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Race and National Identity in Modernist Anthropology and Jean Toomer's "The Blue Meridian"

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ABSTRACT: Jean Toomer's seldom-discussed long poem "The Blue Meridian," which he drafted over a long period beginning in the early 1920s, proposes an amalgamation of race and national belonging in the new type of the "American." Seeing himself as a precursor to this new hybrid, Toomer often polemicized against the limiting logic of race. In proposing such an understanding of race in relation to nation, Toomer drew on the work of anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Melville J. Herskovits.

In a 1934 essay he provisionally titled “On Being an American,” Jean Toomer outlines his “vision of America”—that is, of the emergence of a newly hybridized racial type of which he saw himself as indicative (“Cane Years” 121). Toomer drafted the essay to clarify his own racial identity for a public that, he felt, routinely misrecognized him as an African American as it succumbed to the entrenched Manichean logic of black and white. Having witnessed the “divisions, separatisms and antagonisms” punctuating the American scene, Toomer could report that his countrypeople “were conscious of being anything but Americans” (121; italics in the original). In addressing what he saw as a deficiency in national sentiment, Toomer proposes to resolve the divisions he witnesses by recasting national belonging in utopian terms, imagining a dissolution of class, regional, ethnic, and—above all—racial antagonisms in positing a newly hybridized racial identity, the American—with himself as its prototype.

Toomer’s oft-made claim to being “the first American,” a representative of a newly emerging racial group, was first articulated in a poem of that title that he initially drafted around 1922, which later became the long poem “The Blue Meridian.” His claim rested on his own mixed ancestry, the “seven blood mixtures” he referred to in a letter written around the same time to the editors of the Liberator: “French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian” (“To the Editors” 155). Nearly ten years later, in a short note written just before his 1931 marriage to Margery Latimer, an event that created a national sensation for its brazen violation of the miscegenation taboo, Toomer was even more emphatic:

There is a new race in America. I am a member of this new race. It is neither white nor black nor in-between. It is the American race, differing as much from white and black as white and black differ from each other. It is possible that there

are Negro and Indian bloods in my descent along with English, Spanish, Welsh, Scotch, French, Dutch, and German. This is common in America; and it is from all these strains that the American race is being born. (“New Race” 105)

Toomer’s lists of ethnicities differ slightly from one account to the next, but the effect is the same: in naming himself as one of the first conscious members of a new racial group, Toomer celebrates the unifying tendencies he finds inherent in American cultural belonging.

Toomer’s self-identification as an avatar of an emerging American race involved an obstreperous disavowal of his African American identity that came, increasingly after 1923, to define his public persona, as American became his primary category of identity and he found himself at odds with the literary establishment, black and white. Evidence of this disavowal and its effects are abundant in Toomer’s letters and essays. In a 1923 letter to his publisher Horace Liveright, who had intended to market Cane as the work of a young black writer, he writes, “My racial composition and my position in the world are realities which I alone may determine” (“To Horace Liveright” 170). For similar reasons, the foreword his onetime friend and mentor Waldo Frank provided for the 1923 edition of Cane met with Toomer’s consternation and eventually contributed to their falling out. Toomer was likewise reluctant to allow materials from Cane to be excerpted in anthologies of black writing, most notably Alain Locke’s New Negro anthology and James Weldon Johnson’s 1931 Book of American Negro Poetry.

In the long poem that eventually appeared as “The Blue Meridian,” as I will argue in what follows, Toomer’s views on race, nation, and culture come to constitute a de facto marriage of the pluralist cultural nationalism of his onetime mentor Frank and the “young American” critics on the one hand, and the forecast of biological and cultural amalgamation running through

the work of the period's anthropologists on the other. "The Blue Meridian" was initially envisioned in the 1920s, amid intense debates concerning race and nation, yet the poem in its final form is very much a product of the 1930s, when such debates took on an added urgency within the Depression's profound crisis in machine-age modernity, democratic values, and national identity. The poem was thus the product of a long period during which Toomer's ideas on the topic continued to mature. Clearly Toomer's most ambitious work outside of Cane, the poem existed in prototype among his earliest writings and was written when he was also in the process of envisioning Cane. In his account of this period, Toomer reports that he read much on "race and the race problem in America" but found little satisfaction in the ideas he encountered ("Cane Years" 120). It was then that Toomer "wrote a poem called 'The First American,' the idea of which was, that here in America we are in process of forming a new race, that I was one of the first conscious members of this race" (120). Frank evidently read the poem in one of its earliest incarnations; he refers to it in a letter dated April 25, 1922, as "mere statement, not fleshed not living" ("Waldo Frank" 148). Yet Toomer continued to "flesh out" his epic of racial hybridity in the service of an idealized spiritual America over the following decade and a half. While there is evidently no extant draft copy of "The First American," a version of the poem consisting of its first 125 lines was published as "Brown River, Smile" in the journal Pagany in 1932. Subsequent versions appeared in Alfred Kreyborg, Lewis Mumford, and Paul Rosenfeld's New Caravan anthology in 1936, and in the revised edition of Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps's The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1970, in 1970, three years after Toomer's death. The poem thus underwent several successive rounds of revision and reenvisioning, and in its final form it is undoubtedly Toomer's most fully articulated literary expression of his pan-racial ideal.

The poem's strange blend of the progressive and the retrograde in its meditations concerning race and nation continues to exert a fascination among readers. Critics have identified its roots in a range of sources including Walt Whitman's celebration of democratic ideals, the liberal cultural nationalism of Frank and the Seven Arts circle, and the mysticism of George Gurdjieff, which was clearly a strong influence on Toomer's life and writing from the mid-1920s on.¹ More recently, Stephanie L. Hawkins and Lara Vetter have explored the influence of theories of evolution on Toomer's vexed treatment of race. Hawkins focuses on the influence of biological theories of evolution in the wake of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer on Toomer's blend of science and mysticism in the poem's "advocacy of deliberate racial blending . . . as a means to transcend the boundaries of race ideology and fulfill evolutionary progress toward human perfection" (150). Vetter, on the other hand, claims that

theories of psychic and spiritual evolution, including those of Gurdjieff and Gerald Heard, inform the ways in which Toomer thought about the role of the physical body, the extent to which he had control over that body, and his negotiation of the existence of free will within a framework of universalist subjectivity. (146–47)

As such critical insights suggest, "The Blue Meridian" constitutes a key to Toomer's intellectual development within the cultural climate of the United States between the World Wars, even if it remains a decidedly minor supplement to the major work of Cane.

My object here is not to claim that "The Blue Meridian" deserves to be placed on an equal footing with Toomer's acknowledged masterpiece; admittedly, the former lacks the

polyvocalic nuance and vernacular-based formal innovation associated with the latter. Rather, I am interested in examining claims Toomer makes in the poem and elsewhere concerning the emergence of the “American” as a new racial category. While such claims tend to strike current critical sensibilities as hopelessly utopian or simply naïve, they also connect Toomer’s writings to the work of modernist anthropologists including Franz Boas and Melville J. Herskovits, who predicted a gradual but steady biological and cultural fusion of peoples toward a new type, the “American.” Revisiting such predictions from the standpoint of the present can, in turn, help us to understand the extent to which contestations over the status of race-as-biological-fact versus race-as-cultural-construct played a crucial role in shaping American ideas on race at a formative point in their development. Toomer’s effort to recode national identity as racial identity took place against the backdrop of a steady transformation of the meanings of race and nation, and the unstable linkages uniting these terms. Destabilized and rearticulated through discourses including post–World War I nativism and vying nationalisms, eugenics and scientific racism, and the emerging fusion of biological and social science in anthropology, the stakes of racial identity grew ever more pitched during the period when Toomer wrote and reworked the poem. Admittedly, his cultural nationalism very often capitulates to a mysticism that increasingly put him at odds with progressive cultural agendas as 1920s liberalism gave way to 1930s literary leftism, while his ultimately biological definition of race fails to escape the essentialism he condemned. Yet Toomer’s vision of an “American race” so capacious it would encompass more or less everyone, and would thus nullify the distinctions upon which the racial partitioning of the modern nation rested, appears less idiosyncratic when placed within the context of modernist anthropology, which lent confirmation to Toomer’s views concerning the gradual yet steady effacement of race as a biologically determined category.

Race and/or Nation

As Toomer was well aware, the idea of racial hybridity occupies an uncertain status in American literary and cultural history, which has very often fallen into a Manichean, “either-or” logic. In his detailed study of what he calls the “calculus of color,” Werner Sollors has noted a “tendency toward racial dualism” in attitudes toward race in the United States in particular, observing that “the most dramatic and only truly significant opposition has remained (or become) that between ‘white’ and ‘non-white’” (124). In the historical sources Sollors surveys at length in his account, racial prejudice in the United States is revealed to be thoroughly bound up with an “aversion to hybridity” that often took the form of denunciations of mulattism and led in turn to anxieties over the imagined future hybridity of the nation (qtd. in 131; emphasis in original). This dualistic logic concerning race and the fear of miscegenation to which it led were met, from the latter half of the nineteenth century on, with the claims of a vocal minority who insisted that racial mixing would lead to the forming of a newly hybridized type combining the best characteristics of white and nonwhite. This progressive argument, though no less essentialist than its reactionary counterpart, formed the basis of the cultural pluralism Walter Benn Michaels characterizes as “nativist modernism,” in which an insistence on the nation as a primary point of identification in the 1920s gave rise to racist and xenophobic efforts to shore up the whiteness of the nation on the one hand, and cultural pluralism’s celebration of national diversity on the other (2). What Michaels claims these competing discourses have in common, however, is their recoding of American national identity as a form of racial identity, in which, paradoxically, pluralism’s “valorization of difference” involves “at least a theoretical intensification of the commitment to race” (137). This insistence upon race as a conceptual framework for understanding human populations thus persists, even within the period’s most vocal disavowals of racism.

Toomer's writings, and "The Blue Meridian" in particular, bring into focus many of the relevant discourses surrounding race, nation, and culture in the period Michaels identifies with "nativist modernism," when race remained an intractable problem—a condition suggested by W. E. B. DuBois's prophetic statement in the opening pages of The Souls of Black Folk (1903) that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (13). In effect equating racial anxiety with modernity, DuBois bequeathed the twentieth century a Gordian knot whose untangling would prove to be one of its most persistent preoccupations. Following World War I, in which African Americans had fought in segregated units, the racial question became a national question as black soldiers and workers who had aided in the war effort came to expect the measure of social and political inclusion they had been promised at the close of the Civil War yet had been routinely and categorically denied, especially since the 1896 Plessy decision's confirmation of segregation as constitutionally viable. Meanwhile, working-class whites, emboldened by wartime nationalism and seeing their position as threatened in a changing social order, responded with violence, culminating in the riots of what James Weldon Johnson dubbed the "Red Summer" of 1919 and its long aftermath, when both nativism and racism flourished in various guises. In the 1920s, amid steady numbers of lynchings and the national reorganization of the Ku Klux Klan, African Americans attained a new cultural visibility with the emergence of the Harlem (or New Negro) Renaissance's promotion of black artists, writers, and intellectuals—a movement for which Toomer's Cane became a sort of founding text—and a proliferation of new forms of popular culture featuring black entertainers. Yet despite this token inclusivity, and despite a mass population shift from the rural South to the cities of the North and West described as the "Great Migration," poverty remained endemic

among the nation's African American population, a situation that was only worsened by the onset of the Great Depression, as de jure segregation, disenfranchisement, and racial violence remained the norms until well into the twentieth century—and beyond.

Supporting the period's racist assumptions and implicitly condoning the violence to which they led was a surge of popular titles written in a pseudoscientific vein supporting the theory of a hierarchy of the races. An early exemplar of this genre, Madison Grant's Passing of the Great Race (1916), took the form of a screed against interbreeding. Grant was clear about his position: "When it becomes thoroughly understood that the children of mixed marriages between contrasted races belong to the lower type," he wrote, "the importance of transmitting in unimpaired purity the blood inheritance of ages will be appreciated at its full value and to bring half-breeds into the world will be regarded as a social and racial crime of the first magnitude." Grant added, as if his polemic weren't clear enough, "The laws against miscegenation must be greatly extended if the higher races are to be maintained" (60). Grant's text was highly indicative of the period's overlap between white supremacy and national chauvinism, becoming a kind of polar opposite of the kind of racial admixture in the name of national hybridity that Toomer imagined, and that the period's anthropologists suggested was already coming about. Other texts including Lothrop Stoddard's Rising Tides of Color against White World Supremacy (1920) and The Revolt against Civilization (1923), Charles Conant Josey's The Race and National Solidarity (1923), and Earnest Cox's White America (also 1923) echoed Grant's position, linking the threat of national decline with a weakening of the barriers separating the races. These titles are indicative of the period when, according to Michaels, "intermingling—the fact of miscegenation—will be treated not as the fusion of two races but as the destruction of one by the other," a steady contamination of the "higher" racial stock by the "lower" (61).

Fears of racial intermingling were by no means limited to the fringes of society. Such anxieties crept into the nationalist discourse of demographics and led, in 1920, to the striking from the national census of the category “mulatto,” an identification that would most nearly have captured Toomer’s own status. It was also a period that witnessed an aggressive attempt to racialize national belonging through the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, a piece of legislation that, as immigration scholar Mae Ngai suggests, “comprised a constellation of reconstructed racial categories, in which race and nationality—concepts that had been loosely conflated since the nineteenth century—disaggregated and realigned in new and uneven ways” (69). The United States emerged from World War I as the global standard bearer of modernity, a nation whose immense cities and technological capabilities were the envy of a war-ravaged Europe. Yet as a settler nation with a history of slavery, racial segregation, and internal colonization, the United States found itself beleaguered with a national identity crisis that very often turned to racial categories in its efforts to answer the open question of who could be considered “American.”

It is precisely this question of national identity in a racialized context that preoccupies Toomer’s speaker in “The Blue Meridian.” “It is a new America, / To be spiritualized by each new American[,]” the poem begins (lines 1–2). The poem clearly owes much to Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, particularly with its idea of the individual as a microcosm of the nation, through which the particularity of embodied consciousness reaches out toward the universality of the cosmos. Yet from its outset, the poem deliberately decenters the expectation it sets up that the Whitmanian individual will “embody” the nation by invoking the spiritual where one would expect the physical, an evident instantiation of Toomer’s Gurdjieffian mysticism. At times, the poem sounds imitative of Whitman’s epic voice, as in the lines

Men of the East, men of the West,
Men in life, men in death,
Americans and all countrymen—
Growth is by admixture from less to more,
Preserving the great granary intact,
Through cycles of death and life,
Each stage a pod,
Perpetuating and perfecting
An essence identical in all,
...
So lift, lift, thou waking forces! (lines 47–55, 60)

Here the poem echoes Whitman's call to "the Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth" in his 1855 preface to Leaves, suggesting that the idea of being "American" has less to do with citizenship narrowly construed than with broader affinities and psychic or spiritual states (5). In Whitmanesque terms, the poem's inclusive "we" becomes a "moving whole" comprised of "priest, clown, scientist, technician, / Artist, rascal, worker, lazybones," a list that becomes a shorthand for inclusivity as it combines sacred and secular, manual and intellectual forms of labor, the productive and the profligate, and importantly assigns the artist a central role (Toomer, "Blue Meridian" lines 46, 34–35). Toomer's poem figures its own idea of nation along the lines of a granary of seeds, each of which is a part of a larger whole whose growth is implicit in its essence. In an exuberant image that resonates with modernist invocations of growth such as T. S.

Eliot's Waste Land and especially William Carlos Williams's Spring and All, the poem invokes the "waking forces" whose task is to "lift" themselves through growth. The image of lifting resonates throughout the poem, where—coupled with the poem's many images of race and nation—it connotes the process of racial uplift as much as the idea of natural abundance. In the "new America" the poem projects, a utopian spiritual unity appears as an accomplished fact as "No clever dealer can divide, / No machine or scheme can undermine thee" (lines 183–84). Thus freed from the divisions of the present, which are as much technological as racial (as I will show below), the idealized nation emerges as an undivided whole.

In its diagnosis of present social ills, the poem assigns blame to past divisions with the following:

. . . out of our past comes hell,
Rushing us, sweeping us,
Winding us, blinding us,
Mistakes and hates,
Habits, blights, and greeds,
Out of our past they come
And they are hell. (lines 208–14)

As the first line of the stanza becomes rephrased in its last two lines, the emphasis placed on the "hell" that is the legacy of the past becomes unmistakable. The succession of participles—"rushing," "sweeping," "winding," "blinding"—suggests a sense of inevitability as past becomes present. The poem's effort to supersede what its cosmology views as facile divisions takes aim

not only at racial categories but at all forms of identification based on exclusion. One stanza reads in full,

Unlock the races, Open this pod by outgrowing it,
Free men from this prison and this shrinkage,
Not from the reality itself
But from our prejudices and preferences
And the enslaving behavior caused by them,
Eliminate these—
I am, we are, simply of the human race. (lines 483–89)

This stanza is indicative of Toomer's own attitude in its effort to save the concept of race from the "prejudices and preferences" of racist assumptions by positing a single, unified "human race." The poem is likewise dismissive of other forms of divisive identification: "Uncase the nations / . . . We are of the human nation"; "Uncase the regions / . . . We are of Earth"; "Free the sexes / . . . we are male and female"; "Unlock the classes, / . . . I am, we are, simply of the human class"; "Expand the fields, the specializations, / . . . I am of the field of being, / We are beings"; and finally, "Open the religions, the exclusive creeds / . . . There is a Root Religion / And we are of it . . ." (lines 490–513). In figuring such identifications as "pods" to be outgrown just as a plant bursts forth from its seed, the poem interweaves an image taken from nature to posit an inevitable growth toward a utopian spiritual unity.

In keeping with the unifying spirit of the poem, the trope of race rarely appears as such. Significantly, though, in a stanza redolent with associations with Toomer's own fraught sense of

racial identity, Toomer's first-person speaker initially interrupts the impersonal voice of the poem to simultaneously identify and disidentify himself with the "great African races": "I'm leaving the shining ground, brothers, / I sing because I ache, / I go because I must," lines from this section read, indicating at once the speaker's sense of connection to a racialized past and his need to supersede it (lines 106, 110–12).

Modernism and Racial Hybridity

Early in the 1920s, Toomer gained exposure, largely through Waldo Frank, to the "Young American" critics associated with the journal The Seven Arts, who collectively espoused the ideal of a "beloved community" in which civic republicanism forged a homegrown democratic culture capable of resisting the depredations of industrial capitalism. Such thinking was salutary to the young Toomer, as it enabled him to imagine a way out of the double bind of racial and national identity.² Envisioning a newly integrated American racial type along the lines of what his sometime mentor Frank had imagined as a cosmic whole enabled Toomer to escape the problems of both race and modernity. (This project would ultimately put him at odds with Frank, who continued to insist on race as a primary category of identification.) Toomer utilizes the rhetorical capabilities of modern poetry to rehearse these claims concerning the problems of race in modern industrial society, and to project their imagined resolution in an emerging racial-national type. If the work of Frank and other Young American intellectuals gave him a platform from which to address the problems of industrial modernity through identifying, in his work, with a cultural nationalism rooted in organic community, Toomer took this vision further as he extended it to all of humanity.

While Toomer drew heavily on the work of Frank and other Young American cultural critics, an equally important—though less often noted—influence on Toomer’s views on race came via modernist anthropology, especially the ideas of figures such as Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, Edward Sapir, and Melville J. Herskovits, a group of social scientists associated with an ethnographic paradigm that aimed to expose the cultural fragmentation and racial hierarchies it viewed as products of capitalistic modernity. Boas in particular was instrumental in the intellectual attack on white supremacy in his indefatigable advocacy on behalf of an anti-essentialist view of race and his critiques of contemporary American culture. Crucially, as Susan Hegeman argues, Boas worked to fully discredit the notion of racial hierarchy associated with figures such as Madison Grant as he consistently advocated for a non-essentialist notion of race and claimed instead that “there is no necessary relationship between the ‘race,’ the language, and the culture of a people. Boas insisted that these were distinct features of a given people’s existence which converged accidentally through the historical contingencies of migration, contact, and conquest” (Hegeman 49). In an essay titled “The Real Race Problem” published in the second issue of DuBois’s journal The Crisis in 1910, Boas articulated what would become his platform regarding race as he refuted biological evidence of black as well as mulatto inferiority, and predicted that “the relative number of pure Negroes will become less and less in our country. The gradual process of elimination of the full-blooded Negro may be retarded by legislation, but it cannot possibly be avoided,” and forecast a gradual biological and cultural assimilation of black toward white (25).³

A decade later, in a period roughly contemporary with the Harlem Renaissance, Herskovits, a student of Boas at Columbia, conducted extensive anthropometric research at Howard University and at Harlem public schools with the help of a group of assistants that

included Zora Neale Hurston. Based in the empiricist assumptions of the time, this research was intended, in Boasian fashion, to undermine the ideology of white supremacy, yet the traits Herskovits and his assistants measured—nostril width, height (standing and sitting), lip thickness, and, above all, skin color—were those traditionally associated with assumptions concerning racial difference. In his published account of his findings, the 1928 book The American Negro: A Study in Racial Crossing, which Toomer apparently read, Herskovits argued that the “American Negro” was a new racial type with its own physical characteristics. “For the past two or three years we have been hearing about the ‘New Negro,’” Herskovits writes,

and we have come to associate the phrase with the literary and artistic naissance taking place among a group of young Negroes in this country. The movement has been of no little social significance, for it means that the American negroes—or, in any event, a small group of them—are claiming a portion of their heritage as Americans, and are identifying themselves more and more closely with the culture of this country which is theirs by birth. (18; emphasis added)

Importantly, for Herskovits, as an observer of the Harlem Renaissance, this blending of cultural influences in the modern metropolis meant not that African Americans were developing a separate culture of their own with roots in a pan-African past, as many commentators believed, but that they were effectively becoming more American in claiming their own birthright as an integral group within the modern United States, a claim that effectively goes beyond Boas’s earlier idea that African Americans were becoming more white. For Herskovits, the cultural efflorescence of the “New Negro” was occurring simultaneously with the discovery he reports

that African Americans “are forming a definite physical type which may be called the American Negro. It is not like any type from which it has come; it is not White; it is not Negro; it is not Mongoloid,” Herskovits declares, listing what he took to be the three major “types” of the human population, represented on the North American continent by ethnic groups derived from European, African, and Indigenous American contexts. “It is all of them, and none of them” (19). Paralleling the cultural hybridization occurring in Harlem, Herskovits’s major contribution was, as he saw it, the identification of what he understood to be a new race coming into existence through a gradual amalgamation of “highly mixed stock” (19). In an essay titled “The Negro’s Americanism” included in Alain Locke’s landmark 1925 New Negro anthology and written during the period when he was conducting research for his book, Herskovits makes a case for the “Americanness” of Harlem and its African American inhabitants. “In Harlem we have to-day, essentially, a typical American community,” Herskovits writes. “You may look at the Negroes on the street. As to dress and deportment, do you find any vast difference between them and the whites among whom they carry on their lives?” he asks rhetorically (354). Giving the lie to exoticizing tendencies that saw African American culture as perpetuating aspects of its African heritage, Herskovits viewed African American culture, like its practitioners, as a hybrid that could only be described as “American.”

While an amalgamation of physical features and cultural influences was occurring through encounters between populations over time, more artificial, more deliberate forms of social engineering were also proposed and debated during the 1920s. The most prominent of these, the eugenics movement, found proponents with a wide range of motives—including Toomer himself.⁴ The extent to which eugenicist views had become widespread is attested to in an anonymous essay titled “The Future of America” that appeared in Harper’s in April 1928,

which Toomer read with interest. The essay is unabashed in its eugenicist view, citing the work of Herbert Spencer and Francis Galton approvingly, and largely blaming contemporary social problems on the genetic inferiority and “low mentality” of the mass of individuals who had arrived in the United States in the preceding decades through the importation of cheap labor and the practice of offering asylum. It advocates a “soft” eugenics to be put into practice through social institutions as an antidote to the “dysgenic customs of mate-selection which leave some of the finest types of women unmated while feather-brained and sexually daring ‘flappers’ readily find mates” (537–38). Calling for an end to such permissive sexual mores and a more deliberately orchestrated approach to reproducing the nation’s population, the essay ends by predicting that “we may expect that within a few hundred years all national, racial, and color lines in this country will virtually disappear. . . . There is every reason to expect that amalgamation will be the ultimate solution of all our race problems” (539). The widespread assumption that such a process of gradual biological amalgamation was underway in the modern United States thus led to utopian predictions that racial problems would be solved inevitably through the slow eradication of race itself as a meaningful category for classifying human populations. “All this will make for extreme variability in the future American race,” the article concludes, “and if only we had the means of eliminating all inferior combinations, as the breeder of animals and plants does, we might expect to produce a very superior race in future America” (539). The eugenics discourses of the period all tended to traffic in essentialist notions of race as biologically, rather than culturally, based, yet whereas white supremacist eugenicists sought a promulgation of the white race, which they saw as threatened by the influx of racially inferior blood, “progressive” eugenicists—in whose ranks we may include Toomer—advocated for a deliberate hybridization, an intermingling of the races.

Such arguments concerning the contested future of America were familiar to Toomer toward the end of the 1920s, when he drafted a handful of essays presenting his own diagnoses of current racial problems and forecasts for what we might best describe as a post-racial future. In a “trilogy” of essays from 1928 and 1929, Toomer addresses the ongoing significance of what DuBois had diagnosed as early as 1903 as “the problem of the color line.” In the first of these, an unpublished essay titled “The Crock of Problems,” Toomer begins by lamenting the “hard and fast predisposition . . . to classify, label, and place a person in either the white or the Negro group. It is not suspected that there is any other possible racial location. A man is either white or black; he is either Caucasian or Negro” (55). Toomer goes on to describe his own experiences in negotiating this Manichean logic and declares,

I am, in a strict racial sense, a member of a new race. This new race, of which I happen to be one of the first articulate members, is now forming perhaps everywhere on the Earth, but its formation is more rapid and marked in certain countries, one of which is America. . . . Heredity and environment will combine to produce a race which will be at once interracial and unique. (58)

The term Toomer hits upon for capturing the range of biological cultural inputs shaping this new race is perhaps not surprising: “In so far as race and nationality are concerned,” he ends the essay, “I wish to be known as an American” (59; emphasis added). In a 1929 essay titled “Race Problems and Modern Society,” which Toomer originally presented in a lecture series hosted by Northwestern University professor Baker Brownell, and which appeared in Problems of Civilization, a volume edited by Brownell, Toomer explains his views concerning race as a

problem both created and capable of being remedied by modernity. Echoing the 1928 Harper's essay, which he cites approvingly, Toomer's musing on the conundrum of race takes on a eugenicist cast as he wonders "how to bring about a selective fusion of the racial and cultural factors of America, in order that the best possible stock and culture may be produced." For Toomer, this question "implies the need and desirability of breeding on the basis of biological fitness" (74). Toomer was far from being alone among modernist writers in hailing the possibilities of an "enlightened" eugenics.

The poem embraces similar concerns as it invokes the concept of race to depict the process by which a new American race has been formed of an amalgamation of the three main racial groups Herskovits also identifies: "White," "Negro," and "Mongoloid," the European, African, and Indigenous ancestries Toomer also claimed as his own. The poem depicts this process of gradual genetic and cultural mixing in utopian terms, as a slow deliverance from the divisions and antagonisms of the past and a movement toward an integrated and peaceful future. In the "hell" of the past the poem chronicles, the ". . . old peoples— / the great European races sent wave after wave" have spent themselves in the name of progress as they have "perished, displaced by machines" (lines 70–71, 76). Meanwhile, the "great African races [who] sent a single wave," ostensibly in the form of the Middle Passage, declaim their own "swan song" as they "sing[] riplets to sorrow in red fields"—an image that resonates with Toomer's descriptions of black rural culture as a "swan song" for a Southern agrarian population in the process of disappearing, presumably through the forces of absorption and assimilation (lines 106, 108, 107). The "great red race" similarly expends itself as "pueblo, priest, and Shalakos / Sank into the sacred earth / To fertilize the seven regions of America" (lines 123, 131–33). What follows in the poem is Toomer's effort to render Native American chant:

Hé-ya, hé-yo, hé-yo
Hé-ya, hé-yo, hé-yo
The ghosts of buffaloes,
A lone eagle feather,
An untamed Navajo,
Hé-ya, hé-yo, hé-yo
Hé-ya, hé-yo, hé-yo. (lines 134–40)

While such lines unapologetically essentialize and appropriate native cultures to their own ends, their presence within the poem resonates with the widespread nostalgia surrounding a modernist valorization of the “disappearing” Indian. This elegiac tone gives way to a projected future, in which the “old gods,” including an “inverted Christ, / a shaved Moses, a blanched Lemur, / and a moulting dollar” become so much fodder to fertilize a new spiritual America (lines 669–71). Toomer’s choice of “gods” is noteworthy here: Christ is “inverted,” suggesting that he is literally turned upside-down but also connoting his possible homosexuality, while Moses, the prophet of the Old Testament and leader of the Jews out of Exodus and into the Holy Land, is “shaved,” suggesting a similar emasculation. In addition, one of the Lemurs—according to H. P. Blavatsky’s theosophist theory of “root races,” a race of tall, dark humanoids whose descendants settled in Africa, a theory with which Toomer was familiar, appears void of color.⁵ Meanwhile, the American dollar, which, as the poem suggests, becomes an object of worship in the materialistic culture of its present, rots. (The “moulting dollar” replaces the “moulting Thunderbird” we encounter the first time this litany is recited several pages earlier [line 63],

substituting a contemporary Anglo-American material image for a Native American spiritual one.)

The implication here is clear: Christianity and Judaism have spent themselves, while the materialistic culture of the present United States, with its almighty dollar, goes the way of ancient Rome. Such assertions obviously owe much to Frank and the Young Americans, yet in the poem's embrace of preindustrial black and Native American cultures, its denunciation of modernity, and its insistence on the psychic unity of humanity, it also very clearly aligns with the critical stance associated with what Marcus and Fisher have identified as the "ethnographic paradigm" of 1920s and '30s anthropology, which "entailed a submerged, unrelenting critique of Western civilization as capitalism. The idea was that we in the West have lost what they—the cultural other—still have, and that we can learn basic moral and practical lessons from ethnographic representations" (129). Toomer's invocations of Native American and black folk cultures in the poem thus connect his work with an attitude Marcus and Fisher identify among the period's anthropologists toward preindustrial cultures as repositories of ecological rootedness, organic community, and integrative notions of the sacred—all values perceived as being threatened by modernity.

Race, Nation, and Modernity

To a large extent, Toomer shared the generally pessimistic stance concerning modern mechanized technology that ran throughout the work of the Seven Arts circle and became particularly virulent in Frank's many dismissals of the machine. Technology functions ambivalently in Cane, often figuring as a hostile and even dangerous force in the work's

presentation of southern black folk culture as dead or dying. As Toomer sums it up in a letter to Frank,

Dont [sic] let us fool ourselves, brother: the Negro of the folk-song has all but passed away: the Negro of the emotional church is fading. A hundred years from now these Negroes, if they exist at all will live in art. . . . (Likewise the Indian). America needs these elements. They are passing. Let us grab and hold them while there is still time. . . . The supreme fact of mechanical civilization is that you become a part of it, or get sloughed off (under). (“To Waldo Frank” 166)

Toomer’s telling characterization of rural black culture as a “swan song” in the same letter makes clear the urgency of his project of preserving black idiom and folk expression in Cane, as well as his generally resigned yet nostalgic attitude toward the loss of what he viewed as the integrative, holistic folk cultures of preindustrial America. This attitude was very much in keeping with the stance of Frank himself, who had used similar language to lament the inevitable passing of the “buried cultures” of the US Southwest in Our America in 1919:

The Indian is dying and is doomed. There can be no question of this. There need be no sentimentality. It may seem unjust that a spiritual culture so fine as his should be blotted out before the iron march of the Caucasian. It may seem the very irony of progress. But Justice is an anthropomorphic fancy. And Progress is the measure of children for their own rollicking. (115)

Frank's mockery of the notion of urban-industrial modernity and its homogenizing culture as "Progress" set the tone for many of the period's romantic dismissals of modernity, yet it also resonates, in spirit at least, with the critical stance of much of the period's anthropology, particularly the "ethnographic paradigm" associated with Boas and his students. For instance, Edward Sapir's paradigm-defining 1924 essay "Culture, Genuine and Spurious" describes the "genuine" culture as

inherently harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory. It is the expression of a richly varied and yet somehow unified and consistent attitude toward life, an attitude which sees the significance of any one element of civilization in its relation to all others. It is, ideally speaking, a culture in which nothing is spiritual meaningless. . . . (410)

The "spurious" culture that Sapir identified in post-World War I American society, by contrast, "tolerate[d] a thousand . . . spiritual maladjustments"; it was punctuated by "spiritual discords, . . . the dry rot of habit, devitalized" (410). In its condemnations of the present and its tendency to look toward premodern cultures for solutions to its ills, the ethnographic work of anthropologists in the Boas circle such as Sapir thus overlapped in significant ways with the cultural criticism of Frank and others associated with his Greenwich Village milieu, and both were intellectual sources upon which Toomer drew heavily in his own work.⁶

For Toomer, the mere fact of race—as a biological concept rooted in the work of anthropologists such as Herskovits—in no way explains race problems, which emerge out of the group identifications that result in turn from a pathological need to control an ever greater share

of wealth and material resources. Racial antagonism was, for Toomer, an inevitable by-product of a competitive society driven by grasping materiality. In his pessimistic condemnation of this materialistic society in the 1929 essay "Race Problems and Modern Society," Toomer views economic, political, and social systems as tending to exacerbate racial tension: "These systems express and stimulate acquisitive passion for money, power, antisocial urges," Toomer declares, "and (since it is their nature to arouse and maintain all kinds of antagonisms, it is only natural that they also stimulate and feed) racial animosities" (74). So pronounced were the animosities to which this crass materialism gave rise that they tended to undermine any stable sense of national identity: "America is a nation in name only," Toomer writes, echoing claims he would make elsewhere. "In point of fact, she is a social form containing racial, national, and cultural groups which the existing economic, political, and social systems tend to keep divided and repellent. Moreover," he continues, "each group is left to feel, and often taught and urged to feel, that some other group is the cause of its misfortune" (69). Yet, despite its persistent tone of cultural pessimism, the essay heralds "the positive possibilities contained in the emergence of a large number of the type of people who cannot be classified as separatist and racial. These people are truly synthetic and human. They exist all over America" (73). The "synthetic and human" elements Toomer discerns here and there form a source of optimism, as their existence enables him to imagine a future predicated on the erasure of divisive forms of identification and the shallow materialist values out of which they tend to arise.

Images of technology gone awry appear throughout "The Blue Meridian," suggesting a present no longer under human control:

Not iron, not chemicals or money

Are animate to suffer and rejoice,
Not what we have become, this angel-dough,
But slowly die, never attaining birth
Above the body, above its pain and hungers,
To beat pavements, stand in lines,
Fill space and drive motor-cars. (lines 91–97)

This trope of technology run amok takes on a manifestly national guise as the poem becomes overtly didactic: “The eagle, you should know, American,” one line reads, clear in its address to an “American” reader, “Is a sublime and bloody bird, / A living dynamo / Capable of spiritualizing and sensualizing” (lines 215–18). By contrast with this “living dynamo,” which bears both a spiritual and a sensual significance, the poem predicts that the “majestic flight” associated with this national symbol “may disappear,” as “we have become air-minded” and “The eagle is a flying-machine, / One wing is broken, / The plunge to earth is panic before death[,]” and finally “There is force gone wrong” (lines 223–228). With the development and popularization of air travel for military and commercial purposes in the decade following World War I, the poem laments that the “we” it projects has become “air-minded,” suggesting a preoccupation with flight, as well as an intellectual and spiritual vacancy. This image resonates with lines we encounter roughly two pages later, in which

An airplane, with broken wing,
In a tail-spin,
Descends with terrifying speed—

“Don’t put me on the spot!”—
From beings to nothings,
From human beings to grotesques,
From men and women to manikins,
From forms to chaoses—

Crash! (lines 274–82)

Here the image of the mechanized eagle with broken wing becomes an airplane similarly maimed in an out-of-control death dive, obliterating the “beings” that occupy it as they are reduced to “nothings,” “grotesques,” “manikins,” “chaoses.” The weird injunction that intrudes into the stanza—“Don’t put me on the spot!”—takes on a double valence as both a refusal of agency and accountability, and a protest against this violent hurling of the body toward a particular spot on the ground. Punctuated with an exclamation mark and appearing isolated on its own line, the italicized word “Crash!” serves to invoke both the impact of the plane hitting the ground and the more figurative notion of the 1929 stock market crash.

The poem’s self-conscious invocation of the “crash” is certainly no accident; at various points, it clearly places its disparagements of market-driven modernity into a Depression-era context, even though it suggests at the same time that the problems of modern society are in no way confined to the period following the crash. In lines that place the poem in the 1930s, we read, “In one of the depression years, / Or was it a prosperity year? / I forget. I forget, too, whether the / Republicans were in, the Democrats out, / Or vice versa . . .” (lines 234–38). In its explicitly apolitical stance and its concomitant revaluation of a kind of spiritual democracy, the

poem was clearly out of step with its time in the 1930s. Yet in its apparent condemnation of the capitalist system and the empty values it perpetuates, the poem resonates on a general level with critiques of modernity from both right and left. The poem invokes the 1929 crash and the Depression that followed in oblique as well as explicit terms: “To depression / The stock of debris descends[,]” the poem reads at one point, punning on “stock” and invoking the image of a waste heap, a familiar image in Depression-era cultural production (lines 402–03). “Down go its greed-events,” the poem continues,

Control by fear, prejudice, and murder.

Let go!

What value this, paper of the past,

Engraved, ingrained meaningless? (lines 404–08)

Drawing on the multiple valences of “value” and suggesting the period’s debates concerning the possibility of returning to the gold standard, the poem derides currency as “paper of the past” and associates greed with the divisive logics of “fear, prejudice, and murder,” invoking but not explicitly naming the racial problems of the present. In contrast to the descending “stock of debris,” the poem will go on to propose a contrasting measure of value as “In another Wall Street of the world / The stock of value ascends” (lines 524–25). The poem thus projects an idealized future in which the divisions it diagnoses as false and illusionary—divisions of race, nation, region, sex, class, and religion—will be mended, and “We will be free to use rightly with reason / Our own and other human functions— / Free men, whole men, men connected / With one another and with Deity” (lines 520–23). The poem thus finds a refuge from the ills of modernity

not in political solutions but in an embrace of mysticism. Recasting the crash in positive terms, as an opportunity to abandon shallow, divisive materialist values, the poem optimistically heralds a future for the nation in which other values might hold sway.

Conclusion

Conflating the categories of race and nation, Toomer's imagined synthesis projects the spiritual unity of the United States, a proleptic unity that is always in the process of being created, onto a national body whose members would also constitute a newly hybridized race. The emergence of this new race would in turn be brought about through miscegenation and cultural cross-pollination, the very factors nativists viewed as threats to the nation. For Toomer, however, the "American," as a newly emerging racial-national type, would assume a universalist dimension as the future of humanity, forging cohesion among the once-divided members of the human race. Even if Toomer found much to discourage him in the attitudes of his time, he nevertheless sounds an optimistic note in observing the emergence of what he describes as an "authentic" new type, "not European, not African, not Asiatic—but American" ("Cane Years" 121; emphasis in the original). An undated typescript in which Toomer explores these ideas at length confirms this stance: here, Toomer articulates a vision of America as "the place where mankind, long dismembered into separate usually repellant groupings, long scattered over the face of the earth, is being re-assembled into one whole and undivided human race. America will include the earth" ("Americans" 107). At stake in Toomer's work, then, is the problem of how race figures into national identity and how national identity in turn becomes universalized as human identity.

Rejecting all notions of racial purity, Toomer would sum up his position in stating that

There is only one pure race—and this is the human race. We all belong to it—and this is the most and the least that can be said of any of us with accuracy. For the rest, it is mere talk, mere labelling, merely a manner of speaking, merely a sociological, not a biological, thing. I myself merely talk when I speak of the blending of the bloods of the white, black, red and brown races giving rise to a new race, to a new unique blood. (“Americans” 109)

Here and elsewhere, Toomer makes recourse to the convenient fiction of blood, and thus a biologically determined notion of race, with full knowledge that it is a fiction; in a rare confirmation of this, Toomer presages an understanding of race more in line with our own, in which race appears as sociological construct rather than biological fact. For the rhetoric of blood, as Toomer was well aware, implies division and separation, literalizing racial division on the level of the individual body, comprised in this understanding of fractions: half Jew and half Gentile, or half black and half white. Yet the metaphor of blood—pure or otherwise—has had a curiously long afterlife in American culture, and nearly a century after Toomer’s initial declarations on the matter, we still struggle to find another set of tropes that would enable us to talk meaningfully about racial difference. Toomer is likewise prescient in his prediction that the ameliorated situation he projects into the future is most likely also a fiction. Writing in 1935, he was led to speculate that

may be it will befall my vision as it befell Walt Whitman’s in that, just as I today can see no large signs of the country developing along his lines, so an individual

one hundred years hence will see no large signs of the country having developed along my lines. (“Not Typically American” 100)

In drafting and revising “The Blue Meridian,” his most extensive literary text grappling with these issues, Toomer drew on all of the tools at his disposal: the liberal cultural criticism of Frank and his circle, but also—as I have argued here—the insights of anthropologists who followed in the wake of Franz Boas, who struggled to define race in a way that would undercut racial essentialism and ideas of nation rooted in the discourse of racial purity. Nearly a century on, we can add that such beliefs regarding racial essentialism and racial purity have proven every bit as resilient as Toomer at his most pessimistic could have predicted.

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NOTES

1. See Rusch and Bell for accounts of Whitman’s influence on Toomer. Scruggs and VanDemarr provide an extensive discussion of the provenance of “The Blue Meridian” in the work of Whitman, Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne, Waldo Frank, and Hart Crane.
2. See Blake for a discussion of “beloved community” as a reaction to the dislocations of industrial modernity.
3. See Hutchinson for a discussion of the essay’s notion of assimilation (73–74).
4. See Hawkins for an account of the relationship between Toomer’s work and eugenics discourses.

5. See Vetter for a discussion of H. P. Blavatsky's The Secret Doctrine as the source for Toomer's theory of spiritual evolution, in which the Lemurians, or Lemurs, were an intermediate race from which humans initially emerged, as well as Blavatsky's views on America as the site for the emergence of a new race of humans (117).
6. See Hegeman, especially chapters 3 and 4, for a discussion of Boasian anthropologists in relation to culture critics including Frank.

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