

LEGACIES OF SLAVERY: BLACK DOMESTIC WORKERS, WASTE, AND THE BODY*

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ABSTRACT

One of the legacies of slavery which helped shape the ideology of the Jim Crow South concerned the perpetuation of black women's exclusion to the margins of the established order through their exclusive association with the body and its functions. This association was used to justify black women's destiny as domestic workers in the Jim Crow South, which meant that they were doomed to handle filth, and thus to become tainted with it according to the official discourse. This article explores first the deprecating connotations of the association of black women with the body established by the dominant southern ideology as a relic of the slave period, and then focuses on black domestics' involvement in the management of bodily fluids and waste as part of their professional tasks in the Jim Crow South.

KEYWORDS: black women, black domestics, waste, body, excrement, segregation, US South.

LEGADOS DE LA ESCLAVITUD:
LAS TRABAJADORAS DOMÉSTICAS NEGRAS, LA BASURA Y EL CUERPO

RESUMEN

Uno de los legados del período esclavista que mantuvo su vigencia en la ideología segregacionista del Sur se refería a la exclusión de las mujeres negras a los márgenes del orden establecido a causa de su asociación única y exclusiva con el cuerpo y sus funciones. Esta asociación se utilizó para justificar el hecho de que estas mujeres se vieran obligadas a trabajar sólo en empleos domésticos a lo largo del período de Jim Crow en el Sur, empleos que requerían su contacto directo con la suciedad, lo que originó en el discurso supremacista blanco dominante la tendencia a identificarlas con la basura que manejaban. Este artículo explora primero las connotaciones denigrantes de la asociación de las mujeres negras con el cuerpo tal y como fue establecida por la ideología dominante como reliquia del período esclavista, para centrarse después en el estudio del papel de las empleadas domésticas negras en la manipulación de fluidos y residuos corporales como parte de su actividad profesional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: mujeres negras, criadas negras, basura, cuerpo, excremento, segregación, Sur de EE. UU.



Starting on the basis that in the Jim Crow South the only jobs available for black women in urban environments were those related to domestic service, which often meant that they were doomed to handle filth, this article explores the association of black domestics with waste focusing on their management of corporeal filth in their professional experience.¹ As Susan Signe Morrison (2019) has pointed out,

As the cultural model of waste is mapped onto humans, ethical dangers loom. Those who handle filth become tainted with it. Whole classes of human beings become equivalencies for trash, and, as such, worthy of disposal. Those who become contaminated socially as waste are “thrown out”—geographically, economically, and morally. We physically assign them to the proximity of waste dumps.

In the Jim Crow South black domestics figured prominently among the classes of human beings who became “equivalencies for trash” due to their professional role as handlers of their white employers’ filth. In the case of black southern women, this condition was also a belated consequence of the ideology which had characterized the antebellum South, since as a legacy of slavery, they were almost exclusively associated with the bodily stratum, deprecated by the dominant discourse as impure and dirty (White [1985] 1999, 29-34). This association justified their exclusion to the margins of the system, but at the same time made their role in the “mapping of the self’s clean and proper body” essential (Kristeva 1982, 72). As guardians of the bodily stratum, black domestics took care of the corporeal functions which the dominant ideology despised as polluting and thus threatening for the purity of the white body, from food ingestion to defecation. Their role as handlers of corporeal defilements was especially relevant in their relationship with their white charges, who significantly learnt to feel disgust for the corporeal polluting objects at the same time as they learnt the meaning of race. Since as an effect of the development of Waste Studies “characters associated with waste” in literature have become an object of special literary interest (Morrison 2019), references to fictional characters and episodes will help illustrate this discussion at specific points.

Susan Signe Morrison’s words above suggest the association of waste with that which is “thrown out,” somehow recalling “the logic of exclusion” that, according to Julia Kristeva (1982), “causes the abject to exist” (65). This same logic lies at the heart of Judith Butler’s ([1993] 2011) premise that “regulatory power [...]

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¹ Domestic work was almost the only possible alternative to sharecropping that black women could find in the Jim Crow South (Van Wormer, Jackson and Sudduth 2012, 32-34). Jacqueline Jones ([1985] 1995) explains that in the southern towns and cities, black women could find “relatively steady employment as domestic servants and laundresses” (111), because domestic service was so cheap that only very poor white families could not afford it (129). Trudier Harris (1982) remarks that even black college women were often forced to work as domestics at least temporarily (4-6).



works through the foreclosure of effects, the production of an ‘outside,’ a domain of unlivability and unintelligibility that bounds the domain of intelligible facts” (xxix-xxx). Thus, like the abject, waste originates as the effect of an act of exclusion necessary for the protection of the established order, which ultimately entails the wasted object’s exile to the margins of the system. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002) had already reflected on this topic and had concluded that “Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (44). Inspired by Douglas’s arguments, Kristeva (1982) observes that “filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin”; concluding that “[t]he potency of pollution is therefore, not an inherent one; it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it” (69). Similarly, Gay Hawkins (2006) observes that waste “isn’t a fixed category of things; it is an effect of classification and relations” (2). Concepts such as “prohibition” and “classification” also reverberate in what Morrison (2015) calls “the compulsion to codify and order,” which functions as a manifestation of the human need to separate clean and dirty, and “facilitates the establishment of culture and civilization” as separated from nature (17-18). Therefore, waste is always the consequence of the implementation of a system, which requires the marginalization of all those categories that do not fit into the established order. Accordingly, the meaning of waste depends on the system that originates it as an undesirable by-product, something to be despised, hidden, and expelled to protect the dominant ideology. Throughout history, the systematic ordering of the human experience has tended to extoll culture and civilization at the expense of nature, which has often been interpreted as a carrier of the threat of filth and pollution.

The “logic of exclusion” behind the “regulatory power” which gave shape to the ideology of the Jim Crow South was very similar to that which was operative in the slave period: its final aim was the justification of the inferiority of black people on the basis of their allegedly reduced human status through their concomitant association with animality and instincts “as a stratagem adopted to cordon off the dominant group more securely from its own feared animality” (Nussbaum 2010, 16). This “logic of exclusion” can be interpreted as an ultimate consequence of the historical and sociological process which Bakhtin ([1982] 1984b) described in the following terms:

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. (213)

As a consequence of this bifurcation, “the petty and humdrum ‘coarse’ realities of life,” namely what Bakhtin ([1982] 1984b) elsewhere called “the healthy ‘natural’ functions of human nature” (162), became deprecated by the official discourse in



favor of their ritualized and sublimated versions. Hence, the body as the site of these “healthy ‘natural’ functions,” was turned into an object, “the Other,” “a threatening container of one’s own denied desires” in Linda Holler’s (2002) terms, and bodily issues were ultimately deemed unclean and shameful (90; quoted in Morrison 2015, 30). A series of societal and cultural norms were devised to control basic bodily needs and instincts—especially those connected to fluids, exuding and excreta—with the purpose of distancing human beings from them, therefore causing humans’ final alienation from their bodies (Morrison 2015, 45-46). As a result, in the early modern period what Bakhtin had defined as the grotesque body,² characterized by “its porous skin full of holes and orifices [...] is denied in the interests of a second, non-porous skin that neither exudes nor excretes [...] above all without orifices” (Baudrillard 1994, 105; quoted in Morrison 2015, 33).

One of the early manifestations of the effects of the sublimating process which gave origin to this interpretation of the human body as ideally pure and devoid of orifices was the extreme idealization and glorification at work in the epic and chivalric traditions (Bakhtin [1982] 1984b, 153). As Anne Firor Scott ([1970] 1995) has argued, these traditions constituted one of the main sources of inspiration for the delineation of the myth of the southern lady (15). Imitating other patriarchal regimes, the regulatory power represented by the old southern order took the process of idealization of white women to extremes, to the detriment—and ultimate alienation—of the material bodily stratum. In such a context, the white body became ideally deprived of orifices (see the reference to Baudrillard above), and as distanced as possible from the “healthy ‘natural’ functions” associated to them. To minimize the role of white women’s bodily “holes” and the potential threat which these represented for their purity, all the bodily functions were tainted with a polluting quality and accordingly excluded from the white plantation mistress’s ideal contour. Thus, the myth of the southern lady as a paragon of beauty, virtue, purity, and moral perfection was born. For this purpose, the corporeal dimension of activities such as eating, drinking, defecating, sex, and even procreation was concealed,³ since as bodily functions, they were considered coarse and lacking refinement and were ideally expelled from the spectrum of what was desirable from white ladies. Such activities were located outside or at the margins of white women’s experience in a most unnatural way, and white southern ladies were thus drastically separated from those corporeal “polluting objects” which, according to Kristeva (1982), “stem

² In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin ([1968] 1984a) describes the grotesque body as one with exaggerated protuberances and orifices to facilitate its contact with the world: bodily orifices like the mouth, the nose, and the anus are especially prominent in the grotesque body as contact zones within which “the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome” (317).

³ In the Old South, motherhood figured prominently among the duties of plantation women, but again this experience was idealized, sublimated, and eventually spiritualized to the extent that it was officially devoid of all its bodily and natural implications: the established southern order transformed motherhood into a perfect example of what Adrienne Rich defines as an institution rather than a natural experience (Rich [1986] 1995, 13).



from the *maternal* and/or the feminine” (71; italics in original). In a convoluted, self-destructive, and mutilating fashion, the same (hetero)sexual regulatory ideal which forced southern white women to be perfect wives and mothers required their repudiation of the bodily attributes necessary to perform these roles. In fact, in contrast with their artificial official idealization, the real-life experience of southern plantation women was drastically determined by the reiterated interference of the material bodily lower stratum and its “polluting objects” in it, as research on this field has proved: “A proper diet was also emphasized [...] Just as important was a woman’s duty to clear her digestive track. Antebellum society had a fixation upon bowel regularity, and at no time, it judged, was attention more critical than during pregnancy” (McMillen 1994, 37-38). Paradoxically, although taking proper care of their bodily reality was known to be essential for white women’s survival, fixations like this were still compulsorily concealed and erased from the official discourse and the regulatory ideal designed for southern plantation women, which often had devastating effects on their health (see McMillen 1994).

In what is probably the most popular literary rendering of the Old South, *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell ([1936] 1993) addresses this topic with a relative touch of humor and irony when she depicts Scarlett’s vain struggles to comply with the stipulated restraints on her bodily vigor and Mammy’s concomitant efforts to keep her white mistress’s behavior within the precincts of her prescribed role as a plantation lady. The enforced official deprecation of the bodily functions explains why at the beginning of the novel Mammy tries to persuade Scarlett to eat breakfast at home to avoid eating too much in public later at the barbeque in Twelve Oaks: as she says, “You kin sho tell a lady by what she *doan* eat” (80; italics in original); or why she gets scandalized by Scarlett’s easy labor when her first child is born: “I was out in the yard and I didn’t hardly have time to get into the house. Mammy said it was scandalous—just like one of the darkies” (348). In Mitchell’s novel, Mammy’s voice stands for the official standard discourse and her verdict is clear: Scarlett’s bodily vigor disqualifies her as a lady by making her too comfortable within the sphere of the body and its functions, which sets her away from the desirable physical fragility which inevitably accompanied the process of idealization and glorification of the southern lady. Even as a baby, Scarlett is said to have been “more healthy and vigorous than a girl baby had any right to be, in Mammy’s opinion” (59).

This deprecation of the body and its functions was not at all exclusive of the US South, but it could be taken to extremes there because of the prevalence of the slave system. In her discussion of the politics of disgust, Martha Nussbaum (2010) affirms that, “The discomfort people feel about their smelly, decaying, and all-too-mortal bodies has ubiquitously and monotonously been projected outward onto groups who can serve as, so to speak, the surrogate dirt of a community, enabling the dominant group to feel clean and heavenly” (7). The projection of this generalized human discomfort about the body and its functions onto vulnerable minorities to subordinate them is an example of what Nussbaum (2010) calls “*projective disgust*” (15; italics in original). She uses this term to refer to those situations in which disgust “is extended from object to object in ways that could hardly bear rational scrutiny” (15). According to her, this often involves “projection of disgust properties



onto a group or individual” (16). Women have figured prominently among those groups who have suffered the effects of such a projection (Nussbaum 2010, 17-18; Morrison 2015, 38), hence the special insistence of the official southern discourse on the idealization and sublimation of white plantation women to protect their purity, and the urgency to find another group on whom to project this disgust. The southern slave system made black slaves an easy target for this projective disgust to the extent that black people were eventually reduced to the status of mere providers of bodily needs and containers of the instinctual animality deprecated—because feared—by the dominant planter class. Thus, in contrast with white plantation women, whose purity was defined in terms of the distance separating them from animality and the dirt of the body, black women slaves were exclusively regarded as bodies dispossessed of intellectual skills, moral values, and true human feelings. In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby (1987) discusses the existence of two different but interdependent codes for black and for white women in the slave period, which led to the establishment of two different definitions of the experience of womanhood: while purity and fragility were the ideal virtues of white women, physical vigor and resilience were the qualities demanded of black slave women (20). Accordingly, the two stereotypes designed for black women by the official discourse corroborated their association with the body: the Jezebel stereotype emphasized their link with promiscuous sexuality, while the mammy stereotype transformed them into devoted caretakers of what Bakhtin ([1982] 1984b) called the “healthy ‘natural’ functions” (162) of the white families they served (White [1985] 1999, 27-61; Harris-Perry 2011, 51-97). Mammy’s deprecating comment on Scarlett’s easy labor above—“just like one of the darkies”—confirms her unproblematic assumption of the association of black women with the same polluting bodily functions which were discarded for white women by the established ideology. Thus, Mitchell’s Mammy fits to perfection into the group of domestics who according to Harris (1982) “[lose] all sense of a black self and [adopt] the culture into which [they move], the [ones] that [conclude] that white is indeed right and that it is correct to oppress Blacks” (17). In contrast, Sethe’s thoughts in Toni Morrison’s ([1987] 1988) *Beloved* illustrate the actual devastating effects of such an association, which often served to justify the most execrable crimes against black women. Sethe’s conclusion that anybody white could “dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” (251) evinces the dramatic success of a system designed to dirty black people, or black women more specifically, by imagining them “as tainted by the dirt of the body” (Morrison 2015, 98) to the extent that they were utterly deprived of self-love. In this sense, the words of Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in the Clearing offer an alternative interpretation of the black body:

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people, they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch other



with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You got to love it, you!*" (Morrison [1987] 1988, 88; italics in original)

Here Baby Suggs persuades her listeners to love their black bodies and insists that every single bodily part deserves to be loved. Far from the connotations of dirt and pollution conditioning the interpretation of the body by the dominant ideology, Baby Suggs's speech dignifies the role of the different bodily parts as such, respecting their materiality as flesh and disregarding the official need to sublimate or spiritualize them. Her words show that the black body is impure and dirty only when interpreted according to the official discourse as a projection of the disgust for the flesh shared by those who considered themselves civilized and racially superior.

Still, Baby Suggs does not have enough time to inspire Sethe with her empowering words before the horror of slavery reappears in their lives. Morrison's choice of terms to depict Sethe's feelings above proves that she cannot fulfill Baby Suggs's command to love herself and her flesh because of her traumatic awareness of the polluting effects resulting from black women's association with the body as reductively interpreted by the dominant ideology. The official discourse in the Old South radically alienated slave women's bodies from what Kristeva (1982) calls the "mapping of the self's clean and proper body" (72): in contrast with what happens in the early stages of development of human beings—a definition which in the Old South would apply only to the members of the white race—black slave women's bodies could not be regularly shaped "into a territory [...] where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted" (72). In other words, slave women's bodies were deprived of this differentiation, this distinction of clean and dirty, proper and improper, which condemned them to a perpetual lack of order turning their bodies into a "waste space," a liminal site of ambiguity that vibrates threateningly" (Morrison 2015, 19). In her analysis of the role of codification in the human configuration of waste, Morrison (2015) observes that, "[c]odification suggests that what is pure and what is dirty can be readily perceived" (25) and that "that which cannot be codified threatens with filth" (24). From this perspective, the lack of differentiation or codification allegedly affecting black women's bodies could only corroborate their association with dirt and pollution: "Tainted by the dirt of the body," for the official southern ideology they were wasted beings, "carriers of filth and dirt," "unclean and inhuman" (Morrison 2015, 98). In turn, this justified their destiny as handlers of filth, since in contrast with their white mistresses, this configuration located their status close to that of those "polluting objects" which, according to Kristeva (1982), "always relate to corporeal orifices" and "fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual" (71).⁴

⁴ Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002) identifies the orifices of the body as "especially vulnerable points" and affirms that "[m]atter issuing from them is marginal stuff," and for this reason it is considered dangerous (150).



In her analysis of Laporte's *History of Shit*, Gay Hawkins (2006) observes that throughout history human excrement has gradually undergone a "process of making it an individual or private responsibility" (52) for political reasons; but in her discussion of the role of plumbing in human sanitation practices she acknowledges the constant human attempt to distance ourselves "from any direct role in managing our own waste. While the rich may have always been able to outsource management of their shit, the poor had to deal with their own portable containers" (57). Thus, socioeconomic parameters have historically determined the distance separating individuals from (the management of) their excrements. Often, the establishment of this distance has required the involvement of other individuals as mediators in the process of filth disposal by the most affluent. In the context of the antebellum South, the management of filth, usually involving corporeal waste, corresponded mainly to black slave women, who were thus "required to perform social functions equivalent to the excretory functions of the body" (Douglas 1975, 102; quoted in Morrison 2015, 98). According to Kristeva (1982), the strict regulation of bodily defilements "through frustrations and prohibitions" is essential for "the mapping of [the] self's clean and proper body" to be effective (71). In the context of the southern discourse, this led to one of the many paradoxes at the heart of the dominant ideology: black women, whose bodies were excluded from this mapping and thus doomed to remain forever undifferentiated and dirty, were for this same reason in charge of the management of bodily defilements, which ironically turned them into "the trustees of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body" (72). In other words, by virtue of their association with bodily waste, they had a central role in the shaping of the clean and proper body, which in the South was white by definition.

The slave system came to an end with the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War and the passing of the 13th Amendment in 1865, but the ideology behind it persisted in the mind of most white southerners not only as a nostalgic memory of the past, but also as an anachronistic ideal in the present. Therefore, the old southern values constituted an essential source of inspiration for the ideology of the new southern society in the segregation period, when the members of the new southern middle-class in their new southern homes saw themselves as the true descendants of the old planter class in their old plantation households.⁵ As Grace Elizabeth Hale ([1998] 1999) has thoroughly analyzed, in the Jim Crow South due to the pervading practice of racial segregation in the public sphere, the only possible context for the staging of this "fiction of continuity" between the Old and the New South was the white middle-class home (87). There, white women could still imagine themselves as a modern version of the idealized plantation lady thanks to the presence of black women working for them as domestics. In the new white middle-class homes of the

⁵ Both Fox-Genovese (1988) and Hale ([1998] 1999) offer an accurate explanation of this transition from the traditional antebellum plantation household as an almost self-sufficient site where consumption and production went hand in hand, to the middle-class home of the segregation period as a site of consumption removed from the professional and public sphere of production (Fox-Genovese 1988, 60-82; Hale [1998] 1999, 88-94).



South, like in the old plantation households, black domestic employees—formerly slaves—conveniently disguised as mammy,⁶ were expected “to perform the grubby, tedious domestic chores” (McMillen 2002, 168). This ultimately implied their handling of filth, so that their white employers could aspire to emulate the purity and refinement of the old plantation mistresses. Therefore, as a legacy of slavery, black domestics were expected to reenact—and thus keep alive—the illusion of racial harmony which had supposedly characterized race relationships in the old plantation households. To a large extent this illusion had depended on the exclusion of black women to a marginalized position, that of the material bodily lower stratum, by virtue of their race and gender.

In the Jim Crow South different strategies were devised to perpetuate this exclusion, which was usually disguised under layers of paternalism and fake affection. One of these strategies was the combined popularization of the mammy stereotype and of the trope that black women were endowed with innate natural skills and instincts for the performance of all the domestic tasks related to the different bodily functions.⁷ Among other chores, they were involved in the management of the workings of digestive substances and fluids through their work as cooks. According to Rebecca Sharpless (2010), “cooking in the home traditionally has been an occupation of low status” (2) precisely because it implies the handling of dirt. Quoting Michael Symons (2004), she observes that “cooking is ‘messy, dirty work,’ involving ‘bare hands, sticky fingers, licks of this and that, whacks on fleshy lumps, hissing lids and miscellaneous smells” (4; quoted in Sharpless 2010, 2). Significantly Sharpless (2010) infers that in this way “the elite remain pure and above the mess, delegating the work to those under them” (2). She finds corroboration for this idea in Leonore Davidoff’s reflections (1974, 412-13), and concludes that “[b]y delegating to servants handling dead animals, dirt from the garden, and fire, an employer can then stay clean and ‘more ladylike,’ keeping her hands ‘free from dirt, burns [,] or callouses” (Sharpless 2010, 3). From this perspective, in the Jim Crow South black cooks were essential to protect their white employers’ illusion of cleanliness, purity and civilization through their handling of “dead animals [and] dirt from the garden,” which significantly contributed to disguise the origin of food in nature. Morrison (2015) observes that, traditionally, “[b]ecoming civilized necessitates negating nature” (45), and for this reason throughout history the elites

⁶ The mammy stereotype was born in the slave period, but it became especially popular in the segregation period as a means to emulate the alleged racial harmony of the Old South through the idealization of the black domestics’ relationship with their white employers and the concomitant obliteration of their real conditions of life and work. For more information on this topic see Harris (1982, 12, 16-18, 23-34), White ([1985] 1999, 46-61), Manring (1998), Hale ([1998] 1999, 85-119), McElya (2007), Wallace-Sanders (2008), Sharpless (2010, xxviii-xxix), Harris-Perry (2011, 69-86).

⁷ In *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens*, Rebecca Sharpless (2010) discusses the common trope that African American women were endowed with innate, natural, or instinctive cooking abilities, and argues that in white women’s case these same skills were interpreted from a more intellectual or rational perspective: “the supposedly exotic, ‘other’ African American woman cooked by innate ability and the supposedly more intelligent, rational white woman empiricized her work” (xxiii).



have tried to distance themselves from the natural origin of their food in order to identify “themselves with a higher order of culture” (25). Inspired by Norbert Elias’s (2000) reflections in *The Civilizing Process*, she explains that,

[t]he animal origins [of food] became disguised through the cutting up of the animal before bringing it to the table slathered in piquant sauces. By concealing the animal origin of what we consume, we attempt to camouflage our own animal origin [...]. Alienation from the origin of where food comes from slowly evolved. As the sign of high class embraced the ability to control a fork, one became estranged from eating with the hands. Alienation through technology (the fork) mirrors alienation from the ultimate outcome of what one eats (excrement). (Morrison 2015, 48-49)

The physiological connection between food and excrement, as well as the association of the human feeling of alienation from one and the other at the end of this passage, has probably contributed to the low status assigned to cooks working in private homes, and more specifically to black cooks in the homes of the southern white middle-class.

In the Jim Crow South not only the management of food, but also that of excrements fell into the hands of black domestics, since the perpetuation of black women’s ‘exile’ in the marginalized bodily stratum still served to justify their role as handlers of the polluting bodily functions. Thus, like in the slave period, black women kept being the ultimate guardians or “trustee[s] of [the] mapping of the self’s clean and proper body” even if—or rather because—they were expelled to the margins of such a mapping due to their race. Hilly Holbrook’s words in *The Help* seem to confirm this expulsion: “You can’t even *teach* these people how to be clean” (Stockett 2009, 428; italics in original). Kristeva (1982) explicitly associates this guardian task with maternal authority (71-72), and so it was in their role as caretakers—or surrogate mothers—of their white charges that black domestics exerted this aspect of their job with more intensity.⁸ Therefore, black domestics’ contribution to the health care of their white charges went beyond their role as food providers to include their involvement in the delineation of the “clean and proper body” through their management of corporeal defilements: they were expected to take care of all those moments in the digestive process in which the bodily orifices become a contact zone allowing the trespassing of the bodily boundaries, from food ingestion to defecation. Although references to black domestics’ handling of excrement in literature and in real-life testimonies are not so usual or so evident as those linking them to food, their work as caretakers of white children included tasks such as bathing them, changing their diapers, and in general taking care of their bodily fluids.

⁸ Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (2008) accurately analyzes black domestics’ “dual role as surrogate and biological mothers” (7) to highlight the artificiality of the mammy stereotype, which required that black domestics loved their white charges better than their own children (5-8). Since this essay focuses on the professional role of black women as domestics, it concentrates on their relationship with their white charges.



In Katherine Stockett's *The Help* (2009), Aibileen is almost fully in charge of all these tasks since her employer, Elizabeth Leefolt, shows aversion to the handling of excrements: she avoids changing her baby's diapers and refuses to collaborate in her daughter's toilet training because "she won't let that girl come near her when she going" (93), which suggests an extreme attempt to hide the reality of her own defecating body. Elizabeth's attitude is a clear manifestation of the "horror of *excreta*, which is a uniquely human trait" according to Bataille (1993, 53; quoted in Morrison 2015, 45; italics in original). Deprived of the economic affluence of her friend Hilly Holbrook, Elizabeth probably feels especially compelled to "dissociate [herself] from excrement, filth and waste" (Morrison 2015, 47) to protect her social and racial status as a civilized white middle-class woman by keeping herself utterly distanced from these polluting objects. Her disgust for excrement becomes an expression of the human "horror of that which is only natural [...] our horror of the life of the flesh, of life naked, undisguised, a horror without which we would resemble the animals" (Bataille 1993, 63; quoted in Morrison 2015, 46). This may help explain her unnatural relationship with Mae Mobley: as a baby girl, her life is still too dependent on digestive fluids, defecation, and exuding not yet regulated by societal norms, which causes a reaction of revulsion in her mother, who consequently avoids contact with the girl and leaves her completely in her black domestic's care.

Early in the novel, Aibileen does not hesitate to affirm proudly that she is the one who has taught her white charges "*how to go in the pot*" (Stockett 2009, 92; italics in original), even in those cases when, as she herself acknowledges, she could count on the white parents' help in this task. Stockett's novel suggests that apart from changing diapers and washing them—that is, apart from disposing of excremental defilement—in the Jim Crow South "sphincter training" was primarily black women's job. In light of the psychoanalytical premise that "maternal authority is experienced first and above all [...] as sphincter training" (Kristeva 1982, 71), this fact seems to confirm the proximity of black caretakers to the maternal role through their handling of excrements. To sum up, the prescribed idealization of southern white women and motherhood complemented by the systematic deprecation, denial and exclusion of the body and its functions, ultimately implied a relocation of the source of this "maternal authority" in the configuration of the southern order: "maternal authority" and with it the role of trustee of the configuration of the "clean and proper body" was more in the hands of black women than in those of white mothers, since the former were deemed more apt to handle the dirt of the body.

The process of "sphincter training" and "the mapping of the self's clean and proper body" are not complete until children are also trained to feel disgust for excrements. Morrison (2015) explains that "[o]nce children are of a certain age, when we assume that rationality can prevail over instinct, we shame them to find excretions disgusting" (46). She finds confirmation for this conclusion in Bataille's (1993) reflection about how "we busy ourselves in terrifying [children] as soon as they are old enough to take part (little by little) in our disgust for excrement, from everything that emanates from warm and living flesh" (63; quoted in Morrison 2015, 46). Nussbaum (2010) confirms this perception when she observes that "children do not exhibit disgust until the ages of two or three years old, during the time of



toilet training. This means that society has room to interpret and shape the emotion [disgust], directing it to some objects rather than others” (15). In the context of the Jim Crow South, the instillation of this feeling of disgust and fear—with the ultimate purpose of pursuing a supposedly purifying alienation from the body—was inextricably linked to the process of learning the meaning of race. Hale ([1998] 1999) observes that white southern children gradually learnt racial difference and the culture of segregation at home, where the presence of black domestics proved determinant for the development of this learning process: according to her, “the figure of the mammy haunted these scenes of racial learning” (97). She further explains that in contrast with the childhood state of racial innocence, when the establishment of close relationships between white children and their black caretakers was taken for granted, “[w]ith the end of childhood, whites learnt the meaning of segregation. African Americans could not really be loved. Integrated feelings, integrated living, then, must be packed up with the baby clothes, pulled out and nostalgically caressed perhaps but never taken seriously, not incorporated into adult white ways of being” (117-18). For whites, adulthood meant the assumption of white supremacy, which rendered blacks different and inferior to them, members of a lower race “closer to the ground with its dirt they wallow in” (Morrison 2015, 47). In other words, white children had to learn to identify blacks as “other than themselves,” and, as Morrison (2015) explains, “[o]nce that othering is recognized, we set ourselves up as better than them” and them as “unclean or inhuman” (98). In the Jim Crow South this process of racial learning was juxtaposed to that by which children grow up to feel disgust and shame for the body and its excretions. Consequently, both processes got intertwined in such a way that at the end of the childhood period southern whites had learnt to project their disgust for the body onto the black race as a differentiated group “by reference to whom privileged [whites sought] to define their superior status” (98). Significantly, in *Killers of the Dream* Lillian Smith ([1949] 1994) puts the process of racial learning at the same level as that of learning “toilet habits”—among other things—when she describes how children learnt the culture of segregation in the South: “We were given no formal instruction in these difficult matters but we learned our lessons well. We learned the intricate systems of taboos, of renunciations and compensations, of manners, voice modulations, words, feelings, along with our prayers, our toilet habits, and our games” (27-28).

“Sphincteral training” and racial learning also go hand in hand in *The Help*, where the process of teaching toilet habits to Mae Mobley eventually turns into an opportunity for her mother to dirty the black race. Initially, Elizabeth refuses to participate in her daughter’s toilet training, but her attitude changes when she realizes that her lack of involvement in this process threatens her daughter’s racial learning: it is Mae Mobley’s identification of Aibileen’s toilet as hers, literally and symbolically violating the segregation laws, that prompts Elizabeth’s response. First, she is scandalized and tries to instill fear in Mae Mobley by identifying the black race with dirt and disease: “This is dirty out here, Mae Mobley. You’ll catch diseases. No, no, no!” (Stockett 2009, 95). Then, she adopts a more active role in Mae Mobley’s toilet training, but the goal she pursues is her daughter’s racial learning rather than her “sphincteral training”: she just tries to make certain that Mae Mobley learns that



“her place” is different from Aibileen’s and is not tainted with dirt and disease like hers. Elizabeth’s words above cause Aibileen’s indignant determination to change things by dissociating the black race from dirt and disease. Her main purpose is to prevent Mae Mobley’s racial learning and her assumption of white supremacist views: “I want to yell so loud that Baby Girl can hear me that dirty ain’t a color, disease ain’t the Negro side of town. I want to stop that moment from coming—and it come in ever white child’s life—when they start to think that colored folks ain’t as good as whites” (Stockett 2009, 96). Aibileen accurately associates Elizabeth’s identification of the black race with dirt to the process of growing up through racial learning. Moreover, since all this happens within the context of Mae Mobley’s toilet training, the connection between learning the meaning of race in the Jim Crow South and learning the feeling of disgust for excrements does not seem to be farfetched.

Stockett’s novel gives special prominence to the role of polluting bodily fluids in the relationship between white families and their black maids. Elizabeth’s words above suggest that the disgust that white employers feel for dirt and disease is intimately connected to their perception of their black maids, and Hilly’s Home Health Sanitation Initiative represents the main materialization of this situation in the novel.⁹ This Initiative can be understood as a manifestation of the possible interpretation of the human body as “the prototype of that translucent being constituted by society as symbolic system” (Kristeva 1982, 66), since as Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002) observes, “[t]o understand bodily pollution we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes and try to recognize what appositeness is there” (150). On a social level, Hilly’s Initiative is primarily an attempt to promote segregation in the domestic sphere by placing black maids literally at the margins of the white home and the white space. Moreover, since the Initiative is publicized as “[a] disease preventive measure” (Stockett 2009, 158), that is, as an attempt to prevent the infection of the white body by the pollution allegedly generated by black maids as carriers of excremental filth, it can be read in bodily terms as an expression of the southern obsession with the purity of the white body: the Initiative is a literal—not just metaphorical—attempt to protect the purity of the white body by keeping it distanced from the pollution which black domestics allegedly represented.¹⁰ The episode of the pots in Hilly’s yard, as well as that of Minny’s chocolate pie constitute grotesque events designed to challenge the main purpose of Hilly’s Initiative—the establishment of a

⁹ Some of the real-life testimonies collected by Van Wormer, Jackson and Sudduth (2012) depict the difficulties black maids had to face on a daily basis because they were not allowed to use the toilets of their white employers (85-86, 105).

¹⁰ The Initiative takes advantage of what Hawkins considers “an irrational fear of diseases and contamination” that most of us share: she observes that everyday rituals of cleanliness and purification “are linked more to ethical and visceral anxiety than to real biological danger” (58). Similarly, Douglas ([1966] 2002) observes that “[o]ur idea of dirt is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions” (8), and in fact, “[d]irt does not look nice, but it is not necessarily dangerous” (xi).



distance to protect the white society and the white body from the polluting threat represented by black domestics—by reversing it. The pots literally transform Hilly’s yard into an open-air defecation space, evoking the human “horror at the very idea of defecating on the street” (Hawkins 2006, 48). Similarly, Minny’s chocolate pie ironically realizes the excremental threat which black domestics represented for the pure white body according to Hilly’s Initiative by literally putting the black maid’s excrements in the white woman’s body. To take revenge on Miss Hilly’s mistreatment, Minny bakes a chocolate pie for the white woman using a secret ingredient: her own feces. Significantly Minny’s action shakes the established order by displacing excrements, that is, by removing them from their prescribed (marginal) position, and so it implies a reversal of the logic of exclusion in which waste originates. By using her excrements as an ingredient, Minny destroys “the *distance* from the basest of human products,” the “literal and metaphoric separation from the base” which according to Hawkins (2006) “is one of the defining markers of modernity’s classificatory regimes” (56; italics in original), in two different senses: on the one hand, she violates the racial distance at the heart of the segregation system and of Hilly’s Initiative by undermining black and white distinctions; and on the other hand, she brings food and excrement together, the mouth and the anus, eating and defecating, inviting reflection on the interdependence of these terms, as well as on the paradoxes of a system which reduced the guardians of the “healthy ‘natural’ functions” of the white body, the “trustees of the self’s clean and proper body” to the same status as the filth they handled. A real-life testimony reported by Harris (1982) states this paradox most clearly: “If these [black] women are so filthy, why you want them to clean for you?” (21).

As a legacy of slavery, black domestics in the segregation period were doomed to handle filth due to their race and gender, since they were the targets of one of the most common manifestations of Nussbaum’s (2010) *projective disgust*: the projection of the human disgust for the body and its excretions on unprivileged groups, in this case black women. Through this projection, the regulatory regime in the Jim Crow South—based on that of the antebellum period—removed black women to the margins of the system by assigning them exclusively to the bodily realm, and at the same time depriving them of a “clean and proper body,” which in the South was always white, pure, and ideally devoid of orifices. Paradoxically, this *projective disgust* justified black women’s innate suitability to handle the same polluting bodily functions whose regulation determines “the mapping of the self’s clean and proper body,” according to Kristeva (1982). From her perspective, this regulation is associated with the “maternal authority,” so it was in their role as caretakers of white children that black domestic workers were especially involved in the handling of bodily pollution: apart from cooking for their white families, which implied their contact with dirt mainly in the shape of dead animals, they were also expected to manage their white charges’ bodily fluids, mainly their excrements. In this sense, I have suggested here the possibility of establishing a parallelism between the development of white children’s disgust for excrements and the process of learning the meaning of race in the Jim Crow South. From this perspective, race learning culminated when white children were able to project their disgust for the body and



its dirt on the black race, turning even their otherwise beloved black caretakers—usually disguised as mammy—into polluting elements to be kept at a distance. Research on black women’s professional role as domestic workers in the segregation period has often focused precisely on the analysis of the distance separating their real life and work conditions from the idealized mammy image. This article has rather explored the role of black domestic workers from the perspective of Waste Studies by focusing on their task as handlers of corporeal filth—mainly excrements, since their connection with menstrual defilement would require another study. Since, as stated at the beginning of this essay, “anyone who touches the waste becomes, in turn, contaminated as refuse, to be thrown out socially, geographically, and morally” (Morrison 2015, 99), black women performing domestic tasks in the South were usually equated with waste. There were other equally spurious reasons conspiring with the official discourse to justify their classification as “wasted humans”—to use Bauman’s (2004) term. Among others, the fact that since they were not among those rich enough to waste, they were among the wasted ones: “The rich waste, the poor get wasted” (Morrison 2015, 69). Thus, although they were not unemployed and they were not at all redundant or unnecessary—three of the terms Morrison (2015) takes from Bauman to define wasted humans (102)—their equation with filth and waste by the established ideology in the Jim Crow South was undeniable, which makes the vindication of their role especially urgent.

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