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Halfway Through: The Porch as a Metaphor for the Southerner's Transcultural Identity

“One place comprehended can make us understand other places better,” wrote Eudora Welty in her famous essay “Place in Fiction” (782), thus suggesting that the ability to grasp the sense of the local facilitates the understanding of the global and so can be a foundation for what, in the contemporary cultural perspective, is referred to as a reflective, or hybrid identity.¹ In contrast with the essentialists and the proponents of globalization, for whom the creation of such an identity is but a destructive process of “boundary blurring” (Baldwin et al. 187-9), Welty, a writer “globally” recognized for her lifelong commitment to the one and only locality, the American South (Reagan and Ferris 899-900), presents this process as truly creative. If a writer, like Welty in her fiction, communicates the experience of a particular communal ritual in the language of storytelling (rather than the language of preaching or teaching), he or she makes the experience comprehensible to a broader audience – as readers, we connect “one place” to “other places” instead of setting them against one another. We thus avoid what Tara McPherson refers to as a “lenticular image,” a separatist (or integrationist) vision of the world, which is capable of representing “one” as well as the “other” place yet unable to show how the two are related (24-28). Welty’s texts transform (much as she did with “her” South) an image of the world that keeps others “in place” or is itself being kept “in place” into what Richard Grey calls a “privileged meeting place of collective life” (500). This meeting place is an imagined community, a metaphorical construct, a third dimension situated between the local and the global. Like human imagination, it is always in motion, and does not constitute any scientifically defined social, geographical or ideological group.²

This paper aims to demonstrate that the American South is such an imagined community and thus boasts of the reflective, transcultural identity. In the emblematic depictions of the human space, the particular place which has greatly contributed to the region’s

¹ The reflective character of identity means that it is not a rigidly structured, absolute entity but rather a project that an individual can shape according to his/her current needs and in confrontation with the possibilities and challenges the contemporary world offers. For more on the subject see e.g. Baldwin, Longhurst, McCracken, Ogborn, Smith, 256-7.

² For an extended discussion of imagined communities, see Anderson.

becoming a “privileged meeting place of communal life” seems to be the front porch. According to *The Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*, the porch is a “roofed structure usually open at front and sides, projecting from the face of the house outside and used to protect an entrance” (1530). Such a description immediately creates an intertwined vision of both the private (the house itself) and the public (the outside), and points to the porch as, fundamentally, a liminal space. Therefore, on the one hand, the private / public remains the basic dichotomy defining the significance of the porch and determining the boundaries in the community and in culture: the “private” becomes the “familial / individual / local,” whereas the “public” come to represent the “other / collective / global.” On the other, however, due to the function of protection / projection, the porch also seems to foster the policing of those boundaries so that they become mutually permeable (e.g. the “familial” becomes “other”). The result is, as Gloria Anzaldúa would say, a boundary struggle (*una lucha de fronteras*). This struggle is triggered off within actual physical space and subsequently catalyzes a larger transcultural exchange.

The hybridizing effect of the porch has to do with its origins, marked by West African and Caribbean as well as European and Indian influences (“Porches”). With such diverse roots, the porch epitomizes the *mestizo* culture phenomenon, to use Gloria Anzaldúa’s term once more.³ The fruit of cultural “miscegenation,” the porch has always represented a social structure which brings together a mix of peoples and cultures, so as to rearticulate the rules of a larger culture, distinguished by the phenomenon of creolization. In American Southern culture, the porch fulfills a role tantamount to that of a vernacular structure,⁴ which means that the architecturally complicated “creolization” of the porch expresses the hybrid aspect of the culture of the South.

The porch as an emblem of the social interactions reflects the idea of space which is “shared-yet-separate.” The main function of the porch is to be the “modifier to hot and humid summer climates” (“Porches”), characteristic of the South to the extent that, as Ulrich Bonnell Phillips writes, they make “heat” the region’s principle of organization and thus its metaphor.⁵ By providing relief from the heat, which is the essence of the Southern experience, the porch metaphorically constitutes a stage where all kinds of the

³ With reference to culture in general the term *mestizo* (that in Spanish means a “halfbreed” and was originally used in biology and chemistry to refer to crossbreeding) appeared to depict the South American-originated mixture of cultures: African, Indian and European. In the American context, the term was introduced by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherie Moraga to denote the multiple and flexible identities taking shape on the American-Mexican border (particularly in California). For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon see Anzaldúa.

⁴ See e.g. “The Stylistic Evolution of the American Front Porch.” <http://xroads.virginia.edu>. Accessed 11/08/08; Donlon, 57-97.

⁵ Phillips’s 1929 classic entitled *Life and Labor in the Old South* opens with the line: “Let us begin by discussing the weather, for that has been the chief agency in making the South distinctive” (quoted in Donlon 23).

culturally “heated” Southern images, such as the Ku Klux Klan, the voodoo, the Civil War, the Peace Marches, or even rock-and-roll, can be successfully moderated. Thanks to the metaphorical “shades” that the porch casts, the “hot,” allegedly insoluble, Southern issues of class, race, and gender, after “cooling” and “ventilation,” confront the mainstream cultural questions.

An example of such metaphorical “shade” or “breeze,” found on the Southern porch and moderating the Southern “hot” folklore is oral storytelling. Naturally associated with the porch (Beckham, “Porches” 515), oral storytelling is linked with the deficient Southern agrarian economy. For the majority of Southerners, such economy meant the need to learn how to live “in andante” (Goldfield 71), or, as Paul D. Escott puts it, the need to “sit back and observe the spectacle of life instead of constantly pushing towards a self imposed goal” (8). In the “oppressive heat of the South, particularly the Deep South” where it is “hard to muster the energy to move more than lips and arms for conversation” (Donlon 39), storytelling turns into a form of leisure or work-wisdom. In the end, the front porch, as the celebrated Southern site of storytelling, helps to conjure the Southern identity into art. The awareness of the transcultural Southern identity has influenced the way Southern fiction has construed the porch as a literary and cinematic image. From *The Birth of a Nation* to the films by David Gordon Green, and from *Swallow Barn* to the books by Tina McElroy Ansa, there have been very few narratives by Southern writers or film-makers which do not fictionalize the porch in one way or another. A frequent common feature of texts and films about the South is their concern with ideological contention.

The presentation of the Southern front porch in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) illustrates the idea of “boundary struggle.” Set in Florida during the 1930s, the novel tells the story of Janie Crawford, an African American woman in her late thirties. Janie struggles to define herself within the all-black, self-governing community of the town of Eatonville – one of the few such towns that existed in the Jim Crow South – which Hurston calls “the porch.” Naming the site where the people of Eatonville meet in groups, the word “porch” suggests that the town creates its community ties through the typically Southern collective activity of watching and gossiping. This is a ritual also found in the all-white societies, which implies that Eatonville’s all-black community is not so independent, because actually it follows the white practice of protecting and projecting the unique racial status. Moreover, the people on the Eatonville “porch” pay attention to and talk about Janie’s light skin and her long, almost straight hair, stressing that she is a “bell cow,” unlike the rest of the “gang.” In other words, she is the town’s Other, bound to be “classed off” rather than to remain its part (39, 112).

Janie's "otherness" within her own community has a rather drastic manifestation when Joe Starks, the mayor of Eatonville and Janie's husband, removes her from his store porch, the town's chief meeting place. He orders her to either go inside the store he owns or sit alone on the front porch of their house. There, detached from people who "sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see" and who made these thoughts "crayon enlargements of life" (51) – and excluded from the process of changing "gossiping" into "storytelling" – Janie is supposed to play the role her husband envisaged for her and be a "pretty doll-baby," "rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for [her]" (29). In other words, she represents but a "crayon enlargement" of black male fantasy about his own power and status. Characteristically, "sittin' on porches lak de white madam" (114) was what Janie's grandmother, born in slavery, hopelessly aspired to and dreamed of for her granddaughter. In succumbing to Jody's vision of her on their front rather than on the store porch, Janie symbolically helps to reinforce the old Southern order which had enslaved people in its "exclusive" social practices that sustained class dominance and male hegemony. In the eyes of the people on the store porch, she is the one who only "sle[eps] with authority and so [is] part of it" (46), and thus she is neither an individual person in her own right, nor a typical community member.

Feeling pacified rather than accepted or loved, Janie begins to quest for her own self soon after the death of her oppressive husband. She is now the owner of Jody's both porches and decides to occupy, on a regular basis, the store porch. After placing herself in the middle of community life and reinventing male relations in female terms, Janie begins to assert her power by inviting some people to the front porch of her house and at the same time limiting its availability to others. By the end of the book, Janie is no longer a mere fixture in someone else's "crayon enlargement of life" but a living and loving human being, and she tells her life story to her cousin Pheoby while sitting on the back porch of her own house, a true story-teller rather than a mere gossip or gossip listener. The fact that Janie eventually allows Pheoby to retell her story to the townspeople suggests Janie's conscious consent to confront her newly discovered self with the norms symbolized by the porch and, in effect, to change the porch from a place of control into a space for self-liberation.

The liberation of the voice of a Southern community storyteller is also thematized in Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1993). "Born on the wrong side of the porch," as one of her colleagues said, using a phrase applying to black people and meaning "to be an illegitimate child" (54), Bone Boatwright, the novel's narrator, is in the beginning as alienated from the community as Hurston's Janie. In the South Carolina of the 1950s, where people observe the strict rule of racial segregation, Bone, a poor, white,

ten-year-old girl, whose mother does not even want to mention her father's name, plays a role of the white community's own "nigger" (84). Abused sexually and physically by her step-father, Daddy Glen Waddell, she resembles black female slaves, who went through similar ordeals. She becomes a "black sheep" in the family, which aggravates the contempt with which the community treats her. When Bone's mother, Anney, learns about the abuse, she chooses to live with Daddy Glen and sends Bone to Aunt Raylene, Anney's lesbian sister. Bone's femininity is thus recognized as a threat to white heterosexual norms. Allison portrays a white girl who, in the eyes of the white community, the "right side of the porch," has the courage to question the communal standards, and hence she is the community's "bone of contention."

Similarly to Hurston's Janie, from the perspective of the porch, Bone is the Other, which, paradoxically, gives her the power to transgress the boundaries determined by stereotypes. For example, when she watches three black children from the porch of her Aunt Alma's downtown apartment, Bone thinks that they are prettier than white kids:

The cheekbones were as high as mine, the eyes large and delicate with long lashes, while the mouth was small, the lips puffy as if bee-stung, but not wide. The chocolate skin was smooth, so polished, the pores invisible. I put my fingers up to my cheeks, looked over at Grey and then back down. Grey's cheeks were pitted with blackheads and flushed with sunburn. I'd never thought about it before, but he was almost ugly. (84)

The transgressive idea expresses Bone's ability to come to terms not only with her own "white nigger" status, but also with the Southern craze "on the subject of color," as Bone herself puts it elsewhere (54).

When Bone takes family pictures on her Granny's porch, the place which "has ever seemed so sweet and quiet... so much like home" (22), she realizes the toxic relationship between her mother, a "white trash" girl, and Daddy Glen's, a wealthy white man:

I stood and looked back at them, Granny up on the porch with her hesitant uncertain smile, and Mama down on the steps in her new blouse with Glen in that short brush haircut, while Alma posed on the walkway focusing up at them. Everybody looked nervous but determined, Mama stiff in Glen's awkward embrace and Glen almost stumbling off the steps as he tried to turn his face away from the camera. It made my neck go tight just to look at them. (39)

Bone's Mama's is stiff in the arms of her man, and he looks away from the camera, which suggests their mutual lack of openness and the reluctance to share life together,

even though they seem to represent the “right side of the porch.” Bone, then nine years old, is the only person in her family who notices this; she thus reveals her potential to undermine the mythical racial solidarity.

Bone loses her illusions about the Southern porch and her place on it, but she learns to articulate her true identity. In the final scene of the novel, abandoned by her mother, Bone sits on her lesbian aunt’s porch with her “blank, unmarked, unstamped” bastard birth certificate in her hand and ponders her present and future:

My eyes were dry, the night a blanket that covered me. I wasn’t old. I would be thirteen in a few weeks. I was already who I was going to be. I tucked the envelope inside my pocked. When Raylene came to me, I let her touch my shoulder, let my head tilt to lean against her, trusting her arm and her love. I was who I was going to be, someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman. I wrapped my fingers in Raylene’s and watched the night close in around us. (309)

The fact that she does not belong to one social or ethnic category, but rather is a part of many worlds, which Bone realizes on the porch and in the arms of her notorious aunt, attests that she is much more than just a survivor, as some critics have pointed out (Donlon 150). Rather, Bone is an explorer of threshold spaces, which, albeit traditionally seen as “impure” and “unsafe,” give her safety and confidence. On the porch, she becomes a conscious transgressor, ready to face the world on her own terms.

The temperament for transgression helps Bone to combine her “white nigger” identity with her own voice, which ultimately liberates her from the status of “white trash,” whether in life or in literature. A similar kind of temperament has dramatically opposite effects in the case of Thomas Sutpen, the hero of William Faulkner’s novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Sutpen is a “white trash” boy from West Virginia, who lives there without any awareness of the divisions in the South. The discovery of those divisions comes to him as a shock, when his father sends him with a message to the house of the wealthy plantation owner. Standing on the “portico” (229), he is not allowed in by the “monkey-dressed nigger butler” (231) and instructed to “never to come to that front door again but to go round to the back” (232). At the sound of these words, thirteen-year-old Sutpen “kind of dissolve[s] and a part of him turn[s] and rush[es] back through the two years they had lived there” (229-30). Later on, having improved his social position and acquired a portico on his own, he, too, orders people like Wash Jones and Bon, two witnesses of his “threshold transgressions,” to leave his porch and house. The discovery of the thresholds in the Southern system arouses Sutpen’s determination to defend the existing boundaries, which is

not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life, never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on, with all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right, fix things right so that he would be able to look in the face not only the old dead ones but all the living ones that would come after him when he would be one of the dead. (220)

Ironically enough, people who are descendants of the Southern white elite tell Sutpen's story, the story which Sutpen himself repudiated in his chase for the unattainable, if at all existing, aristocratic ideal of the Southern life.

Another character who believes that a particular class represents the "salt of its earth" and who fails to "cross the threshold of her family history" (Donlon 19) is Jennifer Bingham, the heroine of *Oral History* (1983) by Lee Smith. A contemporary urban, middle-class descendant of the Cantrell family from Hoot Owl Holler in West Virginia, Jennifer visits her relatives, but not out of family sentiments. She wants to complete a project on oral history and she wishes to do well in her course, therefore she equips herself with a tape-recorder to record the stories about a ghost that haunts the family home. She hopes she will attract the attention of her oral history instructor who takes great interest in folklore.

Jennifer hears the stories about her family on the Cantrell porch rather and considers them as sheer romantic lore with a pastoral tinge. Thanks to the "ghost" tape, Jennifer earns the highest grade and fascinates the instructor, whom she marries right after graduation. She never returns to the Cantrell porch or meets any of her Appalachian relatives again. Accordingly, Jennifer, a modern Southern woman, in the history of the porch is just another ghostly presence. Yet, her voice, like the "banging and crashing" voice of the ghost, reverberates within the walls and pillars of the porch so as to "satisfy even the most hardened cynic in the class" (284).

However, Jennifer's ghostly presence on the porch of the Cantrells' rural house does not need to be read as the end of this porch's role as an important transcultural space. On the contrary, such a presence implies that the contemporary porch has accommodated itself to the changing conditions of Southern culture and embraced the development of the varied regional traditions. Such a possibility is also highlighted in Tina McElroy Ansa's 1989 novel *Baby of the Family*, the story of the prosperous African American family of Lena McPherson. Symptomatically, the real front porch of the McPherson house does not face the street but is situated "on another side of the house... directly opposite the formal front porch" (65) and serves as a "private retreat" (63), whereas in

the place of the front porch proper there is a “small open porch with two painted wooden posts supporting the roof” (63), where potted ferns are left to wither in wintertime. Such an inversion in the use of an important spatial element sheds new light on the dual symbolic function of Southern porches: they allow for separation and for exchange in the same degree.

There are two other porches in the McPherson house: one extends from the kitchen and serves a storage place, and the other, described as “really more a small covered patio than a porch” (65), with a glazed door, offers an unobstructed view of the house’s inside and outside. With four different porches, the house appears to be a “community unto itself with a mind of its own” (63). The porches mark the limits of Lena’s living space. Because of a caul over her face, she is considered a “special baby” (6), who can see ghosts and spirits and communicate with them. Lena’s unique gift epitomizes the contemporary South’s capacity to connect itself to other places, to transcend its own limits, and ultimately to function as a “space.” The region becomes a “privileged meeting place of collective life,” an imagined community, America’s “special baby,” whose transcultural legacy, as Lena’s dead Grandmother once explained to her, must be “take[n] on faith” and cannot be “throw[n] away (265). However, if Southerners were to turn away from such a legacy, “it’s like telling somebody who love you to kiss your ass” (265), to quote Lena’s Grannie again.

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