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CARLI GARDNER<sup>1</sup>

# Mash-up, Smash-up: Mixing Genres and Mediums to Rewrite History in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*

## Abstract

In Madeleine Thien's novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, a historical photograph of three protestors at Tiananmen Square is directly inserted into the fictional text. The goal of my research is to start a scholarly conversation on this work by exploring the relationship between the historical image and the fictional text to establish Thien's novel as postmodern. Drawing on postmodernist theories, this paper applies the works of prominent thinkers in the field to ask how the collision of genres and mediums (history and fiction; image and text), in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* renders the novel postmodern. The first aim of this paper is to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between text and image. The relationship is reciprocal because while the photograph certifies and undermines the story, the story also certifies and undermines the photograph. After establishing the multiple functions of the relationship between text and image, this paper explores how the collision of genres elicits multiple interpretations of the novel and the historical events it details. To understand how multiple interpretations of history destabilize historical metanarratives, this paper will finally investigate how the novel gives a voice to those omitted from history. By acknowledging Thien's novel as postmodern, this paper analyzes the important role of fiction in representing those whose experiences are effaced by historical metanarratives. My postmodernist interpretation of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* will provide new ways of reading and interpreting the novel and situating it within the canon of Canadian Literature.

**Keywords:** Historiographic metafiction, Canadian Literature, Postmodern novel, Historical metanarratives, Historic photograph

## Résumé

Le roman de Madeleine Thien, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, une photographie historique de trois manifestants sur la place Tiananmen est directement inséré dans le texte de fiction. L'objectif de ma recherche est de lancer une conversation savante sur le travail en explorant la relation entre l'image historique et le texte de fiction pour établir que le roman de Thien est postmoderne. En s'appuyant sur les théories postmodernes, cet article applique les travaux d'éminents penseurs du domaine pour demander comment la collision des genres et des médiums (histoire et fiction ; image et texte), dans *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, rends le roman postmoderne. Le premier objectif de cet article est de démontrer la relation réciproque entre le texte et l'image. Cette relation est réciproque, car si la photographie est certifiée et sape l'histoire, l'histoire est certifiée et sape également la photographie. Après avoir établi les multiples fonctions de la relation entre le texte et l'image, cet article explore comment la collision des genres suscite de multiples interprétations du roman et des événements historiques qu'il détaille. Pour comprendre comment les interprétations multiples de l'histoire déstabilisent les métarécits historiques, cet article examine enfin comment le roman donne une voix à ceux qui ont été omis de l'histoire. En reconnaissant que le roman de Thien est postmoderne, cet article analyse le rôle important de la fiction dans la représentation de ceux dont les expériences sont effacées par les métarécits historiques. Mon interprétation postmoderne de *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* offrira de nouvelles façons de lire et d'interpréter le roman et de le situer dans le canon de la littérature canadienne.

**Mots clés:** métafiction historiographique ; littérature canadienne ; roman postmoderne ; métarécits historiques ; photographie historique

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<sup>1</sup> Glendon College, York University, Ontario.

In Madeleine Thien's novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, a historical photograph of three protestors on their knees before the Chinese government at Tiananmen Square is directly inserted into the fictional text<sup>2</sup>. The goal of this paper is to engage in a scholarly conversation about the relationship between the historical image and the fictional text in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* to establish Thien's novel as postmodern. Drawing on postmodernist theories, this paper applies the works of prominent thinkers in the field to ask how the postmodern collision of genres and mediums (history and fiction; image and text), in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* challenges historical metanarratives.

To understand how the novel's postmodern elements function to share stories of those silenced by history, the first aim of this paper is to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between text and image. The relationship is reciprocal because the photograph inscribes and undermines the story while the story inscribes and undermines the photograph. To inscribe the story and the photograph means to assert the legitimacy of the history presented in the text and image, whereas to undermine the story and the photograph means to question the legitimacy of the history presented in the text and image. After establishing the multiple functions of the relationship between text and image, this paper explores how the collision of genres elicits multiple interpretations of the novel and the historical events it details. To understand how multiple interpretations of history destabilize historical metanarratives, this paper will finally investigate how the novel gives a voice to those omitted from written history. By acknowledging Thien's novel as postmodern, this paper analyzes the important role of fiction in representing the experiences of "ex-centrics," individuals whose stories are typically effaced by historical metanarratives, objective accounts of history written by the dominant culture. This postmodernist interpretation of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* will provide new ways of reading and interpreting the novel and situating it among other works of Canadian Literature.

In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, literary critic Linda Hutcheon outlines her theory on

the role and the effects of historiographic metafiction in the postmodern novel. Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as the mixing of history and fiction in the postmodern novel. According to Hutcheon, a key feature of historiographic metafiction is the insertion of historical data directly into the fictional text to "inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 123). This dual role of historiographic metafiction: to assert and to question history, destabilizes totalizing accounts of history written by the dominant culture, and is what Hutcheon names "the centre." For Hutcheon, "the centre" represents a single homogenous historical perspective of a male, white, Eurocentric and upper-class voice. In destabilizing the homogenous and totalizing accounts of history told by "the centre," historiographic metafiction carves out spaces for alternative accounts of history told by "ex-centrics:" individuals whose identities in the contexts of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education and social role fall outside the single fixed identity of "the centre" in that they are different, specific, heterogeneous and in flux (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 59). In fact, Hutcheon understands the role of "ex-centrics" as another essential element of the postmodern novel: "the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are anything but proper types: they are ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 114). Through an analysis of the function of the historic photograph of Tiananmen square within the fictional text, this paper investigates how the relationship between history and fiction, and image and text, provides space for the stories of "ex-centrics" to emerge from the margins of history in the postmodern novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*.

The process of documenting history in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is multi-layered and multi-generational: Marie, the main character of the novel's frame narrative, copies and compiles bits and pieces of her family history. Marie collects stories from the past to excavate and then shed light on the histories of "ex-centrics:" characters whose personal stories were previously hidden from totalizing accounts of history. Marie attempts to uncover the hidden histories of Jiang-Kai, Zhuli, and Sparrow, characters who bear a connection to her family and are "ex-centrics" because

<sup>2</sup> This image was directly inserted into page 298 of Madeleine Thien's novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. The image has no known source.

of their heterogeneous social positions as: lower-class citizens, educated musicians, subjects of the Chinese Communist Party, and immigrants, all fall outside of the dominant cultural “centre.” Though positioned as “ex-centrics,” the characters’ status as such leads Marie to preserve the information she compiles about their stories by copying a historic image of the Tiananmen Square protests directly into the new stories she writes. This method of copying and compiling history mixes fictional accounts of the past with a historic image, thus mixing the mediums of text and image and the genres of history and fiction in the novel. Because of the mixture of genres and mediums, a reciprocal relationship between text and image forms. The relationship is reciprocal because the photograph inscribes and undermines the story while the story also inscribes and undermines the photograph. Together, the relationship between text and image in the novel challenges objective accounts of history written by what Thien positions as the dominant cultural “centre:” the Chinese Communist Party and Canadian whiteness.

The insertion of the documentary-style photograph of three protestors at Tiananmen Square directly into the novel inscribes the stories of the characters because it asserts their participation in the events captured. To understand how the photograph of Tiananmen Square inscribes the character’s stories as legitimate accounts of history, philosopher Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* is relevant to studying the relationship between text and image in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. In her work, Sontag claims that “photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it” (Sontag, 1973, p. 5). Sontag’s assertion that a photograph can act as “evidence,” to affirm the reality of “something,” directly applies to the function of the Tiananmen Square photograph as a piece of “evidence” to certify the fictional accounts of the characters’ experiences in the novel (“something”). Sontag expands on her understanding of a photograph as evidence in her statement that “a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened” (Sontag, 1973, p. 5). This theory of photographs as historical proof applies to the function of the image of Tiananmen Square as validation of the characters’ experiences of history. Consequently, the iconic photograph of Tiananmen Square serves as a piece of historical “evidence” to connect the characters from

their fictional accounts of the Tiananmen Square protests to the historic events documented in the image.

The historical photograph of the three protestors at Tiananmen Square further validates the fictional stories of Jiang-Kai, Zhuli and Sparrow as legitimate accounts of history because its direct insertion into the text highlights the reader’s emotional connection to the novel’s characters. Because the photograph captures the experiences of three unnamed protestors whose personal stories are not narrativized in the text, the image contrasts the reader’s intimate relationship to the characters’ personal stories. This contrast between the text and image highlights the reader’s emotional distance from the objective history documented in the photograph of Tiananmen Square. Since the image emphasizes the reader’s relationship to the fictional stories of the Tiananmen Square protests, the photograph underscores the power of fiction to create an emotional intimacy between its characters and reader. Thien speaks about the emotional effects of fiction compared to the unemotional effects of history in her statement that “when we read history, we have this feeling of inevitability. But fiction is different. History knows how things are going to turn out, but for individuals, nothing is inevitable” (Lee, 2019, p. 13). Thien’s distinction between the uncertainty of fiction and the inevitability of history shows why fiction is able to arouse emotion in its reader. By not knowing how the stories of Jiang-Kai, Zhuli, and Sparrow will end, the reader’s pre-existing attachment to these characters grows. The strength of this attachment is also solidified by the reader’s comparative lack of knowledge about the personal stories of the protestors pictured in the historic photograph. Without knowing the intimate historical experiences of the unnamed protestors, Thien’s understanding of history as “inevitable” is emphasized for the novel’s reader.

While the photograph of Tiananmen legitimizes the personal histories of Jiang-Kai, Zhuli and Sparrow, the characters’ fictional accounts of history also legitimize the representation of history captured in the photograph. The text validates the image because the reader’s emotional connection to the narrative extends to the three protestors in the photograph. In the passage preceding the image, Marie retells Jiang-Kai’s experiences of living through the

Tiananmen Square protests from her perspective as his daughter: "he watched on television as three university students stood before the Great Hall of the People bearing a letter to the government" (Thien, 2017, p. 298). Although Marie retells Jiang-Kai's story from the third person, the storytelling is nonetheless intimate: as Jiang-Kai's daughter, the reader imagines the passing down of family history between generations, emphasizing the intimacy of the personal histories told. This intimate style of inter-generational storytelling thus affects the reader's emotional connection to the inserted photograph. Because the reader recognizes Jiang-Kai's implication in the events captured in the photograph, Marie strengthens the reader's connection to the idea that the photograph is a piece of historical "evidence" that affirms objective accounts of history (Sontag, 1973, p. 5). The idea that fiction can substantiate objective pieces of historical "evidence" recalls Thien's comment from her interview: "the work of fiction is in part to get in between what history can tell us, and the mechanisms that history shows us" (Lee, 2019, p. 13). Thien's acknowledgment that fiction can rewrite history to expand upon it demonstrates how Jiang-Kai's witness of the Tiananmen Square protestors legitimizes the historical event presented in the photograph. So, by mixing the two genres and mediums (fiction and history; text and image), Marie's fictional account of the Tiananmen Square protests authorizes the objective history represented in the iconic photograph of the three protestors.

Although the historic image of the Tiananmen Square protestors authorizes the novel's retelling of history, the photograph simultaneously undermines the stories it authorizes. The photograph undermines the credibility of the historical accounts of the Tiananmen Square protests in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* because it shows how the novel interprets history to write fiction. The novel's interpretation of history is evident in the descriptive passage preceding the photograph of Tiananmen Square: "the three stayed where they were, tiny figures, the petition heavy in the air, waiting for an authority figure to receive it" (Thien, 2017, p. 298). Thien's description of the photograph prior to its insertion points to the text's fictional interpretation of the historic events captured. The tension created in this passage between the text and image highlights the contrast between history and fiction in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. By drawing attention to the novel's interpretive approach to

history, the photograph emphasizes the characters' stories as fictional accounts of the Tiananmen Square protests. In emphasizing that the historical experiences of Jiang-Kai, Zhuli, and Sparrow are indeed fictional, the photograph undermines their stories. By threatening the legitimacy of the characters' stories, the photograph raises the question of whose experiences are incorporated into the dominant history.

The photograph further complicates the question of historical representation because its inability to objectively capture history undermines the characters' stories. To understand the limitations of historical photographs, Sontag highlights how photographs, like paintings and written stories, interpret history. Sontag's (1973) assertion that "photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as painting and drawings are," (p. 6) is relevant to understanding how the documentary-style photograph in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is merely an interpretation of history. Because this photograph is intrinsically only an interpretation of the Tiananmen Square protests, the photograph undermines the credibility of the characters' historical experiences in the novel. According to Sontag (1973), photographs are interpretations of reality because they can be staged and crafted like paintings and written stories: "while a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency" (p. 6). That is to say, although photographs aim to capture reality, they are not entirely objective as photographs are always subjective in their selection of subject/object. Due to the limitations placed on photography, such as the omnipresence of the photographer's perspective on the subject/object they are trying to represent, the photograph of Tiananmen Square does not objectively capture historic events. In claiming a subjective relationship between the photographer, the photograph, and the subject/object it represents, Sontag questions the role of photographs in documenting history. In questioning the role of photography in validating historical events, Sontag's theory helps support the argument that the photograph of Tiananmen Square in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* both undermines and inscribes the histories of Jiang-Kai, Zhuli, and Sparrow. In threatening the legitimacy of the characters' stories, the photograph raises the question of whose

experiences are incorporated into the historical record and why.

To question the role of history in omitting certain experiences from the historical record, it is important to understand how the characters' stories in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* combat this marginalization. In fact, the characters' fictional experiences of history function to undermine the supposedly objective history represented in the photograph of Tiananmen Square. Specifically, the story's use of italics to write an imagined dialogue of the photograph's scene draws attention to the novel's fictional account of the historic Tiananmen Square protests: "*Why are you kneeling / Stand up, stand up! / This is the people's Square! Why must we address the government from our knees*" (Thien, 2017, p. 298). By creating a fictionalized exchange between the three protestors and the government official in the photograph, the novel highlights the lack of historical information provided by the image. In recognizing the limitations of the photograph in representing the Tiananmen Square protests, it is necessary to draw on Roland Barthes's philosophy from his critical work *Camera Lucida*. According to Barthes, a photograph can only "refer" to the "real" thing which it captures. For Barthes (1981), a photograph contains a "referent," which is "not the *optically* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens" (p. 76). In making reference to the "real" events at Tiananmen Square, the photograph inserted in the novel shows its inability to capture the stories that the fictional text creates. Instead, the italics used to tell the story behind the photograph fill in the gaps of the "*necessarily* real thing" (history), to which the image of Tiananmen Square "refers" (Barthes, 1981, p.76). Since the fictional text is able to provide more information about the protestors in the photograph, the novel shows the limitations of the photograph in accurately portraying a complete account of a historical event. So, the photograph reveals how objective history silences the stories of Jiang-Kai, Zhuli, and Sparrow while fiction creates space for multiple stories and thus, many different historical accounts. This relationship between image and text, history and fiction, questions whose story is included or omitted from the culturally dominant history written by the "centre."

The collision of genres and mediums in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* functions to include the voices of "ex-centrics" in the historical record. The reciprocal relationship between the historic photograph of Tiananmen Square and the fictional stories of the novel's characters facilitates the novel's resistance of historical metanarratives, objective accounts of history written by the dominant cultural "centre." Because of the tensions created from the mash-up of these elements, the novel elicits multiple interpretations of history to destabilize historical metanarratives. Hutcheon (1988) demonstrates how resistance to a single and objective account of history is characteristic of the postmodern novel: "postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (p. 110). Hutcheon's assertion regarding the postmodern novel affirms that *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* not only destabilizes historical metanarratives, but also affirms the stories of the "ex-centrics" previously silenced by history. Thien's attempt to give a voice to those marginalized by history is evident in her interview statement: "the novel explores how, in such a shadow, a life might have been lived if history had allowed this life to continue" (Lee, 2019, p. 13). In acknowledging that history omits characters' stories and leaves them hidden in the shadows, Thien demonstrates how her novel aims to uncover the hidden stories from the shadows of history to showcase alternative experiences of historical events. In applying Hutcheon's theory on postmodern fiction to *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, it is important to ask how representations of history that utilize multiple genres and mediums to challenge historical metanarratives complicates the reader's experience of the novel within a Canadian context. For instance, does the presence of these postmodern elements in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* challenge the genre of Canadian Literature as space typically limited to including voices from the culturally dominant "centre" (Canadian whiteness). Does Thien's use of postmodern elements in her novel work to reconceptualize what stories fit into the narrow definition of Canadian Literature? In short, yes: *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* challenges the cultural "centre" of Canadian whiteness dominated in the Canadian literary canon to situate the stories of Jiang-Kai, Zhuli and Sparrow as imperative to understanding the rich and complex histories of Chinese Canadians.

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