

Maternal Ecocriticism and the Ecology of Motherhood in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

In Cane, Jean Toomer illustrates that human corporeality is tethered to the material world, a concept that feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo, in Bodily Natures, refers to as “transcorporeality.” Human bodies are not inured to their environment but are affected by the flow and substances of matter in which they are surrounded. In this modernist text, the natural world is enmeshed with female bodies, both seemingly carrying the DNA of the other. The assemblage of the agrarian South, African American women, and scenes of racial violence coalesce and construct a narrative of violated fertility and motherhood. The women of Cane are denied their motherhood because their bodies and being cannot be divorced from the trans-Atlantic trade route, plantation labour practices, and unsustainable logging of old-growth pine forests in post-Reconstruction Georgia. This article examines moments of transcorporeal exchange in Cane (i.e., felled pine trees and fetuses, and maternal bodies and cotton fields) and, in so doing, provides an ecocritical reading of mothering and material interconnectivity—a maternal ecocritical reading—of Toomer’s masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance.

Alice Walker opens her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”—a treatise on African American mothering, artistry, and the natural world—with a reverie on Jean Toomer’s masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance, *Cane*. The women of *Cane*, Walker argues, are carnally abused and mutilated yet remain intensely creative and spiritual. Walker declares that “[s]ome of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers” (32). Walker’s claim of matrilineal ancestry is metaphorically rich but not textually grounded, given the fact that most of the women in *Cane* are denied maternity, a violation that is fruitfully understood in the context of post-Reconstruction Georgia. The recent turn

to materialism in the field of ecocritical theory provides innovative ways of regarding the natural elements of the text and complicates an anthropomorphic reading of the non-human world where human characteristics are simply mapped onto the biotic environment. Instead, reading *Cane* from the prism of material ecocriticism invites a reflection of the human and the non-human as part of an interdependent web of vibrant matter.

Iovino and Oppermann in *Material Ecocriticism* argue that the material world is endowed with narratives, and this “storied matter” is transmitted through interchanges of organic and inorganic matter, human and non-human forms (1). Janet Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* uses the concept of assemblage to describe the relational networks of human and non-human matter: “assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistence presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-24). Although the storied matter of *Cane* is not monolithic, the assemblage of the agrarian South, African American women, and scenes of violence coalesce and construct a narrative of violated fertility and mothering. Moreover, Stacy Alaimo puts forth a concept of “transcorporeality” in *Bodily Natures*, in which she argues for the porosity of bodies. Human bodies, she maintains, are not inured to their surroundings but are affected by the flow of substances and matter in which they are surrounded. In this way, the women of *Cane* are denied their motherhood because their bodies, being, and identity cannot be divorced from the racist social landscape of the agrarian South, plantation labour, and unsustainable farming practices. Toomer highlights the intractable relationship among vibrant, living beings; the natural world is enmeshed with female bodies in *Cane*, both seemingly carrying the DNA of the other.

For Toomer, the violation of African American motherhood is a metonym for the destruction of community. Andrea O’Reilly, in *Rocking the Cradle*, sheds light on the role of mothering in the African American community: “Two interrelated themes or perspectives distinguish the African American tradition of motherhood. First, mothers and motherhood are valued by, and central to African American culture. Secondly, it is recognized that mothers and mothering are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African American people and the larger African American culture” (109).

Using O’Reilly’s paradigm of mothering and communal health and survival, I argue that Toomer focuses on the mother-body not only to showcase maternal desecration but also to recognize the myriad ways in which the African American community in the post-Reconstruction South is violated and fragmented.

Denied Motherhood in *Cane*

“Karintha,” the inaugural piece of *Cane*, is perhaps the most tragic of the narratives because the reader bears witness to the eponymous girl’s too-short lifecycle, which has been created and destroyed by male sexual desire, resulting in stolen fertility, an aborted fetus, and spiritual death. Karintha’s body is botanical in nature: men desire her and want to “ripen a growing thing too soon” (3). As a fruit bearing body, Karintha has a natural cycle of maturation that has been perverted by old men who ride her hobby horse and young men who impatiently count time before they perceive her as old enough to “mate with” (3). The diction here unmistakably places Karintha alongside fauna; she is not a woman with agency who chooses a partner but one who is selected for mating. She is a mere vessel for male desire. The character vignette rhetorically highlights Karintha’s subordination through extended silence. Not only is Karintha silenced in her victimization, but her perspective is withheld from the reader. Instead, Toomer routinely moves from Karintha to the Georgian countryside. In one instance, Toomer interrupts his narrative of Karintha’s hastening sexual development with a reverie on sunsets: “her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon / O cant you see it / her skin is like dusk / when the sun goes down” (4). As the sun rises and sets, so, too, does Karintha, whose beauty is enmeshed with the fading radiance of sunsets. Although it could be argued that Toomer withholds a sufficient exploration of Karintha’s interiority, Karintha can only be understood in relation to her surroundings when read from a material ecocritical prism. Just as Toomer suppresses Karintha’s desire, the reader is, likewise, left unaware about the actions surrounding her baby. Toomer writes:

A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits.... A sawmill nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before one completely burns. Meanwhile, the smoke curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley.... Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in water” (4)

Toomer’s choice to employ vague diction to describe the baby’s untimely birth (i.e., “fell”) suggests that Karintha either miscarried or aborted the baby. Culturally, these acts signify differently, and, thus, the ambiguity surrounding the baby’s death complicates Karintha’s motherhood. Moreover, that the baby ostensibly burned implies that Karintha cremated it, extinguishing the corpse of her baby with a natural element.

Fire, as an element that both destroys and purifies, invites a reading of Karintha's act as either violent (if she committed infanticide) or a ritual of purification (if Karintha miscarried). Either way, Karintha's choice to burn the corpse and not bury it sheds light on the community's complicity in Karintha's pregnancy. Since a collective "you" tasted it in water, a shared resource, Toomer indicates that the entire community ingests the result of Karintha's victimization. Moreover, that the baby falls onto "smooth and sweet" pine needles—a bed-like description—highlights the continuity between Karintha's body and the South, as both mother-body and plant life are potentially safe harbours for the baby, yet these sites of home are sullied by the social landscape of rural Georgia.

Of note in this vignette is the smoke that encircles the trees and spreads through the valley. While the male community victimizes the young girl, the pine trees cushion the baby's fall and the smoke, resultant from the burning, clings to those trees. Toomer's characterization of the smoke as ghost-like indicates that the spectre of the baby is enmeshed with the biotic world. From this opening character sketch, Toomer casts the natural world as haunted by violated motherhood. The fetus is dispersed among pine trees, water, valleys, and cane stalks, and in that way, the reader reads *Cane* through the lens of Karintha's desecrated motherhood. Toomer deftly uses the four natural elements—earth, air, water, and fire—to suggest the omnipresence of Karintha's victimization and its manifestation throughout the natural world. Kathleen Brogan in *Cultural Haunting* argues that ghosts are agents of cultural memory (12). In that way, the ghost, the aborted infant, is a site of cultural memory, as she is a reminder of the millions lost to the trans-Atlantic trade route and the families torn apart by chattel slavery. Karintha's baby haunts the Georgian countryside, and is the ghost who will, in various guises, haunt *Cane*.

Whereas Karintha inspires the narrator's ode to beauty, death permeates the vignette and, likewise, haunts another character sketch in Toomer's opening section titled "Esther," in which the named protagonist is repeatedly cast as a spectre: "her cheeks are too flat and dead for a girl of nine" (22). Esther is the fair-skinned daughter of a wealthy store owner, and, like Karintha, the story marks her transition from childhood to womanhood. As she matures, her physicality continues to deteriorate so that at age twenty-two, her "hair thins [and] looks like the dull silk on puny corn ears. Her face pales until it is the color of the gray dust that dances with dead cotton leaves" (25). Esther's elision with crops is noteworthy insofar as Toomer was moved to write *Cane* while he worked as a principal for a school in Sparta, Georgia. Sparta, the inspiration for Toomer's fictional landscape, is, according to Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr in *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History*,

located almost at the center of Hancock County, a little over one hundred miles southeast of Atlanta, seventy-five miles southwest of Augusta. Hancock County is in the upper half of what was historically the “Black Belt” of the state, the cotton growing heartland where the plantation system of antebellum Georgia was established, to be succeeded in Reconstruction and the following years by the system of tenant farming and sharecropping, piece-work labor, and peonage which would last well into the twentieth century. (8)

African Americans, during the antebellum and postbellum periods, constituted the majority of the labour force that was put in the service of growing cash crops, such as cotton and tobacco. The ecological consequences of cotton plantation practices, in which a premium was placed on increased crop production, resulted in significant soil erosion. Not only did such unsustainable cotton farming deplete the soil, but it necessitated the removal of large tracts of forests. Therefore, the death-like imagery describing Esther—desiccated and dusty—suggests that both Esther and the plants have been unnaturally stripped of their vitality.

The story charts Esther’s desire for the dark-skinned King Barlo, a man beset by religious visions and, according to Esther, “the best cotton picker in the county, in the state, in the whole world for that matter” (25), which again aligns people and plants. She fantasizes about him, which becomes the sole animation in her otherwise insipid life. As an adult, Esther professes her affection for Barlo. Her mind is described as “a pink meshbag filled with baby toes” (26). Like Karintha’s baby who transforms to smoke, ethereal and evanescent, Esther’s offspring is reduced to a metonym of an infant. Toomer offers a stark and disturbing image of motherhood, as there is no living child, only a violated and fragmented being. Although Esther never explicitly dreams of marrying and raising a family with Barlo, each of her fantasies includes babies: in one, she takes an abandoned infant, and in other, she “frantically” loves a dark-skinned baby, whom she perceives as “ugly as sin.” Employing the discourse of racial caste hierarchy, Esther, nevertheless, claims the baby and her position as mother as she holds it “to her breast” (24). Indeed, by the piece’s end, after Barlo rejects and mocks her advances, “the thought comes suddenly, that conception with a drunken man must be a mighty sin [and] she draws away, frozen” (27). In this passage, the diction unmistakably points to sex as a means to motherhood. Her desire, highlighted throughout the piece with images of fire and passion, is revealed to be a yearning for procreation. Just as the baby’s toes are cut off and distorted, so too is Esther’s fertility aborted. Lest motherhood be relegated to the margins of “Esther,” Toomer includes a story about a woman who was so inspired by Barlo’s religious prophesy that she “drew a portrait of a black

Madonna on the courthouse wall” (23). This seemingly tangential narrative is significant enough that Toomer repeats it in “Fern,” another character sketch in the first section of the book: “A black woman once saw the mother of Christ and drew her in charcoal on the courthouse wall.... When one is on the soil of one’s ancestors, most anything can come to one” (19). Very little information is given about this artist; instead, this “sanctified negress” (23) is placed in *Cane*, I would offer, to render the importance of Black motherhood. Elevating the Black woman as the mother of God refutes the general disregard for African American mothers in the South’s Black Belt. Recasting these mother bodies as sites of holiness, in fact, counters the dismembering of families common in chattel slavery. Read from the prism of material ecocriticism, it is of note that Toomer moves from this unnamed woman’s act of artistic rebellion to a reflection on soil. Ancestral soil, the narrator contends, inspires otherworldly visions. It stands to reason that those who toiled on the land and are buried in the earth have left their imprint. The red Georgia clay, an intermediary between the past and the present, is infused with ancestral bodies and blood, an embodiment that continues to affect the community.

Aborted acts of reproduction not only mark the female character sketches in part one of *Cane*, they culminate Toomer’s treatise on African American women’s stolen motherhood. The final section, “Kabnis,” is a highly autobiographical drama that focuses on an African American man from the north, Ralph Kabnis, who takes a teaching position in Georgia. Tied to the agrarian South through history and bloodlines, Kabnis returns to the land that began the collection. In this piece, the title character is drawn to the rural South but is paralyzed by the paradoxes that he encounters, which render him unable to come to terms with the spectres that trouble the landscape. The natural and built environment haunts Kabnis. Being on the soil of his ancestors, Kabnis is overwhelmed, a fact that is highlighted by his first night’s stay on former plantation grounds. Kabnis’s living space in the South is a one-room cabin; thus, he literally inhabits the quarters of his enslaved forebears: an elision of the self and the ancestral corpus, the past and the present.

On the first night of his stay, he is tormented by the night sounds as he imagines the brutality that has taken place in these quarters. Indeed, the land speaks to Kabnis: the moon casts spells, cane fields whisper, and the night winds sing. It is the land that first introduces Kabnis to the African American southern experience. The cracks in the wall, which are referred to as “lips,” that give voice to the night songs physically shower Kabnis with dirt: “[d]ust of slavefields, dried, scattered” (84). The southern dust is richly embodied, and Kabnis’s description of himself as an “atom of dust” (85) registers his transcorporeal connection to the land and his forebears. Kabnis wanders into the night searching to make meaning of this senseless brutality:

Kabnis is about to shake his fists heavenward. He looks up, and the night's beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees.... The shock sends a shiver over him. He quivers. Tears mist his eyes. He writhes.... "Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them. There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and ... tortures me." (85)

In this scene, Kabnis is overwhelmed by the irreconcilable mosaic that he encounters in rural Georgia—the richness of folk culture, the opulence of the natural world, and the racial atrocities that have occurred on that land.

Kabnis's torment culminates when a resident of the area, Layman, relates a horrific story of mob lynching, which is, again, imbricated with aborted motherhood. A pregnant Mame Lamkins refuses to reveal the whereabouts of her husband to an angry mob, and, in retaliation, she is viciously lynched. The mob's terror does not end there. They proceed to cut the living fetus from the mother's stomach and hang it from a tree. Of note in this scene of horrific racial violence is the brutal displacement of the mother from her unborn baby. This separation is a ruthless re-enactment of the denial of motherhood threaded throughout *Cane*. The assemblage of the tree, the baby's corpse, and the mother-body illustrates, once again, a link between the human and the non-human, an alliance that Toomer articulates from the outset of the text. Using the tree as an accomplice for the murder of the fetus reveals that even though the crime is no longer physically visible, the baby's brutal murder is grafted onto the tree. The composition is further expanded as the reader realizes that Toomer, in his fictional Mame Lamkins story, recreates many of the details of the much publicized lynching of Mary Turner. Mary Turner was a pregnant woman who was lynched in Valdosta, Georgia, in 1918, three years before Toomer moved to Sparta, because she publicly asserted that her husband, Hayes Turner, was hanged for a crime that he did not commit. The mob took her to a stream, tied her ankles together, hung her upside down from a tree, and then burned her body. She was in her eighth month of pregnancy. While she was still alive, one of the men cut open Turner's abdomen, causing her unborn child to fall from her womb to the ground, and another mob member crushed the baby underfoot.

In both instances, the land, stream, and trees are put into the service of barbarous acts of white supremacy. This violent performance was designed to silence the African American community in registering complaints about the social conditions of the Jim Crow South. The conflation of voice, land, lynching and silence is marked in the hushed telling of the lynching tale itself, as Layman's voice is "uniformly low and soothing," (92) a rehearsed retelling that does not transgress the parameters of white censorship. Indeed, Toomer

draws attention to Layman's inability to claim voice by analogizing his storytelling to the land's: "A canebrake, murmuring the tale to its neighbor-road would be more passionate" (92). Again, the earth, an unwitting accomplice to these murders, is embodied with narratives; it, too, bears witness to the past, lamenting the crime and mourning the dead.

Ecosystems and Family Systems

Like Kabnis, Toomer is the son who returns to the mother-land of Georgia to reclaim his past. In recognition of the manifold traumas that resulted from the African Diaspora—a term from the Greek, which literally means the scattering of seeds—Toomer mourns the dislocation of the family and specifically locates that as the fragmentation of the mother-body. In fact, the interrelationship of Toomer, the narrator of *Cane*, the natural elements of the South, and the mother-body is nowhere more explicit than in the poem "Song of the Son." Here, the homophonic elision of the son/sun underscores the porosity of living entities.

In a letter to his close friend Sherwood Anderson, Toomer writes of his southern experience, "My seed was planted in the cane-and cotton-fields, and in the souls of the black and white people in the small southern town. My seed was planted in *myself* down there" (qtd. in Kerman and Eldridge 84). In rejoicing for this newly identified cultural affiliation, Toomer uses an obvious birth metaphor. The word "seed" is particularly resonant, as Toomer employs it as a leitmotif in "Song of the Son." Tracing his family's ancestry to Georgia, Toomer felt an immediate sense of connection, typified in the poet's identification as a "son" who has returned to capture the fading folk culture. The poet addresses the "land and soil" in order to communicate with the "song-lit race of slaves," an image that further conflates the ancestors and the earth. The poet recognizes that the enslaved worked the southern land and tended to the crops, and, thus, he mines the natural world as a repository of his own past.

With a keen awareness of the passing of time, Toomer projects a sense of urgency in the poem. The poet's concern for preserving the folk culture is palpable, as he claims that he has arrived just in time to inherit the dying traditions of the culture:

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums, / Squeezed, and bursting
in the pine-wood air, / Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
/ One plum was saved / for me, one seed becomes / An everlasting
song, a singing tree, / Caroling softly souls of slavery, / What they
were, and what they are to me, / Caroling softly souls of slavery. (14)

The narrator does not merely analogize the ancestral body to the plum eschewing, for example, similes of “like” or “as”; rather, the “Negro slaves” *are* the dark-purple, ripened plums. Both are rooted in the southern earth, and their histories are elided. Indeed, as Neil Evernden argues in “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy”: “Where do you draw the line between one creature and another? Where does one organism stop and another begin? Is there even a boundary between you and the non-living world, or will the atoms of this page be a part of your body tomorrow?” (95). To this list of rhetorical questions, I would add, where is the separation between mother and child? In utero, is there a place where the mother-body stops and infant begins? This material entanglement is particularly evocative in the context of *Cane*, as the African American community who worked the land amid the pine-wood air inhabits that space, flora, and fauna. Plaintively singing the souls of slavery, the poet’s intention (much like Toomer’s) is to capture that “everlasting song,” which the environment engenders. From this tree, read as both a family tree and a literal plant, the poet characterizes himself as the last seed of the plum. It is not surprising that Toomer turns to trees, seeds, and fruit in this poem because tree bodies are often bound up with human bodies: “Associations between ... sap and blood, leaves and hair, limbs and arms, bark and skin, or trunk and the human body should not be taken as merely analogical, for they establish a kind of identity between signifier and signified” (qtd. in Silvis 90). Insofar as the discourse of kinship lines is mapped onto trees, (i.e., tree of life and the family tree) trees are simultaneously maternalized and rendered as sites of history and memory. Perhaps the most notable example in African American literature of trees and their link to the mother-body can be found in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in which Sethe, the protagonist who refutes the system of chattel slavery by insisting on owning her identity as mother, has a scar on her back that is discursively rendered as a tree, complete with branches and fruit. The mother, then, is the tree; without her root system, the children and the branches cannot thrive. Just as Sethe’s scar was the result of being whipped during her late-stage pregnancy, the mother-as-tree portrait is not a pristine vegetal and human image; in fact, throughout *Cane*, the beauty of the pines is, simultaneously, grafted with cruel images of lynching and industrial-scale logging. Indeed, it is of note that the fruit of the earth is saved for the speaker from a *dying* tree. Toomer describes the tree as being stripped, an image that gestures to the increase of large-scale logging practices in the post-Reconstruction South. Jeffrey Myers explores the exploitation of the natural world as represented in Charles Chesnutt’s work, which sheds light on Toomer’s ecological treatise in *Cane*: “Both the bodies of slaves and the pine forests of the American Southeast had to be exploited in order to make the fortunes—and the culture—that cotton and tobacco plantations made possible ... plantation

owners literally carved this culture from both the bodies of slaves and the forests themselves” (6). Meyers further offers that during this period, the Southeast was beginning “an acute phase of natural resource exploitation, despite the fact that such calls were preserving wild lands elsewhere in the United States ... [and] that the industrial timber production or cotton and tobacco cashcrop agriculture [were] practices that created a system of debt peonage for—and in some cases virtual reenslavement of—African American farmers in the latter part of the nineteenth century” (6). The speaker of “Song of the Son” recognizes that the forests and its inhabitants are the holders of history, and, thus, the destruction of this habitat reveals the loss of memory and kinship. The image of the sole seed indicates that the speaker will attempt to replant himself, his art, and his history back into the earth, but that possible birth image, set against the myriad narratives of barrenness or stolen fertility, is not a hopeful one. Moreover, that only *one* plum with *one* seed remains reveals the smallness of the gesture against the large-scale destruction of an ecosystem. Cowdrey in *This Land, This South: An Environmental History* explains the region’s “forests and wildlife were brutally used by outsiders, who cut its forests, bought up its land, and financed its railroads and many of its nascent industries” (Cowdrey 103), a history which underlies *Cane*.

Toomer’s use of the saw mills, omnipresent in section one of *Cane*, culminates in “Georgia Dusk,” a poem in which Toomer analogizes the destruction of the pine forest to violence against the African American community. The pine trees, whose sounds are described as “sacred whispers,” create a haunting melody along with the “chorus of the cane,” perhaps as a plaintive protest to the decimation of the ecosystem. In the third stanza, the mill workers’ day is done, and the “buzz-saws stop,” only to leave sawdust piles in its wake: “blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low / where only chips and stumps are left to show / the solid proof of former domicile” (15). The trees—felled and reduced to sawdust—are gone, only the “ghosts” of their being remain. Such imagery returns the reader to “Karintha,” in which the female protagonist uses the sawdust pile as a funerary pyre for her infant. The spectre of Karintha’s infant transmogrifies into the “blue ghost of the trees,” as Toomer subtly links the exploitation of African Americans, and especially mothers, with the exploitation of the environment. Trees are a particularly maternalized plant. Forest scientist Suzanne Simard’s research focuses on “Mother Trees”—the larger, older trees in the forests—and their role in maintaining the health and survival of their surrounding ecosystem. Through a vast and complex network of root systems and fungal threads, Mother Trees actually provide nutrients to the saplings. When a Mother Tree is cut down, the survival rate of the younger members of the forest is “substantially diminished” (Engelsiepen). The significance of the Mother Tree is such that the community’s health and

survival depends on her presence. Although Toomer could not have foreseen this pioneering dendrology research, it offers a striking parallel to Toomer's ideological stance in *Cane*, in which white, patriarchal, hegemonic culture destroys both human and plant communities by desecrating and denying the mother-body.

Inspired by his link to the natural environment of the agrarian South, Toomer responded to it narratively and, for a brief time, celebrated his Black heritage by finding the "seed" of himself in Georgia. Employing a seminal image of fertility, Toomer recognized Georgia as the matrix of his writing and his identity, and, thus, it is apt that *Cane* is haunted by complex birth imagery. Yet although Toomer celebrated this gift—he claimed that "a visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done" (Scruggs and VanDemarr 9)—soon after the publication of *Cane*, he distanced himself from his work and his blackness. In fact, Toomer believed that the African American folk culture of the American South that inspired *Cane* was dying. He wrote that *Cane* was a "swan song" to a fading culture that could not last in the face of industrialization and modernization. In his autobiographical writings, Toomer claims that "[t]he folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*" (*Wayward* 123). Death, birth, the seeds of life, and the agrarian history of the region illustrate the nature-culture interaction that permeates Toomer's masterwork.

To highlight the porosity of human and plant life, Toomer entitles his text *Cane*, an element of the biotic world made clear in the epigraph—"Oracular. Redolent of fermenting syrup, Purple of the dusk, Deep-rooted Cane"—and then plunges the reader in rural Georgia, a post-Reconstruction world in which women are displaced from their motherhood. The botanical narratives in *Cane* coalesce with narratives of ecological and female barrenness. Although motherhood may seem disparate from antebellum plantation labour and the unsustainable logging of old-growth pine forests, these are the material bodies that Toomer encountered during his stay in Georgia. In Toomer's able hands, the reader readily grasps the composition in which human and more than human life are not bifurcated but part of a larger ecosystem of interaction and transformation.

Homes, Gardens and Wombs

Alice Walker's mother was also situated in the environs of Jean Toomer's agrarian Georgia, yet she altered her maternal and physical landscape. Walker writes of her mothering:

By the time she was twenty, she had two children and was pregnant with a third. Five children later, I was born. And this is how I came to know my mother: she seemed to me a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home. Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not need to go to school. (238)

In this way, Walker's mother's creation of home physically and emotionally contests a racially hegemonic society. Walker concretizes her mothering in a list of seemingly exhaustive domestic duties: "she made all the clothes we wore, even my brother's overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds" (238). These acts are renarrated and reconceptualized as empowering. Not only does Walker's mother bear children but she ensures their educational development and physical and emotional safety in a society that treated Black children as detritus. These moments of radical maternity are transcorporeally linked to her radical act of creating beauty and of asserting agency over her family's micro-landscape:

My mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November.... Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena ... and on and on. (241)

Walker's mother does not merely ornament their impoverished home with flowers; through botanical abundance, she provides her children with a sense of dignity. The mother's creation of organic beauty interrupts narratives of unworthiness mapped onto families of poor, Black sharecroppers. By surrounding her children with beauty, she publicly reveals that they and she *are* worthy of beauty, an enmeshment that bespeaks the tenets of material ecocriticism. In this context, material ecocriticism becomes maternal ecocriticism, a theory in which maternal and environmental landscapes are intertwined. Her mothering is tied to her stewardship with the land.

bell hooks in “An Aesthetic of Blackness” provides insight into African American mother’s acts of creating beauty: “Remembering the houses of my childhood, I see how deeply my concern with aesthetics was shaped by black women who were fashioning an aesthetic of being, struggling to create an oppositional world view for their children, working with space to make it livable (132). Here, again, African American women’s mothering is tied to the creation of external space. In “Homeplace,” hooks further explores the porous boundary between the self and environment: “Historically, African American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist” (42). bell hooks’s work echoes Walker’s, insofar as the world outside the boundaries of the self and family, though seemingly stagnant because of class and race stratification, can be acted on and, in so doing, affect the emotional landscape of the inhabitants.

Walker implicitly answers Toomer’s call. Where he sees macro-landscapes of destruction over both earth and women, she sees the radical potential of mothering as work that includes the transformation of place. In writing back to Toomer, Walker renarrates the lack of mothers in the text by bestowing maternity on them—“Some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers” (232)—in recognition that the folk culture was not dying, as Toomer portended, but instead was being nurtured through radical acts of African American motherwork.¹ Inserting the “maternal” in material ecocriticism is a discursive reminder of not only the physical entanglements of humans in a fertile, vibrant and living world, but specifically the blending of the mother-body and the biosphere in such a way that those who do motherwork are shaped by and can shape built and natural environments.

In *Having Faith: An Ecologist’s Journey to Motherhood*, Steingraber, too, highlights the intricate crossings between human and non-human spheres as she theorizes the mother-body as an interactive ecosystem. Steingraber’s womb, an interior maternal landscape, fuses with the natural world. Claiming her body as a “habitat,” she rhetorically positions it alongside other living environments. During amniocentesis, for example, Steingraber reflects on fluid—blood, drinking water, creeks and rivers—and its flow through human and non-human nature:

I drink water, and it becomes blood plasma, which infuses through the amniotic sac and surrounds the baby—who also drinks it. And what is it before that? Before it is drinking water, amniotic fluid is the creeks and rivers that fill reservoirs. It is the underground water that fills

wells. And before it is creeks and rivers and groundwater. Amniotic fluid is rain.... The blood of cows and chickens is in this tube. The nectar gathered by bees and hummingbirds is in this tube. Whatever is inside hummingbird eggs is also inside my womb. Whatever is in the world's water is here in my hand. (qtd. in Alaimo 103-104)

This graphic musing on transcorporeality, in which the non-human world and its inhabitants seep through human bodies, offers a particularly evocative elision when read in terms of the mother-body, which is not a closed ecosystem, but serves as home and food source for offspring. In the preface, Steingraber explains that as an ecologist, she is interested in “how living things interact with the environments they inhabit” (ix). She moves from this broad statement regarding the interfacing of the biotic world to a precise thesis on mothers and the biosphere: “If the world's environment is contaminated, so too is the ecosystem of a mother's body. If a mother's body is contaminated, so too is the child who inhabits it” (x). This memoir goes on to reveal how chemicals and toxins can potentially disrupt female bodies (including breastmilk), which is an important argument but outside the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, Steingraber's trenchant revelation of the porosity of the mother-body with the biotic world is apt for conceiving a theory of maternal ecocriticism. With such an awareness that humans (and in this context, mothers) are the very stuff of the material world, alterations to the environment, however broadly or intimately conceptualized and configured, can result in profound interventions in physical, social, and political spheres.

Endnotes

¹I am borrowing the term “motherwork” from Andrea O'Reilly's insightful work on Toni Morrison's representations of mothering. O'Reilly argues that the responsibilities of motherwork, as portrayed in Morrison's fiction, include “preservation, nurturance, cultural bearing and healing” (131). Applying an ecocritical approach to this framework, I would add that the alteration of physical environments is intimately tied to nurturance and healing.

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. Print.
- Bennett, Janet. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Print.
- Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American*

- Literature*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998. Print.
- Cowdrey, Albert E. *This Land, This South: An Environmental History*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995. Print.
- Engelsiepen, Jean. "Trees Communicate" *Ecology Global Network*. Ecology Communications Group, 2012. Web. 1 May 2016.
- Evernden, Neil. "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy." *The Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. 92-104. Print.
- hooks, bell. "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional." *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 121-134. Print.
- hooks, bell. "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance." *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End, 1990. 41-49. Print.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. "Introduction: Stories Comes to Matter." *Material Ecocriticism*. Eds. Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014. 1-17. Print.
- Kerman, Cynthia Earl, and Richard Eldridge. *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1987. Print.
- Myers, Jeffrey. "Other Nature: Resistance to Ecological Hegemony in Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*." *African American Review* 37.1 (Spring 2003): 5-20. Print.
- O'Reilly, Andrea. *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering*. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006. Print.
- Scruggs, Charles, and Lee VanDemarr. *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. Print.
- Steingraber, Sandra. *Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2001. Print.
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. 1923. Ed. Darwin T. Turner. New York: Norton, 1988. Print.
- Toomer, Jean. *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer*. Ed. Darwin T. Turner. Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1980.
- Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1983. 231-243. Print.