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**“MY BODY IS MY PIECE OF LAND”**  
**Female Sexuality, Family, and Capital in Caribbean Texts**

*by Sandra C. Duviolier*

*[S]exuality in the Caribbean has been and continues to be material for the reproduction of the workforce, family, and nation as well as for boosting national economies and, as such, constitutes important economic resources in the region. Sexual-economic exchanges appear as crucial for the sustenance of the region in the face of inequalities that global capitalism has created in the small Caribbean nations and territories.*

*—Kamala Kempadoo<sup>1</sup>*

*For the poor, the whole notion of sexuality is difficult: it's not a matter of identity as we see it in a modern, affluent Western society. Rather, [ . . . ] sexuality is [often] something you use to find shelter, food and safety. It has a use; it has a value.*

*—Joanna Bourke<sup>2</sup>*

Scholars and activists have begun to pay critical attention to the employment of sexuality, particularly female sexuality, as a viable means of socioeconomic advancement in the Caribbean. Primarily emerging within the past two decades, the publications have often centered on the commodification of sexuality within the public sphere: through the tourist industries. These industries largely perceive Caribbean bodies as “exoticized,” overly sexualized “others,” which attests to the global political economy’s exploitation of Caribbean people generally and Caribbean women particularly. More critical attention could also be given to “private” representations of the sex industries in these locales, as many sex workers’ activities occur outside of the public sphere with Caribbean counterparts as their main clientele. However, these sex workers, especially their manipulation by financially secure patrons, serve metonymically for the Caribbean sex industries within the larger global political economy.

Guitele Jeudy Rahill’s novella *Violated* (2001) and Rick Elgood and Don Letts’ film *Dancehall Queen* (1997) explore the politics of black female sexuality in relation to upward mobility and economic survival in Caribbean settings. The black female body in these texts is currency signifying the potential for basic survival, financial security, and socioeconomic advancement for the girls/women in question and their families. These families at times sanction the use of female sexuality, even at the expense of unwilling young “participants,” perceiving it as the most profitable means by which to attempt to transcend poverty. This essay, locating Haitian and Jamaican bodies, respectively, within

the global political economy, examines female sexuality as “marketplace” that reaps familial financial benefits in *Violated* and *Dancehall Queen*. In so doing, it analyzes the *intentional* use of the black female body for mobility purposes. It diverges, then, from other scholarship on race and sexuality, which largely focuses on “outside” (national and global) exploitation of the black female body.

*“Peggy went out to buy water and instead brought you all something even better”:  
Violated and the Economy of Sexuality*

Haitian American therapist Rahill’s severely underconsidered novella *Violated* provides a fictional representation of sexuality’s currency in Haiti. Informed heavily by many of her patients’ experiences with sexual abuse, Rahill’s *Violated* also explores the ways certain sexual exchanges occurring in Haiti are upheld in the United States, where some characters later migrate. Interrelated with sexuality in this text are its “purchase” and the ramifications of sexual activity on its largely underage laborers: namely Peggy Pouchot, and, to a lesser degree, daughter Kasha.

In the novella’s opening, set in the backdrop of 1950s / pre-Duvalier Haiti, dark-skinned, nouveau riche Henri Berceuse makes an attempt to “purchase” light-skinned, noticeably poor Peggy for sexual services. With Henry’s placing currency and value on Peggy’s complexion, which causes him to lust after her, Rahill alludes to Haiti’s skin-color politics. For instance, although changing with time, Haiti has been known for maintaining an unequal society divided by socioeconomic status and color. The “elite” Haitians and those holding important political positions / power, at particular historical junctures, have been disproportionately lighter-skinned.<sup>3</sup> With her portrayal of Peggy as poor and having no special lineage, however, Rahill complicates class / color politics. She further problematizes these politics with her depictions of Peggy’s complexion rendering her prone to sexual violation as a means of socioeconomic advancement.

Occurring in the more industrialized Port-au-Prince, where Peggy is sent to buy water, her initial meeting with Henri takes place in the market. The marketplace becomes an important location in its serving as a symbolic referent of the body as a marketable enterprise. Typically the site of commercial transactions, the narration illuminates the very publicly commodifiable and exploitative nature of Peggy’s sexual exchanges, regardless of how seemingly “private” the activities. Additionally, the marketplace is a site in which Henri witnesses commercial / global sexual exchanges as a child.

Henri’s first encounters with the bartering of sex work are his childhood memories of (male) American soldiers and young Haitian boys. The soldiers, staying to ensure “peace” in Haiti during the occupation (1915-1934), would sodomize the underage, direly destitute boys in exchange for minimal money or provisions. Because they are impoverished, which renders them more susceptible to exploitation, the young black boys’ sexual labor reaps capital, though very scant, that assists in their basic survival:

*The boys would be compensated with the pennies that could purchase chunks of cassava bread with a thin layer of peanut butter, and if they were lucky, a sprig or two of bitter watercress would be added to this modest but quickly devoured feast. And so, spitting wretchedly, they would hitch up ragged, worn shorts and would limber off like sleeping dogs. [ . . . ] They heard [ . . . ] the sound of coins in their pockets. That sound was associated with one more day that they would get to eat a meal. One less day of wracking, churning and twisting abdominal pain that was hunger. (11-12)*

Though acquiescing to sexual activities with the soldiers for money, the boys, as the passage evidences, are violated. Their pedophilic exploitation for minimal payment allegorizes the incommensurate ways “First World,” more developed territories exploit “Third World,” less developed nations of color, particularly black nations. Their treatment of the young boys, then, attests to the global political economy’s marginalization and devaluation of black bodies, especially poor ones in Third-World countries, sexually, economically, racially, and politically.

The sexual exchanges also provide the soldiers with an opportunity to derive more meaning and authority from their racialized gender identity, which had been threatened by changing racial and gendered politics on the United States home front. Both African-American emancipation/activism and “first-wave” feminism resulted in a larger incorporation of blacks and women into the United States body politic. Subverting the status quo, these changes, as sociologist Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor asserts, “challenged and undermined the unquestioned power which gave some white men a sense of self from their gender and racialized identity.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, the soldiers’ rapes in Haiti, where they are asserting American authority and are perceived as being located hierarchically above the population, affirm their racialized masculinity within a larger global context.

Their actions also complicate the gendered constructions normally associated with sexual abuse/labor and masculinity, as the victims/workers are males. In depicting male same-sex exchanges, Rahill illuminates both the precariousness of this racialized masculinity and America’s crippling effects on Haiti’s national formation and development. Engaging in sexual activities with other males arguably undercuts the soldiers’ masculinity, which had been inextricably linked to heterosexual activities in the early-twentieth century. Conversely, their violation of the boys, whom they reduce to a seemingly “feminized” role, enables them to further assert their masculinity. Unlike Haitian girls and women, who had been viewed as political innocents and not been granted citizenship, Haiti’s patriarchal structure placed nation-state formation, political power, and basic jurisdiction in the hands of men.<sup>5</sup> By sodomizing Haiti’s future generation of potential leaders for money, the soldiers further establish First-World, colonial authority and undermine the black nation-state’s efforts at self-actualization and autonomy.

Further evidencing the global political economy’s exploitation and devaluing of black bodies, the young boys would pose and flex their muscles for white male tourists once the occupation ended and the soldiers returned to the United States. Though not explicitly stated, the narration implies that their actions, particularly the fact that they would lead to them being called “my sissy,” had possible sexual implications. Their exploitation seemingly emasculates the young boys, who will more than likely grapple with the effects of sexual abuse on their masculinity in possibly unhealthy ways—especially since early-twentieth-

century Haiti, as had other nations, discouraged certain types of sexual behavior seen as a threat to manhood, masculinity, and overall humanity. Because the soldiers and tourists are white, however, and also because the soldiers are symbols of American authority and tourists pour money into the Haitian economy, their abuse of young Haitian boys is, to an extent, sanctioned and largely uncontested.

These events impart in young Henri an unfortunate lesson: that blackness is devalued within a national and larger global context—so much so that black bodies, especially economically disadvantaged ones, are commodities that can be bought and sold. He internalizes these racially hegemonic constructions of blackness, which leads to an attraction to light-skinned girls and women, whom he perceives as being the least representative of blackness and its seemingly negative attendants. While his childhood observations inspire him to work diligently to successfully transcend his socioeconomic status, they also partially inform his sexual encounters with primarily light-skinned girls and women. In fact, Henri has sexual-economic exchanges with them, which often leads to their sexual exploitation. Unlike possible ramifications that might occur by exploiting whites, however, Henri's manipulation of light-skinned blacks comes without punishment.

Paralleling the American soldiers' and tourists' manipulating poorer Haitian boys for their personal benefit, Henri prefers light-skinned girls and women of the lowest socioeconomic standing. Their status, or lack thereof, and financial instability allow him to exploit them in exchange for money and other provisions with greater facility. They also enable him to further possess a sense of self-worth that would not have occurred through interactions with aristocratic and middle-class light-skinned girls and women, who, he believes, would perceive him in condescending ways. Being impoverished, they are "easily impressed by his money, so his very black skin did not matter" (7). Henri's relatively wealthy status places him above them hierarchically, regardless of their complexion and its perceived currency.

These exchanges, as evidenced in the case of apparently poor Peggy, are, by and large, unequal. Her first conversation with Henri both reveals her youth, that she is even younger than some of his daughters, and affirms her very economically disadvantaged status. It is also more than apparent, as the narration implies, that Peggy's family's destitution prevents them from pursuing any possible avenues for socioeconomic advancement: her parents have little to no education (her mother Mimi mentions only having two years of schooling); she has eleven siblings, yet lives in a one-room "cement hut"; her family is barely clothed, if clothed at all; and her mother raises the children while her father Pepe supports his ever-growing family with less than substandard wages from his employment, which takes him away from home for large periods of time, by American whites. All of these make Peggy more susceptible to sexual exploitation.

Henri's purchase of Peggy highlights the desperately drastic measures poverty-stricken people take to transcend their socioeconomic situation when no other alternative appears viable. After escorting Peggy home by car from their initial meeting, married Henri conducts a "business meeting" with Peggy's mother Mimi, acquiring Peggy's sexual services in exchange for funding her twelve children's education, including their books and uniforms. Now purchased, Peggy will live in one of Henri's rented bungalows (as mores of propriety and marriage prevent him from having Peggy live in his house).

Mimi's big sale is in tandem with what sociologist Carolle Charles observes in relation to many working-class and poor Haitian women's perceptions of the body as a marketable entity:

In Haiti, poor and working women speak in a different way about the image and usage of the body for social reproduction, for economic survival, for social status, and for heterosexual encounters and conjugal relationships. [ . . . ] While the dominant discourse symbolically describes women and their bodies as "ripe fruit ready to be eaten," working class women, in contrast, define their bodies as a "resource, an asset, a form of capital that can reap profits if well invested." "Kom se kawo tèm" (my body is my piece of land) claim many poor Haitian women.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike larger Haitian discourse's patriarchal constructions of women's bodies, which place the benefits of women's sexuality at the hands of men, poor and working-class Haitian women's definitions allow for female agency and capitalizing off of their own bodies. Nevertheless, their use of their bodies as potential capital is not without sexual exploitation by men. Furthermore, in Peggy's case, Mimi decides to exploit her body as well as her complexion and hair texture, both inherited by a distant ancestor and very much unlike the rest of her family, which render her more of a marketable asset for Henri. In the sale of her own body, Peggy is denied autonomy.

Because Mimi is able to sell her daughter, she excitedly informs her children that "Peggy went out to buy water and instead brought you all something even better" (31). Her comment, resonant of the nursery rhyme's "little piggy" going to the marketplace and returning with provisions, illuminates the body's potential for capital in the market on macroeconomic and microeconomic levels. Yet, Mimi's lessened excitement upon looking at Peggy exemplifies, as the narration implies, her guilt over sanctioning her daughter's sexual exploitation. It possibly also suggests that Mimi may have certain mores concerning "proper" female sexual conduct, but does not have the economic luxury to enforce certain practices. Thus, she perceives selling Peggy's sexuality as the only feasible way out of extreme poverty.

Mimi's selling of Peggy is tantamount to Peggy's commercial sexual exploitation, which the World Congress defines as "sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or to a third person or persons [ . . . ]. [I]t constitutes a form of coercion and violence against children and amounts to forced labor and a contemporary form of slavery."<sup>7</sup> Like slaves, Peggy is sold into servitude without her permission or consent. Her purchase requires her moving to facilities arranged by Henri, where she will, as Mimi informs her, bear his children. Peggy's situation parallels slaves' forced sexual labor, including having to bear children, with slave owners and/or other slaves against their will. Additionally, Peggy is to remain deferential to Henri and confined to the bungalow, not traveling even to visit her family.

Being excluded from the decision-making process of her purchase and future sexual activities with Henri further emblemizes Peggy's relatively young, not fully sexually autonomous position and manipulation by both Henri and Mimi. Though not explicitly sexually abusing Peggy, Mimi exploits her daughter's sexuality for economic gain, thereby

rendering herself a sexually abusive party. Mimi also takes advantage of Peggy's complexion, which attracts Henri and leads to his wanting children with her: illustrated by her informing Peggy, "You can make beautiful children for any man. You are lucky that way" (31). Now bought, Peggy is Henri's "property" and lacks sexual and overall autonomy.

For Peggy, who had previously been abducted and brutally raped, sex with Henri, perhaps by comparison, is pleasurable and "without coercion" (50). Regardless of whatever erotic gratification she experiences, her sexual activities are still, I contend, rape.<sup>8</sup> Besides Peggy being underage at the time her sexual liaisons with Henri begin, Mimi and Henri's exchange leaves little room for contestation or negotiation on her part. Her first sexual experience with Henri also reveals little agency or subjectivity on her end but, rather, evidences her compliance and submission to his sexual needs: "[S]he stood in front of him and solemnly lifted her face to him, eyes closed [ . . . ] obediently, he thought as he hungrily met her trembling lips, finally sure that he could possess her" (50). Rather than consent to sex, Peggy obliges as to not embarrass her family or upset Henri, whose need to "possess" or dominate speaks to the unequal and sexually violating nature of their relationship.

The Pouchots' socioeconomic outlook improves immediately upon Peggy's moving to Henri's bungalow, thereby evidencing the currency of her body as a "piece of land" that provides shelter, clothing, and sustenance for her entire family. Now fed and provided for, Peggy begins her schooling, in which she excels, even studying nursing. Previously severely impoverished, the other Pouchots' living conditions improve as well. The school-age children, minus the eldest Regine who must work, are now being educated. Formerly relying solely on her husband for economic support, Mimi is now financially stable enough to attempt to hone her entrepreneurial skills: she "had begun a small business in which she would buy sacks of rice wholesale and sell them by the *marmite* to neighbors and passerby who now knew that she had rice and sometimes dry kidney beans to sell" (52).

Peggy's purchase and its effects impart in her an awareness of her body's marketability. She, in fact, uses her body for survival and mobility once Henri, a government official, flees Haiti to avoid persecution under the new Duvalier regime (which became notorious for murdering those who openly opposed the presidency). No longer financially supporting the Pouchots, Henri's departure places the task of funding the children's education and mother's entrepreneurial endeavors on Peggy. Peggy must also provide for daughter Kasha, who was conceived not long after her first sexual "assignment." Though not the most willing to exploit her sexuality, Peggy consents to friend Yolette's arranging her sexual relationship with financially stable tailor Antoine Ducasse because of the lack of other viable opportunities for familial survival and mobility.

Rahill's delineations of Peggy's relationships with Antoine and Henri help reveal the social and sexual subjugation of Haitian girls and women. Henri is a government official, which allegorizes female marginalization within the state. Moreover, both men's treatment of Peggy draws parallels to the political climate in which their relationships occur. Peggy's perceptions of Henri, with whom she performs sexually violating services before the Duvalier regime, are of a gentle and understanding man who protects her and her family financially. Evidencing Henri's duality, pre-Duvalier state politics concomitantly sanctioned female subjugation and protected women under the law: the government refused to seriously acknowledge sexual crimes against women, while also deeming them

political “innocents” that needed safeguarding.<sup>9</sup> Yet, even in more seemingly sympathetic approaches to Haitian womanhood, Haiti fails to acknowledge women’s agency and potential to contribute to the body politic beyond a subservient position.

Beginning his relationship with Peggy at the start of the Duvalier regime (1957-1986), volatile Antoine is verbally, physically, and sexually abusive. Peggy no longer has solace or protection in Henri’s gentleness, much like the Duvalier regime’s subverting previous gender politics concerning women’s protection. During the dictatorship, women were oftentimes raped as a measure of seeming oppositional conquest, thereby endorsing female violation and control of women’s bodies.<sup>10</sup> To further his reign on the population, Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier (1957-1971, who was succeeded by his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier from 1971-1986) would threaten potential dissenters with voodoo-inspired tactics. Antoine’s actions are of a sexually violating and controlling nature, even his unwarranted jealousy and false accusations of Peggy’s “infidelity” despite his being married. He also enforces his control over any possible protests from Peggy with claims of engaging in voodoo that had “caused harm to countless and unnamed enemies” (58). In many ways, then, Antoine is the embodiment of the Duvalier regime, especially as it relates to women.

Haiti’s patriarchal structure heavily informs Peggy’s relationship with Antoine. It locates sexual gratification and power as male domains, while women are “compensated” financially for their sexual activities. Their union resembles what anthropologist Ira P. Lowenthal describes as a “conjugal sexual contract” occurring in domestic relationships in Haiti:

[W]hat the man actually proffers [. . .] is a primary lien on his overall future productivity, some significant portion of which (depending upon his own prior commitments to children, former mates, current mates, or parents) will henceforth be devoted to the satisfaction of the woman’s needs (including meeting *her* prior commitments, primarily to dependent children and parents) and to the support of their offspring together.

In her turn, the woman agrees to give the man his “due” or his “right” [. . .]. Her sexuality is here proffered for an extended—prospectively limitless—period of time and made available to her mate essentially on demand [. . .]. Moreover, the *exclusivity* of the man’s sexual access to his mate is promised and assured, and his unquestioned paternity of her offspring thereby guaranteed, at least in principle.<sup>11</sup>

As the passage indicates, men regulate the sexual activities, even at the expense of female partners, who are at times violated. Though female fidelity is expected, men could have multiple sexual partners, thereby undermining female sexual egalitarianism. Having a wife and four children, Antoine’s insecurity leads to his violent “retribution” for what he perceives as Peggy’s sexual infidelity (though she remains monogamous), a violation of the conjugal sexual contract.

Not once in *Violated* is Peggy described as having a sexual attraction to Antoine. Rather, she has sex with him out of duty. Antoine, as delineated in the sexual contract, is able to



engage in sexual activities with Peggy whenever he feels the urge to do so. Peggy is, again, absent from the sexual decision-making process. Around seventeen years old when their relationship begins, Peggy is considerably younger than Antoine, whose age is not specified but is old enough to be married with four children. All of these relegate Peggy to a subjugated position that leaves no space for protest. They also elucidate sexual violation in seemingly consensual domestic relationships.

For Antoine, Peggy's baby daughter Kasha is also a provision in their conjugal sexual contract. Unbeknownst to naïve Peggy, Antoine starts molesting Kasha soon after their conjugal sexual union begins. Though not explicitly stated, the narration's descriptions of Antoine and Kasha's interactions, as well as Kasha's dislike of him, strongly suggest sexual violation. Antoine speaks to baby Kasha, not even a year old at the time, in "soft whispers," while "glancing over his shoulder at Peggy through narrowed eyes" (58), implying his observing Peggy for signs of her possible detection of his sexual abuse. At bedtime, Antoine, much to Kasha's chagrin, rubs her back and showers her with "kisses that lasted too long on her lips and covered her nose making it hard for her to breathe" (59). He would also take Kasha on excursions to his shop without Peggy's supervision, leaving Kasha more vulnerable to his sexual abuse. Because of her constant interaction with Antoine, Kasha occasionally stutters when upset, just as he does. Her constant sexual violation causes her to simultaneously fear and dislike her abuser.

Peggy, apparently oblivious to Antoine's abuse of Kasha, perceives her as ungrateful towards the man who provides them financial stability and, for Kasha, clothing. Though mother and daughter face sexual abuse, Peggy's financial outlook, as it had done with Henri, improves. Antoine's contributions enable his and Peggy's departure to the United States, which would provide even more opportunities for Peggy to fund her family's living expenses and education. Thus, Peggy's conjugal sexual contract renders its benefits: continued successful pursuits for her family's extrication from no education and severe poverty, and possible integration into an even higher socioeconomic stratum.

The Pouchots, though not fully transcendent from poverty and still living in arguably standard conditions, are no longer destitute. They are proud owners of a home with a "proper" infrastructure, as opposed to the cement hut in which they previously lived. More financially secure, they rent bungalows to other families. The neighbors, in fact, consider the Pouchots special because they are financially stable enough to cook and eat twice a day. As their quality of living far exceeds many of their neighbors, their family is even chosen to host a white missionary, exemplifying their upwardly mobile status. Their financial outlook further increases once Peggy moves to the United States and sends enough money to fund both whatever expense Kasha, who remains in Haiti temporarily, incurs and other financial endeavors.

Antoine's sexual molestation of Kasha, which resumes once she joins her mother in Brooklyn, New York around ten-years old, is not divorced from the commercial sexual exploitation of children, particularly Haitian ones. Antoine's sexual behavior is shaped by his childhood experiences, particularly his rape by Saintilia, a young *restavèk* working for his family who had been raped prior to her appointment there. Emblematising exploitation on commercial levels, *restavèks* are poor, usually rural Haitian child/teenage workers (most often girls) living with and employed by more urban, economically stable persons/families who normally do not pay or severely underpay them.<sup>12</sup> Having the

“privilege” of living in a more economically stable environment for free, *restavèks* pay in other ways: they are often mistreated, equated with slaves, and subjected to rape by their “employers.” Saintilia’s status as rural, *restavèk*, and sexually abused elucidates the devaluing of poor Haitian bodies within the more industrialized and, on a subtextual level, globalized marketplace.

Resembling her mother’s sexual exploitation and economic marketability, Kasha’s rape also has financial and familial implications. Sexually abusing Kasha, who is roughly between ten and fifteen years of age at this point, Antoine compensates her by always offering “handfuls of quarters afterward” (96). Kasha does not inform Peggy of her sexual abuse for fear of Antoine’s acting upon his threats to kill Peggy and, therefore, disrupt the family structure. Not quite violated for familial economic survival, Kasha still receives payment for her sexual violation and attempts to maintain her family structure. The convergence of these attests to the interrelatedness of the commodification of sexuality, capital, and the family informing both Peggy’s and Kasha’s sexual violation.

*Violated* ends with sixteen-year old Kasha, seeking extrication from sexual abuse, moving to Miami to meet and live with Henri. Unaware of the circumstances surrounding her birth, Henri, who does not exploit or sexually violate Kasha, represents a departure from her life in Brooklyn. Once an ill Henri dies of cancer several months after her arrival, Kasha is determined to continue creating an existence beyond her sexual violation and her mother’s physical abuse at the hands of Antoine, though, as the narration implies, she may possibly encounter it in her future. Kasha also decides to inform Peggy of Antoine’s sexual abuse—regardless of what she perceives as Peggy’s and Antoine’s less than favorable reactions—which may also be liberating.

Ending on an ambiguous note, as it is unknown whether Kasha returns to Brooklyn or stays in Miami, Kasha’s journey has far-reaching implications. Around the same age as Peggy once Henri begins sexually exploiting her, Kasha’s meeting Henri enables her to encounter a source of her mother’s sexual violation. Occurring in the United States, the First-World territory whose soldiers had manipulated the young Haitian boys, Kasha also confronts a source of Haiti’s commercial sexual exploitation that informs Henri’s abusive actions. Apparently resilient in her quest to end sexual abuse, Kasha may possibly represent a departure from both Haiti’s and her family’s seeming cycle of sexual violation, especially as it relates to economic survival. Her actions, then, emblemize a refutation of the global political economy’s exploitation of Haitian bodies, particularly those of poor black children, which arguably stunts Haiti’s development and growth as a nation.

*“just try to go along with the program as much as possible”:  
The Politics of Female Sexuality in Dancehall Queen*

Like *Violated*, the Elgood and Letts’ film *Dancehall Queen* explores the politics of female sexuality as it relates to the marketplace, global political economy, and familial mobility. Set in 1990s Kingston, Jamaica, the film features working-class / small-time street vendor Marcia’s exploiting sexuality to alleviate her family’s financial burdens. The single mother attempts to do so, at first, through her unwilling fifteen-year-old daughter Tanya’s engage-

ment in sex work with benefactor Larry. However, once Tanya refuses to participate in sex work, Marcia uses her own body as a “piece of land” that yields financial bounty: through her efforts at becoming queen of dancehall, a site of Jamaican popular culture and music in which black female sexuality is celebrated, to win a monetary prize.

Understandings of Larry, Marcia’s relatively wealthy friend, cannot be divorced from the commodification and exploitative representations of black women’s bodies in the marketplace. As proprietor of a go-go business, Larry’s establishment is rife with images of overly sexualized women. The film’s visual depictions of scantily clad female go-go dancers gyrating suggestively on poles reify stereotypes of black women’s, particularly Jamaican women’s, sexuality in Western discourse: as lascivious, overly promiscuous exotics whose seductive, illicit sexuality renders them incapable of rape or violation. The very public setting of Larry’s club also alludes to the commercial exploitation of Jamaican women’s sexuality both nationally and transnationally. Go-go dancers often work as prostitutes for tourists and natives alike, and perform their sexual activities with clients, also known as “johns,” in separate rooms in these establishments.<sup>13</sup>

The tourists’ sexual liaisons with women go-go dancers and other prostitutes illustrate the global political economy’s marginalizing of black Caribbean women’s bodies. These women are not only sexually exploited, but are also expected to be submissive to the oftentimes violating demands of their male clients. For their johns, who are of various races, these sexual engagements also allow them to affirm their First-World, gendered identity. White men, as previously mentioned, assert an uncompromised white masculinity that had been threatened in their respective home spaces. People of color, while often subjected to racism and not asserting a racialized identity, affirm “a sense of Western-ness and so of inclusion in a privileged world.”<sup>14</sup> Not privileged, however, are Caribbean women’s bodies and a Caribbean identity, both of which are relegated to a substandard position.

While tourists affirm their First-World, gendered identity with prostitutes, natives also assert an authoritative masculinity. Deemed inferior racially and globally, Jamaican johns still benefit from the country’s patriarchal structure and having economic leverage. Both inform their sexual engagements with prostitutes, providing them with a sense of empowerment. As scholar-activists Vednita Carter and Evelina Giobbe posit regarding john-prostitute interactions,

In a gender-stratified culture, men exert power over women when they use or manipulate sex role expectations in order to obtain their desires. Johns exert power over prostitutes by exploiting the traditional sex role expectations of women, along with their particular occupational ideology of prostitution. [ . . . ]

The most overt form of power used by johns to insure a prostituted woman’s compliance is compensatory or economic power. Because an exchange of money occurs, the john is given license to use the woman’s body in whatever manner he chooses. [ . . . ] His ability to do so is enforced, directly or indirectly, by pimps and owners of prostitution businesses whose sole objective is to maximize their profits, or by the economic factors that initially put the woman at his disposal.<sup>15</sup>

Like tourists, Jamaican men's masculinity and money place them above the Jamaican women prostitutes, enabling them to regulate the terms of their sexual activities. Their actions are further affirmed by proprietors of these establishments, who profit directly from the exploitation of Caribbean women's bodies. The johns and brothel owners are active participants in the global political economy's devaluation of black, Third-World women's bodies. Because of the prostitutes' black, Third-World status, johns and proprietors of all races and ethnicities violate them, whether directly or indirectly, with no consequence.

Interrelated with Larry's position as owner of a go-go, and very likely brothel-like, establishment in *Dancehall Queen* is his treatment of girls and women. Financially stable, in part, because of his commercial exploitation of women, Larry uses his money to sexually take advantage of his female dependents. Unfortunately, for fifteen-year-old Tanya, Marcia's attractive daughter, her illegally underage status does not preclude her from this equation. Forty-something-year-old Larry funds both of Marcia's daughters' education and pays the majority of her bills. As a result, he, in his own words, expects "returns" on his "investments," which come in the form of access to Tanya's sexuality. The film's introduction of Tanya and "Uncle Larry" portrays an unsuspecting Tanya warding off the sexual advances of her much older benefactor. It also implicates the incestuous-like nature of Larry's molestation, as Tanya sees him as a father-figure and affectionately calls him "Uncle Larry."

Marcia's reaction to Tanya's informing her of Larry's sexual advances demonstrates her participation in Tanya's commercial sexual exploitation for socioeconomic gain. Already aware of Larry's inappropriate behavior, she sends younger daughter Tasha away so Tanya can discuss his actions in private. Dismissing Tanya's claims of Larry's inappropriate touching as commonplace for girls and women, rather than sexually violating, Marcia emphasizes Larry's financial relevance to the family: "But just remember, if it wasn't for Larry, I don't know [how I would] manage. Hi[s] contribution pay[s] most of the bills around here" (Elgood and Letts). To further her family's economic prosperity and educational endeavors, Marcia firmly demands that Tanya acquiesce to Larry's needs as to not anger him. Because she sees no other possible alternative, and her street-vending business does not provide her with financial stability, Marcia uses her underage and unwilling daughter's sexuality as the primary financial "provider" for her family. In so doing, she indirectly sexually violates her daughter.

Naïve, virginal Tanya, forced to "just try to go along with the program as much as possible" (Elgood and Letts), is shocked by Larry's molestation of her escalating into sexual activity. Despite obeying Marcia's orders, her engagement in sex with Larry is rape. At fifteen, Tanya's underage status legally prevents her from consenting to sex with an adult, regardless of her willingness to do so. However, her expressed unwillingness to serve as a sex worker in even the most seemingly "minute" capacities (via Larry's touching) evidences the rape-like nature of Larry's actions.

Yet, for Marcia, Larry and Tanya's sexual engagement is part of an unwritten contract resulting in familial economic benefit. Upon learning of Tanya's loss of virginity to Larry, Marcia fails to acknowledge the violating implications of Larry and Tanya's activity. Also ignored are the possibly crippling effects of Tanya's rape, especially as it is her first sexual engagement, and the breach of trust from the formerly father-like Larry. Instead, Marcia perceives Larry's engaging in sex with Tanya as part of the exchange that allows her

children to go to school and her bills to be paid. Marcia's compliance with Tanya's abuse leads Tanya to angrily declare, "You made me into a whore, Mama," which encapsulates her awareness of Marcia's manipulation of her body as marketplace for financial purposes. While upset by Tanya's rape and accusatory comments, Marcia expects her young daughter to continue submitting to Larry's sexual demands.

Marcia's informing Tanya that "It's you him want" (Elgood and Letts), in response to her asking why Marcia is not Larry's sexual property, strongly implies her possible engagement in sexual activities for her family's economic advancement. Her perceptions of the Jamaican female body are aligned with Jamaican female workers in the sex/tourist industries. According to geographist Beverley Mullings, for these mainly poor and working-class workers,

sex tourism offers much higher income generation opportunities than most blue-collar manufacturing and other service jobs. Assembly workers in Jamaican export processing zones [ . . . ] earned on average U.S. \$1 per hour, with little or no job security, while estimates provided [ . . . ] quote figures of \$U.S. 40-150 as the price charged for a single sexual encounter.<sup>16</sup>

Mullings' passage demonstrates the Jamaican female body's currency in the global political economy. Marcia also views it as an economically marketable entity, which accounts for its popularity in the sex industries generally. Earnings from her street-vending job, service work that is not the most lucrative, pale in comparison to profits from sex work. Representations of the Jamaican female body and money nationally and globally prompt Marcia to use it for economic gain.

Once Tanya refuses further manipulation, Marcia exploits her own sexuality's currency via Jamaican dancehall culture. As *Dancehall Queen* implies, Tanya's defiance resides largely in her being educated, which, ironically enough, is funded by Larry. His initial funding of her education, I contend, is most likely predicated upon his future plans to sexually exploit her. Tanya's body as marketplace, then, grants her an education, and, in turn, her education provides a space for her to reject deploying sexuality for economic gain. Determined not to be further subjected to rape, an obstinate Tanya cultivates a relationship with classmate Trevor rather than spend her after-school hours with Larry. In her act of agency, Tanya attempts to reclaim and possess her own sexuality and interactions with males. Trevor's acting as an intermediary of sorts, however, reveals the extent to which Tanya feels compelled to engage in what will most likely be a sexual relationship to prevent Larry's sexual abuse. Regardless of her intent, Tanya's defiance angers Larry. No longer having access to her body, especially exclusively, Larry ceases his financial contributions to Marcia's household.

Dancehall becomes an important site for Marcia, who, entering the dancehall-queen contest for its generous monetary prize, must find an alternative financial source. Infused with reggae, beats, DJing, and audience participation/dancing, dancehall's salience in *Dancehall Queen* lies in its dialectical function: as a subversive space of black subjectivity, especially among the masses; and a patriarchal site in which the black female body, though celebrated, is arguably hypersexualized. As anthropologist Norman C. Stolzoff

asserts in *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (2000), one of the groundbreaking works on dancehall culture,

Dancehall [...] is the most potent form of popular culture in Jamaica. For Jamaica's ghetto youth (the black lower-class masses), from among whom come its most creative artists and avid fans, dancehall is their favorite recreational form. Yet dancehall is not merely a space of passive consumerism. It is a field of active cultural production, a means by which black lower-class youth articulate and project a distinct identity in local, national, and global contexts; through dancehall, ghetto youth also attempt to deal with the endemic problems of poverty, racism, and violence.<sup>17</sup>

Marcia's immersion in the dancehall could be read as a radical act that contests poverty, its racial implications, crime and violence in poverty-ridden areas, and the sexual exploitation of poorer Jamaican female bodies. Winning the contest would provide alleviation from her current socioeconomic status. Therefore, it would eradicate any possible "needs" to exploit Tanya's sexuality further—and, it could be argued, younger daughter Tasha's sexuality once she matures.

As an affirmation of blackness, dancehall's representations of female beauty do not coincide with Eurocentric ideals. The dancehall scene is replete with images of women in bright colors, elaborate clothing/costumes, and wearing largely brightly colored "big hair" that does not resemble traditional standards of beauty. In studying the semiotics of women's clothing and hair in dancehall culture, pioneering scholar of dancehall Carolyn Cooper argues in *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* that it reflects "a contemporary expression of traditional patterns of hair and body adornment in continental Africa, which have now gloriously reemerged in the diaspora."<sup>18</sup> Dancehall constructs a radically alternative notion of black female beauty and celebrated sexuality.

More immersed in dancehall culture, Marcia also uses her sexuality to manipulate Larry and fund her dancehall endeavors. Adorned in costumes and hairstyles that celebrate her sexuality, the normally plain Marcia reinvents herself as the attractive "mystery lady" whose true self is not revealed until the end of the competition. Hiding her "lowly" street-vendor status, she attracts an awestruck Larry, who, again, becomes a benefactor. However, Marcia's deploying her sexuality with Larry and through her dancehall queen efforts does not involve inappropriate touching or sexual encounters. Now often rejecting sexual advances, Marcia even informs an interested party that "All good things come to he who waits" (Elgood and Letts) without ever acting on her declaration. Because Marcia is older and more experienced sexually, she exercises control over her sexuality and cunning in situations where it may possibly be exploited. Thus, her approach to dancehall furthers its subversive nature.

However, as the dialogue and vivid imagery in *Dancehall Queen* illustrate, dancehall often features highly sexualized depictions of Jamaican women. As dancehall is located in a commercial setting, these representations evidence the commodification of the black female body in the public sphere. Women in the dancehall club are often barely clad and performing very sexually suggestive dances either with or without male partners. Additionally, Marcia's dancehall attire, which informs her "mystery lady" performance,

excites Larry, leading him to refer to her as “sexy bitch” (Elgood and Letts) without making serious attempts to learn her name. These reductive views of the women, as Stolzoff argues, “[uphold] the cultural pattern that celebrates the objectification of female beauty, the sexualized female body with no voice of her own.”<sup>19</sup> As such, patriarchally nationalist and global perceptions of the female body as a hypersexual, “tantalizing object for the male gaze” inform representations of women in dancehall.<sup>20</sup>

Marcia remains unscathed from her experiences in dancehall, notwithstanding its often hypersexual portrayals of Jamaican womanhood. In her refusal to be exploited by dancehall’s gaze or consumers, she subverts the paradigm of women’s exploitation in patriarchal spaces. Rather than merely objectify Marcia, dancehall provides a space for her to celebrate her sexuality and beauty, both of which had been long suppressed, and profit financially from doing so. Dancehall’s representations of the Jamaican female body, then, are complex: often reifying of stereotypes and, conversely, affirming in empowering ways. The latter is largely the case for Marcia, who circumvents herself away from exploitation. In fact, Cooper explores dancehall’s function as a potentially empowering site for women:

This dancehall affirmation of the pleasures of the body, which is often misunderstood as a devaluation of female sexuality, also can be theorized as an act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person. Woman as sexual being claims the right to sexual pleasure as an essential sign of her identity. [...] Exhibitionism conceals ordinary imperfections. In the dancehall world of make-believe, old roles can be contested and new identities assumed.<sup>21</sup>

Dancehall is possibly a space of affirmation of the female body and sexuality. A respite from the daily politics of colonialism and patriarchy, it is also site in which women can challenge their racially and gendered standard position. Marcia, who is unremarkable as a poor street vendor in unfashionable attire, is lauded in the dancehall scene as an attractive woman whose moves reflect a confidence in her body and sexuality.

In winning the dancehall queen contest and its one-hundred-thousand Jamaican-dollar cash prize, Marcia successfully uses her own sexuality to improve her family’s socioeconomic status. No longer needing Larry (who disappears once he learns of Marcia’s true identity and manipulation of him for her benefit) or presumably other benefactors, Marcia ends any possible future eruption of sexualized abuse of her daughters for money. Her dancehall exploits also gain her a male suitor (a photographer who is unnamed in the film), whom she can engage in a relationship on her terms because of her newfound financial stability. More confident about her positioning in society, Marcia leaves the dancehall scene enthusiastically anticipating future economic and social possibilities that await. She escapes poverty, refutes arguably defeatist thinking that would lead to her taking desperate measures for funding, and has a love interest that may likely serve as a father-figure for her daughters. While appearing to conform to the patriarchal script, Marcia’s immersion in dancehall, like dancehall itself, is an act of resistance and transcendence: from patriarchy, poverty, and the exploitation of the female body that normally follows.

*“there’s a whole new world out there waiting, and I’m going to get some”:  
Sexuality and the Quest for Visibility*

Rahill’s *Violated* and Elgood and Letts’ *Dancehall Queen* explore the ways individuals use sexuality as a conduit by which they attempt to gain visibility. Though centering economically marginalized Caribbean characters, especially women, these sexual-mobility exchanges occur across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines.<sup>22</sup> Women in various geographical areas who often marry for socioeconomic mobility are at times subjected to abuse and sexualized violence on the part of their partners. *Violated* and *Dancehall Queen* illuminate perceptions of the female body and currency, including how they lead to mothers exploiting their own daughters, thereby helping to further dialogue on this global, transracial phenomenon.

With specificity to Caribbean nation-states, these texts elucidate the interrelatedness of neocolonialism’s and the global political economy’s effects on these areas. Their status as Third-World, economically dependent countries of color renders them more vulnerable to global exploitation economically, racially, and sexually. These forms of exploitation conjoin in prevalent industries or activities that commodify the body, reducing it to an object for purchase that must undoubtedly yield to the often degrading demands of its purchasers. Euro-American perceptions of the body, particularly the black female body, as a hypersexual entity for public consumption largely shape its sexual and economic marginalization globally and nationally. Many Caribbean locales enjoy economic surges in the economy or more friendly international relations because of the sexual exchanges. These, in turn, influence the treatment of the body, gender, and economics in local Caribbean industries / activities, and, as such, both “dominant” and marginalized groups benefit from the commodification of the black female body.

While Caribbean people and nation-states are exploited by neocolonial endeavors, they at times simultaneously exploit representations of blackness and sexuality for economic gain. They use sexuality to become more competitive in the local and global political economy. In fact, both texts end on hopeful notes, thereby indicating positive possibilities that may arise from trying situations such as sexual exploitation. As Marcia tells competitor Olivine after winning the dancehall title in *Dancehall Queen*, “there’s a whole new world out there waiting, and I’m going to get some” (Elgood and Letts). Though using sexuality in ways that are arguably problematic, particularly sanctioning the abuse of young unwilling participants, it presents more feasible opportunities to integrate into a higher socioeconomic stratum in the Caribbean and larger world. This newfound status may encourage the pursuit of even more possibilities for continued successes that do not involve compromising uses of sexuality. Thus, possible cycles of abuse and violation for Caribbean people and nation-states are not necessarily absolute or immobilizing of the body politic.

NOTES

1. Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 3.
2. Alex Renton, “The Rape Epidemic,” *The Guardian* 27 Dec. 2007 <<http://lifeandhealth.guardian.co.uk/women/story/0,,2218424,00.html>>.



3. For scholarship on color politics, see Carolle Charles, "Popular Imageries of Gender and Sexuality: Poor and Working-Class Haitian Women's Discourses on the Use of Their Bodies," *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean*, ed. Linden Lewis (Gainesville, UP of Florida, 2003) 169-89; Alex Dupuy, *Haiti in the World Economy: Class, Race, and Underdevelopment Since 1700* (Boulder: Westview, 1989); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Culture, Color, and Politics," *Haiti, State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review, 1990) 109-36; and Flore Zéphir, "Preemigration Experience of Haitian Immigrants," *Haitian Immigrants in Black America: A Sociological and Sociolinguistic Portrait* (Westport: Bergin, 1996) 25-41. It is important to note that despite hierarchies based on skin color, it is not an "absolute" marker of social, economic, and political status. Modern-day Haiti's bourgeoisie and middle class are comprised of not only the light-skinned elite that have historically maintained prominence in the country, but Haitians of all complexions who have also been able to reap the benefits of material comfort and/or political representation.
4. Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, "Tourism and 'Embodied' Commodities: Sex Tourism in the Caribbean," *Tourism and Sex: Culture, Commerce and Coercion*, eds. Stephen Clift and Simon Carter (London: Pinter, 2000) 43. Though Taylor refers specifically to the changing Civil Rights and Second-Wave Feminist movements in the "West," it is very applicable to the changing racial and gendered climate in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.
5. For more detailed discussions of women's relationships to the nation-state, see Mary M. B. Racine and Kathy Ogle, *Like the Dew that Waters the Grass*, with Cathy Ogle (Washington, DC: EPICA, 1999); and Beverly Bell, *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001).
6. Charles 170.
7. "Commercial Sexual Exploitation" as defined by the World Congress against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. See Jayne Hoose, Stephen Clift, and Simon Carter, "Combating Tourist Sexual Exploitation of Children," *Tourism and Sex: Culture, Commerce and Coercion*, ed. Stephen Clift and Simon Carter (London: Pinter, 2000) 75. The World Congress's definition surfaced in 1996, years after the events in the novella had taken place, which speaks to children's lack of protection from sexual abuse under the law for many decades.
8. Historian Darlene Clark Hine posits that rape is also an applicable description for black women whose sexuality is bartered and exchanged for money or other financial provisions, as society marginalizes them and renders them insubordinate. See "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New, 1995) 380-87. Haiti's legislation and society at large, informed heavily by patriarchal mores, rendered women subordinate, leaving them little protection from various crimes and offenses against them.
9. Rape was not perceived as a serious crime or given political consideration. In fact, Haitian law dictated that in order for rape to be proven, the violated woman must prove that she was a virgin at the time of her rape. Recently, it has become a more prominent topic, even causing its re-evaluation in relation to the law. See Renton and Bell.
10. Trouillot 167.
11. Ira P. Lowenthal, "Labor, Sexuality and the Conjugal Contract in Rural Haiti," *Haiti—Today and Tomorrow: An Interdisciplinary Study*, ed. Charles R. Foster and Albert Valdman (Lanham: UP of America, 1984) 26.
12. For an autobiographical and detailed discussion of experiences as a *restavèk*, see Jean-Robert Cadet's *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1998).
13. See "General Information: Sex and Travel," [www.seejamaicacheaply.com](http://www.seejamaicacheaply.com).
14. Julia O'Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor, "Fantasy Islands: Exploring the Demand for Sex Tourism," *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*, ed. Kamala Kempadoo (Lanham: Rowman, 1999) 44.
15. Vednita Carter and Evelina Giobbe, "Duet: Prostitution, Racism, and Feminist Discourse," *Prostitution and Pornography: Philosophical Debate about Prostitution*, ed. Jessica Spector (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006) 33.
16. Beverley Mullings, "Globalization, Tourism, and the International Sex Trade," *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*, ed. Kamala Kempadoo (Lanham: Rowman, 1999) 70.
17. Norman C. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) 1.
18. Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (New York: Palgrave, 2004) 131.
19. Stolzoff 243.
20. Stolzoff 243.

21. Cooper 125-27.
22. In the 2000s, socialites Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian enjoyed a surge in popularity and very lucrative business deals upon the release of their sex tapes. Kardashian, in fact, was encouraged to pose nude in *Playboy* by her mother, resulting in more widespread notoriety. See reality television series *Keeping up with the Kardashians*.

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