



Revisiting Liminality: Contestation of Abuse and the Politics of Reclamation of Identity in Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*

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Abstract

This paper explores narratives of sexual violence, commodification and objectification of the black female body in the patriarchal context through the intersectionality of the vectors of race, class and gender. The notion of performativity is central in this context. This paper addresses the way that Mary-Mathilda assumes sexual agency by resisting sexual victimization. She reaches a complex understanding of self by simultaneously occupying various subject positions, such as that of the field laborer, the mother, the mistress and the murderer. Previous scholarship has extensively been focusing on the origin and legacy of trauma, inflicted on the black female body of the twentieth century; however, there has been too little, if any criticism in relation to the active construction of black female subjectivity, located at the level of the body. Even though the practices of racial exclusion and dispossession largely differ in each generation, the outcome of racial violence has largely remained the same, as essentially the black subject's humanity is put into question. Contextualizing this work by connecting it to the present era while exposing the significance of the era in which it emerged, signals at the construction of a larger discourse with political and sociological implications. I explore the question of positionality within the structure of a power hierarchy. Ultimately, Mary-Mathilda with her final act of mutilation of Belfeels, rewrites the fabric of patriarchy and emerges as a radical subject.

Keywords

Caribbean, post-colonialism, intersectionality, liminality

The weapon and the tool seem at moments indistinguishable, for they may each made in a single physical object... and may be quickly transformed back and forth, now into the one, now into the other. At the same time, however, a gulf of meaning, intention, connotation, and tone separates them. If one holds the two side by side in front of the mind... it's then clear that what differentiates them is not the object itself but the surface in which they fall. (Elaine Scarry 173)

This paper exposes the sexual suffering and traumatization of Mary-Mathilda Belfeels, a black female body that resists sexual victimization and reaches a complex understanding of the self by simultaneously occupying various subject positions, such as that of the field laborer, the mother, the mistress, the sexual worker and the murderer. The focus of *The Polished Hoe* is the trauma inflicted on the Caribbean community and specifically on the black female body that occupies a liminal position. In this context, the black female body is the center of sexual politics. A space needs to be created to address the erotic and the issue of agency in relation to the quest for subjecthood. Previous scholarship has focused extensively on the origin and legacy of trauma, inflicted on the black female body of the twentieth century; however, there has been too little, if any criticism in relation to the active construction of black female subjectivity, located at the level of the body.

Mary-Mathilda enters the locus of sexual politics and manages to resist patriarchal oppression by exposing her story. In order to explore the power dynamics of the twentieth century Barbados, Clarke employs the post-slavery plantation system of Bimshire¹. Bimshire is a fictional island in the Caribbean, a place where colonialism has heavily imparted its influence. The Caribbean has traditionally functioned as a third identitarian space, as it was not recognized originally as home by blacks or whites. Frantz Fanon claims in his work *Black Skin, White Masks* that the Antillean is the “negation of the negation”, “a black skin in a white mask” because the only way he can exist for himself is through the language of the colonizer in which he is already the Other (Wright 10).² Thus, this new space is a discursive formation that functions as a locus where multiple subjectivities exist, a locus where the subject can exist par excellence, in a cross-cultural framework similar to the one outlined by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*.³ *The Polished Hoe*, as a postcolonial narrative, falls into such as a space that needs to be expanded in order to include Caribbean people and specifically people from the island of Bimshire as a site of contemplation. Postcolonial literature stems out of the struggle against

¹ The origin of the term “Bimshire” is uncertain, as it is either of English or African origin. It is uncertain if this nomenclature is attributed specifically to the Barbados. For a detailed perspective of the origins of the term, see Sean Carrington, Henry Fraser, John Gilmore and Forde, Addinton. *The A-Z of Barbados Heritage*. Oxford University, 2003, p.25.

² Fanon poses a different interpretation of Adler’s psychoanalytical theory which claims that black people’s subjectivity is constructed through their comparison to a colonial world that is anti-black and promotes whiteness. In this context, blackness is viewed as a sign of inferiority as everything is rendered in comparison to its white counterpart. Thus, the reduction of the body mainly to its colour, equates it with failure as it will never be able to compensate for whiteness and will always experience a lack.

³ Paul Gilroy created a new space, the black Atlantic that is not specifically American, European, British or Caribbean but is rather a diasporic formation. For a detailed analysis, see Fanon, Frantz; translated from the French by Richard Philcox. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 2008.

colonialism as it exposes the recreation of one's identity according to the hierarchies of class, race and gender.

The action of *The Polished Hoe* takes place in a highly racialized space that consists of heavily prescribed white and black spaces. I would like to employ the term third identitarian space in order to provide a fresh outlook in relation to the spatial dimension of Frantz Fanon's employment of the term. By utilizing this powerful spatial metaphor from Franz Fanon's work, my paper opens up the locus for a different spatial dimension, one that is unique to the condition of the Antillean. The existence of a third identitarian space signals the existence of a third space of thinking, a way of thinking that deviates from the dialectical thought of postcolonial theorists who recognize this space only in relation to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. An Antillean, third identitarian space is a new, heterodox way of interpreting Fanon's preoccupation with space. It is the space where radical black subjects reside, subjects that do not fall in the Hegelian dialectic but rather emerge as subjects that oppose representation. The third identitarian space functions as a tool for interpreting the complex power relations in the community of Bimshire and the formation of radical subjectivity. Mary-Mathilda, the novel's protagonist, wavers among the history of her ancestors during the 17th century and her own personal history during the 1950s. *The Polished Hoe* does not evolve around a sequence of events that take place chronologically, but instead, events are revealed through the protagonist's recollections expressed with detachment, exposing her unique history. Clarke places the sexual exploitation of Caribbean black women into perspective, exposing the unique context of their struggle. Mary-Mathilda experiences flashbacks from the lives of her foremothers while revealing her personal story. Through non-linear narration, Mary-Mathilda's story of sexual victimization is unraveled and recorded into history.

The exclusion of the experiences of black women from dominant discourse has been a common practice of the black-nationalist discourse. The Black Power movement pushes black female bodies into the margins, by proclaiming a break from the past. The black female body is forced into submission, as color-blindness conscripts further dehumanize the black body. The lack of historical records enforces the sense of effacement of historical memory. More specifically, black-nationalist ideology excluded black women from representation as it did not privilege their suffering within the context of systematic oppression. As Bell Hooks suggests:

Black male leaders of the movement made the liberation of black people from racist oppression synonymous with their gaining the right to assume the role of patriarch, of sexist oppressor. By allowing white men to dictate the terms by which they would define black liberation, black men chose to endorse sexist exploitation and oppression of black women. They were not liberated from the system but liberated to serve the system. (181)

The threat of getting sexually assaulted was a reality and, at the same time, a form of social control of the black female body. These overt acts of violence are part of a routinized system of oppression. Mary-Mathilda was subjected to emotional and sexual abuse in a highly racialized context, similar to the one of black lives matter. Rape has been the most common manifestation of sexual violence directed towards the black body.

Pauline Bart dealt in her book *Violence against Women: the Bloody Footprints Rape* with rape and other prominent issues of the sexual politics of black womanhood. She claims that rape as well as “other acts of overt violence” that black women have been subjected to such as “physical assault during slavery, domestic abuse, incest and sexual extortion” are linked to “black women’s subordination in a system of race, class and gender oppression” (99). Rape could be viewed as systemic. In lieu of this, black female bodies cannot escape sexual victimization. Violence was legitimized, legalized and therefore condoned.

Violence could be viewed as a social construct, formed in a particular way by the categories of race and gender. The black female body experiences a distinctive form of sexual violence in relation to its white counterparts. Angela Davis confirms that in her book *Women, Race and Class*. She states that:

It would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men’s sexual urges... Rape was a weapon of domination, weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist and in the process, to demoralize their men. (Davis 23)

Thus, rape is a means of domination on the black female body. Rape is implicated in the power dynamics of the society that Mary-Mathilda belongs in. Patricia Hills Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought* undergoes an exploration of the experiences of black women from their perspective and claims that:

rape and other acts of overt violence that Black women have experienced, such as physical assault [...], domestic abuse, incest, and sexual extortion, accompany Black women’s subordination in a system of race, class, and gender oppression. Violence against black women tends to be legitimated and therefore condoned. (177)

Therefore, the abuse of the black female body was rendered as something typical and acceptable. Springer confirms that black females had to learn strategies of “how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those same structures” (176). The female body was marginalized and rendered merely as an object in the possession of the slave owner. This applies to Mary-Mathilda as it is stated explicitly that Belfeels:

put[s] his riding- crop under [her] chin, and raise[s] [her] face to meet his face, using the riding crop; and when his eyes and [her] eyes made four, he passed the riding- crop down [her] neck, right down the front of [her] dress, until it reach [her] waist. And then he move the riding- crop right back up again, as if he was drawing something on [her] body. (Clarke 11)

This action was indicative of the plantation owner-patriarch’s indictment of her becoming his mistress. The riding crop could be viewed as a symbol of subjection. It is the medium that positions one in the condition of servitude and subjugation. It could also be viewed as a symbol of the male will. With the riding crop, the black body is forcefully placed in the zone of undifferentiation between human and animal. Mary-Mathilda is colonized by Belfeels’s desires. The riding crop is indicative of Belfeels’s sexual desires.

Mary-Mathilda's identity forms through the churning network of constraints of the patriarchal society. Identity is socially complex as it categorizes certain characteristics as optimal and others as not. Rahul Gairola, in his article "Burning with Shame: Desire and South Asian Patriarchy, from Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* to Deepa Mehta's *Fire*" explores the assumption of radical subjectivity⁴ by subaltern women, suggesting that Mary-Mathilda, by assuming a radical identity, reshaped "the socio-political atmospheres in the geographies within which" she assumes this identification (308). This gendered individual goes through an internal act of transforming her identity that is nevertheless informed by her societal surroundings. By performing sexual favors, Mary-Mathilda becomes aware of Mr. Belfeels's power over her. Mary-Mathilda was aware of the danger of sexual victimization she was susceptible to. In order to escape this condition, some black women willingly form "working relationships with other black women to confront race, gender, and class injustices" (Springer 179). Thus, Ma and Mary-Mathilda form such a relationship. Wendy Chapkis says that "practices of prostitution, like other forms of commodification and consumption, can be read in more complex ways than simply as confirmation of male domination" (Springer 177). They may be seen as:

sites of ingenious resistance and cultural subversion... [T]he prostitute cannot be reduced to one of a passive object used in male sexual practice, but instead [prostitution] can be understood as a place of agency where the sex worker makes active use of the existing sexual order. (Springer 177)

Within the scope of radical subjectivity falls one's ability to occupy more than one subject positions, as these loci are not fixed but rather fluid, enabling the subject to attain self-awareness and grow as an individual. Mary-Mathilda occupies multiple subject positions that are complicated and contradictory in essence. She navigates among these positions by "escaping the traditional dichotomous existence of a limited femininity" (Springer 180). She becomes a radical subject when she realizes that her agency does not lie outside the locus of her sexuality so she needs to assume a fluid identity. Her sense of selfhood is riven by contradictions as she embraces "a radical subjectivity through sex work" (Springer 172).

The discovery of the incestuous nature of Belfeels's relationship with Mary-Mathilda results in intricate ramifications in Mary-Mathilda's psyche, leading to traumatization. Mary-Mathilda discovers that Belfeels is her father through a collection of pictures where Belfeels, their son Wilberforce and herself are depicted. She refers to these pictures as the "Wall of History" or "Wall of Shame" (Clarke 291). Mary-Mathilda's discovery that Belfeels is her biological father further complicates her position as a performer of sexual favors. She is traumatized because she has been sexually exploited by her own father. This impedes her narrative "as a woman who successfully makes it to the top of the island's social strata by pimping herself" because she is the victim (Springer

⁴ The concept of "radical subjectivity" derives from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Spivak questions whether women of Indian origin have any rights over their existence and the limitations they encounter as their agency is imbibed by the gender position they occupy. She suggests that in order to escape this position the subaltern needs to attain radical subjectivity. I would like to use this concept of radical subjectivity but apply it on women of Caribbean origin, like Mary-Mathilda.

184). Her sexual engagement to Belfeels has turned into an act of incest, it is a deviant act of sexual violation. Mary-Mathilda suffers trauma upon discovering that she is Belfeels's daughter, which makes her the sister of her son. At first, she is unable to utter what she has discovered. Incest is a major issue as her sexual encounters with Belfeels are permeated by incest. Paternity is imprecated with incest. As Judith Butler suggests Mary-Mathilda is "left to fictionalize and fabulate origins [she could not] know ... [Her] account of [herself] is partial, haunted by that for which [she] can devise no definitive story" (37)⁵.

Mary-Mathilda is a liminal subject whose transition to agency is marked by the spatiality of the plantation and the temporality of the night. The plantation she lives in is connected to her rebellion and the confession of her crime. She recognizes the significance of the plantation as a locus where culture and history are intricately connected. By using Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, a phenomenological criticism can be imparted on Mary-Mathilda, a diasporic subject exposing "the limits of the historical scheme of things, the epistemological and ontological horizon within which subjects come to be at all" (Butler 17). The cane fields were parallelized to the ocean as "the forces of history and colonization", as Mary-Mathilda realizes that "everything changed, time itself changed" (Clarke 455). Eve Stoddard in her book *Positioning Gender and Race in (Post)Colonial Plantation Space: Connecting Ireland and the Caribbean* poses a phenomenological criticism of the positionality of sugar plantations and draws a parallel between the ocean and the cane fields where the narrative takes place. She mingles "the physical landscape of the Barbados to the epistemological and ontological horizons that have structured Mary-Mathilda's life possibilities" (Stoddard 164). Space plays an important role in the course of the action as Mary-Mathilda finds the opportunity to kill Belfeels the moment he is looking out towards the sea. She describes explicitly the scene when she committed the crime. Mary-Mathilda approaches Belfeels, who is "slouched in rum' in 'his favorite Berbice chairs', on the verandah of the Plantation Main House with the hoe" (Clarke 395). At that moment, this instrument is not used anymore to plow "the thick black soil" of the plantations but it is "turned against the oppressor" (Plasa 154). Mary-Mathilda kills Belfeels with the shining handle of the hoe, mutilating him with its sharpened blade. First, she gives Belfeels a deadly strike to his head and then causes a "spoiled slaughtering" of the circumcised head of his penis. She says,

I held the hoe by the blade, and passed the handle over his khaki jodhpurs. . . I moved the fly back . . . It was easier than I thought, getting his instrument out of his fly . . . it was so small . . . She closed her eyes, and delivered the first swing . . . she swung the hoe a second time, and a third, and a fourth . . . countless in her madness . . . and it was bloody, like a spoiled slaughtering. (Clarke 460- 461)

⁵ This obscurity in regards to the accountability for the identity of one's self is reflected through language. Mary-Mathilda uses repeatedly the pronouns "I" and "me" in order to convey her crisis of identity and assume agency.

Mary-Mathilda decides to kill Befeels due to the anger she experiences from discovering that he is her father. She moves in and out of her traumatized state, experiencing some moments of clarity. The personal is turned into the political as the trauma of the individual is turned into collective trauma. Many people in the village wanted to kill Befeels, including her own mother but could not. By killing Befeels, Mary-Mathilda fully engages in her position as a radical subject. Befeels's genital mutilation compensates "the sexual pain both he and the system he represents have historically inflicted upon the mixed-race and/or black female body" (Plasa 156). The way that Mary-Mathilda decides to kill Befeels exposes defiance to the structure of a system that perpetuates sexual violation towards the black female body. Her sense of self is at odds with her gender identification. She poses "a threat to the hierarchies of race and the norms of gender alike" (Plasa 160).

At this point, it would be useful to direct Mary-Mathilda in relation to the space she occupies while applying a phenomenological critique of her action, which depends on the spatiality and temporality of the locus in which it takes place. In his book *Gendering Creolisation: Creolising Affect*, Anim-Addo employs Luce Irigaray's phenomenological concept of the "demonic ground of Caliban's woman" to demarcate the space within which creolized women were placed (Anim-Addo 9). This space was marked by the categories of race and gender as well as by a specificity of history. This latter category signifies a demonic ground which could be viewed as the space in which "'Caliban's woman', the black woman (before or after the master's attentions), unsettles the prevailing power dynamics by performing counter to them" (Anim-Addo 9). Foucault argues that "to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value" (Spivak 81). It is necessary to render the individual vocal. It is difficult to voice something that is ineffable and non-transcendental such as the subaltern. Mary-Mathilda disrupts this dialectic of silence through the performance of her ultimate act and confessing the deed. She does not render her feelings and self as completely readable as she does not want to be castigated into a category, even though she is a colonized subject. Thus, in this context the concept of the 'demonic ground' can be viewed as a perilous zone which operates between the sites of oppression and resistance. In order to form resistance and move beyond the shackles of oppression, Mary-Mathilda employs her repressed affects, despite her confinement. So, the "the space of rape for the master" is turned into "a space of his death" (Anim-Addo 9). This space has already been creolized as it is permeated by her affects. This act is "the source of a counter-politics, a counter-imagining, a counter-metaphysics, not originating from the master (and his world) but from the outside space she possesses as the 'other'" (Anim-Addo 9).

Mary-Mathilda has the status of the other, as her identity is riven by tension and conflict. Gorton claims that desire "affects the lives of characters; it marks their bodies, forcing them to move, act or react differently; and it transforms people, radically alters their being-in-the-world" (Anim-Addo 13). Her act is connected to what is repressed by the master's reason, as he is unable to "fully possess the body, as a site of the sacred, of opacity and liminality" (Anim-Addo 9). She abides by the demonic binary, as she finds

the strength to commit murder, despite her existence within the dehumanizing conditions. Wynter employs the term demonic ground in order to expose “the contradictory relation of Sameness and Difference” (Anim-Addo 9). The gendered creolized body in and out of the locus of the plantation is a body at risk. Mary-Mathilda has undergone some transformation as she is rendered the desire to speak out. She challenges the legacy of the gendered body as she enters discourse. Central to the rhetoric of creolizing one’s affect is that the enslaved is deprived of the power of discourse. To speak is hazardous as the enslaved subject would undergo scrutiny. In order to protect itself, it masks its affects with silence. Silence could be viewed as a strategy for self-preservation and self-protection. Ma’s silence could be viewed as “a maternal fracturing symptomatic of the plantation” (Anim-Addo 14). She only breaks her silence when she is about to die to place the mandate upon Mary-Mathilda to not forget. Thus, the issue of memory comes in the forefront.

Mary-Mathilda attains a new sense of selfhood through her final act of mutilating Belfeels. She is not a victim anymore but an agent who enacts a violent act of resistance to oppression. It is interesting to note at this point that throughout the novel the Bajan dialect of English is used, so there is no distinction between the present and the past tense and it is not clear whether Belfeels is dead or not. At the very end, Mary-Mathilda states precisely that she “did” kill Belfeels, making use of Standard English. Her action could be viewed as an act of resistance to her gendered conditions. The fact that Mary-Mathilda chooses to kill Belfeels by mutilating his genitalia exposes that their sexual relationship has not been consensual but rather criminal, as the nature of their relationship has been incestuous. She is a body that is able to think beyond the ravages of her sexual exploitation. Mary-Mathilda claims that she did not murder Belfeels but rather saved her soul. Her action does not fall in the colonial system thus “[she] may risk intelligibility and defy convention, but then [she is] acting within or on a sociohistorical horizon, attempting to rapture or transform it” (Stoddard 176).

Mary-Mathilda’s action to kill Belfeels is an act of radical resistance to victimization. Even though she was placed in a liminal position, having little agency, she manages to assert herself by “creat[ing] [her]self in [a] new form, instituting a narrative ‘I’ that is superadded to the ‘I’ whose past life [she] seek[s] to tell” (Davies 37). As Butler says “This struggle with the unchosen conditions of one’s life, a struggle – an agency- is also made possible, paradoxically, by the persistence of the primary condition of unfreedom” (Butler 19). Through the confession of her action to the Sargeant, Mary-Mathilda tries to locate herself in the Caribbean diaspora, even though she previously struggled as she embodied the subaltern.

In conclusion, this paper is an exploration of the ways that Mary-Mathilda’s identity is constructed in *The Polished Hoe*. It is evident that victimization and agency can co-exist and define one another as part of one’s sense of self. The inconsistencies in the fabric that constitutes Mary-Mathilda’s identity as instances of empowerment and disempowerment are juxtaposed within the multifaceted and nuanced subject positions she occupies. With this paper, I contribute to the field of body politics as I expose Mary-Mathilda’s ability to occupy multiple subject positions at the same time. The intersectionality of class, race and gender plays a major role in the formation of her

sexuality. I address the issue of sexual exploitation of the black female body, which is rendered as an object. The discourse of the oversexualized black female body is subverted. Mary-Mathilda renegotiates her identity and discovers her own sexual desires. What is innovative in my approach is that I show how she overcomes victimization by making the decision to participate in sex work, emerging as an empowered subject. She attains a new sense of selfhood through her final act of mutilating Befeels. By speaking for herself, Mary-Mathilda speaks on behalf of the women who were oppressed by Befeels, like Ma, as well as the ones who are anonymous and more distant figures, who are part of the island's history. Killing Befeels was the only way for her to attain a new understanding of herself and become a radical subject.

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