

A Literary Conversation: Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death*

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Introduction

Critics have discussed the short story cycle, sequence, or composite as a uniquely American mode of writing. Rolf Lundén, for example, remarked that the short story composite, a text made up of connected stories, can convey a conception of “Americanness” or a “more general American cultural pattern,” which represents unity in diversity (106). J. Gerald Kennedy points out a recurrent interest in the problem of community and its relation to the fictional form in American literature, making a similar comment to Lundén by expressing that American writers have attempted to build “a unified republic out of diverse states, regions, and population groups” to achieve American unity (Kennedy viii). Lundén and Kennedy’s frameworks of the short story sequence, cycle, or composite, as a vehicle for depicting national unity or communal harmony in diversity, are indebted to Sherwood Anderson’s statement on his short story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Articulating the significance of creating new American literature, Anderson noted: “[T]he novel form does not fit an American writer,” and “what [I] wanted [in the *Winesburg* tales] is a new looseness. . . . There were individual tales but all about lives in some way connected” (qtd. in John H. Ferres, *Winesburg, Ohio* 14). However, the interest in conveying meanings of national identity or exploring the communal identity, and their relation to the fictional form, is neither monolithic nor quintessentially American. James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), for example, is undeniably a short story cycle in which the stories, place, and theme are closely connected, and thus the collection demonstrates remarkable unity.

As Charles Scruggs, Mark Whalan, and Linda Wagner-Martin have pointed out, Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* had an impact on the production of Jean Toomer’s 1923 short story cycle, *Cane*, which has been considered one of the most important texts of the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁾ However, as Whalan and Wagner-Martin note, *Cane* is also a challenge to Anderson’s book (Whalan 6; Wagner-Martin 20). Connected in terms of setting and the recurrent protagonist, the *Winesburg, Ohio* tales progress linearly while *Cane*’s settings are plural and circular: starting in Sempter/Georgia, moving to Washington and Chicago, and then returning to Sempter/Georgia. *Cane*’s large and racially diverse cast of characters and its eclectic forms, which include sketches, poems, short stories, songs, and dramatic pieces, also make the text difficult to follow. The fictional town of

Sempter, Georgia, is not a pastoral world with organic unity but a locale where racial violence is palpable. Nonetheless, the novel portrays its version of the South as a crossroads where two or more races and cultures can meet and where a 'new American race' can be born.²⁾

Critics have attempted to emancipate Toomer's *Cane* from a northern American context and place it within a larger hemispheric landscape, particularly in comparison with Eric Walrond's short story cycle, *Tropic Death* (1926). In his essay entitled "The Writer Who Ran Away," Kenneth Ramchand makes a brief comment on the Toomer-Walrond connection: "[T]wo stylists of the movement [of the Harlem Renaissance] were Jean Toomer, strange author of the single work, a neglected masterpiece, *Cane* (1923), and Eric Walrond" (21). In his "Introduction" to Walrond's *Tropic Death*, Arnold Rampersad remarks that "[T]he most important [African American literature] for Walrond was Toomer's *Cane* (1923), an extraordinary mélange of forms, including poetry, fiction, and drama, that sought to capture its author's tragic vision of a vanishing black South" (13). Even Walrond's contemporary, the poet Sterling Brown, said of Toomer's and Walrond's pieces that they are "brilliant high marks in fiction," going on to specify that Walrond's talent is "tremendous" (qtd. in James Davis, *Eric Walrond* 4).³⁾ These interpretations, however, do not convey why *Tropic Death* needs to be a collection or a sequence of short stories or how it is related to *Cane*. *Tropic Death*, a book of ten loosely linked short stories, could be placed somewhere in-between a novel and a short story collection. Each of the stories focuses on a fractured, broken, and dissonant Caribbean community that is forcedly created by a history of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, immigration, migration, and indenture. As Jennifer Brittan has suggested, *Tropic Death*'s Panamanian stories "occupy the physical center" of the text, which ranges in its settings from Barbados, Honduras, British Guiana, to Panama (295). Walrond designed *Tropic Death* to draw attention to the Panamanian community as a microcosm of the Caribbean, in an attempt to represent fractured and plural Panamanian communities. The text's concerns with destruction, chaos, and fragmentation as the Caribbean experience in modernity are clearly demonstrated in the character Poyah in "Panama Gold," who lost his leg during his commitment to the Panama Canal Construction.

In her study of the Anglophone Caribbean short story, Lucy Evans has pointed out that the form of interrelated stories is a critical component of Caribbean writers' "imagining of communities" (3). By borrowing Edouard Glissant's and Antonio Benítez-Rojo's notions of the Caribbean as a "multiple series of relationships" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 139) and as a "discontinuous conjunction" (Benítez-Rojo 2), Evans makes the case that Caribbean communities are characterized by their fracture and plurality while entailing tensions as if they were physically dispersed, floating islands on the Caribbean Sea (22–23). Nevertheless, these islands hold in their shared precariousness, geographically making an arc across the Atlantic Ocean. The countries of the Caribbean are also connected to each other conceptually in terms of the history of imperialism, colonialism, and the exploitation of black labor.

Evans's discussion is a useful means of approaching Walrond's representation of Caribbean

communities. In *Tropic Death*, people continuously migrate between the islands of the Caribbean (Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Martinique, and Cuba), Central America (Honduras and Panama), South America (British Guiana), and the southern United States (the Florida Gulf coast area and Louisiana). As a result of contact with various ethnic groups, *Tropic Death's* Caribbean communities become more fractured and plural, and thus are able to produce a new hybrid race and cultures. As Glissant put it, the Caribbean is a locus where cultural and linguistic possibilities are generated as a result of the violent collisions of various cultures, and this particular culture contributes to "the formation of new zones of relational community" throughout the circum-Caribbean world (*Poetics of Relation* 142). Glissant's observation of the omnipresence of plantation culture in the southern U.S. landscape offers a new interpretation of Walrond's Caribbean, making it comparable with *Cane's* depiction of the region. In developing the conception of "relationships" in his remarks on Mississippi, Glissant suggests that the Caribbean archipelago is connected to the southern region of the United States through plantation culture: "The configuration of the Plantation was the same everywhere, from northeastern Brazil to the Caribbean to the southern United States" (*Faulkner, Mississippi* 10). Thus, while the southern United States and the Caribbean are separated by the sea, they are nevertheless connected with each other in terms of a shared history of slavery. In this sense, the sea is not only something that separates but also links. These Caribbean theories suggest that bringing *Tropic Death* and *Cane* together gives us a way to appreciate better how these two texts involve expanding the parameters of the Harlem Renaissance literature to the Americas in terms of geography, culture, and the traumatic collective history of slavery.

In his 1918 essay, "On Creating a Usable Past," Van Wyck Brooks, a critic of the Young American School, insisted that the United States should constitute a "usable past," a set of historical references that would give American writers a sense of continuity or of being a part of a tradition (338). Brooks suggested that such historical reference, spiritual past, and cultural memory have "no objective reality" and yield "only what we are able to look for in [them]" (338). Thus, Brooks asserted that recovering and even inventing a usable past can revitalize the United States, a claim also made by another Young America colleague of Brooks, Waldo Frank (339). In 1919, Frank explored his notion of "buried cultures" in *Our America*, which attempts to redefine the United States as a plural and hybrid nation (93). In his anthology *The New Negro* (1925), Alain Locke also claimed that black writers should dig up and utilize their past. However, there is no organic and consistent usable history for the black diasporas since their past evokes a history of slavery. In his essay "The Negro Spirituals," Locke states that black spirituals had to be chanted in concert halls like European classical music, and they should "transcend the level of [their] origin" (199). In contrast, by using spirituals, work songs, and hymns in *Cane*, Toomer attempts to maintain "the level of [their] origin" (Locke 199). In *Cane*, the use of spirituals and work-songs derived from plantation culture is an appropriation of Brooks's notion of a "usable past," which is able to achieve the text's aim of expanding literary geography.

Walrond's use of various English dialects and his absorption of folk culture are part of his adaptation of the notion of an (un)/usable past that emphasizes the hybridity and fractured nature of Caribbean communities and illustrates a new plural subjectivity emerging within that community. However, Walrond does not simply praise the emergence of a new hybrid race. After all, it is forcedly created through a history of slavery, intra-regional economic immigration, and multiple migrations. By borrowing Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's conception of the machine, Benítez-Rojo notes in *The Repeating Island* that the Caribbean is a sort of machine that has been coupled to the Atlantic and the Pacific, repeating itself globally and continuously (7). Benítez-Rojo continues, "[t]he fleet system was itself a machine of ports [which has produced] anchorages, sea walls, lookouts, fortresses, garrisons, militias . . . churches, palaces, streets, and roads that led to the mining ports of the Pacific along a sleeve of mule trains laid out over the Isthmus of Panama" (8). This argument reminds us of *Tropic Death's* Caribbean workers in the Panama Canal Zone, whose lives are embedded in a machine civilization and the new economy system after slavery.

Borrowing aspects of Glissant's and Benítez-Rojo's theories, in this paper I will make the case that *Cane* and *Tropic Death* transcend literary geography through the use of three arguments. First, I will suggest that Toomer and Walrond share an interest in the notion of an "(un) usable past," before moving on to outline the way in which their texts transcend literary geography. Finally, I will make the case that *Tropic Death* involves a reconfiguration of fragmented yet hybrid selves with the formal hybridity of the texts, in an attempt to draw attention to a shared history of slavery between the southern United States and the Caribbean. This paper will be divided into three parts: the first part will focus on Toomer, and mainly look at how he challenged Brooks's concept of the "usable past." Just as Toomer's *Cane* was in some ways indebted to the author's intra-racial conversations with the Young American intellectuals, so was Walrond's creation of *Tropic Death* influenced by both Harlem and Caribbean intellectuals, and thus the second part of the paper will focus on Walrond.⁴⁾ It will begin by outlining the connections between Walrond, Marcus Garvey, and Harlem, and then look at how Walrond challenged contemporary views of Caribbean geography, society, and Afro-Caribbean diasporas, and how his work overlaps with the thoughts and aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance. In the final part of the paper, I will discuss the description of Caribbean communities in relation to *Tropic Death's* expansive geography in the stories "Drought," "Panama Gold," "The Palm Porch," and "The Wharf Rats." The aim is to suggest that Walrond's formal experimentalism and his use of the short story cycle were crucial aspects of reconfiguring the Caribbean, which in turn contributes to expanding the parameters of the literature of the Harlem Renaissance into the circum-Caribbean world.

Toomer's Appropriation of the Notion of a "Usable Past"

Toomer has been described as a writer of the Harlem Renaissance, but he famously rejected James Weldon Johnson's request to include his work in *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922).

Toomer's objection to being described as a black writer and his lifetime attempts to redefine American racial identity are part of his efforts to present himself as a new kind of American. In an essay entitled "On being an American" (1934), Toomer articulates his concern with the emergence of a new American identity:

I 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. . . . I had seen the divisions, the separatisms and antagonisms. . . . [yet] a new type of man was arising in this country — not European, not African, not Asiatic — but American. And in this American I saw the divisions mended, the differences reconciled — saw that (1) we would in truth be a united people existing in the United States, saw that (2) we would in truth be once again members of a united human race. (qtd. in Turner 120–21)

Toomer's concern with reconfiguring a united people is related to his own racial identity, which cannot be categorized as either black or white, as Toomer put it in his 1922 letter to *The Liberator*: "Racially, I seem to have . . . seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian," but with the fact of racial intermingling, "I am naturally and inevitably an American."⁵ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Toomer's desire to question and reinterpret American racial discourse, I suggest that his 1923 short story cycle *Cane* should reflect his romanticized vision of the southern landscape, its culture, and its people. Nevertheless, we can perceive his effort to represent the South as an intersection in terms of history and culture.

As Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr have noted, Toomer's experience working as a substitute principal in 1921 in the town of Sparta in Georgia, and his subsequent travels with Frank, were two important components in the creation of *Cane* (*Terrors* 9–10). The experience made him aware of his racial heritage and the beauty of black folk culture, as manifested in his frequent use of spirituals and songs, such as "Song of the Son," "Evening Song," "Conversion," and "Cotton Song." By providing a physical and conceptual link between the actual southern town of Sparta and the fictional town of Sempster, *Cane* historicizes the text to convey an interpretation of a history of slavery, which has generated hybrid cultures and mixed race peoples. John T. Matthews has claimed that *Cane* transgresses the American South and extends its literary geography into northern cities such as Chicago and Washington, tracing a history of the mass migration of African Americans from the rural south to the northern cities (296). However, I believe *Cane*'s literary geography transcends American cartography in terms of both time and space by way of using black music culture, including spirituals and work-songs, through which Toomer appropriates Brooks's notion of a "usable past." By transforming an unusable past into a usable one, *Cane* links the histories of a disenfranchised people to that of other Americas. "Cotton Song," for instance, which is found in the first part of *Cane*, particularly substantiates the overall text's concern with history and its relation to an expansive geography:

Come, brother, come. Lets lift it;
Come now, hewit! roll away!

Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day
But lets not wait for it.
.....
Cotton bales are the fleecy way
Weary sinner's bare feet trod,
Softly, softly to the throne of God,
"We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!"

Nassur; nassur,
Hump.
Eoho, eoho, roll away!

We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!" ("Cotton Song" 1-4, 9-12, 13-16)

The call "Eoho, eoho, roll away" and the phrase "Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day" evoke features of the field holler, a type of work song designed to increase labor efficiency, and this indicates that it was also sung by slaves who appealed to God for redemption and freedom from slavery. Although "Cotton Song" is the only song in *Cane* with field holler elements, imagery of the exploitation of black laborers is recurrent, and thus the work is able to represent a sense of continuity of the past, tradition, and cultural memory, which should be distinct from that of white Americans.⁶⁾

Drawing attention to black laborers' long working days and their ephemeral feast, "Georgia Dusk" emphasizes "[r]ace memories" of "king and caravan," and "[h]igh-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man," all memories connected to Africa, a mythological space with which African American workers were unfamiliar (17). However, Toomer's "Georgia Dusk" creates a sense of continuity, where the past influences the present. In this sense, it can be read in light of Paul Gilroy's perspective of the middle passage, as the slave trade brought African slaves to America but also African musical instruments, knowledge, rhythms, and tunes, all of which culminated in the "circulation and intercultural exchange of music" in the New World (87). *Cane* also evokes the image of 'Africa' as a locale connected to the southern United States through the Caribbean in "Conversion": the "African Guardian of Souls," drunk with rum, is "[f]easting on a strange cassava" (29). Glissant has articulated the cultural proximity between the southern United States and the Caribbean in terms of music:

[T]he music [is] principally the same in the culture of this whole area. The African trace was kept alive, reconstructed according to the inspiration of a particular place. . . . [R]ows of slave shackles [and] the same instruments of torture are found everywhere in the old slave order . . . [I]ts history travels with the seas. (*Faulkner, Mississippi* 29)

In the southern U.S. landscape, Glissant finds traces of African culture that lead us to a new interpretation of Toomer's American South as a locale of a "multiple series of relationships" in which new races and new cultures meet by way of the Caribbean archipelago (Glissant, *Caribbean*

Discourse 139). Glissant's view of the landscapes of the Americas as "relationships" has a concordance with *Cane's* concern with a shared history of slavery, histories of people and their culture, which would reconfigure the cultural geography of the Harlem Renaissance.

Walrond's Intellectual Exchanges with Harlem and the Caribbean

With growing interest in expanding the parameters of American literature, Eric Walrond's 1926 short story collection or cycle, *Tropic Death*, is drawing more critical attention as an important work produced during the Harlem Renaissance. Michelle Stephens and Louis Chude-Sokei have both discussed how Walrond's diasporic experience contributed to expanding the U.S.-centric Harlem movement to the Atlantic, making the movement "hemispheric" (Stephens 168) and creating another "black migration narrative" (Chude-Sokei 76). Irma Watkins-Owens focuses on *Tropic Death's* more political aspect, reading the book as a critique of U.S. racial politics and American imperialism in the Caribbean region (14–15). Sean X. Goudie has read *Tropic Death* in terms of its international aspect, calling Walrond one of the forerunners of a "Caribbean American regionalism" that expands American literary geography into the Caribbean (312). Just as the creation of Toomer's *Cane* was indebted to his intra-racial intellectual exchanges with Anderson, Frank, and Brooks, *Tropic Death* owes its creation to Walrond's intra-ethnic dialogues with both African American and Caribbean intellectuals in the Harlem movement.

Born in British Guiana in 1898 and raised in Barbados and Panama, Walrond migrated to New York in 1918. In 1921 he started working as an associate editor of *Negro World*, a publication of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, an organization founded by Marcus Garvey. As articulated in his 1922 essay "Marcus Garvey—A Defense," Walrond was attracted by Garvey's emphasis on racial pride, Pan-Africanism, and his resistance to racial discrimination. However, Walrond was also antagonistic to Garvey's essentialist view of black diasporas, a view that African offspring over the world should be proud of themselves as the inheritors of African culture with the right to return to Africa, which was explicitly manifested in Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement. Walrond's opinion towards Garvey's movement is demonstrated in his 1923 writing "The New Negro Faces America," in which he states, "[T]he negroes of America do not want to go back to Africa. Though Africa, to the thinking ones, means something racial, if not spiritual, it takes the same place in the negro's 'colonization' plans as Jerusalem in the Jew's" (qtd. in Parascandola, "Look for Me All Around You" 331). Walrond did not view Africa as a 'home' to which black diasporas could return, since their ancestors had been uprooted from it and settled in another place for generations.

In *Tropic Death*, Walrond would demonstrate his view of Afro-Caribbean identity, which was characterized by fracture, plurality, and an uncertainty of origins. The same essay also shows Walrond's dissatisfaction with W.E.B. Du Bois, who was of an earlier generation and an influential critic and activist throughout the Harlem Renaissance:

Even before the death of Booker T. Washington, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, Harvard PhD., was looked upon by the negroes as an intellectual icon. But there is now a revolt against Du Bois. The new negro feels that Mr. Du Bois is too far above the masses to comprehend their desires and aspirations. His "Darkwater," they feel, is a beautiful book, but it reveals the soul of a man who is sorry and ashamed he is not white. He hates to be black. In his writings there is a stream of endless woe, the sorrow of a mulatto whose white blood hates and despises the black in him. (qtd. in Parascandola, "*Look for Me All Around You*" 332)

Walrond's critical view of Du Bois's elitism echoes the writers who belonged to the younger generation of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman, who attempted to describe the realities of African American life. Although interested in the issue of black leadership, Walrond was also concerned with the formal experimentalism and the content of literature. Thus, he criticizes Du Bois's view that black writers should think their art as "propaganda," which is illustrated in Du Bois's 1926 essay entitled "Criteria of Negro Art":

[A]ll art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. (qtd. in Sondra Kathryn Wilson 323-24)

As Parascandola observes, Walrond was discontent with Du Bois's idea because, for Walrond, "[L]iterature should be judged for its aesthetic quality, not for its political message," a direct challenge to Du Bois's propagandist view that black authors as the 'Talented Tenth,' a small number of intellectuals, should advance their race through their art (qtd. in Parascandola, "*Winds*" 16). The following words from the Guyanese modernist writer, Wilson Harris, resonate with Walrond's idea of literary aesthetics: "[P]olitical radicalism is merely a fashionable attitude unless it is accompanied by profound insights into the experimental nature of the arts and the sciences" (qtd. in Dave Gunning, "Caribbean Modernism" 910). As I will discuss later, Walrond's aesthetic approach to literature is particularly important for understanding his descriptions of the Caribbean workers, his use of folklore and English dialects, and his use of the short story cycle.

After leaving his editorial position at *Negro World*, Walrond worked from 1925 to 1927 as a business manager of *Opportunity*, a journal of the National Urban League, of which Charles S. Johnson was a chief-editor. As Parascandola notes, Walrond's involvement with *Opportunity* pushed him into the Harlem Renaissance movement (*Eric Walrond* 3). In 1925, Alain Locke published *The New Negro*, to which Walrond contributed one of his Panamanian stories, "The Palm Porch." In his essay "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," under the subtitle of "The Negro Digs Up His Past," Locke takes African culture as "the resources of racial art" for the New Negro, presenting his enthusiasm for African masks and sculptures (267). Rather than looking at how African American folk culture emerged from the history of slavery, Locke admired 'authentic' African culture as a "usable past," which is associated with Brooks's notion. On the other hand, Walrond's *Tropic Death* uses various folksongs to represent the fragmented experience of the

Caribbean community. In “The White Snake,” for example, the narrative focuses on Seenie, a woman with Hindu heritage. Outlawed by her community in Bordeaux, British Guiana, because of a forced relationship with a mulatto named Jack Captain that led to the conception of his child, Seenie lives in Waakenam, a sparsely populated isle near the Essequibo River. In this sense she evokes *Cane*’s Becky, another outcast character who lives in a cabin “on the narrow strip of land” because of a relationship with a black man, producing mixed-blood children (*Cane* 9). Unlike Becky, who remains silent through the entire story, Seenie is an agent in conveying her own voice when the words of songs “sung by the peasants of the East Coast” spontaneously rise on her lips (140):

Minnie, Minnie, come yah!

Salam-bo come yah!

Salam-Matanja, come yah!

Le’ Quackah-Tanyah, ‘tan’ dey! (“The White Snake” 140)

The phrases “come yah!” and “Salam” evoke the sense of a work song, one that would have been chanted by immigrant workers who came to the Americas through coolie trade, which began around the mid-nineteenth century, in a response to a labor shortage as a result of worldwide abolitionism, the movement to end slavery. The song evokes a sense of Seenie’s situation, as she is a member of the Asian diaspora, and thus she is able to contribute to the diversity of Caribbean culture.

It is interesting to note that before *Tropic Death*’s publication in 1926, Walrond made a favorable comment about Toomer’s *Cane* in his review of Jessie Fauset’s *There is Confusion* (1924). In the review, Walrond claims that *Cane*, which explores rural southern life, is far more advanced than Fauset’s literature on the life of the black middle-class, stating: “[*Cane*] is a sort of bridge between the old and the new Negro generations” and the book has “a shockingly esoteric nature,” being “full of beauty and passion and blackly steering clear of the inferiority complex” (qtd. in Parascandola, “*Winds*” 119–20). Walrond was attracted to Toomer’s formal experimentalism, which is characterized in its formal hybridity and its use of folk materials that are “full of beauty and passion” (qtd. in Parascandola, “*Winds*” 120). Walrond’s unconscious adaptation of the notion of an (un)/usable past in his Caribbean stories, a notion Toomer also appropriated, can function as a conceptual bridge to Toomer’s *Cane* in terms of its shared aesthetics. Yet Walrond needed to push forward with his experimentalism in order to articulate a Caribbean migration narrative as well as the community, without romanticizing and exoticizing the Caribbean people and their culture.

As stated explicitly in his “Forward,” Locke’s anthology also aimed to present “the New Negro in a national and even international scope,” which made the Caribbean presence apparent in *The New Negro* (xxvi). In his essay “Gift of the Black Tropics,” W. A. Domingo, a writer and activist from Jamaica, provides information about the 1920 census (341). He observed that of 73,803 foreign-born black people in the United States, around 37,000 black residents were living in New York City, and about 28,000 of them were in Manhattan (341). Within this number of foreign-born

black people, most were English-speaking Caribbean migrants of African descent (342). Domingo claims that West Indian workers were intelligent, skillful, and diligent, and that their language learning and communication abilities contributed to making “the union of the Pacific and the Atlantic a reality” (344). However, by emphasizing communal unity in the Panama Canal Zone, Domingo failed to write about the fragmentary nature of the Panamanian community, a collective that was forcedly created by the Canal project (344). According to Irma Watkins-Owens, from 1904 to 1914, after the American government took over the Panama Canal project, migration to Panama became a crucial part of the intra-regional migrations of Caribbean people (14). Watkins-Owens states that the Project provided the Caribbean workers with “a better opportunity for earning a living,” but it also caused them to encounter American racism (14). She remarks that in every aspect of their life, the color line was always visible, drawn as if it were the American “Deep South,” which is indicative of the proximity of economic conditions between African Americans in the South and black workers in Panama (14). Black workers were paid in Panamanian silver balboas while white American workers were paid in gold (14). Additionally, during 10 years of canal construction, Watkins-Owens observes that numerous black workers died of physical injury “through premature or delayed explosions of dynamite, asphyxiation in pits, falls from high places, train wrecks, landslides, and cascading rocks in the canal cut” (14). Unlike Domingo’s presentation of Caribbean workers in the Panamanian community, *Tropic Death*’s Caribbean is characterized by images of extreme servitude, economic difficulties, hunger, intra-racial tension, and many other sorts of suffering endured by the laboring classes, which is particularly demonstrated in its Panama stories such as “Panama Gold,” “The Wharf Rats,” and “Tropic Death.”

In “Panama Gold,” an ex-Panama Canal worker, Poyah, has lost his right leg, which prevents him from evacuating quickly from a fire. “The Wharf Rats” refers to a group of boys who dive into the sea to pick up coins that tourists throw from a sightseeing boat, which results in one of the characters, Philip, being attacked and killed by a shark. “Tropic Death,” Walrond’s autobiographical migration story from Barbados to Panama, represents Caribbean workers’ living conditions in the Panama Canal Zone through the protagonist of the story, Gerald Bright’s eyes:

Below Gerald’s porch there spread a row of lecherous huts. Down in them seethed hosts of French and English blacks. Low and wide, up around them rose the faces and flanks of tenements high as the one Gerald lived in. Circling these one-room cabins there was a strip of pavement, half of which was shared by the drains and gutters. (“Tropic Death” 180)

As the residents’ spatial positions (“below,” “down,” “low,” and “high”) implicitly demonstrate, in Gerald’s Panama the inhabitants are categorized into two types associated with either lower or higher social class: those who are forced to live in one-room cabins with poor sanitary conditions, and those who are not. Walrond’s Panama attracts a large number of workers from the neighboring countries, which causes a sense of destruction, instability, and isolation in the Caribbean community—all of this is a quintessentially modern experience that Toomer also explored, particularly through *Cane*’s uprooted characters such as Becky’s two sons, King Barlo and Kabnis.

By using Caribbean folk culture and various vernacular Englishes as an (un)/usable past, *Tropic Death* challenges Domingo's simplistic view of communities in the Panama Canal Zone, Du Bois's elitism, and Garvey's propagandist and Afro-centric view of black diasporas. Walrond's short stories allow us to gain a sense that they are loosely connected by the settings and the themes, providing an effective means in conveying the realities of the Caribbean workers and their complex relation to Caribbean communities.

Tropic Death: Merging a Hybrid Race with a Hybrid Text

As Rampersad has noted in his introduction to *Tropic Death*, Walrond's book reflects the author's ambition to fuse modernistic techniques such as fragmentary forms and stream of consciousness with "folk forms" (Rampersad 13). The "folk forms" that Walrond particularly uses in his book are folk cultures and various vernacular Englishes, which I would like to call the (un)/usable past. A Panamanian story entitled "Subjection," for example, reflects Walrond's strenuous effort to differentiate Caribbean colloquial expressions in representing the racial violence of a white U.S. marine against a half-white immigrant called Mouth, with the former having authority over the latter, a canal worker from the Island of San Andrés:

"Unna is a pack o'men, ni'," cried Ballet, outraged, "unna see de po' boy get knock' down an' not a blind one o' wanna would a len' he a han'. Unna is de mos'—"

But one man, a Bajan creole, did whip up the courage of voice. "Good God, giv' he [Mouth] a chance, ni'. Don' kick he in de head now he is 'pon de groun'—" and he quickly, at a nudge and a hushed, "Hey, wha' do you? Why yo' don't tek yo' hand out o' yo' matey' saucepan?" from the only other creole, lapsed into ruthless impassivity.

"Hey, you!" shouted Ballet at last loud enough for the Marine to hear, "why—wha' you doin'? Yo' don' know yo' killin' dat boy, ni'?" . . .

"Yo' gwine kill dat boy," said Ballet, staggering up to the marine.

"You mind yer own goddam business, Smarty, and go back to work," said the marine. He guided an unshaking yellow-spotted finger under the black's warm, dilating nostrils. "Or else —" ("Subjection" 100–101)

In the dialogue, the languages used underline the speakers' differences in race, ethnicity, and nationality, which I regard as a crucial role of the (un)/usable past.⁷⁾ The Caribbean is an experimental place where the collisions of various people and cultures produced new sorts of people, new cultures, and new languages. Language for slaves was particularly important. Slaves, who were gathered from different African tribes and transplanted in the Caribbean and the southern United States, desperately needed to create a new language through which to communicate with their masters.

Another folk form used by Walrond in his work is Obeah, a kind of folk religion that originated in West Africa and which was imported to Caribbean countries and the southern United States,

where it is still practiced today. Obeah has survived through syncretism with Christian symbolism, which demonstrates the coexistence of European and African cultures, and is thus able to represent cultural plurality around that area. In his reading of William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), Glissant has observed common cultural traits between the southern U.S. and the Caribbean: "Thought rides from one person to another, the way the loa (the divinities in the voodoo religion) ride those they have chosen to possess (*Faulkner, Mississippi* 176). Voodoo/Hoodoo rituals are, like Obeah, Afro-Caribbean religious practices spread from Caribbean countries to the United States. By using the term "composite cultures," Glissant compares the American South with the Caribbean in the light of post-colonialism:

Composite cultures were created with western expansion and out of the mingling of many contradictory atavistic cultures. They do not generate their own creation story but content themselves with adopting myths from the atavistic cultures. . . .

We can make conjectures about what these composite cultures have lost—namely, a direct experience of the sacred (the advantage of being able to assume a myth, and to have an intuitive sense of the world's creation)—and what they gain by being able to choose among many different experiences of the sacred, to mix them and, if possible, syncretize them into a new form. (*Faulkner, Mississippi* 115)

Glissant represents the American South and Caribbean counties as colonized countries, analyzing their inhabitants' fate as cultural orphans and suggesting they have to create 'their own' cultures "out of the mingling of many contradictory atavistic cultures" (*Faulkner, Mississippi* 115). In this sort of environment, unable to claim their racial and cultural purity, they accept their own identity as fragmented and hybrid—a new sort of Caribbean identity, which is now called creole or mestizo. This is Glissant's vision of cultural and historical continuity between the southern United States and the Caribbean. *Tropic Death's* folk forms further provide a way to depict the diversity of Caribbean communities in which a hybrid subjectivity emerges. This section first discusses "Drought" to see how the text, from the outset of the short story cycle, attempts to convey the diverse features of the Caribbean while showing cultural and historical proximity between the Caribbean and the southern United States. By further discussing three Panamanian stories, "Panama Gold," "The Palm Porch," and "The Wharf Rats," I will explore how these stories describe an emerging hybrid subjectivity and how their experience becomes a conceptual bridge between the Caribbean and Toomer's South.

From the outset of "Drought," the first story of the collection, *Tropic Death* makes us realize that Walrond's Caribbean is by no means the place of sunshine and blue skies that European or American people were accustomed to seeing on postcards or in travel guides at the turn of the century: "The whistle blew for eleven o'clock. Throats parched, grim, sun-crazed blacks cutting stone on the white burning hillside dropped with a clang the hot, dust-powdered drills and flew up over the rugged edges of the horizon to descent [*sic*] into a dry, waterless gut" (21). The Caribbean sun is so intense that it dries up the Barbadian land, causing chronic drought, hunger,

and death. Indeed, the protagonist of the story, Coggins Rum, loses his starving daughter after she dies from eating the stony dust produced by cutting the marl rock. The story also draws attention to the Caribbean racial caste system, which has a direct impact on Coggins's community. On the way home from his work at the quarry, Coggins passes by the rock engine where its driver, a white Englishman known as "buckra [J]ohnny," is eating meat out of coconut water (22). Next to the driver, a black worker is eating "cookoo" made with corn meal and okras (22). A black girl is standing by Johnny, which implies their intra-racial sexual relations. After introducing these characters, the narrator says "It [isn't] Sepia, Georgia, but a backwoods village in Barbadoes [*sic*]" (22), an intentional comparison with Toomer's American South. By providing the narrative setting at the outset of the story, the text implies that race relations and the oppressive suffering of black workers in Barbados are similar to the situation found in *Cane's* American South, in which some black women work for white people and others are sexually exploited, while black men work in cane fields and sawmills.

In "Drought," the narrator soon reveals how the Caribbean issues of skin color and class consciousness are more complex than in the United States. Further along on his route home, Coggins passes by a "Dutch-style cottage" owned by some Antiguan residents and a mansion surrounded by tropical flowers belonging to two "English dowager maidens" (23). Using terms such as "gap," "obstacles," or "wrestle" to contrast social and class differences, the narrator implies that black labor force at the quarry supports the luxurious lifestyles of these migrants, as well as the development of Barbados (23). By emphasizing the uneven distribution of wealth, the story highlights an economic situation that affects the fracture and plurality of the Caribbean community.

In one of the Panamanian stories, "Panama Gold," economic migration from Barbados to the Canal Zone causes conflict in a Barbadian community. The imagery of dusk, also recurrently found in *Cane* and used to represent a sense of fading in the text's southern pieces and the imagery of the temporary space in "Panama Gold," conveys a sense of fading traditional life, this time in Barbados.⁸⁾

The sun was slowly dying. Ella, a switch in her hand, rounded up her chicks. Cocks came proudly in, puffed by poise and conquest; hens, agitated, jealous of their young, clucked in—furious at the disappearance of a one-eyed one caught by the leg and dragged down the hole of a mongoose.

"Yo' go up dere, an' behave yo'self."

Swish, swish, swish . . . "Ah know you had to be last, yo' rascal yo' . . . jump inside!" Guinea fowl, swifter than a hare, wild as any of the gap's tabbies. . . .

Fishermen at Low'rd set their nets by the twilight visions, mirrored in the sky, of the lore rolling drunk on the sea's bottom. . . .

She would be alone at dusk, cooking, mixing flour or tasting broth. . . . "Why taste it, why? If no fo' me alone?" ("Panama Gold" 35)

The imagery of dusk implies that Ella's self-sufficient life undergoes a transformation. Her sparsely populated village is connected to bigger cities, and this connection makes it possible to distribute

goods, money, and people: “The broad road led to the world. Beyond Black Rock, beyond St. Michael’s to Eagle Hall Corner, and Bridgetown” from which people also migrate to Panama (42). By introducing ‘a Panama man,’ Poyah, the narrator suggests that a large number of Barbadian workers have migrated to the Panama Canal Zone, only to return as Panamanians. The mass migration to Panama causes a substantial decrease in the male population in Ella’s Barbadian community.

Through the relationship between the lighter-skinned Ella, who loves the land and respects local traditions, and the dark-skinned and disabled Poyah, who has returned to Barbados from Panama with enough money to open a shop, the narrator also informs the reader that colorism, classism, and materialism are intertwined, inevitably affecting the transformation of the people of the Caribbean. Ella rejects Poyah, who she perceives as “black in troot” (45), because she is not satisfied with his materialism, his disability, or his darker skin:

“All dem bag o’ flour yo’ a’ got, an’ dem silk shut, an’ dem gold teets, an’ dem Palama hats, yo’ a spote round heah wid—dem don’t frighten me. I is a woman what is usta t’ings. I got me hogs an’ me fowls an’ me potatoes. No wooden foot neygah man can frighten me wit’ he clothes or he barrels o’ cologne. . . .”

Yellow kerchief mopping his brow, he walked off . . . peg step, peg step . . . leaving Ella by the well, gazing with defiance in her being. (“Panama Gold” 47)

Ella’s words reflect her ambiguity toward Poyah, who has known the broader world beyond Bridgetown. Although unable to move freely anymore, Poyah is a merchant, owning his own grocery, and thus he is able to distribute goods and money. Unlike Ella, who is rooted to the land, Poyah still maintains a mobility and fluidity beyond his space. Soon after Poyah leaves, the narrator informs us that Poyah’s shop catches fire. Desperately attempting to put out the fire and find Poyah, Ella discovers only his belongings, including a straw valise, decker’s luggage, an old shirt, and a money canister, which together evoke, as Rhonda Denise Frederick says, “Poyah’s signification of U.S. industry and material goods” (68). The final scene suggests that Ella loses Poyah’s love because of her firm belief in a traditional local life and her rejection of Caribbean modernization as a result of contact with a new sort of customs and culture. By presenting intra-ethnic tension and miscommunication, the story demonstrates how Caribbean people inevitably undergo a great transformation as a result of economic immigration in the region.

The outset of “The Palm Porch” draws attention to the Panamanian landscape as transformed by machine civilization: “Below, a rock engine was crushing stone, shooting up rivers of steam and signaling the frontier’s rebirth” (85). “All, all [nature has] gone,” cries Miss Buckner, the light-skinned Jamaican mistress of a brothel, the Palm Porch, a reflection of her nostalgia for the ‘organic’ past (85). However, the story soon reveals that her nostalgia is linked to her Negrophobia. By juxtaposing the noisy “rock engine” with black people as “sons of the dusky folk,” the narrative implies that Miss Buckner attributes the destruction of the isthmus landscape to both machine civilization and blacks, which gives a reason to her colorism: After the introduction of machine

civilization, “a gang of ‘taw’-pitching boys, sons of the dusky folk seeping up from Caribbean isles, who had first painted Hudson Alley and “G” Street a dense black, and were now spreading up to the Point” (85). Miss Buckner is discontent with her daughters’ black boyfriends because she thinks they are inferior: “Silver is nigger; nigger is silver. . . . Gold is white; white is gold” (91). As Watkins-Owens notes, in the Panama Canal Zone, black workers were paid in silver even if they were skilled workers, while white workers were paid in gold, and thus the payroll was segregated based on race (14). As such, “The Palm Porch” describes how race, class, and the color line are combined, negatively affecting people’s psyches.

In his discussion of *Tropic Death’s* narrative techniques, Dave Gunning identifies the “haziness” of Walrond’s distinctive aesthetic strategy as an effective means to “capture the international dynamics that create life in the Caribbean” (152). Attributing *Tropic Death’s* “haziness” to an uncertainty of origins in the Caribbean, Gunning argues that people and places become indistinguishable and obscured (152). We can observe this when the narrator of “The Palm Porch” says:

Whether [Miss Buckner] was the result of a union of white and black, French and Spanish, English and Maroon—no one knew. Of an equally mystical heritage were her daughters, creatures of a rich and shining beauty. Of their father the less said the better. And in the absence of data tongues began to wag. . . . The prudent Miss Buckner, who had a burning contempt for statistics, was a trifle hazy about the whole thing. (“The Palm Porch” 90–91)

Gunning links Miss Buckner’s uncertain racial identity to Panamanian cosmopolitanism (152). However, by limiting his analysis to the Caribbean archipelago, Gunning fails to see *Tropic Death’s* expansive geography as part of the southern United States, which makes Walrond’s short story cycle more cosmopolitan and international. I suggest that Walrond’s use of “haziness” (Gunning 152) echoes Toomer’s sense of wonder when he encountered ‘a white girl’ in Sparta, Georgia: “If a white girl is colored, who is white? . . . What an incredibly entangled situation the racial situation is in the United States” (qtd. in Whalan 205). As Whalan notes, Toomer’s project in *Cane* was to find a new word to represent the “white girl” whose genealogy, like his own, would reflect an “incredibly entangled” racial situation in the United States (qtd. in Whalan 205). On the contrary, in the Caribbean this had long been a common situation, so that gradations of skin tone became important. In “The Palm Porch,” the narrator ironically informs us that “Miss Buckner would have liked to be white; but alas! She [is] only a mulatto” (90). The narrator also says that people in her community had never heard of Miss Buckner and her five daughters before they moved in to the Palm Porch, emphasizing their hazy and uncertain past. In its explicit mocking tone, however, I suggest that rather than insisting on a Garveyan blackness and emphasizing white European ancestry in genealogies, Walrond’s writing attempts to represent a new subjectivity as an uncertainty of origins that emerged from “the estuary of the Americas” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 139). The final Panama story I discuss is “The Wharf Rats,” which unfolds through the notion of “haziness” (Gunning 152) as a vehicle to convey Caribbean hybridity.

In “The Wharf Rats,” workers are gathered from “the four ends of the earth”: “Down in the Cut drifted hordes of Italians, Greeks, Chinese, Negroes—a hardy, sun-defying set of white, black and yellow men” (67). But the majority of workers who actually dig the canal are “the dusky peons of those coral isles in the Caribbean ruled by Britain, France, and Holland” (67). The story soon shows how the Canal Zone is segregated by racial borders:

At the Atlantic end of the Canal the blacks were herded in boxcar huts buried in the jungles of “Silver City”; in the murky tenements perilously poised on the narrow banks of Faulke’s River; in the low, smelting cabins of Coco Té. The “Silver Quarters” harbored the inky ones, their wives and pickaninnies. (“The Wharf Rats” 67)

As the terms “murky,” “perilously,” and “narrow” indicate, the narrative attempts to emphasize black workers’ terrible living conditions in Silver City. American mistreatment of black workers informs the reader that there is a sort of continuity between the Panama Canal Zone and the southern United States, in which racial segregation is legally enacted. Walrond blurs the conceptual borders between the Deep South and the Caribbean region so that the story can convey shared cultural patterns such as racial discrimination, racial segregation, and the mistreatment of black workers in the two areas. In so doing, the text expands its literary geography to the worlds of Toomer’s American South. Additionally, the story represents Silver City as a festive and hybrid space:

As it grew dark the hewers at the Ditch, exhausted, half-asleep, naked but for wormy singlets, would hum queer creole tunes, play on guitar or piccolo, and jig to the rhythm of the *coombia*. It was a *brujeiral* chant, for *obeah*, a heritage of the French colonial, honeycombed the life of the Negro laboring camps. Over smoking pots, on black, death-black nights legends of the bloodiest were recited till they became the essence of a sort of Negro Koran. (“The Wharf Rats” 67)

The story introduces Caribbean workers’ ability to acclimatize themselves to their new surroundings. This scene evokes the emergence of plantation culture in slavery. As Barbara Bush notes, in plantations, diasporic African slaves shared “the basic rhythms (and some musical instruments) derived from Africa,” which were “fused with the instruments and rhythms of the cultures” with which the African slaves interacted in the Americas (19). By blurring ethnic differences between the Caribbean workers, Walrond’s aesthetics of “haziness” (Gunning 152) can represent Coco Té in Silver City as a place of “relationships” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 139), where people from various Caribbean isles meet, interact, and create hybrid cultures.

Coco Té also produces a hybrid race. Living between various cultures, people naturally accept the ambiguous and indistinguishable cultural patterns which I perceive as indicative of a creole subjectivity, a hybrid race with uncertain origins. A St. Lucian coal passer, Jean Baptiste, frequently goes to the obeah “meeting” held at the English Plymouth Brethren church in the Spanish city of Colón (69). Jean Baptiste’s association with Obeah and the English church implies his simultaneous acceptance of two or more cultures, rendering him hybrid. However, the story also

shows how the new subjectivity in the Caribbean is produced by a history of slavery and intra-regional migrations propelled by the Panama Canal Project. By referring to other St. Lucian workers and the two European nations, which dominated the Atlantic slave trade, the narrator indicates that Jean Baptiste's self-recognition reflects the shared collective memory of slavery and economic migrations throughout the circum-Caribbean region: "Like a host of the native St. Lucian emigrants, Jean Baptiste forgot where the French in him ended and the English began" (68).

Until the Treaty of Paris in 1814, which regulated England's control over St. Lucia, the nation had been ruled by both France and England. Thus even though he was raised in the Anglophone Caribbean, Jean Baptiste is, as his French name suggests, inevitably affected by Francophone culture as well. His family members' identities are also fractured and hybrid. Jean Baptiste's Martinique-born second wife, Celestin, goes to the obeah meeting with him, but secretly goes to the Catholic Church as well. Jean Baptiste and Celestin live with Maffi, a black Trinidadian maid, who sneaks out to an obeah meeting at night, which implies her practice of magic. Maura, who has reddish yellow skin, has been raised as Jean Baptiste's daughter, and she loves San Tie, the son of a Chinese beer seller and a Jamaican Maroon. Philip, Jean Baptiste's eldest son, serves as a messenger for Maura, bringing news of San Tie, who is often away working or hunting, and at times simply loitering. When Maura is at home, she often asks Maffi about Philip's whereabouts, as he is the one person able to contact San Tie on her behalf. However, her frequent questions annoy Maffi:

"Maffi," [Maura] cried, the words smoky on her lips, "Maffi, when Philip come in to-night tell 'im I want fo' see 'im particular, yes?"

"*Sacre gache!* All de time Philip, Philip!" growled the Trinidad girl, as Maura, in heartaching preoccupation, sped towards the lawn. "Why she no le' 'im alone, yes?" And with a spatter she flecked the hunk of lard on Jean Baptiste's stewing okras. (70-71)

The narrator later tells us that Philip is killed by a shark while collecting coins that European tourists have thrown into the sea from the deck of a sightseeing boat. However, the narrator does not merely suggest that Philip's death is caused by white tourism, capitalism, and the economic exploitation of the Caribbean workers, but also hints towards obeah as a factor. In the final scene, the narrative represents Maffi polishing tinware and humming an obeah melody (83):

Trinidad is a damn fine place
But *obeah* down dey. . . .

Peace had come to her at last. ("The Wharf Rats" 83)

The final sentence, "Peace had come to her at last," implies the shark attack is the result of Maffi's obeah magic rather than an accident associated with unequal wealth and economic conditions between Caribbean people and Euro-American travelers. Although the text does not explicitly represent why Maffi wants to use obeah magic to hurt Philip, the last sentence suggests a motive in the form of relief for Maffi from Maura's incessant harassment. Again, Walrond uses his aesthetics

of “haziness,” obscurity, or ambiguity here (Gunning 152). In part, this scene reflects Walrond’s literary aesthetics as a member of the younger generation of the Harlem Renaissance, who rejected the Du Boisian idea that black writers should create their art for propagandistic purposes. Rather than simply criticizing American imperialism and its expansionism, by drawing attention to fractured and plural Panamanian communities, *Tropic Death* reconfigures people of the Caribbean as hybrid creole subjects.

* * * * *

Tropic Death demonstrates that the Caribbean is not monolithic but hybrid, while expanding its literary geography to Toomer’s American South. However, *Tropic Death* does not uncritically celebrate the hybrid Caribbean subjects because they are forcedly produced by a history of slavery and the new economic system. Nevertheless, we can appreciate Walrond’s radicalism, which represented the Caribbean as racially and culturally hybrid in the 1920s when Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement propagated in the Americas, and Harlem writers questioned the black-white binary through creating narratives of racial passing. Toomer used the esoteric form because it was the only way to appropriate Brooks’s concept of “a usable past.” For Walrond, the short story cycle was also a crucial part of his describing Caribbean subjectivity. Even though they differed in both nationality and ethnicity, and there is no evidence that they actually met, Toomer’s and Walrond’s shared interest in the short story cycle allowed them to represent the emerging new self in the Americas and reconfigure the Harlem Renaissance as a more international, cosmopolitan movement.

Notes

- 1) Toomer himself admitted his indebtedness to Anderson’s writing for his artistic maturing. See Charles Scruggs, “Textuality and Vision in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” 93; Mark Whalan 123–47; Linda Wagner-Martin 20.
- 2) Toomer’s notion of a new American race, which includes plural racial and cultural heritages, resonates with the work of a critic belonging to the Young America movement, Randolph Bourne, who attempted to resituate a new American identity in his essay “Trans-National America” (1916). In George Hutchinson’s words, Bourne’s seminal essay presents a vision “in which different ethnic identities would be joined in a cosmopolitan federation” (Hutchinson 103). However, Bourne’s pluralist agenda does not include the most marginalized people of his era: African Americans. *Cane* indicates Toomer’s radicalism because the emergence of a new hybrid race inevitably entails interracial marriage/relationships, a social taboo in the years around the two great wars and a legal issue as outlined in the 1924 Racial Integral Act, which prohibited interracial marriage and classified American citizens into only two groups: black and white.
- 3) For other studies that have mentioned the Toomer-Walrond connection, for example, see Stephens 173 and Brown 41.
- 4) Whalan has also explored Toomer’s interracial intellectual exchanges with Anderson and Frank. See Whalan, *Race*.
- 5) Toomer to the editors of *The Liberator*, August 19, 1922, qtd. in *Cane*, 154–56.
- 6) Jennifer D. Williams also suggests that Toomer’s use of black music such as the spirituals and blues are

a “repository of cultural memory.” See Williams 90.

- 7) Black writers’ use of vernacular languages in their writing is an issue that needs to be considered a little more. Michael North has argued that American modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein thought dialect English as compatible with their high modernist aesthetics, which could create a new sort of literature (North 3–34). Walrond’s *Tropic Death* was ironically accepted in this cultural landscape because, as David Levering Lewis has remarked, *Tropic Death*’s West Indian vernacular was so foreign to his contemporary readers that the text was “neither familiar nor respectable in upper-crust Harlem” (Lewis 189). Hutchinson has also mentioned Waldo Frank’s negative review of *Tropic Death*. See Hutchinson 200.
- 8) Catherine L. Innes has discussed the recurrent imagery of dusk in *Cane*. See Innes 307.

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