Chapter 5

Plantation Geography, Gender, and Agency in Austin Clarke’s 
*The Polished Hoe*

...But this Plantation touch all of we. All our lives was branded by this Plantation. I am giving you the history of my personal life, and the history of this island of Bimshire, altogether, wrap-up in one? 

Clarke, *PH*

In Austin Chesterfield Clarke’s 2002 novel *The Polished Hoe*, the central character, Mary-Mathilda, claims that her story is the history of Bimshire, or Barbados, which is also the story of the plantation complex, first established in the seventeenth century, still hegemonic in the mid-twentieth, when the novel is set. Just as Edna O’Brien appropriates the Anglo-Irish big house to critique the place of women in the postindependence state, so Clarke uses the post-slavery plantation, run by a man of mixed African and European descent, to explore the power dynamics of mid-twentieth-century Barbados. In *The Polished Hoe*, Clarke transmutes the detailed geography of his lived experience into Mary-Mathilda’s life within a colonial regime shaped by the larger networks of the African diaspora and the British Empire. The time-space intersection, the relationships between history and geography, or memory and place structure the purposeful vagaries of Mary-Mathilda’s story in *The Polished Hoe*. Time is collapsed onto the constant space of the sugar plantation, its great houses and masters on one hand and its village chattel houses and field laborers on the other. The continuity of the plantation complex in Bajan history allows Mary-Mathilda to slip between the history of her enslaved ancestors and her own history on one night around...
1950. The concrete specificity of the plantation geography around Flagstaff Road and Sin-David’s Church plays a key role in legitimating the identity between Mary-Mathilda’s story and the history of Barbados, setting the stage for the performative and narrative uprising of Mary-Mathilda into an outlaw agent taking violent control over the meaning of her life. In following that act of killing with an autobiographical narrative, she parallels Cambridge, although his story is set 150 years earlier than hers. Through the time and space of one night, she gives an account of herself first to the constable and at more length and with far more elaborate interaction, to the Sargeant, Percy, her childhood friend. Mary-Mathilda’s liminal passage into agency is structured by the temporality of the night and the spaciality of the plantation. Percy’s crossing of the threshold into the great house where she lives is a metonym for the larger thresholds transgressed in the narrative to follow.

The Polished Hoe depicts a gendered experience of colonization as sexual subjection within Bajan-plantation society. Through Mary-Mathilda’s positionality as the avenged “kip-mistress” of Mr. Bellfeels, Clarke explores the political and moral question of sexual relations across the power hierarchies and the geographic space of the plantation. One of the informing ironies of this novel is that its world cannot be easily reduced to white colonizer versus black worker; it is that, but gender, sexuality, and shades of color complicate the social landscape. Using Judith Butler’s Giving an Account of Oneself, I argue that Mary-Mathilda decides who she is and what her lifelong relationship with Belfeels has meant not only through killing and mutilating the man, but more importantly through giving an account of herself. Mary-Mathilda’s story illustrates Judith Butler’s statement that “ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique. And critique finds that it cannot go forward without a consideration of how the deliberating subject comes into being . . . Not only does ethics find itself embroiled in the task of social theory, but social theory, if it is to yield nonviolent results, must find a living place for this ‘I’” (8). Thus Mary-Mathilda’s need to situate her own experience within that of African enslavement and the rebellion, of European culture and Bajan history, is part of remaking herself as a “deliberating subject” who can and does act.

Clarke’s novels emphasize the pressures of the historical and the collective on the individual’s agency and subjectivity. A recurrent trope in this novel and other plantation texts by Clarke is the characterization of sugarcane fields as the ocean, as vast waves; this metaphor blurs the boundaries between the sugarcane fields that have