Yiu-On Li

Professor Batiste

English 176ML

23 November 2022

The Perversion of Striving: Modernism, Primitivism, and Class in Jean Toomer's "Theater"

Jean Toomer's vignette "Theater" in his larger book *Cane* is a microcosm of Black society and striving. Despair, disparity, and desire collide and coalesce in a modernist mélange that, in one very long breath, lauds and rebukes W. E. B. Du Bois and Jessie Redmon Fauset's notions of Black class and advancement. In my adaptation of Toomer's "Theater"—which was my main contribution to my group's performance of the second part of *Cane*—I sought to capture these chaotic contradictions by incorporating Toomer's subversion of and expansion upon his contemporaries. And out of this chaos arises something like order.

Before any words have been spoken, the audience sees a woodcut on paper projected to the background: *Looking Upward* by James Lesesne Wells. This piece, with a Black figure that stands among black and white buildings leaning and teetering, suggests something not quite right with Black and white: social and moral corruption, a house divided that cannot stand tall and proud. Further, the figure holds several buildings—upright and structurally sound—in their arms while looking to an elusive thing yet out of frame. They, a giant personification of the collective striving of a people, bear the weight of bearing a brighter tomorrow—a tomorrow with houses and systems tall and proud—to higher heights. Yet the buildings at ground level lean and teeter and cluster around the figure's feet, claustrophobic and urban like the modernist and modernizing north of the nascent 20th century, and like the "press inward" of "Theater"'s prose overlapping and overflowing with different characters' thoughts and actions and physical proximities

(Toomer 90). And again, before any words have been spoken, the song "Helpless" from the musical *Hamilton* begins to play in the background—a very danceable song, much like the dances of Mame and Dorris. Or rather, a *remix* begins to play—one by Ja Rule, a Black man—whose source material nonetheless originates from a play that primarily tells the story of a white man. It is this dance between Black and white that sets the stage of my "Theater" adaptation.

Now characters begin to move, though still they do not speak. The Manager directs two Black women, Mame and Dorris, through a rehearsal of a dance routine. Immediately, the concept of dance as pandering to the male and white gazes asserts itself. In the original story, John, the Manager's brother, thinks that the Manager will soon "herd" and "tame" and "blunt" the dancers into people "appropriate to Broadway," and that the audience will consider them "beautiful," as if the dancers had whiteface on (Toomer 90). "Broadway," being "a code word for white," suggests that for society at large to accept these dancers as conventionally beautiful, they must surrender their Blackness and adopt the pallor of white convention (Batiste 96). John, despite his Blackness, is a sort of stand-in for a white person given his education, which Dorris alludes to with "couldnt [*sic*] I have got an education if I'd wanted one?" (Toomer 91). And John, as the partial bearer of the white gaze, wants to have his cake and eat it too: He thinks of the dancers as "my full-lipped, distant beauties," even without their "taming" (Toomer 90). Dorris and Mame and the rest of the women on the stage enact primitivism, which "constructs the invisibility and homogeneity of savage others and also implies a false and inconsistent insistence on love of the other, friendliness toward him or her, that suggests patriarchy more than equality" (Batiste 74). That is, the dancers are puppies to John and to white people: beautiful, but only as pets with their petlike needs, and not as full human beings.

The Manager dictates Dorris and Mame's steps, their primitivist acts, much as society does—puppet strings made all the more visible and invisible by the "white-walled buildings" and the "whitewashed ceiling" (Toomer 89, 93). The irony is that while Mame and the other dancers seem aware of what they are doing—putting on a show and nothing more—Dorris seems to earnestly strive with her dancing. She "throws herself into it" while "the leading lady" is "lack-life, monotonous" and generally "the dance is somewhere where it will not strain the girls" (Toomer 90). Dorris sees dance as a door to a better life and a better soul. She defies the Manager by leaving the stage and radiating "joy" to the other dancers, encouraging them to "forget set steps" and "find their own" without the influence of the Manager (Toomer 92). Even the Manager "forgets to bawl them out," forgets how to control, in the presence of Dorris (Toomer 92). Dorris performs for a gaze, but only as a consequence of performing for herself. The stage cannot contain her.

John enters now. His introduction in the original story is eerie in its parallels to and deviations from Du Bois' own short work of fiction, "Of the Coming of John," in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In particular, the line "until John comes within them" from Toomer contains more than an echo of "when John comes" from Du Bois, to say nothing of the shared names and how Du Bois titles his story (89; *The Souls* 174). Toomer and Du Bois were almost certainly acquainted with each other—Du Bois once asked Toomer to evaluate a few of his poems, and Du Bois himself later wrote a short review of *Cane* (Du Bois, "Letter"; Du Bois, "The Younger"). At the very least, Toomer likely knew of Du Bois' *Souls* when writing *Cane*, given the former's impact and that—based on both books' front matter—it was published 20 years before the latter. Toomer, therefore, plausibly has Du Bois' work in mind when he writes "until John comes within them," and plausibly still structures his story in conversation with Du Bois.

Toomer's text itself seems to bear out this hypothesis. Like the two Johns of Du Bois and as mentioned earlier, the John of "Theater" is educated. Further, his personality seems split between the irresponsible white John and the responsible Black John—irresponsible because John "desires" Dorris on nothing more than a sexual and primitivist level (his descriptions of Dorris almost exclusively regard her body parts and clothing), and responsible because "his mind [is] contained above desires of his body" and he "holds off" (Toomer 89–90). That is, John has fantasies, but he restricts those fantasies to fantasy. And putting aside the parallels between Toomer and Du Bois and focusing on Toomer's work alone, the diction of "comes within," "walls press in," and "the flesh and blood of Dorris are its walls" suggests a very erotic composition to John's thoughts alongside a sense of claustrophobic overwhelm (Toomer 89, 92–93). This complicated man I have attempted to capture in my adaptation: John's grandiose entrance evokes the boisterous, noisome, and violating white John, while his rumination that "throughout history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars" surfaces the melancholic and reflective Black John (Du Bois 5).

Like the Black John of Du Bois, education changes the John of Toomer irrevocably: A hidden chasm now separates the learned from the unlearned. But this time, it is the learned—and not the unlearned—who parts the earth. Whereas the Black John in Du Bois' story attempts to spread his education and meets resistance from those who prefer the old ways, the John in Toomer's story keeps his education to himself and resists association with the uneducated, despite the others' eagerness to the opposite. Everyone is just trying to live within the dancing and the music, but John is too busy trying "to trace origins and plot destinies," too busy judging who is and who is not good enough for him (Toomer 89). Dorris is not good enough for him; her dreams of dancing are too lowly for John; they "dilute" his "passion" for her (Toomer 91). He

"desires her," yes, and he "holds off," yes, but his holding off may come less from possessing a modicum of responsibility and more from his belief that "she'd bore you after the first five minutes" (Toomer 90–91). If only he could "let her go" from her unlearnedness and "keep her loveliness"; if only he could find someone as beautiful as Dorris but more intellectual; if only he could find a Dorris who was not Dorris (Toomer 91). But as it stands, he can only admire Dorris' beauty and scorn what he sees as her primitivism while unwittingly engaging in that very primitivism by his nature as a spectator. Because that is what he is: a spectator. A voyeur looking in at a world so alien to him and so beneath him now, but a world in which he still derives gratification from observing. This John and Du Bois' Black John are both at home in the theater—but one is a permanent resident, and the other is an unwanted guest.

There is a moment in "Theater" that, at first glance, seems to contradict the notion that Dorris has not gone to school like John, when John thinks to himself, "Dictie, educated, stuck-up; show-girl" (Toomer 91). The proximity of "show-girl" to the rest of the sentence would seem to suggest that, when John thinks "educated," he also thinks "Dorris." But Toomer never makes this link explicit. In fact, it is likely that in John's stream of consciousness, he is attributing the quality of "educated" to himself. Earlier in the paragraph he thinks, "Stage-door johnny; chorus-girl" (Toomer 91). A stage-door johnny, as the book defines in the notes, is "a young man who hangs around theaters to meet actresses and chorus girls" (Toomer 176). This description cannot possibly refer to Dorris; it fits, rather, John. And these two sentences parallel each other, with short descriptions separated by commas and people separated by semicolons. In the sentence earlier in the paragraph, "stage-door johnny" refers to John, while "chorus-girl" refers to Dorris. If one carries over this parallel structure to the later sentence, it becomes apparent that "dictie, educated, stuck-up" refers to John, while "show-girl" refers to Dorris. What

also becomes apparent is that John at least has some self-awareness of his pompousness, though that awareness is fleeting and insufficient to scale the wall of the semicolon.

John, with his ambition and "stuck-up" nature, evokes Joanna from Fauset's novel *There Is Confusion*. The two struggle to connect with people who they think do not aim high enough in their careers, as when Joanna writes to Maggie that "you can see that a girl of your lowly aims would only be a hindrance" to Philip, and "wouldn't it be just as well if you didn't see him?" (Fauset 95). But the difference between Joanna and John is that Joanna eventually comes around to the idea of love for the sake of love, no strings attached and regardless of ambition. John does not come around, or at least does not get the opportunity to do so. In my adaptation, Mame advises Dorris not out of Joanna's initial callousness and disdain, but out of resigned experience that this is how the world works, and that this is the sort of man that lives in this world. Mame wishes to protect Dorris from heartbreak and harm, which requires a swift excision of her attraction. Dorris seems to catch on for a bit: At first she dances for John before "withdrawing disdainfully," and later she calculates the kind of silk stockings she might extract from him through a dalliance with him (Toomer 91–92). I show this doubt in my adaptation with the line, "Men? What about women? I'm a star too, aren't I?", which also responds to Du Bois' line for "single black *men*" (Du Bois 5). Here, Dorris rejects John's preoccupation with himself and grasps for a more inclusive future. It is a dance of wit: Dorris and John give and take with each step, opening and closing themselves up, each vying for control.

Ultimately, however, Mame fails, and Dorris falls for John. She dances fervently for him (Toomer 92). She pushes beyond the boundary of the stage, beyond the constraints of class, for love (Toomer 92). John falls too. But then "he wills thought to rid his mind of passion" and his mind "sweeps up" to a dream (Toomer 90, 92). This is a dream where all of John's dreams of

Dorris come true, and he can finally think of her as "glorious": she is beautiful, a figure in "a loose black gown splashed with lemon ribbons"; she is obedient, stepping "just at the right moment from the door" and "who has no eyes" for herself; and she has an intellect that cannot do anything for her but can do everything for John, that understands his manuscripts, who "has eyes to understand him" (Toomer 93). But this dream is not real. It is not Dorris. It is, rather, John's idealization of Dorris, a protective mechanism that his mind has built to shield him from living in an imperfect world with an imperfect Dorris. He sees a Dorris who is not Dorris, a "sweet untruth" (Toomer 93). And while he is living in this untruth, he cannot live in the true world, and thus his face is "a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream," even after Dorris has put on the show of her life for him (Toomer 93).

John has no eyes for Dorris—at least, not the Dorris that exists in the flesh. He does not see that Dorris' ambition is no less than his, that she wants to be a star, that the Manager "picks her for a leading lady, one of these days" and steps aside in recognition that she is now a manager in her own right (Toomer 92). He does not see that Dorris' ambition may yet be greater than his, that her glow is "rich" compared to his "diluted passion," that her glow inspires her fellow dancers to reach for higher heights (Toomer 91–92). When Dorris realizes that John has no eyes for her, "Helpless" stops playing in my adaptation, and she is no longer helpless in loving a man who does not love her back. The realization that she and he are incompatible is crushing, yes. But it is experience that she now shares with Mame. And with this experience, Dorris can stand taller and strive higher.

John is a case of someone striving for the wrong thing, striving in an imperfect world that can lead you astray. He hides behind his voyeurism, picking out eye candy while doing nothing in particular with his education beyond undefined "manuscripts" (Toomer 93). He cannot even

commit to a serious relationship with any of these women, instead fixating on their faults and dwelling on an ideal world that he makes no effort to see to fruition. His mind is a prison; if anything, he is the one without eyes. Education, while valuable, can drain the passion from life, and with passion goes the advancement of a people. Du Bois and Fauset and Toomer seem to concur on one aspect: Passion and love, not listlessness, go the distance.

Works Cited

Batiste, Stephanie Leigh. *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Du Bois, W. E. B. "Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Jean Toomer, May 15, 1925." *Credo*, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 15 May 1925, https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b171-i176.

—. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Yale University Press, 2015.

—. "The Younger Literary Movement (1924)". *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, edited by Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 219–220. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400827879-034

Fauset, Jessie Redmon. *There Is Confusion*. Random House Publishing Group, 2020.

Ja Rule, "Helpless." *The Hamilton Mixtape*, Atlantic Records, 2016. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTX5MNPmSCg.

Jean, Toomer. *Cane*. Penguin Random House, 2019.

Wells, James Lesesne. *Looking Upward*. 1928. *Smithsonian American Art Museum*, https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/looking-upward-33802.