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JEAN TOOMER AND CARL VAN VECHTEN:  
IDENTITY, EXPLOITATION, AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

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A Thesis

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The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

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## ABSTRACT

Jean Toomer's *Cane* is considered one of the literary achievements of the Harlem Renaissance, though the many of his philosophical ideas which inspired it are dismissed. Inversely, Carl Van Vechten's influence as an advocate and patron of African American art is foundational though his *Nigger Heaven* is dismissed. However, there are commonalities in each authors identity positioning and subsequent exploitation of the black Harlem Renaissance ethos. Further, their utilization of Gurdjieffian principles of objectivity and primitivist images of blacks links and explains, in part, how their identities contributed to the ideas expressed in their novels.

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## **Introduction**

Jean Toomer and Carl Van Vechten are both icons of the Harlem Renaissance whose major contributions are complicated by ideological positions and intricate, multifaceted identities. Critics have praised *Cane* and minimized Toomer; similarly, Van Vechten's importance as a patron is emphasized over *Nigger Heaven*'s participatory role. By synthesizing and surveying these dualisms, a more complete picture will reveal the role of each man in the larger movement and distinguish inclusive legacies.

The first section will reunite Toomer's supposed pre- and post-*Cane* identities by using the published text and other writings to demonstrate continuity and a predominant perspective against racialized identities. The second part traces Van Vechten's entrance into the Harlem Renaissance community as a patron and then participant, evaluating his influence and corresponding authority. The third section returns to Toomer and explains how his theoretically deracinated identity was supported by the exploitation of African American characters unable to exert agency or independence in *Cane*. The fourth focuses on Van Vechten's emphasis in *Nigger Heaven* of the exotic and "low" aspects of Harlem life in order to satisfy a curious white audience, in addition to his supervision of HR discourse in *Opportunity* and his relationships with African American authors and intellectuals. The final part draws parallels between the two authors by exploring

common influences and philosophical positions that influenced their identity positioning and literary goals.

## Jean Toomer and the Construction of an American Identity

Any investigation of the role identity plays both in *Cane* and Toomer's life risks participation in a zero-sum game. Toomer's personal views about identity, specifically race and heritage, were so radical that any reading of *Cane* which takes them into account runs the risk of accomplishing one of two things (without reconciling them to each other): discounting the ideologies of post-*Cane* Toomer or generalizing *Cane*-era Toomer's structures of racial identity.<sup>1</sup> Nellie McKay, as one instance among many, suggests:

[Toomer] rejected the 'Negro' writer label in all of its connotations and turned his back on those things that had made the book the splendid achievement it had been. After *Cane* he wrote nothing in which he used, exclusively, those materials related to black American life, but he went beyond this. He deliberately rejected his previous literary ambitions and the modes of expression through which these could have been achieved. His later works were not intended for artistic acclaim. Had the sales of *Cane* been large in 1923 and 1924, his decision to retreat from the literary world might have been different, but, in general, the small sales were not particularly disturbing to him because he had made his withdrawal from that part of his life before the book was published. (McKay 461)

McKay's insistence on creating two Toomers synthetically separates the man from himself, suggesting that his Gurdjieff conversion and subsequent decades of soul searching have absolutely nothing to do with his major contribution to the canon of the Harlem Renaissance. When she says "he deliberately rejected his previous literary

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<sup>1</sup> Incorporating the ideologies of post-*Cane* Toomer tends to deemphasize the importance of race to *Cane*-era Toomer and downplaying the ideologies of post-*Cane* Toomer frequently emphasizes the importance of racial identity to *Cane*-era Toomer (this latter view is common among those critics that intend to secure his place in the race-conscious literature of the Harlem Renaissance).

ambitions” she suggests that he, like a snake, slipped off one skin to assume another, despite the fact that she later indicates that “to his great distress, his later writings went unnoticed” (McKay 461). If he no longer concerned himself with literary success, what exactly was distressing him?

McKay is a prominent Toomer scholar and the example she provides of the binary Toomer is not uncommon. In Chezia Thompson Cager’s *Teaching Jean Toomer’s 1923 Cane*, she maintains that “the ambiguity of Toomer’s declaration of his own African Americanness cannot be allowed to jeopardize the cultural and artistic value of *Cane*. *Cane*’s value as a literary work transcends any ambiguities about Toomer’s life after 1923” (Cager 80). Cager does not, interestingly, question the ambiguity about Toomer’s African Americanness prior to 1923, as though he had led a typical Negro existence up to that point. The difficulty for Toomer scholars is that his unwillingness to identify wholly not only with the Harlem Renaissance but the African American race itself problematizes his place as the author of the Renaissance’s most modern and enduringly influential novel. The reconciliation of this apparent paradox is more difficult than its admission, and is, quixotically, the aim of this analysis. Through a close reading of *Cane* and Toomer’s later “autobiographical” writings (both in conversation and relief) it’s apparent that the foundations of the proposed post-*Cane* Toomer were being laid during the same period in which the novel was being written; in fact, much of the novel draws upon these contradictions of identity to create the tensions within its characters, tensions which Toomer shares. Evidence which suggests a vital link with the symbolically black South

dovetails into more complex feelings which suggest that identification with an authentic black self is not possible and potentially detrimental.

“Song of the Son,” the fifth poem in *Cane*, suggests that the speaker places himself within the cultural heritage of African Americans:

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,  
Squeezed, and bursting in the pinewood air,  
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare  
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes

An everlasting song, a singing tree,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery,  
What they were, and what they are to me,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery. (*Cane* 12)

The existence of these slave souls, embodied by a plum saved for the speaker’s picking, suggests that Toomer found during the composition of at least the (first) Georgia section a connection to the black heritage which had been so elusive during his youth: “It was in this mood that *Cane* was written, not only as a celebration of blackness<sup>2</sup> but also as a record of Toomer’s own search for blackness and a portrayal of the possibility of communion with the racial heritage that exists for every ‘lost’ black man in America” (Lieber 181). This poem is often used to propose that Toomer willingly reentered the black milieu, and the poem again reinforces this reading: “Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee, /Thy son, I have in time returned to thee” (*Cane* 12).

In “Fern,” the narrator echoes the spiritual return to blackness began in “Song of the Son.” The return to Georgia, specifically the return to rural Georgia, evokes a mystical

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<sup>2</sup> This idea of an authentic or real ‘blackness’ is examined more carefully in a later section.

reconnection for the narrator and pushes him, after travel and integration in the North, back into a Negro world: “I felt strange, as I always do in Georgia, particularly at dusk. I felt that things unseen to men were tangibly immediate. It would not have surprised me had I had a vision. People have them in Georgia more often than you would suppose. A black woman once saw the mother of Christ and drew her in charcoal on the courthouse wall... When one is on the soil of one’s ancestors, most anything can come to one” (*Cane* 17). The narrator has, in a spiritual and cultural sense, come home. It’s hard to ignore the visionary aspect of this homecoming because it recalls the spiritual questing which guided Toomer’s personal search for identity. What complicates this passage is that it both indicates a familiarity with place and identity (“soil of one’s ancestors”) and foreignness in personal connection with it (“I felt strange, as I always do”).

No story in the Georgia section articulates this complexity, and ultimately the quest for a black identity, better than “Esther.” Through exploring the identity development of the title character, “Esther” proposes that, for mixed-blood or lighter-skinned blacks, the quest for authentic black identity fixes as its goal communion with an archetypal blackness, in this case King Barlo. For Esther, “Barlo’s image gives her a slightly stale thrill. She spices it by telling herself his glories. Black. Magnetically so. Best cotton picker in the county, in the state, in the whole world for that matter. Best man with his fists, best man with dice, with a razor. Promoter of church benefits. Of colored fairs. Vagrant preacher. Lover of all the women for miles and miles around” (*Cane* 23). Esther, to whom the town is mostly “vague black faces” (23), creates a list for Barlo which places him on a pedestal among the middling rest. His attributes, whether real or

invented by an infatuated girl, suggest stereotypes which Esther reinforces as monolithically black and therefore desirable, if only because she herself does not possess them. It's important that the first in his list of "glories" is his magnetic blackness, and that the other seemingly less essentialized attributes proceed as evidence to support it. At the end of the story, when she finally confronts Barlo to pledge her love for him, "blackness rushes to her eyes [and] Barlo is before her" (*Cane* 24).

What is most challenging about this story is not the way in which Toomer constructs black identity in relief to mixed-blood identity, but that his depiction is grotesque. Esther, a delicate light-skinned dreamer, faces Barlo, drunk and "hideous," and the intraracial differences between, as one woman says, "dictie niggers" and real blacks becomes blatantly clear. Esther thought that she wanted blackness, to be in its presence and become it, but when the object of her desire becomes a real man, he and the blackness he represents becomes "ugly and repulsive to her" (*Cane* 25).

We are meant to sympathize with Esther because she, like all the other mixed-race protagonists of *Cane*, is constantly searching for a stable identity within a world dictated by the black-white dichotomy. Toomer makes his own search literary through the use of these voices, and so it's no coincidence that critics acknowledge the parallels between Toomer and his cast of characters: "*Cane* is full of inarticulate members of this new group of 'Americans' who have yet to become 'conscious' of themselves, in Toomer's phrasing. It presents others in whom violation of the color line provokes ostracism or death as Americans resist the 'merging,' haunted by wraiths of the past" (Hutchinson 53).

Esther (like Avey, Kabnis, Fern, and many others) struggles with all of these problems which are foisted upon her by a societal construct unwilling to accept her even within what should be her own [black] society. Esther's unconsciousness is both figurative and literal; the structure of the story complements this girl in distracted formation and when she encounters Barlo she literally "blacks" out. We're made to assume, based on the vulgar representation of blackness which Toomer gives us, that it's nothing to aspire to.<sup>3</sup> This explains in large part why the dominant tone of *Cane*'s stories is melancholic; the characters are searching for an idealized identity which either does not meet their expectations or does not exist in the world around them.

But Toomer is *not* like his characters. True, his search for belonging and identity mirrors the struggles of the characters he creates for us to sympathize with. However, the primary difference between these "unconscious" members of the new American mixed-blood race and Toomer is the level of consciousness which he claims to have.

All of *Cane*'s protagonists fail to recognize possibilities beyond a raced identity. Paul, in an epiphanic moment, tells the black doorman "I came back to tell you, brother, that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out to gather petals. That I am going out and know her whom I brought here with me to these Gardens which are purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk" (*Cane* 78). Though Paul's declaration is poetic and suggests equality between races, it is still defined by the identities of others and does not transcend race in the same way which Toomer attempted

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<sup>3</sup> I should point out that nowhere in the book does Toomer make whiteness appear better – obviously, based on his interest in the foundation or realization of a new American race, the existing races are disposable.

to by declaring himself race-less. In addition, his assertions appear hollow when Bona is no longer there, especially because Paul says that he “knows” her (apparently, not so well). Toomer sought in his own life to go beyond the distinctions and confinements of race, but he does not imbue his characters with the desire to do so. The direction of the two searches is inverted: the characters seek identity from without, Toomer from within.

Even at the time of writing *Cane*, Toomer was aware that he was not at all like, and did not want to connect himself with, the characters he was creating. Their unconsciousness makes them weak and ineffectual. In the aptly titled “Jean Toomer: Lost Generation, or Negro Renaissance,” S.P. Fullwinder discusses Toomer’s mindset during the period of *Cane*’s construction. He asserts that in Georgia Toomer certainly tried to connect with an African American identity, but that he held serious reservations about the quality and possibility of that kind of life. “For a period of perhaps a year or two, the period during which he composed *Cane*, Toomer found an identity giving absolute in the Negro folk-spirit. But the absolute had, at best, a tenuous hold on the poet. It proved no more enduring than those that had gone before” (Fullwinder 22). It’s no wonder, then, that none of Toomer’s protagonists ever satisfies her search, simply because she is too concerned with connection to a homogenized black ethos. This unwillingness to believe in the ability of people to form authentic relationships with a black or colored identity negates the claims of critics that Toomer either lost his way after composing *Cane* or turned his back on the black community. The truth is that he never believed a place within the black identity was worth having. In addition, Fullwinder points out at the end of the excerpt that Toomer had, up to the time in Georgia, gone through many “identity

giving absolutes” in a search for his own; critics who, like Cager, maintain that Toomer only began complicating his African American identity after *Cane* ignore the years of listlessness and searching that sent him, whether passing as white or not, to several schools and cities looking for answers.

*Cane*'s characters question the value of any kind of raced identity because it either holds them in perpetual limbo (Esther, Fern, Kabnis, Avey's Narrator, Karantha), contribute directly to their death (Tom Burwell and Bob Stone, Rhobert, Becky), blind them to larger realities (Paul, Dan, Dorris and John), or simply isolate them (Carma, Father John, and nearly all the others). The fates of these characters are presented didactically; because they are unable to see past the socially prescribed necessity of racial self-identification, they fail to achieve complete lives.

In addition, these raced identities are not, for Toomer, authentically linked to what he considers real black heritage, what he calls “the folk-spirit.” In a lengthy section of “On Being American,” Toomer recalls the Georgia he experienced during his tenure as substitute principal at the industrial and agricultural school. This recollection suggests that black people, in Toomer's opinion, were quickly losing their heritage and becoming homogenized into American culture:

The setting was crude in a way, but strangely rich and beautiful. I began feeling its effects despite my state [of exhaustion], or, perhaps, just because of it... This was the first time I'd ever heard the folk songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them “shouting.” They had victrolas and player pianos. So, I realized with

deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city – and industry and commerce and machines. The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. *Cane* was a swan-song. It was a song of an end. And why no one has seen and felt that, why people have expected me to write a second and third and fourth book like *Cane*, is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life. (“The *Cane* Years” 123)

Clearly, if *Cane* is meant to convey the death of the folk-spirit, criticism which identifies the elegiac, poetic, and mournful tone of the pieces is on the right track. However, we must not forget that Toomer was, at the time of *Cane*'s writing, only recently introduced to the folk-spirit and that his understanding was more academically superficial than emotional. Because his frame of reference is so small, Toomer necessarily creates, like many of his critics, a binary which demands categorization of what is folk-spirit (Black) and what is modernity (American) so that he can quickly understand and analyze what he sees as discontinuities between race and culture. Ultimately, Toomer's decision to conflate race and culture is the thrust which critics can use to fill the gap between the writer of *Cane* and his racial expatriation. For Toomer, Blackness is spirituals, the South, and any number of historically-centered flashpoints beyond simple skin color. When he sees blacks behaving in what he considers modern ways (moving to industrialized cities, for instance), he is forced to decide whether these changes are compatible with blackness or merely an indication that race itself was dying out as Americans began to assemble that new race to which Toomer believed he belonged. If races of people no longer behave like they're supposed to, if folk-spirit cultures change or die out, what is left to identify with?

The problem lies not with the change in culture but the mandate that culture reflect race in an unchanging, predictable, and socially “accurate” way. Toomer’s unwillingness, perhaps, to identify himself as black might have something to do with reservations about how he might have to present himself, how his racial identity would bleed into his cultural one. Certainly, the company he kept and aspired to belong in was not, in large part, black, but rather a society of artists and writers to which his friend and mentor, Waldo Frank, belonged. Toomer “wondered what if anything Frank had said to these other fellows about my race. But it didn’t matter much, one way or the other. What they thought of my race was of no more consequence than what I thought of theirs. The life was the thing – and we were having that life” (“The *Cane* Years” 127). Toomer fails to realize that, to these “other fellows,” his position as a black author, particularly at this time in literary history, mattered a great deal. His paranoia, that Frank would be talking about his race behind his back, indicates that it mattered to him a bit more than he was letting on though he’s quick to dismiss the consequence. Most importantly, Toomer’s emphasis on the importance of “having that [writer’s] life” suggests that his vagueness about his racial background has a very definite purpose; if he were categorized exclusively and unambiguously as a black author, his position within the wider field of American authorship (meaning, of course, white authorship) would be jeopardized or at least circumscribed by race. Toomer, despite his transcendent mindset, was aware that black authors occupied a decidedly less prestigious place in American letters, and even the progress of the Harlem Renaissance in the following decade would not fully bridge that gap. If, at this time, there was anything Toomer had to lose by choosing to acknowledge himself as racially black, it was his perceived place in the white-dominated

writing world. Ultimately, however, he was not permitted to make that distinction for himself.

When Alain Locke published “Carma” and “Fern” in 1925’s *The New Negro*, Toomer claimed he had not given his permission for his work to be included, if only because it directly identified him as a Negro artist. However, his correspondence with Locke prior to this suggests a close literary relationship. In a Nov. 24, 1921 letter to Locke, Toomer writes “Will be in Washington a week or so I think, and then will doubtless push on for New York. There, I am supposed to have several informal lectures arranged for me. And of course I have material. Want to see you” (*Letters* 28). In addition, “in 1919, Toomer also associated himself with Alain Locke and his Washington social circle. At the time, Locke was a young professor at Howard University and a leading voice in the emergent New Negro movement. Toomer helped organize a study group with Locke, Georgia Johnson, and others in Locke’s circle that focused on historical and sociological aspects of Negro life in America” (Pellegrini 2). It’s evident that, prior to and during the composition of *Cane*, Toomer was actively pursuing participation in literary and philosophical circles regardless of their racial association.

Waldo Frank’s influence on Toomer, beginning in 1920, is definitely responsible for shaping the type of hybrid identity that Toomer would attempt to solidify later in his life. Frank and the Young America movement sought to recover the missing voices in American history through art and pour a foundation for a new American cultural fusion. *Our America*, which Frank wrote in 1919, introduced Toomer to these ideas and,

undoubtedly, began to substantially change not only the way he identified himself but the way he wanted others to recognize him. *Cane* became Toomer's outlet for voicing these opinions about a mixed-blood America and blurring the lines between hybridity and blackness; however, the book was not read that way, or was not "supposed" to be read that way. The Harlem Renaissance establishment had use for *Cane*, not as a careful reordering of identity, but as one of the first modernist works by a Negro author.

The historical record of miscegenation that *Cane* portrays was not in line with the positive image of the Negro that Cullen, Locke, and other New Negro advocates wanted to present to white America in the 1920s. As a result, New Negro advocates, on the whole, recognized and applauded the positive and unambiguous aspects of Negro life portrayed in *Cane*, but the social and historical facts, costs, and complexities of miscegenation that Toomer foregrounds, "the muck and mire of things," had to be ignored at that time for the betterment of the race. This type of selective appropriation of his writings, most notably by Locke in his prominent anthology *The New Negro*, aggravated Toomer and explains in part why he chose to distance himself from Locke and his other Black Washington friends. (Pellegrini 5)

Because Locke and the others refused to see beyond the "unambiguous aspects of Negro life" in order to synthesize *Cane* with their cultural and political goals, it's really no surprise that Toomer moved away from identifying himself with that group of writers. As a consequence of that rift, Toomer's primary link to an African American identity was also ruptured though, as we see in *Cane*, the hybrid identity narrators have already played this scenario out. The novel, in a very concrete way, prefigures Toomer's split with a purely African American ethos because it suggests, in the lives of its characters, that hybrid identities can't be nourished in a static group identity, whether white or black.

Charles Harmon suggests “that *Cane* systematically negates the entire category of race as a way to mediate between the individual and the world at large...*Cane*, like its author, is obsessed with the topic and attacks not identity in general, but racial identity specifically” (Harmon 2). Harmon proposes that Toomer’s concept of his own identity followed a philosophical ‘neither/norism’ which inevitably separated him from any identifying ultimatums. The most important point which Harmon makes is that not only did Toomer’s opinions about identity not change significantly after the publication of *Cane*, but *Cane* is a protracted meditation on the problem with self-identification within an ethnic group. “*Cane* is continuous with Toomer’s later career in that it attempts to demonstrate that intimations of universal significance are only allowed to individuals who maintain their psychic distance from black culture, white culture, and all shades of culture in between” (Harmon 4). Toomer’s level of consciousness, as opposed to his characters’, explains why he believed that fixed identity is a roadblock between the individual and truth and therefore refused to identify himself solely with a single group. What McKay, Cager, and other scholars who try to rescue *Cane* from its author fail to recognize is that Toomer did not change significantly after the publication of *Cane* because the identity struggles of his later life are woven into the novel itself. The primary difference between *Cane*-era Toomer and Toomer after *Cane* is a matter of degrees rather than ideology; the “discordant voice” has already emerged (Ford 145).

From all this, it’s still difficult to draw meaningful conclusions about Toomer’s conception of identity beyond his own. What that identity is, for Toomer, is succinctly expressed in his poem, *Men*:

Different in persons  
Diverse in minds  
Friends in understanding

Exiles in self  
Antagonists in egotism  
Brothers in being

Enemies in greed  
Dull in routine  
Lovers in beauty

Separate in bodies  
Many in desires  
One in ultimate reality

Strangers on the earth  
Prisoners in this world  
Natives in deity. ("Poetry" 210)

Beyond the words, which express alternately the divided truths of the world and transcendental possibilities, the structure suggests a unification of two realities into one conclusion. Each stanza starts with two lines of discord and separation, both between men and within ("Separate in bodies/ Many in desires") which are resolved by looking beyond the inhibitive structures of human reality toward universal principles. These inhibitive structures necessarily include racial identities which divide man's universal connection to his brother by creating cultural masks which disguise and define him against others.

The mistake which the vast majority of *Cane* scholars make is failing to recognize that the novel does in fact correspond to the transcendental ideology which Toomer became known for after his 1924 conversion to the teaching of Gurdjieff. Gurdjieff's

metaphysical system consistently evolved under the influence of his followers (such as Greenwich Village's A.R. Orage), yet:

The central insight of the system was that man is not unified, but is instead a being in whom the "I" (ego, identity, self) is relative and nonpermanent. The impermanence of the "I" is a result of "consciousness" being the compound result of consciousness, subconsciousness, and instinct (thought, feeling, and organic automatism). According to Gurdjieff, all of the catastrophes that take place in life, at whatever scale, arise from the fact that, in his fragmented condition, man does not know himself for what he is and what he is not. Moreover, the problems of human life cannot be effectively attacked by the systems in place because without recognizing the impermanence of the human personality all of the theories, systems, and therapies that mistakenly assess man's capabilities are invalid. (Woodson 3)

The struggle of the hybrid narrators in *Cane* to connect to an African American ethos directly corresponds to Gurdjieff's system of impermanence and consciousness, and the message therein is the necessity of rejecting structures of identity which do not emanate from the self. Because there is no static "I", attempts to connect with communities which are defined by shared traits or beliefs are either bound to fail or yield unacceptable results. Toomer appropriated this ideology and added to it: "Toomer's chief contribution was to formulate and apply an antiracist component to the body of Gurdjieffian doctrine, which did not recognize the concept of race" (Woodson 4). The didactic quality of *Cane* is based on Toomer's principles which later reformed Gurdjieff's system confirming that those who seek to find their identity in the identities of others will inevitably become lost. The appropriation of *Cane* as a Harlem Renaissance text, beginning with Locke's inclusions in *The New Negro*, routinely ignores not only the author's but the novel's refusal to participate in a movement dictated solely by the categorization of raced identities. Had the characters of *Cane* connected with a monolithic blackness, we could

argue that Toomer underwent a significant ideological change after his Gurdjieff transition and that *Cane*, as Cager suggests, “transcends any ambiguities about Toomer’s life after 1923” (80). However, it’s more than evident that *Cane* is an expression of his continuous, before and after 1923, search for an identity uncircumscribed by racial affiliation.

In the end, the identity of Jean Toomer is simply Jean Toomer, just as *Cane* is a novel unto itself, beyond the agendas of the Harlem Renaissance literati:

*Cane* eludes description and categories and can be seen as both a part of, and apart from, the renaissance. Published before the guidelines for New Negro writing were set in Locke’s seminal anthology, it is more a forerunner than a direct emanation of the movement. In tune with certain concerns – social, moral and esthetic, or philosophical – of the time, it developed in directions that were dictated less by tradition, prescription, or fashion than by Toomer’s inner convictions and experiences, and these often went against the grain of the spirit of the era or were inspired by exigencies – personal, literary, and professional – that took Toomer away from Harlem. (Fabre 109-110)

Though Fabre claims that *Cane* is both a part and apart from the Harlem Renaissance, all of her analysis seems to suggest that the novel is about Toomer, in opposition to the evolving spirit of the New Negro. What separates Toomer from his contemporaries (if we can call them that) is the direction of his consciousness which drove him to reject concepts of race<sup>4</sup> which other writers were actively reclaiming and uplifting. Woodson makes the point that many of the Harlem Renaissance writers incorporated Gurdjieffian structures and ideas into their novels and Toomer, in a series of meetings which became increasingly more secretive, introduced these writers to those ideas. Fisher, Larsen,

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<sup>4</sup> In a different section, I’ll explore whether or not Toomer questions the validity of racial classification in general or just for himself.

Schuyler, Thurman, and Hurston were aware of Gurdjieff and his teachings (as presented and amended by Orage and Toomer) and incorporated them into their work; this seems to suggest that, far from being separated from the aesthetics and ethics of the movement, Toomer was central to its development.

Toomer's racial amendment to Gurdjieff's teachings "was a major violation... particularly because the psychological system of the Method is based on 'non-identification.' In a sense, Toomer's approach to this intricate problem was to paradoxically insist that African Americans had to disidentify themselves as African Americans, yet remain conscious that they were" (Woodson 33). Though it seems that Toomer was actively involved in the transforming of a Harlem Renaissance consciousness, doubts remain as to whether or not his interest in teaching the Gurdjieff system was communal or strictly personal. Woodson makes the point that, before Gurdjieff emphasized the importance of writing in his teachings, Toomer "had already been attempting to teach esoteric dances to groups in Greenwich Village, although it was avowed at the time that he did not properly know them" (Woodson 41). Toomer's interest in Gurdjieff's teachings was not purely literary, but rather a response to his desire "to becom[e] spiritual teacher equivalent to Gurdjieff himself" (Woodson 41). Regardless of the fact that Toomer contributed to the output of the Harlem Renaissance by influencing some of its most important writers, his interest in doing so had more to do with the fulfillment of his aspirations as a spiritual leader than a proponent of African American literature. A central distinction that should be drawn between Toomer and his students is that, while the Gurdjieffian Harlem Renaissance writers incorporated

antiracist ideas and new philosophies into their writing, Toomer incorporated the same ideas into his life. None of the writers with whom Toomer shared his ideas of a new, purely American race were as willing to abandon the importance of their black heritage as he was. And, even if they were, it's questionable whether or not Toomer would have considered these writers/students "conscious" enough to do so.

Jean Toomer's identity is less a series of character traits than a response to the philosophical questions of race, "I", American-ness, and what it means to be conscious. Though many authors of the Harlem Renaissance questioned the permutations of the color line, none embraced hybridity as strongly, or desperately, as Toomer. Alternately, Toomer acknowledges his African American heritage ("Racially, I seem to have (who knows for sure) seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian" (Toomer to Claude McKay qtd. in Turner 18)) and omits it ("According to their own subjective experiences, various people have taken me for American, English, Spanish, French, Italian, Russian, Hindu, Japanese, Romanian, Indian, and Dutch" ("Reflections" 18)). The passivity with which Toomer approaches his race reinforces his complete disinterest in it, and the little importance he accords to the owning of it. His reliance on a new, American race stems directly from this indifference, and he embraces American because it denotes a universal "everything" rather than the narrower "something" of Negro. Toomer separates himself from others with black heritage by claiming a higher level of consciousness, ironically derived from the Gurdjieffian teachings which he took the liberty to amend by inserting the aforementioned racial component and thereby buttressing his preexisting views. The "I" which Toomer

presents is disassociated from any prefabricated identities and can therefore be whatever he wants or needs it to be: black (to assist the publication of *Cane* by Liveright), white (to pass effortlessly between racialized societies), or American (to defend his decision to disidentify himself). These ideas form the backbone of *Cane*, in which less conscious American hybrids struggle to form raced identities or commune with “their” group, to their inevitable disappointment or ruin. Toomer creates a didactic relationship between his characters and himself, and their failure corresponds to his imagined success simply because, as a conscious member of a new race, he no longer needs an African American identity, or any other, to support him.

## Carl Van Vechten Moves Uptown

Carl Van Vechten was a prominent citizen, connected literary critic, popular author, trendsetter, and semi-closeted homosexual who became a dominant cultural force in 1920s Manhattan; throughout the criticism, none of this is in question.<sup>5</sup> However, Van Vechten's participatory role in the Harlem Renaissance, complicated by his whiteness and generous/excessive patronage of its black authors, sustains continuous debate, though not a lot of it. Study about Van Vechten typically focuses on either his relationship with a particular author/beneficiary, his role in publicizing African American literature, art, drama, and music through *Vanity Fair* or other predominantly white outlets, or the aesthetic effect he had on the younger, up-and-coming writers through his tutelage and, to a lesser extent, *Nigger Heaven*. This section, like the preceding one about Jean Toomer, will take one step further back and draw parallels between Van Vechten's actions, opinions and literary output and the complex formations of identity that encouraged them. Taking a closer look at his role as patron/participant, discourse about race (exclusively "African American race"), and how this intellectual involvement facilitated a non-traditional identity function both in his professional and personal life will yield unique conclusions about Van Vechten's positioning of himself in relation to the

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<sup>5</sup> A particularly telling anecdote about Van Vechten is the public attention he garnered in 1913 when he was the first person in, presumably, all of New York City (and, likely, the United States) to wear a wristwatch.

Renaissance and how that view precipitated both the popularizing of African American literary forms and their exploitation.

There is no doubt that Van Vechten considered himself white and, unlike Toomer, he had no theoretical qualms about a biracialized American culture, though he tried in his lifetime to soften the effects. His intermingling in the white and black worlds did not require either passing or an indeterminate hybridity, and his access to the latter encouraged deeper and more intimate contact:

Carl Van Vechten's interest in black culture seemed to be an exception to the shallowness of white voyeurism uptown. His signature Harlem tours<sup>6</sup> were rites of passage for white sophisticates, but Van Vechten's fascination with black culture far outdistanced the curiosity of those he shepherded to Harlem... Van Vechten loved his nights at the Savoy, but he was also a dedicated and serious patron of black arts and letters. (Bernard 2)

This commitment was influential in getting Nella Larsen, Langston Hughes, and other Renaissance heavyweights their initial publishing contacts with Knopf and his support of prizes offered to black writers through *Opportunity* magazine are only indicative of the type of dedicated assistance he lent to the development of the Renaissance. "In many ways, Carl Van Vechten, the wealthy white heavy-drinking author of *Nigger Heaven*, was the Renaissance. Without his constant lobbying on behalf of those he had 'discovered,' many of the poems, essays, short stories, and novels that constitute the rich tapestry of the period would not have been published" (Marks and Edkins 1999).

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<sup>6</sup> He would frequently take his wealthy Manhattan friends uptown for a night, exposing them to the exotic Harlem culture within which he had become accepted by some and tolerated by others.

Had Van Vechten's reach extended no further than this encouragement, no one would doubt the sincerity with which he offered it. However, he was not content to assist the advancement of Negro art from a purely financial and intellectual position; he wanted to participate. Van Vechten the patron/participant became a critical mass within the Renaissance, dictating to a large extent the market for African American culture and, ultimately, filling it. There are three flashpoints at which Van Vechten's participation in the Harlem Renaissance reflects back onto his identity formation in relation to it: the questionnaire in *The Crisis*, *Nigger Heaven's* infamous footnote and "Glossary", and Van Vechten's positioning of himself (as Gareth Johns and Russett Durwood) within the text.

*The Crisis* "Questionnaire" created by Van Vechten with editorial assistance from Jessie Fauset posed seven questions to the emerging writers of the Harlem Renaissance. These questions appeared only a few months before the publication of *Nigger Heaven*, indicative of the actions<sup>7</sup> Van Vechten took before the book came out to prepare the unsuspecting audiences, black and white, for the incendiary novel that would prove wildly successful. The published symposium, "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed" which followed these initial questions was published intermittently, as answers came in, in the February through November 1926 issues of *The Crisis*:

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to the "Questionnaire", Van Vechten initiated, with Knopf's help, a media blitz surrounding *Nigger Heaven*, including magazine advertisements featuring specially commissioned artwork by Aaron Douglas. The ads, because they appeared in *Vanity Fair* and other "white" periodicals, were clearly meant to appeal to the white audience. The "Questionnaire", on the other hand, is Van Vechten's less-than-subtle effort at preparing the black intelligentsia.

2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?
3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?
4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?
5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere as "Porgy" received?
6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?
7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own class? ("A Questionnaire" 347)

The answers, generally speaking, were similar to one another, focusing on the independence of the artist in choosing his material, the importance of publishers selecting marketable books, and the role of the black writer and critic who is offended by the dominant portrayal of Negroes to amend it through writing and discourse. All of these answers, as they were designed to do, preempted the African American elite from attacking the decisions Van Vechten made when writing, marketing, and titling *Nigger Heaven*.<sup>8</sup> The transparency of this endeavor is highlighted by the inclusion of (only) Van Vechten, as cultural critic, within the initial publication of the questionnaire<sup>9</sup>:

As Carl Van Vechten writes us: "it [the "consistent portrayal of African-Americans as prostitutes, thieves, and fools"] is the kind of thing, indeed, which might be effective in preventing many excellent Negro writers from speaking any truth which might be considered unpleasant. There are

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<sup>8</sup> With the notable exception of W.E.B. DuBois, who called the novel "a blow to the face."

<sup>9</sup> "Along with the questions went a cover letter signed by Jessie Fauset of the *Crisis*, but actually composed by Van Vechten" (Coleman 109-110). This subterfuge, naturally, calls into question Van Vechten's intentions and problematizes his perceived status (before *NH*, of course) as a selfless supporter.

plenty of unpleasant truths to be spoken about any race. The true artist speaks out fearlessly. The critic judges the artistic result; nor should he be concerned with anything else.” (“Questionnaire 347)

By instituting the questionnaire, Van Vechten establishes several very important paradigms, in terms of his identity within the Harlem Renaissance community, which will place him in a position of influence and blamelessness.

First, by confronting the dominant question of African American literature from its beginnings to his time (is it acceptable to create art which is not hypersensitive to white culture’s perceptions of African Americans) Van Vechten establishes himself as an author that is keenly aware of how the black authors around him feel. This sympathy with the principal problem of African American art in a white market no doubt earned him many friends in the black community. Abandoning his famous frivolousness and speaking instead on serious aesthetic and racial questions also launched his Harlem Renaissance career by transitioning his operative identity from patron to patron/participant.

Second, the questionnaire effectively bridges the gap between white and black artists in the first question, claiming that Negro life is inclusive artistic property rather than an exclusive cultural possession. From then on, “artist”, unless qualified, means an artist of any race. Van Vechten knew that his forth-coming appropriation of black culture would be, if not openly disapproved of, at least resented. Though “most of Harlem seems to have agreed that the book was vile and demeaning to the race,” most of the Harlem

literati whom Van Vechten associated with and encouraged did not object to either the title or the novel itself.

Third, Van Vechten does not advocate writing either about upper-class or lower-class characters. This is important because *NH*, though it opens and closes with a sensationalist depiction of Anatole “Scarlet Creeper” Longfellow, revolves around a melodramatic middle-class love story and dinner parties at which intelligent whites and blacks wax philosophical. He fulfills the requirements of white publishers that the writing be exciting and exotic and the hopes of the Harlem Renaissance that more intelligent characters appear in popular novels. Van Vechten does an excellent job of appearing as neither a hopeless propagandist nor naïve artist by navigating black sensitivities and white expectations.

With this questionnaire, Van Vechten transitioned from being “violently interested in Negroes” (Van Vechten qtd in Coleman 79) to a critic of African American literary discourse, a necessary announcement to justify to the black intelligentsia the publication and subject of his book. Based on the twenty or so responses, both black and white, which the survey generated this establishment of his primacy to the Harlem Renaissance cemented his role as patron/participant. Had *NH* appeared without this introduction and regulation of the discourse, many of the friends he had won as a benefactor would have likely been lost.

The second strategy which he hoped would further secure his critical role in the Harlem Renaissance appears within the pages of *NH* in the form of a footnote and “Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases.” The footnote concerns the use of “nigger” within the African American discourse: “While this informal epithet is freely used by Negroes among themselves, not only as a term of opprobrium, but also actually as a term of endearment, its employment by a white person is always fiercely resented. The word Negress is forbidden under all circumstances” (26). This assertion, far from being unique,<sup>10</sup> is Van Vechten’s way of justifying the prevalent use of “nigger” both in his novel and even its title. But the footnote begs the obvious question of whether or not his understanding of the uses of the word allows its usage by him.

This question signals another, deeper transition in Van Vechten’s formation of his identity in relation to the Harlem Renaissance. Van Vechten had been given, primarily by Walter White, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes, unparalleled access to the night clubs and dives of Harlem in, possibly, repayment for his efforts with Knopf on their behalves and in a goodwill gesture toward a white man with exceptional awareness. Therefore, the freedoms which Van Vechten had been given led him to take more, and it was this access to Harlem and Harlemites that induced the composition of *NH*. In fact, Hughes was so supportive that he composed the blues lyrics that help lend *NH* an air of authenticity for both black and white readers. Van Vechten truly believed that because

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<sup>10</sup> In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe (60 years earlier) similarly assesses the use and existence of “nigger” in black and white speech: “A slang form of negro; it is almost always derogatory when used by whites and often but not always so when used by blacks” (Stowe 2).

he had so many black friends and supporters that he was exceptional (true) and, therefore, entitled to use a word he knew to be taboo (not true).

In her introduction to *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964*, Emily Bernard adeptly summarizes Van Vechten's opinion of himself and the way in which black artists reinforced this belief:

He...must have believed that he was entitled to use the term. Friends like Zora Neale Hurston had crowned him an "honorary Negro." One of his favorite portraits was a Miguel Covarrubias cartoon of himself in blackface titled "A Prediction." Van Vechten took all of this literally. A combination of naïveté and arrogance led him to believe he was unique, a white man who had transcended his whiteness. (Bernard xix)

This supposed, on Van Vechten's part, transcendence of whiteness is the next step in his identity formation. It was not good enough to be accepted by the black *literati*; he wanted access to everything, whether for his personal gratification or the authenticity of his art.

This transition is part of a larger pattern in Van Vechten's relationship to Harlem.

Initially, he was led by black friends to the uptown cabarets, but eventually began leading other whites to those same places without escort, positioning himself as an expert on all things Harlem (a perception which, not surprisingly, was popular downtown). Similarly, the transition between understanding the connotations of "nigger" and using it himself follows this formula of introduction to employment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Tellingly, Van Vechten uses the epithet in his correspondence to whites as well as blacks. In a letter to Hughes, he writes (on a postcard no less) "the situation [public outrage surrounding NH] is easy to explain: You and I are the only colored people who really love niggers" (*Letters* 46). Doubly strange, Van Vechten refers to himself as colored – whether this was meant as a joke is unclear either from this letter or Hughes' reply.

The “nigger” footnote is only indicative of this trend; the “Glossary” included in the back of *NH* similarly introduces the white readership to the exotic vernacular of blacks, and not only as a means of defining the words in the text. In fact, much of the slang does not appear in the proper text at all, but is included to lend authenticity to Van Vechten’s identity as a white translator of black experience and society. Yet there were jokes for black readers as well, such as the circular relationship between “hootchie-pap” and “boody” which are used to define each other in order to keep some of the “squarer” white readers in the dark. Again, Van Vechten is attempting to appease both black and white, and his use of these words and phrases indicates that he wants to be identified in the white world as having inclusive access to the African American ethos and by the black world as one with them. Whereas Toomer sought an exclusive identity beyond race, Van Vechten began to consider himself as an integral part of both groups.

This desire to be an accepted patron/participant with unconstrained cultural access is extended further by the final flashpoint in Van Vechten’s process of identity integration into the Harlem Renaissance. *NH* contains two characters, Gareth Johns and Russett Durwood, whose only purpose is to serve as a mouthpiece for Van Vechten’s ideas about African American literature. Though neither of these characters are central to the main plot of the novel (the love story of Mary and Byron) their influence, particularly on Byron, is more important than any other. Byron’s ambition to be a writer is the subject of both Johns (novelist) and Durwood’s (publisher) advice, and in this way Van Vechten incorporates himself into the Harlem Renaissance by speaking directly to its young

writers from a position of authority, the last facet of identity which Van Vechten imagines for himself.

Gareth Johns is a well-known stand-in for Van Vechten that was employed in several novels before *NH*. The majority of Johns' dialogue is confined to polite conversation in the Sumner home, a well-to-do African American couple, and Van Vechten uses the opportunity to poke fun at himself; "the middle-aged man, with white hair, was nervous. Evidently it was his first appearance as a dinner guest in a Negro home and he was attempting, not entirely successfully, to be easy in his manner" (96). It's easy to imagine Van Vechten in 1925, dining with James Weldon Johnson and his wife for the first time, unsure about how he should behave, quite different from the cavalier person he was downtown. Yet, Johns wastes no time offering advice to Byron as soon as he learns that the young man wants to be a writer:

Apparently, Mr. Kasson, you have a talent for phrases, he commented. I hear that you are a writer.

Not quite yet, Byron responded. I want to write, but it's a large order, isn't it? It's difficult to begin when one realizes what you have accomplished.

So you've been reading my books.

Everybody reads your books, Mr. Johns.

Well, don't let that bother you. The critics and the public always like the new men best. They get tired of us old fellows, once they have discovered the secret of our formulas. What are you going to write about?

I don't know Mr. Johns, that's just it. How does one go about writing?

Well, to be frank, I've always thought that the best way to go about writing was to write. You have plenty to write about. Gareth swept his eyes around the room.

I don't see any sense in writing about this, Byron protested, rather hotly, Mary thought. It's too much like Edith Wharton's set.

Well, the low life of your people is exotic. It has a splendid, fantastic quality. And the humour! How vital it is, how rich in idiom! Picturesque and fresh! I don't think the Negro has been touched in literature as yet.

I'm afraid I don't know very much about the low life of my people. Byron's tone was cold.

There's the college life...

I went to a white college. Byron turned away.

I seem to have offended your friend, Gareth said to Mary. I wonder how. (106-7)

The long passage fuses several key elements of Van Vechten's identity positioning. In the beginning, Johns' authority is established by Byron in order to give the reader the sense that Johns is to be respected and listened to because of his extensive experience. Then, Johns' intelligence is confirmed by Byron's genuine questioning of him, and the answers which Johns provides are sufficiently droll to verify his wit. Now that Johns' intelligence and authority are in place, Van Vechten begins to break Byron down as he emotionally responds to Johns' benign suggestions. Finally, Byron, whom we soon discover is a poor writer and spiteful man, storms off from the benevolence of Johns, signaling that the good advice fell on deaf ears. Margo Perkins rightly suggests that Byron's reaction "arises out of his elitism: he does not want to be associated with the so-called "low-life" of his people" (Perkins 10). The dialogue, and Byron's lack of progress as a writer, is a cautionary tale which synthesizes the advice Van Vechten gave in the *Crisis* questionnaire (write about "unpleasant truths"): "low-life Negroes" are excellent subjects because of interest to white audiences, black authors shouldn't be so sensitive, and "true artists" can't be afraid of offending.

Russett Durwood also serves Van Vechten, repeating virtually word-for-word advice which Van Vechten wrote in his published response to his own questionnaire in *The Crisis*. Though it's customary to read Durwood as H.L. Mencken, this passage suggests that he's just another Van Vechten instilled with literary authority, which further secures the author's position within the Harlem Renaissance ethos. Van Vechten, not surprisingly, had his answers published first in the very next issue of *The Crisis*, ensuring that answers in the following months would be pre-informed (or preempted) by his. Parallels between Durwood's onslaught against (or a backhanded "for") Byron and Van Vechten's *Crisis* answers are numerous:

*Crisis*: You speak of "this side of the Negro's life having been overdone." That is quite true and will doubtless continue to be true for some time, for a very excellent reason. The squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life, offer [sic] a wealth of novel, exotic, picturesque material to the artist. (349)

Durwood: I have visited Harlem in two capacities, as a customer in the cabarets and as a guest in my friends' homes.<sup>12</sup> The whole place, contrary to the general impression, is overrun with fresh, unused material. Nobody has yet written a good gambling story; nobody has touched the outskirts of cabaret life; nobody has gone into the curious subject of the divers [sic] tribes of the region. (222)

Van Vechten asserts in both excerpts that regardless of how many stories about Harlem cabaret and "low-life" are produced, there's always another aspect to be explored. Both voices contradict the "general impression" that "this side of the Negro's life [has] been overdone." Durwood/Van Vechten also emphasizes essential similarities between middle to upper-class whites and blacks and the consequence of black writers not making the

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<sup>12</sup> This sentence alone is suggestive enough to eliminate Mencken as Durwood in favor of Van Vechten.

most of African American material (*Nigger Heaven* being, obviously, the incarnation of those consequences); the novel went through nine printings in four months.

Between 1924 and 1926, no person did more to incite white interest in African American literature and art than Carl Van Vechten. According to Coleman, “An aphorism current during the latter half of the Twenties states: ‘If Carl Van Vechten was not responsible for the birth of the Negro Renaissance, he was certainly its midwife’” (Coleman 78).

Though it’s more than likely that this assessment of his role emanates from the white audience he cultivated, there’s no doubt that similar appraisals came from the artists he was so actively promoting. Zora Neale Hurston opined “If Carl Van Vechten were a people instead of a person, I could then say, these are my people” (qtd in Bernard 4).

Whether or not this influence was genuine or contributed positively to the intra-black discourse about literature, the fact remains that Van Vechten vitally integrated himself into the Renaissance as a patron/participant with unique access and direct authority. His successful transition from flippant playboy to cultural critic and contributor put him in a unique position to significantly alter the course of the Harlem Renaissance through his participation in shaping discourse and the degree to which he created and satisfied the white market share.

In a pair of letters to Langston Hughes, many years later in October 1959, Van Vechten signed off as “Carlo, the Patriarch!” (*Letters* 304 & 306). At the conclusion of the first, Van Vechten writes: “I am not running this show [James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Arts and Letters’ exhibition of Van Vechten’s photographs of prominent African

Americans] as a benefit for myself. It is even named for someone else. It is conducted solely to glorify the Negro and I hope that some day at least a majority of the race will begin to realize this fact. yrs, with too much impatience and some faint hope!” As the reality of the Renaissance faded into anthologies and collections, Van Vechten found his role increasingly diminished, perhaps erased by a necessity to assert African American independence in a Renaissance supposedly supported by that ideal. Whatever the case, Van Vechten knew that his carefully developed identity, despite its success at the time, was evaporating as the decades filtered history. His signoff as “the Patriarch” confirms the identity positioning the preceding pages have supported, yet falls short of substantiating the reason why Van Vechten’s role in the Harlem Renaissance necessitates deemphasizing.

## **Exploiting the Distance Between Identities**

Although Toomer rejected (for himself) a raced identity in favor of a universalized American one, he did not believe that the concept of race was insubstantial. In questioning his own racial heritage and eventually transcending it, Toomer claims for himself the consciousness of a new American race without unburdening others of racial distinctions; negroes are negroes, white people are white, and the distinctions between these groups, rather than becoming less important, are increasingly being defined on either side of the color line:

It would seem that the new Negro is much more Negro and much less American than was the old Negro of fifty years ago. From the point of view of sociological types, the types which are arising among Negroes, such as the business man, the politician, the educator, the professional person, the college student, the writer, the propagandist, the movie enthusiast, the bootlegger, the taxi driver, etc. – these types among Negroes are more and more approaching the corresponding white types. But, just as certain as it is that this increasing correspondence of types makes the drawing of distinctions supposedly based on skin color or blood composition appear more and more ridiculous, so it is true that the lines are being drawn with more force between the colored and white groups. Negroes are themselves now drawing these lines. Interbreeding and intermarriage, for instance, are becoming as taboo among Negroes as among whites. (“Race Problems” 71)

Toomer suggests that the races, rather than joining him in the worthy progress toward a unified human race, are reinforcing the differences in an attempt to gain either cultural dominance or parallel worlds. It’s telling that he includes in this 1929 passage a reference to the “new Negro,” and it’s no mistake that he makes mention of the “writer”

and the “propagandist” in sequence. The critique he makes of the New Negro Movement indicts the premise that African Americans ought to aspire to parity with the dominant white culture in arts, business, education etc. Instead, Toomer makes racial uplift through these avenues appear ridiculous and ironic; intellectual blacks, rather than recognizing the foolishness of race-class competition, are reinforcing the American system of racism.

Because Toomer establishes himself outside of the New Negro Movement and the aims of African Americans in establishing a white-competitive culture, he creates a binary relationship between himself and the black community. As Scruggs and VanDemarr conclude in *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History*, “Toomer’s view of race began with the views of his class, the mulatto elite that upheld its hope for a gradual amalgamation by distinguishing itself in mores and culture from the black masses” (209). Toomer’s ambivalence toward the “black masses” leaves him free to exploit that cultural moment.

In a letter to Alain Locke (sent from Sparta, Georgia in November 1921) Toomer writes, “I’ve learned a lot. Especially from an economic, sociological standpoint. 99% of the people who write and talk about the Negro hardly know his name. Artistically, the field is virgin. I think, however, that for its real exploitation, one would have to come to it under different circumstances” (*Letters* 27). Toomer’s suggestive language reveals a disconnection, even at this (according to some critics) period of reconnection with a black heritage, and an anthropological mindset which separates the author from his subject.

The continuous reference to “the Negro” in this writing and others strongly indicates that the connection to blackness Toomer felt in Georgia was artistic rather than personal. In addition, his use of ‘exploit’ and, more tellingly ‘virgin,’ implies that he himself recognized that *Cane* would not be his reconnection with an African American ethos but simply his writing of it as something outside, or less than, himself. The closing sentiment, that “one would have to come to it under different circumstances” references the opening of the letter, in which Toomer cryptically says that “there is poetry here – and drama, but the atmosphere for one in my position is almost prohibitory.” What he means by his position is unclear, but it’s fair to assume that being a light-skinned substitute principal from the North probably limited his social circle and sustained his visible role as an outsider. This view is reinforced by the mixed-race narrators of *Cane* that share this same experience of distancing and mistrust.

This section elaborates on the indication that Toomer, because of his self-imposed distance from raced identities and belief in a superior “new race,” did not value African American identities (in which we include the “unconscious” hybrid narrators) as evidenced by *Cane* and unpublished or autobiographical writing. As a result, the use of these identities as modernist literary material and ethnically situated objects instead of complex characters is exploitative in three ways; it divests them of agency, makes them indistinguishable from their environment, and ultimately places them in an inferior position.

An important fact to remember is that Toomer was not squeamish about using race to his advantage. In an excerpt from “On Being American,” Toomer compares the effect of Locke’s fixing his race in *The New Negro* with the similarly revealing picture which Frank had created (or, more accurately, transcribed from Toomer’s suggestions) in the original introduction to *Cane*. Both Frank and Locke presented Jean Toomer to the world as an African American, and both directly contributed to the writing, revising, and publication of his work. “However, there was and is, among others, this great difference between Frank and Locke. Frank helped me at a time when I most needed help. I will never forget it. Locke tricked and misused me” (“The Gurdjieff Experience” 132). Toomer is willing to forgive Frank’s transgression because it was, at the time, beneficial for him to do so since Frank was instrumental in the original publication of *Cane*, and knew that a Negro author would attract Liveright more than a white, and especially more than a self-proclaimed indeterminately mixed one. Apparently, Locke’s inclusion did not do Toomer a significant service, and was therefore inexcusable.<sup>13</sup> In “Identity in Motion,” George Hutchinson strengthens this position by summarizing a series of decisions Toomer made about self-identifying as having Negro heritage several years before, during, and after *Cane*; these choices were categorically motivated by their perceived results.

On the surface, Toomer’s rejection of the absolute polarity between black and white is commendable because it criticizes the public discourse, at his time and ours, that

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<sup>13</sup> Ironically, the first publication of *Cane* is not responsible for the endurance of the novel. Had Locke not canonized Toomer by including him in the definitive anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, it’s highly unlikely that the academic community would have rediscovered his work at all.

maintains inherent differences based upon genetic or hereditary traits. Many critics have found this challenge to established racial norms to be the enduring legacy of Toomer and *Cane*, and praise for the novel almost always extols this modernist virtue. However, as the preceding section demonstrated, the author reserved the transcendence of race for the newly conscious hybrid “Americans” rather than blacks or whites, and in so doing only subverted racial categorization for a select few. His legacy, therefore, is the theoretical establishment of a new race rather than a significant disestablishment of the polarized ones. From this new position of his own devising, Toomer granted himself the capacity to write about black and white culture authoritatively because he, “who had seen both the white and colored worlds, and both from the inside,” could decipher them.<sup>14</sup> However, his liminal position in both cultures required a level of invention which led him to generalized conclusions that he exploited to support his theoretic of a superior deracinated status.

Toomer, in his autobiographical writing, is concerned with establishing his authority on the subject of race in America:

I had lived among white people, I had lived among colored people. I had lived among Jews. I had met and known people of the various nationalistic groups. I had come in contact with my fellow countrymen from the bottom to the top of the American scene.

I had seen the divisions, the separatisms and antagonisms. I had observed that, if the issue came up, very few of these United States citizens were aware of being Americans. On the contrary, they were aware of, and put value upon, their hearsay descents, their groupistic affiliations. (“*The Cane Years*” 121)

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<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that, in the letter to Locke referenced earlier, he admitted that his position complicated and cast doubt on his ability to do so.

His complex position, which he supposes to allow him equal access to both sides of the color line, is ultimately formulated as a straw man argument to support his own American identity agenda. William Ramsey, based on a close reading of “Blood-Burning Moon,” suggests that Toomer’s distance from the African American folk identity makes it an idealized solution to man’s modern fragmented crisis:

Though tacitly an indictment of racism, “Blood-Burning Moon” points to a cosmic order detached from blind and earth-bound human passions. Paradoxically, the story’s power can be taken as its limitation. Seen negatively, Toomer’s inability to immerse fully in a South he does not know intimately is an escape from history’s burden, a search *out* of time and political reaction. Seeking a pastoral folk harmony as antidote to the lost modern soul, he spiritualizes ethnic substance into the abstract framework of his ideas. (Ramsey 86-87)

Rather than allowing his rural-folk characters to simply behave humanly, Toomer creates them with an agenda to show the foolishness of “groupistic affiliations.” Ultimately, Ramsey (like most critics) forgives Toomer for inventing an African American community which is used as evidence for its own obsolescence; “By virtue of his bivalent, spectatorial disengagement, Toomer achieves a most fertile creativity, finding release from the customary chains of American binary perception” (87). What Ramsey fails to take into account is that it was not in the process of writing *Cane* that Toomer found this creativity and freedom, but that this vision is a result of his preexisting disdain for those unconscious groups that are unable to transcend race as effectively as he is. The “spiritualiz[ing of] ethnic substance” correlates directly to “a pastoral folk harmony” which Toomer has called a “swan song” being replaced by a modern, new Negro ethos which emphasizes a group identity.

One of the primary ways in which Toomer exploits the rural African American folk is by creating portraits in the first section of racial stagnation. In “Karintha,” the opening story which firmly establishes the reader in Toomer’s pastoral black South, the narrative centered on the title character indicates a core set of values which will remain representative of Southern, authentic Blackness throughout the novel. First, Karintha is limited to carrying out the prescribed destiny of a raced individual; “One could but imitate one’s parents, for to follow them was the way of God” (*Cane* 1). Toomer establishes this cyclical structure of black identity early to homogenize all black experience. Because Karintha is unexceptional in all ways save her beauty (and because minimal characterization beyond this point supports no other conclusions), the reader can infer that the practice of the southern African American is to follow in the footsteps of her parents rather than, as Toomer did, question the racially regimented way of things. Second, Toomer sexualizes Karintha in the first sentence; “Men had always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child, Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” (1). The rest of *Cane* continues this trend of representing black women as hyper-sexualized beings in order to establish a seemingly objective truth which Toomer expresses later in “Fern”; “Now a virgin in a small southern town is by no means the usual thing, if you will believe me. That the sexes were made to mate is the practice of the South. Particularly, black folks were made to mate. And it is black folks whom I have been talking about thus far” (15).<sup>15</sup> This sexualizing, rather than freeing the women to effectively exert personality, circumscribes a role for them within the black ethos that

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<sup>15</sup> It’s curious to me that he includes this last sentence that implies he has been talking exclusively about “black folks.” The second story, “Becky”, deals primarily with a white woman who gives birth to Negro sons.

Toomer is presenting to his reader. Catherine Kodat summarizes Karintha's situation best; "Karintha's beauty is, first, something ascribed to her, something she is made to carry: second, it is a beauty that draws its power through identification with a system of exploitation" (Kodat 7). The interrelation between following in the footsteps of the previous generation and drawing power from your ability to be exploited creates a stable (if unfortunate) cycle of black identity which relies on unvarying tradition, something which Toomer's conception of a new race, necessarily, disowns.

By imposing this cyclical reading of black culture, in which African Americans behave in predictably African American ways, Toomer strips his characters of individual agency and imposes on them a group identity. In "Theater", Toomer refers to "the nigger life" and "mass-heart of black people" in order to unite the North and South together to establish uniform African Americanness. In the North, like the South, black characters fail to communicate with each other beyond socially-prescribed vocabularies; the use of "dictie" in both "Esther" and "Theater" reifies the existence of Black norms which prevent any meaningful communication. The frustrated monologues of Dorris and John both rely upon their knowledge of African Americana to quickly judge the identities of one another, and this, obviously, is a mistake. Both characterize the other as "dictie" (51) and are thereby prevented from action because of their preconceived and ultimately wrong assumptions. These assumptions are based upon an African American discourse, and Toomer intentionally makes their assumptions appear ridiculous in order to critique an identity which is predicated on specialized identities rather than universal human ones. Like Esther, Dorris' inability to effectively connect with another person is the result of a

groupistic racialized ethnicity. John, for his part, is so preoccupied with Dorris' monolithic blackness ("her singing is of canebrake loves and mangrove feastings") that he fails to recognize her as a flesh-and-blood person with whom he ought to interact (*Cane* 53). Because his dream of Dorris supersedes her actual presence at the dance hall, he doesn't react to the end of her emotional dancing, and she runs away in tears. If he had been able to see Dorris dance without instantly becoming lost in a reverie based upon stereotype, they might have achieved true connection.

Similarly, the bizarre relationship of Muriel and Dan in "Box Seat" is ultimately frustrated by hyper-racialized identities which mutually interfere with each character's interaction with the other. Dan's preoccupation with his racial inferiority ignites in him psychopathic mood swings which damage his ability to interact with others, particularly Muriel, who is lighter-skinned, a member of the mulatto "blue-blood" elite. Though the text is not forthright with these distinctions, several details confirm this hypothesis. First, Dan's darker skin is hinted at in the beginning of the story when he fears that a policeman seeing him at Muriel's door (or, rather, the boarding house(?) of Mrs. Pribby) in an affluent (though probably colored) neighborhood might think he is trying to break in. In addition, he is secretly disgusted with Muriel's holier-than-thou outlook which she has been conditioned by the upper-class (whiter) Negro society to adopt; his shout "JESUS WAS ONCE A LEPER!" is meant to critique Muriel's obvious distaste, when offered the dwarf's<sup>16</sup> rose, for those that do not meet her high standards, standards to which Dan

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<sup>16</sup> Tellingly, the dwarf (Mr. Barry) returns to the stage after an Ellison-esque (anachronistic, but appropriate comparison) prize fight to sing a song. This type of entertainment, based upon an anglocentric fondness for the grotesque, certainly draws parallels with minstrel shows. Toomer's choice of dwarves in a primarily

knows he does not conform (66). Muriel is undoubtedly a Northernized “blue-blood” based upon the company she keeps (Bernice, another light-skinned woman), her box seat at the Lincoln Theater, and her ginger appearance under the orange glow of the lamp at Mrs. Pribby’s (61, 61, 58). Eventually, both Muriel and Dan will develop contempt for the other because of constricted ideas about the other and, more importantly, ideas about how the other perceives them. Again, the knowledge, assessments, and labels that correspond to a raced identity prevent meaningful human action and interaction and instead create a cycle of relations which maintain constrictive racialized norms.

At the center of this cycle is a question of how race is conferred upon the next generation. In “Karintha”, Toomer presents “imita[tion of] one’s parents” as the basis for this passing of racialized identities from one generation to the next. How, then, is it possible for *Cane* to remain a “swan song” of a disappearing pastoral Blackness? If the African American ethos is disappearing, as “swan song” seems to suggest, what is replacing it? Admittedly, answering this question is difficult yet central to an understanding of Toomer’s work as exploitative of an unchanging African Americanness.

In *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*, Favor carefully walks the fence between the celebratory and critical readings of *Cane*, speculating on whether or not Toomer believed that authentic blackness would disappear as the “swan song” faded into history:

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black theater (a permutation of blacks in a primarily white theater) critiques the practice of otherizing for entertainment (while he participates in it).

It is my position that *Cane* is a text that elicits a wide variety of critical reaction because it opens a large space in which various discourses of black identity coincide and intersect, sometimes competitively and other times harmoniously. Jean Toomer's personal racial ambivalence, as well as the ambivalence found in the text, and these sometimes contradictory critical positions arrive as a result of Toomer's embrace of the performative as a way of understanding African American identity. As he breaks with repeated and familiar patterns that delineate literary blackness, he re-imagines the shape of both the African American and American communities, exploring ways in which the traditions that define and differentiate might be reworked. As he does this, Toomer asks us to consider what criteria go into making something American or African American. How and when is something recognizably national or racial? (Favor 54-55)

Central to an understanding of this passage is Favor's definition of "reworked," a definition which is sadly lacking. However, by using "reworked" within a context of "performative," Toomer's view of the African American ethos asserts that although the pastoral, rural folk aesthetic/culture is fading, there is a definite set of cultural norms taking its place. This reading is corroborated not only by the cultural norms that constantly inform the actions of *Cane*'s characters, but also Favor's assertion that Toomer is "ask[ing] us to consider what criteria" can be used for evaluating black experience and American experience (to which we might add an infinite number of groups, though *Cane*'s central questions are not concerned beyond Favor's binary). As said before, Toomer is not questioning the authenticity of established racial categories for his characters (though he does for himself) but instead navigates the space between the Old Negro and the contemporarily proposed New one.

In *Cane*, this set of criteria can best be described as a series of environmental contributions. In the same way which the pattern of resitivist black life stripped

characters of agency, the environment/society in which *Cane*'s characters live dictates, to a large degree, their mobility and decision-making. In fact, as Kodat points out, "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," and nature becomes itself symbolic of the Black South (and North) in which the characters exist (Kodat 7). While women are the primary victims of their environment in Part One, Part Two showcases a number of men that are unable to escape the world that surrounds them.

Rhobert, whose representational story follows "Seventh Street,"<sup>17</sup> "wears a house, like a monstrous diver's helmet, on his head" (40). The confluence of religion, Southern/black imagery, and blues lyricism which accompany Rhobert's struggle suggest that even in this northern section of *Cane*, characters continue to be weighted by an immovable African American identity. Though the story opens itself to many interpretations (a product, certainly, of Toomer's fragmented modernist style), it's clear that Rhobert is black and that the house he wears on his head and the mud he's standing in are representations of an inescapable cultural situation. The voice in the story, which is asking others to "call him great when the water shall have been all drawn off," is clearly celebrating the sacrifice Rhobert is making by not removing the house from his head and allowing himself to sink under it. The environment against which Rhobert is futilely struggling can be plausibly read within this context as a black identity, particularly

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<sup>17</sup> Positioned first only to indicate to the reader that we are leaving the pastoral south (is Toomer again reinforcing the primitivism of the south, suggesting that his readers would intuitively know that no rural southern town would have seven main streets?).

because of the idiomatically Southern phrasings in the story which are not common to the rest of the book. The narrator of the piece recognizes the absurdity of Rhobert's struggle: "Soon people will be looking at him and calling him a strong man. No doubt he is for one who has had rickets. Lets[sic] give it to him" (40-1). The narrator's commendation of Rhobert is tongue-in-cheek because it qualifies his strength (he's only judged strong because he was sick) and, as the last line suggests, there's no harm in letting a drowning man think he's great or noble. The last assertion is confirmed by a line a few sentences later; "Lets[sic] build a monument and set it in the ooze where he goes down" (41). Clearly, any monument set in ooze that consumed a man will also surely be swallowed up, so the endurance of Rhobert's legendary status as a carrier of the African American ethos is transient. In the end, Rhobert, like the women of the first section, is simply a victim of a racialized identity he refuses to unburden himself of.

By creating characters which struggle like Sisyphus against set structures of identity, Toomer creates a world in which hybrid, non-groupistic identities are dominant. This one-sided approach to cultural representation allows Toomer to exploit the seemingly close-minded and rigid aspects of the African American ethos in order to place his individualistic, new American race on top of a binary comparison. The limited scope of experience presented in *Cane* (most stories rely on "unconscious" hybrid narrators caught in moribund black cultures) makes blackness appear stifling and suppressive, synthetically building a monolithic black culture of Toomer's own devising. Rather than presenting black culture as robust, multi-faceted, and evolving, Toomer concentrates on portraits of cultural stagnation and, in his own words, the "swan song" of authentic,

Southern blackness. It is difficult to find, in any of *Cane*'s stories, a dynamic black (*not* hybrid)<sup>18</sup> character with strength, wisdom, and who benefits directly or indirectly from an African American identity. In this way, Toomer assembles a series of portraits painted within a short time and with minimal extra-personal experience in order to exploit a racialized identity by showing none of its virtues and all of the shortcomings.

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<sup>18</sup> Even hybrid characters with strength are few and far between. The closest is, naturally, Mr. Lewis of "Kabnis", simply because he has the ability to leave the South. It's no great surprise that, more than any other, Mr. Lewis' position as a liminal Northern schoolteacher equates him directly with Toomer. Some critics equate Toomer with Kabnis also, but the dissimilarities between Kabnis' religious conversion, inarticulateness, and refusal to leave behind a black identity and Toomer's way with words and distance from a racialized identity (all of which he shares with Lewis) make these comparisons rather weak. The rest of the hybrid narrators, as discussed previously, are so frustrated by their inability to connect with the African-American group that their agency is stripped, and with it their transcendence.

### **Market Politics, Stereotype, and “a new crop of Nordics”**

Van Vechten’s contributions to the Harlem Renaissance are problematized by the manipulation of his benefactor position within the African American community, sensationalist approach to literature, and, in relation to both, appropriation of “nigger” and Harlem idiom to both authenticate his conception of Harlem and capitalize on the white audience’s appetite for scandalous literature about blacks.

Having established the capacity in which Carl Van Vechten created an identity within the Harlem Renaissance community, the next step is evaluating what effect that identity had on the African American literary landscape of the 1920s and beyond. As a critic and participant, it’s clear that Van Vechten’s primary operative concern was creating an audience for literature written by and, more importantly, inspired by African American life. In his answer to the self-penned *Crisis* questionnaire, Van Vechten concludes with the importance of exploiting black culture in order to create marketable fiction; “Are Negro writers going to write about this exotic material while it is still fresh or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains?” (“The Negro in Art” 349). In *NH*, Russett Durwood suggests the same to Byron; “If you young Negro intellectuals don’t get busy, a new crop of Nordics is going to spring up who will take the trouble to become better informed and will exploit this material before the Negro gets around to it” (223). Being “better informed”

reinforces why Van Vechten so actively cultivated an insider's identity within the African American ethos, and strongly suggests that at least one of the reasons he so actively engaged with the artists of the New Negro Movement was to create a novel which definitively portrayed 1920s Harlem culture.

Van Vechten capitalizes on his indispensable position within the Harlem Renaissance by taking liberties with what he called the "free gift" of African American "exotic" material. James Weldon Johnson's understandably sympathetic<sup>19</sup> review of *NH* in *Opportunity* not only goes out of its way to praise its realism and craft, but spends nearly 50% of its space describing, in detail, the plot of the novel. Johnson assures his reader early that "the book and not the title is the thing," and so faithfully preempts those that would reject Van Vechten's sincerity based on his too-familiar use of the epithet (Johnson 316). Though the thorough plot summary highlights the extent to which Johnson was willing to go for his friend and patron, it's actually the ludicrous defense of the title which signals that the review and its writer are prejudiced in Van Vechten's favor; "There are those who will prejudge the book unfavorably on account of its title... This attitude is natural, but it is probable that the reaction will not be so strong as it was against the title of the play ["The Nigger"] which was produced sixteen years ago. Indeed, one gauge of the Negro's rise and development can be found in the degrees in which a race epithet loses its power to sting and hurt him" (Johnson 316). Estimating the development of a race based upon its submission to insult and degradation is antithetical to everything which "development"

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<sup>19</sup> At the time of publication, Johnson was aware that, through Van Vechten's influence at Knopf, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* was being prepared for reissue in 1927. Johnson's reference to his "now forgotten novel" toward the end of the review is a subtle hint about where his loyalties lie.

entails, and Johnson's insistence that blacks take no offense is in Van Vechten's best interest rather than theirs.

W.E.B. DuBois' review is more to the point and potentially more honest in its reaction. Though DuBois has a penchant for bold overstatement, his opinion bases its criteria on truth of depiction rather than loyalty to the author; "It is not a true picture of Harlem life, even allowing for some justifiable impressionistic exaggeration. It is a caricature. It is worse than untruth because it is a series of half-truths. Probably some time and somewhere in Harlem every incident of the book has happened; and yet the resultant picture built out of these parts is ludicrously out of focus and undeniably misleading" (DuBois 2). DuBois' critique rests not on the culturally specific details of the novel which Johnson used to vindicate it, but rather "the resultant picture" which, undeniably, revolves around the cabaret as Harlem's "stage of action." Understandably, Van Vechten's primary experience with Harlem, at least up to the publication of *NH*, was primarily in the cabarets he was introduced to by White, Hughes, and Johnson. Lending particular support to DuBois' position is that he, unknowingly, reads Van Vechten's intentions precisely when he says "I cannot for the life of me see in this work either sincerity or art, deep thought, or truthful industry. It seems to me that Mr. Van Vechten tried to do something bizarre and he certainly succeeded." In a letter to Hughes, Van Vechten expresses the same thought; "I have written four chapters of my novel and the rest of it is sketched out. It may be good or bad, but it will be different; of that I am sure" (*Letters* 31). Evidently, *NH* satisfied Van Vechten's primary concern.

It's not necessary to condemn Van Vechten for exploiting his relationships with prominent black intellectuals and writers who defended his project's "literary approaches [which] were more than unwelcome in Harlem in 1926" (Worth 10). Yet the truth is that no other white person would have gotten away with it. Though it's impossible to prove whether or not James Weldon Johnson submitted a favorable review of *NH* based on its content or its author, there's no doubt that Van Vechten knew his novel would sell well and that the friends he had made and subsequently supported would not abandon him. Because of his particular position within the African American intellectual community, he achieved a form of diplomatic immunity which he relied on in order to maintain his status in the black community while he cashed in on the white audience's yearning for exotic Harlem material, a yearning which he in no small part created. The essence of Van Vechten's exploitation was his ability to play both sides of the color line to his advantage, and he was rewarded by both: white audiences kept his book in constant demand and black intellectuals continued to hold him and his influence in high regard. As testament to the latter, a copy of *The New Negro* was presented to Van Vechten in 1927, signed by Locke, Johnson, Fauset, and, most notably, W.E.B. DuBois (Coleman 94-5). Apparently, not even the "blow in the face" of *NH* was enough to knock Van Vechten out of the inner circle.

John K. Young encapsulates the audience and publisher expectations of African American writing that informed Van Vechten's decision; "I would argue that the basic dynamic through which most twentieth-century African American literature has been produced derives from an expectation that the individual text will represent the black

experience (necessarily understood as exotic) for the white, and therefore implicitly universal, audience” (Young 12). Simply knowing this, as Van Vechten no doubt did, does not by itself mean that African American literature is necessarily exploitative. Any text’s marketability is dictated primarily by audience expectation and receptivity, and Van Vechten’s suggestion to black authors that they bear this in mind is, however inimical to his perpendicular proposition that authors be “fearless,” sound advice. His simplified use of “exploit” in both *NH* and *The Crisis* passages is not damning because he, as a published novelist, knows that the exotic sells better than the mundane. However, he insisted upon providing more than good advice, and his contribution to the fiction of the Harlem Renaissance suggests that his primary concern was becoming one of the “new crop of Nordics” which profited from the Negro intellectual’s unwillingness to exploit his cultural material, material which Van Vechten implies is the property of Negro writers.

Ironically, the material which Van Vechten deemed so important to exploit, namely the cabaret and “low-life” aspects of Harlem in which he found so much pleasure, accounts for only a small portion of his book. Though the “Scarlet Creeper” bookends either side of the narrative, the vast majority of the nearly 300 hundred pages is spent among intellectuals and the middle-class Negroes Durwood deemed so uninterestingly “white.” This paradox could be used to vindicate Van Vechten, suggesting that he hoped to portray Harlem as more than a sordid assortment of pimps, prostitutes, and degenerates.

Unfortunately, it's the primacy rather than the frequency of the primitivist material at both the end and beginning of the book which suggests that Van Vechten was primarily concerned, because of personal and public interest, with the more salacious aspects of Harlem and its inhabitants. As Robert Worth points out, the dull intellectual plot necessarily gives way to the exciting and exotic underworld; "Whenever the 'high' plot of educated characters and race propaganda threatens to go somewhere, the 'low' plot returns – with good reason. The Scarlet Creeper and the Bolito King may be caricatures, but they have the saving grace (as DuBois himself observed) of keeping the reader awake" (9).

In addition, the control which these exoticized elements exert over Byron Kasson invokes a popular image regarding the dominance of "low-life" African American culture uptown.<sup>20</sup> By ending his "high" love story in a "low" cabaret, Van Vechten reinforces downtown opinion that Harlem inevitably involves all of its citizens in an exotic underworld of drugs, booze, and violence. David G. Holmes, who partially defends Van Vechten's attempt to influence and imitate Harlem Renaissance discourse, admits that he unavoidably cuts both ways. Though Van Vechten certainly respected and tried to advocate writing about black culture by African Americans:

This is not to naively presume that a white critic of Van Vechten's literary reputation could not have wielded the same authority as others who sought to regulate the artistic identity of blacks during that time. Nor is this to say that Van Vechten did not at times romanticize African American culture as "exotic" and "primitive" in the way many other whites did...

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<sup>20</sup> Byron quixotically re-shoots and disfigures the already dying Pettijohn after Anatole Longfellow shoots him, debasing the novel's supposedly intellectual hero and ending the novel on a particularly sensationalized scene.

[progressive] whites tentatively adapt African American discursive practices and rhetorics while tenaciously interrogating the material inequalities that have afforded them the opportunity to do so. Van Vechten attempted the first move but, given the time period, could neither have fully understood or engaged in the second. As a result, he, to a lesser degree than other white critics perhaps, exploited the very culture he longed to honor. (Holmes 294)

Holmes' defense of Van Vechten's appropriation relies on the time period to justify, to a large extent, the methods by which he "tentatively adapt[ed]" black discourse in *NH*.

Though it's true that, for his time, Van Vechten's championing of African American art is more progressive than that of others, it does little to mitigate the ultimate impact that he had in popularizing primitivist images of blacks, particularly because of the engineering of the novel's inbuilt and instant popularity.

No single element emphasizes the lower-class black idiom better than "nigger" and Van Vechten knew it. The power of the taboo word in the white world was (is?) enough to sell books, and Van Vechten did not need a year's crash course in Harlem cabarets to know that scandal sells. Tellingly, his use of the word is more widespread than simply his novel. Ronald Firbank was a British novelist whose work was not widely read, but who Van Vechten judged to be of great importance and talent. According to Coleman, "In 1922, Van Vechten arranged for the American publication of a new novel by Firbank, the first of his works published in this country. The novel, originally titled, *Sorrow in Sunlight*, was prefaced by Van Vechten and, at his suggestion, the title was changed to *Prancing Nigger*. The sales of the book brought Firbank the first royalties he had received in nine years of writing" (Coleman 74). Two years before Van Vechten burst

onto (or into it, as he would prefer) the Harlem scene, he was already comfortable supporting the use of “nigger” in literature, and recognized its financial potential.<sup>21</sup>

Kathleen Pfeiffer’s introduction to the 2000 reprint carefully criticizes Van Vechten’s decision to keep the title despite the opinions, prior to its release, of his friends in the black intellectual community (Charles Johnson and James Weldon Johnson) and his father, from whom he inherited a progressive racial outlook. This introduction makes the point several times that Van Vechten was in no way racist or prejudiced against African Americans.<sup>22</sup> Certainly, no intelligent critic would make that claim, and it is not being made here. However, as progressive as Van Vechten was during his time, there is no doubt that his decision to title his novel the way he did was influenced by, as evidenced by Firbank’s case, a special knowledge of his audience and that controversy stimulates sales.

Yet even beyond the title, Van Vechten routinely appropriates the epithet in order to titillate his audience by breaking the taboo which he himself footnoted at the beginning of the text. After a particularly sensationalist scene at a “black mass” in Harlem, Byron and Lasca (the only complex and strong, though troubled, African American character in the

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Van Vechten’s predilection for “nigger” seems to be a catching disease; in *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance*, Coleman twice references Van Vechten’s October 1925 *Vanity Fair* article “Prescription for a Negro Theater: Being a Few Reasons Why the Great Colored Show Has Not Yet Been Achieved” as “Prescription for a Nigger Theater” (84, 88). I read this inconsistency as indicative of the freedoms which Van Vechten took with the word informing the consciousness of his critic, much in the same way it must have his 1920s white audience.

<sup>22</sup> Pfeiffer is using “racist” in the conventional way, supposing that that term includes hatred, prejudice, and illusions of genetic inferiority/superiority rather than simple awareness of racial difference.

novel) return to her apartment where she proceeds to categorically debase African Americans, from the lower to the upper class:

If you want to write about Niggers, show them up. Hit them, bully them! These raceleaders! These uplifters! They all make me sick. The black motto is: Drag down the topmost, no matter how much his influence might help you to rise... These Niggers! She cried. Well I learned about life from them. They taught me to kick my rivals. They taught me to hate everybody who got more than I did. And I'll say this: they gave me the strength with their dirty tricks to lift myself out of the muck and mire they call Negro society...Always charming - God I'm sick of that Nigger charm - but behind your back a constant bickering and whispering. Gossip! Jealously! Hatred! Smiles to your face, and a knife in the back. (NH 257-9, excerpts)

Though Byron, after long intervals, attempts to interrupt Lasca, it's not because he's attempting to correct her mortifying tirade but that he fears that in her emotional state she'll break it off with him the same as she had with all the others. When finally she does, telling him "You're just like all the others, you filthy Nigger kept boy," he reacts in what Van Vechten's white audience accepted as stereotypical black emotion, choking and finally pushing her across the room. The scene only confirms these banal beliefs in the hyperemotional, oversexed Negro when Lasca, aroused by Byron's dominance of her, calls out "Kiss me, Byron... I love you. You're so strong! I'm your slave, your own Nigger! Beat me! I'm yours to do with what you please!" (260).

If handled correctly, this over-the-top exchange could have embodied the irony which Van Vechten hoped to achieve in his title; however, Van Vechten did not have the presence of mind, artistic nuance, or inclination to present the scene as anything more than an authentic portrayal of "low" love between "high" characters in Harlem. Further,

Lasca's propitious fate in the novel (Pettijohn is killed, Byron is arrested, but her luxurious and gifted life remains untouched) does more to validate her opinions than contradict them. It's not necessary that Lasca be punished for her opinions, because that approach would certainly devolve into didacticism or propaganda, but the lack of opposing views within the novel as a whole leaves her voice, at the end, the most memorable. A similarly arresting scene with docile Mary Love simply does not and could not exist.

Ultimately, for the vast majority of Harlem Renaissance and African American literature scholars, the enduring legacy of *Nigger Heaven* is its title. In truth, the story itself is so waterlogged by melodrama and Van Vechten's attempts to authenticate Harlem with tedious minutia and details that its literary value is negligible. And yet it continues to generate criticism because it was penned not by a dismissive author looking to capitalize on an interest in African American literature, but a genuine patron of the arts whose legacy, quite opposite to that of his book, endures.

The exploitation of African American cultural material in *NH* would not have been possible if Van Vechten had not gained access to the "insider information" he used to authenticate a black experience to an audience which knew even less about it than he did. In short, it was precisely the patron identity which encouraged the participant one, and studies which separate Van Vechten from the shortcomings of his novel grasp an incomplete (what DuBois would call) half-truth. "Throughout his life, Carl Van Vechten maintained the uncanny knack of being at the right place at the right time" and his

utilization of the Harlem Renaissance moment secured him two parallel legacies, neither of which should be overlooked when appraising his influence (Pfeiffer xix).

## Common Threads

Jean Toomer exploited black culture by fabricating characters whose racialized identities or attempts to connect with an African American ethos paralyzed, distracted, or consumed them. This exploitation is predicated on his attitudes about race, and his desire to transcend race because of its apparent limitations, limitations which he used *Cane* to explain. Van Vechten, on the other hand, does not emphasize the transcendence of race, but rather the sordid stage of lower-class cabaret culture on which (as *NH* suggests) Harlem's drama inevitably plays out. By exploiting his central position within the Renaissance, the loyal support of his beneficiaries, and the hunger of the white audience for exotic material, a "violent interest in Negroes" became literary celebrity.

Each of these authors and novels shaped, to a larger extent than most others, aesthetic and philosophical models for the Harlem Renaissance. Toomer, the first self-conscious African American modernist, and Van Vechten, "patriarch" of the Renaissance, established mutual principles within their novels: a return to the primitivist literary convention, and racial essentialism defined by irreflexivity and Gurdjieffian principles of objectivity.

The Plantation school reinforced demeaning stereotypes of African Americans and dominated literary characterization between Reconstruction and the beginnings of the

Harlem Renaissance. This approach to representation of black character was dictated, in large part, by the expectations of a white audience and publisher insistence that those expectations be met. Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles Chestnutt, for the most part, were “victims” of this editorial directive which mandated characterizations of African Americans as uneducated, exotic, and primitive. In the same way that minstrel shows reinforced distorted white perceptions of blacks, Plantation school literature perpetuated ignorance. Though Chestnutt eventually stopped writing after attempting to “depict black life from a more reflexive ideological perspective” and failing to secure an audience, “Dunbar acquiesced to the degrading black racial stereotypes” and continued to write (Washington 18-19).

Though the principles of the New Negro Movement grew in direct opposition to these demeaning representations, its inability to fully break away from a past dictated by racist white expectations and an essentially unchanged publishing industry is represented by *Cane* and *NH*. Specifically, each of these novels emphasizes the same primitive attributes of African Americans which the Plantation school does, creating what Washington calls a “retrograde racial ideology”:

As a cultural outlook, this primitivist ideology suggested that the defining features of black American ethnic life consisted of its emotional vitality, its proclivity for earthiness and sensual pleasure, which set it apart from white America’s cultural sterility. This hedonistic view of black American ethnic life originated not in the black community, but in Europe where artistic and literary celebrations of primitivism, especially in reference to people of African ancestry, had become an intellectual fashion of the age. The young black American writers, through their associations with bohemian white American writers, were simply lured into this primitivist vogue, thinking [incorrectly] that they were pioneering

new, defiant, black American literary works that would engender public respect and appreciation of black American ethnic culture. (Washington 28)

The emphasis on sex in all three of *Cane*'s sections is indicative of the "proclivity for earthiness and sensual pleasure" Washington identifies as the primary attribute of primitivist literature. The centrality of women positioned as sex objects<sup>23</sup> in *Cane* emphasizes Toomer's commitment to this primitivist ideal as does his correlation between women and the earthy black American South. Even Dorris, situated firmly in the second "Northern" section, can't escape her connection to the sexualized Southern black ethos: "her singing is of canebrake loves and mangrove feastings" (*Cane* 53). Because of Toomer's unfamiliarity with Southern African American culture and his own ambivalence/uncertainty about his racial orientation, it's not surprising that he reduced African American women to agency-less stereotypes. In his 1975 introduction to the novel, Darwin Turner attempts to exonerate Toomer from popular accusations that his depiction of women suggests "women's inferiority in intellectual reasoning and the use of logic"; however, because much of this defense rests on Toomer's apparent astonishment that his ideas generated opposition at all, it's obvious that his knowledge of the subject was exclusively limited to his own conclusions (Turner xiv). The reliance of *Cane*'s female characters on sex to define them insinuates a flatness which is characteristic of primitivist images of blacks.

Without a doubt, the influence of Waldo Frank and his circle on Toomer's process played a significant role in determining the kind of novel *Cane* became. Though many of the

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<sup>23</sup> Karintha, Becky, Fern, Louisa, Avey, Dorris, Stella, Cora.

Harlem Renaissance writers were under the tutelage and direction of “bohemian white American writers,” Toomer’s case is unique because he, more than any other, personally identified with them rather than the young Harlem Renaissance writers whose blackness circumscribed their identities. What makes Toomer’s inclusion in this “primitivist vogue” more apparent is, as explained before, his interest in portraying Negro life and identity as inferior to a transcendental American one, a premise which he developed during his relationship with Frank; primitivism, obviously, helps establish a disparity. In this way, Toomer participates in what Washington calls the “co-optive hegemony” that “achieved the greatest notoriety and influence in the American public culture” (117).

Similarly, Van Vechten’s approach to portraying an African American culture in Harlem relies on exoticized fantasies. Lasca Sartoris is a prime example of a black woman who rises from low circumstances to high society yet retains what white readers would regard as stereotypical black values and character traits, particularly over-the-top emotions and hypersexualized behavior. Mary, predictably, serves as Lasca’s foil, reflecting in her own whiteness Lasca’s blackness, and reinforcing for the white reader the stereotypes which helped define an inaccessible Harlem way of life downtown. Assessing her own passions, Mary concludes that “the Negro blood was there, warm and passionately earnest: all her preferences and prejudices were on the side of the race into which she had been born. She was as capable, she was convinced, of amorous emotion, as any of her friends, but the fact remained she was more selective” (*NH* 54). Van Vechten both polarizes black and white (“on side of the race”) and sexualizes blackness in order to generate a monolithic vision which prescribes temperance and logic to whiteness while

attributing hedonism and emotion to blacks. Mary's position as a curator of African artifacts further validates her perceptions of authentic blackness, and her description of these pieces as "primitive" (55-56) reinforces white-dominated perceptions. The universe of a primitivist work necessarily creates this gap between audience and subject in order to magnify the difference.

The effectiveness of *NH* relies, inevitably, on Van Vechten's perceived position within the Harlem Renaissance community, and this makes the delineation all the more exploitative. Because the uneducated white audience acknowledged his authority on all things Harlem, they accepted his depiction of licentious and fiery blacks as truth. This truth of Van Vechten's depictions relied on anecdotal stories (the account of Christophe on 122-125 is indicative) and details, faithfully recorded in his notebook, which supported superficial white familiarity with black culture; Byron's lunch of "batter-bread and chittlings" authenticates the rest of his actions as derivative of black culture, a small detail fortifying larger generalizations (*NH* 216).

Because each author emphasizes the details and trappings of race in order to create easily digested primitive cultural pictures, they engage in literary essentialism. In addition, publishing constraints during the Harlem Renaissance placed upon African American literature, regardless of the author's race, require that the text communicate the "mythologized version" of black culture rather than any other (Young 17). The connection between essentialism and stereotype is obvious, but the unique philosophical perspective of each author explains why, beyond market pressures, their novels reduce an

African American ethos to easily digestible caricatures reminiscent of the Plantation school's primitivist mode.

Primitivism, ultimately, has its basis in essentialism because "one of the basic tasks of essentialism is the simplification of culture and social institutions" (Mayer 7).

Essentialism, because of its reductive nature, places its practitioner in a position of author-ity to describe culture as he sees it rather than as it might be; the effectiveness of the portrait is always predicated on the knowledge of the painter. Both Van Vechten and Toomer are observers of black culture rather than members and this detachment prevents any reflexivity between themselves and their subject. Stephan Fuchs clarifies the role of the reflexive observer; "Reflexive observers observe themselves and distinguish themselves from other observers, who are themselves reflexive or not. Reflexive observing is not some "higher" or "advanced" mode of observing, as if capable of discovering something very special or unique that is inaccessible to "lower" observers, who are unable to observe themselves" (Fuchs 20).

In Toomer's case, the connection between his subject ("it is black folks whom I have been talking about"(*Cane* 15)) and himself, the first conscious member of a "new race," violates standards of reflexivity because Toomer considers his observations of primitive, agrarian blacks as "advanced." The separation between himself and his subject reduces blackness to a series of essentialized cultural traits explained anthropologically by a "higher" and detached consciousness. This detachment is reflected in the voice of the

narrator, most notably during “Fern,” when it addresses the audience directly, creating a Northern dialogue distant from the South and beyond the reach of the static characters.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, Van Vechten observes and describes black culture from beyond its borders. Although he’s literarily present in Johns and Durwood, the interactions of those characters with black ones are always circumscribed by white authority and knowledge. Byron is twice, as excerpted previously, humiliated or criticized by the more advanced white voice. In talking over Byron’s head, Durwood in particular initiates, just as Toomer’s “Fern” narrator did, a secondary dialogue between himself and the (white) reader which reasserts myths of black intellectual inferiority and child-like understanding.<sup>25</sup> Van Vechten’s and Toomer’s self-styled voices/narrators do not interact with black characters on an equal plane and avoiding reflexivity allows each the distance to essentialize the primitive other.

Gurdjieffian literary principles are perhaps the most striking shared influence on each writer which encouraged essentialist depictions of black culture. At the center of this complex literary system is “objectivity,” a term misunderstood outside of its peculiar origin in this context. As Woodson explains, “objectivity” in the Gurdjieffian sense utilizes coded meanings, literary palimpsests, and embedded text in order to accomplish detachment from identity, critique of the process of reading, and destabilize societal

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<sup>24</sup> Fern’s static-ness, a trait shared by many of the other characters, is punctuated at the end of the story: “Nothing ever came to Fern, not even I” (17).

<sup>25</sup> The comparison of Byron’s fiction to a “Rollo book” most likely refers to a series of juvenile fiction books written by Jacob Ascott in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Durwood’s use of that esoteric reference situates Byron in a childlike position (because the Rollo books are written for children, Durwood supposes that Byron would be familiar with them?).

constructions. For the most part, these goals were not met; “it was beyond the capacity of the Harlem group<sup>26</sup> to create ‘objective’ art because they were insufficiently advanced in the Gurdjieff work, and their writings often expressed little more than a rudimentary and rote grasp of esoteric concepts” (Woodson 24). The perversion of Gurdjieff’s “objective” resulted in fiction which attempted, as *Cane* shows, to undermine positive notions of race or group identity in favor of a transcendental humanness. In fact, Toomer was, as mentioned earlier, instrumental in adding an anti-racialist component to the system which Woodson illustrates:

The text will perform an “attack on race.” The mimetic level of the text will take the form of a satire in which every form of racialism, color consciousness, and race consciousness is ridiculed. The thesis presented in the text is that racialism can only be combated by fostering in each individual a sense of internal freedom from external influences. (Woodson 27)

An argument could be made that *Cane* does not participate in this “attack,” except for the fact that Toomer was instrumental in developing this principle, and so undoubtedly believed very strongly in its premise. Furthermore, the characterizations presented earlier in conjunction with establishing *Cane* as an exploitative text suggest that race consciousness is a negative force which stunts individual growth.

Van Vechten’s influence within this Gurdjieffian framework is, if not equal to Toomer’s, an adequate replacement. “In an important sense, the gap left when Jean Toomer moved away from New York in 1926 was filled by Carl Van Vechten” (Woodson 9). The basis of this assertion rests not only on the mixed-race parties Van Vechten hosted (Woodson

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<sup>26</sup> Woodson includes Thurman, Hurston, Schuyler, Fisher, and Larsen in this group led by Orage and Toomer.

calls it “antiracist social engineering”) but more importantly on the inspiration he provided to the Harlem group after Toomer’s departure. Though Toomer introduced the Harlem *avant garde* to Gurdjieff and objectivism, Van Vechten crystallized the literary approach and, although strict guidelines of Gurdjieff’s vision were simplified and changed,<sup>27</sup> managed to produce what the Harlem group considered, in the words of Eric Walrond, a novel which “abounds in objectivity and truth” (qtd. in Woodson 10).

The racially-centered concept of “objectivity” embraced by Toomer and Van Vechten created a sub-aesthetic within the Harlem group. The gateway, discussed earlier, was Toomer’s formulation of a antiracist component while he studied under Gurdjieff in France (1924). After his departure in 1926, the Harlem group looked to Van Vechten, who had steadily risen in the ranks of the Harlem Renaissance vanguard, and he provided them with an example, in *NH*, of objective writing. His “objective,” however, was not necessarily congruent with the Gurdjieffian emphasis on “irony, narrative obscurity, and textual difficulty” (Woodson 10). Though Van Vechten never outright defines what his conception of objectivity is, a letter written to Langston Hughes during the initial drafting of *NH* suggests that objectivity is juxtaposed against emotion: “I’m very unsettled about Nigger Heaven. I get too emotional when writing it and what one needs in writing is a calm, cold eye. Perhaps future revisions may be made in that spirit” (Letters 34).

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<sup>27</sup> Because of the secrecy which surrounded the Gurdjieffian meetings at this time, details about how the doctrine evolved in the hands of the Harlem Renaissance literati are vague or unsubstantiated. As Woodson points out, “How the form of this literary attack on race was conceived, coordinated, and evaluated can only be determined in so far as the examination of the texts will allow” (11).

Van Vechten and Toomer took from the Gurdjieff system concepts of objectivity and, because of the complexity of the system and uncertain communal definitions of its application, applied that principle in order to create essential images of blackness. In so doing, they opened up “new” avenues of representation that, ironically, relied on preexisting primitivist ideologies which reduced the African American ethos to stereotypes. These stereotypes, veiled by reinterpreted concepts of objectivity, were ultimately meant not as reflexive analyses of race but exoticized depictions in keeping with white audience expectations.

Today, the majority of criticism on *Cane* extols its virtues as a hybrid modernist text and criticizes *NH* for exploiting the cult of the “New Negro” for white audiences drawn to the exoticism and mystery of Harlem. For each, a smaller number of critics reverses these opinions, urging a closer reading of *NH* and less tolerance of *Cane*’s obvious critiques of racialized identity. In reality, both views are correct because the authors are united by an exploitation of the African American ethos and subscription to exoticized, objectified, and essentialized visions of blackness. As a result, neither the positive nor negative aspects of each author’s philosophy and literary output should be overemphasized against the other. Both authors were torn by their own identity within the Harlem Renaissance ethic and rigid, sometimes inflammatory, views of race. Van Vechten believed that characters of any race were reducible to “gestures,” and “as he developed the novel’s black characters, Van Vechten noted, ‘it never occurred to me that they would behave differently than other people. I wrote about them exactly as if they were white’” (Pfeiffer xxii). Similarly, Toomer’s distance from the rural Georgia folk, as well as the

unconscious hybrid narrators, led him to create them as he perceived through his own lens. With this in mind, it's unavoidable that each author would essentialize his subject in order to effectively communicate a marketable, authoritative, and authenticized vision of blackness in a novel. Regardless of whether or not the texts are representative of or belong in the Harlem Renaissance canon, they reveal philosophical, attitudinal, and personal reflections on race in America and should be read not as moments within a movement but explorations within distinct lives.

The essentialist worldview embraced by Toomer and Van Vechten is an evolution of primitivist writing by and about blacks prior to 1920, as well as a manifestation of altered concepts of "objectivity" and resulting emphasis on irreflexivity. *Cane* and *NH* are direct emanations of this philosophy and, although not motivated by the dominant ideals of the intellectual New Negro Movement, central to understanding the diversity, complexity, and individualist motivations of the literary Harlem Renaissance. Because of the primacy of these authors within the Renaissance, their contributions, both in print and not, helped shape discourse, convention, and reception and necessitate careful exploration without gratuitous reverence. Toomer and Van Vechten exploited an African American ethos at the same time they contributed to it, and their novels should not be separated from their extra-textual identities.

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