

Jenny DeSouchet  
Cheryl Higashida  
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### Omnipresence of Music in Experience, Writing

American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance “reached their zenith in the 1920’s”(Cane afterword, 165) and the former primarily embodied the following traits: “hybridity, alienation, fragmentation, dislocation, migration, fluidity, experimentation” (Cane afterword, 166). Jean Toomer’s writing style in *Cane* emulates each of these essential traits of both movements, and does so not only as a writing style characteristic of the time, but in an effort to convey with utter realism the experience of African American culture during the time. Toomer, as a biracial author and teacher, blurs the color line with just his physicality; but in his writing using the blending of genres and literary techniques to convey the blurring distinctions between North and South, Black and White, and interestingly the distinction between music and writing. Terms such as “hybridity”, “fragmentation”, “fluidity”, and “experimentation” quite perfectly describe Toomer’s ability to synthesize poetry, prose, lyrics, and uses of language and narrative techniques to embody the omnipresence of music in African American culture during this time. These traits of Toomer’s writing in *Cane* so effectively allow the reader to visualize and experience music just as he had in his first hand contact with African American communities in both the North and South while teaching and researching the work. Music has a presence in all spheres and genres of writing included in this text, just as music had a presence in all spheres of the African American experience.

On a basic contextual level, Part 1 of text provides the reader with a selection of what appear to be first-hand narrative accounts of events Toomer experienced, interfused with lyrics of songs that are not cited or identified. Amongst these short scenes, which are not identified as completely fiction or nonfiction, Toomer has written individual poems of varying style, length and format. Three of these poems have the word “song” explicitly written in the titles, but the others are not so upfront. What matters about each of the poems and short narratives included in Part I of the

book are the ways in which the language/literary devices evoke music as spirituality and the means by which music mediates emotion, coming-of-age, passion and work-life. Just as music takes on an always-present mean of communication and expression of emotion, the writing style mixes lyrics and musicality into each piece of writing and makes it omnipresent too, here.

“Karintha”, the first section of Part 1, begins with four lines of lyrics that also appear about midway through the story and at the end as well. The lines, “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” are not cited and do not seem to be from any source in particular, but are written in a style reflective of hymnals. Toomer writes these lyrics and places them sporadically throughout each individual narrative in Part I, often using them to separate main ideas and convey changes in time. The use of the lyrics in this manner would not be so effective if they were officially cited and not so interwoven into the text; they are effective because it is not clear who is singing or what the source of the words even are. In this sense, the lyrics are the voice of the South. The lyrics appear often and if read straight through, the story would not be interrupted by them, but only enhanced. This begins to speak to the fluidity of language used by Toomer, and the fluid presence of music within language and the context of the book.

The story “Becky”, which appears after “Karintha” and two poems, begins not with lyrics, but with the epigraph “Becky was a white woman who had two Negro sons. She’s dead; they’ve gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound”(Toomer, 8). This same statement also ends the story of Becky, and in that sense fits the pattern of the lyrics included in “Karintha”, making the two seem interchangeable. The lines are written in a similar style as the lyrics, and have a similar effect and placement. The interchanging of both lyrics and non-lyrics in a similar pattern blurs the distinction between the two and makes it difficult to tell which is which. Again we see a hybridization of two or more types of literary techniques, but the application of these techniques is particularly interesting to note in “Fern”, the

first story in Part I that Toomer has inserted himself into the action and becomes effected by a spiritual experience mediated through music.

Toomer begins "Fern" by explaining the effect that a particular African American woman—Fern—living in the South has on the men of her town, and eventually himself. She appears to him as a "Jewish cantor song" which would have the ability to have "made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his"(Toomer, 21), because of her "Semitic" nose and certain messages displayed by her eyes ("his" refers a Jew singing the cantor song). Already, the emotions surrounding this woman are mediated principally through music, and Toomer's best approach to explaining the aura surrounding Fern is to compare her to specific song. After meeting this woman, Toomer approaches her at a gathering and they walk alone into the woods where she has a strange spiritual experience. While embracing each other calmly, Fern becomes overcome with some strange spirituality and can only express herself through song. The language "Fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was tortured with something it could not let out"(Toomer, 26) expresses Fern's actions and reflects that without hearing her song, the reader simply cannot access the spirituality of the moment. "It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Christ Jesus"(Toomer, 26); here Fern finally lets out the emotions which torture her and what she could not express with words. The song that finally emerges is not that of an individual struggle, but of "A child's voice, uncertain, or an old man's"(Toomer, 26). This experience communicates to Toomer the importance of music as a medium to mediate emotion, spirituality, and the ability of song to echo the struggles of not only one individual in the South, but those of many in a community. Though the writing style is prose, Toomer manipulates sentence fragments and lyrical language to stray away from conventional novelistic writing and break down distinctions.

Involvement of lyrics throughout the prose writing in Part I as well as explicit descriptions of music as a medium are a more simplistic representation of its fluidity and all-encompassing

effect than the techniques used in Part II. Action in this section moves from the South into the North, into a setting where music does not at first appear to be so integrated into spirituality, but more formalized for entertainment. Integration of lyrics within the prose is not as often, but the prose is further destabilized as Toomer's language becomes more and more fragmented and somewhat convoluted. Writing in Part II can be immediately distinguished from the Part I as less traditional and more cryptic with the first story "Rhobert": "The dead house is stuffed. The stuffing is alive. It is sinful to draw one's head out of live stuffing in a dead house. The propped-up antennae would cave in and the stuffing be strewn...shredding life-pulp...in the water"(Toomer, 55). These are not sentence fragments, but the ideas are hard to abstract and understand. The use of ellipses separate subjects in the sentences in a way that music or poetry might do. In this instance we see writing distinctions being further broken down as traditional South African American culture breaks down in the North.

Effects of music in the Northern work-life and emotionality are conveyed and contrasted with those of the South specifically in the poem "Harvest Song" and the story "Box Seat". "Harvest Song" contrasts to the poem "Cotton Song" used in Part I in both structure and content. "Cotton Song" from Part I conveys a song of Southern workers who feel a strong sense of community, while "Harvest Song" uses more formal language to represent the individualized struggle of the Northern African American worker. The beginning stanza of "Cotton Song" says, "Come, brother, come. Lets lift it; Come now, hewit! roll away! Shackles fall upon the Judgement Day But lets not wait for it"(Toomer, 13), and a later stanza sings "Nassur; nassur, Hump. Eoho, eoho, roll away!"(Toomer, 13). The first stanza encompasses the sense of community between Southern workers in the field, while the later one integrates lyrics of the "Cotton Song" into the poem in an informal matter. It captures the voice of the Southern worker and displays it in a straightforward manner. "Harvest Song" moves away from a poetic structure and into more novelistic prose, invoking not a community struggle of work, but an individual one. A stanza towards the end of the poem says, "It

would be good to hear their songs... reapers of the sweet-stalk'd cane, cutters of the corn... even though their throats cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me”(Toomer, 94), in the voice of a single Northern worker. In this excerpt there is a breaking down of poetical structure and novelistic writing, blurring the two together. Similarly, the struggle of the Northern African American worker both reflects and contrasts to that of the Southern worker. While the Southern man speaks to a community of “brothers” and integrates lyrics, the Northern man’s language seems more educated, individualistic, but yearns for the experience had by the Southern man.

The story in Part II that most effectively captures the section’s explicit embodiment of music in emotionality in a Northern African American experience is “Theater”, a scene of passion between a female dancer and John, the brother of the club’s manager. Similar to the previously mentioned writing in “Rhoert”, the prose is less formal and more fragmented, invoking a musical and almost rhythmic feeling. While describing the nightclub that Dorris dances at, Toomer writes, “At night, road-shows volley songs into the mass-heart of black people. Songs soak the walls and seep out to the nigger life of alleys and near-beer saloons, of the Poodle Dog and Black Bear cabarets”(Toomer, 67). In this example, music physically exists in the building that mediates the forbidden passion between these two characters. Rather than existing in the foreground as a means of communicating emotion and tradition, Northern music resonates in the background of settings. The music in the club is described as “Crude, individualized, and yet...monotonous...”(Toomer, 68), which reflects music overall in the scene. Within this crude setting in the nightclub, each individual experiences the music separately and has a unique reaction despite the music’s presence in the background as “monotonous”. Contrastingly to Southern songs that are sung collectively as the primary activity in social settings, Northern music exists in the background of settings to mediate individual experiences. Though one might expect Northern African Americans to be more educated and lacking of traditional spirituals, we see that music still holds a huge significance in mediating

passion. As the presence of music becomes harder to pinpoint, the writing style also becomes more cryptic and less straightforward.

Perhaps the most appropriate word to capture Jean Toomer's writing techniques in *Cane* is "experimentation", a defining factor of the 1920's American Modernism movement. By examining language and the breaking down of established writing structures in Part I and Part II of the text, the differences between musicality in Northern and Southern culture are made apparent, but more importantly the omnipresence of music in both is captured. Simple and more comprehensible language in Part I integrates lyrics into prose and poetry in an explicate explanation of music as a medium for spirituality in Southern experiences. Complete destabilization of novelistic writing and lack of structure in poetry in Part II conveys the less apparent and less traditional effect of music in the lives of Northern African Americans, but does not overlook its importance to mediating emotion.