

RACIAL INTEGRATION IN THE PLANTATION HOUSEHOLD, OR THE DISINTEGRATION OF WOMANHOOD IN THE OLD SOUTH

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In the 19th century the proliferation of abolitionist literature in the North of the United States forced Southerners to devise reasons that could justify the prevalence of slavery in this region: there the slave system was promoted on the basis that it was good for both whites and blacks since it represented an example of racial harmony and integration. This Southern experiment of *racial integration* was especially prominent in the plantation households, where the *harmonious* racial division of labor between black and white women ironically recreated what Bakhtin called the disintegration –or bifurcation– of the “healthy ‘natural’ functions of the human nature”. As a consequence of this bifurcation, elements such as food, drink, sex or death were either sublimated to participate in the world of ritual, or debased to become the coarse realities of the quotidian world.

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In “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel” Bakhtin identifies the development of feudal structures as the first manifestation of what he calls “the vulgar conventionality that pervades human life”, a situation in which “the healthy ‘natural’ functions of human nature are fulfilled, so to speak, only in ways that are contraband and savage, because the reigning ideology will not sanction them” (1986: 162). Such an ideology, which despised the natural, instinctive quality of the human body, left a tangible trace on most of the systems of thought that characterized the Western world until the 19th century and even afterwards: it certainly had a foundational role in the development of the Cult of True Womanhood, and its influence on the characterization of the Southern lady was undeniable.

In his essay, Bakhtin describes these “healthy ‘natural’ functions of the human nature” as the elements of a matrix which as a consequence of the historical development of class distinctions suffered a process of bifurcation:

As class society develops further and as ideological spheres are increasingly differentiated, the internal disintegration (bifurcation) of each element of the matrix becomes more and more intense: food, drink, the sexual act in their real aspect enter personal everyday life, they become predominantly a *personal* and *everyday* affair, they acquire a specific narrowly quotidian coloration, they become the petty and humdrum ‘coarse’ realities of life. On the other hand, all these members are to an extreme degree sublimated in the religious cult, and partially in the high genres of literature and other ideologies. The sexual act is often sublimated and encoded to such an extent that it becomes unrecognizable as such. Such functions take on an abstractly symbolic character; even the connecting links between elements of the complex become abstract and symbolic. It is as if they reject any contact at all with crude, everyday reality. (1986: 213, original emphasis)

From Bakhtin's perspective, the direct consequence of this process was the origin of a sharp distinction between the quotidian, domestic world, which comprises the earthly, immediate version of the elements of the matrix, and the world of ritual, which results from the spiritualization and sublimation of these same elements. Although Bakhtin focuses on the effects of this process on the genealogy of literary genres, we have found his reflections on this topic useful to interpret the question of class and race relations within US domestic environments in the 19th century.

In this period of time the development of the process of industrialization in the North of the USA widened the gap between the world of production, the public sphere, on the one hand, and the world of consumption, the home, the private or domestic sphere, on the other hand: this distinction contributed to the establishment of a strict gender division of labor which ultimately restricted women's work to the domestic sphere. The process of industrialization in the USA also caused the origin of a strong middle-class who demanded the establishment of class distinctions even within the realm of domesticity to keep middle class women apart from their less fortunate sisters, who were usually doomed to become their servants. The 'Cult of True Womanhood' was the answer to this demand: almost miraculously, it kept middle-class women confined in the domestic sphere but untouched by its earthly, immediate quality, or in Bakhtin's terms, its "crude, everyday reality". The memorable description of Victorian women as *angels in the house* compresses into a single image the ultimate purpose of the predominating ideology of the period: the domestic, quotidian chores which constituted the day to day routine of women's lives *at home* were sublimated to the extent that they became the work of *angels*, thus hiding the earthly quality and coarse reality of these tasks –food, drink, sex, reproduction– behind the spirituality of a heavenly mask. This mask guaranteed not only the moral condition of women as immaculate guardians of their families' spiritual standards, but also their social status: as middle-class women their domestic affairs were not supposed to require their direct involvement in the coarsest aspects of domesticity, which were either performed by their servants or simply ignored by the prevailing ideology. In the South the fanaticism which, according to Scott (1995: 14-16), characterized the adoption of this ideology took this sublimating movement to extremes thanks to the prevalence of the slave system there: in other words, slavery made the fanatical "idolizing and idealizing" of Southern women possible. Thus, if in the North the bifurcation of the elements of Bakhtin's matrix contributed to the establishment of class distinctions within the domestic realm, in the South such a bifurcation served to justify the racial distinctions at work in the plantation households.

In the 19th century there was no process of industrialization in the South, and consequently, the development of the middle class was considerably delayed there. According to Fox-Genovese, in this period there was a "distinctive Southern *mentalité*" launched by the South's anachronistic dependence on the work of slaves and its simultaneous involvement in the capitalist world market: in the South "slavery and capitalist social relations coexisted in a kind of symbiosis, but without fully merging" (1988: 54-57). As we have already suggested, slavery contributed to the *fanaticism* of the Southern version of the Cult of True Womanhood, and it did so in two different ways: firstly, the prominence of Southern slavery in the 19th century confirmed the persistence of certain feudal structures there, which was especially consistent with the usual association of the myth of the lady with medieval chivalry (Scott 1995: 15; Prenshaw 1993: 75); and secondly, in the big Southern plantations, the presence of a number of slaves forced to devote at least part of their work and efforts to the care of the

domestic chores in the white household, constituted a definite contribution to the promotion of the image of the plantation mistress as an immaculate lady engaged in social and domestic activities more *honorable* –that is further removed from immediate contact with the earthly realm– than cooking, cleaning, washing, diapering, etc. In other words, the myth of the Old South kept the plantation mistress uncontaminated by the earthly world at the expense of her black slaves.

Even if contemporary scholars such as Clinton, Fox-Genovese, Scott, or McMillen have suggested that the “image of the Southern lady was more a product of fable than fact” and have emphasized that plantation “mistresses had dynamic and various roles in ante-bellum society” (Clinton 1982: xvi; Fox-Genovese 1988; Scott 1995; McMillen 2002), this model not only inspired the education and early training of the young plantation belles, but also shaped their future expectations, hence “the importance of the image as a definer of what constituted a woman and womanhood” (Carby 1987: 24). According to this model, qualities such as purity, chastity, fragility and delicacy should adorn the character and behavior of any white woman of the plantation class. These virtues aimed primarily at the denial of women’s bodily fulfillment through the exaltation of their overwhelmingly incorruptible moral sense: according to Carby, the “constitution of the white female was conventionally portrayed as appropriately delicate, an outward manifestation of an inner sensitivity and refinement” (1987: 27). As a consequence of this, the Southern lady was condemned to fulfill “the healthy ‘natural’ functions of [her] human nature” exclusively “in ways that [were] contraband”: in other words, in the case of the Southern lady the elements of the Bakhtinian matrix –food, drink, sex, reproduction, death– were always sublimated to the extent that their natural, instinctual quality had to remain forever hidden behind a disguise of spirituality and purity. In “The Old Order” Porter denounces this condition when she describes “the frightful *moral* suffering which *masked* altogether [Sophia Jane’s] *physical* experience” of sexual awakening, or when she mentions Sophia Jane’s need to translate “her *natural physical* relief” and the “warm *sensual* pleasure” that she felt while nursing her child “into something *holy, God-sent, amends from heaven* for what she had suffered in childbed. Yes, and for what she missed in the marriage bed, for there also something had failed” (Porter 1979: 335, 334; emphasis added).

The demands placed on Southern white women were essentially the same as those which characterized the Cult of True Womanhood in the North, but in the South white ladies shared their households with women who were considered to bear the stain of vice and corruption on their own skins: as González Groba suggests, “[black] women were considered by Southern white society incapable of filling the role of true womanhood because they lacked the white woman’s exterior sign of purity: her white flesh” (2008: 43). Since they had been deprived of this sign of purity, black women were supposed to suffer from a moral defect, which was compensated for by their bodily strength and resistance: “[white] females were expected to be soft, delicate and fragile, and while strength and ability to bear fatigue were seen as distasteful qualities in a white woman, they were seen to be positive characteristics in the case of black women” (2008: 44). This conclusion is consistent with Bakhtin’s reflections on the bifurcation of the elements of the original matrix, and corroborates the adequacy of his ideas to explain the division of labor in the plantation households.

As we have already suggested, in the Old South white women’s contact with the world of the “healthy ‘natural’ functions” –that is, food, drink, defecation, sex– was minimum: they were not supposed to find satisfaction in eating, drinking, or having sex, and consequently they were not expected to have frequent sexual encounters,¹ or to eat or drink a lot: as Mammy states in *Gone with the Wind*, “you kin allus tell a lady by dat

she eat lak a bird” (Mitchell 1996: 79). Moreover, the sublimation of white women and the consequent mutilation of their bodies did not qualify them as providers of food, drink or sex for others: these tasks were reserved for black women, who within the Southern mythology could be either happy providers of food and drink in their role as faithful domestic servants, or lascivious providers of sexual services for their white masters in their role as Jezebels whose base instincts were designed to lead white gentlemen astray (White 1999: 27-29).

The only possible conclusion to all this is that while the fulfillment of the “healthy ‘natural’ functions” was furtive in the case of the white women, such a fulfillment was taken for granted in the case of the black women and even overtly demanded from them: thus within the reigning ideology the blurring of the white women’s link with the earthly, material world was compensated for by the prominence of the black women’s bodies, which supposedly qualified them not only for the coarsest domestic chores, but also for the provision of an outlet for their masters’ instincts. As Carby concludes, “two very different but interdependent codes of sexuality operated in the antebellum South, producing opposing definitions of motherhood and womanhood for white and black women which coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress” (1987: 20): while in the case of the white lady sexuality could “be used to tempt but [had to] be placed within a shell of modesty, meekness, and chastity: in other words, it [had to] be repressed,” overt sexuality “emerged in images of the black woman” (1987: 27). Then Carby associates this “dichotomy between repressed and overt representations of sexuality” with “the simultaneous existence of two definitions of motherhood: the glorified and the breeder” (1987: 30). Unfortunately, this line of research is not pursued much further, leaving the dichotomy affecting motherhood practically unexplored.

The Old Southern order imposed not only qualitative but also quantitative restrictions on the white women’s fulfillment of the “healthy ‘natural’ functions” with only one exception: motherhood. As with the other elements of the matrix, the glorification of motherhood implied a qualitative sublimation or idealization of the natural experience, but in contrast with the treatment of the other elements, this sublimation did not require a quantitative limitation: quite on the contrary, pregnancy and childbearing were overtly promoted in the South both as an expression of the physical vigor and economic position of the father, and as a means to perpetuate the old Southern patriarchal order. McMillen observes that families “in the antebellum South tended to be larger than the national norm”, and explains that most fathers liked having growing families because a “large family reflected a husband’s masculinity” as well as “the husband’s retention of power” over his wife’s fertility (1990: 3, 35).

The glorification of the experience of motherhood represented a singular challenge for the reigning ideology for two basic reasons: first of all because from a quantitative perspective, the experience of motherhood among women of the plantation class was frequent, as we have just suggested; and secondly because from a qualitative perspective, this experience represented a concentration of all the elements of Bakhtin’s original matrix in their most down-to-earth versions. In *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing*, McMillen analyses the actual conditions and circumstances that affected motherhood among plantation women, and her conclusion is that “in the Old South motherhood was difficult and demanding” (1990: 180). Although she acknowledges the emotional suffering and reward resulting from the experience, McMillen concentrates on its physical dimension and pays special attention to its effects on the mothers’ health as well as to the medical remedies used to alleviate their usually painful condition: her analysis suggests that in pregnancy and childbirth,

food, drink, sex, reproduction, defecation and death went hand in hand, thus making women's bodies the site of a confluence of the different elements of Bakhtin's matrix.

Unfortunately, the glorification of motherhood in the Old South required the unnatural erasure of these earthly aspects in order to promote the image of the white mother as an immaculate or even virginal paradigm of virtue: from this perspective, it is not surprising that Scarlett identifies her mother with the Virgin Mary and that she feels an almost religious devotion for her in *Gone with the Wind* (Mitchell 1993: 63). In this popular novel the bond of affection between mother and daughter is complemented by the special bond between Scarlett and Mammy, which brings a second effect of the glorification of motherhood to the fore: the overwhelming presence of mammies in the Southern mythology. Since the prevailing ideology deprived the glorified white mother of the means to satisfy her infants' immediate, instinctual needs, it became necessary to design a motherly image which could function as a complement for this mutilated icon of motherhood: consequently, the Southern tradition made Southern children dependent on the comforting presence of their black mammies whose physical strength, prominent bodies, warm –sometimes nursing– breasts, embracing arms, soothing voices and nurturing abilities were perfectly designed to satisfy the “healthy ‘natural’ functions” of their white charges.² In Lillian Smith's terms, the Southern mammy meets the white child's “immediate needs as he hungers to have them met. She is easy, permissive, [and] less afraid of simple earthly biological needs and manifestations” (in Manring 1998: 41).

For pro-slavery people, this division of labor between white mothers and black mammies was proof of the *racial harmony* which characterized the antebellum South, but this system of *perfect* racial integration had a serious flaw: it rested on the aberrant perversion of the actual experience of motherhood. If the image of the immaculate white mother denied the white women's involvement in the less dignifying and most immediate aspects of childbirth, child nursing and infant-rearing, the image of the black mammy depended on the black women's unnatural denial of their role as biological mothers of their own offspring. According to Wallace-Sanders, in the Old South a mammy's “devotion for the children she care[d] for [was] best illustrated by her disregard for her own children” (2008: 8). Moreover, Wallace-Sanders's observation that the mammy's “natural maternity is constructed as primitive, instinctual, base” while “her maternal devotion to whites is constructed as sublime, extraordinary, superhuman” (2008: 19), corroborates the dynamism of Bakhtin's bifurcation in the construction of the mythology of the Old South. But even if white children inspired an almost religious devotion in their mammies' bosoms, the affection that they felt for their black nurses depended largely on an instinctual basis: in “The Old Order” Aunt Nanny breastfeeds some of her white charges; after the siege of Atlanta Mitchell's Scarlett finds in Mammy's arms and breast the physical shelter and comfort which she cannot find in her dead mother (1996: 409); and Lillian Smith in *Killers of the Dream* denounces white men's libidinal incursions in the black quarters of Southern towns and traces the reasons for this back to “that passionate devotion which only small children feel, who had grown used to that dark velvety skin, warm deep breast, rich soothing voice” of their mammies (in Manring 1998: 41).

As contemporary scholars have suggested, the image of the black mammy became a symbol of racial harmony and integration, but it was just that, an image at the service of the reigning ideology functioning as a perfect complement for that other central icon of the Old South: the lady (Hale 1998: 105; Manring 1998: 23; McElya 2007: 3-4; Wallace-Sanders 2008: 10). From this perspective, we may conclude that the ideology of the Old South with its dream of racial integration was actually the

consequence of the bifurcation –or disintegration– of the elements of the Bakhtinian matrix. This bifurcation explains the different approaches to domesticity that affected white and black women in the plantation South: according to the Southern mythology, white women belonged in the realm of a sublimated domesticity far from the kitchens and the nurseries where the black women were supposed to exercise the domestic abilities which offered actual satisfaction for their white charges' "healthy 'natural' functions". Nowadays there is evidence that the distance which separated this tableau of racial harmony from the actual domestic experience in Southern households was considerable: the Southern model of racial integration was simply an ideal, a white fantasy ironically built on the disintegration of women's actual experiences. Even so, this was the ideological model that shaped the lives, minds, dreams and expectations of Southern women in the antebellum period and afterwards, and for this reason it deserves due consideration.

Notes

1. At least they were not expected to have more sexual encounters than those required to comply with the reproductive demands of the southern patriarchal society.
2. Wallace-Sanders observes that "the early mammy character between 1820 and 1852 reflected greater heterogeneity than later models that appear about 1890" (2008: 9).

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