

**Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon.** *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture.*  
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xii + 193pp. \$55.00, paper, ISBN  
978-0-8078-2652-2.



**Reviewed by** W. Scott Poole

**Published on** H-South (June, 2002)

## Deconstructing the Porch

Southern boys know that the best dates end in a swing on the front porch. Deeply embedded in the southern collective unconscious, the front porch has served as the chosen terrain of courtship rituals and a place to wait for the rare cool breeze and listen to the folklore of older generations. Homemade ice cream, kissable girls, visits with kin and neighbor, granddaddy's stories--all memories that for many southerners cluster around the porch.

Readers interested only in the white, heterosexual, middle class, neo-Victorian nostalgia the reviewer just engaged in will not be pleased with Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon's *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture*. Donlon's excellent study manages to combine history, anthropology, literary criticism, and cultural studies to account for the traditions related to the role of the porch in southern life. The porch, front and back, has functioned as far more than a hospitable agora for the bourgeois South. Donlon carefully shows us instead how this architecture becomes contest-

ed ground, a space for "the intricate interweaving of race, class and culture in the south" (p. 57).

The author begins by making the thoroughly honest and, at least in academic circles, the utterly courageous admission that personal experience of porch life, and her life as a "a southern lower-middle class white woman," has deeply informed her interpretation (p. 11). Donlon, aware of the dangers of autobiography as history, avoids the perils of subjectivity through her own clearly delineated methodology. Employing a large number of personal narratives in conjunction with southern literary works of figures such as Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner and Ernest Gaines enables her to collate a variety of narratives of what porch life has meant for twentieth-century southerners.

Donlon's interpretation begins with the assertion that the southern porch "is a charged transitional space between public and private spheres" (p. 13). The author's consideration of this transitional space moves quickly beyond the traditional picture of the front porch as emblematic of southern hospitality, showing how it acts as a barrier

reflecting racial mores and what she calls, in a wonderfully explicative phrase, "an everyday site of privilege" (p. 93). The multivalent southern porch can represent, as in a story the author tells us about her grandmother, a place where interracial friendship grows out of talk about common work, concerns, and social needs (pp. 87-8). It also can represent a space controlled by the owners of the home within which they negotiate relationships to the Other, a place where both black and white southerners can mark out private space and power in full view of the public world.

Donlon's chapter on courtship ritual, entitled "Fanning the Flames," shows how southerners have intertwined front porch swing lore with family "creation myths" of heterosexual romance, the courting tales of the "original parents" (p. 133). The author delves further, however, examining Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* to reveal how the southern "family romance," and the spatial negotiations involved therein, have exhibited all the darker sides of sexual power in a patriarchal system. Southern porches, Donlon suggests, have been sites of gendered power struggle and abuse as often as they have been places for sipping lemonade. The vocabulary of patriarchal power has even made use of the social linguistics inherent in how families present themselves from their front porch. For example, illegitimate children, or children of uncertain origin in working class families, are sometimes referred to as being "born on the wrong side of the porch."

Donlon's discussion of these darker elements in southern porch life represents the most disappointing section of the work. She certainly shows us that terrible things happen in connection with southern porches, but does not really connect these events to her larger argument. What is it about the semiotic of the porch that makes it a place of real and rhetorical violence? A more thorough deconstruction of some of the elite sources Donlon employs, especially those brimming with saccharine nostalgia, would have bet-

ter served to examine the "other side of the porch" than the few stories she examines that exhibit a clearly savage character.

The same interpretive failings can be seen in her discussion of gay and lesbian porch culture. She uses only two examples of the southern homosexual experience on the porch and these seem disconnected from the rest of her discussion. In order to make her case, Donlon would need substantive fieldwork in some of the south's thriving gay and lesbian communities in places like Atlanta, Savannah and New Orleans. A thorough examination of how gay/lesbian social power functions on the porch, in contrast with those porches that have primarily (though not always exclusively) served as spaces for heterosexual courtship, would be necessary to draw any conclusions on this interesting and important topic.

One theoretical point that deserved more of Donlon's attention concerns her argument that, for southerners, "family and community" ground social identity (p. 27). Donlon assumes rather than proves this point, a crucial one in her discussion since it becomes the basis for her argument that southern families have made use of the porch to assert their social boundaries. Valorizing family and community, however, seems to challenge her discussion of both the role of "place" and "race," both of which seem crucial to her definition of "southern" in other portions of her work (pp. 1, 9). Perhaps these variables are simply so intermingled that they are difficult to disentangle, but this does seem a key point. It should be noted that this elision seems glaring only because of how thoroughly the author illuminated the theoretical underpinnings of the rest of the work.

Another elision, immediately noticeable to historians, concerns periodization. Donlon's evidence, whether fieldwork or literary fiction, comes entirely from the twentieth century, with much of it drawn from the latter half of the century. There is one brief section on the development of the architecture of the porch, and its an-

tecedents in the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe (pp. 57-69). We learn very little, however, about the cultural experience of the southern porch in the antebellum era. Certainly, evidence for the importance of the porch is available through traditional archival research into diaries, personal correspondence, and photographs.

A more serious objection to the author's use of evidence concerns the limited nature of her fieldwork, a point that she herself notes (p. 18). The work really does seem to be about Gulf Coast architecture and experience, with the emphasis on southern Louisiana. The most compelling and convincing parts of her discussion, for example, are drawn from interviews in urban New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Donlon makes good use of this material, discussing the influence of creolized religious practices such as Vodun on porch decoration. The work also contains an informative discussion of the regionally peculiar architectural styles of the New Orleans porch, heavily influenced by the Haitian "ti kay" that became the "shotgun house" in the southern United States.

However, focusing on this fieldwork, in a *sui generis* part of the South, works against the author, undermining her own rather strong assertion that "one prevailing notion that spans cultural boundaries and characterizes the South as a whole is that the porch ... remains integral to southern identity" (p. 19). How did upcountry southerners use the porch? What boundaries did they construct in their world where work, gender, class, and racial mores often differed from the coastal South? Donlon herself admits these limitations on her research, writing that, "I in no way want to claim that this work is the final word on the porch" (p. 18).

*Swinging in Place*, despite its limitations, will interest not only southern historians but also cultural historians and theorists in a number of specialties. Its theoretical sophistication will draw the attention of anyone who wants to consider how the spaces we construct reflect the people we are.

Frankly, I hope the author turns her attention to a larger work on folklore and southern architecture in many different southern regions, interpreting for us how other types of spaces have shaped black and white southern identities.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

**Citation:** W. Scott Poole. Review of Donlon, Jocelyn Hazelwood. *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. June, 2002.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6416>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.