In Jean Toomer’s Cane, female characters figure prominently; Part One, for example, is comprised, in part, of five stories, character sketches of women whose titles bear the protagonists’ names, and of two poems titled “Face” and “Portrait in Georgia,” which depict their female subjects as fragmented bodies. These female figures—Karintha, Becky, Carma, Fern, Esther, and the unnamed women in the poems—are, in Deborah McDowell’s words, “simultaneously all bodies and nobodies” (298), described mainly in terms of their physical attributes and weaknesses yet rendered empty vessels for the narrative voice and for other characters to try to imbue with meaning. What these women mean as signifiers, therefore, is more significant than what they are as subjects; attempts to make them mean threaten to disembodied the women and ignore the legitimacy of embodied experience. Though readers may infer that these female figures can use their bodies as a means of liberation, particularly through the expression or repression of sexual behavior, any illusion of the women’s freedom is inhibited by their bodies’ symbolic designations.

Cane’s treatment of women’s bodies can be examined using the theories of Deborah McDowell and Margaret Homans as guiding philosophies. In her essay “Recovery Missions: Imaging the Body Ideals,” Deborah McDowell depicts the Black female body as coming into being when appropriated and punished by dominant ideology: “Black women are conscious of their bodies when desire is deferred or gratified and bodies are given credit or blame” (301). Black women are rendered “all bodies” when their bodies are held responsible for eliciting or deflecting desire, are seen as desiring, or are used solely to define the women. In contrast, Black women are “nobodies” when they are rendered symbols—of sexual deviance, for example—in the symbolic order.

According to McDowell, though dominant culture and ideology use Black women’s bodies for their own purposes, even critical discourse (which often posits itself as aware of the subjugation
dominant ideology perpetuates) is guilty of appropriating bodies; it tries to classify all Black women’s bodies as “ideal” for discourse because they are sites of resistance (301). Therefore, Black women’s corporeal bodies, even when treated as “liberated,” are subject to control. In resisting the idea that the body cannot be used as a symbol or to make assumptions about the woman that possesses it, McDowell notes, “body and self do not coincide; the body does not constitute the sum total of the self… ‘recovering’ the body requires attending to its inside parts, its buried zones” (308). Ultimately, McDowell advocates “a view of the body that perceives the reciprocal relation between exterior and interior, between visible and invisible ‘matter,’ between the outside and the inside number” (309). This view of the body is much more complex than the one presented in Cane.

Margaret Homans’ essay, “‘Racial Composition’: Metaphor and the Body in the Writing of Race,” adds to McDowell’s discussion of the Black female body in critical discourse by discussing the impact of postmodern theory on bodies. According to Homans, Black male critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr. have, since the 1980s, advocated a deconstructionist theoretical view of African-American texts. Female writers and critics argue that this approach resists biological essentialism but causes the body, the Black female body in particular, to vanish because deconstructionism dismisses the validity of embodiment and embodied experience. Female writers and critics who argue for the body’s necessary presence in critical discourse and in literature believe that “the body is experiential, including but not limited to the erotic, and context-bound. It bears the traces of remembered histories and is not separable from the mind” (Homans 80). Homans cites Deborah McDowell to note that Black women’s bodies and embodied experiences have been rendered instruments for male literary critics: “the bodies/texts of black women have become the ‘battlefield on and over which men, black and white, [fight] to establish actual and symbolic political dominance and to demonstrate masculine’ control” (McDowell qtd. in Homans 81). Instead of being valued in and of themselves as a facet of subjectivity, bodies are taken away from their possessors and dissected according to their symbolic purposes.

In Cane, female bodies are subject to such control because they are rendered empty signifiers. According to Lacan, classifying the body as signifier permits a negation of the person’s subjectivity: “[t]he signifier does not designate what is not there, it engenders it. What is not there, at the origin, is the subject itself” (Seminar XIV 8). In the stories of Part One that are titled with their female characters’ names, there are no female subjects present, just symbolic figures
that are tied to the land, song, or physical objects such as houses, and are summed up according to their sexual proclivities or lack thereof. Though Darwin T. Turner argues that “the narrator...seeks the soul, the feminine essence of women who in less artistic works would be pitied or castigated as social outcasts” (208-209), Janet Whyde’s assessment of the text’s purpose is more consistent with the way Cane treats women: “As such, ‘woman’ in the first part is obliterated and transformed through interpretation by an outside agent – the narrator/speaker and/or male characters within the individual sketches – into metaphor” (43).

Karintha, the title character of Cane’s opening story, is portrayed as one of the dominant stereotypical images of Black women, the jezebel. Darwin T. Turner praises Toomer for “[writing] lyrically about Southern women isolated or destroyed because they have ignored society’s restrictions on sexual behavior” (213), but his narrators’ treatment of these figures is anything but sympathetic. In her essay “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” Patricia Hill Collins defines the jezebel as “represent[ing] a deviant Black female sexuality” (81). Jezebels have one foot over the line of appropriate sexual behavior and are masculinized because of their sexual aggressiveness. Karintha is an object of lust who entertains multiple sexual partners and who, in keeping with the jezebel characteristic of lack of sentimentality, abandons or murders her child. Dominant ideology requires the presence of the jezebel to show what is considered “inappropriate” sexual behavior, thus drawing a line between the jezebel’s behavior and “normal” sexual actions. The figure of the jezebel allows those who demonize her to classify sexually active black women as dangerous, castrating, and even deserving of unwanted sexual advances.

Though the narrator and other characters in the story play into traditional stereotypes with characterization, or lack thereof, of this title character, Karintha is also depicted in her story as equated with nature. Introduced as “Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” (3), she is tied to the Georgia landscape. Her movements are compared to that of a “black bird” and “red dust,” her loveliness is akin to “a November cotton flower,” and her soul is “a growing thing ripened too soon” (3-4). Karintha’s sexual expression, a result of mimicking her parents’ sexual behaviors, is also designated as ‘natural.’

However, her body’s connection to nature and natural resources makes her ripe for exploitation, just as the land and those who worked it in the antebellum and postwar South have been exploited, according to William Dutch: “Karintha can be viewed as a stalk of cane growing in the field along with other cane plants. People look forward to her ripening for their pleasure and use” (266). Like cane,
which can be chewed to extract its last drops of sweetness, Karintha is similarly decimated for the pleasure she promises. The woman as land metaphor is one that renders the woman passive, put to use as others see fit.

Though Karintha’s symbolic nature makes her mean rather than be, a certain agency could be inferred from her taking on sexual partners as often as she wishes. She seems to control potential suitors with her magnetic sexuality, but they control her when their means of “keeping her up” render her a prostitute and make her body signify this role, “By regarding her as a prostitute, the men who desire Karintha limit her to an existence defined by the tangible, measurable quantities of body and money” (Blake 218). The life that Karintha leads does not discount the presence of her body, but the men who sleep with her and support her financially see nothing but her body, since they and the narrator give no indication that she is compelling for more than her beauty. Deborah McDowell’s concept of the self as a combination of inner and outer elements does not extend to Karintha’s characterization; readers never know who she is, just what she is.

Catherine Kodat argues conversely that “the story of Karintha is liberating insofar as it forces the reader to reflect on the larger racial symbolism she is made to ‘carry’” (8). Karintha’s role as jezebel can help critical discourse interrogate stereotypes of Black women’s sexual behavior which have persisted since slavery times to justify their sexual exploitation and subjugation. She could also be seen as symbolic of the use and abuse of Southern land through slavery. However, critical discourse using Karintha for this purpose appropriates her body and renders it ideal for addressing subjugation of Black women, making it an object as the narrator does, albeit in a different fashion. A deconstructionist treatment of Karintha as only a body to bear meaning splits her mind and her body and risks perpetuating binaries that deconstructionist theory is supposed to interrogate.

Since Karintha’s body is not her own, she vacillates between “all body” and “nobody.” As “all body,” Karintha’s worth is derived solely from her body’s ability to give pleasure and be taken over. In contrast, as a “nobody,” beyond her symbolic functions, her movements are described in ephemeral terms—she does not make a mark on the ground when she moves, is compared to expansive dusk, and carries something immaterial, beauty.

Becky, a vessel just as to Karintha to be filled with meaning, is a stark contrast to Karintha in appearance and in the emotional reaction she elicits; though white, her treatment by the narrator and by the other characters makes her one of McDowell’s “all bodies and
nobody.” First introduced by the narrator as grotesque, Becky is pathetic, weighted down, unlike the light as air Karintha: “Her eyes were sunken, her neck stringy, her breasts fallen...[m]outh setting in a twist that held her eyes, harsh, vacant, staring...” (7). Janet Whyde sees this description of Becky as one facet of the limbo she remains in: “Within the narrative, [Becky’s] body disappears into ellipses—the punctuation of absent words—and the description of her body falls, quite literally, between the interpretation of her by the white community...and by the black community” (44).

A white woman who has had a child with a Black man, Becky is held at a distance by Black and white townsfolk alike, perceived as contaminated and insane, and “[t]he narrator in this story allies himself with the townspeople...adopt[ing] their fears” (Blake 220). Her sexual behavior is seen as unnatural, her engagement in miscegenation not only the fault of the man crazy enough to touch her but also her fault for going against prescribed behaviors. She, like Karintha, is a jezebel, but her sexual deviance is intolerable, whereas Karintha’s is excusable.

To move Becky’s offensive body and the contamination it represents from sight, the townsfolk build her a house far away from everyone else and hide her there, keeping her alive with offerings of food to maintain her as a symbol of a sexual line that cannot be crossed. Oddly, these offerings render Becky a goddess of sorts (Dutch 267) who is placated with gifts lest she punish the townsfolk with a glimpse of her tainted body. Though Becky’s sexuality ‘liberates’ her from the town, this liberation is dependent on her solitude. Becky’s symbolic body serves a seemingly positive function for the community but denies her any humanity or subjectivity: “Becky’s miscegenetic act unites the blacks and whites in this community—through their hatred and charity toward her—but it separates her from the community” (Dutch 267). Becky as a symbol is not empowered but empowers others: the townsfolk can see her as a reminder of their non-deviance, and the narrator finds his voice as an “I” when Becky dies (Kodat 9). To be a symbol, Becky has to disappear, to no longer, as the townspeople can determine, have an embodied existence.

Since Becky never emerges from the home, and only her son in the yard holding a baby indicates that Becky is alive and has committed miscegenation once again, her invisibility makes her house a stand-in for her body and a symbol to those who built it and those who pass by it: “The house, built between a road and railroad tracks, is a stationary reminder to those who are life’s travelers of their innermost urges and deepest levels of conscience” (Eldridge 231). After her sons grow and leave, Becky stays hidden, only the house serving as a reminder of her presence. Eventually, Becky the
human being is openly regarded as dead, a comfort to the narrator and to the townsfolk who symbolically killed her years before by filling her up with their words, rendering her a symbol, and disembodying her by hiding her away at the edge of town. When the narrator states, “Becky if dead might be a hant, and if alive—it took some nerve even to mention it” (8), it is apparent that Becky’s body as representation of moral failing is no longer needed—is, in fact, frightening—for the townsfolk to mark the line between appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior. The house, an inanimate stand-in for Becky, can serve the same symbolic purpose without involving the woman who lives inside it.

No matter its use to the townsfolk, the house cannot stand forever in denial of Becky’s embodiment; it collapses on its tenant, leaving Becky literally an empty shell and showing that her body is the cause of her tragic end. So frightened at the prospect of seeing Becky’s body, which has for so long been rendered invisible, that the narrator and Barlo leave her beneath the rubble. The Bible, referred to by many adherents as the Word, which Barlo leaves on top of Becky’s burial mound, is likely intended to give Becky some spiritual release. However, it stands as a representation of the inadequacy of language to lend subjectivity to human beings.

Ultimately, Becky vacillates between “all body” and “nobody” more than any other female character in Part One. As “all body,” Becky is vividly described as decaying, and the description of her body renders her abject, boundary-breaching; as “nobody,” she is made to disappear into the house built for her. Becky alive (all body) is a bigger threat than Becky dead (nobody), because Becky alive and visible has a disturbing gaze that disrupts the townsfolk’s gaze. Becky alive and invisible is both “all body” and “nobody,” creating a comforting limbo for the townsfolk.

In contrast to Becky, Carma initially seems larger than life in her story in terms of physical strength: “Carma, in overalls, and strong as any man” (12). Portrayed as a jezebel like Karintha and Becky, Carma, though married, spends time with many lovers, is masculinized, and seemingly lacks sentimentality. According to the narrator, Carma is aware of and is perhaps confident about her appeal: “Maybe she feels my gaze, perhaps she expects it” (12). Though stereotypical, she seems initially to have more agency than the other women in Part One, until the narrator renders her part of “the crudest melodrama” (13).

Carma’s status as “all body” appears to, at first, leave no room for her as “nobody.” She is strong and physically capable, and she uses her body to achieve sexual satisfaction from a variety of men. However, she is rendered both “all body” and “nobody” when
her husband, Bane, discovers her infidelity. The “[w]ords, like corkscrews, [that] [worm] to her strength” (13) thrown at her by her husband are consistent with the deconstructionist view of language as the murder of the thing it designates, as disassociated from the body and the sensual. Carma’s husband, by presumably labeling her an adulterer or whore, renders her a symbol of inappropriate sexual behavior, discounting her subjectivity and individuality. The freedom from sexual mores that her body offers is an illusion, since her husband claims her body after she flees from him into the cane fields and uses it as a battlefield on which to express his feelings of sexual jealousy. After a while, Carma becomes “dead weight” (13) to her husband, a symbol of his failed masculinity.

Janet Whyde contends that the narrator, not Carma’s husband, is responsible for oversimplifying both her as a character and her experience: “[The narrator] succeeds in narratively destroying Carma, reducing her story to a melodrama, by defining her body in such a way that she no longer functions as a character, an individual” (46). The narrator seems more fascinated by than sympathetic to Carma, as he gazes upon her openly, says she should have other lovers but blames her for her husband’s imprisonment, and acknowledges that her story is what it is because he chose to tell it that way. Carma’s story shows that she is subject to appropriation because the narrator wants her to mean sexual deviance but not be a woman whose subjectivity is beyond skin deep. The way the narrator constructs this melodrama renders Carma a symbol of uninhibited sexuality whose behaviors lead to men’s ruin; her body takes the blame for inspiring frenzied desire.

The narrator’s symbolic treatment of Carma also links her to the land. William Dutch argues that Karintha, Becky, and Carma are represented as tied to nature and are like the cane that is cultivated and appropriated, all its sweetness extracted. It is interesting, then, that when Carma runs through the cane field, the narrator notes that the stalks have no meaning in the field, just as time and space have no meaning there (13). Carma is, therefore, an empty vessel that vacillates between male and female, freedom and imprisonment, put to any symbolic purpose she is needed for.

Carma, along with Karintha and Becky, is considered a jezebel figure. The first three stories in Cane offer character sketches of sexually expressive women, while the two later female-titled stories, “Fern” and “Esther,” outline the symbolic qualities of sexually repressed women. Dividing women in Cane according to their promiscuity or refusal to engage in sexual activity brings to mind the virgin/whore dichotomy. However, Toomer problematizes this dichotomy: “whores” in the text are not roundly demonized by the speaker(s), though the women’s sexual proclivities never leave them with a
happy ending. On the other hand, virgins are not posited as the ideal, though they too are not demonized.

Fern, a “born-again virgin,” is the most vividly physically described of all the women in Cane, but this description keeps her classified as a symbol, since “[w]e learn nothing of Fern as a character, but we learn much about Fern as a function” (Kodat 11). Her face and her eyes, not the rest of her body, are focal points, for they seem fluid and able to absorb the world around them:

Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that wherever your glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes...They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing—that is, nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see, and they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied...Like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. (16-17)

Fern, like Karintha, has long inspired male devotion, perhaps because she, too, has a light, fluid beauty that does not speak to moral decay, unlike Becky’s grotesque figure, or to emasculation, like Carma’s manlike strength and bearing. Her eyes, too, do not possess Becky’s harsh, vacant, perhaps even condemning gaze: “The eyes are so appealing because of a paradox: while they search for nothing, they deny nothing” (Eldridge 232).

Beyond the extensive description of her, Fern functions as an “all body” because her body is seen as the object of men’s frustrated and gratified desires. Though reclaiming one’s virginity as Fern does is abnormal in the South, according to the narrator, Fern’s body is never blamed but simply given credit for its magnetism. Fern’s body was once a source of sexual release for men, and readers could infer that Fern empowers herself by subsequently refusing sex because no one can give her what she desires. However, Fern’s body places her within the virgin/whore dichotomy. When she has sex, men see her as easy, but when she refuses sex, she is placed on a pedestal to the point of being untouchable. Either way, she is limited by others’ perceptions of her, as seen in the references to gossiping townsfolk when she accompanies the narrator on a walk. These perceptions of the townsfolk and of Fern’s past lovers play into her “nobody” aspects. Fern is a vessel like Becky to hold what people say about her: “Ultimately, the problem with Fern, as it is with many of Toomer’s women, is that everything flows into her but nothing flows back out” (Eldridge 233).

Fern as “nobody” further never seems actively connected to her body. Sex or abstinence plays out on her as she passively waits for
the next man to come along, and even after a sexual encounter or a conversation “[n]othing ever really happened...[n]othing ever came to Fern” (19). As the narrator notes, Fern is always to be found at home, inactive, available to anyone who wants to see her: “you’d be most like to see her resting listless-like on the railing of her porch, back propped against a post, head tilted a little forward because there was a nail in the porch post” (17). Just as Fern never removes the nail to give herself comfort, she drifts through life allowing things to happen to her but never making them happen.

Men who slept with her in the past got no pleasure from the act but felt attached to Fern, wanting to give her something to fulfill her desire and their perceived obligation to her. Fern is a blank slate, an empty vessel that men try to “fill up” with useless objects and use in an attempt to reflect themselves positively. There is no indication that she feels an attachment to her lovers or wants men to prove their love to her. Fern, according to the narrator, seems unaware of what she does to either encourage or turn off men’s sexual advances, so she simply allows the men to stay or to go as they please.

Though the men who use and worship Fern are culpable in rendering her a symbol of either sexual magnetism or purity, the narrator, who controls the image readers see of Fern, is the most liable in disembodifying her, just as he is in Carma’s story: “By making her a subject for sociological speculation and discussing her in a breezy, intimate, parenthetical tone of voice, the narrator detaches himself from Fern and associates with an audience which is, like himself, not-Southern, not-mystic, and not-Fern” (Blake 221). Just as in Becky’s story, the narrator allies himself against the female protagonist and renders her other by vocalizing the collective objectifying perspectives of her. Though the narrator seems to want to analyze Fern, he also has other selfish purposes for her, “As a type of blessed virgin Fern offers to the narrator salvation through the sensations of mystical unification with his past and his people” (Reilly 200). The narrator looks to Fern for enlightenment because her emptiness makes her an apt vessel for expansive elements—God, the land—to fill.

Part of Fern’s objectification involves her “nobody” status as a symbol of the land. As with previous stories, the woman as land metaphor empties the subject of her subjectivity to make her represent agrarian nostalgia or a condemnation of the human subjugation required to tame and appropriate the land. Nature flows into Fern, tying her to the landscape but also filling her with tension she cannot release, a tension the narrator compares to “boiling sap” (19). If she could release the natural forces inside her, Fern could possibly construct a selfhood based on inner and outer
elements; since, however, this “boiling sap” only briefly emerges as inarticulate sound, Fern remains a signifier, not an individual. As a signifier, Fern is also compared to song, which might initially be flattering, since music has long been considered by major philosophers to be boundary-breaching. Music also has dark elements, though, being the closest representation of the traumatic Real and being subject to interpretation by countless listeners who want to make the music “mean.” Both Fern’s body-as-nature and body-as-song make her vulnerable to imposed meaning, vulnerable to presumptuous characters who feel she can give them something.

The final female protagonist with a self-titled story is Esther, a near-white, overly serious child who grows into a sexually repressed woman. Esther is a distinctive figure from the other women in Part One for four main reasons: her physical appearance is not wholly pleasant or unpleasant, she comes close to eliciting sympathy from the narrator, the narrator is able to speak to her thoughts and dreams, and she has no history of sexual “impurity.” Nonetheless, any semblance of agency or subjectivity that Esther has collapses in favor of her status as a symbol of withheld sexual urges.

When Esther the girl is first introduced, she is described by the narrator in terms of “ifs”: “Esther’s hair falls in soft curls about her high-cheek-boned chalk-white face. Esther’s hair would be beautiful if there were more gloss to it. And if her face were not prematurely serious, one would call it pretty. Her cheeks are too flat and dead for a girl of nine. Esther looks like a little white child, starched, frilled” (22). Esther at twenty-two is less potentially appealing, having been aged by loneliness, “Her hair thins. It 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). Finally, Esther at twenty-seven is exhausted from the lack of excitement that comes from working day after day at her father’s grocery store, “Her body is lean and beaten” (25). These descriptions render Esther “all body” because her very nature is seen in her appearance and because her body is affected through the years by her lack of sexual expression and her boredom with daily existence. Anything she feels, her body shows.

Though these physical descriptions of Esther distance the narrator from her, making her subject to his gaze, this narrator (perhaps the same or different individual from the one(s) in the rest of Part One) looks deeply into Esther to examine her thoughts and dreams in a not unsympathetic way. The narrator examines the indelible impression Barlo’s spiritual trance has left on nine-year-old Esther, which leads seven years later to Esther’s dream of having a “[b] lack, singed, woolly, tobacco-juice baby—ugly as sin” (24) rescued from a fire. In Esther’s dream, she longs for this baby to have come
immaculately and, though torn about the morality of wanting this baby, keeps dreaming about possessing him. The narrator depicts Esther’s ambivalence without judgment, even permitting a sympathetic portrait of a girl so trained in conventional morality that the moral boundaries she has been taught intrude on her one indulgence—dreaming of her love for this child, which represents her desire for completion, a desire she thinks can be fulfilled by Barlo.

This dream, however, a reflection of her desire, reflects the desire of the Other, which is dominant ideology; as Lacan notes, one’s desire is always the desire of the Other. The dream would then reflect that the Other wants women like Esther to be “complete” through sexual behavior. Esther is an anomaly compared to the other women in Part One because she has never engaged in sexual behavior. Perhaps this renders her useless in society—no man wants her because she has no sweetness, and her lack of beauty does not even make her a pleasure to gaze on. Unlike Karintha, Carma, or Fern, she can provide no pleasure or even a connection to the land. Unlike Becky, she cannot be an example of immorality which others can use as a basis of comparison. Through Esther, the implication is made that the plain, sexually withheld woman is a symbol, but is not useful enough to be appropriated.

The narrator never seems to use Esther as the other women are used, but despite his examination of her inner thoughts, he ultimately oversimplifies his subject, rendering her mainly in terms of her repressed sexual desire. Contributing largely to this representation of Esther as a symbol of sexual repression is the repetition of flames, both in her dream and in the scene where Barlo comes back into town, giving Esther the opportunity to reunite with the object of her desire. Depicting Esther as an increasingly haggard shell with inner fire the only element to speak to her repressed needs makes her known only by her desire.

Esther’s singular obsession, to achieve “personal wholeness through sexual union” (Blake 222), renders her a “nobody.” Her main concern is why she is unappealing to men, and the purpose that drives her existence is making Barlo and what he represents—otherworldliness, strength—her own. When she realizes that Barlo is a vulgar, “hideous” drunk, not the savior she wanted, Esther feels that there is “no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared” (27). With her desire vanquished, she has no place, showing that all that ever defined her was this desire.

Though Esther, along with the other women in Part One, is rendered a symbolic, hardly individualistic figure, at least she and these other women in the stories are given names, some semblance
of individuality, unlike the figures represented in two of Part One’s poems, “Face” and “Portrait in Georgia.” Both poems are portraits of women who represent, in the case of “Face,” suffering, and in the case of “Portrait in Georgia,” destruction. The subjects of these poems are fragmented, their body parts tied to aspects of history embedded in the Southern landscape. Instead of examining the subjectivity of Southern Black and white women, the poems are only intended to make these bodies, which could be the bodies of any women, mean something. Appropriating bodies as the means to convey a message reaches its peak in Toomer’s poetry.

“Face,” which comes right after “Becky” in Cane, is the portrait of a woman laborer who could be a slave or poor tenant farmer. Though much of the poem does describe the subject’s face, particularly brows and eyes, it also examines the woman’s hair and muscles, all features compared to aspects of nature and the land: stars, canoes, and grapes. Like Becky, the woman in “Face” is weighed down with the effects of life, and, like Esther, her life experiences have made their mark on her body. “Toomer designs the impression of the woman by starting with her hair and continuing downward, a movement which expresses the burden of life which the woman has endured. The images therefore become heavier, beginning with the stars and ending with cluster grapes” (Eldridge 226). Richard Eldridge further remarks on this woman’s beauty as a result of her experience, which is a consistent motif in Toomer’s work.

The poem’s opening lines compare the woman’s gray hair to “streams of stars” (3), rendering it ethereal and intangible. In contrast, her brows are “recurved canoes” (5), life having shaped her as one might carve and shape wood into a canoe, and the result of this carving is the mist of tears on her face. Strangely, and in a way that parallels the description of Fern, the woman’s eyes are mentioned, but they are never looked into. If the eyes are, to borrow a trite phrase, “the windows into the soul,” the speaker’s refusal to look into the woman’s eyes shows his refusal to see her as an individual with a core self. Finally, the woman’s muscles are compared to “cluster grapes of sorrow / purple in the evening sun / nearly ripe for worms” (11-13). This image ties the woman fully to the land; like grapes, she has been cultivated for others’ benefit, and having served her purpose, she is ready for death.

Though the woman’s body represents the toil in her life, thus lending her a certain dignity for having survived her subjugation, she is not able to tell her own story, the same predicament the other women in Part One share. Subject to the speaker’s gaze, the woman is simplified to the extent that she has to stand as a symbol of an entire class, gender, and possibly race. In effect, the speaker renders her body “ideal” in that it can indict the agrarian system in the
South for abusing humans in the name of progress and maintaining the status quo. The woman in “Face,” therefore, is “all body” for the same reason she is “nobody”—her body is all that readers are presented as the sum of what she is.

“Portrait in Georgia,” which follows “Esther” and precedes “Blood-Burning Moon,” uses the same structure as “Face” to render symbolic the body of the white woman. Repeatedly, a body part of the woman is named, followed by a hyphen, which is then followed by an image used to describe that part. In this poem, images of racial violence, particularly lynching, are associated with the body. According to Bernard W. Bell, “The grim image of a woman in ‘Portrait in Georgia’ forcefully establishes the sexual link between the Southern ritual of lynching and the myths of white purity and Black bestiality” (226), while Richard Eldridge believes that the poem “presents a picture of sexual frustration, like Toomer’s other portraits of women who ultimately impose destruction upon those who love them” (234). Both views can be accommodated in the symbolic rendering of the poem’s subject, since the white woman in the poem is used to interrogate what the dominance of whites in the South was often predicated on: a violent reaction against Black people and the myth of white moral superiority.

The fragmented body in “Portrait in Georgia” represents violence, part by part. The woman’s hair is “coiled like a lynchers’ rope,” (2), her eyes are “fagots” (3), her lips are “old scars, or the first red blisters,” (4), and her body is “white as the ash / of black flesh after flame” (6-7). One facet of the woman belies her violence, her breath that is “the last sweet scent of cane,” (5), but this image could show the woman’s false sweetness as exhibited in her speech. This portrait of the body makes the woman lethally beautiful, her pleasing features connected to tying up, whipping, and burning Black bodies.

“Portrait in Georgia,” just like “Face,” renders its subject an empty signifier by making one body stand for an entire class, race, and gender. The woman is perceived by a speaker who both adheres to and subverts traditional love poetry by listing the woman’s most desirable features, but makes them ugly because they are marked by an equally ugly history. The body of this subject is “all body” in that it is abject, drawing the speaker’s gaze to it yet threatening to consume all who come near it. This figure is “nobody” in that it is responsible for carrying racial symbolism, but serves no other purpose beyond a symbolic one.

Being “all bodies and nobodies” is what connects the women in Part One of Cane. Never allowed to tell their own stories, these female figures—Karintha, Becky, Carma, Fern, Esther, and the unnamed
women in the poems—are subject to dissection, interpretation, and oversimplification by presumably male narrators and male characters. Expected to bear the burden of representing the complexity of the Southern landscape with its rules regarding racial hierarchy and sexual expression, the women are never treated as individuals, subjects whose selves are comprised of an exterior and an interior. To “recover” these bodies as Deborah McDowell wishes would be done for all Black female bodies would entail not only interrogating why these women are silenced and rendered metaphor, but also imagining what their stories, their voices, would communicate.
Works Cited


Turner, Darwin T. “Contrasts and Limitations in Cane.” In a Minor