"In the Land of Cotton": Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

Critics of Jean Toomer's *Cane* disagree about the text's relation to the economic and social realities confronting rural and small-town Georgia blacks in the early 1920s. Some scholars read the novel as a nostalgic celebration of a vanishing peasant existence close to the earth. If the text acknowledges the harshness of racism and poverty, it subordinates social protest to lyricism, the representation of the here and now to the search for prophetic truths beyond the limits of history. Bonnie Barthold, for example, noting that the text eschews "linear development," argues that "the achievement of *Cane*" is its "mythic portrayal of a mythic truth on the verge of destruction" (159). Bowie Duncan, reading the text as an "oracular" articulation of post-Einsteinian notions of space and time, remarks that "the meaning of [Cane's] oracle is its multiplicity and uncertainty of meaning" (329). Alain Solard reads "Blood-Burning Moon" as only incidentally the story of a lynching: As the narrative unfolds, the "outline of reality gives way to the haunting presence of a visionary world" (552). Catherine Innes stresses the influence upon Toomer of P. D. Ouspensky's idealist view of "a living universe in which the hidden meaning of all things will be realized and felt, and the unity of all things understood" (155); in this context, Innes reads the Lewis of the text's "Kabnis" section as "a man capable of the cosmic vision, of penetrating the world of appearances, and of fusing together past and present, anguish and joy, 'soil and the overarching heavens' " (163).

All the critics who read *Cane* as subsuming history under myth do not necessarily applaud the political implications of its idealism. Robert Jones notes that "Toomer's reification of thought is evident in the way he consistently proposed idealism as the solution to racism and social problems, yet without the praxis of social activism" (17). Maria Caldeira chides Toomer for his "belief that he would be able to transcend or solve his conflicts with reality through Art" and charges that he "substituted mysticism for his craving for equality and harmony among people" (548). Edward Margolies contends that *Cane* achieves a specious unity by "celebrating the passions and instincts of folk persons close to the soil, as opposed to the corruption of their spirit and vitality in the cities." Even the text's representations of violence reflect Toomer's "primitivism" and "neoromantic attitudes": "Is Toomer unconsciously saying that beauty resides in the pain and suffering of black men? . . . Are passivity and withdrawal from life ultimate fulfillment?" (Margolies 39-40). Donald Gibson argues that, by "locating historical causation outside of time and space," *Cane* offers not "a revelation of the essence of black life" but a "politics of denial" (163, 155). Susan Blake observes that "the central con-

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flict in Cane is the struggle of the spec-
tatorial artist to involve himself in his
material,” never fully resolving this
conflict, the text “advocate[s] . . . [a]
retreat into mysticism” (196, 211). To
these critics, Toomer’s mythic ahis-
toricty does not enable transcendence
of historical tragedy, but instead con-
stitutes an ideological accession and
accommodation to that tragedy.

While many Toomer scholars stress
Cane’s efforts—successful or unsuccess-
ful—to transcend concrete historicity,
a number read the book as an
intense engagement with the actualities
of 1920s Georgia life. Arthur P. Davis,
in an early appreciation of Cane,
observed that “[u]nderneath all of [the]
 elusive meanings, . . . one finds a pro-
 found knowledge of the Southern
scene. . . . There is no overt protest
here, but Toomer was always aware of
the South’s cruelty” (49). Nellie McKay
remarks that Cane is about not only
“the intrinsic worth of black culture”
but also “the pain and struggle wrung
from the soul of a people” and the
author’s own “confrontation with the
meaning of that awful reality” (177).

Discussing the role played by music in
Cane, Nathaniel Mackey notes that
Toomer “celebrates and incorporates
song but not without looking at the
grim conditions which give it birth, not
without acknowledging its outcast,
compensatory character” (36). Lucinda
MacKethan argues that “the Arcadia
that is eulogized by a black poet-narrator
in Section One is the South, land
not only of red soil, cane-field and folk-
song, but also land of lynching and
prejudice, primitive violence as well as
pastoral peace” (229-30). Wahneema
Lubiano deplores the “general tenden-
cy of the critics of Cane to see it as pas-
torial, i.e., non-political,” and, in partic-
ular, to pass over the text’s “explicit
confrontation with lynching” (92).

Trudier Harris argues that, while the
lynching scene in “Blood-Burning
Moon” can “only suggestively be con-
ected” with the rest of the text, its
inclusion places Cane in a tradition of
texts about lynching that expose the
peculiarly American preoccupation
with “exorcizing blackness” (185). For
these critics, Toomer’s celebration of
the resilient folk spirit is always con-
tained within a non-illusory represen-
tation of the social forces threatening to
 crush that spirit.

In this essay I shall contribute to
the debate over the nature and extent
of Toomer’s historicity in Cane by
focusing on two issues: Toomer’s treat-
ment of the economy of middle
Georgia and his reaction to certain con-
temporaneous episodes of Georgia
racial violence. Did Toomer, I shall ask,
retreat from the harsh realities of
poverty and lynching violence through
mysticism and romanticism? Or did
he—albeit in a lyrical and symbolistic
mode—confront essential dynamics
of Jim Crow racism?

W

riting in 1923, Toomer indi-
cated his fascination with the
“life of rich complexity . . . rising from
the agricultural communities” of the
South (Rush 233). Moreover, he con-
sidered himself something of a leftist
at the time he was writing Cane, noting in
his journal that, “if the workers could
bellow, ‘We Want Power,’ the walls of
capitalism would collapse” (Papers,
Box 60, F. 1411). In his treatment of
both agricultural and adjunctive pro-
ductive activities, however, Toomer
offered a somewhat superficial portrai-
ture of the economic life of the share-
cropping and working-class blacks
dwelling in and near “Sempter,” his
fictional name for Sparta, the seat of
Hancock County, Georgia. Toomer’s
treatment of the lumber industry pro-
vides a case in point. Throughout mid-
dle Georgia, lumber mills hired their
workers—both loggers and planers—
from among the farming population.
The mills were for the most part “peck-
erwood” mills; that is, mills with
moveable machinery that operated
near relatively small stands of forest
for short periods of time and then relo-
cated when the lumber had been
removed. Both black and white mill-workers were drawn from "the redundant farm population, . . . notoriously a low-income group" (Jensen 78) and thus furnished a "ready supply of cheap labor" without any protection of minimum-wage legislation (Howard 12-13). While the Sparta-area lumber industry provided only intermittent employment to its workers, it was the sole source of ready cash for many tenant and sharecropping families. When the market for lumber shrank and the lumber industry entered a depression in 1921 (several Hancock County lumber mills closed in May), the ensuing layoffs had a drastic impact upon a work force already strapped by the collapse of the cotton market (Sparta Ishmaelite 13 May 1921: 1).

Few of the realities of lumber production make their way into the pages of Cane. In "Karintha," it is true, there is portentous mention of the "pyramidal sawdust pile" near the sawmill. But this mound is ominous principally because it is here that Karintha presumably buries her unwanted baby, not because it signifies exploitation of people or despoliation of the land. Indeed, if anything the smoke that "curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees" furnishes a means to spiritual transcendence of the conditions leading to Karintha's premature motherhood: the "smoke . . . on the hills"—its wreaths carrying the wraith of Karintha's child—is bidden to "rise / And take my soul to Jesus" (Cane 2).

In "Georgia Dusk," Toomer represents the end of the workday ("The sawmill blows its whistle, buzz-saws stop") and mentions that the trees decimated by the mills are "blue ghosts" where "only chips and stumps are left to show / The solid proof of former domicile." But the poem primarily celebrates the "genius of the South" that "mak[es] folk-songs from soul sounds." The sawdust settles on the "plowed lands" like "pollen," the pine trees are "strumming guitars," and "pine-needles fall like sheets of rain" as the resting laborers, transformed into "high-priests" and "juju-[men]," sing the "resinous" songs that signify their harmonious relation with nature (13). This association of sawdust with dusk and song is even more pronounced in "Song of the Sun," where Toomer calls upon anonymous singers to "pour that parting soul in song, / O pour it in the sawdust glow of night" (12). As Richard Eldridge notes, in this poem "the smoke of the sawmill is man's labor; the mist is nature's. The combined forces couple man and earth at a moment when rest can come and songs can fuse the two forces into a glowing beauty" (221). In both poems, however, Toomer's lush lyricism is achieved only through a fetishization of labor processes. The mill whistle that summons men to and from their labor takes shape as a natural phenomenon; low wages, layoffs, and debtpeonage are invisible. Even the devastation of the woods—with the concomitant threat to the livelihood of the very laborers who chop down the trees—is swallowed up in the dominant images of showering pine-needles and animate, music-making trees. In order to "couple man and earth," in other words, Toomer has to ignore the actual material relation between man and earth—let alone between man and man.¹

If Toomer's representation of the place of the sawmill in the political economy of Sparta indicates a tendency to naturalize and dehistoricize social phenomena, his treatment of the cotton industry is less adequate still. Starting in 1920, and bottoming out in 1921, the year of Toomer's Southern sojourn, all of Georgia's cotton crop was decimated by the boll weevil; the area around Sparta was among the hardest hit in the entire state—indeed, the entire South (Lewis 24). In 1919, 19,789 bales were produced in Hancock County, selling at 40 cents per pound; in 1920, 11,685 bales were produced, selling at 16 cents per pound; in 1921, a mere 1,509 bales were produced, selling at 17 cents per pound. (In 1922, the price went up to 23 cents, but only 710 bales were harvested [Shivers 295]). The 1921
cotton depression drove down the value of labor, compounding the Great Migration of the previous decade and precipitating the remaining sharecroppers and tenant farmers into conditions of increasing economic dependency. Although cotton production recovered somewhat by the end of the decade, the weevil dealt Hancock County agriculture a death-blow from which it never recovered, and what was once “Georgia’s leading farming county in the heart of the Middle Georgia Black Belt” had by the 1970s a per capita income “rank[ing] with the lowest in the nation” (Rozier 1, 19; Brown).2

Such was the situation in cotton farming and labor markets when Toomer arrived in Sparta. As acting principal of the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial school, he could not have been unaware of the economic crisis. An article appearing in the Sparta Ishmaelite a few months before Toomer’s arrival announced that 10,000 people were dying of starvation throughout the South because of the failure of the cotton crop (22 July 1921: 3). Throughout Toomer’s stay, the newspaper was full of hand-wringing about the boll weevil, as well as of advice about diversifying crops, using anti-weevil poisons, and hoarding existing cotton stocks until the price should rise again. Upon his return from his fund-raising trip to Boston, L. S. Ingraham, the principal for whom Toomer had been substituting, loyally proclaimed that Southerners were “enjoying much better times here in the South than are the people of the North” but warned that “there is danger of many going hungry.” Cotton was no longer the mainstay of the Hancock County economy, and Ingraham “plead[ed] with his white and colored friends here and everywhere to plant more grain in the next crop” (Sparta Ishmaelite 11 Nov. 1921: 3).

Toomer does not completely overlook problems in cotton production in Cane. Bane’s absence from home in “Carma”—“Working with a contractor, he was away most of the time” (11)—is possibly traceable to the shortage of local work. When courting Fern, the narrator raises economic and demographic issues in the set of topics he tests out with his reluctant listener: “Mr. and Miss So-and-So, people, the weather, the crops, the new preacher, the frolic, the church benefit, rabbit and possum hunting, the new soft drink they had at old Pap’s store, the schedule of the trains, what kind of town Macon was, Negro’s migration north, bollweevils, syrup, the Bible” (16).

Toomer was vitally concerned with contemporaneous episodes of racial violence.

“November Cotton Flower” begins,

Boll-weevil’s coming, and the winter’s cold,
Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,
Failed in its function as the autumn rake . . . . (4)

Clearly Toomer was aware of the weevil and its consequences. But Cane does not convey the impression of a crisis. We can only speculate about the reasons Bane works away from home; the narrator of “Carma” stresses fate (“karma”) rather than social conditions as the prime cause of Bane’s ending up on the chain gang. The incidental placement of the boll weevil and the Northern migration in the catalogue of gossip items raised by the narrator in “Fern” if anything trivializes these elements’ import. In “November Cotton Flower,” the “rusty” and “pinched” appearance of the cotton-stalk is attributable as much to the season as to the weevil. Moreover, the cotton plant’s devastation turns out to be more apparent than real: “Such was the season when the flower bloomed” (4). To be sure, the flower functions metaphorically here as vehicle rather than tenor, signifying a young woman who, like
Karintha, blooms unexpectedly amid conditions of poverty. Nonetheless, the assertion that the flower does bloom out of season suggests the weevil’s limited power to destroy; tenor acts back upon vehicle.

Other poems and stories in Cane even suggest that the cotton industry is healthy and expanding. In “Esther,” Barlo is said to have “made money on cotton during the war. He is rich as anyone” (23). Some Hancock County blacks did indeed partake of the wartime bonanza in cotton, but for the vast majority the profits were more than eaten up by the subsequent depression. If Barlo still has money, he is indeed exceptional—particularly since Tom Burwell indicates in “Blood-Burning Moon” that Barlo is, like himself, not a landowner but a wage laborer whose earnings depend on daily production (“Came near beatin Barlo yesterday,” Tom boasts to Louisa of his speed in picking cotton [30]). In the historical Sparta of 1921, it is unlikely that either Barlo or Tom would have had any work—at least steady work—at all. Moreover, Tom’s ambition to have his own farm (“An next year if ole Stone’ll trust me, I’ll have a farm” [30]) is highly ironic in the light of what “having a farm” under the circumstances of Stone’s beneficence would actually mean: entry into a sharecropping or tenant farming contract at precisely the moment when landowners, themselves stockpiling past harvests in hope of a higher future price, were characteristically withholding from their tenants all the wages, loans, and advance payments that they could. Finally, in “Cotton Song,” Toomer replicates the rhythms and imagery of a work song chanted by laborers heaving bales of cotton; there is no suggestion that such bales are in short supply. Udo Jung argues that Toomer’s lyric resembles a song recorded by the antebellum travel writer Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted’s report “might well have been Toomer’s source,” Jung notes, since “the resemblances are too great to assume that the poet heard these shouts exactly the same way during his visit to Sparta, Georgia” (331-32). If Jung is right, Toomer may have found his work-song prototype not in any voices of laboring folk that he heard in 1921 Georgia, but in an historical account of the South of some eighty years earlier, when cotton was indeed king.3

If Cane relegates many significant realities of lumber and cotton production to the margins of the text, it insistently foregrounds the presence of cane. Indeed, cane furnishes the book with its title, its dominant image, and its epigraph: “Oriacular. / Redolent of fermenting syrup, / Purple of the dusk, / Deep-rooted cane” (v). At once prophetic and sensuous, suffused in the air and rooted in the soil, cane supplies Toomer with a metaphor ideally suited to his romantic portraiture of the black peasantry. It signifies an earthy eroticism: In “Box Seat,” Dan Moore “was born in a canefield” (56); in “Theater,” Dorris’s singing is of “cane-brake loves and mangrove feastings” (53); in “Blood-Burning Moon,” Bob Stone hurries by laborers boiling cane and cuts himself in a canefield as he jealously seeks his rival Tom Burwell. Cane signifies, moreover, an entry to cosmic spiritual realities: Fern goes into a religious fit when the narrator takes her to a canebrake; Carma hides in a canefield where “time and space have no meaning” (11). Above all, the scent of cane suffuses the landscape and sweetens its inhabitants, transmuting their suffering into beauty and signaling their fusion with nature. In “Georgia Dusk,” the “genius of the South” that is “surprised in making folk-songs from soul sounds” has a “cane-lipped scented mouth” (13); in “Kabnis,” the “pain-pollen” on the faces Lewis beholds in Halsey’s basement “settle[s] downward through a cane-sweet mist” (106). Blacks who migrate from the South do so at the risk of losing connection with their own spirituality behind the North’s “iron hinges” and “storm doors”; it is recoverable only at night, when they

ECONOMICS AND VIOLENCE IN JEAN TOOMER’S CANE

185
sleep “cradled in dream-fluted cane” (55).

From the omnipresence of this motif in Toomer’s text one might conclude that cane constituted an important crop in the Sparta-area economy. The role played by David Georgia would seem to reinforce such a notion. Continually engaged in grinding and boiling cane, David Georgia keeps Becky supplied with syrup and, in “Blood-Burning Moon,” works into the night at the center of a group of men whom he regales with “tales about the white folks, about moonshining and cotton picking, and about sweet nigger gals” (29). Toomer offers a more concrete description of the labor process involved in extracting syrup than he does of any other productive activity. But sorghum cane occupied—and still occupies—a relatively marginal place in the farming economy, furnishing animal feed and syrup and molasses for home use (Shivers 198-99; Atkinson; G. Lewis). There were in the 1920s no large-scale stands of cane in Hancock County equivalent to the immense sugar plantations then existing in Louisiana and Texas and subsequently developed in Florida (Sitterson; Dalton; Lynsky). Sorghum cane was primarily part of central Georgia’s subsistence economy; the average inhabitant consumed four gallons of home-grown and home-ground cane syrup per year (Vance 246). Some farmers marketed their surplus—the Atlanta Constitution routinely carried ads for various-sized containers of syrup—but as Toomer himself indicated in his play Balo (written in 1922, while Cane was in progress), in the depression of 1921 the price of sorghum cane syrup had fallen so low, and shipping costs had become so high, that it was not economically viable for farmers to get their product to market. Cane was, perforce, of use-value, and nothing more. David Georgia may wish to help Becky by bringing her syrup; however, he also has an unsellable supply on his hands. Even for folk with a constantly “cane-lipped scented mouth,” there was a limit to the amount of cane one person could consume. The cane suffusing Toomer’s landscape was a superabundant use-value, possessing limited nutritional value for a population threatened by pellagra and, indeed, starvation.

What Toomer’s unremitting emphasis upon cane suggests, then, is not a profound grasp of the actual role played by cane in the lives of the central Georgia peasantry, but a lyricist’s and a mystic’s reaction to the sensuous features of its harvest and conversion into syrup. Toomer’s choice of a name for his principal purveyor of cane, David Georgia, is significant in this connection. For David Georgia takes shape as an essentially mythic nature-figure—a “genius of the South” (13)—who presides over a physical process, the grinding and boiling of the cane, that signals humanity’s harmonious oneness with nature. Toomer’s poetic imagination was clearly seized by the busy sorghum cane harvest he witnessed in the fall of 1921. Indeed, he seems even then to have intuited the inspirational role that cane was to play in the literary career that was slow in developing. As he wrote in the memorandum book that he carried around in Georgia,

Sitting upon the mower whittling cane,
Chewing the sugar from the white pared pulp.
I am not yet a failure. No, not yet.
(Papers, Box 60, F. 410)

Nonetheless, Toomer’s focus upon cane as the central symbol of the merging of the real and the ideal—coupled with his relatively superficial understanding of the lumber and cotton industries furnishing the mainstay of Hancock County economic life—reveals that Toomer’s stance was indeed, as Blake has argued, largely that of the “spectatorial artist.”5
If Toomer's understanding of the material conditions endured by Hancock County's laboring population was somewhat shallow, this does not mean that he was unconcerned with the most visible and dramatic manifestation of Jim Crow racism—namely, lynching. Critics who defend Toomer against the charge of ahistoricity routinely adduce "Blood-Burning Moon" as evidence of Toomer's unwillingness to slough over the oppressive realities faced by the Georgia peasantry (Reilly; Lubiano; Harris). More significant as proof of Cane's engagement with the here and now, however, are certain barely veiled references to recent episodes of Georgia racial violence in "Kabnis."

In conversation with Layman and Halsey, Kabnis learns of the lynching of one "Mame Lamkins," who was killed for "[t]rying to hide her husband when they was after him." Layman recounts her death:

She was in th family-way, Mame Lamkins was. They killed her in th street, an some white man seein th risin in her stomach as she lay there sopp in her blood like any cow, took an ripped her belly open, an the kid fell out. It was living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So he jabbed his knife in it an stuck it t a tree. An then they all went away. (90).

This grotesque narrative contains only minor variations on the description of the 1918 lynching of Mary Turner in Valdosta, Georgia, included in the NAACP's 1919 publication Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918. In retaliation for the murder of a white farmer by a black debt peon, Sidney Johnson, a white mob engaged in a hunt and lynched at least eleven other blacks before killing Johnson in a shootout. According to NAACP investigator Walter White, Mary Turner, after trying to protect her husband from the mob, died in the following manner:

Mary Turner was pregnant and was hung by her feet. Gasoline was thrown on her clothing and it was set on fire. Her body was cut open and her infant fell to the ground with a little cry, to be crushed to death by the heel of one of the white men present. The mother's body was then riddled with bullets. (Morton 26)

After the killings, White notes, "more than 500 Negroes left the vicinity of Valdosta, leaving hundreds of acres of untilled land behind them" (27).

Toomer almost certainly knew of the Mary Turner murder before his trip to Sparta. It had been widely denounced in the liberal-to-left press as well as in all the major black journals of the day; the Crisis, which had printed White's report in its entirety in 1918, continually reverted to the Turner case as an archetypal instance of Southern barbarism (see White, "Work"). Angelina Grimké and Carrie Clifford, both associated with the writers group based in Washington, D.C., in which Toomer participated beginning in January 1921, had written stories and poems treating the incident (Grimké; Clifford; Ronald Johnson; Hull; Hutchinson). Moreover, Toomer may well have read the 1919 NAACP volume, since the writers group was undertaking "an historical study of slavery and the Negro, emphasizing the great economic and cultural forces which have largely determined them" (Toomer to Alain Locke, 26 Jan. 1921, Papers, Box 164-90, F. 12). While Toomer changed Mary Turner's name to Mame Lamkins, his description of her death and that of her unborn child clearly refers to a case that had attracted attention because of its particular ferocity and inhumanity.

Furthermore, Toomer's decision to feature this case corroborates a central argument of Thirty Years of Lynching—that, contrary to popular belief, the great majority of lynchings (more than seventy-five per cent) were committed not in response to allegations of the rape of white women by black men, but in reaction to black acts of defiance against white abuse, both physical and economic. In this context, black males were the principal lynching victims, but black women were the
targets in several dozen cases (Morton; Zangrando 4-8; Dittmer 131). If the U. S. Congress were to pass an effective anti-lynching bill, the NAACP argued, the nation must relinquish its groundless obsession with black male sexuality and face the facts about Southern racial violence. The notion that Southern lynching derived from imputed black male sexual activity was, Walter White trenchantly noted, “a red herring”: “Lynching has always been the means for protection, not of white women, but of profits” (White, Rope 82). Toomer’s focus on Mame Lamkins—coupled with his representation in “Blood-Burning Moon” of the lynching of the black Tom Burwell for murdering the white Bob Stone in a fight over the black Louisa—suggests Toomer’s familiarity with, and support of, the main lines of argument used by the NAACP in its efforts to pass the Dyer Bill.

Toomer’s invocation of the Mary Turner lynching not only historicizes Mame Lamkins but also suggests a probable historical analogue to Lewis. Critics of Cane, commenting on the contrast between Kabnis and Lewis, routinely conclude that the latter functions thematically as a heroic double of the troubled anti-hero. But such readings fail to provide Lewis with any plausible narrative rationale for his presence in Sempter: Whether Christ figure (Benson and Dillard 90), cosmic hero (Innes 317), or simply visitor “there on his own business” (Callahan), Lewis lacks motivation for the persistent probing and questioning that prompt anonymous death threats. Even William J. Goede, who spots in Lewis “the first portrait of ‘the race man’ who, like W. E. B. Du Bois, will shake a timetable of civil rights in the face of whites” (370), does not assign Lewis a specific mission. If we read Lewis as an NAACP investigator, however—perhaps even a fictional recreation of NAACP Assistant Secretary Walter White—Halsey’s eagerness to get his ear becomes comprehensible, as does Layman’s regret that he spoke of Mame Lamkins in Lewis’s presence: “Noted what I said th other day, an that weren fer notin down” (90). Moreover, the threats to which Lewis is subjected—such as the thrown stone with the message, “‘You northern nigger, its time fer y t leave. Git along now’” (90)—take on added meaning in the light of the conditions under which White carried out his 1919 investigations. While making inquiries into the death sentences meted out to twelve Arkansas sharecroppers involved in a rebellion against debt peonage, White was himself the recipient of death threats and barely escaped from the state with his life (White, Man 47-51; Ovington 156-57). Between 1918 and 1923, the NAACP directed most of its energies toward the fight against lynching, carrying out investigations in the South and lobbying for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in Congress (Zangrando 22-50). For Toomer to portray Lewis as an investigator into the death of Mame Lamkins was to locate his own text in the specific historical context of this anti-lynching campaign.

The Mary Turner case pales in notoriety, however, beside the other historical case of racial violence invoked in “Kabnis”—namely, the multiple killings that took place on the Jasper County “Death Farm” about thirty miles from Sparta only a few months before Toomer’s visit. In February, 1921, a series of bodies of drowned black men—most of them chained together in pairs and weighted down with bags of rocks—were found in the Yellow, Alcovy, and South Rivers. The corpses were eventually identified as those of former workers on the Monticello farm of John S. Williams, where federal investigators had recently begun an investigation into debt peonage (Daniel 110-31; Atlanta Constitution 14 Mar.-15 Apr. 1921). Williams denied involvement in the killings, but his black foreman Clyde Manning confessed to having carried out the murders under orders from Williams, who feared that the
men would reveal their conditions of imprisonment and brute servitude. The first killings, Manning testified, took place on the Williams farm: "Another one of Mr. Williams’ trusty negroes put in a little work—he killed one suspicious negro by brains him with an ax . . . . I knocked four negroes in the head with an ax [in] one week and buried them in the pasture back of Mr. Williams’ house." Then a group of men was drowned in nearby rivers:

"I don’t know how many negroes there are in the river, but I helped Mr. Williams drown six . . . . We took the other five to the river at night, after getting them out of their houses, and chained ‘em down with rocks and threw ‘em in.

"Yes, sir, they all cried and begged—and some of ‘em asked to be knocked in the head before being thrown in, but Mr. Johnny wouldn’t do it and wouldn’t let me do it. We just threw ‘em off and rode on back to the plantation."

One man was loaded down with rocks but allowed to drown himself: "Harry Price, he got out," Manning testified in the trial, "and says, ‘Don’t throw me over, I’ll get over,’ and he says, ‘Lord have mercy,’ and he went over" (Atlanta Constitution 7 Apr. 1921: 2). 8

Although it was blacked out in the Sparta Ishmaelite, the Williams "Death Farm" case created a local sensation. Hundreds watched the sheriff and his deputies drag the Alcovy River for bodies and, a month later, crowded the Covington courtroom in Newton County where Williams was tried for murder. (The trial was moved to Newton County because several government officials in Jasper County, including Sheriff Harvey Persons and Doyle Campbell, Solicitor of the Ocmulgee Circuit, were themselves under investigation for practicing debt peonage [Daniel 122-23].) The case also attracted national attention. The NAACP, busy with the Dyer Bill, did not dispatch an investigator, but its Secretary, James Weldon Johnson, sent a telegram to Georgia Governor Hugh Dorsey urging him to "use every effort to bring to justice the murderers of eleven negroes in Jasper County, Georgia, because they threatened to reveal peonage conditions in that county . . . . and [bring] into light this vicious system of exploitation and debt slavery, which is so prevalent in other parts of Georgia as well" (Atlanta Constitution 29 Mar. 1921: 2). The black and liberal-to-left press (Nation, New Republic, Crusader, Messenger, Crisis) held the incident up as an indictment of Southern neo-slavery. The mainstream press took note: The Literary Digest, a summary organ of nationwide press coverage, commented on reports from eleven newspapers around the country—from Nebraska to New York—expressing various degrees of shock and outrage (16 Apr. 1921: 13-14). Even Southern white newspapers that had blacked out the Williams case as news felt compelled to comment editorially upon the sentences after the fact (e.g., "Let Justice Be Done").

Williams was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison—the only Southern white to be convicted of killing a black person between Reconstruction and 1966 (Daniel 126). No doubt many white Georgians of good conscience were shocked by the brutality of the killings and the trial’s revelations about debt peonage. Governor Dorsey, spurred by the Williams case, in April 1921 published a pamphlet entitled The Negro in Georgia in which he detailed 135 cases of lynching, peonage, and racial violence and called for the repeal of laws enabling debt peonage, as well as for financial penalties on counties where officials “have failed in their duty” to prevent lynchings (Dorsey 24-25). The NAACP reprinted and distributed Dorsey’s statement, considered by one historian “probably the most candid and courageous attack on racial injustice issued by an American governor” (Dittmer 208). Despite Williams’s conviction and sentencing, however, a more beneficent period in race relations did not ensue. And Dorsey, the
Messenger editors sardonically commented, was motivated not so much by humanitarianism as by a pragmatic desire to safeguard Georgia’s labor supply (Anon., “Governor”). As Dorsey commented regarding the Williams case, “After some communities in Georgia have driven away their farm labor and their farm loans, they will have an opportunity to sit down and think over calmly whether it pays to deal justly with the negro” (Atlanta Constitution 3 Apr. 1921: 8). Debt peons were, after all, an even better investment than slaves had been, since “unlike slaves, these peons had no monetary value; they could be replaced at the nearest jail” (Daniel 114; Novak).

Large-scale Georgia landowners in the early 1920s were caught in a contradiction between their short-term need to bolster their falling profits and their long-term need to preserve a labor force capable of producing profits; amid the pressures created by the collapse of the cotton market, the former interest prevailed.10

The early 1920s signaled if anything an increase in economic exploitation and racial violence: Throughout the South there were in 1921 more lynchings than there had been in any year since 1909—a phenomenon that some historians have correlated closely with the per acre value of cotton (Raper 30-31; Beck and Tlonay). There were forty lynchings in Georgia between 1920 and 1922, as opposed to ten in the four years following (Brundage 242). The Ku Klux Klan experienced a significant revival in Georgia in 1921, hosting open meetings of 2,000 robed Klansmen in Atlanta and initiating an organizing drive even in Hancock County, which had a reputation for being a “good” county (Shivers 287). President Warren G. Harding, visiting Birmingham, Alabama, in 1921, proclaimed that “the black man must have an increased political, educational, and economic opportunity if the American nation is to live true to its tradition of democracy” but warned that “social equality between the races must not be considered a possibility” (Atlanta Constitution 27 Oct. 1921: 2). Federal investigations of both the Klan and debt peonage sputtered out by the end of 1921, and the Dyer Bill went down to defeat two years later.11

When Toomer arrived in Sparta less than five months after Williams’s conviction, many African Americans in the real-life analogue to Sempter were, we may speculate, in a state of considerable apprehension, if not outright terror. “Kabnis” cannot, in my view, be adequately understood without reference to the Williams case. While scholars have pondered Kabnis’s racial ambivalence, contemplated his status as an artist-figure, and debated at length the significance of Father John, Carrie K., and the heavily symbolic bucket of coals that Kabnis brings up into the sunlight at the text’s conclusion, they have routinely passed over the substance of Kabnis’s lengthy conversation with Layman and Halsey about racial violence in Georgia. Moreover, Cane critics have tended to view Kabnis’s fears of lynching violence as essentially paranoid. The context provided by the Williams case requires some adjustment of the critical lenses through which “Kabnis”—and Kabnis—are understood.

Kabnis’s conversation with Halsey and Layman makes reference to peonage in general and—unmistakably—to the Williams case in particular. In response to Kabnis’s naïve observation that the South is not “half the terror” pictured in “northern exaggeration,” Halsey wryly remarks, “. . . kindly remember you’re in that land of cotton—hell of a land. Th white folks get th boll, th niggers get th stalk. An dont you dare touch th boll, or even look at it. They’ll swing y sho” (87). Halsey’s comment suggests a linkage between economic exploitation and lynching terror and invokes the folk adage, “Naught’s a naught, / Five’s a figger. / All fer the white man, / None fer de Nigger” (Wolfe 172). Those contesting wealthy whites’ control of the “boll” are the
ones most likely to “swing,” Kabnis, still not “getting it,” then manifests his prior awareness of the publicity surrounding the notorious “Death Farm” killings when he inquires—much as Toomer himself may have inquired—“Things are better now though since that stir about those peonage cases, arent they?” Halsey responds by noting that the effect of the cases was like “th brick thrown in th hornets nest” that “just stirs up the hornets to sting” (87-88). The recent revival of open Klan activity, both statewide and local, supplies a probable referent for the hornets to which Halsey alludes. More specifically, however, Layman mentions actual details from the Williams murders. Answering Kabnis’s demand, “... cant something be done?” he remarks “Sho. Yassur. An done first rate an well. Jes like Sam Raymon done it.” At Kabnis’s prompting, Layman produces a story that makes sense only in the context of the Williams case:

Th white folks (reckon I oughtnt tell it) had jes knocked two others like you kill a cow—brained um with an ax, when they caught Sam Raymon by a stream. They was about t do fer him when he up an says, “White folks, I gotter die, I knows that. But wont y let me die in my own way?” Some was fer gettin after him, but th boss held um back and says, “Jes so longs th nigger dies—” And Sam fell down on his knees an prayed, “O Lord, Ise comin to y;” and he up an jumps int th stream. (88)

Read without any informing context, this incident lacks clarity as a presumed example of the lynching violence the men are discussing: I myself formerly wondered whether Sam Raymon even ends up being killed or is instead a trickster figure who cleverly engineers his escape by offering to drown himself and then swimming away. But the correspondence between the fictional Sam Raymon and the historical Harry Price is too close to be accidental and effaces any ambiguity about Raymon’s fate. “Don’t throw me over... I’ll get over... Lord have mercy”—Price’s words, as reported by Clyde Manning, are replicated in their substance in Raymon’s final speech. Moreover, the reference to “th white folks” having just “brained [two others] with an ax” echoes Manning’s testimony about the first series of killings on the “Death Farm.” Just as Layman’s description of Mame Lamkins’s death alludes to the actual lynching of Mary Turner, his account of Sam Raymon’s murder would have resonated with anyone familiar with the gruesome details of the Williams murders.

Other seemingly incidental details in “Kabnis” gain fuller meaning when read in the context of the “Death Farm” case. When Halsey finally manages to corner Lewis in conversation, for example, he remarks, “I gets t thinkin. I used to subscribe t th Literary Digest an that helped along a bit. But there werenet nothing I could sink m teeth int” (109). When we recall that the Literary Digest gave the most comprehensive available overview of national response to the Death Farm trial, the apparent arbitrariness of this allusion disappears. In spite of the Literary Digest’s inadequacies, Halsey may well have read it to gain information and commentary about the “Death Farm” unavailable in the local press. The topicality of Halsey’s remark about the Literary Digest is signaled, too, by Toomer’s decision to excise this passage from the shortened version of “Kabnis” printed in two segments in Broom in 1922, before the publication of Cane the following year. The first part of the Broom version of “Kabnis” consists of Section 1 of the Cane version; the second part consists of the last two scenes (Sections 5 and 6 of the Cane version) detailing the night in Halsey’s basement. From this second excerpt the dialogue between Halsey and Lewis is the only excluded passage. The implication of this omission is, I think, apparent. The allusion to the Literary Digest is directed primarily outside the text; the only internal passage to which it can be related is the narration of the ax murders and Sam Raymon’s death. But since Layman’s
account of these matters precedes the excerpt (it appears in Section 2 of the *Cane* version), and since the *Literary Digest* reference makes sense only in the context of the press coverage of the “Death Farm,” Toomer clearly felt it wise to excise the allusion from the *Broom* version of “Kabnis” in order to preserve the story’s internal coherence. *Cane*’s historicity, while largely opaque to modern readers, supplies the only rationale for Toomer’s decision to make Halsey a reader of the *Literary Digest.*

Similarly, Toomer’s telling deviation from the lyrics of “Deep River” acquires significance in the context of the Williams murders. The words of the original spiritual are: “Deep River, my home is over Jordan, Deep river, I want to cross over into campground, / Lord, I want to cross over into campground” (J. W. Johnson 100-03). In “Kabnis,” the recurrent lyric is

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

While Nick Aaron Ford dubbed this version of “Deep River” “weird” (23), Toomer’s alterations have a cogent, if horrific, rationale. In a “white-man’s land” where “niggers” both “sing” and “burn,” the river of death—unambiguously Jordan in the original—becomes plural in Toomer’s version: “poor rivers” that “bring rest.” When we recall that the bodies of murdered debt peons were found in Middle Georgia’s Alcovy, South, and Yellow Rivers, the “poor rivers” in Toomer’s recast spiritual become suggestively unmetaphorical. Knowledge of the poem’s historical referentiality enhances appreciation of its irony: The premature “rest” enjoyed by Harry Price and the five other drowned debt peons hardly constitutes a transcendent peace “over Jordan.”

This reading of Toomer’s “rivers” as rivers of actual death is borne out by the treatment of rivers in another piece written by Toomer in the period when he was working on *Cane*—namely, the short story “Withered Skin of Berries.” In the tale’s climactic scene, where the distraught Vera visits Harper’s Ferry with David, she looks at the Potomac River and says, “Let’s stop here and run out to the point.—And plunge in the river. Lord, I want to cross over into camp ground.” Continuing her inner meditation, she contemplates suicide even more directly: “Virgin Mother, you will understand if I drown in the river. . . . O God, I dangle. Lord God, I want to cross into the camp ground” (Turner, *Wayward* 157-58). David wins her back to life by urging her to view the river as a symbolic carrier of all martyrs to racist injustice: “Know you, people, that you are above a river, spattered with blood. John Brown’s blood. With blood, do you understand me? White red blood. Black red blood. . . . Roll river. Flow river” (164). In “Withered Skin of Berries,” the death-river carries the possibility of redemption: The river of suffering becomes the river of righteous revenge. In “Kabnis,” there is no such consolation: Sam Raymon may have found “sweet glory in Camp Ground,” but his death, rather than prompting a struggle for justice, has stirred up a nest of hornets. Nonetheless, the treatment of the Potomac in “Withered Skin of Berries” as a “deep river” where people may enter into “camp ground” through physical drowning reinforces the reading of the “poor rivers” in “Kabnis” as rivers of actual death. In Toomer’s version of “Deep River,” it is not just God, but also Clyde Manning and John Williams, who deliver “niggers” to “Camp Ground.”

The allusions to the Mary Turner lynching and the Williams killings reveal that, in “Kabnis,” Toomer was vitally concerned with contemporaneous episodes of racial violence. Harris’s argument that the Lynch theme of “Blood-Burning Moon” can “only be suggestively connected” to the rest of *Cane* is thus off target: Lynching provides a pervasive subtext to all of
“Kabnis.” Kabnis may fail to grasp Halsey’s larger point about the relationship between those who own the cotton boll and those who “swing” for daring to touch it. But his behavior is less idiosyncratic and neurotic than is often supposed if we take seriously Toomer’s repeated—and oft-quoted—assertion that Kabnis is a version of himself (as he wrote to Waldo Frank, “Kabnis is me” [n.d., Papers, Box 3, F. 84]). There is every reason to believe that Toomer had heard of the Turner lynching and the peonage murders—that he already had the violence of Georgia “on his mind,” as it were—before he made the 1921 trip to Sparta. Upon arriving and registering the local impact of the cases, however, Toomer himself may have reacted much as Kabnis did. Kabnis’s expressions of generalized fear thus serve not so much to signal his paranoia or to distinguish him from his intrepid double Lewis—that is, to characterize him—as to replicate feelings (not entirely irrational feelings) that Toomer himself have undergone on first encountering what he called the “shock of the South” (Turner, Wayward 123). As Toomer noted to Kenneth MacGowan, “Kabnis [sic] is really the story of my own real or imaginary experiences in Georgia” (15 Mar. 1923, Papers, Box 5, F. 164). Toomer’s claim that Kabnis is based upon himself thus refers not only to dilemmas about artistry and racial identity that he shares with his light-skinned writer-protagonist, but also to their common reactions—their “experiences”—in a situation of pervasive racial terror.

Moreover, Kabnis’s highly emotional reaction to Lewis is illuminated by the historical grounding of “Kabnis.” If Lewis is indeed based, at least in part, on an NAACP anti-lynching investigator, then the odd blend of attraction and repulsion in Kabnis’s interactions with him may suggest a certain guilt on Toomer’s part about his own lack of social activism. Writing to Waldo Frank about plans for their 1922 trip to Spartanburg, South Carolina (a week-long trip taking place about a year after Toomer’s sojourn in Sparta), Toomer noted that he would have “suggested [Georgia] in the first place were it not for the fact that certain conditions there (in Sparta, and which I shall tell you about when I see you) make it not the best place in the world at this time.” Clearly Toomer was not tempted to return to the site that had inspired the writing of Cane. Apparently referring to a communication between himself and Frank about putting ideas into practice, he noted, “I too am curiously skeptical of the world of action. It has always seemed uncertain. And unreal, even non-existent.” Interestingly, however, Toomer concluded the letter with the somewhat cryptic statement, “But I have strong hopes this time” (2 Aug. 1922, Papers, Box 3, F. 83). Toomer’s ambition to engage more fully in “the world of action” with Frank for company and support may illuminate the narratorial comment in Cane that Lewis is “what a stronger Kabnis might have been” (95). In the contradiction within Toomer between the spectatorial artist and the engaged activist, the former tendency exerted primacy; when he became immersed in Gurdjieffian mysticism, this former tendency overwhelmed the latter. But Toomer was a complex man. The honorific portrayal of Lewis—and Kabnis’s anguished ambivalence toward this man who “in an odd faint way resembles him” (95)—may signal some lingering regret on Toomer’s part about a road not taken.15

In Parts I and II of Cane, as many critics have pointed out, symbol and myth predominate over concrete historicity. In “Kabnis,” however, Toomer dispels much, if not all, of the cloying scent of boiling cane and encounters the harsh actuality of Jim Crow racism. In part this greater degree of realism is attributable to the form of “Kabnis”: Its status as a sustained story, half-drama and half-nar-
rative, enables this section to explore causes and effects more fully than do the short stories and lyrics, which compress social phenomena into intense imagistic patterns. In part, too, the greater directness of reference in "Kabnis" may be a function of its having been the section that Toomer first tackled on his return north. The brutalities of Georgia life were fresh in his mind and had not yet acquired the nostalgic and romantic overlay they were to take on in the coming months. At Toomer remarked to Frank, "Kabnis sprang up almost in a day, it now seems to me. It is the direct result of a trip I made down into Georgia. . . . I want it to remain as an immediate record of my first contact with Southern life" (26 Apr. 1922 and n.d., Papers, Box 23, Part I). When Toomer remarked that he had "labored to write Kabnis [sic]" and that Cane "as a whole was somehow distilled from the most terrible strain I have ever known" (qtd. in Turner, Jean 156), he may have been calling to mind the intense pain he experienced in re-encountering the "shock of the South." 16

To argue that "Kabnis" makes reference to significant events in contemporaneous Georgia history is not to deny that Toomer was also a symbolist and myth-maker; whether peacefully or not, materialism and idealism clearly coexisted in his consciousness. Cane's historicity is somewhat oblique. While its allusions to the lynching of Mary Turner and the Monticello "Death Farm" could easily have been caught by anyone familiar with racial violence in Georgia between 1918 and 1921, Toomer introduces these historical references in a guarded fashion.

Not only does he change the names of the lynching victims, but, more crucially, he positions the reader almost exclusively in the consciousness of the confused Kabnis, thus requiring the reader to share in Kabnis's fear and mystification. Significantly, the text's blend of narrative and drama provides no access to the inner thoughts of Lewis. The subjective components of Kabnis's identity as an artist and a black man—the features upon which most critics have insistently focused—thus do end up dominating the text's final pages.

Because of his shortcomings as an economic analyst, moreover, Toomer established only a partial connection between racial violence and the configuration of Georgia's political economy. The imagination that would fetishize sawdust and cane in Parts I and II of Cane also failed in Part III to assign full material causality to racial violence: The cotton market, debt peonage, and lynching never completely fused in Toomer's consciousness. The text's conflation of social oppression with individual alienation in its movement toward closure thus reflects Toomer's limitations in relating Kabnis's internal dilemmas to the larger social forces framing those dilemmas. But the early sections of "Kabnis" represent, if they do not fully analyze, the enormities of the racial oppression that Toomer witnessed at first hand in his brief sojourn in the land of cotton. The refusal of these chilling references to lynching violence to be completely subordinated to Toomer's mythifying imagination shows the irrepresibility of history. In Cane, as in life, history is, in Fredric Jameson's phrase, "what hurts" (102). 17

Notes

1. For an alternate reading of "Georgia Dusk" that presents the poem as a description of a lynching ("night's barbecue") and views its representation of nature as a "lynching of the land," see Mitchell (308).

2. The Sparta Ishmaelite's figures for decreased cotton yield were more dramatic still: 2,506 ginned bales in 1920 and 431 in 1921 (21 Oct. 1921: 1).

3. Olmsted's version of the song goes: "Come, bre'dren, come; / Let's go at it. / Come, now, eho! / Roll away!" (Jung 332). In Toomer's version, the words are: "Come, brother, come, / Let's lift it; / Come now, he'w! / Roll away!" (9)
4. In the fall of 1920 the world price of sugar collapsed, wreaking havoc in sugar cane markets. The 1921 harvest drew the lowest price since 1913 and resulted in a "sharp drop in harvesting wages for Negro laborers, [which] rarely exceeded $1.25 per day" (Sitterson 357). In Balo, the farmer WilI claims that his land yielded eighty gallons of syrup, but that "us has more'n we can use, an' 'wouldn't pay I' ship it at th' present price they pays fer it" (277). In July, 1921, there were attempts to use excess cane syrup intermixed with water and calcium arsenate to poison the weevil. Farmers abandoned the concoction on finding that mules licking at the mixture died (Sparta Ishmaelite 1 July 1921: 3; 29 July 1921: 1).

5. Toomer's fascination with the process of making cane syrup is also manifested in "Withered Skin of Berries" (1922), where the Southerner Arthur Bond describes in detail the activities of a "ju-ju"-like "syrup-man." Witnessing the "syrup-man" at work, Bond undergoes a near-mystical experience: "Your soul rises with the smoke and songs above the pine-trees. Once mine rose up, and, instead of travelling about the heavens, looked down. I saw my body there, seated with the other men. As I looked, it seemed to dissolve, and melt with the others that were dissolving too. They were a stream. They flowed up-stream from Africa and way to a height where the light was so bright I could hardly see, burst into a multi-colored spraying fountain" (Turner, Wayward 151).

6. The main alteration Toomer makes in his account of the Turner lynching—the stabbing of the unborn child—may have been influenced by the gruesome account of an African child-killing by Theodore Canot, in which a woman "dragged along the ground, by a single limb, the slimy corpse of an infant ripped alive from its mother's womb. As her eyes met those of her husband the two fiends yelled forth a shout of mutual joy, while the lifeless babe was tossed in the air and caught as it descended on the point of a spear" (384-85). Toomer was familiar with Canot's Adventures of an African Slaver, for he noted in the January 1921 letter to Alain Locke that he was planning to report on it to the writers group. With its frequent references to "ju-ju" and "gree-gree," Canot's book may have been one of Toomer's principal sources on Africa. Alternatively, however—and with quite different political implications—the spearing of the baby may be Toomer's clever way of concretizing the New Negro formulation of Jim Crow racists as the "Huns of America," since the description of Huns by bayoneters of Belgian babies was a dominant image in U.S. government wartime propaganda.

Carrie Clifford's "Little Mother (Upon the lynching of Mary Turner)" was published in 1922 in her book of poems The Widening Light. Angelina Weld Grimké reworked the Turner episode four times in "Blackness," "The Waitin," "The Creaking," and "Goldie" (Hull 129-31; Grimké 218-51, 282-306). Grimké, while apparently not meeting with the group in 1921, was a close associate of two of its members, Mary Burrill and Clarissa Scott.

7. While White's Autobiography, detailing the Arkansas episode, did not appear until many years after Cane was published, he was an influential figure in the early 1920s (Waldron). Toomer might have heard from various sources of the conditions under which White had been compelled to leave Arkansas. Toomer himself had had direct contact with White by 1923, when White wrote to Toomer inquiring whether he had been excluded from the Poetry Society of South Carolina on racial grounds (Papers, Box 6, F. 192). To argue that Lewis is part-NAACP investigator is not to deny his basis in other sources. Toomer noted to Broom editor Lola Ridge that "Lewis, in point of origin, is as authentic as Kabnis. For I myself am frankly the source of both of them" (n.d., Papers, Box 1, F. 18). Toomer rewrote "Kabnis" largely under Waldo Frank's guidance, moreover, and possibly referred to Frank's presence in the magnetic Lewis when he remarked to Frank, "You not only understand CANE; you are in it, specifically here and there, mystically because of the spiritual bond there is between us" (n.d., Papers, Box 23, Part I). For a reading of possible homosexual overtones in the Kabnis-Lewis relationship, see Thornton.

8. For more on debt peonage as a continuation of slavery, see Daniel and Novak. Williams routinely obtained his laborers from the Macon jail by paying their bonds of $20 to $30 and then requiring them to work for him for many years with little or no pay. As H. Bruce Franklin has noted, Article Thirteen of the Constitutional Amendment abolishing slavery stipulated that "involuntary servitude" could be imposed as punishment for crime. Because blacks could be arbitrarily charged with and convicted of "crimes" such as vagrancy and loitering, "emancipation" was accompanied by the systematic "criminalization" of Southern rural blacks (Franklin 101-04).

9. The Literary Digest appears to have been fairly liberal—or at least provocative to conserva- tives—in its stance on race issues. See, for example, its coverage of the Washington, D.C., race riot in "Our Subject Race Rebels" (2 Aug. 1919: 25).

10. Williams died in prison: "The final ironic twist of the case occurred years later at a Georgia prison farm where John S. Williams had earned a trustee position. He was killed while attempting to prevent a jailbreak" (Daniel 131). In July 1922 Manning was convicted of murder and sentenced to twenty years on a chain gang, where he died.

ECONOMICS AND VIOLENCE IN JEAN TOOMER'S CANE
11. The *Ishmaelite* gave the following account of the Klan’s first organizing meeting in Sparta: “Good talk. For youngsters. Or anybody. Want members who are 100% pure Americans. Simon pure. Klan not anti-Catholic. Nor anti-Negro. Nor anti-anything. Knights of the Ku Klux Klan must be in love with U.S. Law-abiding. Sober. And work for maintenance of white supremacy. After speech those not interested asked to leave. Those remaining applied for membership. Large Klan expected to be formed here. Regular speakers to come later. Klans being formed in four corners of U.S.’ (25 Feb. 1921). For a description of the Atlanta Klan meeting, see *Atlanta Constitution* 24 Sep. 1921: 1. Georgia historian John Dittmer notes that “until 1920 the KKK had less strength in Atlanta than did the B’Nai B’rith” (185).

12. At the advice of *Broom* editor Lola Ridge, Toomer seems to have made a number of changes in “Kabnis” before excerpts from it appeared in the magazine. Ridge complained that Toomer’s “character Lewis is not convincing and he seems to have been yanked into your story from some source entirely without your own experience and thought. He is not authentic.” Toomer replied that he had “tried to make Lewis more living and mobile” and that “in the 5th section” (the one from which the *Literary Digest* reference was excised) he had “re-shaped certain of [his] materials to definite gain in mass and structure” (Ridge to Toomer, n.d., Papers, Box 1, F. 18; Toomer to Ridge, n.d., Papers, Box 1, F. 18).

13. For more on the functions of song in *Cane*, see Mackey. While Toomer’s use of spirituals is often read in highly pastoral terms—and his nostalgic reference to the “song-lit race of slaves” in “Song of the Sun” (12) to a degree justifies such a reading—a comment in his *Cane*-era notebook reveals a less romantic appreciation of the roots of the “sorrow 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” (Papers, Box 60, F. 1411). The overtones of Du Bois’s comments on the “sorrow songs” in The Souls of Black Folk are unmistakable.

14. Toomer seems to have shared his preoccupation with “Deep River” with Waldo Frank, who incorporated the spiritual into *Holiday*, a novel about lynching strongly influenced by Toomer. Frank did not have a sure grasp of all his cultural information, however. Showing the typescript to Toomer for revisions, he inquired, “Is that song ‘Dark River’ as I have it on p. 17, or ‘Deep River’? If the latter, will you change it?” (n.d., Papers, Box 3, F. 2). For a reading of the references to “crossing into Camp Ground” as suggesting the “disso[l]ution of past racial and cultural identities into a new one,” see Hutchinson, “Jean Toomer and American” 238. A grimmer possible reference to “Camp Ground” is contained in Walter White’s account of the lynching of Mary Turner, where he reveals that one of the men killed in the same lynching spree was hanged in a wooded area known as the “Old Camp Ground” (White, “Work” 222).

15. While maintaining a distance from activist causes, Toomer was, in the late teens and early twenties, much more seriously interested in leftist politics than is ordinarily supposed, and he supported various anti-racist initiatives into the 1930s (see Foley, “Jean Toomer’s Washington”). In response to a request from Langston Hughes in 1933, Toomer contributed a statement to a publicity campaign on behalf of the Scottsboro boys (Papers, Box 4, F. 111). In 1937 he sent $35 to Angelo Herndon to aid the Committee for Survey of Negro Sharecroppers (Papers, Box 3, F. 102). In the 1930s Frank apparently overcame his sense of the “unreality” of activism, getting assaulted by sheriff’s deputies during an investigation among striking miners in Harlan County, Kentucky, and serving briefly as President of the Communist-led League of American Writers. In my work-in-progress, *Georgia on My Mind: Jean Toomer, History, and the Politics of Modernism*, I explore Toomer’s relationship with contemporaneous left politics. The reading of *Cane* proposed there differs from the earlier one offered here in some crucial respects.

16. At least one of the lyrics from Part I was revised to downplay an originally stronger concern with issues of production, as is shown by the early (and somewhat illegible) sketch of the poem “Reapers” in the memorandum book that Toomer apparently carried around in Georgia: “Black workmen with the sound of steel on stone / Are sharpening scythes they swing them through the reeds / Mules pulling a mowing machine fills [sic] _____ / A rat with belly close to ground / A _____ machine” (Papers, Box 60, F. 1410).

17. For information about Hancock County used in this essay, I would like to thank William Atkinson, Dr. Kent Leslie, Gertrude Lewis, Forrest Shivers, and the Hancock County Historical Society. For more on Toomer’s uses of local history, see Foley, “Jean Toomer’s Sparta.”

196

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ECONOMICS AND VIOLENCE IN JEAN TOOMER’S CANE

197

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