

Bonding People Through Storytelling: Community, Humor and the Porch in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

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Abstract

The present article will examine the African American porch as the nexus of the community and the stage upon which the Black oral tradition becomes art and people, active participants in the recreation of communal ties. We will cast an in-depth look at the porch actors and their performance as depicted in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. The analysis of the porch as an intermediary site opens with a discussion of the origins of this piece of Americana and its crucial cultural function, especially for the African American communities located in the southeastern part of the United States. Several other distinctive attributes of the porch will be identified, all linked to and representative of the community. Ultimately, this article highlights the paramount role of storytelling as a unifying force for a community, through the prism of Naylor's novel, deemed as a faithful rendition of the Black Southern cultural expression.

Keywords: storytelling, community, cultural memory, porch, dialogism

The power of the porch is the power of spoken language.

—Trudier Harris

A Southern porch is a concept as well as a place.

—Eugene Walter

Specific to the South of the United States, the porch appears mainly in works by Southern writers or in novels that reconfigure a Southern story or setting. Certainly, behaviors associated with the porch are not exclusively Southern; however, the geographical position and the natural conditions, the rustic lifestyle, and the slowness specific to this region

have contributed to its idealization in literature as a Southern locale. In African American literature, the porch holds a primordial role in the life of the community as the privileged place for social interaction, storytelling, and the preservation of cultural heritage. This paper seeks to underscore the pivotal role of storytelling as a unifying force for a community, especially when intertwined with humor and performed within the heart of community life—the porch. From the rich African American literary production set in the South, spanning from Zora Neale Hurston to Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ernest Gaines, August Wilson, and more, we direct our attention to Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1989) as an example of the artful depiction of a Southern Black community and its survival through storytelling.

In times of slavery, porch gatherings established the cultural frames of reference that contributed to the articulation of African American culture. Edward Casey (1997) suggests that “a *communitas* is not just a matter of banding together but of *bonding together* through rituals that actively communalize people—and that require particular places in which to be enacted” (p. xiv). Apart from their aesthetic or recreational role, the porch-related cultural activities were psychological devices with a therapeutic value, a means of survival for the individual and the entire community (Blassingame, 1979). Personal and collective memories were encoded in the stories told on the porch and validated in the act of speaking and answering back—a distinctive feature of African American cultural expression, known as the call-and-response tradition.

Group identification, implying specific behavioral values and positive self-concepts, delineated a communal site of resistance located precisely on the porch.¹ The isolated microcosm of the Black porch excluded the control of the master; no laborious tasks were to be performed here, no color lines to be crossed and negotiated with, but most of all, no disruptive intrusions. Given such a relaxed geographical setting, one understands the multi-faceted positive functions that the porch acquires in African American culture and literature as well. A pseudo stage on which African folk culture was perpetuated, this site becomes the recipient of cultural heritage, hence a vital presence in the life of the social group.

The porch is present in African American literature as an integral part of the rural experience and as one of the most appropriate settings for telling stories. For Trudier Harris (1996), porch-sitting is historically and literally a Southern institution. It resembles another primordial locale within the black community—the barbershop. The two sites act

¹ These values were characterized by unique cultural forms in religion, music, storytelling, dancing and conjuring. As Blassingame (1979) explains, the African heritage constituted the catalyst of the Black slave community on the North American continent.

as way stations, points of contact, and ultimately, universal provisional homes. By extension, any place where people congregate may be seen as a variation of the porch. Harris (1996) astutely observes that “the power of the porch is the power of spoken language” (p. 58). When language comes into discussion, we must reflect upon the linguistic disempowerment of African peoples during times of slavery.² The separation from value-defining factors, such as their native languages and oral literatures, also entailed a psychological disempowerment. Moreover, the African oral cultures were transplanted into an adopted language, the language of the master, which was attempting to immobilize them as slaves. Nevertheless, the uprooted slave maintained the link with Africa through folk tales, music, re-enacted customs, and religion. The faithful preservation of the African cultural heritage is most evident in the rich Gullah culture of the African American communities located in the southeastern United States, more precisely in the coastal regions and the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia. Storytelling is a vital element of the vibrant Gullah oral tradition and is faithfully portrayed in Naylor’s book.

Mama Day is a story told on the porch *par excellence*: the readers are informed from the first lines: “we’re sitting here on Willow Springs” (Naylor, 1989, p. 10); everything takes place on the island, more precisely on the porch. The audience is invited to listen to the recreated communal stories of Willow Springs, a fictive sea island located off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. The readers are on the porch and beyond it, separated by space and time, voluntary extensions of the authorial voice (Harris, 1996), while the book becomes a contact zone between writer/narrator and reader.

The strategy Naylor employs in the novel is that of the first-person narrator directly addressing the audience. This omniscient voice plays a tripartite role: narrator in the text, representative of the community, and storyteller in relation to the readers/listeners. It occupies a vital part in the narrative texture by establishing himself/herself as a legitimate oral historian of the community who intimately knows Southern traditions and customs. By using the first person plural, the island voice also conveys the locals’ perspective on the narrated events;

² The African and the European cultures came in contact first in the Caribbean and then on the American continent. Blassingame (1979) explains the disappearance of the traces of African languages after two or three generations, while the acquisition of the European languages was very slow and lasted for two centuries (the 17th and the 18th). This process of intercultural cross-fertilization subsequently crystallized in unique configurations in African American culture. The Creole spoken in the Caribbean or the Gullah spoken on the Sea Islands, in South Carolina and Georgia, has undergone a peculiar fate, its survival defying the passage of time. These Sea Islands have been the home of West African slaves, ex-slaves, and their free descendants for centuries. The paradoxical survival of the Gullah was possible because of the unique setting: independent and self-sufficient islands, cut off from the mainland and free from outer influence. While only superficially addressed in this paper, the vibrant and unique Gullah cultural heritage deserves to be credited more extensively in subsequent research endeavors.

it, therefore, creates the impression of reliability and the degree of trust required in the relation between reader/listener and storyteller. Harris (1996) identifies three stages in the validating process employed by the omniscient narrator: it avoids rejection by being superficially democratic, it draws upon the notion of inequality in slave culture through the use of sharp irony, and finally, it invites the hearer to listen to the fantastical story of Sapphira Wade, the African ancestor of the community. The narrator adroitly enters a dialogue with an outsider audience from “beyond the bridge” tactfully establishing the porch connection which “serves as an interactive metaphor for tellers and listeners” (Harris, 1996, p. 57) and provides a sense of real-time and reliability.

In addition, Naylor skillfully employs interactive patterns of the porch talk in the structure of the novel to convey a sense of immediacy by actively involving the reader/listener/spectator. This strategy of inviting the readers to become ‘hearers,’ is prevalent in African American literature as “a storytelling paradigm” (Stepito, 1991). By mastering the orality specific to the Black Southern tradition, the narrative voice in *Mama Day* manipulates reality, bringing the porch talk to the level of art. Active listening is required, and the directives “[u]h, huh, listen. Really listen this time” (Naylor, 1989, p. 10) given to the audience establish the connection between the author, characters, and audience.

A consideration of the main features of the porch would not be complete without a note on verbal art as performance, albeit superficially addressed in this paper. Storytelling involves performance in African and African American cultures: “it’s acting out [...] and everybody is in the play” (p. 63), claims Zora Neale Hurston (1937). More specifically, performance is an organizing principle which implies an artistic action as well as an artistic event (Bauman, 1975). Folkloric performance is understood as a communicative phenomenon, as “a unifying thread tying together the marked, segregated esthetic genres and other spheres of verbal behavior into a general unified conception of verbal art as a way of speaking” (Bauman, 1975, p. 291). Performance follows speaking, drawing together the members of a community: it is inclusive of both myth narration and the speech expected by the social group. Acting, in Bauman’s understanding, is a behavior rendered meaningful with the help of relevant contexts—the communal porch in this paper.

From an experiential point of view, we distinguish two types of porches, or contact zones, in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*: the communal porch and the porch of the house. The first is the center of the community, while the second creates the link between public and private (the front porch) or between home and nature (the back porch). The public porch, the focus of the present paper, represents the privileged gathering place of the community,

the stage upon which cultural activities are enacted and where group bonding is reinforced. The porch of the general store is a supportive milieu, a retreat from home and from the world outside, where people can communicate beyond everyday pressure. Conversely, the more private porches of dwellings appear as comfortable and comforting sites of repose and retreat after the hard day's work: "sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car" (Naylor, 1989, p. 10). Both contact zones are settings where the communitarian "eternal return" to an ancestral past takes place; they are dialogic (linked to storytelling and memory) and rhizomatic (existing in several places on the island).

Naylor's novel presents a jolly, gregarious community which revolves around the matriarch Miranda—a direct descendant of Sapphira. This self-sufficient social group displays an ideal balance between memory, time, and space. For its members, traveling through memory amounts to a proud reassertion of their African roots, according to the porch talk:

we was being un-American. And the way we saw it, America ain't entered the question at all when it come to our land: Sapphira was African-born, Bascombe Wade was from Norway, and it was the 18&23'ing that went down between them two put deeds in our hands. And we wasn't even Americans when we got it—was slaves. (Naylor, 1989, p. 5)

Two main activities unfold on the public porch: the coming together of people and storytelling. Memory, as the place where the past lives, is reactivated and put to the test in this polyphonic setting; audience participation is expected and encouraged. The many voices and perspectives recreate a multi-vocal communal mind, their memories invoking a multi-vocal past. The sense of belonging to the community is therefore constructed in the overlapping of these versions of the collective stories and memories of its members.³ Thus, multiple perspectives are not only welcomed but also necessary; they delineate a palimpsest porch, which echoes Edward Soja's *thirdspaces* which are sites where "everything is seen as a simultaneously historical–social–spatial palimpsest, [...] in which inextricably intertwined temporal, social, and spatial relations are being constantly reinscribed, erased, and reinscribed again" (Soja, 1996, p. 18). The notion of palimpsest implies a temporal coordinate, as much as it requires material support—the communal porch in this case. This *thirdspace* is not only a fixed point of reference for the community, it also is a sacred site due to the many functions it plays for the collective memory of the island.

³ The sense of community, claims Page (1999), exists in each member's mind, as the totality of possible voices, thoughts and dreams. Individual and collective memories are encoded in the stories told on the porch and are validated in the act of speaking and of answering back.

In *Mama Day*, three rather contradictory versions of the island's myth of origin coexist as part of the collective memory reiterated on the porch:

And somehow, some way, it happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days. 1823: married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman's noose, laughing in a burst of flames. 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble, to go on and bear seven sons—by person or persons unknown. (Naylor, 1989, p. 3)

The omniscient narrator indiscriminately presents these layers of the island's cosmogony as early as the first page. The stories are, in fact, variations on the same theme—the female ancestor and 1823 recorded as the year of her great deeds. According to the island voice, it is a heuristic approach to myth “depending upon which of us takes a mind to her [Sapphira]” (Naylor, 1989, p. 3). The didactic repetition of the ancestor's brave exploits reinforces Willow Springs' collective identity which is crystallized in the contact zone of the porch along with the community's sense of place and time.⁴

People congregate in front of the general store or the barbershop, strategically located at the crossroads, in “the little L-shaped section of stores in the junction of the road that heads toward the bridge” (Naylor, 1989, p. 185). They gather here for a variety of interactive purposes: to talk and to listen, to discuss and to debate, to see and to be seen, to analyze and to judge. There is always a welcoming atmosphere and a congenial audience for stories to be told or for information to be transmitted. This contact zone is indeed the heart of the island.⁵ “The folks” come for fellowship, conversation, and companionship paired with Dr. Buzzard's famous moonshine,⁶ useful in untying tongues. The front porch has an overt and strategic setting: it is a world from which the passers-by cannot hide. The townsfolk parade in front of it and are challenged by those who are seated there watching “the human comedy.” Since the porch is community-oriented, everyone knows

⁴ As a rhizomatic and palimpsest locale, the contact zone records and sediments layers of stories (or of the same story/myth), which are all versions of the collective memory, delineated by Leichter's reading of Ricoeur as “sediments and habits of a shared life, and can be the site where memories of what happened are recounted, exchanged, revised, and challenged. [...] Communal memory appears to arise through the places we inhabit” (Leichter, 2012, p. 126).

⁵ The communal porch is the center of the male world, but it is by no means restricted to women; on the contrary, the island voice depicts a democratic matricentric society on Willow Springs. Private porches tend to be female-oriented, however.

⁶ Very illustrative is the name of the protagonist—Dr. Buzzard. It is reminiscent of the African American trickster tales recounting of Brer Buzzard who, instead of working for food, tricks the other animals until he encounters wittier animals, such as Brer Monkey or Brer Rabbit (Myers, 1996).

everyone else's business and comments upon and judges it, sometimes with a dose of malice: "yeah, the folks can say all the mean things they want" (p. 134). Along with the barbershop or the beauty parlor, the porch is the center for the dissemination of scandal and gossip. "Small places live on small talk," admits the omniscient narrator, and people like to "get the fat out of happenings and chew it over" (p. 132).

The witty porch extends towards the community and is an active contact zone, providing the site for the discussion of political, social, and moral issues. Dialogic⁷ in nature, it is characterized by openness and free exchange of information among its members: they judge and analyze to an extent that would be unacceptable or, at least awkward, outside this communal environment. Interestingly enough, the reader is never presented with the actual porch talk as the island voice monopolizes the exchanges, yet (s)he provides without any discrimination the faithful rendition of the captivating conversations. These discussions are not necessarily founded on divergent opinions—the arguments are only generators of the dialogue. The simple act of congregating can alone reinforce the existence of the community as a set of firm connections between people, place, and the oral history of the place.

The use of hyperbole is very common in these verbal exchanges and is required to maintain the interest of the listeners/readers. There are fantastic accounts of the cosmogony of the island since "it got spit from the mouth of God" (Naylor, 1989, p. 110) or supernatural deeds which punctuate its history. These myths are now part of the collective memory; for example, the ancestor of the island, Sapphira, who "[c]ould walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot" (p. 3). Anchored in imagination, one of Dr. Buzzard's personal stories recounts his brave fight with the demons: "there was six of them suckers: two hanging off an oak tree, [...] two growing big as cows with gleaming yellow teeth and trying to stomp his still to pieces, and the other two raising general hell" (p. 92). Due to the repetitive nature of these stories, the verbal exchange is potentially ritualizing as well as re-actualizing.

Even if it is not presented *per se*, the porch performance on Willows Springs serves as a crucial element in facilitating humor. This burlesque aspect of the dialogue is important

⁷ We approach here Bakhtin's theory pertaining to dialogical relationships that are contained within the chronotope, seen as the intersection of the novelistic space and time: "The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are dialogical (in the broadest use of the word). [...] It (this dialogue) enters the world of the author, of the performer, and the world of the listeners and readers." (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 252).

in releasing tensions and conveying a relaxed atmosphere of credibility, further used by the narrative voice to describe supernatural settings and events in a way that most audiences could find acceptable.⁸ There are stories being told and there is one active dynamic spectator: the crowd on the porch or “the same group hitched up on chairs outside of Parris’s barbershop” (Naylor, 1989, p. 160). Humor is created by inherent distortions and exaggerations—strategies for providing the audience with a good story and an appropriate subject that may be chewed over later on.

The narrative voice does not hesitate to present his/her own opinions and heartily indulges in the conversation. In his/her ironic hilarious way, the island voice shares with the reader some of the hot topics of discussion for which “there’s no end to what could be said” (Naylor, 1989, p. 133). Such is Cocoa’s marriage with “a big-time railroad man, some say. An engineer and all—owns his own train. Some argue back that an engineer only *runs* a train” (p. 132). Ruby (the villain of the story and the voodoo practitioner) and her future marriage are also the talk of the season, therefore “Willow Springs owes Ruby a debt of gratitude” (p. 133) in that respect. Details about the event receive close attention, as is, for instance, Ruby’s wedding dress: “[t]alk had it that she needed three bolts of cloth, but that’s just being evil. One bolt will surely do it—it’s to be a short dress” (p. 133). The porch-sitters have a joke for every pound on Ruby, the island voice admits, “yet, you couldn’t rightly call Ruby fat—she’s amazing” (p. 134). That is the way of things to “go out loud like that inside the beauty parlor or in front of the general store” (p. 133). No member of the community is spared from the sharp-witted scrutiny of this public forum, which acts as a regulator and evaluator of the community itself.

The communal porch is pure wit and mockery, and the omniscient voice deliberately engages the reader in the discussion, transforming even the most common events into comic tales: “there’s something new each week to carry talk along” (Naylor, 1989, p. 133). One of the most entertaining stories is related to the “new hotshot deputy [who] wanted to show off his badge while it was still shiny” (p. 80). It happened, of course, on the porch in front of the store on Willow Springs. The incident also serves as an indirect validation of the porch as the nexus of the community, and this, by an external white party. “The rest is history” (p. 80) or again, porch talk: the deputy losing his way in the cypress marsh, scared by one of the most terrifying lightning storms Willow Springs had known in a decade. As if the story were not comic enough in itself, its aftermath

⁸ The main issues that the audience must accept are: the pseudo-dialogue between Cocoa and her late husband, the miraculous events taking place on the island or the story itself whose narrative time is August 1999 while the novel was published in 1988.

is converted into another humorous tale. The would-be trickster⁹ of the island, Dr. Buzzard, a harmless hoodoo man, claimed that the event was due to his remarkable magic:

A week later Dr. Buzzard done drawn himself twice the crowd in front of Parris's barber-shop and tripled the number of haints he fought off in the south woods. Started out selling his mojo hands for a dollar-fifty—genuine graveyard dust and three-penny nails in a red flannel bag—when he'd used it to scatter two of them demons out of his sight. (Naylor, 1989, pp. 91–92)

The most suitable place to show off is yet again on the porch but in front of Parris's barbershop this time. Even though nobody takes Dr. Buzzard for granted, the folks listen to him for the sake of entertainment, which is amplified even more when high-witted persons like Mama Day put him to shame: "Miranda leaves the crowd laughing and stamping its feet" (p. 92). The adjectival pronoun "*its*" used instead of the more appropriate one "*their* feet" confirms the cohesion of the group. Moreover, the fact that "Dr. Buzzard's sales was certain to fall off a little this afternoon" (p. 92) exemplifies how receptive and sensitive the porch sitters may be in taking the side of the wittiest speaker. Dr. Buzzard's humiliation by a woman, even though she is the matriarch of the island, is yet another situation, but the omniscient narrator refrains from commenting upon it since Mama Day is a highly respected figure.

The communal porch on Willow Springs is a site of encounter with a touch of a mock courtroom as well. When long-absent natives return, they first meet with the porch, as it happens with Reema's son, "the one with the pear-shaped head" (Naylor, 1989, p. 7). The native turned-ethnographer is not even named in the novel and all his efforts of "putting Willow Springs on the map" (p. 7) are scrupulously ridiculed when "[he] came hauling himself back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder and a funny way of curling up his lip and clicking his teeth" (p. 7) or when "he rattled on about 'ethnography,' 'unique speech patterns,' 'cultural preservation,' and whatever else he seemed to be getting so much pleasure out of" (p. 7). Yet, the results of the ethnographer's fieldwork are worthless for the community: "didn't mean us

⁹ A complex protagonist, Dr. Buzzard appears very close to Esu, the trickster-figure in Yoruba mythology, extensively analyzed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1998) in *The Signifying Monkey*. According to Gates, the theme of the trickster transmitted in black vernacular tradition functions "as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, improvised upon in ritual—especially in the rituals of the repeated oral narrative—and willed to their own subsequent generations, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent" (Gates, p. 5). A mediator, a disruptor, a Dionysian prototype, as well as an "expert in medicine or magic" (Gates, p. 5) or moonshine, Dr. Buzzard is omnipresent on the communal porch of Willow Springs.

a speck of good" (p. 7). More so, to the general entertainment, the narrative voice adds that he "put his picture on the back of the book so we couldn't deny it was him" (p. 7).

On occasion, the porch can become the scene of confrontation between its members and outsiders. Paralleling Pratt's definition of a contact zone,¹⁰ the communal porch and the bridge located in its vicinity block the inevitable intrusion of the outside world in the island community: "we done learned that anything coming from beyond the bridge gotta be viewed real, real careful" (Naylor, 1989, p. 7). These outsiders must learn to cope with the crowd's scrutiny and evaluation if they are to be granted entry to the island.¹¹ It is the case with the new deputy who "[c]ome on up to the general store and stumbled across a jar of Dr. Buzzard's moonshine and figured he was on to bigger game" (p. 80) or with the entrepreneurs who tried to buy land on Willow Springs: "them developers [who] started swarming over here like sand flies at a Sunday picnic" (p. 6). The communal voice, always employing the first person plural, indicates: "we knew to send 'em straight over there to her [Mama Day] and Miss Abigail" because if "uh, uh. Mama Day say no, everybody say no" (p. 6); the two sisters being the community's pillars. Mostly confrontational as a site of encounter, the porch and its folks are more distant to intruders and their first impulse would be to ridicule rather than extend a warm welcome.

There is one communal porch on Willow Springs but there are many other pseudo-porches, all fulfilling the same functions in the community. The barbershop, the prayer meetings, or the South woods where men accompany Dr. Buzzard to play cards, drink moonshine, and sing gospel songs are described with the same wit and humor. The barbershop, a standard substitute of the porch, is the place where folks "will wander in and talk about what ain't been brought into the general store for them to buy if they had the money. Will even get into hot arguments about the quality of goods that ain't on the shelves" (Naylor, 1989, p. 132). This is simply because "more than talking about what is, the folks love to talk about what might be" (p. 132), always eager to add an element of curiosity and engagement to yet another highly-anticipated story.

¹⁰ Pratt (1992) borrows the term "contact" from linguistics, where the concept of "contact language" refers to creoles languages (see the Gullah culture). In Pratt's definition, a "contact zone" is synonymous with "colonial frontier" and is regarded as the space of colonial encounters, the place in which geographically and historically separated people interact. These contacts, claims Pratt, are founded usually on coercion, radical inequality, and conflict. Pratt's definition of 'contact zone' as 'colonial frontier' cannot be fully applied to Naylor's novel which depicts a self-sufficient Gullah community that proudly rejects any form of oppression.

¹¹ If the intruders manage to enter the island community, they are "deconstructed" piece by piece (first on and by the communal porch): Reema's boy's conduct is closely scrutinized and ridiculed, "dragging his notebooks and tape recorder," "talking in his little gray machine" (MD 7), the deputy chased off by a sudden lightning storm, or the entrepreneurs driven away to Mama Day.

The garrulous prayer meetings and the church appear as another replica of the public porch on Willow Springs. Mama Day sarcastically remarks that one has to be present there regularly in order to find “what folks is doing in the evening” (Naylor, 1989, p. 93). Winter is a dead season on the island when nothing spectacular worth gossiping about happens; even Reverend Hooper in his church “gets down in the mouth them winters. All that hell and brimstone in his sermons don’t carry the same kinda sparkle when there ain’t no likely candidates to feed the fires” (p. 132). These variants of the porch, when placed on a Deleuzian rhizomatic¹² map, appear as places of confluence, adjacent to the main road and the communal porch. They are nucleated places which define the community of Willow Springs and much of the plot is related to them. The pseudo-porches are an intragroup phenomenon—they are restricted to this congenial community and emerge as its authentic illustration.

The porch and its substitutes are an outgrowth of the island in *Mama Day*; constant practices and experience have infused these places of transition with a symbolism beyond mere functionality. The front of the barbershop is not only a site where people congregate; it elicits a constant, daily renewal of community ties. A way station, the communal porch is strategically situated in the heart of the community and requires a brief sojourning. It is an open and active space where individual itineraries intersect and mingle; a veritable site of encounter for the island community. Marked by dialogism and “highly charged with emotion and value” (Bakhtin, 2010, p. 248), this place urges communication and provides the setting for collective and personal expression. The role of the porch in facilitating community cohesion is manifest in the didactic rehearsal of collective memory, emphasized in the narration by many other ritualistic practices and processions that are not discussed in this paper.

This small secluded island, a replica of a Gullah community, survived through storytelling and preserved its cultural heritage through the spoken word. To add to its inherent complexity, the porch is best described as a dialogical rhizome; it exists in several locations on the island as an authentic yet repeating site, as an outcome of repetitious gestures (Lefebvre, 1991) which involve and rely on verbal interaction. The audacious and gregarious

¹² In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) develop their theory from the vegetal rhizome as the principle of connection and multiplicity while insisting on its proliferating character. The metaphor of the rhizome denotes a decentralized, democratic, non-hierarchical structure which befits our analysis of the communal porch in Naylor’s novel. Furthermore, the rhizome is also stratified; it is a set of plateaus, implying a verticality, which calls to attention the factors of time and memory, not unlike the Bakhtinian chronotope. In light of Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis, we claim that the porch is also a palimpsest, recording layers or versions of collective memory, an endeavor which is reserved for further research.

community portrayed in the novel elegantly revolves around these dialogic and rhizomatic communitarian nodes, mirroring the rhythm and nuances of the Black vernacular specific to the rich Gullah culture of the Lowcountry in South Carolina, and Georgia. The polyphonic porch is indeed the building block of this small community, the stage upon which the locals use their rich storytelling tradition and prowess to preserve their cultural heritage, entertain, and strengthen the fabric of their community.

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