but nevertheless He is ugly.

38 The poet is caught between a despised reality and the sublime personified by nature itself. Kabnis cannot reconcile beauty and poverty, radiance and violence; he says one thing and its opposite at the same time: God is not, yet he is. Through the character of Kabnis the poet calls into question the existence of God and shows the contradictions of the landscape. The rural landscape is pitted against the urban landscape: “Augusta” (Georgia) is opposed to Washington and New York. The descriptions we read are the reverse of what we expect: the rural setting is not the soothing, peaceful setting typical of the traditional pastoral landscape. On the contrary, it is a violent, frantic world that is depicted. The words: “torture”, “hurt”, “lynchers”, “oppression”, “insane” translate such violence. Restlessness is all in Georgia as it becomes, through Kabnis’ description, a place of torture and agony: “A speck on Georgia hillside. Jesus, can you imagine it - an atom of dust in agony on a hillside? That’s a spectacle for you.” (83) The “speck” and “the atom of dust” suggest a flaw in the landscape, which culminates in the lynchings and hangings of black men. At the same time, the speck of dust could be the human inhabitants themselves, indistinguishable from the earth. The black people on the hill are degraded and exalted at the same time as their suffering unites them with Jesus, making them one through martyrdom. Once in the city, the experience is different, it is quite the contrary. The city is quiet and peaceful: “Washington sleeps. Its still, peaceful streets, how desirable they are.” (83) The descriptions of the rural and urban landscapes are thus based on reversed images. Ugliness is beauty to the narrator (Kabnis) and yet beauty tortures him. The world he lives in is an ugly world as the black people around him correspond to the stereotyped vision the Whites have of black persons, “Give an ugly world. Ha, ugly. Stinking like unwashed niggers.” The rural setting epitomizes ugliness; there are “hop pens and chicken-yards” and “stinking outhouse”, the mud is dirty (when it was beauty in Karintha, the very first poem that opens Cane).

39 In Kabnis the rural description is thus denuded of poetry to become totally depressing. Toomer’s choice of words and expressions reveals a process of deconstruction, of antagonistic images which fuse with one another, the result being disruptive. Kabnis cannot bear the fact that God allowed what happened to black people. Again and again, the meaning of images and words is double and multi-layered; binary images are part of the text as they are part of the character himself. There is a manipulation of perspectives: is it the voice of Kabnis that we hear or Toomer’s voice? This question points at a painful reality, the reality of Blacks in general and of Toomer in particular.
Kabnis stands for Toomer’s personae, and the character’s psyche suggests Toomer’s psychological motivation. It is almost as if Toomer, in writing this text, wanted to disturb the reader and bring him bad dreams; hence the saturation of the text with the language of violence, of failure, and of beauty turned into ugliness.

In *Cane*, the horror of African-American roots, of slavery, of lynching, of oppression and of exploitation is described and remembered against the setting of natural beauty. The collective history of African-Americans combines both hell and heaven. The theme of the city-raised protagonist who has never seen the Southern landscapes nor experienced the oppressive social structure of the South but who can discover his identity precisely by returning to the South is one of the major themes of African-American literature. Indeed, the South, for African-Americans, is more than a place. The South represents collective history and the notion of “race-spirit” is embedded in the landscape. When we read *Cane*, we understand that it is only by returning to the South that the characters will return to their roots and find themselves. The text also expresses the suppressed past of slavery, and all that white literature did not want to give voice to. The double-edged language gives the whole text its ambiguity but also its openness. The book’s theme grows out of its rhetorical structure. By creating a text that is double-voiced, Toomer reinvents literature, black literature:

What remains is the haunting presence of the visual and musical motifs in the work, in a constant ripple of echoes and associations - that the very openness and indeterminacies of the sketches, the very ambiguities of the poems, allow the reader to reread the work indeﬁnitely, almost as if participating in its elaboration, as if rewriting meaning into the suspension marks, the blanks, the juxtapositions. [...] It [Cane] is often deliberately provocative and confusing; it lacks visible humor, and yet plays secret, coded games with the reader [...] *Cane* uses echo, stasis, call and response, and images of imperfect circularity to celebrate blackness, and the literature of blackness it is inventing [Michlin 223-24].

During the Harlem Renaissance the form of *Cane* not only came to grips with modernity, it also positioned Blacks as modern and up to date and called attention to the black man as an artist. In contradiction to many modernist American texts that focused exclusively on the city, *Cane* gave expression to a rural environment. Written at a time when black beauty was celebrated by black artists and writers to gain acceptance and respectability, *Cane* also revealed the black self differently, binding it to the land and the past. Toomer deliberately showed the beauty and grace of people who were paradigms of courage and bravery and who were not perceived as the embodiment of beauty. Within a mostly hostile black middle-class context, “Toomer was the first writer of the 1920s to delineate Southern Black peasant life perceptively [...] *Cane* is no conventional world of Black primitives or exotics. In *Cane*, Toomer foreshadowed much of the questioning and criticism of the twenties” [Turner xxii]. The racial crisis, which is an explicit theme of the book, is felt through the ambivalent description and reminiscence of the pastoral land conceived by “a man who struggled for greatness but believed that he had experienced only failure” [Turner x]. It mirrors, in fact, Toomer’s ambivalence towards his black heritage and towards the reality of oppression by Whites. If black culture was to be celebrated, its contradictions had to be embraced. Literature helped Toomer describe personal and spiritual experiences and his attitude towards race as well as the nation’s attitude. His ultimate quest was harmony and self-realization through writing. *Cane* represents an interlude in Toomer’s search for understanding and self-understanding. Beyond these aspects, *Cane* is also the mourning for a rural, religious folk-culture that economic change caused to disappear. In 1923,
'the old Negro' was dying out; extreme poverty and Jim Crow laws in the South had led to the emergence of the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance, but such changes were a source of frustration to Toomer. In Cane Toomer described the end of the rural black culture of Georgia with which he identified, and which established the link between himself and his blackness. He attempted to impose black artistic strength and recognition by going back to the rural Southern roots of the black culture. In bringing the bloody and beautiful environment of Georgia’s red soil to expression, he laid claim to it as an undeniable site of African-American culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The Harlem Renaissance was a period of interest in African-American art and culture; racial pride and identity were defined by black intellectuals living in Harlem. The full participation of African-Americans in American society was claimed through this artistic movement. The Harlem Renaissance (also termed the New Negro Movement) grew out of the changes that had taken place in the African-American community since the abolition of slavery. These changes accelerated as a consequence of World War I and the great social and cultural changes in the United States of the early twentieth century. New York City became a very important center of the expanding black middle class. With the Great Migration, Harlem saw dramatic demographic changes at the beginning of the twenties which transformed the area into a mostly black and Latin part of the city.


6. We will also use the paperback Liveright edition, New York, reissued in 1993.

7. Gates, op. cit. Gates examined myths and poetry found in African tradition to articulate the black tradition’s theory of its literature. He uncovered a system of interpretation that black slaves brought with them to the New World: “There can be little doubt that certain fundamental terms for order that the black enslaved brought with them from Africa and maintained through the mnemonic devices peculiar to oral literature, continued to function both as meaningful units of New World belief systems and as traces of their origins. [...] This topos functions as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, improvised upon in ritual – especially in the rituals of the repeated oral narrative – and willed to their own subsequent generations, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent” [Gates 5].

8. The Signifying Monkey stands as the rhetorical principle in Afro-American vernacular discourse. [Gates 44] This trickster figure helps understand the variability of language and the double-voice at work in African-American texts: “the Signifying Monkey stands as the figure of
an oral writing within black vernacular language rituals. It is from the corpus of mythological narratives that Signifyin(g) derives” [Gates 52].


10. Kabnis epitomizes the return to Georgia, thus, to the origins. The character, Kabnis, is an educated black man who stands for the tragic plight of the mulatto who must confront his inner duality. Because of his ambiguous status (“a bastard” p. 83), he embarks on the journey to his own identity and that of his race.


12. November Cotton Flower [4], is the third poem after Karintha. Like all the poems and sketches of Cane, the poem offers ambiguities to the reader. Its noble form, it is a sonnet, allows to depicts the ordinary life of black men in rural Georgia. The poem is loaded with the imagery of death through the “boll-weevil” which ruins the crops. The flower becomes a dangerous omen: “Boll-weevil’s coming, and the winter’s cold./ Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old, / And cotton, scarce as any southern snow [Cane 4].

13. By applying the jazz technique to his writing, Toomer inscribed his text in modernism itself. For more on this, see Michlin, op. cit, p. 185-191.


15. In “Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art” Claudia Mitchell-Kernan explains that in the black tradition, standard English denotes ways of meaning. The constant friction between several layers of meaning and the shuttle back and forth between the said and the unsaid are striking through the use of antagonistic words and images which eventually prove similar. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art”, in Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore. Alan Dundes (eds), Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973, p. 310-238.


18. Beyond his accusation, Kabnis’s own plight is at stake: why did God allow what happened to his mother and to him? Why is he a “bastard”? Kabnis even gives himself the right to be blasphemous towards God: “A bastard son has got a right to curse his maker. God” [83]. God is ugly and what comes from him is also ugly, and “lynchers” and “business men” are alike to Kabnis.

19. Through the coded meaning of words and of things, Kabnis becomes a spokesman for the Black condition. The inability of Kabnis to bear the burden of the black condition or to express his conflicts is the subject of the play but also the expression of the writer’s own burden.

20. It is, for instance, Toni Morrison’s theme in the novel Song of Solomon (1977). But Kabnis in Cane is the very first character in African-American literature to embark on this journey.

21. The term New Negro was made popular by Alain Locke through his eponymous anthology published in 1925. The idea was that through intellect and production of literature, art, and music black intellectuals could challenge the pervading racism and stereotypes to promote progressive or socialist politics but also racial and social integration. There was a prolific expression of black creativity at the beginning of the twentieth century in Harlem (New York). Many creative projects were launched in Harlem or created by artists who lived and worked in
Harlem. This cultural watershed participated in Harlem’s revival and the Harlem Renaissance movement.

22. After the publication of *Cane*, Toomer refused to be called ‘Negro’ again and that was extremely paradoxical to him since his career was launched through an exploration of blackness, when he chose to turn his back on his black heritage as a whole. This point can, eventually, be understood as the clue explaining the internal conflict and chaos in *Cane* as a whole.

ABSTRACTS

In *Cane*, Jean Toomer’s poems, sketches and songs are images of nature and cities, of rural and urban environments. *Cane* is a landscape conceived and designed by a man who struggled for understanding and is about a man’s own perceptions of Black life in the South. By focusing on some of the poems and sketches we will see how Toomer, by appropriating the language, linked life and work to unveil the memory and truth of the Southern landscape. Toomer provided multiple entries into his text, a characteristic of “minor literature” as exposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Mille Plateaux*. Thus, we will try to assess the variability of interpretations of Toomer’s text through his writing and re-memory of the South.

Dans *Cane*, les poèmes de Jean Toomer sont le reflet de la nature et des villes, d’un monde rural ou urbain. *Cane* a été conçu de manière à traduire au plus près la vie des Noirs dans le Sud des États-Unis et de montrer la perception d’un auteur en proie à des questionnements identitaires. En nous interrogant sur certains des poèmes et extraits de *Cane*, nous montrerons comment Toomer, en s’appropriant la langue, une caractéristique de la littérature mineure définie par Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari dans *Mille Plateaux*, réussit à restituer la mémoire du Sud des États-Unis à travers ses paysages. Cela nous permettra d’analyser l’écriture de Toomer dont les multiples interprétations permettent de révéler la mémoire du Sud.

INDEX

**Mots-clés:** territorialisation, dé-territorialisation, re-territorialisation, double-sens, mémoire du Sud, paysage rural, paysage urbain, paysage pastoral, littérature mineure

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