

Escaping The System:
Dancing to Transcend Racial Binaries in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

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When literary characters are subjected to an oppositional binary structure, or a system that forces them to acknowledge some personality facets and repress others, they cannot achieve wholeness. This traditional oppositional binary structure so prevalent in many late nineteenth and early twentieth-century novels offers numerous instances of fragmentation and racism. A black character within this type of binary structure is viewed only as a black person, and all other aspects of his personality are repressed to his unconscious. If he is black, he cannot be white, he cannot be a mother or a father, he cannot be an artist, etc. He is simply labeled as black. The structure forces fragmentation upon the characters, because they must favor some parts of themselves, such as the mind, over others, such as the body. This oppositional binary structure vilifies the body so that the mind precedes and therefore erases the body. Novelist Jean Toomer attempts to defy this oppositional binary structure by introducing dance into his works.

In *Cane* (1923), a collection of short stories and poems, Toomer writes about oppressed individuals, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance, who struggle to overcome racial binaries. The context of *Cane* is the American system of legalized racism. The novel explores race in a highly segregated society, and aims to find an escape for these oppressed characters from the oppositional binary structure. Toomer acknowledges that the individuals he conjures cannot discover their full identities because racism represses parts of themselves that would have made them whole. Most importantly, they repress an awareness of their bodies. Sex is a racial

signifier, or a symbol, that represents race, because whiteness signifies, or indicates, purity and virginity while blackness signifies the opposite. So, by extension, the body is a racial signifier. It symbolically indicates race. Toomer suggests that by recuperating their bodies, his characters would be able to acknowledge their full identities, transcending the particularities of time, place, and race. Recuperating the body means recuperating race. At the same time, they could acknowledge other people's identities without making assumptions based on race. Throughout *Cane*, Toomer's characters recover their bodies by dancing.

In short stories such as "Carma," "Fern," and "Bona and Paul," Toomer suggests that the first step toward using dance to recover the body is hysteria. With regard to how Toomer uses it, hysteria is an uncontrollable physical outburst derived from internal emotions and senses trying to surface. Hysteria causes mobility of the human body as it links the external body to the mind and the internal being. These stories have protagonists whose lives are limited because of their race and gender. However, they each experience a physical awakening, a moment when their bodies become uncontrollably mobile and experience bursts of excitement and strength. These instances of hysteria occur when repressed material passes from the unconscious to the conscious in a recuperative effort. Though this form of hysteria is uncontrolled and not choreographed, it demonstrates the power of the body to recover repressed material.

According to Toomer, when this hysteria is pathologized, or transformed into something healthier and more controlled, it becomes dance. In "Theater" he depicts a black female dancer who, through her movements, is able both to experience her full identity and also to connect with a white male. Toomer shows that only when the dancer adds personal flare and soul, a reservoir of emotions and experiences, to the choreographed movements can she recover her full identity. When the black protagonists of both "Theater" and "Bona and Paul" dance with a group of

people, they stand out from the other dancers because they make the choreographed movements uniquely their own. They do this by breaking down and mixing oppositional elements within the choreography. Elements such as dynamics, speed, and expressivity can add strength and individuality to a performance so that the audience becomes both captivated and empathetic. When these characters dance, it no longer matters whether they are black, white, male, or female. The audience simply desires to connect with them and become part of them. Only when mind and body work together can individuals be truly whole. Dance in *Cane* enables characters to break free of cultural identity, and experience their share of humanity.

Still, in *Cane*, Toomer never offers a permanent method for achieving wholeness because his characters' experience of this is fleeting and only lasts as long as the dance. Once the dance ends, his characters return to limited, fragmented selves, unable to identify with people outside their own racial and economic backgrounds. Although Toomer seems to want to recover wholeness, he cannot figure out how to do so.

This is because his characters fail to reach their highest form of consciousness while dancing. After completing *Cane*, Toomer studied with the Russian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, whose sacred dances allowed Toomer to attain a higher form of consciousness that his characters never achieve in *Cane*. Gurdjieff's teachings suggest that by committing oneself to rigorous, challenging poses and dance movements, one can transcend everyday consciousness and instead take on a more inclusive form of consciousness that eliminates the unconscious altogether. When the unconscious is eliminated, all aspects of that person are recovered and enter this new, higher, more permanent consciousness. In *Cane*, Toomer's characters achieve wholeness by dancing in a natural, comfortable, and seemingly effortless manner. This effortlessness causes the sense of wholeness to disappear after the dance is finished. The mind

must work in tandem with the body in order that the feeling derived from dance persists beyond the end of the dance. The dance must challenge the mind to work as hard as the body in order for the performer to be completely present in the dance and retain its heightened consciousness once the dancing ends. Toomer shows how dance has the potential to bring about wholeness by breaking down oppositional binaries, allowing people of different races to connect despite the danger and illegality of inter-racial mingling in their society. However, Toomer fails to provide his characters with a method of permanently maintaining this sense of wholeness, and therefore concludes in *Cane* that dance offers only a fleeting recuperation of wholeness. Not until Toomer studied Gurdjieff's sacred dances did he discover how to access a higher, permanent form of consciousness through dance.

In *Cane*, Toomer conflates oppositions so that fragments of people blend together and coexist. This idea of conflating oppositions is expressed in French feminist writer and philosopher Helene Cixous' "Sorties." Cixous discusses how the human mind has, historically, always worked through oppositions. She provides examples of binaries derived from such oppositions, such as father and mother, head and heart, logos and pathos, day and night, sun and moon, etc. She suggests, "A law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions (dual, irreconcilable; or sublatale, dialectical)"¹ Thus, she claims that all human thought is part of a binary system. The main oppositional binaries that Toomer transcends in his work are those of mind/body and black/white. Classified as "black" by American racism, the light-skinned Toomer was trapped from taking on any other identity facets. His novel strikes back against the forces of this oppositional binary structure that fuels racism and victimizes people like him.

¹ Helene Cixous, "Sorties," in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 146-147.

The linguistic structure that organizes thought through oppositions is called the transcendental signified.² For example, the word “mother” has a set of fixed associations, such as caretaker, healer, sympathetic, and selfless. Because one assumes that the mother is connected with terms associated with her label, she cannot assume any of the fixed associations of “father,” such as strong, powerful, breadwinner, or rule-maker. These fixed signifiers thus trap people into an oppositional binary system. In Toomer’s stories, dance helps him discover a way to escape this binary system to transcend the transcendental signified. In dance, the transcendental signified eliminates personality and emotions enliven movements and make a dance whole. Ballet, for example, is so technical that it can appear dull and lifeless. However, when a ballet dancer escapes the transcendental signified of ballet, she adds emotion, power, freedom, and her own reservoir of experience to the steps so that they become more than empty, monotonous forms. The steps or choreography of a dance create only its skeleton. In order to be whole, communicative, and free, the dance must incorporate the dancer’s entire being in a way that transforms the steps into a new, expressive form of movement.

The way to escape a strict commodification of dance made up of lifeless movements is to recover the body in a “hysterical” manner, and then to pathologize this hysteria into something slightly more controlled and focused. Pathologizing hysteria is deeming hysteria, or uncontrollable physical outbursts of repressed material, unhealthy or hyperbolic, and discovering a remedy for transferring this hysteria into something more controlled and beneficial. By pathologizing hysteria with dance, hysteria is “cured” by a normal expression of repressed material in dance. Dance as an escape from the transcendental signified is pathologized hysteria.

In the short story “Carma,” the protagonist, a light-skinned black woman named Carma, begins to tap into her unconscious through hysteria. This hysteria is a reaction derived from the

² Ibid.

body that can be both redemptive and problematic. It can redeem the body, and thus redeem race, but it does so in an uncontrolled and sometimes dangerous manner. Hysteria of any kind, and in this case hysteria through the body, is a way of forgetting or losing control of language. Hysteria is how the amateur body expresses its unconscious. Toomer shows how recovering or acknowledging the body as well as the mind breaks down the mind/body binary, and therefore contributes to the recuperation of completeness. According to Cixous, people often disregard their bodies in favor of the mind.³ By recovering their physical selves, people can transcend the transcendental signified. Cixous suggests that "woman is more body than man is" because women, at least historically, could not transfer their genuine drives toward financial or occupational goals to gain social success.⁴ Black women during the Harlem Renaissance, such as Carma, were especially limited. The only way for them to acknowledge their emotions and drives was to inhabit their bodies and become, as Cixous suggests, hysterics.⁵

Toomer takes hysteria a step further in "Carma" by using language related to dance, the ultimate medium through which wholeness can be achieved. Toomer suggests that while the language of the body is hysteria, this hysteria becomes dance when viewed through a different lens. In this sense, hysteria is the closest form to dance, and is therefore more able than other expressive forms to help people achieve wholeness and limit fragmentation. In a woman, hysteria is the outburst of insufficiently repressed masculinity. Because masculinity and femininity form an oppositional binary, masculinity enters the female unconscious, while femininity enters the male unconscious. In this sense, hysteria is the outburst of the female unconscious. Toomer, therefore, suggests that dance is a more successful and controlled surfacing of the unconscious than hysteria. Furthermore, Toomer uses dance to transform

³ Ibid, 150.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

octoroons – persons of one-eighth African ancestry with one biracial grandparent and three white grandparents – into saviors, or Jesus-like figures. While the octoroon often had high status because of her extremely white skin, Toomer reads the octoroon as societally inferior and powerless, like Carma. This is likely due to his own physical resemblance to the octoroon and his feeling of oppression throughout his upbringing. Female octoroons were particularly placed in an abusive position because dominant white slave owners desired them. Toomer takes the abuse and rape of these women and makes it about the body in a redemptive way through dance.

“Carma” contains both dancing and hysteria to show the difference, and parallel, between the two. Toomer describes a girl in a yard who “is in the forest, dancing.”⁶ This girl, described as an octoroon, is portrayed as strong and powerful while she dances. Similarly, When Toomer writes that Carma “was becoming hysterical” and that she “was strong as a man. Stronger,”⁷ he reveals that hysteria brings out the woman’s repressed masculinity. Both dance and hysteria yield typically masculine strength. However, it is important to note that Carma does not transition from hysteria to dance. Toomer writes, “It fizzled out,” and that, “her eyes were weak and pitiable for so strong a woman.”⁸ Therefore, although her masculinity bleeds through her hysteria, Carma never escapes pathological hysteria, and therefore her body is never fully redemptive. Her feminine and masculine qualities do not coexist for longer than fleeting, transitory bursts of hysteria.

In the short story “Fern,” on the other hand, Fern, another light-skinned black woman, turns her hysteria into song and therefore transforms the pathological language of the body into something redemptive. Like Carma, Fern is labeled “black” but described as having a “creamy

⁶ Jean Toomer, “Carma,” in *Cane* (New York: Liveright, 1975), 14.

⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid*.

brown color.”⁹ Also like Carma, the sexual exploitation of Fern is transformed into something that gives her power over men. This is unlike the women in most cases of casual, perhaps even forceful sex who are victimized and depicted as weaker than men. Rather, men regard Fern as above them, despite their ability to have intercourse with her without resistance or denial. She transcends race and gender constraints of the time by having intercourse without being victimized or made inferior to her sexual partners. Toomer writes of the men who sleep with Fern that “A sort of superstition crept into their consciousness of her being somehow above them. Being above them meant that she was not to be approached by anyone. She became a virgin.”¹⁰ Here, Toomer transforms Fern’s sexual escapades into a redemptive and honorable situation. She becomes the savior figure, similar to the Virgin Mary, who uses her body to gain power. Also, Fern is no longer viewed solely as a black woman. She takes on qualities societally deemed as white by becoming a virgin, because whiteness signifies virginity. By recuperating her virginity, Fern’s sexual acts are not considered sinful. They are glorified and enable her to transcend both gender and racial stereotypes.

Toomer relates this mixing of Fern’s gender and race to the time of day he calls dusk. Dusk causes lightness and darkness to mix, creating a purple color that is neither light nor dark. Dusk is neither black nor white. It transcends darkness, lightness, blackness, and whiteness. At dusk, Toomer writes, “I felt that things unseen to men were tangibly immediate.”¹¹ Here, Toomer discusses people in Georgia who have visions of God or the mother of Christ. He says that at dusk, people have such visions.¹² While Toomer literally refers to these visions when talking about unseen things that become tangibly immediate at dusk, he could also be referring to the

⁹ Toomer, “Fern,” in *Cane*, 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*

resurfacing of the repressed at dusk. In this sense, when an oppositional binary, such as darkness and lightness, melds, the transcendental signified is destroyed, and repressed material can exist in consciousness. At dusk, oppositional entities come into contact with one another and meld.

At dusk, Fern goes into hysteria, during which her eyes “[hold] God,”¹³ Toomer writes. This aligns with the idea of Fern as a savior figure, because she is able to connect directly with God. In addition, God enters her, which suggests that God is a part of her during her physical hysteria. The traditional transcendental signified model contains a vertical line, with dominant sides of each oppositional binary to the left of the vertical line, and weak sides to the right of the line. God is the only figure placed above the vertical line. He encompasses everything within Himself and therefore does not repress any sides of his oppositional binaries. Instead, He controls the system. When God enters Fern, perhaps the transcendental signified has been destroyed and all its elements, including God, surface and become a part of Fern’s identity. After this happens, Toomer writes that Fern “sprang up. Rushed some distance from me. Fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying.”¹⁴ This swaying of Fern’s body is indicative of dance movement. Toomer then writes, “Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her.”¹⁵ This bodily experience relates to Carma’s experience of hysteria. By calling her body tortured, Toomer suggests that Fern does not control her dance-like movements, which means that she is being hysterical. Fern’s body attempts to release all of the repressed material in her unconscious, but the result is frenzied and chaotic. She does not control her body here.

However, after her hysterical outburst, Fern redeems her body through song. Her hysteria turns to song, and she transforms the body’s pathological language into something redemptive.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Toomer writes, “Dusk hid her; I could hear only her song.”¹⁶ By suggesting, “Dusk hid her,” Toomer suggests that the black woman who was identified by her race is gone, or hidden. In her place stands a song that mixes oppositions. Dusk and song do not hide Fern, but rather become Fern. She is no longer defined as a cream-colored black person. She transforms her hysteria into a method of transcendence. However, this transcendence is achieved through song rather than dance. Fern, like Carma, has yet to figure out how to use her body as a conduit to surface repressed material without becoming hysterical. Until she recovers her body in a controlled manner, she will still be restricted by the mind/body binary.

Bona, a white woman, experiences a similar hysterical sensation in the story “Bona and Paul” when she and Paul, a black man, play basketball and Bona is hit in the jaw, which leads to Paul catching her. When Bona feels Paul catching her body, “her body stiffens. Then becomes strangely vibrant, and bursts to a swift life within her anger.”¹⁷ This anger mixed with vibrancy, as well as the use of the word “bursts,” indicates that Bona becomes hysterical in that moment. Similarly to Carma’s experience with hysteria, Bona seems to lose control of her body, as if repressed material is bursting through her in an attempt to escape her unconscious. However, this hysteria becomes dance when Bona is able to settle down. When Paul holds Bona in his arms, and Bona squeezes Paul, “They seem to be human distortions spinning tensely in a fog. Spinning...dizzy...spinning.”¹⁸ The language of dizziness and “spinning” refers to typical dance movements. The repressed material within Bona and Paul escapes from the unconscious into the freedom of the conscious when the two characters’ bodies intertwine. Their racial differences become insignificant because race no longer restricts them. They reject their fear of recrimination and protest racial segregation by melding together.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Toomer, “Bona and Paul,” in *Cane*, 71.

¹⁸ Ibid.

When Paul and Bona touch, they seem completely attached to one another, but when they are separated and stop moving, Paul feels detached from Bona and from himself. While Paul is not moving his body, he cannot connect to others, and perhaps he even feels fragmented himself. Dance as defined as pathologized hysteria is uniquely able to make people feel whole. The connection Paul feels to Bona is transient and only takes place while his body moves. When he stops moving, his body and mind no longer connect, and he and Bona become blinded by race. However, Paul has demonstrated that he has the capacity to escape fragmentation through physical movement; it is just unclear how permanent this escape can be.

Toomer seems to use Paul's fleeting discoveries of connection and detachment as a conduit to discover Toomer's own wholeness as an individual. Like Toomer, Paul is a light-skinned black man. Toomer identifies with Paul and uses Paul to try to escape the trappings of race. Caught between black and white while growing up, Toomer set out to create an "American race" in his poem "The Blue Meridian" in 1936.¹⁹ He attempted to eliminate old racial stereotypes and limitations by integrating all individuals of the American melting pot into a new American race. In "Bona and Paul," Toomer identifies the different races of Bona and Paul. When Paul and Bona walk together on the Boulevard, Paul notices that Bona's "face is pale. She is talking. Her words have no feel to them."²⁰ Paul's observation of Bona's pale skin illuminates the consciousness of racial difference in Paul's thinking. It is very obvious to Paul that he has darker skin than Bona, and that the two are very different simply because of this one visible difference. However, because Paul and Bona are able to connect to one another and feel intertwined when they dance, Toomer suggests that dance yields products of the "American race," or that it conflates racial difference. By deeming himself an example of the "American

¹⁹ Jeff Webb and Jean Toomer, "Literature and Lynching: Identity in Jean Toomer's 'Cane,'" *The Johns Hopkins University Press* 67, no. 1 (2000): 206.

²⁰ "Bona and Paul," 71.

race,” Toomer refused to identify himself as a Negro writer. By suggesting that all individuals belong to this new race, Toomer used the word “American” as interchangeable with “human.” In this sense, Toomer’s “American race” is actually an oxymoron because he uses alternate language to eliminate race from human identity.²¹ He eliminates what Cixous describes as the law that “organizes what is thinkable by oppositions.” Toomer eliminates language that signifies fixed and limited meaning and uses dance to meld oppositional concepts and achieve wholeness.

While many critics argue that *Cane* is a work of African American literature, it is actually a work that defies the label of “African American.” Labeling a work as “African American” imposes limitations on the text, because all aspects of the novel must seemingly fall under this label. In this sense, to call *Cane* an African American novel is to suggest that all its stories and themes revolve around African American-ness. Just as Toomer rejects the label of black or white, his stories defy the racial binary by resisting the label of African American. In this sense, Toomer’s work successfully resists the typical structure of an African American novel. According to George Hutchinson in *Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse*, “The difficulty of speaking or writing from outside the dominant discourse of race is a pervasive motive throughout *Cane*, and it has been matched by the difficulty of reading the text *against* the boundaries of that discourse.”²² Therefore, dance succeeds where language fails. In “Bona and Paul,” Paul connects to Bona physically, and this physical connection occurs against the boundaries of the discourse of race, which is what Hutchinson suggests that language fails to do. When Paul discovers that Bona’s words have no feel to them, he suggests that language does not provide the same feeling that Paul experienced when he and Bona physically touched and danced together earlier at the gymnasium. Her words cannot connect her to him the way that her body

²¹ Webb and Toomer, 206.

²² George Hutchinson, “Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse,” in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 35, No. 2 (University of Texas Press, 1993), 227.

did earlier that day. Paul says to Bona, “I can’t talk love. Love is a dry grain in my mouth unless it is wet with kisses.”²³ Here, Paul claims that bodily actions mean more to him than verbal exchange. He cannot express himself through words the way that he can express himself through physical actions. This illuminates the power of physicality and the idea that the body is capable of releasing more information, emotion, and meaning than a verbal conversation. Thus, Toomer uses dance to defy the transcendental signified.

In his poem “Portrait and Georgia,” Toomer sets up a visual structure that resembles the transcendental signified model to show how the body and race are restricted by it, and then he conflates it. The model appears as a chart with a straight vertical line. The left side of the line contains the superior term, while the right side of the line contains the inferior one. The latter goes into the human unconscious. In dance, if a phrase contains very linear movement, then these linear steps would appear by the left side of the model, while release, flow, and other non-linear movement qualities would go to the right, consigned to the unconscious. The dancer would repress movement qualities that add personality to the choreography in favor of strictly linear steps. In “Portrait and Georgia,” the first four lines of the poem contain one word on the left side of the poem, a dash after this word, and descriptions of the word on the right side of the dash. This dash symbolizes the vertical line of the transcendental signified model. Toomer writes, “Hair – braided chestnut, coiled like a lyncher’s rope.”²⁴ In this line, hair signifies lynching, which relates to racism and slavery. Braids and chestnut both signify mixed-ness. A braid consists of three pieces of hair melded together to create one style. Chestnut is a hair color that contains some brown, some red, and some blonde. It varies in shade, but it is never completely white or completely black. Hence, Toomer seems to suggest that mixing causes lynching.

²³ “Bona and Paul,” 74.

²⁴ Toomer, “Portrait in Georgia,” in *Cane*, 30.

Therefore, mixing, from a societal viewpoint, is negative and violent. White should never mix with black, hence the transcendental signified. Toomer also writes, “Lips – old scars, or the first red blisters.”²⁵ Lips are a common racial signifier here. In addition, the red blisters symbolize welts from a whipping. The body is being described through the violent lens of slavery. Toomer suggests that this lens can never fully disappear because scars, a signifier of abuse, remain just like words on a page.

However, through the surfacing of the repressed unconscious by mixing oppositional terms, Toomer defies the binary structure of the transcendental signified. At the end of “Portrait in Georgia,” Toomer notes, “And her slim body, white as the ash of black flesh after flame.”²⁶ Here, Toomer collapses the oppositions by incorporating black and white into a single phrase with no dashes of separation. Toomer conflates oppositions. He turns a white body into a burned body. He mixes white flesh with black ashes. In “Portrait and Georgia,” Toomer articulates the transcendental signified, then demonstrates how to collapse it.

The poem “Prayer” also conflates oppositions. While Cixous treats body and soul as opposites, Toomer connects the soul to the body, specifically to the eye. The eye is a homonym for “I,” which designates an individual being. Therefore, the connection of the soul and the body here helps to identify the individual. When a dancer recovers her soul from her unconscious and applies elements of her soul to her physical movements, she becomes a whole individual. Dance enables people to recover the soul in a redemptive manner that yields wholeness. When Toomer refers to his “soul’s flesh-eye,”²⁷ he suggests that the soul and the eye, or the body, work in tandem to create an individual person. The dancer cannot rely on just the eye (body) or just the soul to achieve wholeness: the two must mix. There is no dash or vertical line that separates the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Toomer, “Prayer,” in *Cane*, 68.

flesh from the soul. They coexist with the mind, and this coexistence of physicality and soul makes a human being whole.

Just as he portrays the transcendental signified in order to diminish it, Toomer sets up the idea of fragmentation throughout his novel in order to expose its failures and thus deem it problematic. *Cane* is “rendered through close and careful encounters between blacks and blacks, and blacks and whites, in an almost mythic, transitional, pre-Jazz age, Jim Crow rural South.”²⁸ To some extent, Toomer’s racial ambivalence explains the theme of fragmentation in his writing. When race no longer claims our identities, all aspects of our backgrounds and personalities emerge and fragment us. Toomer himself “found as his great theme modernity’s attendant for fragmentation and alienation.”²⁹ However, Toomer incorporates a sense of spirituality throughout *Cane* that does not align with the theme of fragmentation. Kerman and Eldridge observe: “Jean was trying to fit the blackness that was a part of him into a more comprehensive human view...he was passing from preoccupations with external, visible reality to concentration on internal, invisible reality.”³⁰ This internal, invisible reality belongs to the soul. While Toomer uses dance in *Cane* to feel less fragmented, the dancers in his stories only fulfill this goal when they concentrate on their internal performances in addition to their external ones. Only when the dancers use their personal inner feelings and elements of their souls with their external dance movements do they conflate fragmentations within them. Toomer could not see his internal reality, or his soul, but he knew it was inside of him. He could feel it. In this sense, Toomer did not necessarily deny his blackness, but rather denied its control over his identity. By deconstructing an identity limited by race, Toomer attempted to rewrite himself as a whole being

²⁸ Toomer. *Cane*, xxii.

²⁹ *Cane*, Ixii.

³⁰ Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard T. Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 115.

who embraced every aspect of himself, including those that only existed internally. In this sense, fragmentation is necessary because it lays bare each entity that must be included in the eventual whole. Toomer shifts from fragmentation to wholeness using dancers' souls as critical elements of their performances.

While the transcendental signified symbolizes fragmentation, the circle symbolizes wholeness. Each section of *Cane* contains an illustration of part of a circle. With each new section, the circle gets closer and closer to closing and becoming complete. In this sense, Toomer is working toward recovering a full circle, and is therefore using the novel to work toward the achievement of wholeness. However, the full circle is never portrayed. Therefore, despite his discovery of dancers becoming whole while incorporating their souls into physical movement, Toomer never achieves permanent wholeness. When the dance ends, fragmentation once again takes precedent. As long as dance remains ephemeral, Toomer cannot use dance alone to close the circle. Nevertheless, Toomer finds fleeting escapes from the transcendental signified through a combination of rhythm, soul, and the body.

"Carma" explores the strength derived from the mixing of rhythm, soul, and the body by depicting a light-skinned black, socially inferior woman who recovers wholeness when she dances. Toomer describes a light-skinned black girl in a "whitewashed shack" who sings, "Dusk takes the polish from the rails."³¹ Here, dusk blends the girl with the whitewashed shack, making her dusk-like. Because dusk blends whiteness and blackness, the woman takes on the qualities a highly sexualized, light-skinned black woman, or an octaroon. However, despite Toomer's description of octaroons as socially inferior and powerless, when Toomer writes, "She does not sing; her body is a song. She is in the forest, dancing,"³² the woman begins to gain strength. She

³¹ "Carma," 31.

³² Ibid.

uses her body to express herself in the forest and gains a sense of freedom. When she uses her body, she becomes more than her race. Her body yields freedom, and freedom yields strength because weakness is caused by repression. By writing, “juju men, greegree, witch-doctors,” Toomer associates the woman’s dancing with power and conjurers.³³ In this sense, he provides her with strength and power through the practice of dance.

However, even when dance recuperates body and soul, the transcendental signified remains. According to Jacques Derrida in “Difference,” people can eliminate the fixed meanings or significance of words by playing with language. He uses the example of the word “difference,” and suggests that by replacing the second “e” with the letter “a,” it becomes “differance,” a word that does not exist and therefore is not signified.³⁴ However, while changing the spelling initially eliminates the transcendental signified, the new word will inevitably acquire a new fixed meaning over time. In this sense, rather than escaping the system’s center, Derrida simply shifts the center. Thus, even when Toomer creates new terms with new meanings, such as his “American race,” eventually this language also becomes signified.

In “Kabnis,” Toomer demonstrates the limitations on language and its inability to blend people the way the body can. Kabnis thinks, “God, if I could develop that in words. Give what I know a bull-neck and a heaving body, all would go well with me.”³⁵ Here, Kabnis suggests the limits of language and the expressiveness of the body. Kabnis wishes he could write in words what he can say through the body, but knows that he lacks the words to develop his ideas. He can only describe the world by giving it bodily characteristics. In this sense, the world can only be

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Difference” in “Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences” in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 256.

³⁵ Toomer, “Kabnis,” in *Cane*, 81.

fully understood and explored when the body is recuperated. Dance has the power to explain the world and connect people in a way that language cannot. Kabnis is frustrated with language, because he wants to be able to write in the same way that he can use his body to make sense of the world. He struggles as a literary artist because he feels stifled by words. Unlike Derrida, Kabnis is aware that words cannot escape the transcendental signified. These words are all signified, and therefore they all pose limits on Kabnis's freedom as a writer. The body, on the other hand, can be more open and experimental. The body fills in the gaps that signified words cannot quite touch.

However, Toomer also shows that dance, like language, does not permanently eliminate the transcendental signified, although it gets much closer to that goal than language. In "Theater," Toomer portrays a black woman dancing on a stage and a white man who connects with her as she dances. As soon as the dance ends, the mixing of binaries that occurred during the dance is undone. The world once again becomes fragmented and incomplete. "Theater" illuminates the fleeting experience of melding and wholeness with regard to dance.

The melding of black and white in "Theater" seems to be depicted in somewhat of a negative light. Toomer writes that at Howard Theatre, founded by the all-white National Amusement Company in Washington, D.C.,³⁶ black dancers "dance and shout above the tick and trill of white-walled buildings."³⁷ Here, Toomer juxtaposes the black dancers with the white building, suggesting that the dancers are imposing themselves on a white-dominated space. This idea of white people entering black space and transforming this space suggests the culture of theater during the Harlem Renaissance. White people in rebellions against more "civilized" art

³⁶ Alison B. Fortier, *A History Lover's Guide to Washington, D.C.: Designed for Democracy (History as Guide)* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014), 2.

³⁷ Toomer, "Theater," in *Cane*, 51.

forms took up black music and dance styles.³⁸ White people attempting to be “modern” danced the fox trot and the lindy hop. However, with the popularity of these black dance forms among white people came the commodification of such forms. In “Theater,” when John, a white man and the manager’s brother, walks into the auditorium, Toomer writes, “the space-dark air grows softly luminous.”³⁹ According to black theater historian Karen Sotiropoulos, “The commodification of black music and dance that accelerated with the prewar fox-trot thus resulted in a level of commodification of black style, of black culture, and in a sense, of black identity.”⁴⁰ Therefore, what seems to be the melding of black and white in “Theater” is actually a form of commodification. The “black style” depicted on stage does not represent authentic black art, but a commodified version of it that meets expectations of white theater managers and producers.

One needs to be careful not to confuse cultural mixing with commodification. In “Theater,” the white theater manager controls black dance forms. As John watches Dorris, the black female dancer who catches his eye, and her peers perform on stage, he thinks, “Soon the director will herd you, my full-lipped, distant beauties, and tame you, and blunt your sharp thrusts in loosely suggestive movements, appropriate to Broadway.”⁴¹ Here, John elaborates on the idea that black movement was tamed and “modernized” to fit the mold of Broadway dance, transformed into consumer products that did not accurately represent the inspiration of the work.⁴² Therefore, “success trapped African American artists. African Americans had to grapple with two interdependent identities to be both

³⁸ Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America*, (Harvard University Press: 2009), 239.

³⁹ “Theater,” 51.

⁴⁰ Sotiropoulos, 239.

⁴¹ “Theater,” 51.

⁴² Sotiropoulos, 242.

'modern' and black."⁴³ In this sense, there were two types of black dance during the Harlem Renaissance. There were the authentic, participatory dances performed in saloons and at local gatherings, and there were the commodified versions of those dances performed on stage.

When John says the director will "tame" and "herd" the dancers in "Theater," he described them in a way that indicates that he does not recognize black women as human beings. In this instance, the oppositional racial binary is as prevalent as ever. John imagines talking to the dancers and saying, "Soon the audience will paint your dusk faces white, and call you beautiful."⁴⁴ Like Carma and Fern, these dancers are described as octaroons with "dusk" skin rather than black skin. However, while this dusk color represented mixing in a transcendent way in Toomer's other stories, here John suggests that whiteness dominates dusk, and that mixing, or dusk, is ugly and inferior to whiteness. Despite the fact that these octaroon women have white ancestry and could possibly pass as white, they are labeled "black" and defined by this blackness in a negative way.

When John watches Dorris dance, however, he realizes that mixing transcends the dualism of mind and body, and black and white. John experiences mind and body as separate categories at the beginning of this story. They unite only during Dorris's dance, and he finally accepts the beauty of mixing. When John enters the theater, his "body is separate from the thoughts that pack his mind."⁴⁵ His body reacts to the women dancing on stage, and he yearns to stamp his feet to the music. However, "His mind, contained above desires of his body, singles

⁴³ Sotiropoulos, 239.

⁴⁴ "Theater," 51.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

the girls out, and tries to trace origins and plot destinies.”⁴⁶ By attempting to trace the origins of the “girls,” John acknowledges that they are different from him. However, as John’s mind begins to connect with his body as the dance continues, these differences, such as race, become insignificant. They melt away along with the separation of mind and body. While John watches the dancers, his “feet and torso and his blood press in. He wills thought to rid his mind of passion.”⁴⁷ Therefore, dance seems to have the power to unite the mind and body, despite John’s efforts to resist its power. The mind and body create an oppositional binary. Therefore, because dance seems to bring these two entities close together and perhaps is even able to unite them, dance defies the binary system. However, John fights the will of dance to unite his mind and body. Only when Dorris brings her own inimitable flare to the choreographed movements do mind and body unite.

As John watches Dorris on stage, he thinks, “Dance from yourself. Dance!”⁴⁸ John is enthralled by her ability to apply her whole self to the choreography. He feels ecstatic watching her as he kinesthetically responds to her, feeling her mind and body create a whole, moving, thinking being. John experiences a rush of physical excitement while he watches Dorris dance. He recuperates his body by connecting it to Dorris’s. This unity of the mind and body is appealing and powerful for everyone in the theater. Dorris has created herself as a whole being beyond the transcendental signified, and beyond race. Her physicality is expressed in a controlled and sensual manner, rather than in spontaneous bursts. Watching Dorris helps John to become whole with Dorris.

By then, Dorris has left the memorized choreography behind. Toomer writes, the dancers all “forget set steps; they find their own. The director forgets to bawls them out. Dorris

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

dances.”⁴⁹ Here, the act of forgetting means that the mind no longer controls the body with learned movements. Philosopher Judith Halberstam reflects on this idea of forgetting as an escape strategy in *The Queer Art of Failure* when she writes, “Memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls ‘a ritual of power’; it selects for what is important. . .it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions, and it sets precedents for other ‘memorializations.’”⁵⁰ In this sense, memory makes some things more important than others. Signified language is simply language that is tied to memorized meaning. When people forget the meaning of certain terms, language structures or even movements, they are no longer signified.

In this regard, dance itself, in the form of set choreography, adheres to the transcendental signified. When Dorris dances movements that are all her own, her body articulates a new form of communication and self-expression that exists outside the prison house of memorized movement or language. While language cannot escape this prison house, Dorris reveals how dance can escape it when she performs in front of John. Therefore, language and dance can both be signified, but only dance has the capacity to escape the transcendental signified, albeit fleetingly.

When John becomes whole, he experiences a new form of consciousness. Watching Dorris dance, he “dreams” of being in a room, and “that the flesh and blood of Dorris are its walls. Singing walls.”⁵¹ While consciousness is chiefly a mental function, John finds a way to connect it to the body as well. When the mind and body unite, or the body becomes the mind and vice versa, a new type of consciousness occurs that takes on a dream-like quality. Although John’s experience is described as a dream, he is not literally sleeping and is not literally

⁴⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁰ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 211.

⁵¹ “Theater,” 53.

unconscious. In this dream, the white walls that once segregated Dorris from John due to their racial differences are now made of “the flesh and blood of Dorris.” By connecting his mind to his body, John connects himself to Dorris. Melding mind and body therefore recuperates race and makes racial differences less significant. The differences that John so clearly recognizes between Dorris and himself melt away when Dorris dances. This is the glimmer of hope for Toomer in dreaming of an “American race” that will ignore the racial binary and make it insignificant.

In “Kabnis,” the protagonist also experiences this dream-like state of consciousness that follows physical recovery. Lying in bed next to a woman, he thinks, “Ralph Kabnis is a dream. And dreams are faces with large eyes and weak chins and broad brows... The body of the world is bull-necked. A dream is a soft face that fits uncertainly upon it.”⁵² Like John’s “dream” in “Theater,” Kabnis’ dream emphasizes the physical. The dream does not derive from the unconscious, but results from mind-body consciousness. Toomer clearly believes that multiple forms of consciousness exist. He attempts to explore these different forms, or levels, of consciousness in order to discover which type of consciousness incorporates or surfaces material from the unconscious. In this sense, Toomer explores dreams in the hope of discovering a consciousness that gets rid of the unconscious altogether.

Toomer describes Kabnis’ dream self as broad-browed, weak chinned, and large eyed, all terms that are race-neutral. Kabnis is not defined by race in his dream. His features do not associate him with particular racial, economic, or ethnic identity. Because his features are not specific to a singular community of people, they can be applied to any human being regardless of personal, racial, or ethnic background.

Unfortunately, John’s dream in “Theater” ends as soon as Dorris stops dancing. When Dorris looks to John after her dance in the hope of seeing his love and her dance reflected on his

⁵² Ibid.

face, “She finds it a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream.”⁵³ According to psychoanalyst C.G. Jung, the shadow consists of the repressed elements of a person’s identity. When people acknowledge their shadows, they recover this repressed material and are able to be whole.⁵⁴ When John’s shadow, or dream, was projected on Dorris during her dance, he recognized it and became whole. Now, it is hidden in his unconscious, suggesting that dance is only able to offer fleeting possibilities of wholeness and recovery. Once the dance ends, performers and audience alike go back to the way they viewed the world before the dance. Dance, then, is like a drug that eventually weans off and returns its users to their grim realities. When Dorris realizes that John’s dream is over, “Her eyes, over a floor of tears, stare at the whitewashed ceiling.”⁵⁵ In John’s dream, this ceiling was made of Dorris’s flesh and blood. Now, it is whitewashed, separate from Dorris’s slightly darker skin. In this sense, the ceiling represents the racial binary that is forced back into place when John’s dream returns to his unconscious.

The idea of dreaming to create a new definition of consciousness occurs again in “Box Seat.” In the first paragraph of this short story, Toomer tells black people to “shake your curled wool-blossoms” and “stir the root-life of a withered people.”⁵⁶ It seems that Toomer is encouraging black people to help put white people in touch with their instinctual lives. Toomer tells the black people to “Call them from their houses, and teach them to dream,”⁵⁷ so they can experience the new form of consciousness that John discovers in “Theater.” As revealed in “Theater,” dance is the catalyst of this dream-like state of consciousness. Black people must teach white people to dream by teaching them how to dance. When both white and black people

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ C. G. Jung, “The Shadow,” in *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, 2 ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 145.

⁵⁵ “Theater,” 54.

⁵⁶ Toomer, “Box Seat,” in *Cane*, 57.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

dance, they will experience the same connection between the mind and body that brings them to a dream-like state of consciousness. When the mind and body become one whole entity, consciousness dissolves the unconscious. This dream-like state of consciousness recovers material that previously existed in the unconscious.

Mind-body consciousness is explored in “Box Seat.” For Dan, a black man, sex has the function of dance in “Theater.” It is a catalyst for transcending the mind-body split and achieving wholeness. When Dan speaks to Muriel, a light-skinned black woman, or octaroon figure, in her house, Toomer writes, “Dan’s consciousness crudely swerved into his passions. They flare up in his eyes. They set up quivers in his abdomen.”⁵⁸ As his body yields to physical desire, Dan experiences the shift from mental consciousness to mind-body consciousness.

In “Box Seat,” Toomer suggests that black people are more open and experienced with their bodies, and thus must help white people to tap into their bodies. He writes, “Dark swaying forms of Negroes are street songs that woo virginal houses.”⁵⁹ The virginal houses that Toomer refers to are those of white people. Toomer uses the term “virginal” both literally and figuratively. Literally, because the experience of orgasm is another way of achieving a new form of mind-body consciousness, similarly to the dream-like state that derives from dance. However, as in dance, this consciousness dissolves when the orgasm ends. Figuratively, Toomer uses “virginal” as a metaphor for white people’s obsession with civilization and propriety. Toomer urges them to let go of this obsession and experience their bodies. Muriel, whose light skin enables her to pass as a white woman, feels conflicted between her physical desire, which signifies blackness, and propriety, which signifies whiteness. Propriety is linked to civilization, and civilization dominates nature and the body. Propriety makes people believe that the body

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

should be repressed because bodily experiences of any kind are inappropriate, inferior, and primitive. Although Toomer discovers only fleeting opportunities to transcend these oppositional entities, he makes it clear that these entities exist in everyone. Everyone has the capacity to value propriety and also to experience the body.

In “Box Seat,” music and rhythm yield dusk, and therefore enable people to mix different elements of their identities, such as propriety and desire. When Dan, a black man, walks down the street singling, “Girl-eyes within him widen upward to promised faces. Floating away, they dally wistfully over the dusk body of the street.”⁶⁰ By giving Dan “girl-eyes,” Toomer suggests that men can embrace female qualities in the same way that Carma and Fern embrace masculine strength. According to Cixous, people have both male and female qualities, but the qualities that do not coincide with somebody’s assigned sex are repressed within the unconscious. Therefore, Cixous would argue that there are “girl-eyes” in every man, just as there are “boy-eyes” in every woman. When one looks at the text through this particular lens, it seems that Dan succeeds in surfacing his repressed “girl-eyes” when he sings. However, he loses the “girl-eyes” when they float away from him, suggesting that the recovery of repressed material is transient. The “girl-eyes” that float over the “dusk body” of the street provide hope that the unconscious and the conscious can mix. Dusk, in *Cane*, often refers to the mixing of races. Linking it to male and female qualities suggests that gender, like blackness and whiteness, has a certain fluidity.

When Dan sits next to a “portly Negress” at the Lincoln Theatre, the large black woman’s roots seem to transcend oppositional binaries by having this same fluidity. Her mobile roots sink down into wavering bloodlines, enabling her to exist in two places at once, which connects her to parts of herself that were missing beforehand, namely her body. Incorporating the body into the recovery of repressed material makes this recovery natural and more likely to result in mixing.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Toomer writes, “Her strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south.”⁶¹ In this wedding of north and south, conscious and unconscious, the Negress acknowledges her black roots. For Muriel, who is caught between love and hate, propriety and passion, and blackness and whiteness, this Negress offers hope that she can acknowledge both sides of these binaries. The Negress also recovers her soul when Toomer writes, “a soil-soaked fragrance comes from her.”⁶² Here, soil is a homonym for the soul. As the Negress’s roots travel southward into earth’s soil, they travel into her soul. Because soil is of the earth, her soul is natural. Once she sinks roots in the south and acknowledges her black roots, she is no longer troubled by binaries. In this instance, race symbolizes the unconscious. By recovering race, all of the elements trapped in the unconscious, such as gender and the body, are also recovered. This Negress succeeds in doing what Dorris, Kabnis, and Muriel all try to do. Dorris tries to do this in performance, Kabnis in art, and Muriel in her relationship with Dan. Dorris gets closer than Kabnis and Muriel at freeing the unconscious because by dancing, she uses the recuperation of her body to meld oppositional binaries. If Muriel could sink roots the way the Negress does, she would no longer be the “Sweet, tame woman in a brass box seat.”⁶³ She would accept her blackness, and therefore accept that she does not need to be so whitewashed, tame, and pure. She would acknowledge that she can be civilized without being “virginal.” Her soul would incorporate qualities of both blackness and whiteness. Race would no longer restrict her. Like the Negress, Muriel’s mobile roots would travel south and disappear in blood.

Toomer’s work emphasizes the capacity for mixing and blending fragmented entities through mobility. In “Seventh Street,” Toomer asserts his theme of fragmentation and the

⁶¹ Ibid, 63.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

oppositional binary of whiteness and blackness, while showing the capacity for transcendence through mobility. Toomer writes, “Split it! In two! Again! Shred it!”⁶⁴ Here, Toomer explores people’s obsession with splitting everything into two parts. He then suggests that rhythm and music combined with dance allows the melding of these oppositions to occur. Toomer writes, “jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington.”⁶⁵ He suggests that whiteness, or “whitewashed wood” disappears in blood. Because blood is linked to the body, Toomer hints that the body is the key to dissolving whiteness or blackness into pure human-ness. While music begins this necessary mixing, only the music of the body, dance, can fully achieve it.

While blood can be problematic and sometimes even dangerous, as when it is connected to violence, Toomer suggests in “Seventh Street” that blood can also be redemptive. The blood that causes white and whitewash to disappear flows down Seventh Street. Blood flow relates to dance because physical mobility, which often culminates in some form of dance, causes blood to flow through the body. Therefore, blood flow is interchangeable with dance because both are forms of mobility that cause mixing. The blood on Seventh Street flows “in shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets.”⁶⁶ This redemptive blood has the capacity to transform an entire community. Like dance, blood washes away binaries, helping people to achieve wholeness and complete the circle.

In “Box Seat,” Dan suggests that to be a real, whole person, one should not isolate oneself and inhabit a world without dynamics or complexity. He says, “Life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them. No one should want to.”⁶⁷ Here,

⁶⁴ Toomer, “Seventh Street,” in *Cane*, 41.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ “Box Seat,” 60.

Dan suggests that opposites such as joy and pain, and beauty and ugliness, should coincide with one another. He says, “Perfect joy, or perfect pain, with no contrasting element to define them, would mean a monotony of consciousness, would mean death.”⁶⁸ The two key words in this section are “consciousness” and “death.” When talking about a “monotony of consciousness,” Dan suggests that by isolating certain elements and repressing their opposites, consciousness of the mind becomes boring and lifeless. In this sense, choosing to suppress the unconscious and remain in the transcendental signified leads to death. It is also important to note that Dan refers to the consciousness of the mind, which he sees as monotonous and problematic, rather than mind-body consciousness, which enables a person to become whole.

Jung suggests that a person has access to wholeness only when she recovers the repressed oppositional material of herself through ritual. Jung does not use the term “ritual” in a religious sense here, but rather as a performance-specific form of recovery, such as dance, linked to a tradition or exhibited behavior. Jung claims that repressed material exists in the collective unconscious, and that it can infer the nature of the shadow. According to Hans Christian Andersen, the shadow is the dark, inadmissible, repressed side of the human soul.⁶⁹ However, despite its darkness, the shadow enables people to discover creativity and depth in life. It rids them of life on the surface of reality.⁷⁰ When people incorporate depth and internal emotions into ritualistic dance forms, they are able to recognize their shadows, and audience members are able to project their shadows on these performers.

In “Bona and Paul,” Toomer shows how ritual can recover the shadow when Bona watches Paul’s choreographed drilling. This drilling can be seen as ritualistic. While language

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹Hans Christian Andersen, “The Shadow,” in *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 6.

⁷⁰ Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Child and The Shadow,” *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 32, No. 2 (1975): 140.

does not enable mixing to occur, Toomer shows how dance and movement allow such mixing, especially of races, to take place. When Bona watches Paul drill in the school gymnasium, she compares his drilling movements to dance. As she watches him, “The dance of his blue-trousered limbs thrills her.”⁷¹ This is because Paul’s movements seem different from those of the other drillers. “One man is out of step. In step” writes Toomer. “He is in the front row. He is in no row at all.”⁷² Much like John while watching Dorris dance, Bona is physically excited as she watches Paul. Like Dorris, he stands out from the rest of the others. Like John with respect to Dorris, Bona’s conflicts about Paul’s blackness disappear and become insignificant when she watches him dance. Bona compares Paul to “a candle that dances in a grove swung with pale balloons,” “a harvest moon,” and “an autumn leaf.”⁷³ While Paul moves his body, he appears natural, so Bona compares him to elements of nature. In this sense, while Paul drills, he recovers the nature repressed in the unconscious. United with his body, he becomes nature.

Later, when Bona and Paul dance, Paul experiences emotions that language cannot match. Toomer writes, “The dance takes blood from their minds and packs it, tingling, in the torsos of their swaying bodies. Passionate blood leaps back into their days. They are a dizzy blood clot on a gyrating floor.”⁷⁴ Blood is extremely important here, because the blood connects the mind to the body. It is the element that courses through both the mind and the torso, linking the two so that they are identical. What enables the blood to course through body and mind uniting them is dance.

By suggesting that Bona and Paul form a “blood clot on a gyrating floor,” Toomer implies that dance causes mixing to take place. This is no longer a black man and a white

⁷¹ “Bona and Paul,” 70.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

woman, but a single entity whose blood has mixed. Paul says to a black man who doubts Paul's connection to Bona, "I danced with her, and did not know her. I felt passion, contempt and passion for her whom I did not know...And all the while the Gardens were purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk."⁷⁵ Here, Paul proves to the black man guarding the door that racial differences need not cause segregation. People who do not confront their shadows are reduced to the language of the conscious or the language of reason. They are incapable of accessing the unconscious or thinking outside their current language and thought systems. They are incapable of accepting racial differences without segregating the different races. Jung suggests that people are able to recognize their shadows when they realize that they subconsciously project their shadows onto other objects.⁷⁶ When Paul dances with Bona, the garden turns purple. Paul has projected his shadow onto the garden.

Just like dusk, the purple garden represents the mixing of races. Paul describes the garden as beautiful and harmless, as if to emphasize that racial mixing is just as beautiful and harmless, despite threats of punishment for inter-racial mingling at the time. Paul says, "white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals. That I am going out and know her whom I brought here with me to these Gardens which are purple."⁷⁷ All faces, whether black or white, are petals. Paul projects his shadow onto the garden of flower petals and sees both his own and Bona's faces among them.

For Paul, white and black faces together create a beautiful garden that he wants to explore and collect petals from. He views mixing as a positive experience, rather than something to be feared and avoided. Only when Bona and Paul dance together does he discover that they are petals in a purple garden full of passion. Paul recognizes that nature makes up his shadow. While

⁷⁵ Ibid, 78.

⁷⁶ Jung, 145.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

some people suggest that human experience is located in the brain, Jung argues that human experience is found through art. Toomer explores this idea by enabling his characters to explore their identities and projections of their shadows through dance.

In “Kabnis,” Toomer describes a fragmented room where, unlike the garden in “Bona and Paul,” whiteness and blackness do not mix. Of Kabnis’s bedroom, Toomer writes:

“Whitewashed hearth and chimney, black and sooty saw-teeth...The walls, unpainted, are seasoned a rosin yellow. And cracks between the boards are black. These cracks are the lips the night winds use for whispering.”⁷⁸ Not only does Toomer dramatize the contrasts between light and dark, but he also personifies all of the darker aspects of the room. He suggests that the black chimney has saw-teeth and that the black cracks between boards are lips that whisper. In contrast, white elements of the room are simply described as stationary objects. Toomer relates black entities of the room to the body, which suggests that perhaps only black people, in his novel and in the Harlem Renaissance, have succeeded in recovering their physicality. White people, according to Toomer, still fail to do so. While the majority of black characters recuperate their bodies through dance, Bona is the only white character in the novel who dances. The other white characters are mostly spectators watching blacks dance. Therefore, Toomer could be suggesting that black people have escaped the transcendental signified and recovered the body, while white people are still trapped within the system.

Toomer shows how Kabnis, like many other black characters, changes from a man who adheres to the transcendental signified, separating mind and body, to a man who recovers the body and thus defies the transcendental signified. When a hen settles in Kabnis’s home, he wrings its neck and throws its broken body into the bushes, which suggests that Kabnis does not value the body and subconsciously separates it from the mind (head). He “throws the head

⁷⁸ “Kabnis,” 81.

away,” Toomer writes, and “Picks up the hopping body, warm, sticky, and hides it in a clump of bushes.”⁷⁹ Separating the hen’s mind from its body literally kills it. Perhaps Toomer uses this scene as a warning to encourage people to unite mind and body.

However, despite his former separation of mind and body, Kabnis shows that he is capable of recuperating the latter. Kabnis says that he is “Earth’s child. The earth is [his] mother.”⁸⁰ The body recovers its nature by captivating the soul, connecting it to soil and roots. All people have such roots, which link the different facets of identity that combine to make people whole. By claiming the earth to be his mother, Kabnis also disregards any specific genes or elements of his background that might distinguish him from others. This relates to Toomer’s notion of the “American race.” Because Kabnis considers himself a man of the earth rather than a black man from the south, he thus opens himself up to multiple aspects of identity that can naturally coexist. Oppositions do not limit him.

However, Kabnis still feels a need to repress certain emotions that society has convinced him belong in the unconscious. When Kabnis acknowledges the beauty of hills and valleys, he becomes emotional and tries to convince himself that nature is ugly. He says, “Oh, no, I won’t let that emotion come up in me. Stay down. Stay down, I tell you. O Jesus, thou art beautiful...Come, Ralph, pull yourself together.”⁸¹ Here, Kabnis stifles the urge to experience emotion before the beauty of nature. He is not supposed to recover nature, and by extension he is not supposed to recover race. He tries to force his emotions to “stay down” by repressing them, forcing them into his unconscious. Kabnis rejects nature because he fears that by accepting nature he will lose touch with civilization. He says, “This loneliness, dumbness, awful, intangible oppression is enough to drive a man insane. Miles from nowhere. A speck on a Georgia

⁷⁹ Ibid, 82.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid, 83.

hillside.”⁸² He craves a mix, or blend of nature and civilization, but he does not know how to recover the one without repressing the other.

It is clear that Kabnis has the potential to enable nature and civilization, and thus mind and body, to coexist within him. However, though he comes very close, Kabnis never quite realizes this potential. When Lewis and Kabnis lock eyes, Toomer writes, “Kabnis, a promise of a soil-soaked beauty; uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him.”⁸³ Here, Kabnis gets as close as he ever does to defying the transcendental signified by embracing nature, and thus the body. Kabnis finds a connection to Lewis that gives him “the sudden need to rush into the arms of this man.”⁸⁴ He remains, however, “suspended,” unable to experience the resurrecting touch of the soil. This is how Kabnis fails at what the Negress in “Theater” achieves. She sinks her roots into the soil, while he finds himself trapped and suspended over the soil. He wants to sink his roots, but cannot. Had he done so, Kabnis would have been “resurrected” as a complete, conscious, and alive human being. He would have completed the circle. However, Kabnis never completes the circle, and neither does Toomer in *Cane*.

At the end of “Kabnis,” Toomer illuminates just how close Kabnis gets to completing the circle. He writes, “Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes,”⁸⁵ tying together Jung’s idea of shadows as projections of repressed material, the dream-like state of people when they experience a unity of mind and body, nature derived from soil, and the physical eye that stands as a homonym for “I,” or the individual. Thus, Toomer concludes *Cane* by stating that although the projection of the shadow can create the dream-like consciousness that enables

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 96.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 115.

people to embrace nature and the body and thus to identify themselves as whole beings, the shadow, consciousness, and recovery are all fleeting and transient. Toomer comes very close to resolving the problem of fragmentation, but in *Cane* he never closes the circle.

Although Toomer fails to do this in *Cane*, he later went on to study with spiritual teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, with whom he discovered how to complete the circle by using dance. Toomer was a part of Waldo Frank's Art as Vision Group and approached *Cane* as a lyrical-impressionist. According to the Toomer scholar Jon Woodson, "In lyrical-impressionism, the writer is ahistorically merged in the present and tries to catch the fleeting sense stimuli as they strike upon the conscious mind."⁸⁶ When Toomer wrote *Cane*, he searched for fleeting stimuli, rather than permanently recovered material, to enter his conscious mind. This is why he only discovers fleeting moments of wholeness in *Cane*. Characters such as Dorris, John, Bona, Paul, and Fern never recover anything permanently because they achieve only one level of consciousness. According to Woodson, "higher consciousness is a matter of escape from the three-dimensional world. To exercise this escape, it is necessary for the artist to throw off the chains of our logic."⁸⁷ Toomer used *Cane* as an effort to escape from the "three-dimensional world." In *Cane*, Toomer shows how traditional language limits people, and how people must communicate through something larger and more transcendent than language, such as dance. When writing the book, he aimed to "project onto language all that can be communicated of an inexpressible, transcendental consciousness and was not presented to recapitulate the fragmentary mind

⁸⁶ Jon Woodson, *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 31.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

of modern art.”⁸⁸ However, writing the book only enabled Toomer to discover fleeting, transitory moments of escape through these projections, just as his characters do.

It wasn't until Toomer began working with Gurdjieff that he discovered how to access his highest state of consciousness. Gurdjieff sought to help people transform habitual manifestations of mind and body and to recreate themselves as fully conscious and alert beings.⁸⁹ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Gurdjieff spent eighteen years traveling the world in search of hidden knowledge of forgotten religions and sciences that would help him link ritualistic movement to consciousness. He traveled the monasteries and cliff communities of Abyssinia, learned dervish-whirling and other Sufi rituals in Bokhara and Afghanistan, and practiced Tibetan ritual with the Dali Lama in Lhasa.⁹⁰ In 1915, back in Moscow, he developed his spiritual philosophy derived from his travels into a score of tables and charts that related the body to the happenings in mechanics, chemistry, astronomy, atomic physics, psychology, and color and sound perception of the time.⁹¹ In 1917, Gurdjieff opened the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Tiflis. This school attracted young dancers who wanted to study Gurdjieff's sacred dances.⁹²

The dances derived from an ancient dance mannequin machine that Gurdjieff was shown in a Sufi monastery near Tashkent. The machine transmitted sign combinations with its seven universal joints. Gurdjieff claimed that the specific Sufi performances could

⁸⁸ Ibid., 32

⁸⁹ Ibid., 35

⁹⁰ Mel Gordon, “Gurdjieff’s Movement Demonstrations: The Theatre of The Miraculous,” *The Drama Review*, 22, no. 2 (June 1978), 35.

⁹¹ Ibid., 36.

⁹² Ibid., 37.

uncover the lost Zoroastrian and Lamaist wisdom about body and consciousness.⁹³ These dances lacked graceful and harmonious dance rhythms. Instead, the performers were given challenging poses and patterns that forced them to change the way their minds and bodies interacted.⁹⁴ In *Cane*, Toomer had explored the use of dance as a catalyst for mind-body union, even if his characters never discover wholeness as a permanent state. But this experience had readied Toomer for accessing the highest state of consciousness through the performance of Gurdjieff's sacred dances. The closest Toomer gets to permanently completing the circle and discovering wholeness in *Cane* is when Dorris dances in "Theater." She and John meld together and discover themselves outside of race in a dream-like state of consciousness. However, because John and Dorris never access Gurdjieff's highest state of consciousness, they fail to achieve permanent wholeness.

Gurdjieff found a remedy for people like Toomer's Dorris and John who lose the wholeness they momentarily gain through dance. Discrediting the techniques of fakirs, yogis, and monks, Gurdjieff created what he called a "fourth-way" spiritual technique, which enables people to find permanent wholeness through dance. According to theater scholar Mel Gordon, the key to the fourth way was to disregard pre-conceived notions of beauty, and instead to submit to "a completely different plane of understanding, to awaken [one] into experiencing the sense of cosmic place and time, to permanently shatter and enlarge [one's] socially-delimited notion of personality."⁹⁵ Gurdjieff aimed to create movements and poses that would actively bring the mind into accord with the body. The movements were precise and difficult. By creating precise movement patterns and shapes,

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 37.

people found themselves transported to a higher state of consciousness. Whereas Dorris returns to her original state after reaching a peak level of consciousness, Gurdjieff's movements enabled people both to attain and to remain at that peak state. According to Gordon, "Each epoch, each nationality, each occupation has its own particular repertory of movement that prevents the individual from perceiving new sensations or thoughts. Before one can comprehend new sources of knowledge, a motor change must be affected."⁹⁶ This reflects Toomer's use of dance in "Theater," where the commodification of black dances keeps the dancers from experiencing a sense of wholeness. Like Derrida with respect to language, Gurdjieff aimed to create a new form of movement in an effort to use dance as an escape rather than a trap.

Gurdjieff's approach to movement broke barriers because it helped his followers recover the connection between mind, body, and emotion, as Toomer did with respect to his characters. However, Gurdjieff took this idea further, discovering a more permanent escape from the transcendental signified. Gurdjieff's main thesis was that people are controlled by three interconnected entities: cognition, feeling, and movement.⁹⁷ By modifying the fixed movement patterns of his students, he sought to change their consciousness. Toomer's Dorris delves into her fixed movement pattern and attracts John with her easy, graceful, personalized dance. This dance does not yield the change in consciousness Gurdjieff required. Gurdjieff urged his students to stay completely alert while dancing without getting distracted by the happenings of the world outside of the dance space. He sought dance movements that did not come naturally to his students in an effort to keep them thoughtful and alert while dancing. These dances gave

⁹⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 38.

performers access to what philosopher Sylvan Joseph Muldoon calls the “astral body.”⁹⁸ While the physical body links mind and matter, the astral body is the vehicle of the soul.⁹⁹ Dorris dances only with her physical body, while many of Gurdjieff’s exercises enabled conscious experiences to exist through the astral body. According to Woodson, “there was an experience of being aware of experience as though it was happening to a body in which the awareness or personality was not present.”¹⁰⁰ For people like Jean Toomer, isolated by their personalities and troubled by a deep-seated sense of fragmentation, Gurdjieff’s sacred dances helped to create a higher consciousness that remained even after the dancing stopped.

Two years after *Cane* was published, Toomer attended demonstrations of Gurdjieff’s sacred dances in New York.¹⁰¹ In July of 1924, Toomer traveled to the Chateau de Prieure, the house outside Fontainebleau where Gurdjieff had established his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.¹⁰² In France, Toomer was finally able to live free of segregation and bans on interracial social and sexual intercourse. Here, he discovered how to make total human consciousness more permanent. While studying Gurdjieff’s self-observation and non-identification methods of routing conscious experiences through the astral body, he experienced awakening from an unconscious or sleeping state to a more conscious or waking one. Despite his use of dreams in *Cane*, Toomer may not have even reached a waking state of consciousness in his novel. When Dorris dances in “Theater,” she puts her whole self into the dance in a way that makes her movements seem effortless and personal. This passionate, natural performance sends John into a dream-like state that enables him to connect with Dorris in the same natural and

⁹⁸ Sylvan Joseph Muldoon, Hereward Carrington, and York Beach Weiser, *The Projection of the Astral Body*, (York Beach, ME: S. Weiser, 1973,),15.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Woodson, 40.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰² Ibid., 38.

effortless manner in which she dances. Gurdjieff, on the other hand, argued that the highest state of consciousness requires effort. While Toomer briefly escaped from the transcendental signified in the sleeping state, this state of consciousness offered no permanent escape. Therefore, Gurdjieff brought Toomer a step closer to permanent consciousness.

After awakening from an unconscious to a conscious state, Toomer realized that two other types of awakening were necessary to attain the highest possible level of consciousness. The second awakening was from the waking to the self-conscious state. The third was from the self-conscious to the cosmic-conscious state.¹⁰³ By practicing Gurdjieff's demanding sacred dance exercises, Toomer was able to explore these different levels of consciousness and decipher for himself how conscious a human being can be. Although Toomer added his own psychology and experimentation to Gurdjieff's work, it was the latter's movement exercises that enabled Toomer to make these discoveries about the different levels of human consciousness.

In 1926, Toomer believed that he finally attained the highest and most permanent level of consciousness. He referred to this experience as a "birth above the body."¹⁰⁴ He discovered that he could only experience a spiritual awakening through the body. He wrote about this unique form of spiritual awakening in his autobiography, *Exile into Being*.¹⁰⁵ By studying dance, Toomer became a new spiritual being. He felt himself become the whole man that he so desperately struggled to discover while writing *Cane*. While Toomer understood when he wrote *Cane* that dance has the capacity to make people whole, he was unable to close the circle because writing about dance was not enough to make him discover how dance can make people permanently whole. He had to experience this physically himself.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 41.

Because dance is ephemeral, it is never performed the same way twice, even when the steps are the same. Dance itself is fleeting and transitory. It creates forms of human connection that enable people to feel whole in the moment, but the moment ends as soon as the dance does, and never exists in the same way again. Toomer never made it past this idea of transience when he wrote *Cane*. However, after studying with Gurdjieff, Toomer discovered that there are some elements of the holistic experience derived from dance that can remain with the performer and spectator after the dance is over. These elements are spiritual, and they remain permanent when a person reaches the highest point of consciousness through dance.

Toomer experienced this as the death of his former self and the birth of a completely new series of sensations. In *Exile into Being* he writes, "It was as though I had been touched from within in an extraordinary quiet way that stilled my functioning and momentarily suspended me between what had been and what was to come... My body and my life were in the power of a Power."¹⁰⁶ Here, Toomer explains that he felt suspended in the hands of a higher transformative power. This suggests that he was so conscious and hyper-alert of his actions and thoughts that he could see them functioning during something of an out-of-body experience. He was so aware of his mind and body working in tandem that he physically felt that he could see this connection inside of him.

Toomer mainly used Gurdjieff's teachings to transcend problems with race. While Toomer explored the idea of mixing in *Cane*, he later acknowledged that rather than being so focused on the melding of races to achieve wholeness, he wanted to help develop a new type of humanity that evolves from "an influx of spirit from a supernatural source."¹⁰⁷ Because Toomer fully recovered his body and his total consciousness, he developed a spiritual awareness greater

¹⁰⁶ Jean Toomer, *From Exile into Being* (Unpublished MS: Fisk University Library, 1938), 1.

¹⁰⁷ Woodson, 42.

than that of someone who could only experience his spiritual essence during sleep. In this new spiritual state of awareness, race became insignificant because black people were no longer seen solely as black people. Personalities became more inclusive and less restricted by race. In *Cane*, Toomer developed the idea that movement and dancing bring about the same spiritual essence that dreaming does, but that this essence only lasts as long as the dance or the dream. By studying Gurdjieff's sacred dances, Toomer discovered that dance could fully connect him to his spiritual being and his whole self outside of race while remaining in a completely conscious state. While Toomer already knew that dance was a means of experiencing wholeness and integration, Gurdjieff helped him to recognize the extent of its powers.

In late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British and American literature, the body is erased in favor of the mind. Following this era, modernist writers tried to redeem the body in their works. Writers such as D.H. Lawrence and Gertrude Stein gave characters their bodies back by melding body and mind in their works. Toomer was one of these modernist writers eager to address the problems with the traditional mind/body binary. But, because of his black roots, Toomer faced a greater challenge in recuperating the body. For him, recuperating the body also had to mean recuperating race. In his attempt to write in a modernist manner during the Harlem Renaissance, Toomer had to acknowledge the body, especially the black body, as doubly problematic. The black body was lynched, whipped, and raped. Given the stigma and history of the black body during the Harlem Renaissance, Toomer's success, even fleetingly, in redeeming it was an unlikely accomplishment.

Toomer succeeded in recuperating the body by mixing modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. In doing so, he discovered that mixing is the key to recovery. He also discovered that dance is the key to mixing. While the characters in his novel access their unconscious by

melding mind and body, race, and gender, Toomer tapped into his ability to create a work that recovers the unconscious by melding modernist writing with the Harlem Renaissance. Both Toomer and his characters achieve this melding to their greatest capacity through dance. Toomer's characters dance to recover their bodies, and therefore to recover their races because the body is a racial signifier. In this sense, the characters redeem both a modernist problem (erasure of the body) and a Harlem Renaissance problem (the black body) through dance. Toomer then redeemed these problems within himself by studying dance under Gurdjieff. He learned that by dancing Gurdjieff's sacred dances, he could access the highest consciousness between his mind and body that enabled him to acknowledge himself as more than just a black man.

Toomer acknowledged how dance lets people break from language structures and reclaim their body spaces. These experiences in turn help people to recover their whole selves. By eliminating fixed binaries in *Cane*, Toomer uncovered repressed material in an effort to discover himself as a whole being outside of race and location. However, despite his efforts, Toomer never closes the circle of *Cane*. The book was written in such a way that there is no ending and no beginning. In this regard, the book itself is a circle, and this circle defies the vertical structure of the transcendental signified. However, the circle illustration portrayed repeatedly in the book is always incomplete. This is because, despite Toomer's discovery of fleeting escapes through dance, the circle is written on paper, and is therefore permanent. Toomer finds no permanent escape in *Cane*, so he cannot illustrate a permanent circle in his book. Toomer later discovered the capacity for a permanent escape that he always knew existed when he studied dance under Gurdjieff. Dance is uniquely able to provide a permanent escape from the transcendental

signified, but one must physically recover the body, and then put the body to rigorous use, in order to achieve the necessary consciousness to grasp this escape.

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