

# Jean Toomer's Magazine Auras

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## ABSTRACT

*Drawing on George Bornstein's idea of a "textual aura", this essay proposes a distinct instantiation of this effect arising from the particular circumstances of periodical publication and reception, a magazine aura. Jean Toomer's publications in a range of modernist magazines illustrate the manifestations of a magazine aura, with particular attention to Toomer's appearances in Broom and The Little Review.*

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The aura emerges in part from the material features of the text. The original sites of incarnation thus carry with them an aura placing the work in space and time, and constituting its authenticity as well as its contingency.

— BORNSTEIN 2001, 7

THIS STATEMENT, SYNTHESIZING WALTER BENJAMIN'S AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY with Jerome McGann's and Peter Shillingsburg's editorial theories, defines George Bornstein's approach to editing and interpreting modernist literature.<sup>1</sup> Through the notion of the "textual aura", Bornstein articulates a space through which editorial practice and textual scholarship engage with each other, as exemplified in his various editions of W. B. Yeats's works and the readings in *Material Modernism* (2001) and elsewhere. In that book, especially, Bornstein seeks to redraw the lines of modernist studies to account for multiple occasions of publication, and the multiple linguistic and bibliographic codes they generate: "examining modernism in its original sites of production and in the continually shifting physicality of its texts and transmissions results in alternative constructions very

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1. In reference to Bornstein's own auras, it is worth pointing out that this claim originates in his earlier essay on W. B. Yeats and "textual reincarnation" (1998, 224). The notion of the textual aura is, of course, portable across historical periods, but my focus here will be on the modernist era as well.

different from current ones” (2001, 1). As Bornstein would demonstrate across a wide range of authors, texts, and publishing contexts, our perceptions of the works produced roughly a century ago are often a “back-projection of our present ways of thinking” (2011, 66). This lesson is perhaps the most instructive for the tangled histories of racialized identity in the U.S. The historical solution Bornstein proposes is a sustained effort to “look again at original contexts and their implications”, as he concludes in a chapter about the overlapping publishing networks that sustained many Black, Irish, and Jewish modernists (2011, 173). This approach sometimes recovers forgotten production histories, as in Bornstein’s reading of Alain Locke’s path-breaking 1925 collection *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (a subtitle he would always insist upon) as much more of a “biracial, collaborative project” than was apparent from later editions’ erasure of the Bavarian artist Winold Reiss from the frontispiece and title page (2001, 150). At other moments, Bornstein outlines neglected connections within publishing networks to redraw the lines of historical influence, as in his reading of the context in which *The Waste Land* first appeared. “The poem’s (and the manuscript’s) invocations of Black and Irish culture match its presence among Black and Irish works on the Boni and Liveright lists”, Bornstein concludes. “Its polyglot nature and place of publication reinforce each other” (2011, 173).

My own attempt at historical recovery that follows — tracing the periodical roots of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* in the months before that book joined the Liveright list itself in the autumn of 1923 — follows very much in a Bornsteinian spirit. Toomer’s own relationship to American conceptions of racial identity was notoriously complicated — or, perhaps, all too simple, as Toomer often insisted that he was an “American”, nothing more nor less, within a society that compulsively measured subjectivity in single drops of non-white blood. Toomer was delighted to be associated with Liveright, to whom his work was recommended by his then friend and mentor, the novelist Waldo Frank, and *Cane* was as thoroughly modernist, if not more so, as any title on the B&L list. As Bornstein notes, the *mélange* of poetry, fictional vignettes, and a drama *manqué* “deployed jumps between discrete units, mixed forms, a potpourri of elevated and everyday language, and a sense of mythic presences behind everyday occurrences” (2011, 172). In the decades since *Cane* was published, fell into obscurity, and began to be recovered during the Black Arts movement, though, it has been read much more often along the lines of the (narrowly defined) New Negro Renaissance than as part of a broader (and usually implicitly white) understanding of literary modernism.

When we read the various pieces of *Cane* appearing across a span of modernist little magazines (with the notable exception of *The Crisis* and its circulation in the tens of thousands), however, the extent to which Toomer was participating in multiple periodical networks, and the degree to which those networks were open to texts focused on Black communities, becomes much more apparent. My attempt to recover the auras generated by Toomer's magazine texts also adapts Bornstein's notion of the "contextual code", which he outlines as occupying a "middle ground" (1993, 179) between a text's linguistic and bibliographic codes, created by the placement of a text within a collection (as in Yeats's habit of reordering the contents of his poetry collections in their republications). As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, periodicals offer a related but distinct version (so to speak) of a contextual code, one typically beyond the control of a text's author and instead determined by a magazine or newspaper editor.<sup>2</sup> While Bornstein, among other scholars examining particular authors' production histories, often thinks through the difference an original periodical publication context might make for a specific text, as in his attention to the initial appearance of Yeats's "September 1913" in the *Irish Times* newspaper (1998, 238–40), in my work on Toomer and periodical texts more generally, I have tried to expand this frame by accounting for the full range of a periodical's contents, advertisements, editorial practice, and location in relation to other magazines of the day.<sup>3</sup> In other words, I have sought to unearth a "magazine aura" that similarly locates periodical texts within a deeply historicized sense of time and place, in order to take account of their "authenticity" and "contingency" — or, to ask what it might have meant for the readers (or some of the readers) of a particular magazine at a particular point in its history to have encountered a particular text there, in relation to the texts and materials circulating in that issue or across a run of issues.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Though beyond the scope of this essay, Toomer's eventual organization of the various pieces and three sections of *Cane* creates a more bookish contextual code as well.

3. See YOUNG 2003, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, and 2022.

4. While I am mindful of Patrick Collier's claim that contemporary scholarly "readings and the tools that enable them — digital databases, search tools, microfilm, or facsimile copies — are effectively remediations of the magazine", I would not go so far as his conclusion that "how 'actual readers' experienced any of this [. . .] lies in the vast realm of the unknowable" (2022, 21–22; my ellipsis). No doubt there are important and inevitable constraints on the historical reconstruction of such knowledge, but I would see the material traces of magazines' periodical

Along those lines, it is important to note the ways in which periodicals and periodical codes — a term adapted by the modernist magazine scholars Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker from McGann’s and Bornstein’s theorizations of the bibliographic code — produce reading experiences that are distinct from, if inevitably related to, those associated with codex books.<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking — and there are notable exceptions to all of the following claims, both from the magazine and book ends of the spectrum — periodicals are designed to be more temporary, ephemeral, and disposable than books, while asking readers both to encounter an individual issue and to consider that specific object in the wake of a much larger, and usually unfinished, whole. A periodical’s original audiences also approach the reading experience within the structure of its distribution, so that “the time between installments/issues, the pause, matters” (TURNER 2006, 311). “These gaps,” Margaret Beetham observes, “whether days, weeks, or months, offer different periods of pause and recollection, but all in their differing ways construct time both as serial and as punctuated by the ‘now’ of the publication, a succession of ‘present moments’” (2015, 327).<sup>6</sup> While magazines, like books, might well be set aside for a reader’s eventual attention (as, for instance, the pile of *New Yorkers* in my living room would attest), books are not *designed* to be replaced after a week, a month, or a quarter has elapsed.

Codex books, like magazines, enable readers to access them in non-linear ways if they choose, but this similarity comes with some significant differences as well. “Except for loose pages,” Sukanta Chaudhuri writes, “it is hard to think of a more manipulable arrangement of text on paper than the codex volume (2010, 114).<sup>7</sup> But the ephemerality of the periodical, in contrast to the presumed permanence of the book, impacts a reader’s attitude toward the contents of each medium: a book chapter, once skipped, can always be returned to at some later time (assuming the reader has kept the book or can retrieve it from a library or elsewhere), whereas an unread magazine piece is more liable to remain so, especially in an age like

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codes as enough to make reasonable inferences about the kinds of readers with whom they sought to be in dialogue.

5. Or now, of course, with the various digital and audio forms of texts. See BROOKER and THACKER 2009, 6. For an especially thoughtful approach to conceptualizing the periodical as an object of study, which seeks to parse the nuances of the periodical experience a bit more finely than the periodical code sometimes allows, see also PHILPOTTS 2015.
6. On this point see also MUSSELL 2015.
7. As Chaudhuri notes, he is drawing here on insights from CHARTIER 1995, 18.

the 1920s, when few periodicals were retained for any appreciable length of time, and in any sort of easily accessible way for the reading public at large. While a hybrid generic work like *Cane* certainly resists this forward readerly momentum to some degree — it is not necessary to have read the story “Becky” in order to understand the characters and plot of the story “Bona and Paul”, for instance, even though “Becky” comes first in the book’s sequential arrangement of pages — the kind of thematic trajectory that accumulates in a linear reading of *Cane* is entirely absent from a reading of “Becky” in the October 1922 issue of *The Liberator*, replaced by a reader’s contingent and possibly non-linear arrangement of the magazine’s contents, both within that issue and across a larger spread.

Periodicals, within individual issues or across a larger span of time, and the periodical texts within them, operate as emergent wholes in the philosophical sense, in ways that can be significantly more multiple and complex than for other kinds of artworks. This is the case both ontologically and pragmatically. Any given issue of a periodical is at once similar to and different from other issues, of that particular journal or related ones. As James Mussell suggests, “[e]ach successive issue must assert its difference from its predecessor, introducing enough singularity to disrupt the rhythm but not enough to break it entirely” (2015, 351). To isolate a given installment of a periodical, then, is to arrest its natural flow while also, if such a study is to develop in response to the emergent nature of the periodical, to perceive a given issue within a broader spectrum. The magazine or newspaper remains open to multiple possible readings, for, as Beetham notes, “[m]ost readers will not only construct their own order, they will select and read only some of the text” (1989, 98). At this practical level, then, any reading of a particular periodical text will operate within one of multiple possible fields, as an individual reader, or editor, will position the periodical text against a particular emphasis on some aspects of the larger periodical field, but in terms of that single issue and its broader run, while other such orientations and readings would be inherently possible. The range of possible readerly juxtapositions and interactions, Sean Latham concludes, generates an “interactive alchemy of the magazine as a whole, forming potential networks of meaning that individual readers could activate across the flattened surfaces of these composite texts” (2011, 419). With that brief background in mind, I turn to the moment of *Cane*’s publication, in order to work back from there to the multiple moments in which pieces of the book appeared periodically.

As a starting point, consider the abundance of differences in the contextual codes accruing from a text’s placement in *Cane* versus its

location in an earlier magazine.<sup>8</sup> In *Cane*, the poem “Her Lips Are Copper Wire” appears in the second section, between the stories “Theater” (rejected by Gorham Munson for *Secession*) and “Calling Jesus” (published in the New Orleans-based *Double Dealer* as “Nora” at the request of editor John McClure). But in the little magazine *S4N* — literally as well as figuratively, with pages measuring on average about 4½ by six inches (RUMBLE 2007, 263) — Toomer’s poem, misprinted as “Wires”<sup>9</sup>, abuts the closing lines of Hart Crane’s “America’s Plutonic Ecstasies”, a parody of E. E. Cummings’s style. The contextual currents surrounding “Her Lips” flow from the magazine’s engagement with Dada, *unanimisme*, and Futurism, with editor Norman Fitts even sending his own translation to F. T. Marinetti, whose essay on the movement also appears in this issue. Toomer’s story “Fern”, to which I return below, also takes on Futurist overtones in the context of its *Little Review* “special number” on the Italian-American artist Joseph Stella. Similarly, the poem “November Cotton Flower”, whose title in *Cane* picks up a reference in the opening story, “Karintha” a few pages earlier, loses this connection in the obscure Alabama magazine *The Nomad*, which advanced a tentative response to the allegedly heroic recovery of a Southern agrarian past then circulating in magazines like *The Fugitive* in Nashville. On the other hand, *The Nomad* also operates as a surprising instance of the modernist nexus of Jewish publishers and Black writers stretching from its usual headquarters in New York<sup>10</sup> to Birmingham, where *Nomad* editor Albert A. Rosenthal and his spouse, Ida Schwartz, were partners in their own law firm in addition to their lives as poets and publishers. Toomer’s story “Blood-Burning Moon”, finally, is one of the key texts in *Cane*, closing off the opening section’s portrait of the Southern violence surrounding racialized desire and identity with an extended description of a lynching. But its magazine incarnation came in the obscure *Prairie*, renamed from its original title *The Milwaukee Arts Monthly*.<sup>11</sup> Toomer appeared in a primarily

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8. In total, eighteen pieces that Toomer would include in *Cane* were published across nine magazines, with Toomer’s work occasionally appearing in multiple issues of the same periodical. *Cane* consists of twenty-eight texts; some of these were rejected by magazine editors and did not appear in print prior to their book form, while in a few other cases Toomer never circulated texts outside of *Cane*.

9. Though outside the scope of this piece, there are several linguistic changes between Toomer’s magazine and book versions, most notably in the elision of the three middle sections of “Kabnis” when it ran in two *Broom* installments.

10. See Bornstein 2011, 164–73. That group of publishers included, of course, Boni and Liveright.

11. For a more complete history, see YOUNG 2021c.

Midwestern textual environment, with the startling image of a black sculpture — a bust of *Prairie* editor Samuel Pessin by the Milwaukee artist Girolomo Piccoli, who had provided Pessin with the magazine's first office space adjacent to his bookshop (MUKHERJI 2017, 116) — inserted in the middle of Toomer's text, in an uncanny echo of the story's closing description of Tom Burwell's death: "Now Tom could be seen within the flames. Only his head, erect, like a blackened stone" (TOOMER 1923b, 24).

## I. "Parts of this Unusual Book": *Cane* and Its Periodical Pieces

While Horace Liveright advised Toomer that promotional materials for *Cane* should include "a definite note sounded about your colored blood", Toomer famously insisted, "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 2006 172n1, 171). Toomer was eventually willing to acquiesce to Liveright's advertisements highlighting his blackness in order that his book might "reach as large a public as possible", but he asked that in any materials accompanying review copies, he be referred to according to the terms he had provided to his publisher, the "essential lines of my sketch" — that is, not as an author with "colored blood" (2006, 172). While Toomer had been associated with Alain Locke, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and other emerging Black intellectuals in the years before *Cane* (HUTCHINSON 1991), he declined to give Locke permission to reprint excerpts from that book in the *New Negro* anthology (where they appeared anyway), and successfully blocked James Weldon Johnson from including any poems from *Cane* in the 1930 edition of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*.<sup>12</sup> As Toomer would explain in a later memoir, he declined such requests "because I did not want *Cane*, which is an organism, dismembered, torn to bits and scattered about in the pages of anthologies" (TOOMER 1993, 102).<sup>13</sup>

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12. On Toomer's involvement in Black literary societies in Washington, D.C., see also McHENRY 2002, 253–66.

13. As Charles Scruggs and Lee Vandemarr note, Toomer "was not consistent about this policy, however; he later allowed parts of *Cane* to appear in anthologies designated as 'Negro'" (1998, 266n39), including Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927) and V.F. Calverton's *Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929). Locke also included five poems from *Cane* in his 1927 *Four Negro Poets*, "apparently

Ultimately, Liveright's ads for *Cane* positioned the book in relation to multiple cultural contexts, both highlighting its author's "natural" sense of rhythm and musicality, while also connecting Toomer to more established avant-garde writers. As Michael Soto has documented in detail, B&L adopted competing promotional rhetorics across a range of ads for *Cane*, in keeping with the book's relation to various other titles on the publisher's list. In some cases, these ads located Toomer's book as a "vaudeville out of the South" expressing the "primitive rhythms of the Negro soul", while elsewhere they listed Toomer alongside white modernist novelists, including Theodore Dreiser, Ben Hecht, and Ludwig Lewisohn (along with the more expected association with Frank, who had accompanied Toomer on a journey through the South while researching his own 1923 lynching novel, *Holiday*) (2001, 169, 174). If, as Soto concludes, the publisher's marketing assumptions "cut the furrows along which *Cane* has been read" (2001, 164), a cross-cultural harvesting of Toomer's work has largely lain fallow.

When various pieces of what would become *Cane* were appearing across a wide range of modernist magazines in 1922–1923, however, Toomer's desire for his work to be encountered outside the silo of "Negro" literature was more often realized. An advertisement in the January 1923 issue of *Broom*, for example, which included Toomer's story "Karintha", extols that issue's contents as representing "The Oldest and Newest Art of America":

BROOM has never lacked faith in the Artistic future of America. Here are new writers, some known, most unknown, whose work is as varied, as fertile, as powerfully muscled as anything being written in England France or Germany. Here is Comparative Literature. Here are writers who will be studied in Courses in Comparative Literature twenty years hence. Why not read them now?

Rather than "featuring Negro" for Toomer, the ad's ensuing list of authors locates him alongside Kay Boyle, Kenneth Burke, Malcolm Cowley, Gertrude Stein, and William Carlos Williams, among others, while juxtaposing these American authors to a future canon of comparative (i.e., white, western European) literature.<sup>14</sup> My point here is not that "race" is erased or glossed

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with Toomer's permission", Barbara Foley notes (2014, 272n47). Toomer turned down Nancy Cunard's invitation to contribute to *Negro* (McKAY 1984, 200; see also NORTH 1994, 150). On Toomer's response to Locke's anthologizing, see also FAREBROTHER 2009, 108–09.

14. On this ad, see also NOWLIN 2011, 212.

over in the *Broom* "Karintha"; a poetic refrain informs readers that "Her skin is like dusk", and, as Eurie Dahn notes (2021, 149), the magazine version carried a parenthetical headnote that was dropped from *Cane*: "(To be read, accompanied by the / humming of a Negro folk-song)" (TOOMER 1923a, 83). Rather, I see reading "Karintha" in *Broom* as redirecting the scope of "modernism" to account for representations of raced subjects in ways that often remain occluded. Similarly, when Toomer's story "Carma" ran in the Marxist magazine *Liberator* in September 1922, its bibliographical environment included poetry by the labor activist Ralph Chaplin and an opening story by Genevieve Taggard, who would remain an important presence in the American leftist literary scene throughout the 1920s and 1930s, thereby locating the Southern rural class structures operating in the background of Toomer's story alongside urban Socialist contexts.

While conceptions of the "New Negro" were broadly circulating in the U.S. and internationally during this period, as part of what Davarian Baldwin outlines as an "overlapping and contested architecture of race consciousness" (2013, 4), the far-flung dispersal of Toomer's texts in modernist magazines offers a related instance of cultural travel. Such connections are especially apparent in the January 1923 *Broom*, where Toomer's "Karintha" appears within a special emphasis on modern American art and literature in relation to Mayan culture, part of what Stephen M. Park calls "but one manifestation of the 'Mayan Revival' that swept through the USA in the early part of the twentieth century" (2011, 22). That *Broom* should promote Toomer's story as part of its "challenge to Americans to recognize a national art as profoundly American as BASEBALL / THE CINEMA / THE JAZZ BAND / AND THE DIZZY SKYSCRAPER" positions "Karintha" not as relegated to a racially defined audience but as part of a broadly and "profoundly" American literature, even as an image of a Mayan mask below the story's closing lines in turn complicates the magazine's sense of "American" literature in juxtaposition to Mayan history.<sup>15</sup>

Despite Toomer's often tenuous relationship to the New Negro movement itself, or to his writings being perceived as only expressing a "Negro" consciousness, part of their cultural work, in *Cane* and before, was surely to put modernist representations of Blackness into dialogue

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15. This revision of what constitutes "American" literature might seem to carry over to Matthew Josephson's joint review in *Broom* of *Cane* and William Carlos Williams's *Great American Novel* as both "Great American Novels", but as Eric B. White demonstrates, Josephson's rhetoric implies that "Williams's work was already 'American,' whilst Toomer's work was only 'becoming' American" (2013, 154).

with other elements of the literary avant-garde, often produced in and disseminated among transnational contexts. While the texts of *Cane* engender a cumulative effect through which they “feature Negro”, in their magazine contexts Toomer’s poems and stories situate the Black experience within a more varied modernist spectrum of cultural fragmentation, even if they sometimes “feature Negro” in a different sense, as the only text overtly within those magazine issues that represents Black characters and perspectives.

A Liveright ad in the October 1923 *Broom* includes *Cane* alongside Frank’s *Holiday*, Djuna Barnes’s *A Book*, and (most prominently) a Victorian account of the “Orient”, C. M. Doughty’s *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, explicitly marketing *Cane* as a product of avant-garde journals: “You have seen parts of this unusual book in BROOM and probably other portions in ‘Little Review’ and other unfashionable magazines. The book is really a stirring event in the year’s literature. \$2.00.”<sup>16</sup> While, as Allyson Hobbs notes, “Toomer’s nearly white skin and dark wavy hair made it difficult for anyone, including African Americans, to pin down his racial identity” (2014, 181), it is still notable that the Liveright ad includes a photo of Toomer, along with those for Barnes and Doughty. Rather than playing up his “colored blood” in this instance, that is, Toomer’s publisher offers the author’s physical presence in conjunction with other “unusual” and “unfashionable” books associated with the avant-garde journals *Broom* and *Little Review*. The absence of an authorial image for Frank’s *Holiday*, with the text in the center square inviting *Broom* readers to write to B&L for their complete backlist, reinforces the ad’s featuring of Toomer’s visual presence, just as the copy for Barnes’s *Book* highlights her “almost mythical personality that has loomed so largely and intangibly over modern art in America.”<sup>17</sup>

While *Cane* figures as an exemplary instance of the Harlem Renaissance’s “collage aesthetic,” in Rachel Farebrother’s terms, Toomer’s magazine publications operate outside of that destabilized form of the book, within

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16. Doughty’s *Travels* was originally published by Cambridge University Press in 1888, and was then returned to public attention by T. E. Lawrence, with a second British edition in 1921. Liveright’s was the first American edition, with a reprint in 1926 and further re-issues from Random House in 1934 and 1937 (O’BRIEN 1987, 232–36).

17. On this ad, see also SORENSEN 2017, 112–13. A Boni & Liveright ad in the “New Negro” issue of *Survey Graphic* aligns *Cane* and *Holiday* with Jessie Fauset’s *There Is Confusion*, but again omits a photo of Frank while including images of the other two authors (see WHITE 2013, 155–56).

the equally complex and more multiply inflected collage of the magazine.<sup>18</sup> Before *Cane* had developed as an aesthetic whole, the pieces of this textual organism had indeed been “scattered about” in the pages of various periodicals. As an emerging author anxious to establish his career, Toomer sent his work to several different types of journals, with and without success. As Mark Whalan observes, “The range of little magazines and other outlets to which he sent pieces of *Cane* [ . . . ] is evidence of the scope of the audience that Toomer felt he could address” (2007, 219).<sup>19</sup> Toomer appeared in overtly political journals — *The Crisis*, the official organ of the NAACP, and the *Liberator* — in recognizably avant-garde magazines — *Broom*, *Little Review*, *Modern Review*, and *S4N* — and in distinctly local periodicals aiming for national and even international audiences — *The Double Dealer* in New Orleans, *The Nomad* in Birmingham, and *Prairie* in Milwaukee (and later, probably, in Chicago). To read Toomer’s texts through and across these magazines, thinking of such connections as part of the “intertextual web” discernible from a broad reading of magazines (LATHAM 2011, 413), enables a case study of the diverse set of modern periodicals participating in 1920s U.S. print culture and their intersections with modernist representations of Blackness.

Toomer’s career intersected with these journals at different stages of their life cycles: “Blood-Burning Moon” appeared in what would be the final (and only fifth) issue of *Prairie*, while “Fern” arrived shortly after *The Little Review* was at the height of its fame (or notoriety), shortly after its final installment of *Ulysses*. While Toomer’s three texts in *The Double Dealer* came as that journal was establishing its place in various modernist cultural networks, the magazine folded a few years later; meanwhile, *The Crisis* is still in operation, albeit in substantially different form since the days of W. E. B. Du Bois and Jessie Fauset as editors. Toomer’s original readers were more likely to encounter his poems and stories outside of the bibliographic contours of the New Negro Renaissance, or simply to read Toomer as part of a larger modernist field that was not necessarily, or consistently, cordoned off into racialized texts and audiences.<sup>20</sup> Many of

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18. For readings of *Cane* along these lines, see FAREBROTHER 2009, 79–109, PECKHAM 2000, and ROBLES 2020.

19. Similarly, Dahn notes, “The variety of periodicals with which Toomer associated himself reveals something of the variety of identities with which he affiliated himself” (2021, 156).

20. While Greg Barnhisel includes Toomer among a group of Harlem Renaissance writers who sometimes “published in primarily white literary and political journals [ . . . ] and in so doing laid claim to being part of mainstream — that is, white —

*Cane*'s original readers would have come to Toomer's work via magazines as well, through B&L's ads and through reviews, which spanned a similarly broad scope, from *Opportunity* to *New Republic*, and from *Survey Graphic* to *The Double Dealer*.<sup>21</sup> Even in bibliographical contexts explicitly associated with the Harlem Renaissance, such as Countee Cullen's 1927 collection *Caroling Dusk*, Toomer maintained his affiliations to a more bohemian milieu. The headnote Toomer provided for Cullen, for instance, claims that his writings "were first given printed form by *The Double Dealer* of New Orleans" and that subsequent magazine publications led Toomer to become part of a "literary and artistic group in New York" including Frank, Alfred Stieglitz, and Gorham Munson, with whom Toomer had "been associated in the effort to articulate the diverse significances of America" (CULLEN 1993, 93–94).<sup>22</sup>

## II. A Futurist "Fern"

In *Cane*, "Fern" is one of several portraits of Southern Black women populating the opening section. This vignette, even more so than the other members of this series, comments directly on the narrator's interest in seeing Fern, especially in terms that he in turn relates to heterocentric scopical regimes of female Black sexuality. As Barbara Foley points out, the male narrator "assumes that the reader he addresses throughout the tale is a man and in closing passes along her name to men both black and white, presumably wishing them better luck in sexual conquest" (2014, 208). The bibliographic environment generated by the Autumn 1922 *Little Review* meanwhile, is, as one might expect, saturated in a European avant-garde, with contributions from Gertrude Stein, Guillaume Apollinaire, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, and the Belgian poet Jean de Bosschère, along with photographs of Stella's paintings interspersed throughout its pages.

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literary culture" (2018, 429), the extent of such magazine publishing across the color line was more extensive than might be apparent from Barnhisel's brief account. See YOUNG 2021a and 2022.

21. Dahn notes as well that "Contemporary readers most likely came to Toomer's book through advertisements placed in magazines, his writings published in those periodicals, and magazine reviews of *Cane*" (2021, 135).
22. See also SCRUGGS and VANDEMARR 1998, 105. This history elides Toomer's earlier appearances in *Liberator* and *Crisis*, as well as three pieces in the socialist newspaper *New York Call*.

Fern's mixed-race status, Michele Elam writes, is "represented as peculiarly enabling this palimpsest of the narrator's projections onto her" (2015, 377). For U.S. readers of *Cane*, the "soft suggestion of down slightly darkened" (TOOMER 1922, 25) in Fern's skin potentially takes on an exoticized quality by virtue of her mixed-race status. For *Little Review* readers, though, Fern's Jewish heritage presents her in different mixed terms, even if she doubtless remains a kind of "Rorschach blot upon which others might project" (ELAM 2015, 376). The fictional figure most associated with the magazine in 1922 was, after all, still Leopold Bloom, who "himself embodies racial mixture as imagined by his time", as Bornstein points out (2011, 55). While the "Black-Jewish parallels" that Bornstein elucidates in the book form of *Ulysses* were not quite in evidence in its serial instantiations, a broader sense of the "racial and cultural congruencies that Joyce deploys against racism and prejudice" (2011, 58) are still apparent in the magazine installments.<sup>23</sup>

Toomer's narrator, notably, does not initially specify his own racial status. The long opening paragraph's focus on how men have viewed Fern ends by clarifying: "And it is black folks whom I have been talking about thus far. What white men thought of Fern I can only arrive at by analogy. They let her alone" (1922, 26). By the bottom of the second page, the narrator mentions parenthetically, "I was from the north and suspected of being prejudiced and stuck-up" (26–27), and then aligns himself with other Black men, or at least men "who have had experience in such things" (27), that is, in the knowledge that "love is not a thing like prejudice which can be bettered by changes of town" (27). From that point through the end of the story, the narratee is positioned as a man traveling through Macon, Georgia, as the narrator has. He declares, again parenthetically, "it makes no difference if you sit in the Pullman or Jim-Crow as the train crosses her road" (27), before wondering, "Would you have completely forgotten her as soon as you reached Macon, Atlanta, Augusta, Pasadena, Madison, Chicago, Boston, or New York?" (27). The distinction between Pullman or Jim-Crow railroad cars implies a Black American reader, as the additional fee for a Pullman-car fare afforded Black travelers at least nominal protection from white "hostile or even violent passengers who opposed their presence in first-class railroad spaces" (THAGGERT 2022, 103). On the other hand, a presumably

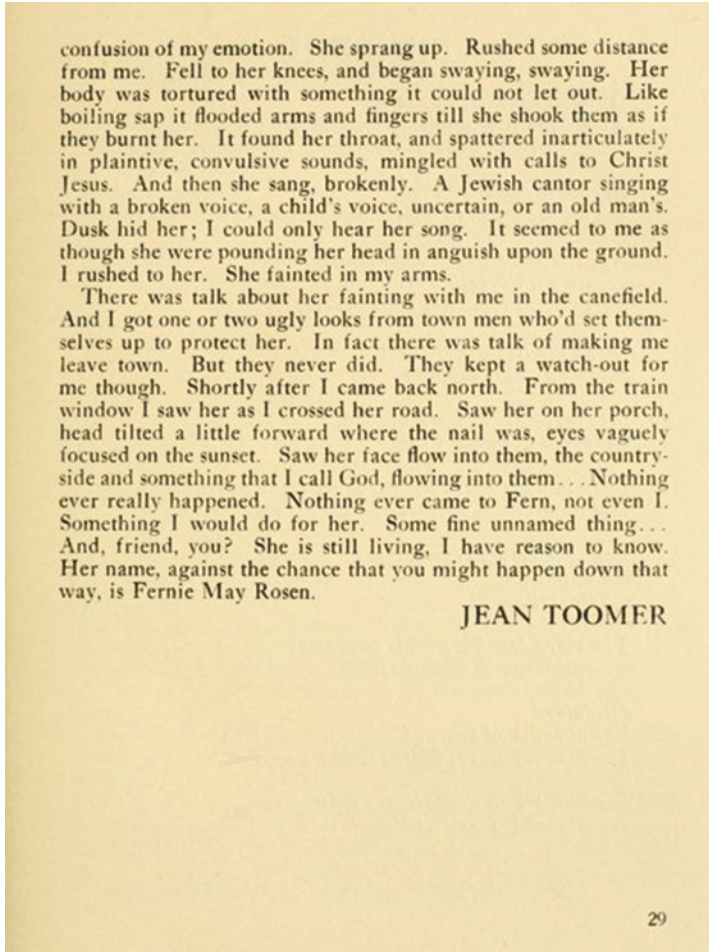
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23. Bornstein pinpoints two passages from the "Lestrygonians" and "Cyclops" chapters, comparing the published versions to those in the Rosenbach manuscripts (2011, 58–60). In each case, the *Little Review* version represents an intermediate stage of Joyce's revisions, with the specific Black-Jewish parallels not quite present in the magazine texts.

white audience's implied unfamiliarity with the story's setting returns in the narrator's note about visions — "People have them in Georgia more often than you would suppose" (28) — before the closing line, again conjecturing a male listener's eventual return, "Her name, against the chance that you might happen down that way, is Fernie May Rosen" (29). "The Jewish surname", Bornstein writes of Toomer, "clinches his point about the hybrid nature of identity" (2011, 66), a mixed subjectivity already signaled by the narrator's synesthetic perceptions: "At first sight of her I heard a Jewish cantor sing" (TOOMER 1922, 27). The details of this verbal portrait seem to imply both a Black and white readership as well, even when the story was repurposed for *The New Negro*, as Bornstein notes (2011, 65), but I would see that kind of audience as being especially important for understanding the place of Toomer's story within the arc of the late-phase *Little Review* as well.

Toomer, as far as I have been able to determine, was the only Black author appearing in *The Little Review* in the early 1920s (if we perceive racial identity in terms of the drops of blood mentality in circulation at the time). But "Fern" was not the only story to focus on Black or Southern characters and settings. Maxwell Bodenheim's poem "Lynched Negro" appears in the same issue (Spring 1925) as Toomer's story "Easter". Stephen Hudson's story "Transmutation" (Winter 1922) seems also to be set in the rural South. Louis Gilmore, better known to *Double Dealer* readers, published sporadically in *Little Review* as well (Spring 1922, Winter 1922, Spring 1924), while a story from the Picabia Number (Spring 1922), "The Resurrection and the Life" by William Jitro, focuses on an unnamed "Negro". Jitro was, according to Margaret Anderson, one of two "talents" (along with Baroness Elsa) whose work she and Heap accepted from the "tide of unsolicited manuscripts" (1969, 177), though "Jitro" was apparently a pseudonym. Toomer himself, of course, was ultimately more interested in the "porousness of the geographical, racial, and aesthetic boundaries which both joined and separated white and black writers in equal measure," as Kathleen Pfeiffer writes (2021, 56). An important element of that "porousness" for Toomer certainly derived from publishing in journals like *Little Review* and *Broom*. The location of "Fern" within a Futurist issue thus highlights the story's closing emphasis on contemporary urban motion, with the string of cities the reader may pass through after his passing glimpse of Fern on her porch, and that the narrator will presumably return to once he has left the isolated town as well.

Most importantly, reading "Fern" in *The Little Review* highlights the self-conscious narrative dynamics of vision in relation to the magazine's ongoing interrogation of the ways in which readers might perceive literary



**Figure 1.** From the Modernist Journals Project, Brown and Tulsa universities, ongoing. [www.modjourn.org](http://www.modjourn.org).

and visual works of art as refracted through their periodical reproductions.<sup>24</sup> Along those lines, the details of the story's publication call attention as

24. At this stage in the magazine's history, Jane Heap was taking on a primary editorial role, with a corresponding focus on new directions in European art. In addition to the Stella Number, *Little Review* featured work by Picabia, Constantin Brâncuși, Man Ray, Fernand Léger, George Grosz, Wassily Kandinsky, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Juan Gris, and Giorgio de Chirico, among several others, sometimes in dedicated issues and otherwise as part of clusters collecting an array of art from various schools.

well to the question of how readers should see Toomer himself as a *Little Review* author, as he was not yet “known to our readers”, in the formulation Jane Heap would typically adopt for established contributors. In this case, the magazine’s practice of positioning author’s names below the last line of each work creates a juxtaposition between the story’s final revelation of its central figure’s full name and the name of its author (see Fig. 1). Just as Toomer’s story asks its readers to imagine an alternate version of Black identity, even if still circumscribed by the racial tragedies and terrors of the American South, its publication in *The Little Review* asks those readers to perceive Toomer not (only) as a Black writer but as one immersed in the magazine’s avant-garde collage. The material contingencies of the text’s magazine aura thus reframe its “authenticity,” both aesthetically and racially, in ways that are surely lost by reading Toomer outside of these pages.

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