

Director's Note: We began this project in 2007. Or 2002. Or when I read CANE in a college literature seminar before that. In 1998 I was working on a production at the GEVA theater, in Rochester, NY, when I unexpectedly started dreaming about Toomer's text. I hadn't read the book since college; still, it haunted. In 2002 I made a suite of dances for MIT undergraduates based on the poems from Toomer's text. These dances, set to music by MeShell N'Degeocello, answered some questions I had about the pungent imagery of Toomer's language and his depictions of struggles between people and environment. In 2007 I started working on an abstract solo dance that I later realized was based on my memories of the long story that ends CANE, titled Kabnis. By then, I had been telling SLIPPAGE artists that CANE would become a project for us to re-imagine in some way.

An ongoing collaboration with the extraordinary artists of Wideman-Davis dance sealed the deal. We began working together in 2012 to fashion this version of CANE; the process has been terrific all around. The company artistic directors worked to craft the choreography that enlivens this creative work. I find myself still haunted by the sounds and imagery that populate this work, stories that bear witness to African American lives pressured to withstand powerful forces - natural and man-made - that shape our common destiny. **Thomas F. DeFrantz**

Please see www.slippage.org/cane for more information and www.slippage.org/cane/canecollaborators.html for collaborator bios.

SLIPPAGE and Wideman-Davis Dance
present

CANE
an original dancework

April 20-29, 2013
Sheafer Laboratory Theater
Duke Bryan University Center 125 Science Drive Durham,
NC 27708

Inspired by Jean Toomer's experimental 1923 text of the Harlem Renaissance, CANE explores memories of African American sharecropping held by a technologically-devised canefield.

Performed by **Tanya Wideman, Thaddeus Davis, Kalin Morrow, Amber Mayberry**. Choreographed by **Tanya Wideman-Davis** and **Thaddeus Davis**, Conceived and Directed by **Thomas F. DeFrantz**, Visual Design and Programming by **Eto Otigbe**, Music by **Tara Rodgers**, Sound Sculpture and Programming by **Jamie Keesecker**, Additional Programming and Sound Discoveries by **Jung-Eun Kim** and **Peter Whincop**. Lighting by **Jesse Belsky**, Costumes by **Marissa Erickson**. Production Management **Shireen Dickson**. Stage Management **Meg Ralston-Asumendi**; Assistant Stage Management and Usher Management **Natasha Jackson**. Special thanks to Duke Theater Operations, Jennifer Prather, Susan Sears, Tim Scales, Leah Wilks, Duke Program in Dance.

The performance will last approximately one hour without intermission.

In(di)visible Man: Jean Toomer and *Cane*.

*I am of no particular race. I am of the human
race, a man at large in the human world,
preparing a new race.*

I am of no specific region. I am of earth.

*I am of no particular class. I am of the human
class, preparing a new class.*

*I am neither male nor female nor in-between. I am
of sex, with male differentiations.*

I am of no special field, I am of the field of being.
--XXIV from *Essentials* (Toomer, 1931)

Perhaps it is no surprise that Jean Toomer's masterwork, *Cane*, is as complicated to classify as its author. Born in Washington D.C., December 1894 and baptized into the Roman Catholic Church as Nathan Pinchback Toomer, the man whose influence on both American modernist literature and the Harlem Renaissance cannot be understated spent his career blurring boundaries of identity and narrative to reflect what he saw as the fundamental transformations of place, person, and production emerging from post-World War I America.

Though he did not grow up in the Deep South, Toomer's parents' heritages were firmly rooted there. His mother, Nina Pinchback, was the daughter of a free slave from Macon Georgia, who became first black lieutenant governor of Louisiana, himself descended from a white Virginia planter and his mulatto slave. His father, Nathan Toomer, was born a slave in Chatham County, North Carolina who moved among Georgia's white wealthy class in the 1880s after marrying his second wife, Amanda Dickson, "the richest colored woman alive." Unfortunately, Jean Toomer's parents' union was brief; the elder Nathan abandoned his wife when his son was just a year old.

He spent some time in an all-white primary school while he and his mother lived in New York, but upon their return to D.C. his Pinchback relatives steered the young man's education. He enrolled at esteemed all-black public schools, Henry Highland Garnet School and later Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. In high school and beyond, Toomer resisted the categorization of "Negro," a resistance facilitated by his light skin, geographic location, economic privilege, and cultural education. Toomer insisted upon what we would now call multiracial identity at a time when vestiges of the "one-drop" rule dominated and polarized personal and legal racial heritage and identification. He himself would marry twice, both white women, and actively resist the marketing of his work, especially *Cane*, as noteworthy because its author was black.

When one is on the soil of one's ancestors, most anything can come to one.
--"Fern," *Cane* (1923)

Toomer attended multiple institutions of higher learning in Wisconsin, Illinois, and New York, never staying long enough to earn a degree but taking courses in a wide array of fields: agriculture, physical education, religion, sociology and literature. He tried various professions – car salesman, grocery clerk, shipyard worker – all the while crafting stories and poems some that would find their way into *Cane*. Encouraged by the writer Waldo Frank (*Our America*) but bereft of funds, he returned to D.C. in 1920 and supported his writing with the small stipend he earned as a caregiver to his aging grandparents. In 1921, he secured a position as acting principal at the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute in Georgia. This pivotal trip would connect the struggling writer with the land of his father and provide him a sensory landscape to flesh out the skeletal structure of *Cane*.

*Wind is in the cane. Come along.
Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk,
Scratching choruses above the guinea's squawk,
Wind is in the cane. Come along.*
--"Carma," *Cane* (1923).

It is in this emotionally and physically charged in-between space of now and then, modern and traditional, rural and urban, men and women that Toomer sets *Cane*'s characters and stories. While he omits scenes of planting and harvest, the cane fields dominate the book's geographic and sensory landscape. Toomer gives voice to the myriad textures that reside in this both familiar and unfamiliar territory and its inhabitants. In *Cane* he finds the most complete expression of an artwork to mirror his insistence upon new forms to accompany new identifications. Perhaps the two greatest disappointments to follow *Cane*'s publication are 1) that Toomer never completed another work of such breathtaking complexity despite writing essays and poems up until his death in 1967 and 2) Modernist and Harlem Renaissance literature students and scholars continue to overlook the book's contributions to the development of both literary movements.

Our *Cane* illuminates Toomer's *Cane* in ways that are both wholly new and yet intrinsically bound to the text. The mix of mediums -- dance, music, information processing -- unlock the book's performative potential. The collaborative team expands the reach of Toomer's formal innovations by embodying the physical, aural, and visual registers of the characters, narrator, and setting. We pay particular attention to the ways Toomer illustrates the different effects of change (economic, social, and psychological) on men versus women. While he subjects all his characters (human and environmental) to intense scrutiny, it is women's daily life that bears the weight of his imagination. They often succumb to the emotional and physical vagaries of men; however, they also resist and retool social and personal dynamics and carve out a path to survival and endurance. A digital field of cane that contains and reframes the oral history narratives of former slaves, images of black American rural life, and natural environments past and present, allows us to complicate, as did Toomer, the documentary impulse in the representation of history and everyday life. Instead, we invoke a hauntology, an indeterminate state that holds past, present, and future in deliberately uneasy relationship, never quite dead but often buried and unquiet until stirred by artists' deliberate hands.

--- Jules Odendahl-James, production dramaturg.