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SOUTHERN BLACK WOMEN'S CANEBRAKE GARDENS

Responding to Taylor's Call for Aesthetic Reconstruction

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*In this response, I suggest that Black southern women in the U.S. have always been central to the “reconstruction” that Taylor identifies as a central theme of Black aesthetics. Building on his allusions to Alice Walker and Jean Toomer, I explore Walker’s tearful response (in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) to Toomer’s *Cane* (2011). Walker identifies their mothers’ and grandmothers’ informal arts of storytelling and gardening as the hidden roots of both her and Toomer’s work. I suggest that Walker’s tears function to water her mother’s (and other mothers’) gardens, thereby sustaining southern Black women’s foundational work in reconstruction. Through telling their stories and planting gardens, along with crafting meals, designing clothes, and designing and decorating homes, southern Black women have always been necessary to Black aesthetics—filling worlds with aesthetically-rich and energetic artworks that Black formal artists such as Walker channel and transfigure into their formal artistic productions.*

1 Introduction: Black Women's Self-Representations in Popular Culture

From the first time I heard Paul C. Taylor speak, what I admired most was his willingness to engage with aesthetic self-representations by women of colour in popular culture. As a then-graduate student, what stuck with me was a playful and humorous remark he made about his research on self-representation in internet models of colour. And now, in Taylor's present article, what sticks out most are his references to Ana DuVernay and her television series *Queen Sugar* (on the Oprah Network, 2016-Present), featuring two Black sisters who inherit their father's sugarcane farm in Louisiana. That series also resonates, moreover, with two major Black artworks that similarly foreground both women and the Deep South, and to which Taylor pays tribute, namely Jean Toomer's *Cane* (2011) and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983).¹ This is in part because *Cane* is set in the Deep South of rural Georgia, where Walker was born and raised.

This is precisely what moved me to attempt to a response to Taylor's timely call, picking up on two notes I hear, not just in this article, but in his work generally. To wit, a specific gender and region—women and the Deep South—have always constituted the ground floor of Black aesthetic reconstruction, albeit largely invisibly (another central theme in Taylor's Black aesthetics) to most who live elsewhere or are embodied differently. To flesh out this response, I will retrace Walker's account, in *Gardens*, of Toomer's *Cane*, its effect on her, and the largely-invisible roots that she identifies in both his work and hers: namely, the informal arts of southern Black women, especially storytelling and gardening. More precisely, Walker repeatedly emphasizes that she cries in response to formal Black artworks such as *Cane*, which she interprets as improvisations on the informal Black artworks of the formal artists' mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers. In this way, such works preserve

.....
1 Hereafter *Gardens*.

these otherwise-erased southern Black women's courage

By 'informal artworks' here, I mean aesthetically-invested productions (including gardening, cooking at home, sewing, and quilting) that are not typically identified (by, for example, philosophers of art) as belonging to formal artistic traditions. Such productions deserve to be called 'artworks' in part because they are mindful creations, infused with aesthetic values, expressing their creators' inwardness, and belonging to traditions that are transmitted from masters to novices and that are at least unconsciously modified and transformed thereby. Moreover, such productions—when stolen from the historical and geographical edges of colonial empires—have long been identified as artworks, and proudly displayed at the prestigious museums at the centre of the art-world. When created within those empires, however, such productions are typically excluded from the pantheon of 'the arts'

The reason for this exclusion, arguably, is that these productions are the work of members of disempowered groups whose work in general (and indeed whose very life and being) receives on average very little respect from the surrounding society. Put more simply, if a work is created mainly by women, especially Black women, and most especially southern Black women, then many gatekeepers of the artworld (including philosophers of art) assume that the work could not possess the seriousness and dignity they associate with 'art'. And the 'southern' part of this phrase tracks the institutional conservatism of the South, which still pressures women to work exclusively as homemakers and mothers, extorting as much unpaid labour from them as possible while violently restricting their outlets for potentially lucrative and recognized artistic work outside their homes.

Returning to my thesis, southern Black women tell stories to future Black formal artists, mostly men and some women; and when a southern Black woman formal artist like Walker recognizes those hidden origins in a given southern Black woman's artwork—like "the stories

told to Toomer by his grandmother, she of the ‘dark blood’ to whom the book is dedicated” (1983, 65)—then she cries. And these tears, finally, water the still-obscured roots of subsequent women’s literal and figurative gardens. This, I suggest, is the heart, devalued by misogyny and regional prejudice, of Taylor’s Black aesthetic reconstruction, like the canebrake farms of DuVernay’s *Queen Sugar* (2016-Present)

What, the reader might wonder, does ‘reconstruction’ mean here, for me and for Taylor? Though unable to locate a clear definition in his essay for the broader philosophical concept (as opposed to the political era), the closest thing I can find there is the following quote: “The basic reconstructionist impulse,” Taylor writes, is “aimed at rooting out the conditions for the persistence of white supremacist and anti-democratic practices” (2020, 18). This tells us what reconstruction wants to do, and what it negates, but it does not capture positively what it is. So, I suggest we turn to the powers of language for a moment.

Reconstruction’s root, obviously, is ‘construction’, which in philosophy is most often presented (though usually implicitly) in formal terms, as in an architect’s placement of lines and shapes in abstract graphing space. Sometimes, however, ‘construction’ is instead articulated in philosophy in terms of the raw materials that are gathered and reformed into these formal designs. To raise the point of a neglected alternative meaning—the one that is, in fact, the dominant sense in my own Deep South home state—‘construction’ can also mean the gruelling manual labour that is still performed disproportionately in the US by people of colour.

It is this third sense that I will try to sing in response to Taylor, by considering who exactly is doing the necessary work of transforming raw materials into the shapely edifices of racial justice. I wish to consider those who are reconstructing the gardens and canebrake fields of Black aesthetics; and they are, disproportionately, anonymous southern Black informal women artists (such as Toomer’s grandmother and Walker’s mother). To help raise the visibility of these vital reconstructions, shin-

ing a bit of light on their songs, I now turn in my second section to an analysis, by the foremost tender of these gardens today, of one of the gardens' brightest illuminators

2 Walker on the Southern Black Women of Toomer's *Cane*

In an interview collected in *Gardens*, Walker praises *Cane* so highly that the word 'praise' begins to seem inadequate:

I did not read *Cane* until 1967, but it has been reverberating in me to an astonishing degree *I love it passionately*; could not possibility exist without it *Cane* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are probably my favorite [sic] books by black American writers (Walker 1983, 259, her emphasis)

Anyone familiar with Walker's text knows that there is no one higher in her personal pantheon than Zora Neale Hurston, so for *Cane* to be paired with Hurston's masterpiece, already constitutes an enormous affirmation. But she goes further here. She "could not possibly exist without it"

As Walker reveals a bit earlier in the same interview, she is not only this vulnerable with her interviewer on the subject of *Cane* Apparently, she is even more vulnerable on that subject in the classroom with her students, and on a regular basis She describes this experience as follows:

It is clear from the first line of *Cane* that Jean Toomer is a poet, blessed with a soul that is surprised by nothing It is not unusual to weep when reading [Gwendolyn] Brooks, just as when reading Toomer's *Song of the Sun* it is not unusual to comprehend—in a flash—what a dozen books on black history fail to illuminate. I have embarrassed my classes occasionally by standing in front of them in tears as Toomer's poem about "some genius from the South" flew through my body like a swarm of golden butterflies on their way toward a destructive sun Like [W E B] Du Bois,

Toomer was capable of comprehending the black soul. It is not “soul” that *can* become a cliché, but something to be illuminated rather than explained (Walker 1983, 258, her emphasis)

The most germane point from this passage, vis-à-vis Taylor’s essay, is Walker’s deployment of “the black soul.” Taylor uses exactly this phrase to identify a problematic strategy, historically, for coalescing a Black aesthetic canon (2020, 31). Problematic, he explains, because such strategies “raise worries about invidious essentialism” (ibid)

Though Taylor’s point is of course well-taken, the fact that Walker also talks in this same quoted passage about Du Bois—author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1996), whom Taylor praises similarly highly—suggests that what Walker is describing with “soul” is less likely to be “invidious essentialism” (ibid). More precisely, whatever this “soul” is for Walker, she makes it clear that it would be a “category mistake” to even attempt to render it clichéd, in part because (unlike a cliché) her soul is inherently inexplicable (albeit “comprehensible”) (1983, 258). Instead, this soul is illuminable, and apparently *Cane* throws onto it one adequate light. This raises the question, then: What must something be to be non-understandable but comprehensible in the light? It appears one cannot (as it were) “stand under” Walker’s Black soul, so it seems to have no foundation. What one *can* do, however, as *Cane* does, is put one’s arms around that soul, provided there is enough light, as indeed there is thanks to *Cane*—comparable, for Walker, to the flight of a swarm of golden butterflies through her body as they prepare to perish in the sun.

It sounds like it is time, in search of further illumination, for more poetry. In *Cane*’s poem, *Song of the Sun*, to which Walker alludes by name in the above quote, Toomer writes that, “though the sun is setting on / A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set” (Toomer 2011, ll). Note the twin sources of illumination here: the sun and song. There is a perpetual setting of the star and, by implication, an equally perpetual rising of Black music. *Cane*’s subsequent poem, *Georgia Dusk* (which contains

the line that Walker references, “some genius of the South”), begins on a similar note (Toomer 2011, 19) With the “setting sun,” the sky is apparently “too indolent to hold / A lengthened tournament for flashing gold” (ibid) Instead, the sky “passively darkens for the night’s barbecue” during which feast the abovementioned Southern “genius” is “making folks-songs from soul sounds” (ibid) In this poem, too, therefore, the literal light fades, creating a problematic absence for the Black community beneath it; the absence is then addressed by the figurative light of song, which speeds from Black souls to their own rescue, and survival till the next sun

Returning to the above block quote, its most important point vis-à-vis my reply to Taylor is Walker’s freely admitting to having wept openly while rereading *Cane* to her students (for the presumably umpteenth time) In addition to registering the power and truth of Toomer’s work (in Taylor’s terms, its reconstructive power), Walker’s tears also constitute a significant motif in her collection, both within the text and in her readers’ responses (mine included) “Many women wept, they later told me, as I read it” Walker relates, in reference to the speech version of *Gardens’* titular essay, delivered at a 1973 symposium at Radcliff College (Walker 1983, 316)

A second instance of this motif can be found in Walker’s subsequent description of the same conference Sitting in the audience with her friend, the celebrated poet and activist June Jordan, Walker felt shocked that there “was *no* response whatsoever” from the rest of the audience “to the increased suicide rate among young women of colour” (which a speaker mentioned) (Walker 1983, 316-317) “I burst,” Walker writes of her immediate response,

into the loudest tears I’ve ever shed And though I soon dried my face, I didn’t stop crying inside for...Maybe I haven’t stopped crying yet But that’s okay; what I’m crying for is worth it (Walker 1983, 317)

Seeing her tears, some of the other women at the conference chastised Walker, admonishing her that she was “trying to ‘carry’ my mother”, even though (in their view) “the weight is too heavy” (Walker 1983, 318). Her friend Jordan, however, reassured her with a question: “‘But why shouldn’t you carry your mother; she carried you didn’t she?’” (1983, 319). Remembering this challenge, Walker summarizes it as “perfection in a short response” (1983, 319). Though it is relatively clear what motivated the tears in this instance, in the case of *Cane* a closer reading of Toomer’s text might help, also to illuminate the connection between the tears and the gardens.

3 Southern Black Women as Reconstruction-Artists in *Cane*

The two passages in *Cane* that Walker references in the above block quote belong to a larger motif in Toomer’s text, in which I locate its strongest tone of Taylor’s reconstruction. In this motif, Black women, sometimes metaphorized as buildings, literally or figuratively sing, in response to the fading sun or rising moon. The effect of said songs is to protect and sustain the Black world. In short, Black women compensate for the fading visual light with the auditory light of their soul-songs. The first instance of this motif, found in the short story *Carma* is as follows:

Dusk takes the polish from the rails. Lights twinkle in scattered houses. From far away, a sad strong song. Pungent and composite, the smell of farmyards is the fragrance of the woman. She does not sing; her body is a song (Toomer 2011, 15)

Here the sun fades, named as “dusk,” in response to which the houses put forth replacement lights, which are soon accompanied by the figurative song of a Black woman engaged in the constructive work of tending her farm.

The second instance of this motif is found in the story *Blood-Burning Moon* which begins as follows: “Up from the dusk the full moon came

Glowing like a fired pine-knot, it illuminated the great door and soft showered the Negro shanties...Negro women improvised songs against its spell” (Toomer 2011, 39) Shortly thereafter, Toomer elaborates on this event “The women sang lustily at the rising moon,” he repeats, adding that “their songs were cotton-wads to stop their ears” (2011, 40) Again, the Black women’s song is a response, in this case to the noisy call of dogs, chickens and roosters on the farm “as if heralding some weird dawn or awakening” (ibid) This weird dawn refers to the moon’s rising, which Toomer describes at the story’s end as “an evil thing, an omen” to which the farm animals are responding in fear, and which is overcome by the song of brave southern Black women (2011, 49)

The third instance of this motif is found in the story *Theater* Its metaphorizing of women as buildings is not only stated explicitly, but implicitly affirmed by the fact that the houses are described as singing (like the literal women in the first two instances of the motif). Moreover, they are singing for a similar goal The passage reads as follows:

Dorris dances She forgets her tricks She dances Glorious songs
are the muscles of her limbs And her singing is of canebrake
loves and mangrove feastings The walls press in, singing Flesh
of a throbbing body, they press close to John and Dorris They
close them in John’s heart beats tensely against her dancing body
Walls press his mind within his heart And then, the shaft of light
goes out the window high above him (Toomer 2011, 71)

As with the first instance, a different part of the Black woman’s body (other than her voice) is described as doing the singing (in this case, that part is her musculature) And this singing is linked directly to the constructive work of the sugarcane fields. Then, as the dancing woman is reconstructed into a building, she emits a light (like that of the second instance of the motif) in the form of song

The fourth instance of the motif, from the story *Box Seat*, elaborates on

Toomer's woman-building metaphor. The story's first sentence claims that "Houses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street," in response to which metaphorical shining "dark swaying forms of Negroes are street songs that woo virginal houses" (which, as the next sentence clarifies, is a specific young Black man) (Toomer 2011, 76) As in the previous three instances of the motif, the time in question is again dusk; and again, a different aspect of a southern Black woman's body responds to the fading sunlight with her own figurative light, which inspires song.²

To clarify, as promised, the relationship between this motif in *Cane* and Walker's reconstructed *Gardens*, I now conclude this penultimate section with a look at her speech-turned-essay, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1973) For starters, its second sentence begins with Toomer "When the poet Jean Toomer walked through the South in the early twenties, he discovered a curious thing: black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so *unconscious*, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held" (Walker 1983, 232) Some of them, Walker continues "were our mothers and grandmothers," who "seemed to Jean Toomer: exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey" (1983, 232) For Walker, though, they were "artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste" then "died with their real gifts stifled within them" (1983, 233). But part of their gifts survived. Walker's mother, for example,

made all the clothes we wore, even my brother's overalls She
made all the towels and sheets we used She spent the summers

² The final instance of this motif, from the final novella, entitled *Kabnis*, modifies the motif slightly, in the following opening sentence to section 5: "Night, soft belly of a pregnant Negress, throbs evenly against the torso of the South" (Toomer 2011, 142). That night "throbs a womb-song to the South," and "set" the "cane-fields" "singing" (2011, 142). Meanwhile, "White paint on the wealthier houses has the chill blue glitter of distant stars" (2011, 142).

canning vegetables and fruits She spent the winter evening making quilts enough to cover all our beds (Walker 1983, 238)

These subaltern arts, sewing, culinary arts, and quilting, are key elements of many southern Black women's stifled and cramped artistry. Though Walker's mother never achieved recognition for this buried artistry, and though "no song or poem will bear my mother's name" nevertheless "so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories" (Walker 1983, 240)

Her mother's greatest art was even more directly impactful She "adorned with flowers", Walker remembers of her mother, "whatever shabby house we were forced to live in" (Walker 1983, 241) She planted "ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November" (1983, 241) In fact, whatever "she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties" (1983, 241). Walker observes fondly that "it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye" (1983, 241). This, finally, is where the link lies: "Guided by the heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength," Walker summarizes, "in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (1983, 243) As she notes elsewhere in this collection, "I have, myself, always required an absolutely quiet and private place to work (preferably with a view of a garden)" (1983, 70) This, it seems to me, is the oft-hidden heart of Black aesthetic reconstruction, in southern Black women's canebrake gardens

4 Conclusion

Taylor, in my view, also deserves the praise that Walker lavishes on Toomer, namely that he "is both feminine and masculine in his perceptions, unlike most black male writers He loved women" (Walker 1983, 259) Now, of course, it is not enough to simply love women, as

love can easily be accompanied by abuse and neglect (for which Taylor rightly criticizes Du Bois) But such loving is a good start, and a trait that Walker also justifiably ascribes to herself. In fact, this trait is so important to her self-perception that she plants it in the subtitle of *Gardens*, namely “Womanist Prose” In the book’s front matter, the second of four definitions she provides for “womanist” is “a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually”, and who “values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter” (1983, xi) Recognizing these loving gifts in Taylor, I am inspired by, and offer this humble response to, his beautiful reconstructive call

It seems only right, though, to close my response to Taylor with a reminder that his call is simultaneously a response to the call of (formal) Black artists in this reconstructive tradition And on the view presented here, those artists’ call, in turn, is also a response to the implicit call of informal Black artists such as the southern Black mothers and othermothers weaving tales and kneading earth When Walker formally acknowledges her mother’s artistry, she is not merely deigning to note something objectively inferior to her own work On the contrary, Walker is an artist, working in an array of formal genres, giving proper citational respect to a fellow artist working in an array of more foundational genres The vegetables in the garden, artfully formed and transformed, sustain Black bodies The stories in the community, artfully formed and transformed for each child, sustain Black heart-minds There would be no Black aesthetics of reconstruction, and indeed no Black formal artists, without the unjustly-obscured works of the master artists who are southern Black women

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