

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

Daniella Gáti
Bern, Switzerland

Abstract: This article investigates the subliminal anxiety concerning African American identity and origin developed by the poems in Jean Toomer's *Cane*. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of the specter, I argue that these poems act as specters in that they enact and embody the South as a harmonious African American land of origin while simultaneously negating the possibility of its present or past existence. In doing so, the poems reframe African American longing for a point of origin into a haunting, anxious but impossible desire. Predicated on absence, the longed-for South (re)emerges as a sensual experience in the *Cane* poems, which manifests and negates the wished-for but unattainable original condition. Thus, the longing for a point of origin as well as its object—the American South—become Derridean specters, which inescapably challenge the foundations of African American identity while simultaneously constituting its core. In this light, the absence of previous critical investigation of the *Cane* poems becomes telling. The analysis of the function of the *Cane* poems reveals what other considerations will inevitably conceal: The United States' past has not been and cannot be able to provide a solid and anxiety-free foundation for the identity of the nation's African American citizens.

The poems of Jean Toomer's literary masterpiece *Cane* represent an unusual view on its central theme of African American identity and heritage. Published in 1923 and considered one of the main works of the Harlem Renaissance, *Cane* has given rise to many critical disputes due to its experimental form and structure. It is a collection of prose pieces, sketches, and poems that are very diverse in style and genre but are unified by their overarching concern with the African American experience in the South and the North. The constituting pieces themselves are difficult to categorize generically, and the entirety of *Cane* has never allowed a stable categorization into one genre or another (cf. Beal). The most overt reason for this, as has overwhelmingly been recognized, is that, while its parts are so different

Daniella Gáti

formally, *Cane* is still unambiguously one unified whole because of the clear connection of its parts in terms of theme.

Given this thematic unity, it logically follows that any wholesale reading of *Cane* should attempt to account for how its various smaller pieces work together in different ways to achieve the book's overall effect. As I will show, however, the poems have received far less critical attention than the short stories.¹ My article aims to bridge this gap by investigating the contribution of the poems to *Cane*'s central theme and by suggesting that it is the spectral nature of this contribution that has caused the poems' neglect in critical discourse.

While *Cane*'s short stories employ plot and structural devices to depict the effects of longing and searching for racial identity on African American characters, the poems resort to other means to explore and further deepen this question. The short stories intellectualize the problem to the extent that they make visible how characters respond to it and attempt to cope with it; the poems, however, use a second, subtler strategy, which allows further insights into the question of identity. In order to elucidate this strategy, it is useful to apply Jacques Derrida's concept of the specter because it is a theoretical construct that uses its own elusiveness as a tool for interrogating issues that are themselves resistant to more traditional means of analysis. However, given the complexity of Derrida's concept of the specter, I commence with outlining what is to be understood as the specter before I elaborate on how I use this concept on the *Cane* poems and what this application yields.

My article is an attempt to demonstrate that with the help of Derrida's specter the self-concealing function of the *Cane* poems can be clarified. After a brief introduction to Derrida's specter, I investigate what haunts, that is, what images of the South as homeland and trauma the poems present as *revenants* along the reading trajectory in *Cane*. Then, I analyze the poems' spectral work: how they assume "flesh and phenomenality" (Derrida 5) so as to 'become the body' of this haunting by affecting the senses rather than the intellect. Lastly, given an understanding of the contradictory nature of the poems as specters, I examine the response of critical readers to *Cane*. Ultimately, I aim to show that the poems' spectrality and the lack of reader response to it have their own, hitherto ignored, implications for the question of African American identity and racial heritage: that what lies at the foundations of African American identity is not a shared ideal site of origin but the mournful longing for it. Where harmonious roots for identity are sought, what appears is the specter.

1 In this essay, I will use the term 'short story' to cover any work in *Cane* that is not a poem. Although this is an oversimplification, it still makes sense in the given context since my focus lies on the poems and it would be confusing and unnecessary to follow up on a generic discussion of the non-poems in *Cane*.

THE DERRIDEAN SPECTER

Derrida draws up his concept of the specter in *Specters of Marx* based on a reading of *Hamlet's* ghost. In essence, he identifies the specter as the “being-there of an absent or departed one” (5): Its core constituent is that it is the appearance of what is not, or at least what is not there. In short, the specter is the presence of absence. It is the emphasis on this central paradox, along with its far-reaching consequences, that distinguishes Derrida's specter from other ghosts. ‘Ordinary’ ghosts usually represent departed ones and hence focus on the mourning for those departed. Thus, Jennifer D. Williams, referencing Freud, talks of specters as mourning when she observes that “[f]or those [...] who continue to grieve, the lost object lingers as a *specter* in the ego, ensuring that the *vestiges of the past persist in the present*” (89; my emphases).² While mourning does have a role for Derrida, the Derridean specter is more concerned with the questions arising from the central paradox of present absence. These are questions of the specter's identity, its material and temporal status—questions that confront the beholder of the apparition due to the unsettling apparition of what should no longer be able to appear. Thus, in his reading of *Hamlet*, Derrida focuses more on the beholders' attempts to grasp the meaning of the appeared dead than on the grief of the prince over his lost father. For instance, Derrida details the guards' and Horatio's combined attempts to assign an ontological status to the appeared specter and Hamlet's interrogation of Horatio in order to determine what the specter is and how it can be that it has appeared (5-8). The central feature of Derrida's specter, then, is the ontological and epistemic challenge it presents to its beholder.

The specter's challenge arises on the one hand from the paradoxical nature of its appearance and on the other from the conditions that call it into being—what Derrida calls the “*three things of the thing*” (9). In terms of its appearance, the specter is troubling to the beholder because it upsets notions of what is and what is not, what we can grasp and understand, as well as what past and present are. In short, it questions presence both in a material and in a temporal sense. Because it has appeared, it is certainly materially present; yet its precise material constitution is questionable and uncertain. Derrida writes:

It is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. (5)

2 Cf. also the psychoanalytical strand of specter theory, most prominently Abraham and Torok.

Daniella Gáti

One does not know, and yet it is there. The beholder is, therefore, confronted with something that can neither be defined nor discarded. Furthermore, in terms of temporality, the specter is equally dubitable. Because it is what is absent, what has existed in an earlier time, the now present spectral being does not really belong to the present time. Thus, not only is the idea challenged that the past is a closed entity that we have left behind but the sense of the present is also destabilized because it can no longer be regarded as a known and identifiable unity.

What is so troubling to the beholder of the specter in terms of its appearance is that although there appears to be no way of defining what it is and where it is in time, it still cannot be dismissed because it has appeared. The encounter with the specter, then, is a powerful invitation to engage with what we cannot know but cannot dismiss as unimportant; but this is an invitation that is rather imperative because the specter has come seemingly without being called for and now that it is there, it will not leave. With specters, Derrida contends, it is always “[a] question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*” (11), that is, a returner. Therefore, he adds that “[o]ne cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*” (11). The specter, then, is an apparition that not only cannot be identified or categorized but also cannot be discarded—neither at the time of its appearance nor at any other time in past or future. It is constituted by the fact that it always returns.

Why would such a specter ever appear? What causes it? Why can it not be dispelled? Derrida explains that—although the specter looks as though it were an external force—it is in fact internal to the identity of its beholder. This means that the absence it consists of is one that is central to its beholder—that is, the specter is the beholder. Three things, Derrida ascertains, characterize this central absence: These are the “*three things of the thing*” (9), which originate from inside the individual and summon an ostensibly external being. Mourning is the first of these, the second is language, and the third is work. Mourning “consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present,” Derrida writes (9). It is evident, therefore, that, as with other ghosts, grief over a lost person or object plays an important role for Derridean specters. Yet the main significance of mourning for Derrida is not the emotion of sorrow but rather the attempt “to ontologize” (9), which he also calls an “irrepressible desire for identification” (11) and which he diagnoses so acutely in his reading of Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo’s struggles with this uncanny and unknown presence, the specter. It is not the grief itself that makes an external apparition materialize but rather the radical alterity of the ontological status of the person or object lost.

The second condition is that of language. In what follows, however, I will not deal with this condition at length because of its lack of usefulness for my purposes. In essence, it means that “one cannot speak of generations of skulls or spirits [...] except

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

on the condition of language” (Derrida 9). Yet this condition seems to ignore that it is difficult to speak of anything at all—not only skulls and spirits—on any other condition than on that of language. Thus, this concept is difficult to operationalize for any practical purpose. This is all the more true for literature since it is by definition the art form that communicates in language par excellence, and so the condition of language is one that any literary text will trivially fulfill.

The third of Derrida’s “*three things of the thing*” is work (9). “[T]he thing *works*,” Derrida observes, “the ‘spirit of the spirit’ is *work*” (9). The sheer existence of the specter is preconditioned by the fact that it do something, namely that it return and haunt. Derrida quotes Paul Valéry in connecting the fact that “‘*the spirit . . . works*’” with “‘a certain *power of transformation*’” (qtd. in Derrida 9). Earlier in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida defines the relation of the spirit to the specter. “[T]he specter,” he writes, “is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. [...] [I]t is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition” (5). In other words, the spirit, which is embodied by the specter, is animated by the work of transformation. There is no spirit or specter of a lost or departed one unless there is some work, or something at work, within the bereaved person that is of an ontological (and hence mournful) nature. It is this work that transforms the spirit (absence, loss) into a seemingly external being (the specter). Thus, the first and third conditions are intricately connected: If, as Derrida states, the mourning is of an ontological nature, then it is by construction “the *work* of mourning” (9; my emphasis) so that there is automatically a spirit, a transformation, and, hence, a specter.

Consequently, if the specter, appearing as an external force and yet being in essence summoned by its beholder, actually is that absence that is so central to and within its beholder, this questions the distinction between haunting specter and haunted beholder itself. The destabilizing work of the specter does not simply concern an external object or being, which the individual could be puzzled by but then turn away from and know his or her own identity unharmed. Instead, the identity of the beholder him-/herself becomes uncertain. This helps explain why the specter cannot be dismissed as this would mean the dismissal of one’s own identity itself. In this way, the specter cannot but return without end—and, as evidenced by the fact that it “*begins by coming back*” (Derrida 11), without beginning. Thus, in sum, Derrida’s specter is an eternally present absence, challenging the person to whom it appears not only because it is itself unidentifiable but because it destabilizes the identity of the beholder him-/herself.

Given this understanding of the Derridean concept of the specter, it is possible to conceive the *Cane* poems as specters and to use this model to gain new insights into

Daniella Gáti

the question of African American identity, which they thematize. There are three basic ways in which the poems are specters, to each of which I devote one section of this article. First, by depicting the ‘lost’ original condition of the American South at various stages of the reader’s journey through *Cane*, the poems keep appearing and reappearing like *revenants* in order to confront the reader again and again with images of the longed-for idealized site of African American origin. In this way, the reading experience of *Cane* is constituted as the experience of being haunted by a specter whose “comings and goings” (Derrida 11) cannot be controlled.

Second, instead of activating the domains of reason and logic, the poems work with the senses and sensations, assuming a “flesh and phenomenality” (Derrida 5) and so ‘performing’ the longed-for original African American experience. The spectral work, then, that the poems of *Cane* carry out is the transformation of the spirit, that is, of the longed-for original African American experience, into a form of “flesh and phenomenality” that constitutes the specter. The poems invoke this “flesh and phenomenality” by impressing upon the senses the sensual experience of longing. The nostalgia felt for African American roots is worked into physically tangible or visible experience, which the structural depiction of characters is unable to achieve. Thus the poems are literally “the becoming-body” (Derrida 5) of a haunting longing for the roots of African American identity, focusing on the essence and character of the longing itself rather than on the characters working their way around it.

Third, the poems are characterized by absence. This is a point that will occupy me throughout all sections and that has a paramount implication in terms of reader reception, on which I elaborate in the final section. What comprises the center of the longed-for object in *Cane* is a harmonic, communal black Southern experience that is able to constitute a heritage and lay the foundations of an identity. Yet such an unproblematic experience has never existed; it is absent. Paradoxically, the roots of the African American experience lie in slavery—a painful and destructive background, which can barely be drawn upon as the common foundation of a harmonious racial identity. Hence, the nostalgia inherent in the haunting longing cannot but be illusory: A sentimental, noble South cannot be attained because it has never existed. The center of the ever-present, haunting longing is an absence. This absence is explicitly reflected by the poems themselves: In them, the inability of the South to constitute an ideal homeland for African Americans is powerfully expressed by images of pain, loss, and violence often side by side with objects of longing. Thus, the poems as *revenant* specters haunt with both the nostalgia for idealized roots and an overt awareness of the original trauma, which renders the haunting longing ultimately obsessive.

Yet the poems are themselves largely absent from critical investigation. Consequently, the centrality of absence in the longing for an ancestral African

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

American condition has also received little recognition. As I will elaborate in the third section of my article, while *Cane* has been the subject of many readings, it is predominantly the short stories that have received the majority of critical attention. If the poems act as specters, then despite their “being-there” (5) and although they work, they are invisible: In Derrida’s terms, the “[t]hing is [...] invisible, it is *nothing* visible” (5). Thus, it should not surprise that readers of *Cane* have had a hard time identifying the poem-specters and how they function. Indeed, this is a strategy of the poems themselves: They make tangible to the senses the haunting feeling of controversial longing for racial roots, but they are elusive to critical investigation and categorization. They disappear from the reader’s conscious attention to inflict their work in the subconscious, more emotional realm. Thus the poems work to reveal—and at the same time conceal—the very question of the mournful but paradoxical search for roots that called them into being. This could explain why the issue of the absence of harmonious African American roots has gone unnoticed in so much of the critical discourse on *Cane*.

WHAT HAUNTS: *REVENANT* SPECTERS OF NOSTALGIA AND IMPOSSIBILITY

The poems in *Cane* work around the issue of a haunting longing for an original African American experience by representing and problematizing the longed-for condition. Their primary characteristic is that, as the reader progresses through *Cane*, they make the object of longing materialize again and again by evoking the images of a harmonious, original African American condition, which can constitute a shared heritage and hence serve as roots for African American identity. Between the short stories, the poems appear and reappear as yet another embodiment of this longed-for original condition. In other words, they perform the ever-repeating return of the specter of the African American past. The reader is thus constantly reminded that although the short stories may have progressed to the North or to the cities, the longed-for South always keeps reemerging in the mind. However, by evoking, often side by side, images of communal culture as well as those of rupture and pain, the poems contrast the nostalgic harmony and the violence inherent in the original experience of African Americans in the South. It is not only the images of harmony that return to haunt but also those of pain and rupture. This makes the eternal return of mournful longing paradoxical not only because its object is partly painful and terrible but also because its harmonic side is rendered doubtful by its coexistence with violence. Given this, the fact that the poems continue to forever evoke the South highlights the obsessiveness of the specter: It is a specter whose haunting object of

Daniella Gáti

longing is both ancestral and traumatic, and it is a specter that keeps returning both because of the harmony and because of the trauma.

The reading experience of *Cane* is constituted, in Toomer's own well-known view, as a journey from the South to the North and back to the South again (Bowen 15). It is between the stages of this journey that the poems appear and reappear, recalling again and again the South and the Southern condition as a haunting original stage for African Americans. Out of sixteen poems, including the opening epigraph, only five can be argued to not explicitly invoke the South and its African American experience. These are "Nullo,"³ "Evening Song," "Beehive," "Storm Ending," and "Her Lips Are Copper Wire." Nonetheless, out of these, I believe that only "Evening Song" and "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" can be interpreted as entirely detached from issues of African American identity; the other three can easily be connected to these questions. "Nullo" and "Storm Ending" belong to a specific category, which I will discuss later, that deals with nature as a basic organizing principle of the African American heritage. "Beehive" has other reasons to be tied to the South: Apart from mentioning "black" (1) and "farmyard flower" (14), it is constituted of the central images of black bees at work, which is difficult not to connect with slaves at work in the fields. Thus, with the exception of two poems, all poems in *Cane* act as *revenants* by centering on and emphasizing the different facets of the black Southern experience.

"Reapers," "Cotton Song," and "Harvest Song," but also to some extent "November Cotton Flower," focus on the work in the fields. In particular, they emphasize or, in the case of "Harvest Song," problematize the communal experience of such work, which is an important aspect of what is desirable in the black Southern experience. "Reapers," the first poem after the opening epigraph, emphasizes the repetitive and continual aspect of the slaves' work. Work is naturalized as "a thing that's done" (3), as something that will "continue" (8) even in spite of an obstruction such as the death of a field rat. Alliteration ("the sound of steel on stones" [1]) and rhythm ("one by one" [4]) underline the repetition inherent in field work. This repetitive, hard work is made bearable only by its constitution as a communal practice by the slaves through the means of work songs. As pointed out by H. William Rice, the depiction of such an ancestral communal experience is the function of "Cotton Song," which reworks the traditional call-and-response pattern in black American work songs to portray a mutually constructed and hence more bearable work experience (596). In

3 Throughout this essay, numbers in parentheses refer to the lines of the poems. The cited poems are: "Beehive" (page 48), "Reapers" (page 3), "November Cotton Flower" (page 4), "Song of the Son" (page 12), "Georgia Dusk" (page 13), "Storm Ending" (page 49), "Nullo" (page 18), "Face" (page 8), "Portrait in Georgia" (page 27), "Cotton Song" (page 9), and "Harvest Song" (page 69). The opening epigraph, which is also quoted in this study, is located on the title page and thus has neither title nor page number.

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

“November Cotton Flower,” it is the aesthetic perception of a cotton flower blooming out of season that is communal in nature. The fact that “[o]ld folks were startled” (10) leads to a change in superstition, a shared trait of the entire community itself: “Superstition saw / Something it had never seen before” (11-12). What the poems “Reapers,” “Cotton Song,” and “November Cotton Flower” do, then, is to construct an image of slave work in the fields that constitutes a site of longing because it is made harmonious by an emphasis on its communal nature.

“Song of the Son” (SoS) and “Georgia Dusk” (GD) also carry elements of work, but they highlight a different facet of the black Southern experience. Work and the objects related to it—such as “plowed lands” (GD 11) or “land and soil” (SoS 6), “sawdust” (SoS 2), “buzz-saws” (GD 9), “pine-smoke” (SoS 3), and “[s]moke” (GD 13)—contribute to constructing an image of Georgia as a place of everyday activity and economic prowess. This is combined with an abundance of natural imagery. There are fruits—“plums” (16) and “plum” (19) in “Song of the Son” and the “early promise of a bumper crop” (12) in “Georgia Dusk”—“sun” and “sun is setting” (GD 2; SoS 11); “pine” (GD 21), “pines” (GD 26; SoS 7), “pine-needles” (GD 22), and “pine-smoke” (SoS 3); and images of the land and the sky (GD 1, 11; SoS 6, 11). Thus, the overall impression is that of a land viewed from some distance, maybe from a hilltop, characterized by quiet but assiduous everyday life and a haunting natural beauty. Read in this context, “Nullo” and “Storm Ending,” which do not explicitly refer to Georgia or the South, also contribute motifs of nature to this general image of a peaceful land of harmonic artisanship and overwhelming beauty. The “spray of pine-needles” (1) and “western horizon gold” (2) of “Nullo,” as well as the descriptions in “Storm Ending” of “[t]hunder blossoms” as “gorgeously above our heads” (1) and the rain as “golden honey” (8), suggest a sublimely beautiful landscape remote from the cruelties of human civilization. The beauty and apparent peacefulness, however, are not unproblematic—an issue I will return to below.

A third and last facet of what constitutes a *revenant* in the poems in *Cane* is the image of the African American slave woman. In two poems, “Face” (F) and “Portrait in Georgia” (PG), the image of the woman returns and reappears as something pale, worn, and ghostly. Both poems use the same strategy of naming a body part and then relating to an object or an effect with it; for instance, both commence with “Hair—” followed by an evocation, which is “braided chestnut” in “Portrait in Georgia” (1) and “silver-gray” in “Face” (2). Therefore, one image after the other appears and then slips away, uncalled for and uncontrolled like a ghost. Furthermore, both poems emphasize the everyday wear as well as the looming violent death of the African American slave woman. Wear is witnessed by, amongst others, the images of “old scars” as the woman’s lips (PG 4) and by the brows wrinkling in “ripples blown by pain” (F 6), while

Daniella Gáti

the woman's hair and body are linked with the probability of violent death, the "lyncher's rope" (2) or the "black flesh after flame" (7) in "Portrait in Georgia." In only a few lines and almost entirely without action, these two poems summarize the fundamentals of slavery: the omnipresent possibility of degradation and violence and, at best, slow decay through the everyday experience of hardship and suffering. Women appear to focalize the experience of slavery; indeed, this witness aspect of the experience of women leads Williams to conclude that "black women in the book animate the parting soul of slavery" (89). Thus, by evoking these women, "Face" and "Portrait in Georgia" evoke the "soul of slavery" (89) itself. In the manner of specters, then, these two poems conjure up images of the past condition of slavery even as the reader progresses away from the slave-holding South toward the urban North.

In highlighting the different facets of the African American experience in the South above, I have progressed from the most harmonic to the more and more problematic poems. Indeed, the nostalgic longing for an original African American condition is revealed in the poems as an increasingly problematic issue. While almost no critic has failed to note the melancholia and yearning in *Cane*, the Southern experience also innately entails a further aspect and hence the longing for it rests on an intrinsic problem. The problem arises from the stark contrast in which such harmonious images stand to the violence that is inherent in the Southern system—a violence that renders nostalgia and identification with the system paradoxical and absurd. In fact, nostalgic longing becomes all the more obsessive because of this contrast: It represents a longing for something that should not be longed for. It is a longing that becomes all the stronger because it exists in spite of itself.

The poems in *Cane* clearly point to this paradox by juxtaposing harmonic elements with depictions of violence and rupture. While some poems are predominantly beautiful, others introduce subtle but unmistakable elements of brutality or pain, and some of them display the most poignant beauty side by side with the most appalling violence. In "Song of the Son," although African Americans are described as "[a] song-lit race" (12), this race is still a "race of slaves" (12); the "Negro slaves" (16) are still "dark purple ripened plums, / *Squeezed*" (16-17; my emphasis) and the very soul of the soil is "plaintive" (14). When the repetitive, everyday motions in "Reapers" do not even pause as a result of an animal's death but continue relentlessly, this is a clear indication of the extent to which death and the infliction of pain have been internalized as a natural part of the system. Indeed, Rachel Farebrother points to the important role of mechanization in the violence of the South. Importantly, she argues, it is not the mechanization of industry and technology predominant in the North that is problematic. Rather, it is mechanized behavior and the resulting determinism in the South that causes inevitable catastrophe. Paraphrasing Michael North, Farebrother

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

describes this phenomenon in connection with the short story "Blood-Burning Moon" in writing that "Toomer describes the unthinking violence of the white mob as a wordless, mechanized hum that rolls forward uncontrollably, breaking everything in its path" (511-12). It is this kind of mechanized behavior that the killing of the field rat and the relentless continuation of work afterward constitute.

Yet that the violence in the South is not simply mundane but is instead of a deeply shocking nature is made clear by the allusions in "Georgia Dusk." When the sky "darkens for night's barbecue" (4), it is difficult not to think of the charred body of some fugitive slave who may have become, as the next lines state, a "feast of moon and men and barking hounds, / An orgy for some genius of the South / With blood-hot eyes" (5-7). The 'portrait poems' "Face" and "Portrait in Georgia" are even more explicit in their evocation of the violence done to African Americans in slavery. While "Portrait in Georgia" specifically mentions two brutal ways of white racist murder, lynching and burning, in lines 2 and 7 ("lyncher's rope" and "black flesh after flame"), "Face" enumerates the effects that the brutality of the everyday has on a black woman. The woman's brows are "quivered by the ripples blown by pain" (6), her "muscles / are cluster grapes of sorrow" (10-11), and her eyes are a "mist of tears" (8). The poem also suggests that the 'ripening' that African Americans undergo in slavery—such as when they become "ripened plums" in "Song of the Son" (16)—is not a maturing but rather a rotting process. This suggestion becomes evident when, as a result of her sorrows, the woman described in "Face" turns "nearly ripe for worms" (13).

Furthermore, "Portrait in Georgia" unequivocally points out that these sorrows are not restricted to individuals but pertain to everybody and constitute the very foundations of the South. This is achieved in two ways: The title being "Portrait in Georgia," not "*A* Portrait in Georgia," suggests that any portrait painted in Georgia would have to look the same because the experience is common to everyone. In addition, it is not clear whether the person painted is black or white since her body is "white as the ash / of black flesh after flame" (6-7). This indicates that neither black nor white are unaffected by the violence of lynching and burning. William M. Ramsey makes the same point about the short story "Blood-Burning Moon." He argues that there is a common, unifying force that controls the entire South and acts as an organizing principle to the actions of blacks and whites. "Blood-Burning Moon," he writes, "is really about the mystical unity of its black and white characters. All are simultaneously animated by one, overarching, weird force that binds them in mutual interconnectedness and interdependence" (85). It is clear, then, that, be it mechanized into appearing natural or overtly shocking in its gruesomeness, violence is something that constitutes the very core of Southern people's existence, whether as victims or oppressors.

Daniella Gáti

Thus, it is apparent that the poems in *Cane* do not portray a naively harmonic, idealized South that can unproblematically constitute the roots of an African American heritage and the basis for African American racial identity. Instead, since the longing for such a heritage and identity cannot be vanquished, it becomes a painful, impossible longing, which is all the more obsessive because it is impossible. I maintain, then, that the poems in *Cane* act as specters, which appear and reappear to haunt the mind with the longing for a never-existent original African American condition. Their key feature is that they reoccur along the reading trajectory, calling into mind again and again the desired harmony and beauty of the African American past. This desire, however, is transformed into obsession as its object is revealed as painful and violent. Thus, the longing is rendered impossible and absurd.

“FLESH AND PHENOMENALITY”: THE POEMS’ SENSUALITY

In line with Derrida’s theory, if the poems are *revenant* forms of the longing for a racial identity and origin, then this requires that they assume some kind of “flesh and phenomenality” (5). The question that naturally arises is how they achieve this. This is all the more important to note because it is not clear a priori why this would be a particular feature pertaining only to the *Cane* poems. Obviously, every poem can ‘embody’ what it represents; in a sense, a poem does this by definition. By physically appearing on the page, it becomes the corporeal form of what it communicates. Yet *Cane*’s poems go further than this. With only one exception, which will be addressed subsequently, they all appeal first and foremost to the senses to render the experience of a haunting longing a physical one. They, unlike the short stories, do not represent the problem in its structure or in intellectual terms but merely on the grounds of how it resonates physically in the body: what it looks like, how it feels, smells, sounds, and tastes.⁴

Already the second word of *Cane*, occurring in the opening epigraph, is one that pertains to the senses: The cane plant is described as “[r]edolent of fermenting syrup” (2).⁵ The entire epigraph consists of two sensations—that of being redolent and that

4 In what follows, I will use the term ‘sensation’ as an antithesis to thought. However, when I use it, I mean only those feelings that are felt in a physical, that is, sensual, way. I do not mean to go into the distinction between abstract feelings such as joy or sorrow and the specific sensations of the body since these are in no way obvious and their detailed discussion would lead me far from my topic. What I wish to maintain in using ‘sensation’ is simply the emphasis on what is felt, by the body and through the senses, rather than what is thought.

5 The opening epigraph, as previously stated, does not have a title or a page number. It does not even appear in *Cane*’s table of contents. Therefore, if it has a central role in the creation of a

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

of being of purple color—which points to a certain significance of the very first word, “[o]racular” (1). The essence of the cane plant, most important ‘inhabitant’ of the South, seems to be its oracularity, which is intrinsically connected with its appeal to smell and sight. Considering the omnipresence of cane in the book, which is even eponymous with it, the fact that it is the sensual nature of cane that gives it oracularity suggests that the sensual perception of the African American experience in the South is tantamount to understanding this experience. Indeed, the two strong sensual impressions that open the entire book herald the centrality of the phenomenal, sensual experiencing of longing. Thus, they act as oracles of the haunting that pervades the entire reading experience.

The haunting spirit assumes visual forms first and foremost in “Nullo” and “Storm Ending.” “Nullo” combines two strong images, that of a “spray of pine-needles” (1) and that of “[d]ry moulds of cow-hoofs” (4), to achieve a unitary effect: the evocation of the landscape and the single moment in time and place. Ann Marie Bush and Louis D. Mitchell point to the way in which these poems use many smaller evocations to form “one conceptual compound image, the totality and essence of the subject” (106). This single effect is then painted in “western horizon gold” (“Nullo” 2) and enveloped in the silence evoked by the shortness of the poem and the dominant use of soft liquid phonemes (/l/ in “Nullo” and “falling” [6]). Very similar in manner, “Storm Ending” consists of a string of images that figuratively substitute nouns from the plant register for those pertaining to weather. Thus, “[t]hunder blossoms” (1) are “bell-like flowers” (2) and the rain is “like golden honey” (8). The composite effect is that the storm is both evoked in terms of the visual appearance of the clouds and thunder that constitute it and in terms of the reaction of the forest below. Colors again play a vital role as the entire scene is “[b]itten by the sun” (6) and the rain is “like golden honey” (8).

In general, the unity of the black experience in the South as a sensual experience is suggested by recurring sensual motifs in the poems of *Cane*. The most striking example is from the visual domain: the complex circular connection between gold, purple, and dusk. In the opening epigraph, purple is described as “[p]urple of the dusk” (3; my emphasis); in “Nullo,” however, it is gold that pertains to the sunset (“western horizon gold” [2]). In “Georgia Dusk,” the dominant color that accompanies the “setting sun” (2) is “flashing gold” (3). In “Song of the Son,” these colors are even more intricately intertwined. At first, sunset is evoked only figuratively as “an epoch’s sun declines” (8). Later, however, “the sun is setting on / A song-lit race

haunting effect focusing on the cane plant and its oracular nature, this effect disappears even more than do the effects of the other poems.

Daniella Gáti

of slaves” (11-12). This implies that the sun, equivalently with the song—with which it is also a near homophone⁶—colors the slaves by shining on them. The slaves, however, are described this time not as golden or brown but as “dark purple ripened plums” (16). The circle of gold, purple, and dusk closes with the effect that the poems involved in it evoke not only the visuals of their own themes but also each other. The South appears as a complex blend of various intricately intertwined sensual experiences.

The ‘portrait poems’ “Face” and “Portrait in Georgia” are somewhat of a special case in terms of visual evocation. Both are built almost exclusively of assemblages of images, in which parts of a woman are evoked by a single image with optional description. For instance, in “Portrait in Georgia,” the eyes are “—fagots” (3) and the lips “—old scars” (4). Yet, while these poems represent the uttermost reduction in visual terms, that is, they show really nothing more than a row of images, they are still intertwined in the net of mutual invocation that colors constitute in the *Cane* poems. In “Face,” the “cluster grapes of sorrow” (11) of the muscles are “purple in the evening sun” (12). In “Portrait in Georgia,” the “chestnut” (1), the “fagots” (3), and the “red blisters” (4) allude both to the “flashing gold” (3) of “Georgia Dusk,” and, so, to the other golden sunsets mentioned above as well as to the last word of “Portrait in Georgia” itself: “flame” (7). Thus, in spite of their stark visual reduction, these two poems also partake in the uncanny circularity of pictorial evocation that the use of colors entails.

Taste, smell, and touch are interconnected in the *Cane* poems, and, unsurprisingly, they revolve around the issue of the sweetness of the cane. Heralded in the opening epigraph as “[r]edolent of fermenting syrup” (2) and “[p]urple of the dusk” (3), the cane is immediately connected with the purple-gold-dusk evocational circularity. It smells of syrup and is purple like the dusk, but the dusk is also golden like the “golden honey” (8) of “Storm Ending,” and not just the dusk is purple but so, too, are the overripe plum slaves in “Song of the Son” (16). The South emerges as an amalgam of something sweet to the taste and similar of smell, and oozing (e.g., “fermenting” in the epigraph) and gluey to the touch, like syrup and honey. In addition, this amalgam is directly linked to the central sensual circularity of the *Cane* poems, which endows the emotive experience of the Southern condition with a multifaceted corporeality.

Finally, the black Southern experience also becomes audible in two different ways. The African American musical tradition, in the form of work songs, blues, and spirituals, constitutes one strand. In “Cotton Song,” the traditional call-and-response

6 Consider also the title “Song of the Son,” which extends the play on words to son-sun-song. This visual circularity is, therefore, extended to the domain of the audible.

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

pattern is given back in formal as well as onomatopoeic terms. Rice, who provides an elaborate formal analysis of “Cotton Song” and “Harvest Song” as work songs, points out that the prosody of “Cotton Song” reflects the rhythm of the field work while the rounded vowels and soft consonants of “roll” and “soul” mimetically reflect the rolling of cotton bundles (595). Rice adds that with its “eoho” calls and the refrain lines (“We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!” [“Cotton Song” 16]), “[i]t is clearly a performance involving a caller and a group of responders” (595). Hence, apart from reflecting the sounds of the slaves’ work, it makes audible the traditional slave work song. “Reapers” is similar in terms of sound, although it departs from the black musical tradition to evoke only the sounds that nonvocal activity causes in the field. Here, we hear the scythes’ clamor (“the sound of steel on stones” [1]), the blades cutting (“silent swinging” [4] or “mower through the weeds” [5]), and the rat “squealing” (6). In sum, the poems appeal to the senses to make the experience of the black South visible, audible, tangible; thus they represent the material form of the experience in a way that is perceptible to the body but less so to the mind.

There is, however, one poem that does not appear to conform to this pattern of sensual depiction. It is the last poem, “Harvest Song.” Visually, although it is set in the fields, it does not evoke the images or colors of nature. Instead, a sunset is described merely in semantic terms such as “at sundown” (1) or “the sun has set” (14). Rice points out that, in terms of sound, this poem does not imitate the work song: There is barely any call and no response, and the poem’s rhythm “is a prose rhythm, turgid and slow” (597). Neither does “Harvest Song” use onomatopoeia to reproduce other sounds of the field: The “scythes” (7) appear mute and the “eoho” calls are placed between parenthesis. Again, the only auditory description that occurs is semantic: “My ears are caked with dust” (11) or “I am a deaf man” (12). Analogously, the sense of taste and the feeling of hunger, which are central to the poem, are not rendered in any way that would be perceptible through the senses but are described exclusively and repetitively in semantic terms. “I hunger” or “And I hunger” concludes almost every line whereas taste is discarded as an absence as the speaker says that the grain of corn “has no taste to it” (15); “I do not taste it” (3). Sensual experience is no longer the main strategy through which the Southern condition is communicated.

Instead, the dominant technique of “Harvest Song” is semantic description. Poetic meter is gone, the lines are long, and the experience is mediated to the reader through syntactically simple statements consisting mostly of a noun and a predicate: “I hunger” or “I am a reaper” (14-15). The predication is reinforced by repetition: For instance, both “I hunger” (or “And I hunger”) and “My throat is dry” occur four times, and both hunger and dry throats reoccur additionally in other contexts. The condition of the hungering reaper is not felt but understood.

Daniella Gáti

What becomes felt, then, in “Harvest Song” is that there is no sensation, no feeling. There is only an emptiness. If the Derridean specter in *Hamlet*’s case is “*nothing visible*” (Derrida 5), then this specter is ‘nothing that can be felt.’ What is felt is only the absence of feeling. Haunting becomes embodied by absence itself; the “flesh and phenomenality” (Derrida 5) of the spirit is vacuum. This brings home the point, more clearly than ever before, that the object of the haunting longing is absent. In longing for it, one physically feels nothing but absence. The only physical sensation that remains possible is emptiness because the desired ideal original condition is inexistent.

THE ABSENCE OF WHAT IS EVER-PRESENT: READERS OVERLOOKING THE POEMS IN *CANE*

We have seen how the poems embody a sensual, physical experience of the South, which haunts the reading of *Cane* by its repetitive reappearance. This experience is a specter transformed by the work of evocation from nostalgic longing into physical form. It cannot be dispelled because it always returns; but it is the return of absence because it embodies something that has never existed. Therefore, the feeling that the poems evoke is the physical feeling of nothing, and the manner of their evocation makes nothing be felt in a multitude of vivid sensations.

In this light, given their spectral nature, it is interesting to see that the poems of *Cane* have seldom been brought under analysis as an entity. Critics have analyzed individual poems, but usually as parts of some other analytical agenda. This meant that while certain poems, which suited the given agenda, underwent analysis, others were ignored. Neither, importantly, have the connections within the *Cane* poems themselves been investigated. Instead, in the numerous writings on *Cane*, the poems have been treated as if they were no different from the short stories. In particular, in comprehensive analyses of *Cane*, the main focus has been awarded to the short stories, bearing witness to the implicit assumption that the ‘meaning’ of the book is primarily contained in its short stories and not in its poems. As I will argue, this is not due to simple ignorance or neglect on behalf of critics but is rather a strategy of *Cane* itself—which is an implication of the spectral nature of its poems.

Some critics have analyzed individual poems from *Cane* in combination with Toomer’s other poems in order to demonstrate the presence of certain poetic styles in his overall oeuvre. For example, Bush and Mitchell use only “Nulló” and “Storm Ending” to reveal the use of cubist techniques; subsequently, they argue that Toomer in general can be regarded as a cubist, rather than imagist, poet (106). In so doing, they respond to an earlier strand of criticism that had come to the contrary conclusion that

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

Toomer's poetics lie primarily in the imagist vein. Consequently, these earlier critics use some examples of the poems to demonstrate the opposite point. For instance, Robert Jones, contending that Toomer's poetics is primarily imagist, discusses several of the *Cane* poems, including "Storm Ending," "Her Lips Are Copper Wire," "Face," and "Reapers," but he does not consider their interrelations or their function as an entity within the book. He identifies a main trajectory of the reading experience set by the short stories: the journey from the South, the image of a harmonious African American past, to the North, the image of rootlessness, alienation, and displacement, and finally back to the South but no longer with the possibility of achieving the original harmonious condition. Unsurprisingly, Jones then comes to the conclusion that the poems do nothing but support this main trajectory. Rice's analysis of the work songs "Cotton Song" and "Harvest Song" can serve as a final example of such a generic discussion of some *Cane* poems. It is striking that just through the juxtaposition of these two poems, Rice arrives at a conclusion that is very similar to Jones's. By carefully analyzing the use of traditional elements of meter and the call-and-response pattern in work songs, Rice also locates a movement from identification with the communal experience in "Cotton Song" to disorientation and the loss of such shared experience and heritage in "Harvest Song." This trajectory seems to lie at the heart of most critical investigation of *Cane*—a point that I will return to later.

At the same time, this trajectory has been identified almost exclusively through reliance on the short stories. Full-scale readings of *Cane* have not clarified what role the poems play in shaping the meaning of *Cane*. The above-cited examples regard the poems as merely complementary to, and not coconstitutive of meaning with, the short stories. A few critics have awarded the poems more constitutive power; they, however, rarely considered more than a few of them. For instance, in her insightful essay, Barbara E. Bowen discusses only "Georgia Dusk," "Portrait in Georgia," and "Harvest Song," and all three very briefly, while she considers nine out of fourteen short stories—this in spite of the fact that she focuses on voice, in particular the voice of call-and-response and the blues, both of which pertain more to the poems than to the short stories. Similarly, in his otherwise very perceptive essay on contrasting images of the South, Ramsey discusses various short stories, including "Carma" and "Blood-Burning Moon," but only three poems: the epigraph, "Song of the Son," and "November Cotton Flower" (Ramsey 76, 77, 83). Tellingly, although Ramsey offers an elaborate discussion of "Song of the Son," his reading of the epigraph as well as of "November Cotton Flower" constrains the meanings of these poems as merely complementing those of the stories. Hence, for Ramsey, in the epigraph, "Toomer announces his prophetic or oracular aim [...]. The result is a *narrative* that hovers intermittently and lyrically above time-bound, harsh social realities" (76-77; my emphasis). The poem has

Daniella Gáti

its prime meaning and goal in the narrative. In the same vein, “November Cotton Flower” gains significance only by being “placed near this story [‘Karintha’],” which serves to underline that “[l]ike the November cotton flower,” the young girl Karintha “blooms fearlessly in her own season” (83). Lastly, even Toomer himself, when describing “*Cane’s* design” both “[a]esthetically” and “[r]egionally” in the passage quoted by Bowen (15), mentions only one poem (“Harvest Song”) alongside five stories. Such disregard of the poems even in analyses that claim to concern the book as a whole suggests the view that the poems are in some manner inferior to the short stories. The poems appear to be able to assist the meaning, but not to create it.

Strikingly, in talking about the ‘meaning’ of *Cane* as a unified piece of art, some critics simply do not mention the poems at all. For example, in spite of the fact that she does not explicitly focus on the short stories, Farebrother fails to discuss a single poem in her analysis of *Cane* as a collage. This is all the more surprising since she analyzes recurring motifs that also feature in many of the poems, such as “pine-needles, the sawmill,” and “curling smoke” (507). Even more stunningly, in identifying a formal structure in *Cane* and demonstrating how “[f]orm follows function,” Frederik L. Rusch does not consider the poems as constitutive of *Cane’s* internal structure (25). Again, this is surprising since Rusch’s main focus lies on fragmentation and Toomer’s “break[ing] up the struggle for racial and regional identity into facets to present the problem as fully as possible” (24). Apparently, the poems cannot contribute such facets to the overlying problem, at least not consciously.

It should be clear, then, that even though they constitute roughly half of the book in terms of number, the poems in *Cane* seem to disappear when it comes to identify what effect the book carries and how it achieves it. I believe that the explanation for this lies in the spectrality of the poems themselves and that this has certain interesting implications for the question of racial identity and the longing for roots. The poems could be seen as affecting their readers in a potentially less conscious way, which might explain the fact that they have largely eluded overt critical discourse.

I have argued that the main function of the poems in *Cane* is to lend to the haunting longing of racial identity a physical form, one that is perceptible to the senses. Therefore, the channel through which the poems communicate their meaning is an entirely different one than the one that operates in the stories. While the stories offer plot and structure, which are comprehended by the mind, the poems escape easy intellectual categorization. Instead, they subtly but repetitively impress upon the senses what it feels like to be haunted with the longing for a shared, original African American experience. Hence, readers cannot readily identify what exactly it is that the poems do, but at the same time, the poems are still subconsciously exerting their work on them.

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

This has a very central implication in terms of the identity politics that are at stake in *Cane*. In his discussion of *Hamlet's* ghost, Derrida identifies the armor, the outer shell of the specter, as what “prevents perception from deciding on the identity that it wraps so solidly in its carapace” (7). It seems that it is the very solid materiality of the specter that prevents its exact identification. Applied to the poems, this explains how they can assume form and physicality and yet, or exactly therefore, escape identification. If “the identity” that the material outside shell “wraps so solidly in its carapace” (7) consists of the aspects of African American identity that the poems embody, then by construction, these aspects cannot be perceived.

Indeed, I argue that this has been the case. The widespread lack of perception of the poems has led the vast majority of critics to read only a partial image of the South as constituent of ancestral African American identity. Because the poems only make felt the paradoxical nature of the haunting longing for a black Southern site of origin, critics have failed to see and identify this longing as consisting simultaneously not only of desire but also of repulsion. Repulsion arises out of the recognition of the bloody foundations on which the South as site of the black experience rests, and it is the juxtaposition of this recognition and the desire that exists in spite of it that make the longing obsessive. The senses register this obsessiveness, but not the reason for it. Hence, critics and other readers of *Cane* are led to habitually disregard the problematic nature of the black Southern experience in constituting African American identity.

In fact, there is much evidence for this in the relevant scholarship. Almost none of the critics have failed to note the yearning for the black Southern condition, nor have they been blind to the violence committed on blacks. Still, it seems that the South as a site of longing has not been questioned. Referencing Todd Lieber, Charles W. Scruggs, in a 1975 article not devoid of problematic phrasing itself, agrees that the main issue of *Cane* is that it consists of the Manichean conflict “between a world that is technological, culturally white and spiritually sterile, and one that is agrarian, culturally black and richly primitive” (277). From Scruggs’s words, the South emerges as the unidimensional representative of a condition worth longing for. According to Rice, the first “part of the book explores and celebrates the slave culture of the South” (596) while the second and third parts dramatize the mourning over its decline. For him, too, the problem of *Cane* does not arise from the inherent paradox of the Southern experience but rather from the failing identification with it, which was still successful in the first part of the book and to which the speaker yearns to return. Jones discerns a similar movement in *Cane* from the beginning poems, which “represent celebrations of ancestral consciousness,” to “the ones which end the cycle,” which “chronicle the poet’s loss of empathetic union with Afro-American consciousness” (258). Consequently, he, too, diagnoses the problem as consisting of “a shift in the poet’s

Daniella Gáti

consciousness from spiritual identification to spiritual alienation” (260). In his view, the poet bemoans “the passing of an era supplanted by industry” (259).

The image that arises out of such readings is one of a harmonious South, constituting a homeland for African Americans and the native soil from which a communal culture and ancestral heritage can grow. The North, however, emerges, in Michael Krasny’s words, as a site of “neuroticized Black consciousness [...] in quest of its uprooted spirituality and racial identity,” which, naturally, can only be achieved “by means of a return to the moon-filled Southland of ‘moon-children’” (42). This widespread view, however, is very problematic. Interestingly, it is the modern counterpart of the paradox pointed at by Frederick Douglass when he discusses the song of the slaves sent to the Great House Farm. Douglass describes these selected slaves as “peculiarly enthusiastic,” which he presents as the reason for why “they would make the dense old woods [...] reverberate with their wild songs” (315). While immersed in the experience, Douglass does not realize that this image of the slaves singing “most exultingly” easily leads to “persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness” and states that he has “often been utterly astonished” at this “since [he] came to the North” (316). Yet this is a logical conclusion to be drawn from the harmonious image of the slaves singing. Similarly, in *Cane*, the lack of perception of the anxious tension between desire and repulsion automatically leads readers to envision a harmonious and unproblematic South as the site for an ancestral and communal black experience.

Yet the fact that the slaves manage to react in a creative manner to the probations of slavery does not mean that slavery constitutes a sound basis for their self-identification or a legitimate homeland. I hope to have shown that adequate analysis of the poems makes this clear. Nonetheless, the only critics that I found to be aware of this are Ramsey, Farebrother, and Williams. Interestingly, all of them proceed from the mournful longing for the South as a precondition for the problematics of its violent past. Williams, although concerning herself primarily with the spirit of mourning, articulates the paradox clearly by stating that “the South for African Americans functions as a site of trauma as well as a symbolic homeland” (88). Ramsey is a bit more subtle. On the one hand, he recognizes that Toomer conceptualizes the South as a site of yearning when he notes that “[w]hereas the North long had been perceived as the Promised Land of freedom from southern bondage, now it is the South, through mystical uplift, that will give Toomer an identity, liberating him from the spiritual vacuity of modernism” (87). On the other hand, however, Ramsey makes clear that this South is merely mythical, illusory and self-created. Thus, he distinguishes between “two Souths. One is a temporal South of disturbing historical oppression and despairing lack of progress. The other is what could be called Toomer’s transcendent

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

or 'eternal South,' existing above time and social particulars" (76). Farebrother, too, supports my identification of the desire-repulsion binary as inherent in the poems' representation of the South when she argues that Toomer refuses "to authorize a single vision of the Southern landscape" (510). From this she draws the conclusion that "[b]y foregrounding hybridity and the image of the mule in particular, Toomer forestalls any attempt to read this poetic account of the South as sentimental romanticism" (508)—a conclusion that my reading of the poems also yields. But the number of critics with whom this "attempt" has not been "forestall[ed]" (Farebrother 508) suggests that there are mechanisms in *Cane* that work to conceal the inherent paradox of the "site of trauma as well as a symbolic homeland" (Williams 88) and that these mechanisms are effective. In the terminology that I have sought to apply in this essay, the specter remains unseen and unnameable. In Derrida's words: "It is still nothing that can be seen when one speaks of it"—the "[t]hing is still invisible" (5).

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have sought to conceptualize the poems of *Cane* as specters, physically embodying a haunting yearning for an ancestral African American experience and repeatedly invoking both the desire and its impossibility. What such an analysis reveals, on the one hand, is that the haunting ideal site of origin is constituted by absence. A harmonic South with an unproblematic ancestral and communal African American condition has never existed and is created merely as an object of longing by the desire that longs for it. It is precisely its absence that makes the yearning for it so haunting and obsessive since it implies the inexistence of roots that are free from anxiety and on which African American identity could be based in an unproblematic way. *Cane* does not, then, merely explore the displacement of the African Americans living in the North alienated from their original culture in the South or the decline of the era of Southern African American culture, but it problematizes the roots of the black experience in America as such, as well as the very search for them. In this respect, conceiving of the poems as specters leads to different and more complex conclusions about questions of racial identity and heritage than those of earlier investigations, which have for the most part not recognized the problematics of mourning for the ancestral black experience.

On the other hand, taking into account the aspect of phenomenality of the poems as specters, it becomes evident that the poems communicate in a different way than the short stories, which has its own implications for the questions of identity and heritage. By appealing to the senses and sensual experience, the poems carry out the work of

Daniella Gáti

haunting on a subconscious and physical level. Longing for the ancestral experience and the antithetical repulsion from it are revealed as conditions that pertain to the innermost of the human emotions—so much so that they remain hidden from the mind. The lack of identification of this point by the vast majority of readers of *Cane* demonstrates that this is an inherent feature of the identity politics that the book explores. Indeed, *Cane* portrays the yearning for roots—in spite and because of its impossibility—as something that cannot be discarded because it is innate to physical existence and perception but simultaneously as something that the mind cannot see or name. Hence, the search for racial heritage and an ancestral experience is itself spectral because it is ever-present and yet does not “[belong] to knowledge” (Derrida 5).

In conclusion, I contend that the spectrality of the *Cane* poems allows a more profound exploration of African American identity. In revealing and making felt the ontological and epistemic ambiguities of the longing and struggle for an ancestral black experience, the poems disclose a simultaneous coming to terms with and rejection of the black Southern past. At the same time, they show this coincidence of acceptance and refusal to be a never-ending process since neither can the haunting longing for African American roots be dismissed nor can the intrinsically violent foundations of black Southern experience be undone. The only thing that can, then, constitute something of a shared experience is this very alternation between yearning and impossibility, acceptance and rejection. In other words, at the core of the African American experience, the most intrinsic shared presence is that of the specter.

WORKS CITED

- Abraham, Nicolas, and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994. Print.
- Beal, Wesley. “The Form and Politics of Networks in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*.” *American Literary History* 24.4 (2012): 658-79. Print.
- Bowen, Barbara E. “Untroubled Voice: Call-and-Response in *Cane*.” *Black American Literature Forum* 16.1 (1982): 12-18. Print.
- Bush, Ann Marie, and Louis D. Mitchell. “Jean Toomer: A Cubist Poet.” *Black American Literature Forum* 17.3 (1983): 106-08. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. 1845. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 1997. 302-69. Print.

Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

- Farebrother, Rachel. "Adventuring through the Pieces of a Still Unorganized Mosaic': Reading Jean Toomer's Collage Aesthetic in *Cane*." *Journal of American Studies* 40.3 (2006): 503-21. Print.
- Jones, Robert. "Jean Toomer as Poet: A Phenomenology of the Spirit." *Black American Literature Forum* 21.3 (1987): 253-73. Print.
- Krasny, Michael. "The Aesthetic Structure of Jean Toomer's *Cane*." *Negro American Literature Forum* 9.2 (1975): 42-43. Print.
- Lieber, Todd. "Design and Movement in *Cane*." *CLA Journal* 13 (1969): 35-50. Print.
- North, Michael. *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.
- Ramsey, William M. "Jean Toomer's Eternal South." *Southern Literary Journal* 36.1 (2003): 74-89. Print.
- Rice, H. William. "Two Work Songs in *Cane*." *Black American Literature Forum* 23.3 (1989): 593-99. Print.
- Rusch, Frederik L. "Form, Function, and Creative Tension in *Cane*: Jean Toomer and the Need for the Avant-Garde." *MELUS* 17.4 (1991): 15-28. Print.
- Scruggs, Charles W. "The Mark of Cain and the Redemption of Art: A Study in Theme and Structure of Jean Toomer's *Cane*." *American Literature* 44.2 (1972): 276-91. Print.
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. 1923. Ed. Darwin T. Turner. New York: Boni, 1975. Print.
- Williams, Jennifer D. "Jean Toomer's *Cane* and the Erotics of Mourning." *Southern Literary Journal* 40.2 (2008): 87-101. Print.