

Constructing Radical Black Female Subjectivities

Survival Pimping in Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*

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The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, or the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly arranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation, and suspicion.

—Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex"

The feminism of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s made concerted and successful efforts to challenge the inequity of power dynamics between men and women; however, issues of age, race, class, and sexuality were often rendered invisible or simply ignored. Black feminists identified the concerns of black women in their literary works and scholarship in attempts to fill the gaps; they were preoccupied with examining not only the suppressions and negations of black womanhood within white feminism but also the sexism that was prolific within black communities. Issues important to black womanhood, such as black women's sexual agency, were either ignored or silenced within these earlier conversations, even as the challenge to racist and sexist social structural systems progressed. Safe spaces for black women to address the erotic or the usefulness of sexual agency in one's search for self were not readily available, and the subject was minimally addressed. This is not to say that some black female writers and critics did not recognize the importance of the erotic and sexual politics; however, the codes of conduct, Victorian ideals of femininity, and unwritten notions of respectability impeded black women's ability to explore sexual agency. Perhaps much of this can be attributed to the ways in which the "old definitions" and "old patterns" that Lorde mentions in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex" influence traditional representations of femininity and

respectability. The codes of conduct established within black communities to protect black women from the male gaze and the negation of the black female body were all intended to “imitate progress” while “still condemn[ing] us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt.”¹ In other words, efforts to reclaim and legitimate black female subjectivity were insightful; however, in order to deem black women worthy subjects and to challenge the stereotypical images of them, black women were expected to perform within the narrative of traditional womanhood, which would have called for women to be passive, nurturing, asexual, submissive, and lacking sexual agency. Codes of conduct were established in black communities to erase the stereotypes of the over sexed black woman by following Victorian ideals of femininity.² Some women committed themselves to motherhood in its most orthodox form in an effort to shift the focus away from sexuality and to illuminate their commitment to families.³ The move to accept traditional representations of womanhood contributed to class divides within black communities where one’s economic status and social capital determined if one was worthy of respect. Black women were encouraged to deny any aspect of their sexuality in order to demonstrate that they were respectable.⁴ Protecting black women from subjugation and objectification led to the policing of their sexuality and perhaps the “recrimination” of those who dared to seek sexual agency, because their actions were interpreted as lewd and deviant.

Through a close reading of Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe* (2002), this essay investigates how black women evolve from the basic stereotype of sexual deviance to a more nuanced sense of self—a radical black female subjectivity—as they navigate the inner-workings of sex work and survival pimping.⁵ Fluctuating between scenes of nineteenth-century slave life and mid-twentieth-century pre-independence Barbados, *The Polished Hoe* sheds light on the double colonization and sexual exploitation of black women both during slavery and after emancipation. The novel is the confession of a “well respected” though “kept” woman, Mary Mathilda, who kills her would-be father-lover and pimp, the plantation manager Mr. Bellfeels. Clarke’s novel is within the tradition and literary ranks of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1976), Shirley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).⁶ These works invoke the slave past and examine its role in the construction and design of the black female self and how she negotiates the ways in which an oppressive and colonial past potentially impedes her social mobility and psychological development. Rape, incest, and other forms of sexual exploitation experienced by black women during and after slavery are illuminated; however, an alternate story also exists where women worked from within these oppressive spaces to embrace and re-create an otherwise demon-

ized sexual self. Clarke's text is different from those of the above-mentioned African American female writers in that his focus is on another part of the black diaspora, the Caribbean region, and because of his gendered position as male. Importantly, *The Polished Hoe*, potentially places Clarke within the legacy of women writers engaging in conversations about female sexual agency (though not without some concerns, to be addressed later).

In Clarke's narrative, the actions of Mary and her mother, Ma, serve as a political instrument and authoritative voice on the struggles of black women in their attempts to challenge sexual stereotypes while producing a counter-discourse to traditional representations of womanhood through their complex participation in survival pimping and sex work. This essay seeks to add to progressive scholarship that probes the ways in which black women create safe spaces to unapologetically accept their sexuality and the sexual agency that evolves as a result while simultaneously acknowledging the fluidity of feminine identities. In what follows, I begin by describing the implications of what bell hooks calls "radical black subjectivity" for the sexual agency that may be secured by women who participate in sex work. Second, I examine how Clarke's protagonists, Ma and Mary, evolve and emerge as sexual agents rather than mere victims in their quest for personhood. Their reinvention of self surpasses personal subjectivity and serves as a testament to the struggles of women like themselves who resist from the margins, validating such experiences as worthy of scholarly critique. The third part of the essay challenges the simplistic and troubling idea that women who participate in sex work are merely objects—objectified by men or self-objectified. To read women's sexual subjectivity in such a limiting way is to deny them agency, sexual and otherwise.

Radical Subjectivity, Sex Work, and Sexual Agency

In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks asks: "How do we create an oppositional view, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization?"⁷ Her answer is resistance and opposition but a most important and initial step is becoming a subject. The process of becoming a subject "emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined."⁸ Here, hooks is in conversation with other feminists who have engaged in theoretical discussions regarding the power that lies within the discovery of self and the struggles that evolve as one tries to navigate self-

hood amid the mire of systemic forms of oppression and social entities that make it difficult for one to accept the fluidity of subjectivity. In its most general sense, subjectivity has been defined within feminist and black cultural studies as a critical examination of how a woman herself (as subject) sees her role, and how that role contributes to her identity and meaning. What proves most valuable about hooks's exploration of subjectivity and the process to self-actualization is the radical stance she takes. It's not just about becoming a subject, but a radical subject. Radical subjectivity is the subject's "inner willingness to rebel, to move against the grain, to be out of one's place" (Stallings 3).⁹ In *Mutha' Is Half a Word*, Lynn Stallings expands on hooks's notion of radical female subjectivity when she pontificates that "wild women" [what I call radical women] do not need a context for their rebellion. Their rebellion is "self-authored" and "purposefully incorporates that desire as the context for rebellion from the beginning, as opposed to an afterthought," allowing for a new politics of sexuality for black women and culture.¹⁰ For the purposes of this essay, radical subjectivity occurs when women recognize that they cannot deny the agency that sexuality affords them and reject particular codes of conduct and respectability in order to embrace their sexuality—and, I would add, the fluidity of femininity.¹¹ Though rife with inevitable contradictions, discovering or embracing a radical subjectivity through sex work can allow one to escape (if only momentarily) from the role of victim. The possibilities and limitations allow for a continued examination of how contemporary feminists and feminist theory in general discuss the agency of sex workers.

According to Kamala Kempadoo, "the concept of sex work emerged in the 1970s through the prostitutes' rights movement in the United States and Western Europe and has been discussed."¹² Borrowing from Than-Dam Troung's study of prostitution and tourism in Southeast Asia, Kempadoo defines *sex work* as "human activity or work as the way in which basic needs are met and human life produced and reproduced."¹³ Sexual labor, then, is comparable to other forms of labor that humans perform to sustain themselves, and the term *sex work* "capture[s] the notion of the utilization of sexual elements of the body and as a way of understanding a productive life force that is employed by men and women."¹⁴ Furthermore, sex work has been discussed as "an occupation engaged in by choice or perceived necessity; it is not an orientation or property of an individual."¹⁵ Advocates of sexual labor recognize *sex work* as a more desirable term when discussing the exchange of sex for material gain, as it allows more room for sexual agency and empowerment of the laborer. Although Clarke's narrative hails from an earlier historical time period, I choose to characterize Mary as a sex worker rather than a prostitute (or in its most colloquial sense, a whore, or more specifically in African American vernacu-

lar, a ho), because her sexual relations are about survival and, as her mother notes in the novel, “fair trade” for self-sufficiency and sustenance. Naming becomes important here. Indeed, in its most generic and literal sense, a hoe is the tool used by Mary’s mother and the others who came before her to weed and work the cane fields as well as that which Mary polishes and sharpens with the intention of using it to murder Bellfeels. On the other hand, from a figurative standpoint, *hoe*—in the sense of *ho*—is used to name and subsequently define Mary. Though Clarke stated in an interview that he had no idea that within African American vernacular the term *ho* means “prostitute,” his experience as a writer and his vast knowledge of Caribbean literature and popular culture suggests that he is familiar with the use of double entendre. Within Caribbean culture, for example, the musical genre of calypso (a staple within Caribbean spaces) relies heavily on this trope. The same is true of literature from the region. Perhaps, Clarke’s application of “polished” to the term *hoe* is a way to soften the blow of the use of this term to define Mary. In this context, *polished* is used to identify a sex worker who is considered within her community a “high brow” “working woman” worthy of respect (with limitations). Mary, though from a working-class background, is well versed in the area of respectability, educated from travel and reading, as well as the mother of one of the most respected doctors on the island. Her position as Mr. Bellfeels’s mistress has earned her the title of Mrs. Bellfeels, a life as mistress of the great house, and the resources that go along with it, such as maids and gardeners. The concern with Clarke’s use of *hoe* lies in the terminology—the word choice. While sexual agency can be attained by one who practices sex work while claiming the classification *ho*, this is not a term that most women who engage in sex work would use to refer to themselves due to its association with moral degeneracy, deviance, exploitation, shame, and the like. I will use the term *sex worker*, rather than *ho*, in this essay due to its allowance for a more complex examination of women’s relationship with labor that involves sexual activity, mainly because it is less judgmental and more self-determining.¹⁶

It is when Clarke’s characters reinvent themselves and claim the autonomy that sex work and survival pimping allows them that they are empowered to accept the sexual agency that radical subjectivity allows. I interpret agency as empowerment, an act or particular behavior performed knowingly and freely. In this case, sexual agency is approached as a hard-won victory for black women in Clarke’s novel. The concept of women’s agency has often been rejected within the realm of sex work.¹⁷ Perhaps this has much to do with the fact that “there is a persistent pattern through much of history that positions the social gendered category ‘women’ as the sellers or providers of sexual labor and ‘men’ as the group deriving the profits and power from the interac-

tions.”¹⁸ However, women can choose to be pimps and sex workers in order to change their social class location, increase their chances for survival, and resist the stereotypical shaming and derogatory nature of sex work. They can shift our cultural views of femininity as a static category. *Pimp* has been used primarily to refer to men who locate and manage customers for sex workers in return for all or a portion of the earnings. In contemporary subcultures “pimping” is valorized through song and has historically been recognized—though not necessarily accepted—as a viable means for the underprivileged to become players in the capitalist institution of supply and demand, providing an opportunity to gain the power and autonomy otherwise denied due to lack of resources. The quest for social power and control, material wealth, social recognition, and upward mobility motivate the would-be pimp. The next section of this essay examines how women like Clarke’s Ma and Mary, who find themselves in circumstances where they can perform the role of pimp by selling themselves or helping others to sell themselves, can carve out a degree of autonomy through gaming the system. Though men are disproportionately privileged in sex industries, it is not uncommon for women to be agents and not simply victims. Women who have accepted their radical subjectivity can use their sexual agency to maneuver and navigate the various roles within sex work successfully, revising our traditional representations of female sexuality and femininity.

“You Turned Your Daughter Out?” Locating Power from within “Deviant” Spaces, the Mother as Pimp

Rape and other acts of overt violence that Black women have experienced, such as physical assault during slavery, 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.

—Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*

In her seminal work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins identifies the various sexual images of black women as hot mamas and jezebels, among others. She maintains that these controlling images have been influenced by the legacy of slavery and have been essential to the political economy of domination fostering black women’s oppression.¹⁹ A core theme in black feminist scholarship has been challenging such controlling images and reclaiming the black female

body in order to afford black women status as subjects rather than bodies to be used and abused. Spanning scenes from slavery and the period after emancipation, Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* is a fictive representation of the plantation society in Barbados during the 1940s, with an acute focus on representations of the everyday lives of black women. During slavery, black women had little to no control over their bodies and were unable to protect themselves from sexual abuse. As Hilary Beckles notes in *Natural Born Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados*, "slavery in the islands led to the legal and customary institutionalization of the slave owner's right to unrestricted sexual access to slaves as an intrinsic and discrete product."²⁰ The mothers in Clarke's novels were not far removed from slavery, and those women who came before them would have experienced slavery in the manner outlined by Beckles. Even as slavery ended and countries in the region sought independence from their former colonizers, the remnants of slavery and the culture of white patriarchal domination persisted within the plantation society. A hierarchy was still intact whereby blacks remained, for the most part, in servitude for the white planter classes: white men, white women, creole whites (born locally), "mulattoes," black men, and black women were part of the imposed hierarchy. Ma belongs to the category of black women who worked in the cane fields and were subjected to Mr. Bellfeels's sexual abuse. Mary was fathered by Bellfeels and is considered "mulatto." Mary could have continued as a field hand, inheriting her mother's social economic status; however, Ma reclaims her own body and that of Mary when she chooses to pimp her daughter in order to secure for her a "better life," one where Mary lives in the plantation great house rather than serve there or work in the neighboring fields. Ma's decision to pimp her daughter complicates the theme of mother-daughter relationships and troubles the traditional notions of motherhood. By going against traditional representations of motherhood and mothering, Ma develops a radical subjectivity, and her renewal of self takes place; she teaches her daughter to tap into her sexual agency, a new understanding of the body, and the varying purposes it can potentially serve—including but not limited to pleasure and economic stability.

Motherhood is a recurrent theme in scholarship and literature on the African diaspora. "The role of mother not only brackets in the notion of what it is to be a woman," writes Gayle Wilentz, "but also dialectically branches out into a community role, with its strengths and imitations."²¹ The mother is recognized as the transmitter of cultural values and practices and is also charged with the task of introducing girls to womanhood, remaining pivotal to their identity formation.²² Collins goes so far as to suggest motherhood as a symbol

of power.²³ During slavery, meeting the criteria of motherhood outlined above would have been mostly unattainable and contradictory, as enslaved women were not positioned to mother effectively. “Black motherhood, by implication, was conceptually and legally tied to the perpetuation of slavery,” writes Beckles. “This matrifocal legislative approach to slave reproduction ensured that from the point of view of white society, black women’s maternity could not be separated from enslavement and degradation.”²⁴ Protecting or advocating on behalf of one’s offspring was not always possible, therefore denying black women opportunities to be active mothers. Post-slavery, black women were afforded an opportunity to mother in ways denied them during slavery, though not without complications. One of the dilemmas they faced was raising black daughters in societies that were hostile to black females. Considering that there is no definitive break between slavery and post-slavery, systems of oppression remained intact, making it imperative that black mothers teach their daughters how to adjust to and survive subordination. Collins writes:

Black daughters must learn how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those same structures. In order to develop these skills in their daughters, mothers demonstrate varying combinations of behaviors devoted to ensuring their daughters’ survival—such as providing them basic necessities and protecting them in dangerous environments—to helping their daughters go further than mothers themselves were allowed to go.²⁵

The black mother’s loyalty, sense of duty, and expectation to ensure her daughter’s survival are a subtheme in Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe*. The mother, Ma, accepts responsibility for her daughter’s success and arms her with tools that would help her to transcend the race, class, and gender obstacles that Ma herself struggles to resist and overcome; she does not simply acquiesce to the abuse of Bellfeels or his ilk. Mary becomes a “respected” woman with social and economic capital; however, the survival tools she is afforded violate normative moral codes, considering that it is through sex work that she receives notoriety. Ma is a “mother outlaw” who uses sex work as a space to locate agency and empowerment for her daughter.²⁶ Her actions allow for an exploration of how women navigate and delineate personal identity and agency in moments charged with complex situations of mothering, sexual violence, and poverty. Ma evolves as a radical subject who, in turn, redefines power to ensure her daughter access to a more privileged life by becoming a pimp.

Ma challenges class-, race-, and gender-based conventional structures when she introduces her daughter into sex work instead of succumbing to victimization. As a pimp, she also moves beyond scripted gendered roles con-

sidering pimping has and continues to be treated as a masculine space. In her new role, Ma subverts patriarchal notions that women engaging in sex work can only be seen as victims as well as the idea that sex work can only be considered a form of “deviance.” Ma orders a re-visioning of the black female body politic, because the body can be used to empower and liberate even when it is experiencing abuse. In “Gender, Race, and Sex: Exoticism in the Caribbean,” Kempadoo reminds us that while the agency of those who have been victimized is difficult to examine, there is great value in oppositional agency and counterhegemonic forces.²⁷ Ma may have been a former victim of repeated rapes, and she might exist in a patriarchal culture that requires female subjugation and submission, but by becoming a pimp she is able to challenge that domination by teaching Mary that her body can be used to gain a better life. Though focused on more recent representations of women and sex work in the Caribbean, Sandra C. Duvivier’s statement about women and sex work in Haiti applies to women like Ma and Mary: “The black female body . . . is currency signifying the potential for basic survival, financial security, and socioeconomic advancement . . . perceiving it as the most profitable means by which to attempt to transcend poverty.”²⁸ Ma recognizes the potential to improve their standard of living by offering Mary to Bellfeels. The promise here for Ma is not only a more liberal and counterhegemonic response to the ultraconservative traditional rules of female respectability but also a chance to empower herself and Mary. By deciding who will have access to her child’s body, she secures agency, no matter how limited.

Ma is aware of the various discriminatory practices against black women that initially prevent her daughter from obtaining upward social mobility, and her dream for Mary to become a teacher or seamstress is interrupted by the reality that she lacks the resources to make these dreams materialize. Ma is a field worker, and Mary’s only opportunities would be to follow the same path or become a domestic for whites. Therefore, the intentional use of the body for material gain and survival should not be dismissed as degenerating and deviant; instead, readings should be complicated to discern an alternative to total submission and victimization. Wendy Chapkis writes:

Practices of prostitution, like other forms of commodification and consumption, can be read in more complex ways than simply as confirmation of male domination. They may also 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.²⁹

Ma is laying the groundwork for Mary to experience the agency Chapkis outlines as she deviates from the normalcy associated with respectability and moral cultural definitions of what constitutes as a viable way to earn a living. Even in her role as pimp, Ma can be read as one acting defiantly not necessarily to resist an entire power structure but to gain individual empowerment and secure the form of agency that she wants for Mary. As Cathy Cohen observes, so-called deviant behavior may be embraced to pursue “greater autonomy over one’s life, to pursue desire, or to make the best of very limited life options.”³⁰ She continues: “Instead of attempting to increase one’s power over someone, people living with limited resources may use the restricted agency available to them to create autonomous spaces absent the continuous stream of power from outside authorities or normative structures.”³¹ In *The Polished Hoe*, Ma breaks the rules not necessarily to be a martyr but to survive by using the limited resources available to her—Mary’s body.

Ma’s own internalized racist ideals and discourse influence her belief that Mary’s is marketable because of her light skin and “good hair.”³² Ma asks, Why waste these good looks on local Bajan boys who can hardly afford to support themselves, much less provide a good life for a wife? Or, why leave Mary at the mercy of “these wolves in the road, in the sea, in the Church, in the school, in Sunday School. In the cane fields. . . . All o’ them [men] wanted a piece” (*PH*, 144). Ma knows what it is like to be sexually exploited by “these wolves” and “in the cane fields,” as she, too, has served as mistress to Bellfeels, but without any economic or social gain due to her darker skin. She avoids repeating this cycle of unrewarded exploitation for Mary. Mary’s Caucasian features place her in good stead for economic stability, and knowing this, Ma pimps her out to the white Bellfeels. Of such negotiations between black women and white men, historian Barbara Bush observes that “such power was not monolithic and operated at a number of levels, not always with negative consequences.”³³ Considering that Ma’s mother had been a slave, Ma would have observed the power that some black women gained through providing sexual services to white men, solidifying her decision to become a pimp. Ma recognizes the power of female sexuality. Bush points out that “this power network forms a ‘dense web’ which passes through official institutions without being exactly localized in them, there are innumerable, diverse points of resistance which may even involve a temporary inversion of power relations. Such inversion was evident, for instance, in the power of white women held over black men, whom they could punish at will. Black women, too, despite their racial and sexual inferiority, could at times manipulate with men to their own advantage.”³⁴ She continues: “The ambivalent relationship between black women and white men in terms of power and resistance may be partly explained by Foucault’s assertion that sexual power is not purely repressive.”³⁵ The promise

of individual autonomy through sexual power leads to Mary and Ma becoming the partners and entrepreneurs of this new business of sex work with Bellfeels as the client and not the only proprietor of agency.

Of Ma's first transaction in her role as pimp, Mary recollects:

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

Mary continues "and Ma, stanning-up beside me, with her two eyes looking down at the loose marl in the Church Yard . . . looking at the ground . . . Not on me, her own daughter" (11). Unfamiliar with the rules of "the game" and the logistics of sex work at this juncture, Mary interprets her mother's silence as one of powerlessness, an inability to protect her. Unable to comprehend Ma's refusal to comment on or acknowledge what she perceives to be dehumanizing, Mary later reckons with Ma's choice and adjusts to the program. hooks's contention that some black women willingly establish working relationships with other black women to confront race, gender, and class injustices is applicable in that Mary could certainly have resented Ma for using her body as a commodity without her consent. However, Mary is able to forgive Ma's assumed negligence when she realizes Ma's intentions as well as the limitations that placed her in this conflicting position of pimp to her daughter.

Ma arguably participates in what Julia O'Connell defines as "survival pimping" in *Prostitution, Power, and Freedom*.³⁶ Of her own relationship with Bellfeels, Mary also noted that "Ma chose Bellfeels" (367). Here, she validates her mother's pimping act as empowering and seems to understand the under workings of this decision. She is not Bellfeels's mistress based on his choice alone. Also, as Ma affirms in conversation with Mary: "if it wasn't you, Mary-girl . . . it woulda be somebody else daughter. And even though it is what it is, I feel more better to see that it is you getting some o' the sweets that goes along with it, if you know what I mean" (426). Ma continues: "Fair exchange . . . is no robbery. Get something for it. . . . If I was a woman o' means that I wish I was, you would have your own hairdressing place. Or a dressmaking place. Or even be a teacher. But this is our lot" (428). Ma comprehends and is knowledgeable of the ways in which she and Mary are disadvantaged, daring to resist from the margins by creating radical female subjectivities; they can move from the bottom realm of the community to the luxuries of the great house with servants, which Mary ultimately does though not without complications and contradictions probed in the next section.

Negotiating Deviancy, Decency, Diplomacy, and Sex Work

But change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness.

—Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*

Within the scope of a radical subjectivity is the ability for one to navigate more than one subject position, whereby allowing for a femininity that is fluid; the performance of this radical subjectivity also allows for the personal growth and self awareness women experience, as Hill Collins posits in the above epigraph. While Ma serves as a survival pimp, Mary begins as one forced into sex work—a victim. As Mary comes of age, however, there is an identity shift where she moves from exploited sex worker to one who endures survival sex. Furthermore, Mary goes beyond survival mode and makes way for a fluid femininity by becoming a woman who occupies various subject positions which include: the cultured “high brow” woman of the great house who is well regarded within her respective community; the woman of substance who manages her own nuclear family of sorts (common-law wife to Mr. Bellfeels and mother to their son, Wilberforce); the woman who builds her own enterprise and financial safety net as a sex worker by “pimping” herself, rather than being “pimped” by her mother alone; the woman who sometimes has to bite her tongue and serve the wishes of Mr. Bellfeels against her will; and the woman who will eventually seduce fellow law man and childhood friend, Sargeant, in order to be exonerated for the murder of Mr. Bellfeels. Mary skillfully navigates these subject positions throughout the novel. She knows when to don the title of sex worker, common-law wife, pimp, pimped, or victim when appropriate, thus escaping the traditional dichotomous existence of a limited femininity where one is considered either lady or whore (respectable or disreputable). Little to no room is left for an in-between existence within scholarly discussions about female sexuality. Clarke's Mary's complex identity lends itself as a useful example of how women like Mary are indeed able to occupy varying subject positions, even when they are in essence complicated and contradictory.

Mary's mother maybe a survival pimp, but her daughter moves from sexual victim to an active agent and willing participant in “survival sex.” as mentioned earlier. Survival sex in this instance indicates that Mary is conscious of and aware of the fact that her body has become a source of income, stability, and perhaps an inroad to securing the socioeconomic “high brow” status her familial lineage does not afford. Once, as she confesses, Bellfeels is in her system from the moment she is handed over to him by her mother, and as

he takes her virginity (37) she makes a conscious decision to make her body her “piece of land”—her investment capital.³⁷ Mary escapes her subjugated and disempowered impoverished status by strategically taking her body back from Ma to become her own pimp and, ultimately, a sex worker; she becomes her own boss, ensuring an economic security that was not otherwise possible. There is agency here in that Mary reclaims her body not only from Bellfeels’s potential payment free sexual exploitation but also from Ma, an empowering act. Arguably, by accepting the roles of pimp and sex worker, Mary escapes the victimization of forced sex; she reclaims her body with a new consciousness in which she willingly trades her body for “a better life.” Sex work becomes a viable means of securing not only daily survival but also Mary’s desire for status, considering she “knew the power of the man who was turning her into a force-ripe woman” (67): “I wasn’t so young not to also know that the man fooping me³⁸ by force was a man of means, and privilege, able to put me in a category which not one of the boys I grew up with, and who, later on as men, were after me, could” (67). Instead of being defined by Bellfeels or others in the community, she determines how her new identity as a self-identified sex worker will be shaped and employs Ma’s idea of “even exchange” (428). The subject position of the impoverished victim of sexual abuse is juxtaposed with that of a woman who now represents herself as “the polished hoe,” understood as a “high brow” sex worker.³⁹ It’s not only about performing sex work but securing a particular upper-class status. She chooses to use her body freely to gain the comforts of a domesticated “kept woman” by saving herself for Bellfeels alone.

Choosing Bellfeels and pimping herself out to him are acts of, first, performing a radical subjectivity granting Mary agency, and second, in turn, protecting her from the sexual harassment and possible rape enacted by Clarke’s male characters at whim:

I am talking about a time, when any one of them, driver, overseer, book-keeper, manager . . . even the man-leader of a field gang, anybody in the scheme of things, in a more higher position, could grab your hand, and lead you in a cane field; pull down your bloomers, put you in a pile of cane trash; and after he unbutton his fly, and pull out his dickey . . . he could lay down “pon top o” you, bam-bam-bam!, and jerk off. And that was that. (104)

Mary ends this sexual abuse by becoming Bellfeels’s common-law wife. As all-powerful overseer and one who “don’t trust no fecking man . . . with what is mine [Mary in this instance],” (163), he guarantees Mary protection from unwanted sexual abuse, as none of the other men would risk questioning Bell-

feels's authority and power. Sex at the whim of men in the cane fields was traded in for an existence as a common-law wife and mother with access to pleasurable consensual sex with Bellfeels—once she betrothed herself to him. Her pride in her role as participant in a respected traditional family structure is highlighted as she references the moonlit walks she and Bellfeels shared, her joy when she, Bellfeels, and their son would share evenings together, singing and dancing: “You shoulda seen the three of us! Father. Mother. Daughter. And Child” (31).

Mary's earned position as common-law wife does not erase the contradictory and complex nature of her existence and her community's normative reading of femininity. It is her radical subjectivity that allows her the will and ability to navigate various subject positions, empowering her in one instance. Yet the way in which she achieves this fluid identity is tainted by her former roles as the pimped, pimp, and sex worker, thereby making it difficult to sustain her newfound empowerment on a steady continuum. The ways in which Mary secures motherhood and common-law wife status fuels the private condescending conversations of Clarke's well-crafted Bajan community, perhaps also infused by jealousy (238–39). She is referred to as Mrs. Bellfeels in public but as Bellfeels's “whore” in private. She herself internalizes self-denigrating descriptions of herself: “There is a distinct difference in the way Mr. Bellfeels see me, and the way he was brought up to see me, from the way he see Mistress Dora Blanche Spence Bellfeels. Yes. One is wife. The other is harlot. One is Mistress. The other is whore” (118). The fluid femininity Mary embraces is occasionally trumped by the overpowering forces of two polarizing representations of femininity: wife or harlot, mistress or whore. Of this dominating representation of femininity, Ifeona Fulani writes:

The New World History of enslavement and colonization, of sexual exploitation, abuse, and the stigmatization of black and female bodies, produces at one extreme a burden of oppressive stereotypes such as the mammy and the Jezebel and, the other extreme, pressure to conform to Victorian and Christian notions of proper female behavior. The sexual conduct of black women has been subject to scrutiny and control, not only by white colonial society but also within black communities, which displace the burden of “proper conduct” and bourgeois respectability onto the persons of black women.⁴⁰

Although aware of the power within consciously choosing to participate in sex work, Mary is also familiar with the limitations within the scope of such self-empowerment, notwithstanding the stigmatization Fulani articulates above.

Mary's discovery that Bellfeels is her biological father further complicates

her ambivalence with sex work and its limitations as a securer of autonomy, as it is one thing to pimp oneself out to a client and quite another to become your father's sex worker. The trauma of being sexually exploited by one's father momentarily obstructs Mary's narrative as a woman who successfully makes it to the top of the island's social strata by pimping herself in that she resumes the role of victim. Incest impedes Mary's full transformation from victim to victor at this juncture. Literary and historical representations of incest reveal the shame and guilt experienced by such victims, especially when the victim simultaneously resists victimization yet is drawn to the abuser; Mary "desires" Bellfeels and appreciates how his status can elevate her in life. How does Mary as daughter, common-law wife, sex worker, and mother of Bellfeels's son successfully navigate victimhood from incestuous abuse along with the agency she secures from time to time?

Knowledge that Bellfeels is Mary's father is possessed by others within her community but kept quiet out of fear, as Bellfeels has the status and power to maim or hurt anyone willing to give voice to this reality. Mary's mother's request for child support, which would also serve as an acknowledgment of paternity, was addressed with Bellfeels's "riding-crop across her back, *whap! whap!*" (429) and a promise to end her life because "Be-Christ, how would it look, for people to hear that I fooping my own daughter! You want to send-me-up to Glandairy? Or cause a fecking scandal on this Plantation? You hate me summuch" (430). Bellfeels's questioning of Ma as one who hates him is ironic in that Mary, who once desired, and dare I say loved him, begins to hate Bellfeels once she confirms that he is her father. The discovery is made through a collection of photos—showcasing, Bellfeels, Wilberforce (their son), and Mary as she came of age—all of which she refers to as her "Wall of History" or "Wall of Shame" (291). The obvious fact of paternity is revealed when Mary

would look at the photographs of herself, at age five, and seven, and nine, exactly the three ages of Wilberforce in the triptych in the oval-shaped silver frame, and see the resemblance, which struck her always as the resemblance of the son taking after the mother. But when she looks at all three together, this is when the thought of a mark, of a silent sin, . . . entered her mind. (431)

This "silent sin" and erased paternity initiates a vexed and more complex perspective of her sexual encounters with Bellfeels, in which acts are no longer performed for survival, success, or desire but are currently reflected upon as acts of incest and sexual violation. Appearing volatile and vulnerable in this instance, Mary is clearly a woman who is suffering from shock, abandon-

ment, and trauma. She experiences shock, in that she discovers the man she has somewhat betrothed herself to is indeed her father, lover, and john; abandonment, in that she would have preferred to be fathered in the way that his son Wilberforce and daughters (Euralie and Emonie) had been—they were protected by Bellfeels and publically acknowledged as his children and heirs to his possessions; and trauma, in that the sexual abuse and violation contribute to her current mental anguish. How, then, does Mary navigate her roles as Bellfeels's mistress, lover, and child?

Scholarly responses to Gail Jones's *Corregidora*—a novel depicting the horrific legacies of slavery where black women were both traumatized and legitimized by their relationships with white slave masters who fathered them yet served as their lovers—afford an understanding of the challenge Mary encounters as she tries to navigate her varied subject positions in terms of her relationship with Bellfeels. In her examination of the intersection between abuse and desire, Stefanie Li suggests that Jones's text urges us to "consider the complexities and contradictions of delineating agency and personal identity in circumstances charged with complex issues of intimacy, violence, and need."⁴¹ Jones's women are traumatized as a result of being exploited by slave master, Corregidora, as well as incest due to the fact his daughter, Gram, becomes his lover once her mother, Great Gram, leaves him. Li writes not only about the victimization but the resistance inherent in such volatile circumstances. Great Gram's departure from Corregidora's brothel does signify a type of resistance and self-empowerment, yet her desire to hold on to the legacy of the Corregidora lineage by not changing her last name suggests a problematic reliance on Corregidora's legacy, or as Joanne Lipson Freed has noted, a repetition of sexual exploitation of slavery reproduced in the present through traumatic narratives told by the Corregidora women.⁴²

Clarke's Mary is poised to demonstrate the same type of ambivalence noted among Corregidora's women—lover, friend, or enemy to those who exploit them such as Corregidora and Bellfeels. As Mary delivers her statement—which serves as her own traumatic narrative—to Sargeant about the murder she has committed, many contradictions are noted. On the one hand, she speaks confidently about her decision to "choose" Bellfeels to be her john because of his status and ability to make her a woman of substance; on the other hand, she speaks painfully about the statutory rape she undergoes as a child and the vulnerability of being Bellfeels's mistress. Mary is proud to be known as Mrs. Bellfeels, yet she is ashamed of her former sexual desire for her father. She expresses a fondness for the common-law family that she, Bellfeels, and Wilberforce create together, yet she loathes the erased paternity. These inconsistencies demonstrate the multifaceted and nuanced subject positions Mary

occupies and illuminates the moments of empowerment and of disempowerment. Anger and rage fueled by this newfound knowledge of incest informs her decision to murder Bellfeels in order to be free of his tyranny as well as to protect herself from further violation—an act of resistance. Arguably, the desire to murder Bellfeels seems more initiated by the erased paternity. Wavering in and out of her traumatized state, Mary does have moments of clarity. One such moment is revealed when she draws on her pimping skills as she plots Bellfeels's murder. Knowing that Wilberforce remains unmarried, resides in the great house, and has become the most respected doctor on the island and heir to most of Bellfeels's wealth, Mary no longer needs Bellfeels. This new rage emanating from her trauma combined with the "rebel consciousness" she inhabits leads to Bellfeels death:

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. (460–61)

It is plausible that through Bellfeels's death Mary is liberated (though she has to answer to the law) and has the opportunity to fully engage her radical subjectivity. Mary's agency is continuously located within her subjectivity as pimp. To be exonerated for Bellfeels's death, she hustles Sargeant.

Love, Lust, or Pimpnosis: The Seduction of Sargeant

Your freedom, your life is taken from you, as a woman in this Island, for the certainty that you will have food, and a roof over your head, and over your thrildren's head . . . but if you play your cards right, you will have these things to look at; these things of material value flowing unto you, in abundance in your direction.

—Clarke, *The Polished Hoe*

The violation Mary experiences is measured not only by its effect on Mary herself but also by its effect on other women. In a way, the personal becomes political. Her individual trauma translates into a collective trauma that needed to be rectified. Above, Mary articulates the volatile situation of women but also suggests that "if you play your cards right, you will have . . . abundance in your direction" (275). "Playing your cards right" for Mary is about performing within the realms of sex work to secure self-sustenance and self-preservation.

“Playing your cards right” is parallel to what Denise Brennan recognizes as “performance as strategy.” In her recent study of sex work, *What’s Love Got to Do with It*, Brennan warns against assuming that all sex workers are inherently oppressed. Instead, she suggests “a nuanced understanding of women maneuvering within the sex trade. . . . The sex trade story is not simply of women who use sex work as a survival strategy but also of women who try to use sex work as an advancement strategy.”⁴³

In using sex work to survive and seek advancement, Mary draws on the agency won to escape pending punishment for murdering Bellfeels while simultaneously securing complete freedom from Bellfeels. Furthermore, it is fair to suggest that she consciously initiates a collective resistance against patriarchal structures when she kills Bellfeels for his acts of violence and, notably, erased paternity. Mary seduces and pretends to love or desire Sargeant—building upon her radical subjectivity by way of utilizing sex work as an “advancement strategy.”⁴⁴ Sargeant becomes Mary’s latest conquest/would-be client. Would sharing her story with Sargeant grant her an opportunity to “pimp” him by way of sharing her story to secure his empathy, thereby situating herself to be exonerated from the murder she committed? This final section contends that Mary demonstrates how “polished” she is by using her wits and her pimping skills to win over the law, represented by Sargeant. From the subject position of “polished” sex worker, Mary’s killing of Bellfeels and her ability to swindle the law demonstrates how marginalized subjects are able to thwart existing structural powers to win agency while empowering others. Mary’s victory becomes a community victory.

Cognizant of the history between herself and Sargeant, where he like the other men in the community desired her, Mary seduces and manipulates Sargeant. His former (and perhaps still existing) love and lust for her is apparent. Mary uses her sexuality as well as her class subject position to manipulate Sargeant, who feels vulnerable in her company—emasculated in some ways. He knows that he has to take her statement, but he procrastinates. He reveres her in the same ambiguous and dichotomous subject position as do the other community members: Mrs. Bellfeels but also the sex worker. He would “do anything, but have to face her” (40). Sargeant’s fear is a combination of never being able to have access to Mary (because of his social standing) and his feeling intimidated by Mary’s acquired status. Pretending to desire Sargeant is a part of Mary’s scheme. She leads him in a seductive dance (165). She “places her body teasingly before him” (381) and eventually leads him to her bedroom. He is excited and “the urge is there. But he is scared. The fear is like heat, white and searing” (319). Unable to perform, Sargeant is vulnerable and open to Mary’s didactic retelling of her life and that of others. To this end she successfully

seduces Sargeant first through her sexual advances and second through her retelling of the vile acts of Bellfeels, not only to her but also to others in the community, consistently illuminating herself as both empowered subject and victim as she deems fit; she skillfully navigates these subject positions. The reader is bombarded by image after image of Bellfeels's tyranny done to soften the blow of the murder but, more importantly, to advance to freedom:

On Clotel: allegedly raped by and pregnant for Bellfeels, she hung herself. (14–15)

On Golborne: a famous cricketer who was severely beaten by Bellfeels and left disabled. Bellfeels, “that avaricious man, had his hand buried inside Golborne’s pot.” (16–17)

On Ma: Mary’s mother was repeatedly raped and physically abused when she dared to mention that Mary was indeed Bellfeels’s daughter in an attempt to secure child support. (165)

On Sargeant: not only is he denied a chance to court Mary, but also he is dehumanized by Bellfeels when he (Sargeant) is allegedly accused of stealing a mango. As Sargeant recalls, he was traumatized by the event and urinated on himself then and every other time he saw Bellfeels. Bellfeels treated him “like a savage,” Sargeant adds. (111–12)

Mary’s identification of the wrongs done to her and others by Bellfeels offers Sargeant perspective. Her reference to the stripping of Sargeant’s masculinity by white men who were empowered enough to deny him humanity and ultimately deny him conjures the memory of Mary joining Bellfeels in a cave during a community picnic. Sargeant reflects on his inability to rescue Mary from Bellfeels and his powerlessness amid the laughter of the white solicitor general and others who profess that Mary is too young for Bellfeels yet revel in their own desires to “take a piece offa she, too!” (164). Unable to defend Mary, Sargeant “gallops down the beach” repeating, “I hate Mary, I hate Mary, I hate Mary” (165). The actions of these white men are indicative of the ways in which they exploited black women in order to not only dominate and repress them but also to demoralize black men.⁴⁵ Because of Sargeant’s powerlessness and inability to articulate his frustration with white male privilege, he projects his anger onto Mary. Mary uses this moment of reflection as representative of Bellfeels’s tyranny and wins Sargeant over through her suggestion that the suffering Bellfeels is responsible for was not just done to a specific individual but an entire community. He deserved to die!

More importantly, Mary knows that there are many who wanted to hurt or kill Bellfeels themselves but lacked the wherewithal to do it. Her mother once vowed to kill Bellfeels but couldn’t follow through: “I going—kill yuh,

I going—kill yuh . . . one o' these good days" (417). Of others who wanted to stop Bellfeels's philandering, primarily women, Manny notes:

Who in the village did not know, and wish for, and hope that 'the son-of-a-bitch who inhabits the Main House, don't deserve his throat slit; and the sooner, be-Christ, the better? And who would raise a hand of censure, or answer a call from the Plantation or the Solicitor General, to take the oath and give evidence against Miss Mary-Mathilda. (412)

Again, it can be argued that Mary "saves the day" with her act while counting on the law to be on her side, allowing her a new beginning as Mary Mathilda (Christian name) rather than Ms. Bellfeels. In her closing statement she tells Sargeant:

All I ask you, Sargeant, when people including the Commissioner of Police, ask you to repeat what my evidence is, tell him what you know about me. Just as I am. Without one plea. You would know what to leave in and what to leave out. Let your conscience be your guide. Tell him about me, not out of malice, but as a woman who did what she do, did, to save her soul. (450)

In the end, Sargeant notes that "he will omit as much as possible of the evidence from the Statement he has to write" (452).

Conclusion

An initial reading of *The Polished Hoe* likely reveals a woman eager to tell her story in order for it to be documented in the sense of sharing the plight of black women after emancipation; however, a more in-depth reading suggests this is potentially true but with more important implications. The retelling of the story is consciously done to create empathy for the narrator in order to forgive her by the end of the text for the act of murder she committed. She becomes one whose femininity ebbs and flows based on her situation and the subject location she needs to occupy. In the end she occupies the space of a woman who functions from the margins of the margins with a secured sense of her radical subject position where she acknowledges both the agency she secures as a sex worker and the moments of volatility. Mary's narrative encourages an evaluation of our concept of sex work as a social location that simply subjugates or victimizes the subject. Mary secures her citizenship and ultimate freedom from Bellfeels through sex work.

Notes

1. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Refining Difference" (1980), in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 123.
2. For further information about historical representations of black women and respectability, see Elizabeth Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontents: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Karla Hollaway, *Codes of Conduct: Race, Ethics and the Color of Our Character* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995).
3. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).
4. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
5. Austin Clarke, *The Polished Hoe* (New York: Amistad, 2004). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *PH*.
6. Gayle Jones, *Corregidora* (New York: Plume, 1976); Shirley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: Berkley Books, 1986); Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon, 1979); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987).
7. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 15.
8. bell hooks, *Yearning*, 15.
9. L. H. Stallings, *Mutha' Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007).
10. Stallings, *Mutha' Is Half a Word*, 3.
11. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*; Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," in Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 144–75.
12. Kamala Kempadoo, Introduction, in *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*, ed. Kamala Kempadoo and Joe Doezema (New York: Routledge, 1998), 4.
13. Kempadoo, Introduction, 4.
14. Kempadoo, Introduction, 4.
15. Heather Montgomery, "Children, Prostitution, and Identity: A Case Study from a Tourist Resort in Thailand," in Kempadoo and Doezema, *Global Sex Workers*, 144.
16. Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 59.
17. Kempadoo, Introduction, 9.
18. Kempadoo, Introduction, 5.
19. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 177.
20. Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 22.
21. Gayle Wilentz, *Binding Cultures, Black Women Writers in African and the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1991), 117.

22. Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Wilentz, *Binding Cultures*; Simone Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

23. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 132.

24. Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 133.

25. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 124.

26. The term “mother outlaw” was coined by Adrienne Rich and used by Andrea O’Reilly to define mothers who, “in order to resist patriarchal motherhood and achieve empowered mothering must be ‘bad mothers,’ or more precisely, ‘mother outlaws.’” O’Reilly, *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (Ontario: Canadian Scholars Press, 2004), 2. Outlaw mothering then is set up in contrast to dominant and expected views of motherhood.

27. Kamala Kempadoo, “Gender, Race, and Sex: Exoticism in the Caribbean” (paper delivered at the Simpósio Internacional “O Desafio da Diferença: Articulando Gênero, Raça e Classe,” Salvador, Bahia, Brasil, April 9–14, 2000).

28. Sandra C. Duvivier, “‘MY BODY IS MY PIECE OF LAND’: Female Sexuality, Family, and Capital in Caribbean Texts,” *Callaloo* 31, no. 4 (2008): 1104.

29. Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 29–30.

30. Cathy Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics,” *Du Bois Review* 1, no. 1 (2004): 40.

31. Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance,” 40.

32. See Patricia Mohammed’s “‘But most of all mi love me browning’: The Emergence of Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Jamaica of the Mulatto Woman as the Desired,” *Feminist Review*, no. 65 (Summer 2000): 22–48.

33. Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838* (Kingston: Heinemann Press, 1990), 111.

34. Bush, *Slave Women*, 111.

35. Bush, *Slave Women*, 112.

36. Julia O’Connell, *Prostitution, Power, and Freedom* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

37. This phrase, borrowed from Duvivier’s “‘MY BODY IS MY PIECE OF LAND,’” adequately summarizes Mary’s understanding of her body’s capital worth and her willingness to use it, first to survive, but later to experience the good life.

38. This is a colloquial Barbadian term for sexual intercourse.

39. The term “high brow” is being used to accentuate Clarke’s naming of Mary as “the polished hoe,” suggesting that Mary is witty and strategic in how she navigates sex work—the workings of a “polished” woman. She is not simply a victim. She lives in the great house on a hill with servants and resources unattainable by most she grew up

with, known to all as the “Mrs. Bellfeels . . . Mistress of the Great House” (138). Mary has been afforded opportunities to travel, has access to the finer things in life, plays the piano, is knowledgeable about her community, and skillfully manipulates her relationship with Bellfeels to secure a upper-class lifestyle. We see Mary’s “polished” attributes during scenes where she intimidates Sargeant with her knowledge of the world, culture, art, music, women’s suffrage, material possessions, and ability to gain it all, along with the respect of her community, through sex work (214–37).

40. Ifeona Fulani, “Gender, Conflict, and Community in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy*,” *Frontiers* 32, no. 2 (2011): 1.

41. Stephanie Li, “Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*,” *Callaloo* 29, no. 1 (2006): 131.

42. Joanne Lipson Freed, “Gendered Narratives of Trauma and Revision in Gayle Jones’s *Corregidora*,” *African American Review* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 411.

43. Denise Brennan, *What’s Love Got to Do with It? Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

44. Brennan, *What’s Love Got to Do with It*, 23.

45. See Angela Davis’s *Women Race and Class* for a more in-depth analysis of sexual abuse of females as a way to demoralize black men.