

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction
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Prof. Andrew Goldstone (andrew.goldstone@rutgers.edu)
(Murray 019, Tuesdays 2:30–4:30)

October 18, 2016. Toomer.

1894 b. Nathan Pinchback Toomer in DC
1914–17 attends six colleges/universities
1919–23 magazine publications (*NY Call*,
Crisis, *Liberator*, little magazines)
1920 changes name: Jean Toomer
1921 Substitute principal, Sparta, GA:
Agricultural and Industrial Institute
1923 *Cane* published by Liveright
Small sales, critical success
1923– mystical/religious pursuits
(Gurdjieff, Jungian, Quakers...)
1925 *Cane* excerpts in Alain Locke, ed., *The
New Negro* anthology (JT is not happy)
1967 d.



Passport, 1926. Beinecke.

The drama surrounding the publication of *Cane* is a unique and revealing instance of the problem that no person considered “Negro,” according to the one-drop-rule of the U.S. regime of race, could get a hearing *except* under the sign of blackness.

George Hutchinson, “Identity in Motion: Placing *Cane*,” in *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001), 52.



The school in Sparta, Georgia. Jean Toomer Papers, [Beinecke library](#).

A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accents about, and of which, till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them.

Letter to the *Liberator* (Claude McKay and Max Eastman), August 19, 1922, *Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919–1924*, ed. Mark Whalan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 70–71.

black folk

Come, brother, come. Lets lift it;
Come now, hewit! roll away!
Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day
But lets not wait for it. ("Cotton Song," 13)

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“I saw a man arise, an he was big an black an powerful—”

Some one yells, “Preach it, preacher, preach it!”

“—but his head was caught up in th clouds. An while he was agazin at the heavens, heart filled up with th Lord, some little white-ant biddies came an tied his feet to chains.” (“Esther,” 30)

Hanby: Professor Kabnis, to come straight to the point: the progress of the Negro race is jeopardized whenever the personal habits and examples set by its guides and mentors fall below the acknowledged and hard-won standard of its average member. (“Kabnis,” 128)

Kabnis, a promise of a soil-soaked beauty; uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him. Arm's length removed from him whose will to help. . . (“Kabnis,” 132; qtd. by “PD”)

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Hair—braided chestnut,
 coiled like the lyncher's rope,
Eyes—fagots,
Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath—the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
 of black flesh after flame.

“Portrait in Georgia,” 38, qtd. by “MDA” and “Colin O’ Gilead.”

Kabnis wants to hear the story of Mame Lamkins. He does not want to hear it. It can be no worse than the shouting. (“Kabnis,” 124)

The method by which Mrs. Mary Turner was put to death was so revolting and the details are so horrible that it is with reluctance that the account is given...

Walter F. White, “The Work of a Mob: An Investigation by Walter F. White, Assistant Secretary, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in Brooks and Lowndes Counties, Georgia,” *Crisis* 16, no. 5 (September 1918): 222. [Modernist Journals Project](#).

discussion

Think more broadly: what kinds of relations does *Cane* establish between art and racist violence? Look for an example to discuss.

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If you're stuck, look at the end of the second section of "Kabnis."

next

- ▶ bring Toomer back in
- ▶ Hemingway: interchapters and “Big Two-Hearted River”