



The Harlem Renaissance

OLLI SPRING I, 2021 – WEEK 3 – HARLEM IN THE SOUTH

Agenda

JEAN TOOMER

- Jean Toomer, a lost voice of American literature
- Imagism about the Southern region of the U.S. in the long-form work of Toomer, most known for *Cane* (1923), anticipates the popularity of Faulkner (whose first novel isn't published until several years later).

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

- Ethnography at the turn of the century
- From *Their Eyes* to "Color Struck"
- Losing Zora and then finding her again: Alice Walker's journey with Black female historiography

JEAN TOOMER

- Born to two "free Colored" people, Jean Toomer was born and raised in Washington, D.C.
- He was born "Nathan Pinchback Toomer." He did not take the name "Jean" until his literary career.
- For much of his life, he was passable as white though he did not realize this until he moved to Georgia and did research on the rural Black south in North Carolina (where his father's family was from).
- He would often say he did not believe himself to be of the "Negro" race but of the 'human' race and that racial solidarity should not be the goal but that the dissolution of race altogether should be the goal in America.
- Later in life, he followed the spiritual and philosophical teachings of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, who argued that humans did not possess a unified consciousness but instead were in a constant state of 'waking sleep.' In order to really awaken one's true potential, he articulated a 'system' of 'work' on oneself.



CANE (1923)

- *Cane* is inspired by the time that Toomer spends in rural Georgia as a principal. Upon returning to the metropole, he wants to articulate Black rural life
- Charles S. Johnson, a contemporary of Toomer's (and first Black president of Fisk Univ) writes that *Cane* is "the most astonishingly brilliant beginning of any Negro writer of his generation." Langston Hughes writes that "*Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America." He contends that the only reason it became less known is because it did not feature characters or composites of Black Americans living in Harlem in the way white people wanted to see them. However, today, *Cane* is largely regarded as a classic of American modernism—least of all because it anticipates both in form and subject matter the writing of towering figures like William Faulkner.
- Literary characteristics of the novel that are Modernist
 - imagism: the articulation not of plot-driven narrative but image-driven poetics
 - composite structure: multiple forms in one, stories told in vignettes with some recurring characters and some not; the idea here is to give a three-dimensional, fuller *feeling* of what the subject matter (Black rural South) is rather than a plotted story that functions as 'an example' of the subject matter
- Toomer's later work "The Blue Meridian" was largely his version of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922); thus, even Toomer sees himself as attempting to bridge the gap between literary Modernism and the New Negro Arts Movement.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, ETHNOGRAPHER

"Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934)

- "The Negro's universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama. His very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile...Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course. there is an impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life. No little moment passes unadorned...A Negro girl strolls past the corner longer. Her whole body panging and posing. A slight shoulder movement that calls attention to her bust, that is all of a dare. A hippy undulation below the waist that is a sheaf of promises tied with conscious power. She is acting out. 'I'm a darned sweet woman and you know it.'"
- "It has often been stated by etymologists that the Negro has introduced no African words to the language. This is true, but it is equally true that he has made over a great part of the tongue to his liking and has his revision accepted by the ruling class. No one listening to Southern white man talk could deny this. Not only has he softened and toned down strongly consonated words like 'aren't' to 'ain't' and the like, he has made new force words out of old feeble elements. Examples of this are 'ham-shanked' 'battled-hammed' 'double-teen' 'bodaciously' 'muffle-jawed.'"
- "It is lack of symmetry which makes Negro dancing so difficult for white dancers to learn. The abrupt and unexpected changes. The frequent change of key and time are evidences of this quality in music."

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, ETHNOGRAPHER

"Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934)

- "Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making...God and the Devil are paired, and are treated no more reverently than Rockefeller and Ford. Both of these men are prominent in folklore, Ford being particularly strong, and they talk and act like good-natured stevedores or mill-hands. Ole Massa is sometimes a smart man and often a fool. The automobile is ranged alongside of the oxcart...And through it all walks Jack, the greatest culture hero of the South; Jack beats them all—even the Devil, who is often smarter than God."
- "Mimicry is an art in itself. If it is not, then all art must fall by the same blow that strikes it down...The contention that the Negro imitates from a feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He mimics for the love of it."
- "What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas. The most ardent admirer of great Shakespeare cannot claim first source even for him. It is his treatment of the borrowed material. So if we look at it squarely, the Negro is a very original being."
- "Very few Negroes, educated or not, use a clear clipped 'I.' It verges more or less upon 'Ah.' I think the lip form is responsible for this to a great extent...If one listens closely one will note too that a word is slurred in one position in the sentence but clearly pronounced in another. This is particularly true of the pronouns...In storytelling 'so' is universally the connective. It is used even as an introductory word, at the very beginning of the story. In religious expression, 'and' is used. The trend in stories is to state conclusions; in religion, to enumerate."

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, WRITER

Dust Tracks on a Road (1942)

"It was only that night in bed that I analyzed the whole thing and realized that I was giving sanction to Jim Crow, which theoretically, I was supposed to resist. But here were ten Negro barbers, three porters and two manicurists all stirred up at the threat of our living through loss of patronage. Nobody thought it out at the moment. It was an instinctive thing. That was the first time it was called to my attention that self-interest rides over all sorts of lines. I have seen the same thing happen hundreds of times since, and now I understand it. One sees it breaking over racial, national religious and class lines. Anglo-Saxon against Anglo-Saxon, Jew against Jew, Negro against Negro, and all sorts of combinations of the three against other combinations of the three. Offhand, you might say that we fifteen Negroes should have felt the racial thing and served him. He was one of us. Perhaps it would have been a beautiful thing if Banks had turned to the shop crowded with customers and announced that this man was going to be served like everybody else even at the risk of losing their patronage, with all the other employees lined up in the center of the floor shouting, "So say we all!" It would have been a stirring gesture, and made the headlines for a day. Then we could all have gone home to our unpaid rents and bills and things like that. I could leave school and begin my wanderings again. The "militant" Negro who would have been the cause of it all, would have perched on the smuddled-up wreck of things and crowed...So I do not know what was the ultimate right in this case. I do know how I felt at the time. There is always something fiendish and loathsome about a person who threatens to deprive you of your way of making a living. That is human-like, I reckon."

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, WRITER

Dust Tracks on a Road (1942)

"While I was in the research field in 1929, the idea of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* came to me. I had written a few short stories, but the idea of attempting a book seemed so big, that I gazed at it in the quiet of the night, but hid it away from even myself in daylight.

For one thing, it seemed off-key. What I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was an am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes aman or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color. It seemed to me that the human beings I met reacted pretty much the same to the same stimuli. Different idioms, yes. Circumstances and conditions having power to influence, yes. Inherent difference, no. But I said to myself that that was not what was expected of me, so I was afraid to tell a story the way I wanted, or rather the way the story told itself to me. So I went on that way for three years "



THE BARRACoon:

THE STORY OF THE LAST "BLACK CARGO"

- "De King of Dahomey, you know, he got very rich ketchin slaves. He keep his army all de time making raids to grabee people to sell. One traitor from Takkoi (Cudjo's village), he a very bad man and he go straight in de Dahomey and say to de king, "I show you how to takee Takkoi." He tellee dem de secret of de gates. (The town had eight gates, intended to provide various escape routes in the event of an attack.)Derefore, dey come make war, but we doan know dey come fight us. Dey march all night long and we in de bed sleep. It bout daybreak when de people of Dahomey breakee de Great Gate. I not woke yet. I hear de yell from de soldiers while dey choppee de gate. Derefore I jump out de bed and lookee. I see de great many soldiers wid French gun in de hand and de big knife. Dey got de women soldiers too and dey run wid de big knife and dey ketch people and saw de neck wid de knife den dey twist de head so it come off de neck. Oh Lor', Lor'! I see de people gittee kill so fast!"
- "Dey come and tie us in de line and lead us round de big white house. Den we see so many ships. We see de white man dat buy us. I in de last boat go out. Dey almost leavee me on de shore.As the slaves were being rowed out to the Clotilda, the ship's captain began to suspect that the Dahomey were going to trick him and try to recapture the people he'd just bought, so he gave orders to "abandon the cargo not already on board, and to sail away with all speed."When I see my friend Keebie in de boat I want go wid him. So I holler and dey turn round and takee me. When we ready to leave and go in de ship, dey snatch our country cloth off us. Dey say, "You get plenty clothes where you goin'." Oh Lor', I so shame! We come in de 'Merica soil naked and de people say we naked savage."



ALICE WALKER

IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHERS GARDENS (1986)

- "They dreamed dreams that no one knew-not themselves, in any coherent fashion-and saw visions no one could stand. They wandered or sat about the countryside crooning lullabies to ghosts, and drawing the mother of Christ in charcoal on courthouse walls.They forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spir- .. its sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay. And when those frail whirlwinds fell, in scattered particles, upon the ground, no one mourned. Instead, men lit candles to celebrate the emptiness that remained, as people do who enter a beautiful but vacant space to resurrect a God.Our mothers and grandmothers, some of them: moving to music not yet written. And they waited.They waited for a day when the unknown thing that was in them would be made known; but guessed, somehow in their darkness, that on the day of their revelation they would be long dead. Therefore to Toomer they walked, and even ran, in slow motion. For they were going nowhere immediate, and the future was not yet within their grasp. And men took our mothers and grandmothers, "but got no pleasure from it." So complex was their passion and their calm."
- "How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist. Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if singing, too, had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life. Then you may begin to comprehend the lives of our "crazy," "Sainted" mothers and grandmothers. The agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short-Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who died with their real gifts stifled within them."

FOR NEXT CLASS

Claude McKay: Poetry, Novels, Politics

