

**S**tudents of *Cane* have long been aware that the "Sempter" of Toomer's text is Sparta, seat of Hancock County in central Georgia. Toomer himself freely acknowledged his text's close connection with the locale where he had lived for three months in the fall of 1921 while serving as substitute principal for the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute. In 1922 Toomer wrote to Sherwood Anderson, "My seed was planted in the cane- and cotton-fields, and in the souls of black and white people in the small southern town. My seed was planted in *myself* down there." In a 1923 letter to the *Liberator*, Toomer remarked, "A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting-point of almost everything of worth that I have done." To Waldo Frank, Toomer explicitly identified the site of his inspiration when he complained in July of 1922 that "[t]he impulse [*sic*] which sprung from Sparta, Georgia last fall has just about fulfilled and spent itself." In his letters to Frank, Toomer particularly stressed the autobiographical basis of *Cane*'s final section, noting in April of 1922 that "Kabnis" was "the direct result of a trip I made down into Georgia this past fall" and that he wished it "to remain as an immediate record of my first contact with Southern life." Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's decision during a Southern trip to "visi[t] the academy where Jean Toomer had taught for a short period and received much of the inspiration for *Cane*" indicates that for many years *Cane* enthusiasts have been aware of the text's geographical referent. Subsequent critics have taken as axiomatic the profound impression made on Toomer by his visit to rural Georgia, where he discovered a black peasant life that unleashed his poetic imagination and inspired one of the classic texts of modern African American letters.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this widespread recognition of *Cane's* grounding in the Sparta environs, critics have not adequately explored Toomer's representation of Sparta in his text. Sparta is routinely treated as little more than a backdrop to the soul-searching undergone by a light-skinned, middle-class artist suddenly landed among black rural and small-town folk; the actual procedures by which Toomer transformed Sparta into Sempter have received little attention. The result of this neglect has been not only to dehistoricize the category of "identity," rendering it a subjective rather than social phenomenon, but also to downplay the nature and extent of *Cane's* specific historical reference. Many critics treat the South of *Cane* as a mythic realm defying the incursions of history. But even critics who acknowledge the historical particularity of Toomer's Sempter—its racial violence, economic exploitation, tangled religiosity, and intra-racial color prejudice—see these features of Georgia life more as providing a vivid physical and sociological landscape than as supplying a knowledge essential to the project of decoding the hermeneutics of *Cane*.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere I have examined *Cane's* relationship to the economy of Hancock County and to certain episodes of racial violence contemporaneous with Toomer's visit—in particular, to the NAACP's antilynching campaign of the early 1920s and to the case of the notorious Monticello, Georgia, "Death Farm," where eleven black debt peons were murdered by a white plantation owner a mere six months before Toomer's arrival in nearby Sparta. I have argued that, despite his tendency to fetishize labor processes and romanticize the relation of black agricultural workers to the land, Toomer engages with the actualities of Southern racism in *Cane* far more concretely than is often supposed. In this essay I propose to trace the political subtext accompanying Toomer's fictional treatment of a series of actual Sparta inhabitants, both white and black. As his biographers note, Toomer had acquired from his grandfather a "penchant for creating names to suit the person, occasion, and mood"; in *Cane* close attention to names—both those alluding to contemporaneous people and places and those playing upon past historical referents—offers important insight into Toomer's transposition of context into text. Through nomenclature, Toomer gave rein to impulses ranging from the satirical to the insurrectionary; an examination of the relation of historical features of Sparta to fictional features of Sempter reveals Toomer's pronounced antipathy to controlling elites, both black and white, as well as a strong

(if somewhat veiled) sympathy with rebels against the dominant hierarchy. Toomer may have written in a densely symbolistic modernist idiom, but he did not substitute myth for history.<sup>3</sup>



"Toomer does not impress me as one who knows his Georgia," W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1923, "but he does know human beings." Du Bois's "impression" was largely inaccurate: Toomer's insight into human behavior did not preclude close attention to his Georgia setting. Many of *Cane's* represented localities are portrayed with considerable historical verisimilitude. The "dull silver . . . tower" that Kabnis sees across the valley between the school and Sempter belongs to the high-towered Victorian-era courthouse that to this day dominates the hilly center of Sparta. Broad Street, the site of Fred Halsey's wheelwright business, Esther's phantasmagoric wanderings, and Tom Burwell's capture by a lynch mob, was and is the main artery through town. The well which serves as a gathering place in "Blood-Burning Moon" is one of three that were situated along Broad Street in 1920s Sparta. Halsey's wheelwright's shop is, moreover, a close replica of the "Old Rock Shop," a former stagecoach stop and smithy that stood right off Broad Street from 1819 to 1927 and was, according to one local historian, "of much interest to visitors." A traveler to Sparta in the early 1920s described the "Old Rock Shop" as having walls "of plaster blackened by many smokes and perhaps a fire or two. . . , speedily falling to decay, but underneath show[ing] the bare red granite, sturdy and ageless." The panes and windows were "broken in many places," and "[l]eaning against the sides of the building [were] numerous old wagon wheels, ancient as the shop itself." This account corresponds in many particulars with Toomer's description of Halsey's shop: "The walls to within a few feet of the ground are of an age-worn cement mixture. . . . Inside, the plaster has fallen away in great chunks, leaving the laths, grayed and cobwebbed, exposed. . . . The shop is filled with old wheels and parts of wheels, broken shafts, and wooden litter. . . . A window with as many panes broken as whole, throws light on the bench."<sup>4</sup>

Toomer's descriptions of the immediate environs of Sempter also would have been recognizable to anyone familiar with the Sparta area. The schoolhouse where Kabnis teaches—a "large frame house, squatting on brick pillars"—replicates the building featured in the brochure

for the 1921–1922 school year at the Sparta A and I. At the time of Toomer's visit, there existed on the western end of Sparta a black community called Dixie, originally "a colony composed of superannuated slaves," which became "quite a populous village" after the Civil War. Dixie was reached by a road called the Dixie Pike, which appears in *Cane* as the thoroughfare "grown from a goat path in Africa" where Carma drives her wagon. The Sparta A and I was located west and slightly south of Dixie, just outside Sparta, and Toomer probably regularly traveled along the Dixie Pike on his way into town—as is suggested by the narrator's comment in "Fern" that "[i]f you walked up the Dixie Pike most any time of day, you'd be most like to see [Fern] resting listless-like on the railing of her porch."<sup>5</sup>

The Ebenezer church mentioned several times in *Cane* corresponds with the Ebenezer church of which the prominent Sparta-born Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) churchman Lucius Holsey was an early pastor. Erected in 1879 and demolished shortly after Toomer's 1921 visit, the Ebenezer church was located in the Powelton Road area northeast of the town center. It was adjacent to both the road and the railroad line leading out of the east end of Sparta. The road to Pulverton along which the narrator and Barlo travel in "Becky" is similar to the actual road to Culverton, where the railroad and the road still run closely parallel for several hundred yards. On trips to Culverton Toomer himself must have seen the "narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road" on which he located Becky's publicly exposed shack; from this spot he could have heard the tolling of the bell of nearby Ebenezer church.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the fictional "factory town" that furnishes the site of Tom Burwell's lynching in "Blood-Burning Moon" corresponds closely with the Montour village, a pre-Civil War cotton mill community, also known as the "Old Factory," which was originally within the Sparta city limits. In the early 1920s the forty-acre Montour factory grounds were frequently used for agricultural fairs and political rallies; the factory building itself, however, had not been used for many years and stood in a state of disrepair, full of rotting floorboards like those used to build the bonfire in which Burwell is burned alive. In his descriptions of both Sempter and its immediate environs, Toomer was clearly drawing in detail upon his memories of Sparta and inviting knowledgeable readers to recognize familiar terrain.<sup>7</sup>

Toomer also assigned to several of *Cane*'s white characters the

names of actual Sparta inhabitants. Although some of these names are given to minor characters mentioned only in passing, a number of Toomer's references suggest a common satiric intent. In "Esther," for instance, two white characters are assigned names associated with prominent Sparta families. "Old Limp Underwood," who is said to have "hated niggers" but who, as a consequence of Barlo's preaching, "woke up next morning to find that he held a black man in his arms," presumably belongs to the Underwood family, whose landmark house had stood in Sparta since the mid-nineteenth century and was at the time of Toomer's visit inhabited by the aged Carrie Underwood. Banker Warply, who parks his car to "await the prophet's voice" (21), may take his name from the Atlanta-based banking firm Robinson and Humphrey Wardlaw, which transferred bonds to a nearby Davisboro bank during the Sparta sinking fund scandal. This scandal, a notorious affair involving adultery, embezzlement, and suicide, resulted in a 1921 trial that was, according to the *Atlanta Constitution*, "one of the most important [cases] to be tried in Hancock County in many years." Reaching its termination just around the time Toomer arrived in Sparta, this newsworthy trial could not have escaped his notice. The writer's possible play upon "Wardlaw" (protector of the law) and "Warply" (distorter of the law) can be taken as a glancing allusion to this scandal.<sup>8</sup>

Such historical references take on resonance in the context of the tale's commentary on race relations. In "Esther" the preacher Barlo offers one of *Cane's* most explicit denunciations of slavery—namely, Barlo's sermon about the "big an black an powerful" man who had his feet "tied . . . to chains" by "little white-ant biddies" who took him to a "new coast [that] wasnt free." The "new coast" is still not free, since Barlo's magnetic display of black pride prompts the sheriff to "swea[r] in three deputies" and "white and black preachers [to] confer as to how best to rid themselves of the vagrant, usurping fellow." Toomer's assigning the names of Sparta's white elite to spellbound members of Barlo's fictional audience implies a continuity between the slavetraders who kidnapped Barlo's folk hero and the "little white-ant biddies" who police and control this hero's descendants.<sup>9</sup>

Toomer's critique of the white elite's pretensions to superiority is furthered by his choice of the name *Stone* for a father-son pair appearing in two different sketches. In "Becky" it is John Stone who secretly furnishes the bricks and lumber out of which Becky's ramshackle

house is built. In "Blood-Burning Moon," Tom Burwell works for "ole Stone." Moreover, John Stone's son, Northern-educated Bob Stone, is drawn to Louisa as man to woman rather than master to servant—"Why nigger? Why not, just gal?"—but regrets the "sneaking that he had to go through" and reflects that his "friends up North" would be "incredible, repulsed" by his behavior. He consoles himself for historical loss—"His family had lost ground"—with a reminder of continuing hegemony: "Hell no, his family still owned the niggers, practically." Both father and son end up destroying the rural poor whose lives they touch. Becky is buried beneath John Stone's bricks when her chimney collapses. Bob Stone, himself a victim of Burwell's jealous rage, precipitates Burwell's lynching by a group of "white men . . . rush[ing] about . . . like ants upon a forage." "[W]hite-ant biddies" are once again associated with the suppression—here, the murder—of a powerful black male.<sup>10</sup>

Readers familiar with the Hancock County of the early twentieth century would readily recognize John and Bob Stone as members of the Stone family based in Linton, a small town about ten miles south of Sparta. The Stones were a four-generational family of doctors whose male founder, Dr. John Stone, had moved south from Vermont, building in 1837 the "elegant and romantic" house that was one of Hancock County's architectural landmarks at the time of Toomer's visit. John Stone's son, Dr. Robert Glenn Stone—a country doctor who is said to have "kept the oath of Hippocrates" for "rich and poor alike"—had two sons who both became doctors: John Julian (b. 1874) and Robert Glenn Jr. (b. 1881). John Julian, the probable prototype for Toomer's John Stone, performed "untiring . . . service during the influenza epidemic of 1917–1918" and took as his motto the dictum, "One's masterpiece could be painted even in a cabin." Robert Glenn Stone Jr. practiced first with his brother and then with his father in Georgia but moved back north after World War I. Toomer altered the Stone genealogy by making his Bob Stone the son rather than the brother of John Stone. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Stones of Hancock County, with their historical links to both North and South and their careers of social service, furnished Toomer with appropriate targets for his commentary on the inevitably destructive effects of race and class privilege.<sup>11</sup>

*Cane's* most resonant echo of the name of a prominent white Spartan, however, is his choice of the name "Burwell" for Toomer's black

hero in "Blood-Burning Moon." William Hix Burwell, described by Hancock County historian Forrest Shivers as a "windbag politician," defeated the infamous Populist Tom Watson in an election to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1918 and was serving as Speaker of the House when Toomer visited Sparta in 1921. He was, moreover, a wealthy Sparta businessman who had formed the Sparta Telephone Company in 1902 and built a neo-Georgian house on a Sparta street named after his family. Most significantly for our purposes here, in 1900 Burwell had attempted unsuccessfully to raise capital to rebuild the Montour textile mill. William H. Burwell had thus aspired to be the owner of a renovated factory on the site of the antebellum cotton mill where Tom Burwell is lynched in Toomer's text.<sup>12</sup>

Critics have both praised and faulted "Blood-Burning Moon" for its mythic treatment of Tom Burwell's lynching. Alain Solard argues that the story is only incidentally about a lynching: as the narrative unfolds, the "outline of reality gives way to the haunting presence of a visionary world." Donald Gibson agrees that an aura of supernatural necessity surrounds the omnipresent image of the moon but complains of its reactionary effects: "[T]he orientation of the tale is unworldly since its events point away from the natural world toward forces outside time and history. . . . The tale's supernatural referent can only give the impression that the two vying males are acting out roles determined in a context far larger than either knows." Despite their differing assessments of the implications of Toomer's mythic fatalism, both Solard and Gibson hold that the tale's articulation of causality is essentially ahistorical.<sup>13</sup>

Toomer's decision to name his black hero after one of Georgia's best-known white politicians, however, makes it difficult to read "Blood-Burning Moon" as wholly removed from contemporaneous personalities and events. At the very least, Toomer's play with the name of Burwell—like his use of the names Underwood, Wardlaw, and Stone—signals the writer's thumbing of his nose at the "white ant-biddies" in Sparta's local elite. It also conveys Toomer's sympathetic identification with the descendants of Sparta's slaves. Unlike some other Hancock County families that had formerly owned slaves, the Burwells did not have an elite mixed-race branch in Sparta. Hence any black Burwells that Toomer might have encountered during his stay in Sparta would have been, like Tom Burwell, dark-skinned—and probably field laborers as well. Tom Burwell is, then, not merely a black man who



has a quarrel with a white man over a woman but an instrument of revenge against the enslavers of his forebears. The situation of Tom's lynching in the ruins of an antebellum factory that a descendant of those enslavers had hoped to bring back into operation only reinforces this point and, above all, connects past and present exploitation. While Gibson may be right that Tom and Bob act out their roles "in a context far larger than either knows," this larger context has less to do with fatalistic lunar omens than with the controlling hierarchy of class and race. In this connection, the tale's recurrent motif—

Red nigger moon. Sinner!  
 Blood-burning moon. Sinner!  
 Come out that fact'ry door—

is susceptible to a historically specific reading. Is the "Sinner" bidden to come out of the factory any person—black or white—who ignores the fatalistic omen of the red moon, as both Solard and Gibson argue? Or is the "Sinner" a member of the historical Burwell clan, burdened with "Blood-burning" crimes, who is being called to account at the gates of his domain? As Nellie McKay comments, when Tom Burwell dies, "the rotting floorboards of the crumbling edifice of white power are being destroyed with him."<sup>14</sup>

*Cane's* multiple references to Sparta's prominent white families reveal that—at least for readers able to pick up his clues—Toomer is offering a pointed commentary on racial and class inequalities, past and present. Indeed, once one recognizes Toomer's veiled historical allusions, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to read *Cane* as an abstractly lyrical representation of Southern life: historicity molds interpretation. But we have as yet examined only the tip of the historical iceberg in *Cane*. Toomer's social critique is significantly deepened and extended by his allusions to a number of important Sparta-area blacks, both contemporaneous and earlier. Although Toomer was clearly loath to declare open partisanship, his veiled references to these figures convey unambiguous admiration for the black insurgent and antipathy to the Uncle Tom. Members of the white elite do not furnish the only targets for Toomer's satire.

The single most important play upon names in *Cane* is contained in the book's title. Various critics have ruminated over possible word-plays. Charles Scruggs has suggested a connection between cane the plant and cane the walking stick. Moreover, he and others have dis-



cerned a pun on Cain, the fugitive son of Adam and Eve, who, in proslavery biblical interpretation, is said to have founded the "race" of slaves. African Americans of Toomer's generation used the expression "working like Cain" to denote hard labor. Alain Locke, playing on a motif of vengeance commonly associated with the biblical Cain, wrote to Toomer in 1922, "I cannot resist the wretched pun that I hope the book will raise Cane." Scholars familiar with Toomer's idiosyncratic spelling have also noted the oddity of his repeatedly calling his book *Cain* in autobiographical writings composed almost a decade later. In a note to one such misspelling in Toomer's unpublished autobiography, for example, Darwin Turner remarks, "I cannot explain the reason for this interesting spelling error in the typed manuscript. The reference obviously is to *Cane*."<sup>15</sup>

Turner and other *Cane* critics have apparently been unaware of an incident in local Hancock County history that Toomer, through his contacts with Sparta's black community, may well have heard spoken of during his 1921 visit—namely, an 1863 slave rebellion largely masterminded by one John Cain, a slave subsequently executed for his leadership role. Cain, a painter by trade, served as lieutenant in the group of thirty-four insurgents. In newspaper coverage of the rebels' trial, he was reported to have declared that "they ought to be free and that the company would have to fight for their freedom. His plan was to 'fight their way through' to Sparta, into 'private houses' and take arms and ammunition, then 'fire' Sparta and head for the Yankee troops." When the insurrection failed, Georgia historian Kent Leslie notes, "all four of the ringleaders [Dick Shaw, Spencer Beasley, Mack Simmons, and Cain] were tried in the Superior Court of Hancock County—and convicted of attempting to incite an insurrection and sentenced to hang." In sentencing the four, the presiding judge emphasized that he was enforcing laws enacted "for no other purpose, but keeping the slave in subordination."<sup>16</sup>

We cannot be certain that Toomer heard of the 1863 rebellion during his Sparta sojourn. If the garrulous characters Layman and Halsey in "Kabnis" correspond at all closely to actual people Toomer met, however, it is likely that Toomer's informants on local history would have spoken of the rebellion. Moreover, Toomer may have inquired into this facet of Sparta history, since he had been reading about slavery before his trip to Sparta and, in his *Cane*-era journal, voiced a clear-sighted appreciation of the suffering that had generated the slave songs: "The

Negro slave, ill-housed and fed, driven relentlessly to an unrewarded labor, beaten, maimed and killed, separated from his loved ones, and denied even the vestiges of justice and liberty, gave to the world, in exchange for its bitterness, a song." In this journal he also expressed openly anticapitalist sentiments, noting that "[i]f the workers could bellow, 'We want Power,' the walls of capitalism would collapse." He viewed himself as a spy in enemy territory: "It is evidence of weakness that men like myself are not forced into the service of the governing class, or exiled, or murdered." Whether we view such statements as serious expressions of revolutionary sympathy or as sophomoric experiments with revolutionary rhetoric, it is clear that the Toomer who traveled south in 1921 was prepared to view John Cain as a hero.<sup>17</sup>

To argue that Toomer may have titled *Cane* with John Cain in mind is not to argue that he did not also wish to invoke the sensuous motif of boiling cane that suffuses the text—or, for that matter, walking sticks or a son of Adam and Eve. As I have argued elsewhere, Toomer's grasp of economics was somewhat shallow, and during his harvest-season sojourn he was entranced by the image of unalienated peasants extracting use values from the Georgia soil, as is evidenced by the omnipresent figure of David Georgia. But the text's allusion to Sparta's most famous antiracist fighter requires us to readjust the lenses of both race and gender through which we read the text's pastoral. Male characters like Barlo and Tom Burwell assume a new centrality in the opening Georgia section of the text. Instead of being exceptional characters in a landscape dominated by largely passive earth mothers, they stand forth as inheritors of a historic—and, for Toomer, largely male-identified—mantle of resistance. In the light of a possible allusion to John Cain in the text's title, it becomes increasingly difficult to argue, as Lawrence Hogue does, that *Cane* is "silent on the hate, the rebellious young blacks," of the 1920s South. Even as Toomer aestheticizes rural poverty, history insistently erupts onto the scene. With John Cain a looming presence behind the motif of cane, any reading of the text as a nostalgic evocation of a people "caroling softly songs of slavery" is deeply problematized.<sup>18</sup>

If the allusion to John Cain summons up a heroic past, the text's references to certain contemporaneous black Spartans limn a less than heroic present. Two figures appearing in the "Kabnis" section of *Cane*, the school principal Hanby and the wheelwright Halsey, are of particu-

lar importance in signaling Toomer's critical assessment of Sparta's black elite.

Toomer's vituperative portrait of Hanby—boot-licking with wealthy whites, authoritarian with subordinate blacks—anticipates Ralph Ellison's caricature of the Southern black educator, Dr. A. Hebert Bledsoe, in *Invisible Man*. Toomer did not have to rely entirely on his imagination for this satiric sketch. The real-life prototype of *Cane's* Hanby was, in part, Linton Stephens Ingraham, the founder and principal of Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute, who in 1921 hired Toomer to replace him while he journeyed to New England to raise funds for his school. Born a slave to Linton Stephens, one of Sparta's most intransigent white supremacists, Ingraham (whose name was sometimes spelled "Ingram") set up the Institute in 1910 and persuaded Sparta's white citizenry to incorporate it into the city's school system in 1914. "Ingraham proceeded with due circumspection," comments Shivers, and "never forgot the necessity of maintaining good relations with the white community while struggling to maintain and improve his school."<sup>19</sup>

That Ingraham worked hard to further the cause of black education in a situation of extreme duress is undeniable. A report on one of Ingraham's talks during his 1921 New England fund-raising trip noted that the visiting principal "spoke of the increasing demand for education, and of the obstacles in the way, such as poverty, the employment of children in the fields, of the failure of the crops through the boll-weevil, drought, etc., and of the non-enforcement of the compulsory school laws." Ingraham raised thirty-four dollars on this occasion. While cut-backs in public funds from the collapse of the cotton market necessitated the early closing of all Sparta schools, both black and white, in the spring of 1921, the racial inequities in public education were nonetheless stark. W. E. B. Du Bois, writing about Georgia education in 1926, when the immediate economic crisis had been somewhat alleviated, noted that in Sparta "expenditures for white and colored are entirely disproportionate." White teachers earned an average annual salary of \$7,549.78; black teachers earned \$702.00. Although blacks constituted 69% of school-age children, nothing was spent on equipment in their schools, whereas \$993.87 was spent on equipment in white schools; nothing was spent on black students' supplies, whereas \$833.26 was spent on whites'. Clearly Ingraham had to curry the favor

of philanthropists and travel out of state to raise funds if he wanted his school to survive.<sup>20</sup>

In order to carry out his mission, however, Ingraham seems to have been compelled to play the role of an Uncle Tom. He was a popular figure with the opinion makers on the *Sparta Ishmaelite*, who noted on the principal's return from his trip north that "[t]he white and colored people of this city and county should be proud of the work that he is doing to educate and elevate his people." Moreover, in response to the horrific Williams "Death Farm" trial in nearby Newton County some six months before, Ingraham had joined with two other prominent Sparta blacks—D. W. Ingram of the solidly middle-class Ingram family and Professor N. G. Barnes of the Sparta A and I—to write a sycophantic letter to the *Ishmaelite*:

We fully realize that we are passing through the most crucial period in our county's history.

The crime wave seems to be abroad in the land. We have many things to be thankful for here in our county, chiefly among them are the peaceable relations between the two races. . . .

We fully realize that no county can prosper where it's [*sic*] citizens do not, as a whole, cooperate. As citizens we wish to assure the law-abiding white citizens that we stand for law and order and our every interest is for the uplift of our county.

It bears noting that the murders on the Williams farm—euphemistically referred to here as a "crime wave"—had occurred because some black workers imprisoned there had been suspected of testifying to federal investigators about debt peonage. At a time when racial terror was peaking in central Georgia, Ingraham and his cohorts were praising the elite of Hancock County for their forbearance and assuring them that Sparta's blacks would "cooperate"—meaning, presumably, *not* testify if asked.<sup>21</sup>

While in Georgia, Toomer no doubt felt it necessary to suppress his skepticism in dealing with Ingraham, who not only was his employer but also had made it possible for Toomer to find temporarily "a way out of the cul-de-sac" of living with his aged and ailing grandparents. Moreover, according to Nellie McKay, Ingraham was a friend of Toomer's grandfather, Reconstruction-era Louisiana Acting Governor P. B. S. Pinchback. Toomer was nursing his dying grandfather during the composition of "Kabnis"; emotional delicacy may have prevented

him from more explicitly labeling the target of his satire. In *Cane's* fictional portrait of the "cockroach Hanby," nonetheless, Toomer's venom overflowed:

He is a well-dressed, smooth, rich, black-skinned Negro who thinks there is no one quite so suave and polished as himself. To members of his own race, he affects the manners of a wealthy white planter. Or, when he is up North, he lets it be known that his ideas are those of the best New England tradition. To white men he bows, without ever completely humbling himself. Tradesman in the town tolerate him because he spends his money with them. He delivers his words with a full consciousness of his moral superiority.<sup>22</sup>

Hanby is an unambiguous exemplar of the Booker T. Washington position in the early-twentieth-century debate over black education and civil rights waged between the Tuskegee educator and Du Bois. Hanby's chastisement of the dissolute Kabnis is couched in recognizably Washingtonian rhetoric:

[T]he progress of the Negro race is jeopardized whenever the personal habits and examples set by its guides and mentors fall below the acknowledged and hard-won standard of its average member. This institution, of which I am the humble president, was founded, and has been maintained at a cost of great labor and untold sacrifice. Its purpose is to teach our youth to live better, cleaner, more noble lives. To prove to the world that the Negro race can be just like any other race.

This formulation comes directly, of course, from *Up From Slavery*, where Washington advocated self-help, humility, and moral purity as the prerequisites for black progress. Du Bois, contending that Washington's position "has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators," urged that the (white) South "do her full duty to the race she has cruelly wronged and is still wronging." Toomer's satiric caricature of Washington in Hanby suggests the young writer's ideological alignment with Du Bois in this important debate among black intellectuals.<sup>23</sup>

That Toomer identified himself with Du Bois is indicated, furthermore, by an implied parallel between the autobiographical Kabnis and the radical educator. In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois had written mov-

ingly of his experiences as a teacher of black sharecroppers living in "cabins and farmhouses . . . [s]prinkled over hill and dale" near the "blue and yellow mountains" of backwoods Tennessee. But he concluded that the South was "an armed camp for intimidating black folk" and lamented the persistence of Jim Crow institutions breeding "an ignorant, turbulent proletariat." Despite his resolve to live in Atlanta, Du Bois could never shed his detestation of the "hot red soil" of Georgia, the "Land of the Color Line" where he "could not lay . . . in the ground" the body of his dead first-born. Kabnis, with his fading idealism, his tortured sensitivity to the "serene loveliness of the Georgian autumn moonlight," and his antipathy to the "powdery faded red dust . . . of slavefields," articulates a Du Boisian ambivalence toward the project of Southern pedagogy. This ambivalence was all the more pronounced, we may speculate, because Toomer, as substitute principal at the Sparta A and I, inherited Ingraham's mantle of authority and "was required to visit homes, businesses, and churches" as the school's institutional representative. To be placed in the position of administering a school founded on Washingtonian principles of accommodation must have been difficult indeed for the young writer. Significantly, Toomer's fictional counterpart in Kabnis is only a teacher, vulnerable to his boss's every whim. Toomer was probably making oblique reference to his problematic position as substitute principal when he wrote to Locke from Sparta that "there is poetry here—and drama, but the atmosphere for one in my position is almost prohibitory." As bearer of Ingraham's mantle, Toomer may well have wondered whether he, like the statue of the Founder in *Invisible Man*, was lifting the veil from the face of the kneeling slave or lowering it more firmly in place. *Cane's* vituperative portrait of Hanby, I suggest, cannot be fully understood without reference to its creator's complex reactions to his assigned task of standing in Ingraham's shoes.<sup>24</sup>

If Ingraham was the historical source for Toomer's portrait of the black educator in Hanby, the CME Bishop Lucius Henry Holsey provides the locus for much of Toomer's critical commentary on organized religion in *Cane*. Where Ingraham has a fairly direct fictional analogue in Hanby, however, Holsey is alluded to more obliquely in the text. Lucius Holsey (1848–1920), the son of a planter named James Holsey and a woman "of pure African descent . . . [and] of fascinating appearance and comely parts" named Louisa, was the "driving force" behind the CME church in the post-Reconstruction South. An advocate of white paternalism and an early opponent of black self-

determination, Holsey called upon whites to fulfill their obligations to their former slaves and upon blacks to trust in the superior judgment of their former masters. Holsey lived in Sparta during his youth and early adulthood, helping to found the Sparta CME Ebenezer church in 1879 with a land grant from his white friend and ally, Bishop George Foster Pierce of the Methodist Church, South. Holsey later moved to Augusta to found Paine College (originally Paine Institute), the star in the system of Methodist-affiliated schools for blacks.<sup>25</sup>

Even within the context of Southern religious institutions, the CME church was conservative. Unlike the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, which had its antebellum roots in the abolitionist Free African Societies and maintained a degree of antiracist activism, the CME made no attempt to intervene in political affairs. Indeed, its continuing economic dependency on the white Methodist Episcopal Church, South, entailed that "[a]s a condition of transferring ownership of church property to the new denomination, political activity of any sort in the recipient churches was strictly prohibited." Moreover, the CME was strongly affected by intraracial color prejudice. During a 1910 election for bishop, the dark complexion of one of the contenders was an issue, since the church took pride in the fact that "[o]n the bench of the bishops . . . there is now but one of the dark hue, all the others being mulattoes, quadroons, or octoroons." This prejudice apparently extended to the congregations, as is illustrated by the following anecdote set in Sparta's Ebenezer CME church of the 1880s:

[On] a Sunday morning long past . . . a heavysset, dark-skinned woman wearing a bandanna around her head, an apron, and generally shabby clothing supposedly rushed into the service at the Ebenezer church and positioned herself in a front-row pew, interrupting Bishop Holsey's sermon. Her color, her unpolished manner, and her dress immediately told the more affluent and lighter-skinned parishioners, decked out in their finest attire, that she was neither a member nor an invited guest. The woman fanned herself, gasped for breath, and tried to recover from her exertions while the minister and church members stared in stunned silence following her unexpected intrusion. Then, slowly, a solemn hymn reportedly swelled around the visitor as the congregation began to sing:

None but the yellow,  
 None but the yellow,  
 None but the yellow . . . shall see God.



Even if the story is "apocryphal," as Adele Alexander suspects, it was circulated among the black aristocracy themselves "in a spirit of self-mockery, laced with a discomfiting undercurrent of truth."<sup>26</sup>

Both Holsey and his prize project, the Paine Institute, were highly controversial. Holsey detailed his views on slavery and race in his *Autobiography*:

The training that I received in the narrow house of slavery has been a minister of correction and mercy to me in all these years of struggle, trial, labor, and anxiety. I have no complaint against American slavery. It was a blessing in disguise to me and to many. It has made the negro race what it could not have been in its native land. Slavery was but a circumstance or a link in the transitions of humanity, and must have its greatest bearing upon the future.

Southern whites, according to Holsey, "taught, practiced, and preached to the Negroes" a religion that "directed them to be the friends of the ex-slaves. . . . I saw from the first no reasons for any feelings of hate or revenge, either on the part of the one or the other." Construing the antebellum master-slave bond as a "reciprocal" one, he insisted that interdependency continued to characterize black-white relations after the abolition of slavery: "God placed us among you in this broad land. Your home is our home; your interests are our interests; and whatever may effect [*sic*] the one must in a large degree effect [*sic*] the other."<sup>27</sup>

Holsey's critics and admirers alike note that institutions like Paine were among the few sites where Southern blacks and whites could interact on anything resembling a collegial basis. Paine was, to its credit, one of very few educational institutions in the entire country in which black and white faculty taught side by side. To Holsey's regret, however, Paine—and the paternalistic "Paine Idea" on which it was based—met with considerable hostility in the black community:

[F]ew of the colored people approved of [the Paine Institute], and the men of my own "faith and order" were more against it than those on the outside. . . . They fought it because they thought that other Negro organizations would reproach us for being under the Southern sentiment and bowing to the verdict of pure prejudice upon the race question. Already all the colored churches had branded us as "Democrats," "bootlicks," and "white folks' niggers," whose only aim was ultimately to remand the freedman back to abject bondage.

In the seventies and eighties, Holsey later reflected, "I was very much slandered, persecuted, and rejected by my own race and people." While Holsey insisted that Paine enjoyed unruffled racial harmony, this harmony seems to have been based largely on uncontested white dominance. One historian notes that "[a]t Paine the racial situation was often tense, for there southern white presidents and faculty—usually ministers and missionaries—often adopted a patronizing, if not racist, attitude toward their black students and colleagues." A white faculty member at Paine noted in 1887 that "[s]ocial equality is an expression never heard within the walls of the Institute. My observation is that the more cultured our pupils become the more averse to the idea they get to be; excellence within their own sphere seems to be their hope." While this pedagogue's formulation may be a bit suspect—he resigned from Paine when the first black faculty member was hired—his perception cannot have been entirely inaccurate. "[B]lack disliked the Paine Idea so much," concludes Glenn Eskew, "that in order to get students Holsey had to pay them to attend class." Holsey's decision to enroll his own daughter Katie in Paine's first graduating class was doubtless an embattled one.<sup>28</sup>

My argument that Lucius Holsey is an absent presence in *Cane* does not hinge upon the contention that Toomer ever met the CME churchman. Holsey died in 1920, the year before Toomer's Southern visit, and in any event had not lived in Sparta for many years. Toomer may have read the famous churchman's 1898 *Autobiography*, however. Moreover, Toomer may well have known of Holsey through the network of personal connections among the aristocracy of color amidst whom he had spent his youth in the Washington, D.C., home of his grandfather. Furthermore, on his way back north Toomer visited in Augusta with people to whom he had been introduced by mutual acquaintances in Sparta. Holsey's son, the Reverend C. Wesley Holsey, was the CME presiding elder in Augusta. Since Augusta's privileged black elite formed a closely knit group, and since activist members of Sparta's Ebenezer congregation doubtless had ties with the Trinity CME church in Augusta, it is possible that through his Augusta contacts Toomer learned something of Holsey and, in particular, of Paine College.<sup>29</sup>

The principal evidence that Toomer was interested in Holsey, however, exists within the pages of *Cane*. As we have noted, Ebenezer church is mentioned several times in the text. The tolling of its bell accompanies the collapse of Becky's house and Barlo's callous toss-

ing of his Bible on the rubble. While Barlo is heroic in his opposition to the "white-ant biddies" in "Esther," this "African Guardian of Souls" is also, in the poem "Conversion" that immediately follows the sketch, said to have "[y]ield[ed] to new words and a weak palabra / Of a white-faced sardonic god." Toomer thus clearly associates Ebenezer Church with Barlo's hypocritical participation in Becky's ostracism—an ostracism that, moreover, unites the otherwise rebellious Barlo with his antagonists along the lines of gender. Furthermore, the church with the "squat tower" next to Halsey's house is a "forlorn, box-like, whitewashed frame" structure—a description corresponding with one historian's notation that the Ebenezer church of 1921 Sparta was a "neat frame building painted white." Not passing up an opportunity for satiric remark, Toomer places above his church "a spiral of buzzards reach[ing] far into the heavens. An ironic comment upon the path that leads into the Christian land." By juxtaposing Layman's and Halsey's gruesome tales about lynching with the "high-pitched and hysterical" singing emanating from Ebenezer, Toomer implies the futility of religious escapism in the face of racial terror. Moreover, Kabnis's wry comment about preacherly corruption—"the preacher's hands are in the white man's pockets"—specifically calls to mind the economic arrangements existing between the Colored Methodist Episcopal and the Methodist Episcopal, South, churches. Sempter's Ebenezer church, modeled upon the historical Ebenezer CME church founded by Lucius Holsey, is associated, in short, with a hypocritical and oppressive religiosity.<sup>30</sup>

Holsey's most direct imprint upon *Cane* is felt, however, through the character of Fred Halsey. Toomer's prototype for Halsey was the blacksmith William Henry ("Bubba") Ingram Jr., who was the proprietor of the Old Rock Shop at the time of Toomer's visit. A man of mixed heritage also known popularly as "Old Rock," "Bubba" Ingram—no relation to L. S. Ingraham—was a 1916 graduate of Paine Institute. It is through Halsey's confessional remarks to Lewis that Toomer articulates a vituperative attack on Paine Institute and the "Paine Idea":

Y know, Lewis, I went t school once. Ya. In Augusta. But it wasnt a regular school. Na. It was a pussy Sunday-school masqueradin under a regular name. Some goody-goody teachers from th North had come down t teach th niggers. If you was nearly white, they liked y. If you was black, they didnt. But it wasnt that—I was all

right, y see. I couldnt stand em messin an pawin over my business like I was a child. So I cussed em out an left.

The school's strong religious emphasis, the "goody-goody" Northern teachers, the intraracial color prejudice, the paternalistic authoritarianism—these traits unambiguously link the site of Halsey's Augusta miseducation with the Paine Institute and the "Paine Idea." At the time when Halsey was a boy, Paine was the only church-affiliated school for blacks in Augusta. Toomer could readily assume that any reader familiar with Southern black education would immediately recognize the target of his wheelwright's ire. Toomer's decision to assign his wheelwright a name closely resembling that of Paine's founder thus takes on ironic import, especially when we consider that "Halsey" was a spelling chosen by some of the black members of the Holsey family. If Fred Halsey figures as a putative relation of Lucius Holsey in *Cane*, then, he is a rebellious and dissatisfied heir to the churchman's accommodationist ideological estate. The Jean Toomer who took delight in teaching the Old Testament-bred students at the Sparta A and I about "polytheism and deity evolution" clearly identified with his wheelwright's rejection of CME religious and social doctrine.<sup>31</sup>

In the context of Halsey's frontal assault on the legacy of Lucius Holsey, the roles of certain minor characters in *Cane* bear reinterpretation. We will recall that Louisa, the name of Holsey's reputedly handsome dark mother, is also the name of the beautiful young woman "the color of oak leaves on young trees in fall" who is desired by both Bob Stone and Tom Burwell in "Blood-Burning Moon." On his way to see Louisa, Bob imagines himself in the historical role of slavemaster: "He passed the house with its huge open hearth which, in the days of slavery, was the plantation cookery. He saw Louisa bent over that hearth. He went in as a master should and took her. Direct, honest, bold. None of this sneaking that he had to go through now."<sup>32</sup> Through his daydream, Bob is linked with a historical slavemaster, James Holsey, who did in fact "take" a woman named Louisa as his prerogative—and fathered Lucius Holsey as a result. The interracial relationship in *Cane* that most explicitly reflects the continuing legacy of slavery is thus doubly grounded in Hancock County history, not only through the references to Stones and Burwells noted earlier but also through an allusion to the mother of Sparta's most noteworthy black scion. But Lucius Holsey, we will recall, held that the "narrow house of slavery" had been

a "blessing in disguise to me and to many" and that the continuing reciprocity of black-white relations entailed "no reasons for any feelings of hate or revenge, either on the part of the one or the other." The tragic fates of Tom, Bob, and Louisa in "Blood-Burning Moon" ironize Halsey's faith in the benevolence of the white elite and reveal the enduring destructiveness of slavery's sexual and racial bequest to Georgia society.

Two additional characters in *Cane* invite reinterpretation in light of Toomer's critique of Lucius Halsey—namely, Carrie Kate Halsey (usually called "Carrie K."), Fred Halsey's winsome teenage sister, and Father John, the prophetic old man inhabiting Halsey's basement. Noteworthy in "Kabnis" for her suppressed attraction to the magnetic Lewis and for her unstinting devotion to Father John, Carrie Kate is usually read as signifying a black womanhood committed to a nunlike guardianship of the past. This character's first name suggests that she may be based in part on Carrie Ingram, a younger cousin of "Bubba," whose father Durock occasionally worked in the Old Rock Shop and whom Toomer may have met during his Sparta trip. Carrie Kate's second name, however, suggests a possible connection with Kate Halsey—in which case the nature of Carrie Kate's guardianship becomes open to question. For Kate Halsey was the daughter of Lucius Halsey; she had gone to Paine at her father's behest and after her divorce chose to live with and care for the old man in his declining years. But where Father John denounces the slaveholders' distortion of the Bible—"th sin th white folks 'mitted when they made th Bible lie"—Lucius Halsey, by his own account, was accused by other blacks of "bowing to the verdict of pure prejudice upon the race question" and "aim[ing] to remand the freedman back to abject bondage." If Carrie Kate keeps alive a religious legacy from the slavery era, then, it is very different from the one nurtured by her historical prototype. Like her brother Fred, she is a dissident within the clan from which she takes her name.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, Father John himself gains in coherence when read in the context of Toomer's critique of the CME church. I am not arguing that Father John has a "real-life" analogue in 1920s Hancock County; critics have been correct to interpret him as a largely mythic figure, symbolizing—if barely articulating—the almost inexpressible burden of the slave past. Nor am I arguing that the old man is the father (or grandfather) of Fred and Carrie Kate, and thus an ironic double of

Lucius Holsey himself. While Fred and his sister tend to the old man's needs, they evince no familial closeness to him; the term "Father" is clearly an honorific religious designation. But Father John's somewhat murky message about sin is nonetheless illuminated by *Cane's* references to Lucius Holsey and the CME church. The old man's message can be interpreted as referring to a specific distortion of biblical doctrine. Charles Scruggs makes a good case that the "lie" in question is the biblical myth of Cain, which, like that of Ham, was reworked as a justification of slavery.<sup>34</sup> Read more generally as a comment on the power of white elites to shore up their hegemony by defining the religious doctrine that will guide blacks, however, Father John's babbling coheres with other elements in *Cane's* discourse about religion: the Ebenezer bell tolling as Barlo tosses his Bible onto Becky's collapsed shack; the buzzards circling above the hysterical chanting of the Ebenezer congregation; Fred Halsey's invective against the Paine Institute. That this warning is uttered by an old man cared for by a young woman named Kate only reinforces the subversiveness of Toomer's veiled commentary on Southern religious institutions. Father John's discourse, obscure as it is, functions in "Kabnis" as Toomer's refutation of the "Paine Idea."



*Cane* is not a straightforward work of social protest that wears its politics on its sleeve; Toomer couched his satiric commentary in a densely symbolistic and psychologistic idiom that requires considerable decoding. Toomer's mimetic impulses were disciplined within the regime that we have come to associate with high modernism; as he wrote to Gorham Munson, "Mystery cannot hope but accompany a deep, clear-cut image. . . . I desire the profound image saturated in its own lyricism." No doubt Toomer agreed with his soulmate Waldo Frank, who, in praising an early draft of *Cane*, remarked that "the vile current realistic novel has spoiled all minds for the essential and pure lines of aesthetic form." Moreover, the sly manner in which Toomer slips in many of his historical allusions suggests that the writer was reluctant to undertake a frontal critique of Sparta's white and black ruling elites. About the full reasons for this reluctance we can only speculate.<sup>35</sup>

What I hope to have demonstrated here is that the common critical supposition that a modernist preoccupation with psychological interi-

ority and symbolistic discourse entails mythic ahistoricity has led *Cane* scholars to ignore a number of the text's buried but by no means inaccessible references to contemporaneous Georgia history and social institutions. The Toomer who went South in 1921 and rediscovered his roots looked upon himself as not just a poet but also a radical. Writing to Boni and Liveright right after the completion of *Cane*, he remarked that his next major work would be about "this whole black and brown world heaving upward against, here and there mixing with the white. The mixture, however, is insufficient to absorb the heaving, hence it but accelerates and fires it. This upward heaving is to be symbolic of the proletariat or world upheaval. And it is likewise to be symbolic of the subconscious penetration of the conscious mind." While Toomer wrote to Munson in praise of saturated imagery, he also stipulated, "I still demand extra-artistic consciousness in works of art." Toomer has been done a disservice by critics who, reading his subsequent commitment to Gurdjieffian mysticism and psychotherapy back into his earlier literary efforts, have minimized, even excluded, his quite progressive social and political views. A participant in an undifferentiated Bohemian radicalism that saw no contradiction between Marx and Freud, Toomer embraced a "heaving upward" in both the historical arena and the individual psyche. *Cane* is just as much "about" Sparta as it is "about" a black artist's search for his subject and his self. Indeed, to invoke W. H. Auden, another modernist who claimed kinship with both Marx and Freud, the "rich interiors" of both subject and self are denuded of many crucial dimensions—philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic, as well as historical and political—as long as Sempter's relation to Sparta remains "still unexplored."<sup>36</sup>

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## Notes

The following have provided invaluable help in my research for this essay: Katherine Bray; Professor Carleton Morse of Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia; George Gardiner; Harrell Lawson; Professor Kent Leslie of Oglethorpe University; Gertrude Lewis; John Rozier; Forrest Shivers; Professor Gerald Smith of Paine College; the *Sparta Ishmaelite*; the Hancock County Public Library.

- 1 Jean Toomer, *A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings*, ed. Frederik L. Rusch (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 17, 16, 14;



- Toomer to Frank, 26 April 1922, Waldo Frank Papers, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Box 23, Part 1; Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977), 106.
- 2 For mythic readings of *Cane*, see Catherine Innes, "The Unity of Jean Toomer's *Cane*," in *Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Therman B. O'Daniel (Washington: Howard Univ. Press, 1988), 153-67; Alain Solard, "Myth and Narrative Fiction in *Cane*," *Callaloo* 8 (fall 1985): 551-62; and Bonnie Barthold, *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981). For historical readings, see Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984); Wahneema Lubiano, "Messing with the Machine: Four Afro-American Novels," Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1988; and John Reilly, "The Search for Black Redemption: Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *Studies in the Novel* 2 (fall 1970): 312-24.
  - 3 Barbara Foley, "Georgia on My Mind: Economics and History in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," forthcoming; Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1987), 28.
  - 4 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Younger Literary Movement," *Crisis* (1923): 162; Jean Toomer, *Cane* (1923; reprint, New York: Boni and Liveright, 1975), 83, 97; William Gaissert, "Down the Road," *Sparta Ishmaelite*, 13 December 1979, 5; Elizabeth Wiley Smith, *The History of Hancock County, Georgia*, 2 vols. (Washington, Ga.: Wilkes, 1974), 1: 55. The Du Bois review is part of a *Crisis* article attributed to both Du Bois and Alain Locke. In a letter to Locke clearly dated between September 1922 and January 1923, however, Jessie Fauset made it clear that the section on Toomer was written by Du Bois (Fauset to Locke, n.d., Locke Papers [henceforth LP], Moorland-Spangarn Research Institute, Howard University, Box 164-28, Folder 40).
  - 5 *Cane*, 83, 10, 15; photograph in Toomer Papers (henceforth TP), Box 66, Folder 1506; E. W. Smith, 1: 57.
  - 6 *Cane*, 5; George Gardiner to author, 8 February 1994; Harrell Lawson to author, 14 January 1994; Gertrina Nelson, "Ebenezer-Holsey Memorial C. M. E. Church, Sparta, Georgia, July 21-27, 1952," Souvenir Booklet; Gertrude B. Lewis to author, 4 September 1993.
  - 7 E. W. Smith, 1: 101; Forrest Shivers, *The Land Between: A History of Hancock County, Georgia, to 1940* (Spartanberg, S.C.: Reprint Co., 1990), 210-11.
  - 8 *Cane*, 21; Shivers, *The Land Between*, 132, 314; *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 September 1921, 3.
  - 9 *Cane*, 20-21. In January 1921 Toomer began studying the history of U.S. slavery with the Washington, D.C., writers group to which he belonged.

He wrote to Locke that one member had reported on T. R. R. Cobb's "An Historical Sketch of Slavery," that another had summarized material from Wells (presumably H. G. Wells), and that he himself was tackling Captain Theodore Canot's "Twenty Years an African Slaver" (Toomer to Locke, 26 January 1921, LP, Box 164-90, Folder 12). Actually titled *Adventures of an African Slaver*, Canot's account of his travels, which frequently mentions "juju" and "gree-gree," seems to have exerted considerable influence on Toomer's conception of Africa (1854; reprint, New York: Dover, 1969). That Barlo's preaching inspires a woman to draw "a portrait of a black madonna on the courthouse wall" (21) suggests an association of Barlo with Marcus Garvey, since the figure of the black madonna was important in Garveyite iconography. See Tony Martin, *Literary Garveyism: Garveyism, Black Arts, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Dover, Mass.: Majority Press, 1983). "Barlo" also echoes "Balo," the mystical hero of Toomer's 1922 play of that name, and even perhaps "Babo," Melville's black insurgent in "Benito Cereno."

10 *Cane*, 31-34.

11 Shivers, *The Land Between*, 133; E. W. Smith, 2: 161.

12 Shivers, conversation with author, April 1993; Shivers, *The Land Between*, 210-11. Toomer's own life was more closely intertwined with that of William Hix Burwell than he may have known. In 1898 and 1899, Jean Toomer's father, Nathan Toomer, who had business dealings in the Sparta area, was continually trying to get out of Burwell \$155.08 that he claimed Burwell owed him. See Virginia Kent Anderson Leslie and Willard B. Gatewood Jr., "'This Father of Mine . . . a Sort of Mystery': Jean Toomer's Georgia Heritage," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 77 (winter 1993): 802-05.

13 Solard, 552; Donald B. Gibson, *The Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981), 164.

14 Shivers to author, April 1993; *Cane*, 29, 31, 35; Nellie Y. McKay, *Jean Toomer, Artist: A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894-1936* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984), 177. Antebellum cotton mills were often operated by slave labor. See Broadus Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South* (1921; reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), 25. Toomer's decision to root the lynching in "Blood-Burning Moon" in Bob Stone's pursuit of Louisa, rather than in any charge that Tom Burwell sexually approached a white woman, accords with a crucial 1919 finding of the NAACP: contrary to the popular view, the preponderance of Southern lynchings were not the consequence of alleged sexual harassment or abuse of white women by black men. Most lynched black males were killed for standing up for their rights. See Frank Morton, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States 1889-1918* (1919; reprint, New York: Arno and The New York Times, 1969). The phrase "blood-burning moon," with its clear reference to the Book of Revelation, variously echoes the spiritual lines "When the sun refuse to shine, when the moon goes down in

- blood" and "And de moon will turn to blood in dat day" (Clyde Taylor, "The Second Coming of Jean Toomer," *Obsidian* 1 [1975]: 45). Sterling Brown suggests that this "old spiritual . . . got [a] new meanin[g]" as songs about "freedom not only from sin . . . but from physical bondage . . . spr[ang] up . . . [i]n the wake of the Union army and in the contraband camps" ("Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs," *Phylon* 14 [1953]: 48–49).
- 15 Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain and the Redemption of Art: A Study in Theme and Structure of Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *American Literature* 44 (May 1972): 276–91; Nathaniel Mackey, "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," *Callaloo* 10 (winter 1987): 29–54; Maria Caldeira, "Jean Toomer's *Cane*: The Anxiety of the Modern Artist," *Callaloo* 8 (fall 1985): 544–50; Locke to Toomer, 4 January 1922, TP, Box 5, Folder 46; Darwin Turner, ed., *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer* (Washington: Howard Univ. Press, 1980), 127, 129, 132, 127 n. Charles Larson suggests that Toomer's idiosyncratic spelling of *Cane* reflects "what the book finally became for him"—that is, the burden of black identification (*Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen* [Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1993], 23). On the colloquial use of "Cain," cf. Arthur P. Fauset to Alain Locke: "I've worked like Cain down here" (25 July 1922, LP, Box 164–28, Folder 29).
- 16 Virginia Kent Anderson Leslie, "Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849–1893," Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1990, 102–03; Adele Alexander, *Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789–1879* (Fayetteville: Univ. of Arkansas Press, 1991), 133. Alexander comments that the abortive Cain rebellion "rocked Hancock County in 1863." As given in the court record, however, the testimony of the slave rebels countered the newspaper report of intended mass murder. Alexander concludes of the insurgents, "They probably did hope to escape to the Union lines—an understandable aspiration—but did not intend to murder the local people or to 'fire Sparta'" (133–34). One of John Cain's descendants, Oliver Cain, was a businessman in Sparta in the early 1920s (Lawson). Possibly Toomer disguised him as John Crane, merchant father of Esther Crane in "Esther."
- 17 TP, Box 60, Folder 1411. Toomer scholars and biographers are fond of citing Toomer's somewhat sophomoric frustration at his unsuccessful attempt to talk radical politics for ten days with New Jersey shipyard workers, who, he found, were more interested in "playing craps and sleeping with women." Kerman and Eldridge, for example, conclude that this experience "cure[d] [Toomer] of ideas about life as a laborer and of his dream of socialism" (71). Toomer clearly had no close personal identification with the working class, and soon after his New Jersey experience he wrote to Georgia Douglas Johnson that "poverty and privation . . . dwarf the soul, weaken the body, dull the mind, and prohibit fruitful activity"

(Johnson Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Institute, Howard Univ., 4 June 1920, Box 162-2, Folder 9). Nonetheless, it is inaccurate to assert that Toomer lost all interest in left-wing politics.

- 18 Foley, "Georgia on My Mind"; Lawrence W. Hogue, *Discourse and the Other: The Production of the Afro-American Text* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1986), 38. Willard Gatewood remarks that the term "dictie"—used by Barlo's companions to refer to Esther—was given widespread currency by Marcus Garvey, who "sometimes referred to upper-class blacks as 'aristocrats' or as 'upper tens' but usually preferred 'dicties' or 'dictities,' a term that had become popular by 1920" (321). The association of "dictie" with Garvey may suggest a further linking of Barlo with the renowned black nationalist.
- 19 Shivers, *The Land Between*, 277.
- 20 "Lend a Hand," leaflet, TP, Box 66, Folder 1506; *Sparta Ishmaelite*, 13 May 1921, 1; Du Bois, "The Negro Common School in Georgia," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. Meyer Weinberg (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 134-35.
- 21 *Sparta Ishmaelite*, 4 November 1921, 3; *Sparta Ishmaelite*, 29 April 1921, 5. For more on the Williams "Death Farm," see Foley, "Georgia on My Mind." The Ku Klux Klan grew rapidly in the South in the early 1920s after its revival in 1915. John Dittmer estimates that until 1920 the Klan had less strength in Atlanta than did the B'nai B'rith (*Black Georgia in the Progressive Era 1900-1920* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977], 185). But on 23 September 1921—a few days after Toomer's arrival in Sparta eighty miles away—there was a rally of two thousand robed Klansmen in Atlanta (*Atlanta Constitution*, 24 September 1921, 1).
- 22 Kerman and Eldridge, 75; McKay, 45; *Cane*, 93.
- 23 *Cane*, 93; Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903; reprint, Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1961), 53. Throughout his youth Toomer must have been immersed in the Washington-Du Bois debate. His high school, the elite M Street School (later named Dunbar High School), had many vocal supporters of Du Bois on its faculty. Toomer's grandfather Pinchback, however, was close to Washington and routinely put him up during the educator's trips to the capital. Moreover, one of the members of the writers' study group in which Toomer participated before his trip to Sparta was Clarissa Scott, daughter of Emmett J. Scott, Howard University administrator and author (with Lyman Beecher Stowe) of the hagiographic biography, *Booker T. Washington: Builder of a Civilization* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Page, 1917). Toomer had certainly been thoroughly exposed to the controversy over the relative merits of the two educators' visions of black education. For more on the Washington study group, see George B. Hutchinson, "Jean Toomer and the 'New Negroes' of Washington," *American Literature* 63 (December 1991): 683-92; Ronald M. Johnson, "Those Who Stayed: Washington Black Writers

- of the 1920s," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 50 (1980): 484–99; and Barbara Foley, "Jean Toomer's Washington: From 'Blue Veins' to Seventh-Street Rebels," forthcoming, *Modern Fiction Studies*.
- 24 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 56, 85, 153, 155, 82, 81; Charles T. Davis, "Jean Toomer and the South: Region and Race as Elements Within a Literary Imagination," in *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 190; Kerman and Eldridge, 81; Toomer to Locke, 8 November 1921, LP, Box 164–90, Folder 12. Eric Sundquist remarks that the Du Bois who taught school in the South is "an avatar of Jean Toomer's character Ralph Kabnis in *Cane*" (*To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993], 466). Elsewhere I argue that Lewis is an NAACP investigator into local lynchings and is possibly based specifically on Walter White, who probed various 1918 Georgia lynchings and was at least once driven out of town (Foley, "Georgia on My Mind"). If this is the case, and if Hanby is based at least in part on Ingraham—who publicly involved himself in the "Death Farm" affair—then there is a logic to Lewis's otherwise cryptic remark that the story of his own embattled presence in Sempter "might involve present company. (He laughs pleasantly and gestures vaguely in the direction of Hanby)" (*Cane*, 95).
- 25 Bishop L. H. Holsey, D. D., *Autobiography and Sermons, Addresses, and Essays* (Atlanta: Franklin, 1898), 9; Othal Hawthorne Lakey, *The History of the CME Church* (Memphis, Tenn.: CME Publishing House, 1985), 33. Around the turn of the century, Holsey, in despair at the continuing subordination of blacks and "disenchanted with Bourbon democracy," briefly supported the People's party and announced his support for "'separation and segregation' of the races with the goal of establishing a black state where as 'governor, legislator and judge,' the African American 'could be a man among men.'" Holsey subsequently grew "frustrated with his failed efforts at black nationalism . . . [and] increasingly pessimistic" (Glenn T. Eskew, "Black Elitism and the Failure of Paternalism in Postbellum Georgia: The Case of Bishop Lucius Henry Holsey," *Journal of Southern History* 58 [November 1992]: 655, 658, 662). According to James C. Bonner, Bishop George Foster Pierce owned eighteen slaves and nine hundred acres of land; see "Profile of a Late Antebellum Community," in *Plantation, Town and County: Essays on the Local History of American Slave Society*, ed. Elinor Miller and Eugene D. Genovese (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), 40. Pierce "viewed blacks as inferior and their efforts to achieve equality as committing 'violence contrary to the ordination of nature'" (Eskew, 649). Holsey married Harriet, a young slave in Pierce's household.
- 26 C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the Afro-American Experience* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1990), 62; Gatewood, 152; Alexander, 162.

- 27 Holsey, 10, 23; quoted in Lakey, 443.
- 28 Eskew, 651; Lakey, 448; George Esmond Clary Jr., "The Founding of Paine College—A Unique Venture in Inter-Racial Cooperation in the New South, 1882–1969," Ed.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1965; Holsey, 25; Holsey quoted in Eskew, 646; Dittmer, 160–61; Clary, 81.
- 29 Eskew, 648 n; Gatewood, 90–91. C. Wesley Holsey "failed in his attempt to be chosen bishop in 1922" (Eskew, 648 n). Toomer appears to have visited in Augusta with some women by the names of Mary Alice and Emma Lue, to whom a letter of introduction on Toomer's behalf was written by one Evelyn living in Sparta: "This is Mr. Toomer who has been with us for the past two months, but is now leaving us, which we are very sorry [*sic*]. He is on his way to Washington and is stopping in Augusta for a day. Will you and Mary Alice make it pleasant for him" (TP, 25 November 1921, Unidentified E-H, Box 9, Folder 287). Toomer's Augusta contacts may have spoken of the presiding elder's ambitions during Toomer's visit on the way home in November 1921.
- 30 *Cane*, 26, 86, 88; Alexander, 159.
- 31 Katherine Bray to author, n.d. (October 1993); John Rozier to author, n.d. (October 1993) and 17 November 1993; Gardiner; William Gaissert, "Down the Road," *Sparta Ishmaelite*, 13 December 1979; Shivers to author, n.d. (April 1993); Gerald Smith to author, 9 February 1994; *Cane*, 108; Toomer to Locke, 8 November 1921, LP, Box 164-90, Folder 12. The identification of Fred Halsey as a member of the Ingram family is supported by Toomer's location of Halsey's house near the Ebenezer church in the Hunt's Hill section of Sparta. The Ingrams lived in Hunt's Hill, where the residents, while said to be "'not what you'd call wealthy,'" were "light-skinned [and] comfortably situated" (Lawson; Alexander, 157). Several members of the Ingram family attended Paine Institute, which was rechartered as Paine College in 1903 (Gardiner; Carleton Morse, telephone conversation with author, 4 April 1994; Clary, 11). Professor Gerald Smith of Paine College asserts that Toomer was "referring to Paine College" in the statement by Halsey. "The Sunday-School reference is a shot at the church-relatedness of Paine College. . . . The goody-goody teachers refers to the Home Mission Board of the Methodist Church which sent deaconesses to serve as teachers. How goody-goody they were, I don't know, but they were tough academics who tolerated no nonsense. . . . About the nearly white business: Bishop Holsey was a mulatto, with red hair and light skin. In Augusta of the time, the 'near whites' formed what might be called a Negro aristocracy, socially speaking. Trinity CME Church [of Augusta] was notorious for its light-skinned constituency" (G. Smith to author, 4 October 1993). While the Ingrams were not related to the Ingrahams, Toomer may have been preserving the close resemblance in the two families' nomenclature by giving Halsey and Hanby quite similar names.

- 32 *Cane*, 31.
- 33 Gardiner; Eskew 648 n; *Cane*, 115.
- 34 Scruggs; Caldeira, 545.
- 35 Toomer to Gorham Munson, 31 October 1922, TP, Box 6, Folder 183; Frank to Toomer, n.d., TP, Box 3, Folder 84.
- 36 Toomer to Horace Liveright, 9 March 1923, TP, Box 1, Folder 16; Toomer to Munson, 8 October 1922, Toomer Papers, Box 6, Folder 183.



