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# Policing Our Daughters' Bodies

## *Mothering in African Literature*

In *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, bell hooks acknowledges the dearth of material addressing the experience of black girls. She opens her memoir by recounting the powerful effect of reading Toni Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye*, "I was still in my teens when I read this book. It shook me to the very roots of my being. There in this fictional narrative were fragments of my story—my girlhood" (hooks, 1996: xii). The novel had such a profound effect because Morrison portrayed girls confronting issues of race, class, and identity. hooks observes that although many feminists are thinking and writing about girlhood, they do not understand how race and class effect girlhood. She notes, "White girls of all classes are often encouraged to be silent. But to see the opposite in different ethnic groups as a sign of female empowerment is to miss the reality that the cultural codes of that group may dictate a quite different standard by which female self-esteem is measured" (xiii). In order to understand the complexity of black girlhood and the relationships of black girls and their mothers, more research and analysis is needed.

Frequently when issues of mothering and socialization are discussed, it is based on the experience of whites and these experiences are then extrapolated as the norm for everyone. However, if one turns to the writing of many women of the African Diaspora, one will often find embedded in the literature an analysis of black mothering. The following paper provides a sampling of texts from African American, Nigerian, and Haitian writers who address mothers' attempts to control their daughters' sexuality. hooks' memoir, *Bone Black* (1996), set in the southern region of the United States, describes her developing awareness of the different treatment of boys and girls and the limitations placed on girls, who are socialized to be given away in marriage. Flora Nwapa's short story, "This is Lagos" (1971), set in Nigeria, illustrates the way in which girls

are taught to be wary of men in order to protect their virginity and to maintain familial customs. Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), set in Haiti and New York City, depicts the devastating effects of testing practices used to monitor the chastity of girls. These are very different texts with different locations, time periods, and genres; however, each resonates with regards to female sexuality. In both the nonfiction and fiction, we see mothers actively participating in what appear to be oppressive and coercive systems of gender control, and thus seem to not only internalize their own oppression but also to legitimate it by sanctioning these practices with reference to their own daughters.

Although mothering takes on different forms and is performed in varied contexts, concern regarding their daughters' sexuality is a frequent issue for mothers, as reflected in texts across the African Diaspora. Mothers are frequently depicted as very concerned about their daughters' sexuality and often express this concern by seeking to preserve their daughters' virginity. In the texts, chastity is commonly viewed as a beneficial trait to instill in young girls that will allow them to marry well and maintain an honorable reputation. The high value placed on chastity often leads mothers to police their daughters' bodies with tactics ranging from monitoring to inspections. When taken to the extreme, these practices can become oppressive; however, it is important to understand the motivation behind the course of action.

Policing is not only about control, but also about protection. In fact, this should be the foremost aspect of policing. The mothers to be discussed are not primarily seeking to control their daughters but to protect them from the realities of unwanted pregnancies. In fact, one might argue that it is the unequal weight of unplanned pregnancies that falls upon females which is behind the different attitudes toward male and female sexuality found in some cultures. But even if this is the case, the differential attitude actually intensifies the problem by encouraging boys to express their sexuality, while punishing girls for doing the same. This makes the restrictions placed on girls seem more coercive than protective, which in turn may foster negative attitudes in young girls about their sexuality. Thus, the mother's desire to protect her daughter appears coercive and ultimately damages the daughter she sought to protect.

African American mothers are often shown policing their daughters' bodies to protect them from sexual trespassers. The desire to preserve their daughters' virtue is seen as early as the slave narratives. For example, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs describes her grandmother's disappointment that she became a mistress to a white man, "O Linda! Has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother" (1987: 56). The narrator also anguishes over her fall in virtue, but she sees it as her best hope to avoid the advances of her master who has a reputation for impregnating his slaves and selling their babies. Despite the lack of control within the slave system, many female slaves were concerned about their chastity and sought to preserve their virtue. This issue is

also quite prevalent in late nineteenth-century novels by African American women who sought to overturn the negative stereotypes about black women that developed as a response to the frequent rape of female slaves. Thus writers like Frances Harper (1988) and Pauline Hopkins (1988) directly address this issue in their novels. In *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*, Harper creates a chaste heroine that maintains her virginity despite the attempts of several slave owners to corrupt her virtue, while Hopkins argues in *Contending Forces* that black women's virtue should not be diminished as a result of their forcible rape. The concern expressed in African American women's literature regarding black women's virtue has become a less central issue as we become more removed from our slave past and less impacted by the negative stereotypes that developed from it; however, we have not fully escaped this negative stigma, which is readily reflected in the sexualization of black women in contemporary media.

With this history in mind, readers should not be surprised to see concerns regarding the avoidance of sexual promiscuity and the maintenance of virginity in contemporary African American texts. Thus although hooks' memoir traces many aspects of her childhood, sexuality is a prominent feature of her memories. hooks' mother is quite vigilant in monitoring hooks' sexuality. For example, hooks' recalls her mother's response to finding her soiled panties:

When mama finally asks me if it is me that has the panties with the discharge, with the sometimes funny smell, I do not ask her how she knows—she finds out everything. Yet she is mostly gentle when she comes across a secret that may hurt in the telling. I tell her I suppose they are mine. She wants to know have I been doing anything with boys. I do not know what this anything is. When I say no, she asks again and again. I always answer no. When I become tired of answering this same old question I ask her a question. I ask her What is this anything that one can do with boys. I am so angry at boys—the ones I do not know, who are capable of this anything that makes me be questioned in a way that feels like I have done something wrong, like I'm on trial. She does not want to tell me what the anything is. She believes me. (1996: 94-95)

This interview with her mother is then followed by a trip to the doctor, who confirms that girls may get infections and that they are not caused “by the anything that can be done with boys” (1996: 95). At home, her mother attempts to give her a vinegar and water douche, but she struggles so much that her sister is brought in to help her mother:

My oldest sister enters the bathroom with a smirk on her face that tells me right away that she sees that I am naked, afraid, ashamed; that she enjoys witnessing this humiliation. Together they struggle to perform the task. Mama asks angrily What are you going to do when some boy

sticks his thing up you?; I am shocked that she could think that I would ever be naked with a boy, that I would ever let anyone touch my body, or let them stick things in me. When I say this will never happen to me they stop their tasks to laugh, long and loud. I weep at their refusal to believe I can protect myself from further humiliation. (1996: 96)

The anguish surrounding this movement reveals hooks' resistance to the way in which girls are deemed victims within the sexual arena. Her mother and sister accept this positioning of females, but hooks' is shocked that they expect her to accept such degradation. She has not been completely socialized to play the role of female sexual victim; she still believes that she will have control over her body and sexuality. Anything less is shameful in her eyes.

Throughout hooks' memoir, we see the shame that is instilled in her regarding her body: "they have always made us ashamed of the body, made us tuck it away under our pillows like some missing tooth for which the fairy will reward. They reward our silences about the body" (1996: 95). While shame of the body seems to be something equally instilled in girls and boys, gender does effect the way in which this shame is instilled. There is a point in which boys come into their manhood and are expected to be conscious of their bodies in a way in which girls are not:

Masturbation is something she has never heard anyone talk about girls doing. Like so many spaces of fun and privilege in their world, it is reserved for the boy child—the one whose growing passion for sexuality can be celebrated, talked about with smiles of triumph and pleasure. A boy coming into awareness of his sexuality is on his way to manhood—it is an important moment. (1996: 112)

Thus it is clear that boys are expected to be sexual in a manner that girls are not. In fact, girls are depicted as victims of their sexuality, "Sexuality is something that will be done to them, something they have to fear. It can bring unwanted pregnancy. It can turn one into a whore. It is a curse" (1996: 112). hooks is aware of this difference between girls and boys and thus keeps her masturbation a secret and views it as a source of shame. In order to combat her sense of shame, hooks separates the act of masturbation from the sexual realm: "She denies to herself that she is being sexual. She refuses to think about it. Males are not the object of her lust. She does not touch herself thinking about their penises moving inside of her, the wetness of their ejaculations. It is her own wetness that the fingers seek" (1996: 113). Thus her sexuality is denied and repressed.

hooks learns early in life that a woman's sexuality is not her own, but her husband's. She recalls identifying with a woman in her favorite book, *Passion Pit*. The woman is sexually aroused and then told by her partner to beg for sex. hooks "can understand the intensity of the woman's longing, her willingness to

ask, possibly even to beg. She knows this affirmation of the woman's sexual hunger is exactly what would be denied her in real life" (1996: 117). This has been ingrained through "Tom Thumb Weddings," witnessing her mother's lack of power in her own marriage, and through warnings about what boys and men will do to her.

hooks describes the Tom Thumb wedding as adult entertainment; it is not fun for the children. She is supposed to be happy that she is chosen as a bridesmaid, but she would rather be playing outside than be in a make-believe wedding. The mature hooks reflects on this event, "We [were] practicing to be brides, to be girls who will grow up to be given away" (1996: 9). The phrase, "given away" has particular significance, as we reflect on hooks' socialization. She informs us that she learned "early that it is important for a woman to marry" (1996: 22). However, the pretend Tom Thumb wedding from first grade makes hooks suspicious about marriage, for it had not been enjoyable. At sixteen her mother continually tells her the importance of cooking and cleaning in order to be a good wife, but hooks vows never to marry, "Whenever she thought of marriage she thought of it for someone else, someone who would make a beautiful bride, a good wife. From her perspective the problem with marriage was not the good wife, but the lack of the good husband" (1996: 97). Although her mother attempts to mold hooks for her later role of wife and mother, hooks resists. In hooks' eyes, her mother appears to consent to her own oppression, but hooks refuses to concede. She refuses to see marriage as an ideal objective because she cannot overlook her mother's loss of identity within her marriage.

Despite all that she has been told about marriage, hooks has seen the contradictions in her own mother's marriage. She tries to explain to her mother why she does not wish to marry,

Seems like, she says, stammering, marriage is for men, that women get nothing out of it, men get everything.... She did not want the mother to know that it was precisely her marriage that made it seem like a trap, a door closing in a room without air. (1996: 98)

hooks has witnessed the negative effects of marriage for her mother. When her father left, her mother "became energetic, noisy, silly, funny, fussy, strong, capable, tender, everything that she was not when he was around. When he was around she became silent" (1996: 98). In other words, she sees the life sapped out of her mother as a direct result of her marriage. Yet, in spite of what seems to be a difficult marriage, hooks' mother seeks to prepare her to be a "good wife." She continues in her mission to socialize her daughter for a role that calls for continual subjugation. It is as if she is unaware of her own victimization and thus blindly guides her daughter to a similar fate.

hooks' memoir, *Bone Black* (1996) speaks to the truth behind depictions of mother-daughter relationships found throughout literature of the African Diaspora. Her mother's concern regarding her daughter's sexuality is replicated

in numerous texts.<sup>1</sup> For example, in Flora Nwapa's "This is Lagos," both Soha's mother and aunt warn her of the dangers of Lagos men. As Soha leaves for her aunt's home in Lagos, her mother warns her, "They say Lagos men do not just chase women, they snatch them" (Nwapa, 1994: 42). She is then instructed to be careful. However, her mother was comforted by the thought that her sister would take care of Soha. It is clear in the story that men are seen as sexual predators from whom mothers and mother figures must protect their daughters. However, the fear is not so much that the daughters will be snatched, but that they will be irreparably ruined.

Soha is aware of the danger of Lagos men, but she seems to think she is equal to the challenge. Early in the story, she is described as "full of life. She pretended that she knew her mind, and showed a confidence rare in a girl who had all her education in a village" (1994: 42). Although Soha is not worldly in her dealings with men she does employ some feminine wiles. For instance, when her suitor, Mr. Ibikunle, first comes to her aunt's home, she makes him wait: "Her mother had told her she should never show a man that she was anxious about him. She should rather keep him waiting as long as she wished" (1994: 44). When she does come down she banters with him about a wife that he claims he does not have. Upon hearing his denial, Soha laughs long and loud and responds, "Who are you deceiving? Please go to your wife and don't bother me. Lagos men, I know Lagos men" (1994: 45). This comment suggests that she does indeed perceive the threat of Nigerian men and Lagos men in particular, but at the same time she seems to think she can handle the risk.

Soha's aunt, Mama Eze, however, does not think Soha can protect herself from Lagos men. Upon Soha's arrival, Mama Eze takes a maternal interest in her sister's daughter. Soha also acknowledges this protective mother-daughter like relationship, but does not take Mama Eze into her confidence. Although Mama Eze did not know about the young man's visit, her suspicions are raised: "it was obvious to her that Soha had secrets. It was easy for a mother of five children who had watched so many girls growing up in the 'yard' to know when they were involved with men" (1994: 46). She does not, however, ask Soha directly about her suspicions; instead, she warns her: "This is Lagos. Lagos is different from home. Lagos is big. You must be careful here. You are a mere child. Lagos men are too deep for you. Don't think you are clever. You are not. You can never be clever than a Lagos man. I am older than you are, so take my advice" (1994: 46). In her role as surrogate mother, Mama Eze seeks to protect Soha from the dangers of Lagos men. Her warnings reflect the concerns of her sister, Soha's mother, and reveal her desire to act like a mother towards her niece.

Despite Mama Eze's good intentions, Soha does not pay any attention to her words of wisdom. In fact, shortly afterwards she announces her intention to move to a hostel. This announcement creates a great deal of consternation for Mama Eze because her sister expected her to watch over Soha. Upon discussing this turn of events with her neighbor, Mama Bisi, Mama Eze learns

more about the nature of the hostel. Mama Bisi tells her, "Soha is not a better girl. Do you know the kind of girls who live in that hostel at Ajagba street? Rotten girls who will never marry. No man will bring them into his home and call them wives.... Soha will be lost if she goes there" (1994: 48). This then is the danger of Lagos men; they threaten a girl's goodness. Thus at this point, Mama Eze and Mama Bisi are concerned that Soha will endanger her reputation as a "good girl." Living in the hostel will allow for too close of an association with Lagos men, which in turn will make Soha rotten and no longer marriageable.

However, in Soha's case she does marry, but because it was not done properly it is as if they were not married. After moving out of her aunt's home, Soha returns with Mr. Ibikunle to announce their marriage. They have in fact been married for a month. Mama Eze is outraged that Soha would marry without telling anyone, "It is a slight and nothing else," she says (1994: 50). But it is Mama Bisi that guesses the reason for the secrecy—Soha is pregnant. The young people are then scolded for ignoring tradition:

"You hear, Mr Ibikunle, we don't marry like that in my home," Mama Eze said. "Home people will not regard you as married. This is unheard of. And you tell me this is what the white people do. So when white people wish to marry, they don't seek the consent of their parents, they don't even inform them. My sister's daughter," she turned to Soha, "you have not done well. You have rewarded me with evil." (1994: 50)

Mama Eze cannot understand why Soha did not take her into her confidence. However, her husband, Papa Eze, cannot understand the women's commotion, "you woman talk too much. Mr Ibikunle has acted like a gentleman. What if he had run away after pregnating Soha? What would you do?" (1994: 50). Mama Eze responds, "Aren't you a man. Aren't all men the same?" (1994: 50). Papa Eze is addressing Mr. Ibikunle's honorable response to the pregnancy, but this is not the only source of the women's anger. Their anger also seems to be a response to the colonialist infringement upon traditional customs—the young couple has married like white people, not Nigerians. It is clear that the older women are seeking to uphold a tradition that is not as important to the men or the younger woman.

Mama Eze urges the young couple to get ready to go home to Soha's parents, but after a year "Mr Ibikunle did not have the courage, or was it the money, to travel to Soha's home to present himself to Soha's parents as their son-in-law" (1994: 50). What is behind this flouting of tradition? And why is it so important to the older women? Soha has been trained to be a "better girl," yet she ignores her aunt and mother's warnings about Lagos men. One might be tempted to say that Soha resents and resists the commodification of marriage and like bell hooks does not wish to be given away. But I suspect that this would be a western reading of the situation and not necessarily the interpretation of an Nigerian audience. Soha's actions are clearly a reflection of her concept of gender norms, but they are also complicated by issues of

tradition and the colonialist presence.

What is clear though is that society expects mothers and mother figures to be vigilant in their preservation of their daughter's chastity. The description of the girls living at the hostel on Ajagba Street illustrates the value placed upon female virginity. However, Nwapa appears to be questioning societal mores that demand such policing of female bodies. Soha has not been a "better girl," yet she is married. Marriage is described by Mama Eze as "the prayer of every woman," (1994: 50) yet this is supposed to be achieved through chastity and the adherence to tradition. But whose interests does this tradition serve? Does it protect women or oppress them? Are men expected to have the same regard for tradition?

The issue of tradition is also explored in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). In the novel, Martine regularly tests her daughter Sophie's virginity, as her own mother had tested her. The process of testing is presented as a tradition. Martine tells Sophie, "When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside. Your Tante Atie hated it. She used to scream like a pig in a slaughterhouse. The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure" (Danticat, 1994: 60-61). However, the concern about purity has devastating effects on those tested. Martine is haunted by both the testing and the rape that brings an end to the testing, while Sophie chooses to tear her own hymen as a means of escaping the testing. It is only by failing the test that the women escape the horrors of the testing process.

Sophie is first tested after coming home at 3:00 am and not being able to explain her whereabouts. Although she assured her mother that she had not done anything wrong, Martine proceeds to test her. This testing is her means of assuring herself that Sophie is indeed a "good girl." Afterwards, her mother warns Sophie that "[t]here are secrets you cannot keep" (1994: 85). Martine continues to test Sophie weekly "to make sure that [she is] still whole" (1994: 86). Sophie is tested by her mother as were her mother and aunt before her. Testing is not only a family tradition, but, a cultural tradition. When Sophie returns to Haiti, she learns from her grandmother that this practice continues: "The mother, she will drag her inside the hut, take her last small finger and put it inside her to see if it goes in. You said the other night that your mother tested you. That is what is now happening to Ti Alice" (1994: 154). The practice is so pervasive that Sophie hears "it compared to a virginity cult" (1994: 154).

In an attempt to understand the practice, Sophie questions her grandmother about the motivation for the testing. She is told, "If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced" (1994: 156). Thus a girl's virginity becomes a source of honor for her mother. Her grandmother explains, "From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring



her back to me” (156). Testing is used to ensure that girls live up to the expectation that they will remain chaste until marriage. Tante Atie explains that “*Haitian men, they insist that their women are virgins and have their ten fingers*. According to Tante Atie, each finger had a purpose. It was the way she had been taught to prepare herself to become a woman. Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing” (1994: 151). However, following these precepts does not guarantee the ultimate reward of marriage. Tante Atie remains bitter about never having married: “They train you to find a husband,’ she said. ‘They poke at your panties in the middle of the night, to see if you are still whole. They listen when you pee, to find out if you’re peeing too loud. If you pee loud, it means you’ve got big spaces between your legs. They make you burn your fingers learning to cook. Then still you have nothing” (1994: 137). Tante Atie suffered through testing and was properly trained to be a wife and mother, but the expected husband never materialized. She did all that was required of her but it was all for naught—she has no husband.

Perhaps Tante Atie would not be so bitter, if she did not also feel like she lost part of herself in the process of being trained for wifehood. As she reflects on the meaning of the ten fingers, she notes that “Her fingers had been named for her even before she was born. Sometimes, she even wished she had six fingers on each hand so she could have two left for herself” (1994: 151). It is as if all of her individuality was pushed out of her in order to make room for the training to be an ideal woman. Her bitterness is further reflected in her comments about the limitations placed on women. Tante Atie observes, “Your mother and I, when we were children we had no control over anything. Not even this body” (1994: 20). This point is reinforced by Martine’s reflections on their youth as well. She tells Sophie, “You should have seen us when we were young. We always dreamt of becoming important women. We were going to be the first women doctors from my mother’s village. We would not stop at being doctors either. We were going to be engineers too. Imagine our surprise when we found out we had limits” (1994: 43). The limits experienced by Martine and Tante Atie were a result of gender expectations and the place of women within their community. Women were expected to wives and mothers, not doctors and engineers. These dreams were pushed aside to make room for the more practical duties of cooking and cleaning.

These unrealized dreams are reflected in Tante Atie’s bitterness and her heavy drinking. When Sophie asks about her drinking, Tante Atie responds, “I drink a little to forget my troubles,’ ‘It’s no more a vice than the old woman and her tobacco” (1994: 143). The grandmother frequently admonishes Tante Atie about her drinking and how it might affect Sophie’s respect for her. But this scolding has little impact on her. Tante Atie responds, “Sophie is not a child anymore, old woman. I do not have to be a saint for her” (1994: 111). This suggests that she took up drinking after Sophie went to live with her mother. I suspect that this is in part because until that time Tante Atie was able to make

use of some of her training to be a surrogate mother for Sophie. But after Sophie returns to her mother, Tante Atie has no outlet for the training she received. Without a child to mother or a husband to care for, Tante Atie is left with nothing—she has neither family nor career.

This training and testing also has negative effects on Tante Atie's sister, Martine. The nightmares Martine has had most of her life are a response to both the testing and her rape. While explaining to Sophie why she tested her, she acknowledges "that the two greatest pains of [her] life are very much related. The one good thing about . . . being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day" (1994: 170). This realization though comes only after she has tested her own daughter "because [her] mother had done it to [her]" (1994: 170). Thus despite the pain caused generation after generation, the practice was continued without question.

Although the practice is not directly questioned until Sophie has the courage to do so, there are several points of indirect critique of testing and the related subjugation of women. Sophie remembers the story of a rich man who married a poor black girl because she was a virgin:

For the wedding night, he bought her the whitest sheets and night-gowns he could possibly find. For himself, he bought a can of thick goat milk in which he planned to sprinkle a drop of her hymen blood to drink.

Then came their wedding night. The girl did not bleed. The man had his honor and reputation to defend. He could not face the town if he did not have a blood-spotted sheet to hang in his courtyard the next morning. He did the best he could to make her bleed, but no matter how hard he tried, the girl did not bleed. So he took a knife and cut her between her legs to get some blood to show. He got enough blood for her wedding gown and sheets, an unusual amount to impress the neighbors. The blood kept flowing like water out of the girl. It flowed so much it wouldn't stop. Finally, drained of all her blood, the girl died.

Later during her funeral procession, her blood-soaked sheets were paraded by her husband to show that she had been a virgin on her wedding night. At the grave site, her husband drank his blood-spotted goat milk and cried like a child. (1994: 154-55)

This story is clearly an indictment of the virginity cult. Concern about virginity should not lead to murder, nor should it lead to the painful tearing Sophie chooses in order to bring an end to the testing. She takes her mother's pestle to bed with her and rips into her flesh: "It was gone, the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she *tested* me" (1994: 88). It is with great relief that she fails her final test. She could not, however, later explain to her husband why she had hurt herself like that. She "could not explain to him

that it was like breaking manacles, an act of freedom” (1994: 130). Sophie could have had intercourse with Joseph, her future husband, and thus brought an end to the testing, but this might be seen as reinforcing the need for such testing. However, her willingness to rip her own flesh rather than endure further testing impresses upon the reader the degree of pain and humiliation that the testing caused.

The testing, however, is merely a reflection of women’s low position within Haitian culture. The disparate treatment of females and males begins at birth. Sophie’s grandmother explains to Sophie how one can tell if a baby is a girl or a boy by the lantern of the midwife. Initially the lantern goes back and forth between the shack and the yard as the midwife goes between the mother and her pot of boiling water. If the child is a boy, the lantern will eventually be left outside the hut and if there is a man, he will stay with the baby. But if it is a girl, the mother will be left in darkness with the child (1994: 146). This inauspicious beginning is further limited by the roles that are available to women. Their identity is based on the needs and wants of men. This is particularly evident in stories that depict men killing their wives without penalty. This is true of the story related earlier about the rich man and of a song Sophie hears men singing as they work in the cane. They sing of “a woman who flew without her skin at night, and when she came back home, she found her skin peppered and could not put it back on. Her husband had done it to teach her a lesson. He ended up killing her” (1994: 150). This seems like an indication of the low status of women within the community.

While *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is clearly the most egregious example, “This is Lagos” and *Bone Black* also comment on the negative side effects of the recurring concern with female chastity and the mother’s role in maintaining this patriarchal dictum. I find it striking that such very different texts, both in narrative form and Diasporic location, address such common concerns. The mothers and mother figures are in the position of policing their daughter’s bodies in order to ensure that they fulfill the expectations of men. They are essentially engaged in a power struggle for control over the daughters’ bodies and by extension their minds and souls. While inter-generational conflict is not unusual, what remains unclear is why mothers continue to socialize their daughters according to the dictates of men. One might argue that in “This is Lagos” the mother and mother figures have not been harmed by patriarchal dictates and perhaps even benefit through their marriages, but what about the mothers in the other texts who are clearly harmed by patriarchal expectations? How will the chain be broken? When will mothers no longer be in a position of training their daughters to submit to the same subjugation that they experience? Neither of these writers provides the answers to these questions, but they do inspire us to ask the questions and to begin to pursue the answers.

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<sup>1</sup>While I believe that finding this concern with premarital sex in such disparate texts is indicative of the far reaching nature of this concern, we should not expect to find this within every region of the African Diaspora. For example, Denis Paulme (1963) notes that despite regional differences among African females most enjoyed a tremendous amount of premarital sexual freedom. This observation is reinforced in Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974) and John W. Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1979). So while we may find similarities within the African Diaspora, we must not use one setting to speak for all and thus disregard important regional differences.

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