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### Stories to the Distant Reader: Shaping Cultural Narratives in Do Not Say We Have Nothing

Hannah Perry  
*Taylor University*

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Hannah Perry

Making Literature

31 January 2019

Stories to the Distant Reader: Shaping Cultural Narratives in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*

About three-fourths of the way through Madeleine Thien's novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, Marie visits Shanghai seeking answers. She encounters shadows of her family history that, thus far, have been only words from her Chinese-born mother and her friend, Ai-ming, who had taken refuge in Marie's childhood home in Canada shortly after the Tiananmen Square protests. Marie wanders the city, meeting her father's acquaintances and gathering relics of his past while trying to locate Ai-ming, whose circumstances are unknown. As she receives a recording of her father playing piano, Marie remembers something Ai-ming once said to her: "*I assumed that when the story finished, life would continue and I would go back to being myself. But it wasn't true. The stories got longer and longer, and I got smaller and smaller. When I told Big Mother this, she laughed her head off. 'But that's how the world is, isn't it?'*" (Thien 303). In fact, Marie is not even the center of her own story; Thien's narrative stretches from the Great Chinese Famine to the lives of three musicians at the height of the Cultural Revolution to the university students who find themselves in the heart of the Tiananmen Square protests. Marie does not fly halfway across the world to apply meaning to the stories she has already heard; instead, the stories *supply* meaning to people and objects who are otherwise shrouded by silence and the passing of time. Such is the way that storytelling sifts through the layers of time, space, and meaning to expose the depth and enormity of the world and of a single human soul. Specifically, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* by Madeleine Thien invites readers through a process of learning how to recognize the patterns of storytelling within unfamiliar sociocultural

frameworks by exploring the assumptions imposed upon the narrator by other characters as well as the assumptions that audiences bring to their reading experience.

Thien sets her characters in a time and place where stereotypes are binding: upper-class Chinese citizens are self-serving, and their descendants are corrupted by the same advantages. Incredibly, the majority culture has wholly bought in to these stereotypes. Twenty-first century readers may easily condemn these oppressive behaviors given their temporal, spatial, and cultural distance from the settings. However, at the same time, readers should recognize that this distance complicates their perception of the line between the characters' conscious classism and the social expectations that the characters subconsciously espouse as a result of cultural influence. Particularly during the Cultural Revolution, the characters lacking power are manipulated within a larger system that sets their personal interests in opposition to one another for the benefit of the system itself. While some become perpetrators for their personal benefit, many of the characters are a result of their circumstances—not as a mere excuse, in which they feel helplessly bound by their circumstances, but rather their attempts to maintain control over their lives are not as important to their immediate circumstances as the dominating influence of larger power structures. However, these larger systems are so far beyond the characters' control that any act of defiance against them could be futile or even dangerous.

Thien suggests in an interview that her characters' behaviors are not merely characteristic of people under oppression, commenting on the irony behind self-imposed restrictions even within a free nation: "North America is fascinating because artists can be tempted to impose limitations on themselves. Or sometimes the structures we inhabit, what Doris Lessing called the prisons we choose to live inside, are the most difficult to see" (Chariandy). Though she speaks in the context of art, her explanation illustrates how human nature is content to loiter safely within

defined boundaries, blind to its own self-imposed limitations. In *Do Not Say*, with both political instability and natural human tendency in their favor, the Communist Party relies on the perpetuation of stereotypes and the simplification of art and history to unify their people's minds to think and act predictably, reducing threats of opposition and establishing the Party as the one credible source of truth. As the Party creates a vocabulary for its cause, the people are instructed to pledge their trust to the government, who in turn promises a life of comfort and mental simplicity.

In twentieth century China, culture and circumstances have a significant impact on how the characters react to different people and events. Always, there is a delicate balance between the influences of nature and nurture—the soul that produces the personality and the environment which informs everything the characters know. In *Do Not Say*, Marie wonders, “Would I still be the same person if I woke up in a different language and another existence?” (Thien 88-89). Did Zhuli choose to love music or was she inherently predisposed to dedicate her life to it? Both sides of each coin are necessary to examine these individuals as multi-dimensional beings limited by the constraints of their personal character and circumstances. In any case, to comprehend the full effect of Thien's storytelling on the readers' perceptions of the characters, it is important to recognize the implicit influences surrounding twentieth-century China.

One of the first characteristics of Chinese culture that a Western reader might question is the family dynamics that provide the characters a context for understanding themselves and their position. The reader quickly finds it not uncommon for multiple generations and multiple branches of family to live in the same household; at any given point, Big Mother Knife's household might consist of her husband, her sister and her husband, three sons, and a niece. Perhaps because family has such a strong influence on identity in a Chinese context, one family

member's lack of allegiance to the Party might be enough to make the whole family a threat to the Cultural Revolution. Thus, as characters are forced to write denunciations for their parents and siblings and cousins, the Party actually reeducates them on familial identity; instead of participating as a single family unit, the whole nation of China collectively becomes one family with one allegiance. Nevertheless, the Party requires much more than a half-hearted denunciation to gain its trust; Zhuli refers to her lineage as "a bloodline, a touch, a virus" that infects her status and identifies her as a target to revolutionaries (253). The process of writing denunciations in this era is perpetual; in order to effectively deconstruct the traditional Chinese family structure, these denunciations are required so that individuals might adopt a habitual inclination to prioritize the country over the family unit, which is a massive undertaking on behalf of the Party. Nonetheless, even these cultural circumstances do not exempt many from the deeply human instinct of self-preservation, resulting in familial betrayal and shifting loyalties that favor the Party. Western readers would have trouble identifying the significance of these denunciations if Thien had not established family dynamics as she did. As the novel progresses, the importance of national unity becomes increasingly evident as the citizens of China are molded to accommodate a set of ideas and opinions that mimic the loyalty they owe to their own immediate families.

The history and status of the Chinese family certainly influences individuals' self-perceptions, though not in the overgeneralized way that the Party assumes. The fact that an individual's family member is a counter-revolutionary does not necessarily suggest that the individual shares the same views. Conclusions cannot be determined based on a linear compilation of historical data, which Thien models in her novel through the Book of Records. In an interview with *Literary Hub*, Thien remarks that

records are often kept by the conquerors or perpetrators, as a kind of documentation of power and efficiency, and very disturbingly, of possession of people and lives. They are a record of particular attempts to organize the world. Files can be opened and closed, giving the record keepers the catastrophic illusion that they have every right to control the beginning and end of narratives (Chariandy).

The irony in its name, the Book of Records, points to the dissonance between its formal title and the purpose prescribed to it; though its name suggests an official document full of factual data, the pages relate the fictional story of the adventures of Da-wei and May Fourth. When Wen the Dreamer begins his project, he simply copies chapters as a gift to his future wife, Swirl. He faithfully embarks on a search for each individual chapter of the original, mirroring the work of a collector of historical data, which also presents an irony in light of Wen's identity as a poet. Yet, the Book of Records does not remain merely a work of copied fiction; when he cannot find any more chapters, Wen the Dreamer continues in its tradition by allowing it to evolve into a work of creative nonfiction, and he uses the record to document indirectly his own family history. The Book of Records blurs the boundaries of objective fact and genre as an expression of subjective experience. However, it serves as only one example of the disillusionment of non-complexity and linearity; all throughout her novel, Thien challenges the assumption that one story or idea can offer a comprehensive or objective portrayal of reality. Nevertheless, the Party attempts to perpetuate this perception of objective reality, undertaking the great challenge of navigating the whole population of China through one narrative. If the Party wants to succeed, no one can doubt its sovereignty, and so they simplify the narrative of China past and present to guarantee ideological understanding and acceptance from both the uneducated as well as higher-status citizens seeking an easy path to power. The Party provides categories, narratives, and even

language in a tidy package, relying on the people's propensity toward simplicity to gain sociopolitical momentum.

However, the main characters in *Do Not Say* are educated in a practice of meaning-making that is more complex than daily observation. For these characters, one of the main sources of outside narrative emerges through music. Specifically, the connections in storytelling and music rely on the ways in which people before them have established a tradition from which future generations formulate a basis of meaning. For example, Sparrow taps the core of this idea when offering advice to his cousin about her Ravel piece: "It's a matter of finding the simple in the complex, rather than the complex in the complex, do you understand what I mean?" (115). Not only do Sparrow and the other musicians have the motive and patience to continually make meaning every day, but Sparrow here describes a strategy for approaching complexity as it pertains to music. In these terms, complexity is not a vague, unattainable ideal only accessible to lofty intellectuals or those of financial means as Party propaganda would suggest. Sparrow and his cousin, Zhuli, happen to be thoroughly practiced in their arts, but as they work toward improvement, they can still return to the fundamentals of music—individual notes and rhythms—to make meaning out of complexity.

These processes of making meaning are not chaotic; ideas do not randomly assemble and suddenly become complex, but they derive from a combination of a curiosity pursued by the character and the structure of learning that has been passed on through family and culture. Specifically, *Do Not Say* allows flexibility within this structure of learning; poetry, numbers, and music pursue similar ends through inherently diverse means. Thien capitalizes her creative freedom to translate the structure of storytelling into terms of classical music, wherein the theme must be understood first before one can begin to comprehend the variation. For example, in

Glenn Gould's rendition of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, the untrained ear might be tempted to dismiss the piece as chaotic or non-cohesive, yet Bach composed with an approach similar to Thien's by easing the listener into the piece slowly. Even a great composer such as Bach is pulling inspiration from his own interpretation of the world, which takes form through music in this piece; he integrates his own creative expression and interpretation with his underlying theme, building complexity and intensity to a climax. Though the musicians of *Do Not Say* are indeed heavily influenced by their heritage, the novel also illustrates the characters as unique individuals with personal interests, motivations, and aspirations. They allow themselves to be influenced by Bach's piece, providing them with a medium through which they can understand the world outside of their own family history and identity. Zhuli describes this expanding complexity in relation to her understanding of the physical world:

But what was music? Every note could only be understood by its relation to those around it. Merged, they made new sounds, new colours, a new resonance or dissonance, a stability or rupture. Inside the pure tone of C was a ladder of rich overtones as well as the echoes of other Cs, like a man wearing many suits of clothes, or a grandmother carrying all her memories inside her (189).

Here, Zhuli suggests a simultaneous restriction and freedom that demonstrates the logic behind meaning-making; the notation on a page and even the physical sound waves that travel from the source to the ear are bound by rules at the most basic level. "A man wearing many suits of clothes" does not alter the fabric of the clothes, nor does he try to stick his arms through the pant legs, but rather he dresses himself in an order of his own choosing. As complexity develops, more patterns emerge and direct how certain pieces should fit together, making the process of interpretation more logical—if also individualized—than chaotic.



On one hand, storytelling challenges the neat presuppositions that people need to make judgments every day and explores the realities of authentic human experiences. At the same time, it accomplishes more than making people uncomfortable. It offers comfort as readers and listeners recognize themselves in the characters exploring the limits of human nature. By this definition, good art must necessarily exceed the boundaries of context. The Party crafts a story and performs patriotic music, both recognized as legitimate art forms. However, the Party designed propaganda for a specific audience, and by the nature of cultural values that shift over time, future readers and listeners cannot engage in these ideas with the same level of understanding as would have been perceived by its original audience. But how do people distinguish an old truth from a culturally-engraved maxim? *Do Not Say* asks, “How does a copy become more than a copy? Is art the creation of something new and original, or simply the continuous enlargement, or the distillation, of an observation that came before?” (418). Wen the Dreamer’s own Book of Records is not entirely his own creation, nor is it an explicit autobiography. It rests somewhere in between, accumulating storyline alongside Wen’s travels while embodying the same characters that have endured since its conception. The story is guided by a movement that is not bound by time, but rather flows alongside it. In the novel, Ai-ming offers an observation characteristic of authentic, enduring stories, saying, “But for anything to be alive, it required motion: the current must run, the record must turn, a person must leave or find another path. But without movement or change, the world became nothing more than a stale copy” (331). Thien’s idea of motion does not resemble the Party’s upward-and-outward definition of progress; her motion is fluid and circular, reiterating many of the same themes and concepts embedded in nature, expressed through different contexts and mediums which, combined, make an infinite number of stories.

The abstract nature of music more easily accesses the fluidity of art in motion. It is easier to lie through language and to believe that those lies encompass the complexity of the idea—or, at least, all a person needs to know of it. Music, on the other hand, is not associated with concrete definitions like words in a language, making it a clever choice as a metaphor and model in Thien's novel. Sparrow thinks, "Sound was alive and disturbing and outside of any individual's control. Sound had a freedom, that no thought could equal because a sound made no absolute claim on meaning" (315). This is why the Party only approved eighteen operas for public consumption, and why denunciations and slogans became so powerful within their propaganda. However, for Thien as a writer, language is her chosen art, and therefore she must believe that language can be utilized to point to more profound themes. She creates an undertone throughout her words that suggests implications greater than their literal meaning. Thien says of her work, "I sometimes think that experimentation in storytelling is partly about finding ways to defy the linearity of language, and more powerfully, the linearity of time" (Chariandy). In her intentions to make her language meaningful, she looks to music as a model to structure and develop her novel in the tradition of compelling art.

As much as the process of playing music and sharing stories comprises art, another important facet to the subversive nature of art is its impact on people even after the music has ended or the storyteller has finished. The essence of music and storytelling is not confined to temporal sound; even after the music stops, the melody can replay again and again in the listener's mind (albeit imperfectly), and characters do not cease to "live" in the imagination of the reader. Toward the end of *Do Not Say*, Yiwen tells Marie, "It might be finished, it might be over, but that doesn't mean I've stopped hearing it" (418). *Do Not Say* encompasses enough generations for the novel to be read as a collection of stories in different times; certainly, the tone

and essence changes with each section—the carefree optimism of the young musicians inhabit a different world than the impassioned activism of the university students. Nonetheless, readers cannot help but read the whole novel as a unit. People tend to perceive time as a forward progression, and all the good and bad will eventually be forgotten or thinly dissolved into the past, to which Thien responds with the startling implication that not all things pass. Even if the story is over, it never stops; Thien even complicates the idea that every story has a true starting point. Ideas ebb and flow with the tide of the time, but as long as people are available to listen, the perpetual interaction between storyteller and listener continues. Marie, Thien’s character who lingers throughout the novel as an attentive listener, ends her story for a time, saying, “It is a simple thing to write a book. Simpler, too, when the book already exists, and has been passed from person to person, in different versions, permutations and variations. No one person can tell a story this large, and there are, of course, missing chapters in my own Book of Records” (462). Though stories must necessarily stand incomplete, some people still feel compelled to contribute their vision of the narrative through a range of perspectives or the expression of a chosen craft. Thien demonstrates that good storytellers participate in distending the limits of creativity and thought and deliberately withdraw from the comforts of pretension, choosing to become smaller and smaller within the vast amplitude of a beautiful and complex history of the world.

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