

History and Storytelling: Historical Narratives by Women Authors of the Contemporary American South

Susanne Rothaug (Würzburg)

During the past 20 years, there emerged a particular new kind of historical fiction in the American South. The striking features of these historical novels are: 1) the concentration on aspects of everyday life, usually of a family, in the past, 2) the high number of female authors, 3) the extensive use of modes of “Southern Storytelling,” i.e. oral forms of narrative, of journals, letters, diaries, folk songs and the like, and 4) very importantly: the use of multiperspective in the narrative structure. There are countless examples for novels following this pattern, among them Jayne Anne Phillips’ *Machine Dreams*, Anne Tyler’s *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Lee Smith with *Oral History*, *Family Linen*, *The Devil’s Dream*, Kaye Gibbons’ *Charms for the Easy Life* and *A Cure for Dreams* and others.

To assess the changes in the contemporary scene it is necessary to have a short look at some important features of the South as a distinct region in the U.S. “The South is another land, sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation. [...] [T]hat it is different and that it is solid — on these things nearly everybody is agreed” (Cash 1941:41). This quotation from W.J.Cash’s classic study *The Mind of the South* refers to a distinction that is still present in the United States. There are a number of features that characterize the South and the Southerner, the most important of which is no doubt the affinity to tell stories. As Lee Smith puts it: “We just have a narrative approach to life. [...] It’s like everything is a story, I mean even things somebody from Ohio, say, would not even bother to *mention*, much less think it was a story” (Hood, Smith, and Wilson 1992:306). This trait has always been very important for Southern literature. But the most distinct factor for a regional Southern identity is no doubt the unique historical development that separates the South from the rest of the nation. The conflicts with the North originating in the slavery debate brought about the most important event in Southern history:

the traumatic experience of defeat in the Civil War and the destruction of the Old South's social order during the period of Reconstruction. In the aftermath of the Civil War the "realities" of Southern history were overlaid by a myth of that history which idealized the social values of the pre-war period. This struggle between the "facts" of history and its mythical quality, between illusion and reality, determined the literary development ever since we can speak of a serious independent Southern literature. Especially the *Southern Renaissance* is defined by what Allen Tate called the "backward glance" that the South gave "as it re-entered the world" after World War I (1959:292).

The particularly problematic relationship of the South to its history — i.e., the impossibility of telling fact from fiction — helps to accentuate the basic problems that historiography and historical fiction always have to face.

1) History per definition deals with objects that are out of reach, simply because they lie in the past and therefore are gone forever. History through language provides events with a structure that they do not possess in themselves and it is therefore always already representation through language. There is no history that is not the representation of history. What becomes clear here is the decisive role that the narrative as an anthropological constant plays both in historiography and (of course) in historical fiction. History has to be told as a narrative. Ricoeur calls narrative "the privileged means by which we reconfigure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience [...] Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode" (xi). This narrative mode is also the point where historio-graphy and fictional accounts of history meet. This dependency of historio-graphy on language leads to several problems, especially so since the "linguistic turn" in philosophy and postmodernism's "representational crisis" have called the value of language itself into question. It is obvious that this premise undercuts historical authority and the claim to objectivity and truth implicit in Leopold Ranke's famous dictum that history tell "wie es gewesen ist." So who is to tell what is fact and what is fiction, what reality and what myth in Southern history? Faulkner's classic modernist hero Quentin Compson fails exactly in this attempt to sort out his family's past as an

existential truth. Quentin is a good example of how modernism deals with history: it still seeks a kind of universal truth and it still believes in the humanist, essentialist “identity” of the subject. And this leads to the second major problem that history faces besides the problem of authentic representation.

2) The relationship of history and the human subject: History is not only supposed to have a meaning in itself, but also to have meaning for the individual. History is the most important means of “Selbstvergewisserung” for the subject, because historically it can relate its subjective existence to “objective” events in time. Foucault declares the notion of the humanist subject and the idea of a continual historical process as being mutually dependent:

“Die kontinuierliche Geschichte ist das unerläßliche Korrelat für die Stifter-funktion des Subjekts [...]. Aus der historischen Analyse den Diskurs des Kontinuierlichen machen und aus dem menschlichen Bewußtsein das ursprüngliche Subjekt allen Werdens und jeder Anwendung machen, das sind die beiden Gesichter ein und desselben Denksystems.” (1997:23)

Foucault insists that these systems of thought need to be deconstructed in order to reveal them as logocentric discourses. Accordingly, during post-modernism the idea of historical continuity has been destroyed and subjective agency along with it. Historians evaluate the past according to personal inclinations, existing power relationships and systems of thought and are therefore subject to ideology. For historical *fictions* this means new ways of expressing the unreliability of categories such as truth, fact, fiction etc. John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* did this for Southern history. Barth accepts the mythification of all fact and thus the impossibility of “factual,” let alone existential, truth. Reality and fiction blend into one and can only be played with.

It is obvious that this kind of historiographic metafiction marks the end of the development of historic fiction that began with modernism. So the decisive questions to be asked now are the following: What uses can history and historical fiction be put to in our “post-postmodern” context? In how far can authors of the “Sunbelt South” of the 80s and 90s be expected to draw on traditional elements such as storytelling, history and family? And what role does history play in the “de-historized” contemporary American society, where,

according to Baudrillard, history can only be experienced in “simulacra” of that history or as “spectacle” and “museum piece”? And why is it that “identity” and history are such important themes in the novel?

The answers to these questions can in fact be seen as the logical consequence of poststructuralism’s iconoclastic approach of deconstructing history and the subject as “grand narratives” (Lyotard). This makes it possible for those marginalized and suppressed within this context to claim their own history, or rather *her-story*, as alternative or revisionist historical projects. They have to *rewrite* their stories in order to install themselves as historical subjects. These “micronarratives” of history make it possible to assume a continuity in history without laying claim to any universality of the historical process. There is no one History but only histories. The same revisionist approach holds true for the idea of the subject. The perspectives of minorities and of women necessarily require different notions of the subject because of its different relationship to the dominant discourses. As Nancy Miller puts it: “Only those who have it can play with not having it” (1988:75). Women who try to claim a place in history need a subject position that allows active agency in order to (re)define their place in the past as well as in the present. For these reasons, the idea of “identity” and subjective agency plays a crucial role in contemporary historical novels by women. In these novels, the authors make use of oral traditions, of storytelling as a means of transmitting history, and they usually use the family as a setting. In doing so they place themselves exactly in the tradition of Southern literature as described above and at the same time they change this tradition according to the needs of the present. Their historical fictions have three aims:

- 1) To establish women of the South as historical subjects and *rewrite* their history.
- 2) In doing so, to contest the a-historical traits, the “simulacra” of history in the post-historical society.
- 3) To provide contemporary women with a means of identification through a “usable past.”

The interesting fact about this projects is that the basic methodological problems with history — the “reality-representation” gap and the question of the subject — that have been radicalized during postmodernism are still visible in contemporary texts. In a way, in these contemporary Southern women writers, the heritage of postmodernism meets the requirements of the contemporary scene.

I chose Lee Smith’s *Oral History* and Kaye Gibbons’s *A Cure for Dreams* to illustrate two different versions of dealing with these problems. Lee Smith is primarily concerned with questions of representability, the truth of the past, modes of representation and the effects of history on the female subject. In *Oral History*, these questions are presented in the context of the rural past of the Appalachian mountains and the advent of postmodern American mass culture that threatens to destroy the indigenous mountain culture. The novel begins when Jennifer, a present-day college student, returns to her relatives in the Appalachian village Hoot Owl Holler with a tape recorder for an oral history project. The oral stories she hears about the history and legends of her family make up the main part of the novel. In *Oral History*, Smith contrasts three different discourses of the historical: 1) the written, academic perspective of the “city folks” like in Jennifer’s notebooks and Richard Burlage’s journal, 2) the oral stories of the mountain people, and 3) the “disneyfied” version that American popular culture and commercialism provide. At the same time, Smith uses Jennifer to parody the literary stock situation of the educated person seeking self-knowledge in an idealized past. Jennifer about her project:

One feels that the true benefit of this trip may derive not from what is recorded or not recorded by the tape now spinning in that empty room above me, but from my new knowledge of my heritage and a new appreciation of these colourful, interesting folk. My *roots*. I think this is why Dr. Bernie Ripman urged me from the beginning to choose this as my oral history project: he wanted me to expand my consciousness, my tolerance, my depth. (8)

Her clichéd phrases show clearly that she has no real understanding of what she witnesses, she can only move within the discourse of her naive freshman prose. So she observes about the family: “I think it’s just wonderful the way all of you still live right here in this valley and help each other out,” Jennifer says.

"It's remarkable. Not many people live that way any more." *Extended family situation*, she thinks, but it's too dark to write in the notebook (10). She chooses to ignore the satellite dish, the movie magazines and especially the ironic comments of her supposed grandparents. Instead she wholly believes in her clichés about identity and her roots, about the good old times and the extended family. When she is forced to acknowledge some truths at the end of the novel she still manages to "turn it all around in her head" by the time she leaves, as we learn from Smith's ironic postscript. Jennifer perfectly illustrates why the construction of subjectivity through the past has to fail in her case.

Furthermore, if this is the way how academics treat the past we can infer that Smith values the oral histories as a more authentic and unprejudiced way to the past. They provide a convincing opposition to the totalizing and obscuring discourse of Richard and Jennifer. But even these narratives often contradict each other and almost always show the inability of one particular person to know the whole story, as the multiperspective helps to accentuate. The first archetypal storyteller, and the one with the most authority, is Granny Younger, medicine woman and village elder. She is also the one who initially starts the story about the curse of the Cantrell family. She comments on her narrative: "I know moren you know and mought be I tell you moren you want to hear. I'll tell you a story that's truer than true, and nothing so true is so pretty. It's blood on the moon, as I said. The way I tell a story is the way I want to, and iffen you mislike it, you don't have to hear" (27-28). In Granny's narrative it is apparent from the beginning that she is very much influenced by folk tales, mythology and even belief in witchcraft. But exactly these elements make her tale so vivid and interesting. The old world of mountain clannishness, superstition, blood feuds, dulcimers, quilts, and Appalachian speech really comes back to life in Granny's tale. Sally, the last oral narrator on the other hand, is a down-to-earth person who tries to rationalize her family's history. But even in Sally there remain aspects inexplicable and out of reach of her attempts to grasp the whole truth. "'I'll start at the beginning,' I said, which I did, and although I told it the best I could, I'm still not sure I got it straight" (240). And a little later: "I can see I'll have to start again. It's hard, you know, to

find the beginning. This is not it either, of course — nothing ever is — but this is where we'll start" (250). But Smith is not content with contrasting oral and written records of history. As I said, the third version involves mass commercial culture that counters its own lack of historical consciousness with simulacra of history. In *Oral History* this is exemplified by "Al's grandest plan yet: Ghostland, the wildly successful theme park and recreation area (campground, motel, Olympic-size pool, waterslide and gift shop) in Hoot Owl Holler" (291-92). This project signals the end of the storytelling tradition, the perversion of the family heritage into a consumer product and history into a spectacle. What we have at the end of *Oral History* is a blending of cultures in the worst possible manner: the indigenous folk culture turns into a cheap imitation of itself for the sake of commercial mass culture. The only glimpse of hope that Smith leaves for the reader is the fact that "the old homeplace still stands, smack in the middle of ghostland, untouched" (292).

While Lee Smith problematizes the gap between history and representation, Kaye Gibbons takes advantage, so to speak, of that gap and fills it with a decidedly women-centered version of history. Her subject matter are female subversions of a discourse usually dominated by men. The protagonists of her novels, including *A Cure for Dreams*, are usually women of small-town North Carolina who take pleasure in the art of conversation and discover in *language* a power otherwise inaccessible to them as women in pre-World War II America. The language is also the means of establishing closely knit communities or even networks of women, the most important of which exists among the three generations of women of the Randolph family. Accordingly, the main narrator Betty observes at the opening of the novel: "Talking was my mother's life. I spent my life listening to her." The novel consists of a "patchwork quilt" of these narratives that span three generations and a period of time from 1990 back to 1890. The emphasis on women's relations is to provide a means of identification for the granddaughter Marjorie, but also for women in the present-day South by giving a revised version of their history and of the idealized picture of the Southern Lady. Consequently, in Gibbons's world men are irrelevant at best, at worst abusive. I would like to

point out one episode of the text that tells about men's behavior and women's living conditions at about 1930, and shows clearly how Gibbons means male and female discourses to function in this novel. The scene is the following: The grandmother Lottie and a couple of men are called to the site of a murder. The husband of a woman of the village has been found shot dead in his backyard. Lottie immediately realizes from the condition of the house — half-eaten dinner, irregular last stitches on the famous quilt etc. — that it is Sade herself who committed the murder. "She probably sat and picked at her nice pie and went over every other humiliation and embarrassment, both public and private [...]. Then the thought more than likely dawned on Sade how easy it would be to kill him and be rid of him" (44-45). The signs that Lottie is able to read belong to the inferior discourse of the women's world and are therefore beneath the men's attention. They move within the classic criminalistic discourse of footprints, broken windows and the like. "He didn't know to examine cotton stockings for briar picks, and he didn't know how to see and judge clean and dirty plates, slivers of cut pie, wild stitches, and wailing. This had more to do with the fact that he was full-time male than it did with the fact that he was merely part-time deputy and neither bright nor curious. Details escaped him" (46). The episode ends with Sade not even being suspected. She lives happily ever after, so to speak, with the quilt as a kind of trophy in her new sitting room, formerly her husband's bedroom. Gibbons tries to show with episodes like this that women's discourse *can* be powerful, that women were not totally oppressed in history and that contemporary women therefore can draw on a tradition of power and resistance. Both Gibbons and Smith, each in her own specific mode, relate ways for women toward a "usable past."

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