

HUMANITIES CENTER GRANT PRESENTATION

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March 20th at 12:10pm

Humanities Center
224 W. Packer Ave.



Pollock, Jackson. *Cotton Pickers* (c. 1935)

"'I see the blade': The Radical Nature of Jean Toomer's Pastoral"

The impact of slavery on agricultural labor in the U.S. casts a long shadow on the manner in which American writers depict the natural world and their relation to it. I propose that in modernity the pastoral becomes an idiom particularly well-suited for mapping the problems of post-Emancipation race-relations, economic exploitation, and the loss of positively valued relationships with the land. This presentation will explore the work of Jean Toomer, whose modernist pastoral forms destabilize the dominant paradigms for understanding the pastoral tradition in American culture. I will perform a close reading of Jean Toomer's "Reapers," the first poem in the multi-genre masterpiece *Cane* (1923), and demonstrate how it participates in and rejects the familiar affirmative idioms of the pastoral tradition. I argue that Toomer's experimental pastoral challenges those forms of pastoral writing that scholars have rightly criticized, in which the author creates idealized, escapist representations of place and the rural past.