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CHRONOTOPE AND HISTORICAL MEMORY IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN HISTORICAL FICTION

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Abstract: *The representation of the past in American historical fiction of the second half of the twentieth century is closely connected with the ways in which writers organize narrative time and space. This article examines the chronotope as one of the principal formal devices through which historical experience is reconstructed and reconsidered. The analysis is based primarily on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope and is supplemented by Yuri Lotman's theory of spatial boundaries, Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, and Gaston Bachelard's understanding of intimate space and memory. Six recurring configurations are considered: the road, the threshold and ship, the house, the boundary line, the opposition between cyclical and linear time, and the public square. The discussion focuses on selected novels by Charles Frazier, Michael Shaara, Charles Johnson, Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, Sherley Anne Williams, Thomas Pynchon, N. Scott Momaday, Larry McMurtry, Robert Coover, and E. L. Doctorow. The analysis shows that space and time in these novels are not passive elements of setting. They participate directly in the interpretation of war, slavery, territorial expansion, modernization, racial identity, and national memory. At the same time, the relationship between spatial and temporal elements differs from one novel to another. In some works, geographical movement determines the rhythm of*

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historical time; in others, competing concepts of time give meaning to particular spaces. The variety of these relationships suggests that late twentieth-century American historical fiction cannot be reduced to a single chronotopic model.

Keywords: *chronotope, historical fiction, historical memory, American literature, Bakhtin, narrative space, narrative time, historical consciousness, demythologization*

Introduction

Historical fiction occupies an unusual position between historical fact and literary invention. Its treatment of the past is not limited to reproducing events that can be found in historical records. Writers select particular moments, places, characters, and perspectives and organize them into narratives through which the past acquires a new meaning. For this reason, the formal organization of a historical novel is closely related to the author's understanding of history.

This problem becomes particularly important in American historical fiction of the second half of the twentieth century. During this period, a number of writers returned to such subjects as the Civil War, slavery, westward expansion, indigenous history, modernization, and the political conflicts of the twentieth century. Their treatment of these subjects often differs considerably from earlier historical narratives. Instead of presenting history as a continuous movement toward national progress, they frequently emphasize discontinuity, trauma, conflicting memories, and the difficulty of establishing a single authoritative version of the past.

One useful approach to this problem is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin describes the chronotope as the artistic interrelationship of time and space. Time becomes concrete and

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perceptible through spatial forms, while space becomes meaningful through its relationship to temporal development. In this sense, the chronotope is not simply a description of where and when an event takes place. It is a principle that contributes to the organization of narrative and to the production of meaning (Bakhtin 1981, 84–85).

This approach is especially relevant to historical fiction. Historical events are always experienced somewhere: on a battlefield, on a road, in a plantation house, on a ship, at a territorial boundary, in a city, or within a particular community. These spaces carry traces of earlier events and may also determine how characters understand their own historical position. The relationship between time and space therefore becomes one of the means through which literature interprets history.

The purpose of this article is to examine the principal chronotopic structures found in selected American historical novels of the second half of the twentieth century and to determine how these structures participate in the reinterpretation of historical experience.

Theoretical Background

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope provides the principal theoretical basis for the analysis. He identifies several recurrent forms, including the road and threshold chronotopes. Each of them combines a particular spatial organization with a characteristic form of temporal experience. The road, for example, is associated with encounters and movement, whereas the threshold is associated with crisis and transition (Bakhtin 1981, 243–250).

The application of Bakhtin's theory to twentieth-century American historical fiction requires some caution. Bakhtin developed many of his observations through his study of ancient and medieval literary forms. The novels considered here belong to a very different literary and historical context. They range from realist historical narratives to works characterized by

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postmodern experimentation. Consequently, the similarities between their chronotopic structures should not automatically be understood as evidence of direct generic continuity.

For the purposes of this study, the chronotope is therefore used as a functional category. It makes it possible to examine how particular historical materials influence the construction of narrative space and time.

Yuri Lotman's theory of spatial boundaries provides an important supplement to Bakhtin's approach. Lotman argues that artistic space is frequently organized through oppositions such as inside and outside, one's own and the foreign, or familiar and unfamiliar. A boundary becomes particularly significant when it is crossed, because such a crossing may initiate a change in the narrative situation (Lotman 1990, 131–142).

Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia is also relevant, particularly when the narrative focuses on exceptional spaces. A ship, prison, cemetery, or similar location may operate according to social and temporal rules that differ from those of ordinary life (Foucault 1986, 24–27). Such spaces are especially suitable for narratives dealing with slavery, displacement, imprisonment, and unstable identities.

The analysis of domestic space draws on Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. For Bachelard, the house is closely connected with memory and intimate experience. Rooms, corners, attics, and cellars acquire psychological significance and become part of the individual's experience of space (Bachelard 1994, 8–14). This perspective is particularly useful in examining Toni Morrison's representation of houses marked by the memory of slavery.

Methodology

The article employs comparative textual analysis. The selected novels represent different periods and forms of American historical fiction, but they share an interest in the reconstruction of historical experience.

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The analysis concentrates on six space-time configurations:

- 1) the road chronotope;
- 2) the threshold and ship chronotope;
- 3) the house chronotope;
- 4) the boundary-line chronotope;
- 5) the opposition between cyclical and linear historical time;
- 6) the public-square chronotope.

These categories are not intended as rigid classifications. A single novel may contain several chronotopic structures, and a particular chronotope may acquire different meanings depending on the historical subject and narrative strategy of the work.

The discussion therefore considers three aspects of each example: the organization of space, the representation of time, and the relationship of both to the novel's interpretation of history.

The Road Chronotope

The road chronotope is particularly important in Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* and Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*. Both novels are concerned with the American Civil War, but their use of the road produces different forms of historical experience.

In *Cold Mountain*, Inman's journey through wartime North Carolina provides the main structural framework of the narrative. The road brings him into contact with people who would normally occupy very different positions within the social hierarchy. He encounters a healer, a preacher, fugitives, and violent groups of men. These encounters give the journey an episodic structure and make the experience of war appear fragmented rather than systematically organized.

The road also changes the social relations of the characters. Away from plantations, military structures, and other institutional spaces, distinctions

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between social groups become less stable. A former planter, an escaped enslaved person, and a deserter can encounter one another within the same temporary space. The road thus corresponds closely to Bakhtin's understanding of it as a place where people separated by social distance may meet.

The role of movement is different in Shaara's *The Killer Angels*. Here the movement of military units toward Gettysburg provides the temporal framework of the narrative. The closer the soldiers come to the battlefield, the more compressed the narrative time becomes. Earlier stages of the movement are presented at a relatively slower pace, while the battle itself receives detailed treatment, with events sometimes recorded almost minute by minute.

The connection between distance and narrative duration is significant. As geographical distance decreases, temporal density increases. The road therefore provides a visible form for the growing historical pressure that leads to the battle.

The destinations of the journeys also differ. Gettysburg is a historically identifiable place whose significance derives from the actual Civil War. Cold Mountain, on the other hand, is presented largely through Inman's imagination as a desired home and as a possible return to a world that existed before the war.

The comparison suggests that the road does not have one fixed meaning. It may lead toward a historically documented location or toward a place whose significance is primarily emotional and symbolic.

The Threshold and Ship Chronotope

The threshold chronotope is associated with transition and crisis. In the historical fiction considered here, however, crossing the threshold does not always produce a single decisive transformation. It may instead become a repeated experience of displacement and trauma.

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Charles Johnson's Middle Passage provides an important example. The slave ship Republic is separated from ordinary social space and occupies a position between continents. It belongs fully neither to Africa nor to America. The Atlantic voyage consequently becomes more than a geographical journey. It represents an unstable condition between different identities and forms of existence.

The ship can also be considered in relation to Foucault's notion of heterotopia. Its enclosed space is governed by an extreme social order in which the distinctions between freedom and enslavement, life and death, and belonging and displacement become particularly visible.

Octavia Butler's Kindred presents another version of the threshold chronotope. Dana moves between twentieth-century Los Angeles and antebellum Maryland. The movement is involuntary and occurs when she is placed in situations of physical danger. The temporal transition is therefore accompanied by bodily experience and injury.

An important difference between these examples and the classical threshold model is repetition. Dana does not cross from the present into the past only once. She repeatedly returns to the historical world of slavery. Similarly, Rutherford Calhoun's experience in Johnson's novel is not resolved by one decisive crossing. The threshold becomes a space of recurring crisis.

This repetition changes the meaning of the threshold. Instead of marking a single passage from one condition to another, it represents the persistence of the past within the present. Historical trauma is consequently presented as something that cannot simply be left behind.

The House Chronotope and Historical Memory

Domestic space acquires a special significance in narratives concerned with memory. The house can preserve traces of individual experience, but it can also become a material representation of collective history.



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Toni Morrison's *Beloved* offers one of the clearest examples. The house at 124 Bluestone Road is both a place of refuge and a space dominated by the memory of violence. The ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter makes the past materially present within the house. The building therefore participates directly in the narrative rather than serving simply as a background.

Bachelard's discussion of vertical domestic space is useful here. He associates different parts of the house with different dimensions of consciousness and memory. Morrison, however, does not simply reproduce this symbolic system. Some of the most traumatic memories in *Beloved* are associated with an ordinary part of the house—the kitchen.

This spatial arrangement is important because it prevents slavery from being represented as a distant historical event. The trauma remains embedded in everyday domestic experience.

A similar relationship between domestic space and historical memory can be observed in *Song of Solomon*. The family house exists within a city whose official and unofficial systems of naming do not fully coincide. The unofficial name of the street preserves a form of communal memory that is absent from the official urban record.

The opposition between official and unofficial naming consequently becomes a spatial representation of competing versions of the past.

Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* presents another use of domestic space. Rufel's farm initially belongs to a social world defined by racial and hierarchical boundaries. As the narrative develops, those boundaries become increasingly unstable. The house becomes a place where the relationship between enslaved and enslaver is tested and transformed.

In these novels, domestic space is therefore closely connected with the question of whose history is remembered and whose history has been suppressed.

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The Boundary-Line Chronotope

Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* presents perhaps the most explicit example of the boundary-line chronotope. The line surveyed by Mason and Dixon is not merely part of the geographical background. Its physical construction becomes an important part of the narrative.

Pynchon describes the process through which the surveyors clear a path through the forest and place boundary markers. The abstract idea of a geographical line is consequently transformed into a physical object produced through human labour.

The organization of narrative time is closely connected with this movement across space. The surveyors' progress can be measured in miles, and the geographical measurement contributes to the rhythm of the narrative.

The historical significance of the boundary extends far beyond the moment of its construction. A line established in the eighteenth century later acquires associations with the division between free and slave states and with the historical tensions that culminated in the Civil War.

The boundary therefore demonstrates that a geographical decision made at one historical moment may have consequences that become visible much later.

Pynchon's treatment of the boundary also includes astronomical measurement. The surveyors use the position of the sun and stars in determining geographical coordinates. The terrestrial boundary is consequently connected with a larger system of scientific and cosmological measurement. Weisenburger relates this aspect of the novel to the Enlightenment belief in universal systems of knowledge and their relationship to territorial expansion.

The novel's treatment of cartography thus raises questions about the apparent neutrality of geographical knowledge and about the political consequences of drawing lines across territories.

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Cyclical and Linear Historical Time

N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* presents a different kind of chronotopic conflict. Here the principal opposition is between two forms of time.

The first is linear and irreversible. It is associated with military service, imprisonment, movement to the city, and assimilation. The second is cyclical and connected with Pueblo ritual and seasonal experience.

The spatial opposition between the Jemez reservation and Los Angeles reflects this temporal difference. The reservation is associated with ritual cycles, whereas Los Angeles represents the linear time of industrial and capitalist modernity. The protagonist moves between these spaces without initially finding a stable position in either.

The final ritual running sequence is important because it reconnects the protagonist with cyclical cultural time. In this respect, the novel presents ritual temporality as a possible source of continuity after the destructive experience of displacement.

Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* also places different temporal models in conflict, although its position is less straightforward. The Texas frontier is associated with repeated cattle drives, seasonal movement, and the mythology of the American West. At the same time, railroads, settled agriculture, and fencing represent a new and irreversible historical order.

McMurtry's treatment of this conflict is ambivalent. The disappearance of the frontier is presented with considerable nostalgia, but the violence and destructive aspects of frontier life are not ignored. Modernization is consequently both a historical loss and an unavoidable transformation.

The Public Square and Collective Historical Experience

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The public square constitutes another important chronotopic structure. In Bakhtin's discussion, the square is associated with collective participation, spectacle, and the temporary exposure or inversion of social hierarchies.

Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* gives this model a distinctly twentieth-century political form. Times Square becomes the setting for the execution of the Rosenbergs and is represented as a combination of courtroom, theatre, and public ritual.

The temporal organization of the novel contributes to this effect. The events are concentrated within a short period of three days, creating an atmosphere of exceptional intensity.

E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* presents a less physically unified form of public space. New York is divided among socially and economically different areas, including New Rochelle, the Lower East Side, and Harlem. The characters inhabiting these spaces do not constantly meet, but the narrative repeatedly moves between them.

The city is consequently connected through narrative montage rather than through continuous physical interaction. The reader gradually recognizes relationships among social groups that remain geographically separated.

This is an important modification of the traditional public-square model. Collective historical experience no longer necessarily depends upon people occupying one physical location. Narrative form itself can create connections among otherwise separated spaces.

Chronotope and the Demythologization of History

The six chronotopic configurations examined above perform different functions in the reinterpretation of American history.

In Frazier and Shaara, the road makes war visible as movement, uncertainty, and encounter rather than simply as a coherent sequence of military events. In Johnson and Butler, threshold spaces make the experience of slavery

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and displacement inseparable from physical and psychological trauma. Morrison and Williams transform domestic spaces into locations where suppressed histories remain active.

Pynchon's boundary chronotope draws attention to the historical consequences of territorial division. Momaday and McMurtry use competing temporal systems to examine the relationship between modernization, cultural continuity, and the frontier. Coover and Doctorow, finally, demonstrate how public space and narrative montage shape collective historical consciousness.

The significance of these structures lies partly in their ability to challenge established historical myths without necessarily doing so through direct authorial commentary. The organization of space and time itself can make a familiar historical interpretation appear inadequate.

For example, a war presented through the experience of an individual travelling across a devastated landscape produces a different understanding of history from one presented exclusively through military strategy. A house haunted by the memory of slavery makes the persistence of the past visible in a way that a chronological account of emancipation cannot reproduce. A boundary that continues to influence historical events long after its construction challenges the assumption that political borders are merely neutral geographical facts.

Chronotope therefore becomes one of the ways in which literary form participates in historical interpretation.

Spatial and Temporal Dominance

The comparison also reveals that space and time do not always have equal structural importance.

In the road and boundary narratives, the spatial component is generally dominant. Distance, movement, direction, and geographical measurement determine the rhythm of historical time. This is particularly clear in Mason &

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Dixon, where geographical measurement is closely connected with narrative progression.

In *House Made of Dawn* and *Lonesome Dove*, by contrast, temporal categories play the more decisive role. The reservation and the city, or the prairie and the railway, acquire their particular meanings because they embody different concepts of historical time.

This distinction is useful because it prevents the chronotope from being treated as a completely symmetrical relationship between time and space. Depending on the novel, one of these dimensions may become dominant while the other functions primarily as its material expression.

The result is a more differentiated understanding of chronotopic organization in historical fiction.

Conclusion

The analysis of selected American historical novels demonstrates that the representation of historical time is closely connected with the organization of literary space. The chronotope provides a useful framework for examining this relationship because it brings together formal, temporal, spatial, and historical dimensions of narrative.

Six major configurations can be distinguished in the corpus examined here: the road, threshold and ship, house, boundary line, cyclical and linear temporal opposition, and public square. Each contributes in a different way to the interpretation of the American past.

The road makes historical movement visible and often replaces an orderly representation of war with fragmented experiences of encounter and uncertainty. The threshold and ship transform historical displacement into an experience of physical and existential rupture. The house preserves traumatic memory and places suppressed history within the sphere of everyday life. The boundary line demonstrates how territorial decisions can acquire consequences

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far beyond their original historical moment. The opposition between cyclical and linear time brings cultural conflict and modernization into focus, while the public square reveals the relationship between collective memory, political spectacle, and narrative representation.

The analysis also shows that there is no single chronotopic model that defines late twentieth-century American historical fiction. The same historical problem can be approached through different spatial and temporal structures, and the same chronotope can acquire different meanings in different texts. The plurality of these forms is therefore not incidental. It is closely related to the broader tendency of late twentieth-century American writers to question unified and authoritative interpretations of the past.

Chronotope, in this context, should be regarded not simply as a category of narrative setting but as an important means of historical interpretation. Through the organization of space and time, historical fiction can expose suppressed memories, question established boundaries, and reconsider the cultural myths through which a society understands its past.

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