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Jean Toomer and the Politics and Poetics of National Identity

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JEAN TOOMER AND THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Jean Toomer’s place in the world of letters rests on Cane, the author’s profound statement on the quest for African-American identity. Published in 1923, Cane was composed during a year of intense creativity which followed Toomer’s three-month stay in Sparta, Georgia in 1921, during which time he served as Acting Principal in an industrial and agricultural school. As had happened to Du Bois in rural Tennessee, in backwards, poverty-ridden, oppressive Georgia, Toomer touched base with the deep roots of Black culture under conditions which recalled the slave past. The writer celebrated that return to the foundations of Black life in Cane, charting his own adventures on southern soil, contrasting the conditions of Blacks in the North, and positing cultural/geographical tradeoffs in search of a whole, healthy Black identity. Compressed yet exhaustive, Cane would be the author’s main creative statement on African-American identity. That splendid work justly merits the acclaim it received at the time of its publication and the place it now occupies in the literary canon. An experimenter in life and in letters, Cane’s author realized that Cane need not and could not be duplicated; he next focused his energies on mastering the poetics of national identity, a project which had captivated his imagination during his apprentice years. Little attention has been given to this aspect of Jean Toomer’s literary and personal life, although the author’s earliest excursions into writing centered on the challenges of national identity or what he called “the new world soul.” Additionally, Toomer intermittently wrestled with the composition of a work on national identity for over fifteen years, ultimately achieving a sterling measure of success in his magnum opus, “Blue Meridian,” published in 1936.

Even before he began composing Cane, the Washingtonian explored the poetics of national identity in a poem entitled “The First American.” This Whitmanesque fragment assayed the possibility and process of constructing an inclusive national character by merging the best racial characteristics of America’s three racial groupings—Black, Red, White. This achievement would eventuate in “The First American”—a being free of the conditions of class and color, moving American nationality from theory to fact, from ideality to actuality.
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Toomer's deep interest in the question of national identity stemmed not only from his own multi-racial heritage, but also from his early life in turn-of-the-century Washington, D.C., where he was reared among a significant mulatto population, some of whom—such as the Grimkes—maintained family ties across the color line.¹ Toomer's grandfather, Reconstruction politician, P. B. S. Pinchback, was himself the offspring of a long and stable Black-White relationship between a wealthy southern planter, Major William Pinchback, and his emancipated slave-mistress, Eliza Benton Stewart, a woman of Indian, Caucasian, and African descent. The Pinchbacks maintained ties for over eighteen years in two different states. They had eight children, two of whom, P. B. S. Pinchback and Napoleon, were sent by the father to Gilmore Academy, a private school in Cincinnati, famed for educating the mixed children of wealthy white men and African-American women. In addition to the Pinchbacks Jean Toomer's racial lineage consisted of other Black-White families, a condition which prompted his concern with national identity. Caucasian in appearance, Nathan Toomer, the writer's father, lived on both sides of the color line, while listed alternately as Black and mulatto in census data. Prior to marrying Nina Pinchback, Jean's mother, Nathan had been married to Amanda Dickson of Augusta, Georgia. The latter was the “natural” daughter of one of the wealthiest white men in the South, David Dickson, who claimed Amanda as his child in a deathbed confession, leaving her the major portion of his considerable wealth. Following the breakup of the Nathan Toomer-Nina Pinchback marriage, Nina's second husband was Archibald Combes, of New Jersey's famed and historic mulatto colony, Gouldtown, which had been settled by the descendants of a seventeenth-century African named Gold or Gould and the granddaughter of the Englishman Walt Fenwick, founder of southwestern New Jersey and friend of William Penn.² Either by the clerk's perception or by their own statements, both Archibald and Nina were listed as “white” on their marriage certificate.


²Steward and Steward, Gouldtown.
Toomer's complex racial background left him sceptical of racial labels and suspicious of a social system which designated people who were palpably “white” as “black.” Like Richard Wright, who similarly could not understand why a woman of his grandmother’s “white” complexion was labeled “colored,” Toomer early in his life began seeing through the social construction of reality. Race, Toomer was convinced, was a cultural, not a biological issue. Like many light-skinned Washingtonians of his time, Jean Toomer lived on both sides of the color line, as he so chose, exploiting his own biology to subvert the caprices of color. In Washington “functional passing”—to obtain jobs, to attend educational institutions, to secure entrance to entertainment facilities—had been raised to a fine art. Jean knew many Washingtonians who passed during the day to maintain jobs and who rode “uptown to the respite of a Negro home” at the end of the day, the situation faced by Vera, the central character in the author’s short story “Withered Skin of Berries.” Mary Church Terrell, a friend of the Pinchbacks, whose daughters grew up with young Jean, reported that her daughters often utilized their white skin to purchase tickets for their “darker brothers.” Questions about race and nationality never came up at the University of Wisconsin. But before going off to college, the student had prepared himself to adopt the strategy of “functional passing,” a resource which Gunnar Myrdal noted was historically called upon by numerous light-skinned students in pre-integration America to avoid the added tensions of racial problems in university life. In New York in the twenties, Toomer, Gorham Munson recalled, gained luncheon accommodations for Charles Johnson and Alain Locke by a functional pass. Moving easily across the color line, the writer, like Lear and Cordelia, regarded himself as one of “God’s spies,” garnering data on the human condition as race distorted it. Like another famous Shakesperian character, Jean Toomer often felt “what fools these mortals be.” Seeing beyond race, he felt the nation and saw it off balance and off guard and culled his own sense of nation and national identity from hardcore experience.

Toomer’s interest in national identity was further intensified by contemporary debates on American nationality. The depiction of national character framed “the battle of the books” which took place during the early years of the

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century. The moderns—heralded by Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne, and Waldo Frank—called for a “deprovincialization of the arts” and for a literature which reflected a more inclusive national character. The younger generation of writers, spurred on by the heavy waves of immigration which changed the face of America, succeeded in moving American letters from its New England base, making way for the depiction of other regions and other cultures. Deeply immersed in the social and cultural criticism of the period, the apprentice writer quickly perceived that the literary broadening of national identity should and must include the presence of the African-American. Having embarked on an intense reading program in contemporary criticism in 1921, Toomer became electrified by a passage from Waldo Frank’s *Our America*, a highly influential manifesto which pleaded the modern’s cause. Published in 1919, *Our America* examined the historical roots of American culture and included an analysis of the Native American and Jewish presence, Frank’s attempt to expand the base of national character. An avowed cultural pluralist, Frank, who called himself “mystical,” challenged writers to develop a “historical / anthropological” approach to American culture and character, one that would capture the unity-in-plurality that time and the mingling of cultures had produced in this country:

Some day some one who is fitted for the task will take the subject matter of this Chapter and make a book of it. He will study the cultures of the German, the Latin, the Celt, The Slav, the Anglo-Saxon and the African on the American continent: plot their reactions one upon the other, and their disappearance as integral worlds in the vast puddling of our pioneering life.

Toomer was immensely impressed by *Our America’s* brief put pioneering inclusion of the African presence as part of America’s “buried cultures,” and later used the concept of “buried cultures” in “Withered Skin of Berries,” written in 1922. His own racial background included (among others) French, Indian, Anglo-Saxon and African, and he warmed to the recognition of complexity and diversity that an anthropological approach to American life promised. While sensing a radical breakthrough in Frank’s brief acknowledgement of the African ethos, Toomer had been disappointed that the New Yorker had not matched his chapter-long discussions of Indian, Puritan, and Pioneer with a like chapter on the American Negro. “I missed your not having included the Negro in *Our America,‘” he chastened Frank. “I have often wondered about it.”

7 Letter to Waldo Frank, March 24, 1922. Waldo Frank Papers, University of Pennsylvania.
Frank welcomed the letter from Toomer and saw a veritable cultural goldmine in Toomer's complex background. "My own life," Toomer explained, "has been about equally divided between the two racial groups." The introductory letter continued:

And the family, for the most part... has lived between the two worlds, now dipping into the Negro, now into the white. Some few are definitely white; others definitely colored. I alone have stood for a synthesis in the matters of mind and spirit analogous, perhaps, to the actual fact of at least six blood minglings.

"You're the sort of like one doesn't forget," Frank responded, encouraging further correspondence from the serious young Washington writer. Toomer, Frank realized, was the-thing-in-itself—a walking symbol of the multi-cultural world which the moderns theorized they sought. Frank himself requested Toomer's assistance on a projected—but never completed—revision of *Our America*, which was to include the chapter on the American Negro. But Frank had in fact already abandoned the *Our America* "program"—a fact which Jean would not realize for another two years.

Frank's "buried cultures" passage was to serve as intellectual objective correlative for Toomer, giving programmatic shape and real-world substance to the complex of radical and subversive ideas with which the yet-unpublished-writer struggled. Invigorated by the encouragement of Frank, now a forgotten presence in American letters, but then a controversial and celebrated presence, Toomer appointed himself heir apparent to the "buried cultures" theme, which both personally and professionally struck a responsive chord, promising the possibility from moving Mixed America from underground to foreground. For him the double-consciousness produced by the national and the ethnic promised a too-ness. Unlike Du Bois and other members of the "tortured tenth," who regarded their twoness as a painful burden, Toomer, who had come under Dostoevski's influence, saw the heightening of consciousness caused by racial / social diversity as an exhilarating experience—the fortunate fate of modern man. He shared Hegel's view of America as the staging ground for a new world order and further intuited that the national-ethnic crucible would produce the futuristic, universal man. On these convictions, from his Washington base, the author plunged into the debates on national identity, positive that he spoke from a unique perspective. He engaged the New York writers in long, epistolary discussions on creativity and culture. By the time he had completed *Cane,*

8 Jean Toomer Collection, Fisk University.
portions of which were published in the little magazines of the period, Toomer had an avid following awaiting him in New York.

In May of 1923, Toomer moved to New York, having notified his publisher Horace Liveright of two projects, the most serious of which focused on a novel on national identity. Correspondence with Frank, Munson, and other members of the Village coterie lead him to believe that he was entering a community of like-minded artists, committed to his vision. In New York, he soon discovered that the literary avant garde to whose program he had attached himself had become the descending wing of the modern movement. The program outlined in *Our America* had been abandoned by Frank himself, who was soon to leave America for Europe, convinced that he had won the battles but had lost the war. Of the Village writers only the desperate Hart Crane remained faithful to the cause of national identity, sharing notes and plans with Toomer on the ambitious project which became *The Bridge*, published only in 1930. Surveying his prospects from close encounters with literary New York, the newcomer soon realized that he was caught in a genuine crisis of literary development. He had exhausted the ethnic theme in *Cane*; moreover, he had deep doubts about the incipient Harlem Renaissance, whose sensationalism was at war with Toomer's seriousness. Yet the climate did not seem supportive of his national identity project.

Toomer's adjustments to literary New York and to life in Greenwich Village where he settled became immensely complicated by the love which erupted between him and psychologist Margaret Naumberg, the wife of Waldo Frank. Frank agreed to release Naumberg from a loveless marriage and voiced understanding of the Toomer-Naumburg love, but then turned hostile to Toomer, creating an underground climate of gossip and suspicion for which Frank was notorious. Toomer, new to the literary intrigue and malice of New York, became un-nerved by the behavior of Frank, trying on a number of occasions to bring Frank to terms with their disintegrating relationship. Toomer continued to struggle valiantly from May 1923 to January of 1924 with the national identity project, determined to find the "new world soul" in soul-less New York. He sketched out "notes for a novel," and wrote an exploratory essay which summarized the achievements of the moderns, clearing the way for a modern creative synthesis such as he envisioned accomplishing in those "notes." But the times were out of joint. In addition to the break with Frank, who had secured the contract for *Cane* and had written its "Foreword," Toomer next found himself in an agon with his publisher over the advertising strategy for *Cane*, a dispute which touched deeply the question of Toomer's identity.
In August of 1923, while vacationing in Ellenville, New York, where he had gone to seek respite from Frank’s hostility and from the fallout which attended the collapse of the Village literary front, Toomer turned his hand to composing an autobiographical sketch, requested by Liveright for inclusion in review copies of *Cane*. The ensuing controversy concerning the material proved to be a traumatic form of experiential learning for Jean, forcing him to see that a wide gap existed between him and his presumably avant-garde publisher. More significantly, this Liveright incident began undermining Toomer’s faith in art as he needed to practice it. In advance of the request for an autobiographical sketch, Liveright had taken out an ad in *The New York Times*, which appeared on August 19th, publicizing *Cane* as “a book about Negroes by a Negro.” In an early instance of “blacksploitation,” the publisher had determined to use the racial line as the authenticating principle of *Cane* in his advertising program. Toomer had been distressed when Frank chose to “feature Negro” in *Cane*’s “Foreword,” having preferred that his book appear without racial identification, as Chesnutt’s works initially had been sent forth. However, both Liveright and Frank had commercial considerations in mind and felt the racial identification would help sales of *Cane* and of Frank’s new novel, *Holiday*. Their advertising strategy encompassed the simultaneous release of two books on the Black South, with the “Foreword” to one book written by the author of the other. In seeking the sketch from Toomer, Liveright, whose intensive use of advertising was innovative in a publishing world slow to conceive of books as commodities, conjectured the autobiographical enclosure as part of his advertising strategy.

Toomer welcomed the chance to present his life to the public and seized the occasion as an opportunity to advance the persona he wished to create for the “new world soul” book to which he was deeply committed. With these ideas in mind, Jean prepared a submission following his 1922 letter to *The Liberator*, cataloguing the various racial lines in his background. In response, Village poet, Isidore Schneider, who worked in Liveright’s publicity department, thanked his fellow-writer for the prompt cooperation and indicated satisfaction with the contents, although not the length, of the piece:

> Thanks for acting so promptly and helpfully on my suggestion for a story on your career. What you have is, of course, too full for general newspaper use, but I think it can be excerpted to make a very acceptable piece. To the Associated Negro Press it is going complete, and I am in hopes of having it given equal prominence in some of the magazines.9

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Schneider additionally inquired about the novel-in-progress, the work which relied on the persona Toomer had developed in the copy sent for reviews. "Your account of your plans interested me personally, very much," the immigrant writer advised the disciple of Whitman, "and if we can get together again I should like to hear more about your new book."

Having received Schneider's gracious acceptance of the material, Toomer was angry and confused by a subsequent letter from Horace Liveright, redirecting the focus of the article. Promising that review copies were to be put in the mail that week, the entrepreneur-publisher returned the copy. The tone of Liveright's letter betrays that businessman's exasperation with the complexity of Toomer's life; the contents, the publisher's intent to reduce a multi-racial background to one-dimensional ethnicity:

I'm returning this to you because I want to make a few suggestions. In the first place, I think it is at least one page too long. Second, I feel that right at the very start there should be a definite note sounded about your colored blood. To me this is the real human interest of your story and I don't see why you should dodge it. Of course it is difficult to say where this would be published. My own idea would be to have a little pamphlet made of it right away and inserted in the review books as they go out. Will you let me know what you think of this plan?10

Toomer took a few days to let the publisher know what he thought of his plans, sorting out the various feelings the letter generated. His response—detailed and complex—reveals the concerns of a serious man resisting the falsification of his life's history. Moreover, close scrutiny of the incident in the context of that crucial summer shows a committed artist grappling with a creeping and unnerving understanding of the extent to which extra-literary motives could distort and control the contours of his artistic career. His September 5th return letter to Liveright began:

Your letter of August 29th on hand. First I want to make a general statement from which detailed statements will follow. My racial composition and my position in the world are realities which I alone may determine. Just what these are, I sketched in for you that day I had lunch with you. As a unit in the social milieu, I expect and demand acceptance of myself on their basis. I do not expect to be told what I should consider myself to be.11

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
Toomer then took umbrage at Liveright's dishonorably accusing him of dodging the racial issue:

Nor do I expect you as my publisher, and I hope as my friend, to either directly or indirectly state that this basis contains any element of dodging. In fact, if my relationship with you is to be what I'd like it to be, I must insist that you never use such a word, such a thought again.

The September letter then drew a fine line between the author's inviolable rights as a human being and his obligation to the promotion strategy of a commercial publishing house:

As a B and L author, I make the distinction between my fundamental position and the position which your publicity department may wish to establish for me in order that Cane reach as large a public as possible. In this connection, I've told you, I have told Messrs. Tobey and Schneider to make use of whatever factors you wish.

Eschewing that role which Leslie Fiedler years later brilliantly characterized as "the pimp of the particular," the poet of Washington established independence from the publisher's intentional use of racial exploitation:

Feature Negro if you wish, but do not expect me to feature it in advertisements for you. For myself, I have sufficiently featured Negro in Cane.

Toomer's letter concluded on a promise to "go over the sketch and revise it as near as possible in accordance with your wishes." But he insisted that the publisher honor the distinction between advertising and reviewing. It was acceptable that Liveright devise advertising copy along racial lines if he so chose. Toomer felt convinced that the community of reviewer-writers would see his multi-racial background as an interesting and needed addition to the contemporary art scene and wanted to impart that information to them.

Records indicate that the disputed pamphlet did in fact accompany review copies of Cane, although a sample has not been located. The heated exchange alerted Toomer that his own publisher opposed the literary persona that was the genius and genesis of the national identity novel. Moreover, Toomer sensed the hand of Waldo Frank at work behind the desired contents of the sketch.

Frank, Toomer recalled, had insisted on racially characterizing the author of Cane in that work's "Foreword," and had written Jean of Liveright's plans to get his assistance in "creating a Negro market for Holiday." Toomer's anger

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13 Toomer Collection.
toward both Frank and Liveright was intensified by the two men's participation in a 1922 trip to South Carolina, where Frank, with Toomer's assistance, had successfully "passed for Negro," in order to get material for *Holiday*. That trip had provided ample measure of the ambiguity of race in America and had given both Frank and the publisher grounds upon which to develop a more humane and sophisticated approach to the complexity of Toomer's racial background. Additionally, Jean was galled by the arrogance and duplicity of the two men, who, while proclaiming themselves high priests of art, were, in practice, subjecting the Washingtonian's embryonic career to the whims of segregation and discrimination. To identify him as a Negro writer in pre-integration America was to throw him and his art to the caprices of a yet deeply racist society, an act Toomer would perhaps have expected and accepted of men of less pretense. In the context of that crucial midseason, the new writer needed the imaginative act of grace which, in sexist England, had given Mary Ann Evans space to produce the masterpieces of George Eliot. In contrast, under pressure of their perceived interests, Frank and Liveright ignored Toomer's precarious position, remaining insensitive to the implications of their actions on the newcomer's mind, life, and art. That behavior created an environment of anxiety and doubt which seriously affected Jean's attitude toward his work. Moreover, the incident dramatically forced a yet-insular mind to see that the author and the publisher of *Our America* had but a verbal commitment to the national identity question, the pursuit of which was leading Toomer into an existential void. "No one there spoke to my condition," the poet later wrote of that period, using the lamentable language of George Fox to capture the void of that barren season. So that winter, Toomer began deconstructing the poet in himself, deciding, like Fitzgerald's Basil Duke, that since he could not be the type of artist he needed to be, he would then become nothing but a man.

Toomer had fallen prey to that winter's discontent when G. I. Gurdjieff, Director and Founder of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man arrived in New York from France towards the end of 1923. Entering in the wake of the collapse of the avant garde, Gurdjieff, who called himself Beelzebub, found a host of dejected souls and weary bodies languishing in their broken tower, seeking refuge from the backlash which the bourgeoisie inflicted on the aesthetic movement that notorious winter. Toomer warmed to the possibilities of the Institute upon reading the Prospectus distributed in trendy bookstores and other radical/liberal thoroughfares. While ignorant of the

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Institute’s founder, the poet knew that Gurdjieff had been the mentor of Ouspensky, whose *Tertium Organum* had animated late night discussions in the Village upon his arrival in the Spring. Ouspensky proclaimed the existence of a higher race of men/women and held self-development as the beauty of existence. Gurdjieff’s Prospectus, not only affirmed humankind’s potential for development, but, more compelling to Toomer, the Institute proposed a path, a method to synchronize belief and practice. With a deep-felt need for a community of like-minded folk and his conviction that he had come to an end, Toomer responded to the Institute’s call. Accompanied by Naumburg, who also shared his excitement, Jean attended the Demonstration given by Gurdjieff and his pupils at Webster Hall.

Responses to the Webster Hall demonstrations revealed Toomer’s need for a community bound together by values—such as the talented tenth environment against which he had rebelled but whose claim on him would remain indelible. The Washington of his youth and the Pinchback household had engendered models of masculine mastery, and in the Gurdjieff of that performance there loomed the flickerings of Pinchback of Bacon Street, whose values and supreme self-sufficiency Toomer yet respected, although he had rejected the grandfather’s way. These memories and longings, operating in conscious and subliminal forms, haunted the writer, who contrasted the world of art as he had discovered its operations in New York with the aspirations he had levied against the art enterprise. Later he wrote:

> With an intensity of experience such as I have seldom known I distilled the essence of the literary and art world I came in contact with. With the result that I saw with unmistakable clarity the truth that neither art nor literature were doing for men and women who engaged in them what was most necessary in life... namely providing them with a constructive and whole way of thinking.

Severing the pain and the confusion of that cruel midseason, on July 19, Toomer abandoned his quest for the new world soul and sailed to Fontainebleau to scale the magic mountain of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. An unpublished poem from that period, here entitled “That Cruel Midseason,” preserves that metaphoric moment and also contains the misgivings which the anguished poet in Toomer registered against the actions of the man:

> My will has ever been a pliant thing
To loss of leaves,
Knowing new leaves would come,
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Knowing, in a mind superior to mine,
The purpose of it all;
Now some blight has struck
And will would hold,
Hold leaves against withering.
What cruel mid-season is this,
(No ecstasy of ferment)
That the sun upon my roots is torture.
Leaves fall,
A sound scratches against the hollow winds,
It is my call for soil to cover me.15

The writer remained in the Gurdjieff experience for a decade—from 1924 to 1934. In short time he had become second in command in the Gurdjieff work in this country, leading workshops on self-development, raising funds to help maintain the Institute, writing. He himself developed a loyal group of supporters and devoted himself to his groups. In between the demands of the Gurdjieff work he completed a number of manuscripts, all of which were hastily composed and never published. Yet the aborted 1924 project on national identity continued to haunt him. Toomer saw clearly—as Harold Cruse was later to argue persuasively—that the national identity question was at the soul of a genuine American cultural movement.16 In his own way, Toomer substituted the Gurdjieff experience for the national identity project. In fact, his decade-long commitment to Gurdjieff is best understood as a desperate attempt to envelop himself in a context which kept alive his faith in universalism upon which the national identity project rested. Returning to the ideas of 1924 intermittently, he finally completed “Blue Meridian,” a poem on national identity.

Published under the title “Brown River, Smile,” a short version of “Blue Meridian” first appeared in Pagany, in 1932, during Toomer’s marriage to the writer, Marjorie Latimer.17 Some form of the poem had been completed as early as summer of 1931, when Jean used the existing sections as title poem for a volume which he sent to Harper. Following Harper’s rejection, Toomer received another expression of regrets from Harrison Smith, which found 1932 “bad times for poetry.”18 But Kreymborg et al. introduced “Blue Meridian” to

15 Ibid.
17 Toomer and American writer, Marjorie Latimer, married in 1931; she died in childbirth in 1932.
18 Toomer Collection.
the public, carrying the poem in a version which ran over 700 lines in their 1936 annual, *The American Caravan*. Publication of this marvelous poem marked the end of a fifteen-year-old preoccupation with the “new world soul myth” whose themes had first invaded and captivated young Toomer’s imagination in 1921. The poem has the energy and force of a long-incubated expression and carries the inevitability and conviction of a poetic idea whose time has come. Written in free verse, in stanzas of varying lengths, “Blue Meridian” rightly claims a place in that woefully short collection of democratic vistas which contains *Leaves of Grass* and “The Bridge.” Having neither the bulkiness of *Leaves* nor the obscurity of parts of “The Bridge,” Toomer's new world soul epic too celebrates an American civic aesthetic. “Blue Meridian” advocates as it creates a vision of America free of the bitterness occasioned by unfair social divisions in class, color, race, and sex. Understanding the power of ideas to create a just society, Toomer also lamented the fragmentation of knowledge in American life and foresaw the rebellion against the academy which the sixties brought. Indeed, the major themes of “Blue Meridian” read like a blueprint for the widespread social rebellion of the sixties, as *Cane’s* ethnic passage made its theme a bible for young African-Americans during the same period.

Like *Cane*, “Blue Meridian” too is about a process of becoming. The earlier work had charted the modernization of the African-American personality, developing an ideal personality over a three-part structure from thesis through antithesis to synthesis. Utilizing a similar structure, “Blue Meridian” works out the coming-into-being of the omni-American, contrasting the worlds of black, red, and white America, eventuating in a new world of the blue man, or the man of the color purple. The lengthy first and second sections of the poem repeat, recapitulate, and fulfill each other, reaching a new synthesis in the short, culminating, third “meridian.” Each section or meridian begins with a three-line stanza which describes a meridian, first conceived as divided halves in the “Black Meridian” and “White Meridian” sections, finally seen as one magnificent whole in the transformation brought about as black and white meridians form the new blue meridian. The lines of the introductory stanzas suggest the process of completion from separation and division to wholeness and perfection which this paean to democracy achieves. The first division addresses “Black Meridian, black light”; the second, “White Meridian, white light,” both brought together when black and white combine to form “Blue Meridian, banded light.” Toomer designates the “light” of each meridian as the “I of earth and of mankind,” calling on the primordial source of life / light / energy. In Toomer’s myth of genesis, the light of humankind was initially one life force, as the gods
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of “Blue Meridian” originally came from one “root religion.” In its Wordsworthian falling away, human society broke the wholeness of the life circle, consigning humanity to separate existences seen as half meridians, imprisoning life in categories of race and nationality, abandoning the universal spark which represented wholeness. Neither black nor white meridian can reach a higher point of existence until they partake of each other’s nature, by accepting that tertium quid which will propel a new fusion, a stronger and higher strain of being because it shares all of nature’s bounty and inherits all of culture’s gifts.

The evolutionary image and processes of change and accommodation, loss, gain, and ultimate fulfillment dominate “Blue Meridian.” Following Whitman, Toomer sees all the humankind as part of one long march dating back to Adam. Again echoing Whitman, Jean insists that every strata of humankind has played some part in determining the current stock:

We—priest, clown, scientist, technician,
Artist, rascal, worker, lazybones,
This is the whole—
Individuals and people,
This is the whole that stood with Adam
And has come down to us.

Building from the “new Adam” myth of the Puritans, Jean heralds America as the land of the new Adam, but insists that that being has yet to fulfill itself; the great promise of American personality must be moved from ideality to reality. The American—conceived as the ultimate development of historical man—yet bears the mandate to become that being worthy of the munificence of contemporary America, this rich legacy captured in references to the splendid geography and natural resources of the country:

Thou great fields, waving thy growths across the world,
Couldst thou find the seed which started thee?
Can you remember the first great hand to sow?
Have you memory of His intention?

Great plains, and thou, mountains,
And thou, stately trees, and thou,
America, sleeping and producing with the seasons.

While nature’s bounty provided the material conditions which made America the staging ground for a new world vision, the inhabitants were not “spirit-selected” to fulfill the country’s destiny, but rather came by the accidents of fate:
When the spirit of mankind conceived
A New World in America, and dreamed
The human structure rising from this base,
The land was as a vacant house to new inhabitants,
A vacuum compelled by Nature to be filled.
Spirit could not wait to time select,
Weighing in wisdom each piece,
Fitting each right thing into each right place,
But had to act, trusting the vision of the possible,
Had to bring vast life to this vast plot,
Drawing, in waves of inhabitation,
All the peoples of the earth.

Toomer describes the three main waves of inhabitants and the contribution each made to the American continent, beginning with the European influx:

The old people—
The great European races sent wave after wave
That washed the forests, the earth's rich loam,
Grew towns with seeds of giant cities,
Made roads, laid silver rails.

Africa's gifts to the "vision of the possible" came in the form of forced labor and compensatory song:

The great African races sent a single wave
And singing riplets to sorrow in red fields,
Sing a swan song, to break rocks
And immortalize a hiding water boy.

"Blue Meridian" celebrates the magnificence of the "great red race," the final major racial group constituting the omni-American:

The great red race was here,
In a land of flaming earth and torrent-rains,
Of red sea-plains and majestic mesas,

As each group had a major role to play in building the country, each helped undermine the historic mission of the new world. The Europeans, led by greed and the desire to be dominant, lost spiritual motivations and "perished displaced by machines." These "dear defectives" or civilized barbarians created a world of chaos. In the wake of rampant industrialization and commercialization America became unlivable, alien to human needs, echoing the end fore-shadowed in Revelations:

They say that near the end
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It was a chaos of crying men and hard women,
A city of goddamn and Jehovah
Baptized in finance
Without benefit of saints.

The African, too, shares responsibility for stunting the American plan. As the European has been fixed in a group image of master, the African remained frozen in its slave personality, even after the period of slavery had ended. They insisted, Toomer insists, on “keeping the watermelon,” the author’s highly inventive metaphor for perpetuating a destructive stereotype, remaining the dialectical other of the European, moaning and groaning of its fate as an oppressed class, rather than effecting a new self:

But we must keep keep keep
The watermelon—
He moaned, O Lord, Lord,
This bale will break me—
But we must keep keep keep
the watermelon.

The native American had lost its glory and splendor, its culture trivialized in the descent from the purple hill to pueblo, where that spirit “Sank into the sacred earth.” Indians, too, fixed on symbols of group narcissism: “The ghosts of buffalos / A lone eagle feather, An untamed Navajo.” Frozen by their commitment to their “dear defective” selves, all divisions of America cannot grow beyond their present level, leaving the country united by geography, but unjoined in spirit:

And thus we are—
Gathered by the snatch of accident,
Selected with the speed of fate,
The alien and the belonging,
All belonging now,
Not yet made one and aged.

“Blue Meridian” then proclaims the need for an American civic aesthetic which will cultivate and harmonize one nation out of its many people.

As in Cane, in “Blue Meridian” Toomer’s evolutionary perspective centers in humanism—in the death of the old gods and the empowerment of man. Each of the old gods perished in the new world, their demise presaging the rise of humanism:

The old gods, led by an inverted Christ,
A shaved Moses, a blanched Lemur,
And a moulting Thunderbird,
Withdrew into the distance and died,
Their dust and seed drifting down
To fertilize the seven regions of America.

Toomer’s new God will spring as a “faceless deity”— safe from the claims of
group narcissism, able to herald a multi-cultural / multiracial people:

We are waiting for a new God,
For revelation in our day,
For growth towards faceless Deity.

The poet calls upon the great primordial forces of nature to generate that energy
which, in turn, will generate the new world soul:

O thou Radiant Incorporeal
The I of earth and of mankind, hurl
Down these seaboards, across this continent,
The thousand-rayed discus of thy mind,
And blend our bodies to one flesh,
And blend this body to mankind.

While the inspiration and force will come from the world spirit, each American
in submission to the new world spirit, creates and sustains the new American,
partakes of a “civic Holy Communion”:

It is a new America
To be spiritualized by each new American
To be taken as a golden grain
And lifted, as the wheat of our bodies,
To matter uniquely man.
We are waiting for a new people,
For the joining of men to men
And man to God.

The second half of “Blue Meridian” is devoted to the second division of
America—the white meridian, those “who have power” but “are less than we
should be.” Toomer depicts inhabitants of the white meridian as power-driven
and insular, cut off from their best selves, power without wisdom. Group
narcissism marks their habits of control and exclusion. In a series of impera-
tives, the poet appeals to white meridians to “Let go” of the destructive hold
which has categorized, divided, separated and alienated humankind. “Unlock
the races” the poet implores. “Open this pod by outgrowing it. Free men from
this prison and this shrinkage.” Toomer sees sexism stemming from the same
forces of control and power that created racism and orders:
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Free the sexes
From the penalties and proscriptions
That allegedly are laid on us
Because we are male or female.

Class divisions too must become part of the past in the new America:

Unlock the classes
Emerge from these pockets;
I am, we are, simply of the human class.

Understanding that the field of knowledge helps create and sustain false consciousness, Toomer laments the specializations which have imprisoned truth:

Expand the fields, the specializations,
The limitations of occupations,
The definitions of what we are
That gain fractions and lose wholes—
I am of the field of being.
We are beings.

Religion too must be liberated from the sects and schisms that divide rather than unite:

Open the religions, the exclusive creeds,
Those tight parodies of God's intentions;
There is a Root religion
And we are of it, whose force transforms,
Whose way progressively reveals
The shining terraces of one reality.

The new America will celebrate emancipated humankind, which then casts a "rainbow to heaven":

Uncase, unpod whatever blocks, until,
Having realized pure consciousness of being,
Knowing that we are beings
Co-existing with others in an inhabited universe,
We will be free to use rightly with reason
Our own and other human functions—
Free men, whole men, men connected
With one another and with Deity.

By developing its highest potential, the new American reaches its own divinity:

This new God we have—
Man at last triumphant over not-man,
Being born above anti-being,
And in this being, and everywhere,
The god who is, the God we seek.

The "White Meridian" section of the poem fulfills the "Black Meridian" part, by accommodating the cultural tradeoffs which must be achieved for group harmony and social cohesion to exist. In this section, the insular inhabitants of the White Meridian give up privileges based on group identity and take their chances in the world as individuals, people at large in the universe, true to self rather than to group identity:

The old peoples—
The great European races sent wave after wave
That washed the forests, the earth's right loam,
Grew towns with the seeds of giant cities,
Made roads, laid silver rails,
Factoried superb machines,
Died, and came alive again
To demonstrate the worth of individuals
The purpose of the commonwealth.

The descendants of the Africans also experience a death-in-life; they overcome their slave psychology and come to know that all labor—even forced toil—is sacred:

Love does not brand as slave or peon
Any man, but feels his hands,
His touch upon his work.

Dying to group identity, the African emerges as an individual in the new world:

And welcomes death that liberates
The poet, American among Americans,
Man at large among men.

The death of group identity among "the great red race" will help sustain the banded new world soul:

And pueblo, priest, and Shalakos
Sank into the sacred earth
To resurrect—
To project into this conscious world
An example of the organic;
To enact a mystery among facts—

"Blue Meridian" posits the necessity of perpetual cultural tradeoffs, in pat-
terns of accommodation and adjustments, in the interest of a higher humanity:

Islanders, newly come upon the continents,
If to live against annihilation,
Must outgrow themselves and their old places,
Disintegrate tribal integrators,
And fix, as their center of gravity,
As their compelling ideal
The symbol of Universal Man—
Must outgrow clan and class, color,
Nationalism, creed, all the fetishes
Of the arrested and dismembered,
And find a larger truth in larger hearts,
Less the continents shrink to islands,
Less human destiny abort
And man, bristling against himself, explode.

Section Three of “Blue Meridian” presents the “high way of the third,” the path of “The man of blue or purple.” Toomer sees the blue man or the man of the color purple reconciling “yes and no.” This higher order of being has been “Struggling for birth through ages.” The autobiographical poem contained within “Blue Meridian” charts Toomer’s own progress and struggles for birth at a higher level and offers his life as a “reconciling force,” his own being as a “generator of symbols, Source of a new force.” The autobiographical poem presents the poet as a companion of the cosmos, working against “Anti-cosmic outlaws” for the brotherhood of man:

Driven by what the cosmos has put in me
Let me then affirm to those, the mazed,
Who like myself have seen self-streaks,
Who too have felt the sear
And would rather suffer it than pass it on—
We are made to grow, and by growing attain,
Rising in new birth to live in love.

The references to “self-streaks” and to “the sear” point to Toomer’s troubles with Frank and with Liveright and the battle over the personality of the poet in 1924. The poem reflects on the Cane days, and depicts the poet’s peak experiences during the splendor of the spring in 1923:

I held a fair position as men rate things,
Even enviable—
I could taste flavors in a grain of sand,
My eyes saw loveliness.
Toomer then records his yet-lingering surprise concerning the failure of the brotherhood of art. As he sought highest ground and took the “highway to heaven,” the brotherhood sought to undo him:

Curious, then, that I, of all people,
In the month of the nasty mouth,
Should have found myself caught
In a backbay leased by public and private scavengers:

Toomer’s criticism of the failure of the New York art scene reflects his decision in 1924 to give up the personality of the poet and his break with the moderns, who falsely claimed themselves “the brotherhood of art”:

The brotherhood of man cannot be realized
By stunted men, nor by those dismembered,
Closed in themselves, but off from the mainstream
And therefore frustrated and bent to live in hate;
Exiles can but gang against themselves and earth,
Suffering the wrong turn as it works out
With even stronger compulsion towards catastrophe.
We who would transform ex-I to I
And move from outlaw to I AM,
May know by sacred testimony—
There is a right turn,
A struggle through purgatories of many names,
A rising to one’s real being
Wherein one finds oneself linked with
The real beings of other men, and in God;
The kingdom exists, and is to be entered.

The poet pinpoints the personality of Margaret Naumburg as a redeeming agent in his life:

I met a woman—
Much that I am I owe to her,
For she was going where I was going.
We together,
And a buried being was called to life,
A beauty and a power, a revelation
Of what life is for, and why we are;

The autobiographical poem records the separation of poet and psychologist—
“I and she pushed we apart, We divided us.”

Following the chronology of Toomer’s life, the autobiographical excursus addresses Marjorie Latimer, her essence captured in memories of the midwest
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where she and Toomer met and of the southwest where they had their honey-moon:

Sweetheart of the lake!
Marvel of the prairies with starry eyes!
Angel child! Princess of earth!
Girl of the mesas and the great red plains!
Star of the sky! Joy of the sun!
Pride of the eagle! Beloved of the thunderbird!

Moving through the loss of loves, Toomer then accepts the loss of celebrity as the price paid for his fidelity to the new world soul:

My life is given to have
Realized in our consciousness,
Actualized in life without celebrity,
This real: wisdom, empowered: men growing
From womb to birth, from birth to rebirth,
Up arcs of brightness to the resplendent source.

The poem comes to an end with the poet as the new world soul realized, triumphant, praising his America:

No split spirit can divide
No dead soul can undermine thee,
Thou, great coasts and harbors,
Mountains, lakes, and plains,
Thou are the majestic base
Of Cathedral people;
America,
The seed which has started thee has grown.

Through sympathetic identification and powers of imagination of the poet, the new meridian gains life, banded by the poet:

Blue Meridian, banded-light,
Dynamic atom-aggregate,
Awakes upon the earth;
In his left hand he holds elevated rock,
In his right hand he holds lifted branches,
He dances the dance of the Blue Meridian
And dervishes with the seven regions of America, and all the world.

"Blue Meridian" was to be to Toomer's maturity what Cane had been to his youthful experiences. Both works issued from the compulsions of the writer's internal development. And as Cane exhausted and fulfilled Toomer's obsession
with the rites of ethnicity, "Blue Meridian" absorbed and expressed the creative energies and personal fidelities attached to the new world soul myth. The publication of "Blue Meridian" brought Jean Toomer immense joy and cathartic release. His personal sense of achievement compensated for the virtual silence which greeted his marvelous poem. The greatest interest in "Blue Meridian" came from a University of Pennsylvania composer, Carl McDonald, who sought permission to set the work to music for the University's Choral Society; however, the Director was unable to raise funds for a commission and abandoned that project, leaving the work which expressed Toomer's deepest poetic convictions without an audience. The neglect of this major poem confirmed the wisdom of having aborted that project back in 1924; then, as in 1936, a harmonizing inclusive civic aesthetic did not have a public in America. Toomer's success in completing the poem brought his life full-circle and effectively marked the end of his quest for fulfillment as a secular, creative writer.