Contestatory Voices in a Composite Text: Grinding Cane’s Double Pastiche

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Through its opening epigraph, *Cane* acquaints readers with the task of tracing Georgia’s elusive, vaporous genius:

Oracular.  
Redolent of fermenting syrup,  
Purple of the dusk  
Deep-rooted cane. (Toomer 1)

In two sentence fragments parceled into four lines, Jean Toomer progresses from the indeterminate adjective, oracular, and its smoky evocation of the prophetic to the graspable cane root. By opening with an adjective of ambiguous referent, *Cane*’s preface forces the reader either to read up the page, affixing “oracular” to the title, or down the page through an elliptical layering of imagery that at last resolves back to “cane.” Reading up, we receive “oracular *Cane,*” while reading down, subtracting descriptive clauses, we compute “oracular cane.” The oracle’s precise manifestation appears unreachable, interwoven between vertiginous and paginated material. If it is the book which is oracular, then the Georgian sugar fields are diminished to a synecdoche of spiritualism, a subordinate element of a textual system which is actively staking teleological claims. However, if it is the reed which constitutes the locus of rural southern black mysticism, then the pages of *Cane* offer only a secondary documentation of a substance and aurality independent of its print. In turn, when examining the tonal and rhythmic qualities of this aurality we must ask, to use Brent Edward’s terminology, whether *Cane* is generatively *lyrical,* an oracular source in itself, or merely a compilation
of *lyrics* such as the sheets which accompany musical records and have only a “kind of secondary or bastard status flat on the page” (587).

Through the epigraph’s spatial ordering, *Cane* encourages readers to speculate into the relationship between the composed text and its constitutive materials. If reading up the page seems ridiculous, then consider that when reading down, “fermenting syrup” comes before “deep-rooted cane.” If read from top to bottom, the spatial and temporal arrangement of *Cane*’s epigraph compels readers to work backwards from the industrial process of fermentation, to reverse engineer and thus glean from the syrup the root. This root, literally vertiginous and figuratively genealogical, is accessible only through smelling the rich redolence of the commodity syrup – it is through the syrup’s aroma that we detect a hint or haunt of the original plant. In order to retrieve the roots of the erstwhile oracle, the liquid syrup demands a pliable hermeneutics which permits such non-linear and atemporal readings. Although the reader should strictly differentiate cane from *Cane*, this process of differentiation can be engaged only by reading Toomer’s book, just as the cane root can only be recalled from smelling the syrup’s redolent scent.

Perceiving that his book would outlast the backcountry singers which it intended to eulogize, Toomer conceived of *Cane* as the textual preservation of a nearly extinct southern folk culture. Chronologically, the untexted musical, narrative, and sermonic exchanges personified as a folk spirit tend to precede *Cane* and the modernity into which the book was disseminated. However, with the epigraph’s evocation of oracle, an entity which can state the future in the present, *Cane*’s placement of the syrup before the root contradicts traditional conceptions of temporality; the epigraph suggests that *Cane*’s relationship with oral folk will resist schematization by linear chronology. Rather, *Cane*
inhabits a temporal space of simultaneity wherein texted and untexted expression appear to exist in a para-literary and even reciprocally instigative relationship.\(^1\) Just as this almost extinct southern song culture informed *Cane*’s authorship, so too did *Cane* contribute to that culture by originating the characters, narratives, sermons, and songs in a text which could be read by modern readers. This co-dependence between *Cane* and folk reflects the broader period paradigm of a modernity whose literature, music, and art had been shaped by untexted folk and whose anthropology had simultaneously constructed the terms “folk,” “folk song,” and “folklore” as means for referencing perceived pre-textual expression.

The epigraph’s direction to read against folk’s commodified fermentation applies to *Cane*’s entire text, although the southern cycle with its prominent cane motif particularly demands recognition of the parallel processes which convert cane fields into syrup and folk expressions into literature. Of this cycle, “Karintha,” “Becky,” and “Carma,” sketches of women at adolescence, middle, and old age, provide an inter-textual narrative detailing the corporeal origination and textual reification of folk expression. As a story of childbirth, “Karintha” elucidates the conditions of authorship for one particular folk song, and the extension of Christological teleology to describe the aftermath of a pine mill fire. “Becky” thematizes illicit birth as the epicenter of folk generation and “Carma” the extra-marital affair. As folk simultaneously evolves into literature and literature is constructed from folk, *Cane*’s characters are themselves both sources and products of folklore and folksong. This co-dependent circularity undermines the certain explication of the relationship between the text’s characters and incorporated

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1 My phrase “reciprocally instigative” is inspired by Laura McGrane’s wording “mutually generative” in “Mother Shipton Speaks: Sounding Oracles in Eighteenth-Century Print Culture.”
folk, thus troubling the seemingly simple task of differentiating cane from *Cane*. Although it is impossible to separate these materials completely (as it would be impossible to differentiate the various features of the cane reed’s anatomy by only smelling the syrup’s scent), with an acknowledgement of *Cane*’s co-dependent and reciprocally instigative relationship with folk, we can read against the grain of “Karintha,” “Becky,” and “Carma” in order to evaluate the degree to which that folk exerts pressures on its framing text. In other words, we must measure the degree to which the oracular cane resists its placement within a potentially lyrical *Cane*. Since *Cane* is lyrical or at least contains lyrics, and folk is by its nature oral, the non-linear reading encouraged by the epigraph demands undertaking an auditory investigation in which we examine the voices presented and authorized within *Cane*’s text. Specifically, we must question the narratory authority of *Cane*’s speakers in order to reveal contestatory voices suppressed by the text’s seemingly monological progression.

I. Ballad Scholarship, Pastiche, and the Authorial Appropriation of Folk

The tensions established by *Cane*’s incorporation of untexted songs, stories, and sermons reflect the problem of a modernist era which simultaneously constructed and drew precedent from folk. While Modern artists from Gauguin to Stravinsky to James Weldon Johnson valued untexted folk expression to the extent of indulging in what became known as the primitivist movement, such artists attempted to maintain authorship over their own works in which folk was somehow a contingent element. At its surface, *Cane* appears to exemplify this primitivist modernity by incorporating folk into its pages through pastiche, a method of literary imitation wherein the speaker subjugates untexted expression beneath his own narrative purpose and authority. According to the Oxford
English Dictionary, pastiche is a French term which denotes either a “a medley of various ingredients; a hotchpotch” or a composition in the “professed imitation of the style of another artist.” While cultural critics often discuss either definition of pastiche in relation to a specific work of art, *Cane* is both hotchpotch collage and literary imitation, and since the text enacts both denotations, we can refer to it as a double pastiche. The term “double pastiche” is significant to *Cane* for its description of the authoritative model by which the speakers of individual stories, poems, and character sketches administer folk and integrate folk tunes and tales into its text. *Cane’s* text imitates folk and then disperses these imitations throughout the length of the book, relying upon the speakers localized within each story and poem to restore narrative coherence through the authority of their voices.

Pastiche, generally suggesting Modernity’s ironic tendency to mimic preceding literary traditions while struggling to be of the moment, describes a Modernist model for authorial control which we can apply to an examination of *Cane’s* relationship with folk. Reflecting on the book’s historical hybridity, David Nichols labels *Cane* as the paradoxical “modern classic” and unknowingly ascents to the narratory authority model designated by pastiche:

*Cane* can be seen as both an interpretation of the modernization of African America and as a product of that very transformation, for *Cane* would seem to enact the process by which metropolitan cultural forms came to predominate: Toomer published a modernist book that included lyric poems about folk songs. (22)

The belief that “metropolitan cultural forms came to predominate” implies that modern literature had eclipsed something else. In *Cane*, pastiche denotes the subjugation of “folk songs” beneath Toomer’s “lyric poetry.” However, the ambiguity of lyric, and its
suggestion either of an incanted organic totality or imitative liner notes, undermines the certainty of Nichols’ claim that a literature of modernity had overwhelmed antebellum folk. Nichols’ conception of textual incorporation is, like double pastiche, static. It is as if folk expressions are like pieces of felt glued into a collage or the individual sediments cemented into puddingstone: songs, stories, and sermons are decomposed and reconstellated to the speaker’s intentions. As a text which both interprets and modernizes African America, *Cane*, according to Nichols, exerts uncompromised mastery over its folk material.

Nichol’s commentary follows from an extensive critical legacy which describes literature’s appropriation of folk exclusively in terms of authorial intent. We can trace this legacy back through modernity to American literary scholar George Lyman Kittredge, and specifically, to his 1904 preface to the *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. In an examination of the of 17th and 18th Century British oral and print culture, Kittredge systematically differentiates “folk” poetry, which is crafted orally and unconsciously by a community of anonymous authors, from “artistic” poetry, the conscious texted creation of one individual author. Evolving from rumors, common history, or religious worship, folk poetry encourages adaptations on the part of listeners, and through its impersonal narrative structure consents to rearticulation under a form of communal authorship. In contrast, the published literary poem is a fixed entity resistant to alteration. Any such alterations to an artistic poem would constitute corruptions or debasements of that text. Where the folk poem’s historical mutation and inability to achieve a “fixed and final form” erases distinctive authorship, the artistic poem retains an intrinsic link to its singular author (Kittredge 16).
Though Kittredge wrote about popular British ballads, his definition of the anonymous, dynamic folk poem could be applied to Cane’s pastiched songs. “Karintha,” for instance, condenses the entire process of folk song production into a matter of lines:

…the smoke curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley. . . . Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in water. Some one made a song:

Smoke is on the hills. Rise up.
Smoke is on the hills, O rise
And take my soul to Jesus. (2)

In this folk song’s liturgical reading of pollution, the work’s authorial indeterminacy is unimportant. The author is simply any “some one,” and the act of creation itself is a general process of making (recall the etymology of poetry from the Greek poieo meaning “to make”). In his (or her) vocalized translation of nature into song, the anonymous author and generalized mode of conception engenders a dynamic musical culture able to respond immediately to an event. This immediacy is inflected through the song’s juxtaposition of description and imperative in an improvised and moralizing call to action. Inhabiting a presumed oracular landscape, the song maker internalizes the vision and taste of smoke, frames his visceral experience as a sign from the Christian God, and interprets this sign as a call to greater spiritual devotion. The smoke song evangelizes through its calling upon listeners to “Rise up!” and supplicates by its prosopopoeiac appeal to the entity who can bring the speaker to Jesus. Exhibiting a suitable marriage of provincial event to populist theology, the freshly minted folk song could expect extensive oral dissemination throughout the local community.

In the context of Karintha’s vignette and its oblique figuring of childbirth and infanticide, the smoke song constitutes an article of folk generated by Cane’s text. This
presentation, which the modern reader would understand as imitation, or pastiche, apprehends an ephemeral sentiment in comparatively permanent text. Kittredge derided the practice of such textualization as he saw it in the efforts of 17th century London publishers to reify oral folk ballads into broadsides:

In the seventeenth century there was a great demand for printed ballads, and there grew up a class of professional “purveyors to the press,” as Mr Child calls them, who were kept busy in supplying materials for the single-page issues which were hawked about by peddlers and with which every alehouse seems to have been papered. Many traditional ballads were printed in this form, usually in debased versions. (27)

Kittredge perceives an adulteration of folk in the broadside publication of ballads where others simply saw the transcription of a transcendental expression from one medium to another. The printed ballad disrupts natural folk production by interpolating the written word between event and song, implicitly presupposing literacy as a necessary condition for song making. According to Kittredge, the so-called debased ballads of the 17th century suggested at folk’s desperate attempts to coexist with an increasingly literate, educated, and by extension, folk-hostile society:

To this oral literature, as the French call it, education is no friend. Culture destroys it, sometimes with amazing rapidity. When a nation learns to read, it begins to disregard its traditional tales; it feels a little ashamed of them. What was once the possession of the folk as a whole, becomes the heritage of the illiterate only, and soon, unless it is gathered by the antiquary, vanishes altogether. (12)

Kittredge contends that widespread literacy, like the edenic forbidden fruit, enlightens and shames with the same liberating gesture. The individualized author assumes greater agency over the anonymous community in the 17th century when the shepherd’s rustic folk song falls neatly into Milton’s “Lycidas,” an intentionally anachronistic figuring of death and remembrance. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the borderland narratives
yield to Walter Scott’s novels and the oral ballads are superseded by Wordsworth’s

*Lyrical Ballads.*

In his *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, modern African American writer James Weldon Johnson presents a narrating protagonist who, like Kittredge, mourns the apparent extinction of folk culture while devising a project to save it. Just as Kittredge’s harangues against print adaptations of folk ballads (somewhat ironically) preface the anthology, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, the speaker of *Autobiography* attempts to preserve oral folk music through a textual project. This protagonist finds the inspiration of this project in Germany when he observes a musician who

seated himself at the piano, and, taking the theme of my ragtime, played it through first in straight music form. I sat amazed. I had been turning classic music into ragtime, a comparatively easy task; and this man had taken ragtime and made it classic. The thought came across me like a flash – It can be done, why can’t I do it? (Johnson 66)

*Autobiography*’s protagonist quickly embarks upon a quest to classicalize any and all folk songs and slave spirituals into musical forms he believes to be more permanent, proper, and ambitious than existing adaptations. At the dawn of a Modernist age in which painting, music, and drama reflected an equation of novelty with simplicity and various artists contributed to a primitivist chic, *Autobiography*’s speaker actually attempts to make an existing music form more elaborate (Karrer 130). The progression from ragtime to classical entails for Johnson’s hero a valorization project that would embed the content of southern spiritualism into a permanent cultural memory while spurning the form. But fighting against the too-recent shame of antebellum black culture and the artistic currents of his time, while attempting to differentiate the content of southern black folk from its form, this project falters. The folk songs prove resistant to classicalization and Johnson’s
hero meditates in the closing lines of *Autobiography* over his failure to formalize and concretize folkloric expression:

…when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage. (Johnson 100)

The speaker cannot consummate his ambition into musical score, his attempts to valorize folk amounting to nothing more than “yellowed manuscripts,” or the textual grist of an interesting autobiography. The protagonist is shown to be a dupe of both modernity and James Weldon Johnson, whose book parodies efforts to restore a lost folk culture by transcribing songs into text. The protagonist of *Autobiography* hopes to “catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state,” but fails to apprehend the aural moment in permanent text (81). His attempt to cull a diversity of songs into an classicalized imitation leaves nothing more than “tangible remnants of a vanished dream,” a paginated corpse entombed in the confines of a “little box.” Johnson presents a scenario in which the authorial model of double pastiche fails, as folk exerts an opposing, and in this case intractable, pressure against the modern author undermining his attempts to encapsulate folk within an artistic project.

As Kittredge blamed literacy and the protagonist of *Autobiography* historical education for the death of folk culture, Toomer accused the 20th century commodification and standardization of music for making American southern blacks embarrassed to sing (Johnson 85). While Kittredge and Johnson scrutinized the textual poetics of ballad broadside and folk chant, Toomer eulogized the lost aurality of folk songs, debased and displaced under the brunt of modern technological innovation. In his unpublished
autobiography, *The Wayward and the Seeking*, Toomer describes how modernity’s mechanized instruments contributed to the erasure of folk expression:

There was a valley, the valley of “Cane,” with smoke-wreaths during the day and mist at night. A family of back-country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I’d ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them “shouting.” They had victrolas and player-pianos. So I realized with deep regret that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. (123)

The assertion that *Cane* formed completely as a desire to apprehend some fleeting genius of the black south cannot be taken as a postulate for studying *Cane*, but rather as one of many potential interpretations of the work’s conception. Toomer’s reflections pit a learned, “urban,” black elite against a poor, uneducated scattering of tenant farmers. The former group objectifies modernity through its ownership of player-pianos and victrolas, mechanical instruments patented in the late 19th and early 20th century respectively, that had begun to achieve a widespread presence in the rural south by 1921, the year of Toomer’s appointment to the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial School. As the town folk oppose the expression of the shack dwellers, so too do their musical instruments confront one another. Specifically, Toomer perceives that by its standardized and disseminable format, the automated music of victrolas and players pianos will not only outlast southern folk music but also expedite its death. Observing the Georgian backcountry song culture disintegrating under the pressures of a nascent entertainment industry, he conceives of *Cane* as a pre-emptive eulogy for something soon to be lost:

The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into “Cane.” “Cane” was a swan song. It was a song of an end. (123)
Toomer believes that in publishing a book of literature, he can sustain folk as permanently recallable by employing the widespread American print culture which had precipitated that aurality's demise – *Cane* would write against rather than contribute to a “modern desert.” By using the pastiche model to incorporate oral folk expression into a work of written literature, Toomer concedes that victrolas and player pianos have come to predominate society, and attempts to arrange spirituals, sermons, and stories in a manner palatable to the modernized reader. Toomer’s concession is similar to that of Kittredge who bemoaned literacy’s eradication of folk while prefacing a written, and thus literacy-demanding anthology, and Johnson’s protagonist who attempted to valorize “primitive” expression by composing classical score (Johnson 81). Through its textual physicality, intrinsic division of writer and reader, and mass reproduction, *Cane* resembles those phonograph records and player piano scrolls whose ubiquity Toomer blamed for folk’s decline.

Kittredge’s ballad scholarship, Johnson’s hero’s classicalization project, and Toomer’s remarks about *Cane* epitomize a modernist mentality which lauded folk while subjugating untexted folk material beneath singular authorial control. Folk songs were anthologized by Kittredge, classicalized by Johnson’s protagonist, and pastiched by Toomer, as similar means for preserving a folk culture which was perceived to be dying. Contemporary ballad and print scholarship has confronted the modernist mentality exemplified in these three projects for its inability to recognize the simultaneity and mutually provocative nature of modern literature and folk. Kittredge unwittingly fashions folk through his series of definitions and then proceeds to treat “folk poetry” as a category of literature untempered (let alone unoriginated) by modernity. Similarly,
Johnson’s hero “gloated over the immense amount of material I had to work with…material no one had yet touched,” constructing a class of songs and then ascribing to that class an aspect of cultural purity (66). Toomer thought that the “folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert.” If we understand the very concept of folk as a modernist construction, then we can deconstruct its temporality with the same warrant that we did *Cane*’s epigraph. In this vein, Brent Edwards helpfully writes:

…we need to “shift the ground from underneath a criticism erected on such contraries as orality/literacy, craft/politics, and (inaudible) music/(articulate) writing. (580)

The stale binaries comprising a set of scholarly presumptions demand to be undermined according to Edwards. Likewise in her lecture at “The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature” session of the 2004 MLA Conference, Meredith McGill argued for shifting the temporal grounds supporting a split between orality and literacy:

The often dissonant relation of the ballad form to the print formats across which it circulates suggests that we need to begin to regard the ballad not only as pre-literary but also as a para-literary form…

If the ballad and print formats can co-exist in a para-literary relationship, then it seems reasonable that literature and the untexted oral traditions of folk could co-exist and perhaps, co-generate as well. At the “Sounds in the Eighteenth-Century City” session of the same conference, Laura McGrane claimed that the vocalized oracular statements of Welsh prophetess Mother Shipton and the textual adaptations of those statements existed in a “mutually generative” relationship. When assembled, Edwards’ imperative to rethink folk temporality, McGill’s identification of co-temporaneous print and oral cultures and McGrane’s designation of these two cultures as reciprocally informative amount to a revision of the terminology and precepts guiding folk-literature scholarship. No longer is
the literary author intrinsically authoritative, the folk expression inert material without agency, or the text a stable, static pastiche. Like the “up” reading advocated by the epigraph, criticism which recognizes the simultaneity and mutual provocation of folk and literature undermines readings which tend to schematize the book in a linear fashion while accepting the authority of the speaker’s voice.

Now, while we may provisionally accept Kittredge’s definition of folk poetry as an expression which requires a multiplicity of authors, we need not agree with his conclusion that print culture has silenced all of these contestatory voices beneath the speaker’s one dominant voice. Rather, we must examine how the narratory control of Cane’s pastiche belies a non-folk process of voice selection and authorization. Cane’s reader is not privy to these politics, but is aware by virtue of the multiple voices comprising the book’s polyphony that not all entities are content with the volume of their voices. Thus, in measuring the degree of Cane’s narratory control, we should evaluate the extent to which these secondary voices intervene in the text versus the degree to which they are merely decorative chatter arranged by an autocratic narrator for the local-color enrichment of his pre-conceived narrative.

In a cautionary note, D.A. Miller warns that the mere presence of folk expression within literature is insufficient evidence to imply the existence of a multiply voiced text:

If one perspective (such as the narrator’s) includes a consciousness of others, it may need to subvert or parody them, in order to maintain its differences by an effect of transcendence. Yet if despite its difference it shares a common structure with its rivals, it may be running the risk of self-subversion or self-parody in the very attempt to undercut them. (11)

Miller is uncertain whether a text can valorize itself by presenting and subverting alternative perspectives without to some extent subverting itself. In any regard, Miller
believes that an author’s introduction of secondary and tertiary voices into his work amounts to a dangerous jeopardization of the speaker’s authority. For Toomer in *Cane*, the interspliced oral folk exclamations emerge as Trojan horses, decorative objects with the innate capacity to wrest authority from the narratory voices framing it.

II. Crumbling Pastiche? Questioning Narratory Control in “Becky”

In “Becky,” one of the character sketches in *Cane*’s southern cycle, several signifying and non-signifying voices percolate through the text appearing to disrupt narrative coherence. The tension of competing narrative voices ensues with the story’s epigraphic opening, a recursively prophetic summary which, like the epigraph’s oracle, ruptures temporality:

Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons. She’s dead; they’ve gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound. (5)

Becky’s tale illuminates the contention not merely between oral and textual expression but between competing oral voices vying for space in a texted field. Toomer suggests this competitive tension initially by associating the vocalized call to Jesus with the coniferous pines, and the Bible’s pagination of deciduous “leaves.” Though belied by their synonym, “evergreen,” the Jesus prayer pines are the same trees that go up in smoke later in “Becky” and also in “Karintha.” They are ephemeral organisms subjected constantly to the commodification of milling much in the same way Georgian folk is milled by record companies, authors, and book publishers attempting to tap a perceived organic pastorality. The Bible is unread in “Becky,” contributing to the aural landscape an
unsignifying “aimless rustle” rather than signifying words. Conversely, the personified pines actually speak, but the content of their whispering is undisclosed in the text.

“Becky” sublimates the material oppositions between print, voice, and sound into the village’s complex social and religious calculus. At the level of diegesis, “Becky” is the story of how a village copes with the embarrassment of living with an unwed white woman who has mothered two racially mixed boys. In confronting the social burden Becky presents, the Christian village struggles to negotiate their public sense of propriety with their private piety. The villagers publicly scorn Becky as the “insane white shameless wench” and the “poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman” but under the anonymity of nightfall, they indulge Becky with charitable contributions ranging from sugar and snuff to the construction of her house:

John Stone, who owned the lumber and the bricks, would have shot the man who told he gave the stuff to Lonnie Deacon, who stole out there at night and built the cabin. (6)

Which is more significant – that Stone supplied the materials for Becky’s house or that he would kill anyone who disclosed his generosity? That the villagers physically patronize Becky or that they curse her? Stone’s violent suppression of knowledge pertaining to his charity and his delegation of the construction to another man illustrate the importance of keeping Becky’s charity concealed from other villagers. The clandestine nature of the communal assistance is perhaps somewhat motivated by the villagers’ desire to impress God while adhering to the Christian imperative in regards to charity:

let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father who seeth in secret shall recompense thee. (Mathew 6.3-6.4)
Becky’s cabin, for instance, is situated in such a location as to conceal her from the community while yet exhibiting her to God as a display of individual benefactors:

Ground islandized between the road and the railroad track. Pushed up where a blue-sheen God with listless eyes could look at it. (6)

Wedged between transportation arteries, Becky is spatially marginalized, distanced from the community but at least in plain sight of God (even if He is lazy-eyed.) It follows that Becky is also socially isolated from her village. She speaks no words throughout her tale, and no one speaks directly to her. The villagers only communicate with Becky through the mediated language of commodity and consumption: men and women bring Becky supplies, and she writes her reply in the “thin wraith of smoke” curling from the cabin chimney. The only attempt to confront “Becky” with language comes from passengers who ride the “six trains a day” on the adjacent rail line in a form of communication mediated both by industrial technology and the process of textual reification:

Trainmen, and passengers who’d heard about her, threw out papers and food. Threw out little crumpled slips of paper scribbled with prayers, as they passed her eye-shaped piece of sandy ground. (5)

As elsewhere in Cane, the railroads here constitute an interstitial medium of transition, a shifting locus which transcends locality. While these passengers live in a localized auditory culture when they “hear” about Becky, they can toss written “papers” at Becky’s cabin from the anonymous comfort of a coach at speed. As in “Fern,” the train’s velocity obscures the most visibly evident aspects of identity, guaranteeing that it makes no difference if you sit in the Pullman or the Jim Crow as the train crosses her road…(5)

From the perspective of a bystander along the right-of-way, the speeding train coach makes the race and class of passengers indistinguishable. Just as the victrola eradicated
the communal identification of folk production, the train, as another form of modern technology, eradicates the potential for collective identification. In addition to this effacement of visualized identity, the passengers achieve a secondary level of anonymity by scribbling their prayers rather than vocalizing them. Where print culture typically accentuates the individual identity of an author and where oral culture conversely breeds anonymity, the act of writing a prayer in “Becky” shields an author from the social implications of his work. Visible only to Becky, these anonymous, scribbled prayers constitute one of the instances in which *Cane describes* the conditions which provoked folk rather than *simulates* the product of those conditions. *Cane* notes the existence of these paper prayers, but since the work does not seek to imitate their content with pastiche, the train prayers remain on the margins of Toomer’s textual project.

The textual margins suggested by these non-disclosed printed prayers begin to imply that the printed narrative “Becky” is not in itself an exhaustive adaptation of the story surrounding Becky. However, since the reader is reliant upon “Becky’s” speaker to compose a coherent narrative, these margins are obscured, as are the contestatory voices which vie with the speaker for a share in telling the story. Despite the whispering pines and rustling Bible leaves which seem to puncture through the lamination of narratory authority, the speaker generally maintains control over his story and the pastiche model of authorship remains intact. As a seeming example of this control, consider the narrative mastery which the speaker exerts over David Georgia, an archetypal oral storyteller embedded within “Becky”:

> Old David Georgia, grinding cane and boiling syrup, never went her way without some sugar sap. (5)
Presented with his synecdochic sugar and its symbolic figuration of folk production, David Georgia is objectified in “Becky” as a piece of stock scenery without agency in the narrative’s propulsion. Georgia is voiceless, circumscribed within another storyteller’s web.

However, to even understand David Georgia’s importance as a muted storyteller, the reader needs to resist Cane’s spatial ordering by first reading “Blood Burning Moon” (in which Georgia’s avocational identity is first established) and then returning back to “Becky.” This reader must engage in the atemporal “up” reading suggested by Cane’s epigraph in order to ascertain the significance of David Georgia in “Becky” as the muted storyteller. This non-conventional reading serves to undermine the speaker’s authority by questioning the certainty of the narrative’s order. If we read “Becky” backwards through “Blood Burning Moon,” a short story printed several pages later in Cane, then we begin loosen the speaker’s hold on the narrative’s temporal progression.

Unified narratory authority unravels further when the speaker descends into the story himself, first through a subtle slippage into first-person language (“Could we take them in?”) and than more explicitly (6):

It was Sunday. Our congregation had been visiting at Pulverton, and were coming home. There was no wind. The autumn sun, the bell from Ebenezer Church, listless and heavy. Even the pines were stale, sticky, like the smell of food that makes you sick. Before we turned the bend of the road that would show us the Becky cabin, the horses stopped stock-still, pushed back their ears, and nervously whinnied. (6)

Now playing a part in the story he is telling, the speaker is subject to the viscerally palpable terror of approaching Becky’s cabin. The aural landscape which once featured only “rustles” and “whispers” has erupted into a confusion of church bells and horse whinnies as the speaker and Barlo (not yet coronated by the wartime cotton boom) return
home to their village. In his state of fear, the speaker synesthetically conflates nauseating food with the “stale, sticky” pines and reduces Becky’s home to the slang phrase, “Becky cabin.” The first-person narration is further destabilized when its speaker remarks that “Eyes left their sockets for the cabin. Ears burned and throbbed.” Detached from his eyes, the speaker is now divorced from his ocular capacity while meanwhile, anxiety has inflamed and hindered his auditory perception as well. He is without eyes and ears while apprehensively anticipating the collapse of the cabin, and figuratively, the dissolution of his narratory uncertainty. When the cabin does collapse, the destruction signifies the sealing off of Becky as an epicenter of folk rumor:

Through the dust we saw the bricks in a mound upon the floor. Becky, if she was there, lay under them. I thought I heard a groan. (7)

It no longer seems to matter if Becky was at the site of the cabin or had perished elsewhere. The mention of a groan is marginalized by the subordination of the utterance under two passive clauses – the speaker brackets the ineffable within language by mentioning that at one point he thought that at another point he had heard a groan. When the speaker appears at his least certain and the pastiche most likely to crumble, Barlo responds symbolically with an act that punctuates the folkloric flux generated by Becky’s life:

Barlo, mumbling something, threw his Bible on the pile. (No one has ever touched it.) (7)

Although Barlo is stifled vocally into “mumbling something,” his act of tossing of the Bible (significant as the first and greatest text) preempts and suppresses oral speculation into the life of Becky, “the white woman who had two Negro sons.” The certainty of Becky’s death is the subjugation of one particular oral folk culture under a literary text,
and the Bible’s literal position above Becky’s body serves as a sign of this subjugation.

The villagers will no longer pray to pines or pray for the pines to pray to Jesus, but rather to the Bible, one example of what the whispering pines have been milled into (another example is the book Cane). Though Barlo’s silent gesture transcends time (“no one has touched it since”), the speaker makes his own resolutions for temporal inquiry into Becky’s life through his own rearticulation of the events and his framing of this retelling:

The last thing that I remember was whipping old Dan like fury; I remember nothing after that – that is, until I reached town and folks crowded round to get the true word of it. (7)

“Becky” at this point confidently alludes to itself as the “true word of it,” though the speaker’s repetitive evocation of remembering suggests that Cane’s readers should not accept the text as perfectly true. This text after all relies upon the memory of a character socially embedded in the narrative, an oral partisan conveying his own theorization of Becky. The constant percolation of signifying voices and unsignifying sounds suggests that while the speaker has successfully narrativised the drama of Becky, he cannot present an absolutely authoritative adaptation of the story. Like Becky’s haunting presence, contestatory voices remain indelibly in the text. While it may seem that the double pastiche authorial model remains unbroken, and that “Becky” has enacted a mode of literary authorship consistent with that described by Kittredge, Johnson’s protagonist, and Toomer himself, the pressures exerted by these voices and sounds anticipates the further destabilization and eventual decomposition of a monological narratory voice.

III. Carma’s Moving Womb, Melodrama, and the Disintegration of Narratory Authority
Now progressing from “Becky” to “Carma,” while continuing to heed the epigraphic imperative to read against the text, we can examine a story for which the pastiche authorial model is confronted by contestatory voices which are internal and external to the speaker’s body. In Cane’s southern cycle, “Carma” differs from the other narratives and poems through its interpolation of an extended atemporal, non-narratological description in the midst of an otherwise continuous story. The third of Toomer’s five titularly eponymous southern cycle character sketches, “Carma” has four components. The first component is a rhymed quatrain that approximately repeats three times in the story:

Wind is in the cane. Come along.
Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk,
Scratching choruses above the guinea’s squawk,
Wind is in the cane. Come along. (10)

The speaker’s prosopopoeic invitation to “come along” emerges from a phonic landscape in which the oracular cane field approximates speech by the brushing contact of windblown stalks (cane stalks in the first and third quatrain, and corn stalks in the second.) Again, like the pine “whispers” and Bible “rustles” in “Becky,” the personified “talking” cane stalks suggest a sublimation of voices oppositional to the speaker. This choric (and of course oracular) cane divides “Carma” into its remaining three constituent parts. The second component, following the quatrain, introduces the character Carma as the woman “in overalls, and strong as any man.” The third component of “Carma,” is a parenthetical gushing of imagery that resists simple classification within the narrative:

(The sun is hammered to a band of gold. Pine-needles, like mazda, are brilliantly aglow. No rain has come to take the rustle from the falling sweet-gum leaves. Over in the forest, across the swamp, a sawmill blows its closing whistle. Smoke curls up. Marvelous web spun by the spider sawdust pile. Curls up and
spreads itself pine-high above the branch, a single silver band along the eastern valley. A black boy . . . you are the most sleepiest man I ever seed, Sleeping Beauty . . . cradled on a gray mule, guided by the hollow sound of cowbells, heads for them through a rusty cotton field. From down the railroad track, the chug-chug of a gas engine announces that the repair gang is coming home. A girl in the yard of a whitewashed shack not much larger than the stack of worn ties piled before it, sings. Her voice is loud. Echoes, like rain, sweep the valley. Dusk takes the polish from the rails. Lights twinkle in scattered houses. From far away, a sad strong song. Pungent and composite, the smell of farmyards is the fragrance of the woman. She does not sing; her body is a song. She is in the forest, dancing. Torches flare . . . juju men, greegree, witch-doctors . . . torches go out . . . The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa.

Night.
Foxie, the bitch, slicks back her ears and barks at the rising moon.) (10)

In this passage, *Cane* does not imitate songs with an adopted folk tongue, but rather describes the conditions which prefigure folk with its own modern vocabulary. Densely layered with indeterminate images and “composite” auralities, this passage shifts from the temporal conditions of “Carma’s” narrative to describe the village landscape comprising the story’s backdrop. In this paradigmatic portrayal of the transition from day to night, “Carma” elaborates dusk as a co-temporal phenomenon, or a liminal progression which happens in the midst of other things. From the sun setting as a “band of gold” to the dog barking at a “rising moon,” the passage distills an impression of a dusk period which has been so richly generative of folk throughout *Cane*’s southern cycle. Dusk interstitially inhabits the space between the professional work day and the domesticated night – the railroad “repair gang is coming home” just as the “women had started their supper-getting songs” (Toomer 10, 24). When the sun is “too indolent to hold / a lengthened tournament for flashing gold,” there evolves “a feast of moon and men and barking hounds, / An orgy for some genius of the South” (13). As folk inhabits a liminal
space between text and voice, so does its metonymical time of day fall at the crevice of
day and night.

Germane to the question of contestatory narrative voices in “Carma” are the
typographical and grammatical properties which characterize this parenthetical text and
its relationship to the remainder of the story. Grammatically, the parentheses suggest the
subjugation of the enclosed content below that of the remaining narrative so that dusk
occurs in the me meantime of Carma’s story – the text employs a series of gerunds to express
that “the sawmill blows its closing whistle” as “the repair gang is coming home” until
finally, “A girl in the yard of a whitewashed shack not much larger than the stack of worn
ties piled before it, sings.” In addition to their temporal framing of the passage, the
parentheses formally embed and conceal the dusk moment within the text. This portrayal
is buried at the epicenter of “Carma,” but at the same time is partitioned by an
impermeable, parenthetic membrane determining that the narrative and non-narrative
descriptions do not contaminate one another. Additionally, when concatenated - ( ) - the
parentheses begin to resemble the folds of the womb, an anatomical term further
suggested by the passage’s grammatical content.

Through its syntax and imagery, the parenthetical passage exhibits further
generative, womb-like properties. Particularly, the diction employed in the dusk portrayal
exhibits a tendency toward reifying the descriptive elements within. For instance, the
passage relays that “No rain has come to take the rustle from the falling sweet-gum
leaves.” A prose translation of this line would read, “No rain has come to make the
falling sweet-gum leaves stop rustling,” or “No rain has come to make the falling sweet-
gum leaves damp.” By nominalizing “rustle,” the womb passage converts motion into a
discrete, tangible entity. Similarly, the cowbells which lure the gray mule do not ring but have a “hollow sound.” Later on, “Dusk takes the polish off the rails,” wherein “polish” reifies the shining state of the rails prior to sunset. The text will later unequivocally assert that “She does not sing; her body is a song.” As the biological womb converts the seminal intentions of sexual intercourse into a gestated body, so too does “Carma’s” textual womb transform the active conditions which generate folk (droughts, milling, railroad construction, and carnival are each implied) into a series of reified images.

In addition to its typographical resemblance to and thematic evocation of the womb, the parenthetical dusk passage actually exhibits signs of physical conception: “The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa.” Recalling the alterable and non-linear temporality suggested by the epigraph’s spatial ordering, the progression from the Dixie Pike and its folkloric evocation of the antebellum south to its predecessor in the African “goat path” draws readers back along a trans-Atlantic umbilical chord to a continentalized aural origin. Figuratively, the Dixie Pike and the goat path are linear offshoots of the graspable root of the epigraph, the root of an oracular entity which interpolates the future within the present by prophesy. Just as the epigraph instructs readers to find the root in the syrup, or the origin from the product, the preconditions for folk are realized through the product text.

The remainder of “Carma” fixes on the womb as a locus of heterogeneous textuality, and by extension, narratory uncertainty: while within these parentheses the speaker culls auditory sounds, voices, and songs, he does not incorporate them into a cohesive, grammatically intelligible whole. As in the latter stages of “Becky,” the pastiche model comes into question when it is impossible to determine the agency of the
speaker over what is spoken. This destabilization of narratory authority follows from the
womb in the remainder of the story, a dramatic narrative which the speaker recursively
alludes to as “the crudest melodrama” (11). This seemingly self-effacing remark suggests
that the ensuing story will follow an archetypal course. Melodrama is

[a] dramatic form which pits an undivided protagonist against
external adversity, and resolves the conflict with an extreme
solution designed to produce an overwhelmingly monopathic
catharsis, may seem naïve, trivial and second-rate, especially when
compared with the rich complexities and broader moral dimensions
of tragedy. (Smith 10)

Derived from the Greek word melos, meaning music, a melodrama integrates song into a
dramatic context to convey stories of excessively heightened emotionality, moral
certainty, and clear resolution. While the term’s etymological suggestion of musical
drama suggests that Cane, with its pastiche of oral, textual, and musical elements, may
qualify as melodrama, the text’s moral indeterminacy troubles such rote classification. By
evoking melodrama, the speaker attempts to separate the melodramatic contents of
Carma’s story from his rendition or performance, and presents an attitude of confident
detachment.

As in “Becky,” the oral exchanges comprising village chatter reveal the
narrative’s “consciousness of others,” which enacts, hastens, and annotates the nature of
the plot conflict in “Carma” (Miller 110). The gossip of “week-old boasts and rumors”
confronts and stifles Carma with the public revelation of her infidelity. Now the woman
who was “strong as any man” finds herself enervated: “Words, like corkscrews, wormed
her strength. It fizzled out. Carma’s husband cannot see that she was becoming
hysterical.” “Hysteria” here describes the psychological condition instigating Carma’s
inarticulateness in the face of an oralized past, her recognition of her own inability to
narrativize herself, and her subsequent reliance upon the body to extirpate herself from a rhetorical crisis. Carma’s oral ineffability reflects Claire Kahane’s conception of the hysteric as a figure opposite of the feminist orator:

The feminist and the hysteric presented mirror images of woman’s relation to the public voice: the feminist an active subject position and the power of the voice; the hysteric passively acted out through her body what her voice could not speak. (7)

Extended from its etymology (hystera being the Greek word for “womb”), hysteria draws its connotations from this opposition of the feminist speaker and ineffable unstable, non-vocal woman, and from Plato’s conclusion in the *Timaeus* that a hysterical woman anatomically possesses a “womb which wanders.” The moving womb destabilizes orality as an authorized mode of conveyance. When Carma’s speech fails, she throws herself in the cane break, or, recalling the epigraphic juxtaposition of cane and *Cane*, and the reader’s inability to separate these two entities, she buries her meaning and originary womb inaccessibly in *Cane*’s text. Here, the suppressed orality of a physiological condition sublimates into an increasingly destabilized textuality (Kahane 10).

Carma’s husband and the rest of the search crew fail to realize the intractability of the lost womb and assume the aspect of clumsy readers. They know not what to search for or how to find it. Presuming that he is undertaking a body recovery, Carma’s husband …wasted half an hour gathering the neighbor men. They met in the road where lamp-light showed tracks dissolving in the loose earth about the cane. The search began. Moths flickered the lamps. They put them out. Really, because she still might be live enough to shoot. Time and space have no meaning in a canefield. No more than the interminable stalks … Some one stumbled over her. (13)

When the search crew’s linear readers follow the “tracks dissolving” amongst the “interminable stalks” and find Carma by accident, they discover not a corpse but a
woman playing dead. This playing is both the “extreme solution demanded by melodrama” and an enactment of imitation, or pastiche in itself. Carma’s concealment of meaning in the cane field is also the concealment of her womb in *Cane*’s textual field. The pastiche text enwraps Carma’s pastiche body and, consequently, Carma’s hysteria becomes “Carma’s” moving womb. At this point, the speaker who had possessed such a confident hold on his narrative has degenerated into rhetorical stumbling. Carma’s melodrama began with confident, short declarative sentences and occasional sentence fragments that nevertheless sustain grammatical coherence:

> Carma’s tale is the crudest melodrama. Her husband’s in the gang. And its her fault he got there. Working with a contractor, he was away most of the time. She others. No one blames her for that. (13)

but the narrative ends in grammatical and thematic disarray:

> Twice deceived, and one deception proved the other. His head went off. Slashed one of the men who’d helped, the man who’d stumbled over her. Now he’s in the gang. Who was her husband. Should she not take others, this Carma, strong as a man, whose tale as I have told it is the crudest melodrama? (13)

The speaker’s syntactical grasp weakens when phrases like “His head went off” provide no certain referents. The unexpected end-stopping between the fourth and fifth sentences particularly illuminates this loss of control. “Now he’s in the gang. Who was her husband.” Here the signified husband is named almost as a stopgap solution to the identity of the man consigned to the gang. The speaker has degenerated from factually rehearsing an oration of melodrama into a state of authorial hysterics. As with the speaker in “Becky,” whose mention of characteriological remembering undermines the certainty of his own narratory memory, “Carma’s” speaker implicitly questions himself by calling on the reader to corroborate his earlier assertion. But unlike “Becky’s” self-understanding
as the “true word of it,” “Carma’s” speaker recognizes his story merely as the way the “I have told it,” and concludes the narrative frantically by requesting the reader’s affirmation of a question.

With a hysterical speaker self-consciously registering his inability to tell the story of a melodramatic woman, the separation between authorial subject and oral object blurs – Becky’s hysteria has become the speaker’s hysteria and conversely, “Carma’s” moving womb undermines that speaker’s textual authority. Like its eponymous subject, “Carma” becomes infected with hysteria in the face of worming aurality, and the wandering womb now connotes the failure of pastiche to serve as an appropriate model for the authorial appropriation of folk within this narrative. Under the pressures provoked by the oral “week-old boasts and rumors,” a definitive relationship between oral folk and speaker disintegrates in this melodramatic moment of the text, lost in the book’s interminable stalks.

Works Cited and Consulted


