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Deconstructing the Text and (Re)Constructing the Past: History and Identity in Geraldine Brooks' *People of the Book*

Summary

This paper examines Geraldine Brooks' latest novel *People of the Book* (2008) in light of postmodern critiques of history and the desire to explore and signify the past through processes of deconstructing male-centered dominance and (re)constructing histories. The paper highlights ethno-spatial representation that involves intercultural dynamics behind the fate and importance of the manuscript. Drawing on discussions of postmodern views of history and identity construction, I engage the novel against the background of these and other postmodern and postcolonial concerns, also considering intertextual effects stemming from the mixing of genres and sub-genres. Lastly, I offer a reflection about the potential of this fictional account, based on the real-life fate of a prayer book that has testified to the spirit of interfaith tolerance and mutual enrichment of diverse cultures, to provide a context for understanding contemporary preoccupations with heritage, history, memory and identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Key words: Geraldine Brooks, *People of the Book*, history, identity, narrative, intertextuality, postmodernism, postcolonialism, gender, memoir

Dekonstrukcija teksta in (ponovna) konstrukcija preteklosti: zgodovina in identiteta v romanu *People of the Book* Geraldine Brooks

Povzetek

Članek preučuje najnovejši roman Geraldine Brooks z naslovom *People of the Book* (2008) v luči postmoderne kritike zgodovine in poskusa, da se razišče in označi preteklost skozi procese dekonstrukcije moške dominantnosti ter (ponovne) konstrukcije zgodovin. Prispevek izpostavi etnoprostorsko reprezentacijo, ki vključuje medkulturno dinamiko za hrbtno usode in pomembnosti rokopisa. Razprava se opira na različna postmoderna dojetanja konstrukcije zgodovine in identitete ter druga postkolonialna vprašanja, poleg tega pa upošteva tudi medbesedilne učinke, ki izvirajo iz mešanja zvrsti in podzvrsti. Nazadnje avtorica ponudi v premislek možnosti dometa te fikcijske pripovedi, ki temelji na stvarni usodi molitvenika in priča o duhu medverske strpnosti in vzajemnega oplajanja različnih kultur. To naj bi ustvarilo podlago za razumevanje sodobnega ukvarjanja z dediščino, zgodovino, identiteto in s spominom v Bosni in Hercegovini.

Ključne besede: Geraldine Brooks, *People of the Book*, zgodovina, identiteta, pripoved, medbesedilnost, postmodernizem, postkolonializem, spol, spomin

Deconstructing the Text and (Re)Constructing the Past: History and Identity in Geraldine Brooks' *People of the Book*

1. Introduction

Informed by postmodern notions of history, deconstructionist and discourse analytical methods, this paper discusses the novel *People of the Book* by Geraldine Brooks as a narrative that seeks to recast the presentation of the past through examination of a Hebrew codex known as the Sarajevo Haggadah. The novel's plot is inspired by and centered around this rare book, which has drawn attention and interest for centuries due to its wondrous beauty, controversial design and mystifying fate. As Brooks describes it,

The Sarajevo Haggadah, created in medieval Spain, was a famous rarity, a lavishly illuminated Hebrew manuscript made at a time when Jewish belief was firmly against illustrations of any kind. It was thought that the commandment in Exodus "Thou shalt not make unto thee any grave image or likeness of any thing" had suppressed figurative art by medieval Jews. When the book came to light in Sarajevo in 1894, its pages of painted miniatures had turned this idea on its head and caused art history texts to be rewritten (8).

In Brooks' story this magnificent book is to be examined by an expert of the name Hanna Heath, a manuscript conservator from Australia who, in the aftermath of the Bosnian war, in 1996, is deemed by the United Nations, the sponsor of the book conservation, to be the best choice both for her nationality and her expertise. This spirited and resolute heroine functions as the unifying element of the different narrative strands, including a romance as she crosses paths with Ozren Karaman, chief librarian of the National Museum and the Muslim hero who saved the book during the recent Bosnian war. The outlined plot serves only as a hint at the panoramic and rich canvas of the book's pages among which Hanna finds clues to its past. Each of them serve as narrative threads of a sweeping story, alternating between Sarajevo at different periods, *fin de siècle* Vienna, fifteenth-century Venice, and Spain during the Inquisition and in 1480, as well as locations which Hanna visits, ranging from Harvard to the Australian outback. These seemingly disparate places are brought together through diverse narrative solutions such as sensory prompts, illustrated by the following example when Hanna, preparing to inspect the Haggadah, runs a metal ruler over the sheets of her papers: "The sound of the metal edge traveling across the large sheet was like the sound of the surf I can hear from my flat at home in Sydney" (4).

I contend that against the background of this dynamic and exciting story lies an imbedded concern with how the narratives within the novel are created to present the problems of reality and history with multivalent effects. Hanna's job of inspecting a book is in itself a reflection of the act of book analysis, one that will lead her to open more than just pages of a book. As she scrutinizes the manuscript, she ends up writing out a new chapter of her life, filled with excitement, mystery and self-exploration, reflected in an alternative history of the book. The character of Hanna thus acts both as a writer and a reader, who, in the act of research, writing and interpreting, develops

into a symbolic author with a constructive and productive potential, an author who is “capable of re-creating strong emotional, social, and cultural bonds” (Durante 2001, 8). The examination of the manuscript, a “close reading,” as it were, therefore marks the start of a drama that confronts Hanna with her own past and her hidden vulnerability, but simultaneously hints at the process of reading history and leads to our heightened awareness about the fictionality of history. But the stories of the different stages in the book’s history are told from different perspectives and also through exchanges between the characters. And there is a host of them, including Lola, a Jewish laundress turned Communist partisan who finds shelter with the family of an Albanian Muslim rescuing the Haggadah during WWII; a Spanish Jew by the name of Ruti who secretly studies the Kabbalah and whose father copies the manuscript’s text; and Zahra, a Muslim girl enslaved in North Africa and brought to Spain disguised as a boy, who paints the images of the Haggadah. Their interconnected destinies are meticulously structured and revealed through a complex set of techniques, mostly through exchanges between characters, which is another level of revelation and self-realization through text. Consequently the conversations between characters become “a form of storytelling designed to explore a means by which characters can discover or recuperate a provisional sense of wholeness in their lives,” thereby making storytelling “both a fictional subject and mode, theme and technique,” in the words of Robert Durante (2001, 8–9).

2.1 (Hi)stories lost in history

Of course, a book is more than the sum of its materials. It is an artifact of the human mind and hand. The gold beaters, the stone grinders, the scribes, the binders, those are the people I feel most comfortable with. Sometimes, in the quiet, these people speak to me. They let me see what their intentions were, and it helps me do my work (Brooks 2008, 19).

Hanna’s comments on her philosophy and work reveal another dimension besides her dedicated faith and immersion in the world of science; they hint at her desire to render everything explicit, accountable to scientific analysis and logical deduction as it relates to her mediating role in interpreting the voices of the past and reconstructing their histories. However, despite Hanna’s thorough and expert application to the task, it is also implied that a mere factual, scholarly approach on its own will not provide ready access to the truth about the past. More specifically, this assumption seems to endorse Hayden White’s contention on the fictionality of history:

How else can any “past,” which is by definition comprised of events, processes, structures, and so forth that are considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an “imaginary” way? Is it not possible that the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth? (1984, 33)

Moreover, the speech/writing binary opposition established in the novel’s excerpt suggests Hanna’s inherent authority and the privileging of writing as she is the storyteller of other people’s stories, the writing medium for others. Even though Brooks’ novel is not deeply interested in aesthetic experimentation that could be considered truly “postmodern,” such textual locations

give place to discussions about the contentious nature of widely accepted notions of history and literature, as well as the related issues of identity and language. A spate of authors including Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Brian McHale, and others have developed varying notions of postmodernism, to varying conclusions and interpretations. But there is a shared feature in these refined definitions of postmodernism, as one critic points out: “One ariadnean thread, however, does run throughout even the most labyrinthine discussions, and that thread is history” (Elias 2001, xxvii). By now we have also seen interpretative views, or a critique of the postmodern critique of history, most famously those offered by Terry Eagleton in his book *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996)¹ but my discussion will be focused on the precepts of narrative theory and aesthetics of demystifying of historical facts and events, objectivity and truth in this novel.

A literary and theoretical study of history was launched by the postulation that history is founded in storytelling, questioning the absolute knowability of the past, and upsetting the very foundation of authenticity of historiography and the notions of its veracity. Initiated by the historiographic skepticism of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra, the most prominent interpretation of the relationship between literature and history is offered by Linda Hutcheon in her seminal texts *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* and *The Politics of Postmodernism*. She argues that the radical opposition between the two modes is undermined since the reader of the genre of postmodern novel labeled historiographic metafiction is simultaneously aware of the fictionality of fiction and the knowledge that the novel is to a certain degree rooted in real-life events. Consequently, Hutcheon develops the concept of historiographic metafiction as an interweaving of literary theory, history and narration. It is manifested in fiction that explores its own statement by narrating history, and contends that postmodernists, by playing with history, create the potential for a subversive form of cultural critique. Foregrounding the fictionality of history, she sees historiographic metafiction as fundamental in the postmodernist poetics, and “historiographic metafiction thus trades in comprehensive theories for textuality, simultaneously rejecting the celebration of heroic winners in favor of the perspectives of underdogs” (2002, 51).

The question of power and empowerment is central: Brooks’ novel focuses not only on the limits of documentary history but also on its politics. This is intimated towards the end of Hanna’s research on the manuscript when she admits to building an unscientific narrative since facts alone seem insufficient and inadequate for her designs and motivations, and thereby affirms the approach to history as storytelling:

I wanted to give a sense of the people of the book, the different hands that had made it, used it, protected, it. I wanted it to be gripping narrative, even suspenseful. So I wrote and rewrote certain sections of historical background to use as a seasoning between the discussion of technical issues....Then, I wanted to build up a certain tension around the dramatic, terrible reversals of the Inquisition and the expulsion. I wanted to convey fire and shipwreck and fear (264–5).

¹ Eagleton’s conclusion is that postmodernism considers “History, as opposed to history with a small h, [...] a teleological affair,” based on “the belief that the world is moving purposefully toward some predetermined goal which is immanent within it even now, and which provides the dynamic of this inexorable unfurling. History has a logic of its own, [...] but generally speaking history is unilinear, progressive and deterministic” (45).

This excerpt seems to reflect Hutcheon's questioning of historical representation in postmodern culture and distinction of its status, defining the relationship between the past (events) and history (narrative) as "[p]ast events are given *meaning*, not *existence*, by their representation in history" (2002, 78). But the spatial and temporal framework of the novel reminds us that it is not "just a book" whose fate the readers trace, but also the transformations and migrations of cultures which are determined by the authoritative "grand Narratives" of grand empires as the totalizing stories discussed by Jean-François Lyotard (1984) in *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He argues that due to the fragmentation of postmodern society instead of the grand metanarratives, we have "micronarratives" or "local narratives," a plurality of discourses as one of the key traits of postmodernism. Consequently, there are no absolute or objective truths, and writers and readers are capable of creating and making use of local or provisional truths which have a liberating potential. Such an example is found in the representation of alternative, even marginalized, stories or histories of characters in *People of the Book*, resisting a totalizing "grand narrative."

It has already been noted that this novel resists the typical designation of postmodern writing; for instance, it demonstrates the lack of invoking an external world, i.e. "anti-referentiality," that postmodern fiction has exhibited, with self-reflexiveness as its key dimension. But it does reflect concern with themes such as dislocation, alienation and fragmentation, and issues embedded in the postmodern argument such as authenticity, individuality, a questioning of the real, kitsch, simulation, and repetition, as the manuscript itself is under inspection regarding its genuine origin. Thus, in an episode of the novel set in 1996 Sarajevo, Hanna's expertise is scrutinized and rejected by a male authority, causing her self-doubt and professional and personal withdrawal. Another dimension of postmodernist writing that this novel contains is the effect of blending the "factual" text (that of the official and recognized "truth" of the Hagaddah's destiny) and the literary text (the imaginary reinterpretation of the historical facts in this novel) in an attempt to deconstruct patriarchal history and linear temporality.

2.2 Reinterpreting history and self

People of the Book does not disclose the self-conscious and self-referential treatment that is typical of historiographic metafiction; hence, it lacks the standard metafictional procedure of introducing the author as a character in the novel. But this novel intimates other metafictional concerns regarding narrative, representation, documentation and legitimacy. Over the last several decades a range of theoretical and critical readings have been devoted to the interrelation of metafictional literature and history, viewing both as types of texts which are deeply affected by language and narrative and thus subject to numerous interpretations. In this regard, the most convincing argumentation has been offered by Patricia Waugh (1984), who contends that metafiction indicates more than the fictional act behind the writing of history, and "that history itself is invested, like fiction, with interrelating plots which appear to interact independently of human design." Due to the narrative structure that links Hanna's story with that of the Haggadah, told from alternating points of view resulting in multiple perspectives, the novel communicates the complexities of writing history. The novel opens with a first person narration and shifts to the formal third-person narration and back and forth again, reminiscent of a feature about story and

discourse that Waugh detects in many metafictional novels “which shift from the personal form ‘I’ of *discourse* to the impersonal ‘he’ of *story* remind the reader that the narrating ‘I’ is the subject of the *discourse*, and is a different ‘I’ from the ‘I’ who is the subject of the *story*” (49, 135).

The tension of polivocality within the novel brings dynamics as well as challenge to the historicity of the text, or, in other words, this tension reaffirms the notion that history is not objective and impartial, but defined by interests of a particular party or ideology. It is useful at this point to recall Dominick LaCapra’s critique of traditional documentary history and the related exploration of relationships between history and theories of subjectivity, experience and identity. Partly reacting to the excessive poststructuralist and postmodernist attempts that reject the referential function of language and narrative, LaCapra (1987, 76) calls for renegotiating the postmodern crisis of history, urging historians to acknowledge that they are in dialogic interchange with the past. Therefore it is possible to see the novel *People of the Book* as a text that inscribes a new historicity that is neither an example of simple historical realism nor a dull variation of postmodern historical fictionality. The new histories, presented in the novel through a third-person narrative and a first person alternation, destabilize the previous rendering of the past and therefore allow for a reinterpretation of events.

Another dimension of postmodernist writing in this novel is the effect of blending the “factual” text (that of the official and recognized “truth” of the Hagaddah’s destiny) and the literary text (the imaginary reinterpretation of the historical facts) in an effort to dismantle history and the linearity of time. For purposes of the latter, shifting in time and space is incorporated throughout the novel, thereby challenging borders and continuity, although the typical postmodernist game-playing is for the most part indiscernible. The alternating narrative perspectives and different discourses of the numerous characters unfolding in a plurality of voices may be seen as a contribution to a specific polyphony in the novel.² We do not follow the plot through the lens of an objective world but through multiple perspectives and voices. Hanna’s voice, for instance, is that of a rational loner and passionate professional, the contemporary and tense voice, occasionally colored by “Aussie” expressions. Zahra’s perspective, on the other hand, is that of an artistic and contemplative enslaved Arab girl disguised as a boy in fifteenth century Seville, remote in time and space yet immediate in her intimate revelation of repeated suffering and abuse, her innermost yearnings and persistent resistance. The intimate form of first-person narration of Hanna and Zahra allows for distinctive and excluded histories to be articulated and a new historicity created, generating an emancipatory effect. “Women as historical subjects are rarely included in ‘History’ to begin with” argues Diana Fuss (1989, 95), who encourages authors to break the exclusionary – a monologic narrative of male dominance and progress that constructs others as people without history – which is what Brooks does through characters such as Zara who articulate/write/illuminate themselves into existence. In other words, when Brooks writes the story of Zara, she attempts to recast women and other marginalized groups as individuals with history, or rather, their respective histories. Therefore the act of writing this tale becomes a reversal of exclusion or an act of countering invisibility, as depicted in the following scene:

² *People of the Book* contains multiple equal voices, fulfilling the dialogic or polyphonic text requirement with a resulting dialogic openness, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, who contrasts this type of text with the conception of the monologic or homophonic novel (encompassing all its voices within a single authorial world-view). See Bakhtin 1984, Ch. 1.

I turned the parchment and suddenly found myself gazing at the illustration that had provoked more scholarly speculation than all the others. It was a domestic scene. A family of Jews—Spanish, by their dress—sits at a Passover meal. We see the ritual foods, the matzoh to commemorate the unleavened bread that the Hebrews baked in haste on the night before they fled to Egypt, a shank bone to remember the lamb’s blood on the doorposts that had caused the angel of death to “pass over” Jewish homes. The father, reclining as per custom, to show that he is a free man and not a slave, sips wine from a golden goblet as his small son, beside him, raises a cup. The mother sits serenely in the fine gown and jeweled headdress of the day... But there is another woman at the table, ebony-skinned and saffron-robed, holding a piece of matzoh. Too finely dressed to be a servant, and fully participating in the Jewish rite, the identity of that African woman in saffron has perplexed the book’s scholars for a century (19–20).

Even though there are opinions that deem such feminist undermining of gender patriarchy as contrived or as “kindly feminism [that] informs Brooks’ efforts to invent women who were important to the creation and existence of the precious book” (Le Guin 2008), my interpretation attributes to this insistence a certain level of necessity to render it thus. If a literary text is understood as part of discursive fields in which power is both reproduced and challenged, then the novel’s narrative clearly endeavors to dismantle the authoritarian patriarchal gender structures. An example of inherent deconstruction of masculinist normative in the manuscript is given in the character of Ruti, a Jewish girl in 1492 Tarragona, who secures herself access to a forbidden text. Excluded from the secrets of Kabbalah due to age and gender, she discovers a way to access and experience *jouissance* in the mystery of the text through physical pleasure, i.e. corporeal satisfaction: “She came to think of it as right, somehow, that these two forbidden ecstasies should be linked: that her femaleness, which should have barred her from this study, actually made it possible for her; the yielding up of her now-willing flesh providing the means to acquire delight of the soul.” Similarly, in a more contemporary context, Hanna’s struggle against exclusion from information and recognition is representative of women’s endeavors to shape their empowered, acting selves in a gendered contest. For example, Hanna’s mentor demands that she efface herself in the name of high professional standards: “When you have worked well, there should be no sign that you have worked at all. Werner Heinrich, my instructor, taught me that. ‘Never mistake yourself for an artist, Miss Heath. You must be always behind your object’” (233, 33).

Unrepresented or misrepresented in traditional historical narratives, female characters such as Hanna or Ruti write out their (hi)stories of the past, discovering that they must find a new way of making history, one that assumes the production of a new historicity. An issue that is related to presenting the past in the form of history is the notion that the complexity of the past exceeds the characters’ ability to re-present it fully. A good measure of traditional written history, based on documents, is frequently considered another kind of violence inflicted upon oppressed peoples since the oral history of these silenced or excluded groups was not deemed important or reliable. However, in the opening of the novel there are significant oral storytelling markers—the narrator does not name herself: “I might as well say, right from the jump: it wasn’t my usual kind of job.” Moreover, the narrator does not address anyone in particular, which constitutes a

rhetorical pattern typically associated with orality. This rejection of the language of documents and evocation of the oral in written texts combines with another important feature that builds, perhaps even conditions the narrative. That pattern is based on contradiction, represented at different levels, adding to the question of how conflicting tensions of the text can be reconciled. For example, in a structural sense we trace the mysterious clues of the manuscript through each chapter backwards through five centuries, while the central story of Hanna moves in the opposite direction, ahead in time. The character presentation offers also interesting binaries: the late nineteenth-century Viennese character Mittl, in declining health and performing sloppy book-binding of the precious manuscript, is sharply contrasted with Hanna's glowing physique and meticulous conservatory works. Hanna's task of protecting the manuscript stands in radical opposition to that of her former supervisor Werner and his rescue mission of the same book which he undertakes as an act of amends for his burning of Jewish manuscripts during WWII. In the following quotation Hanna contrasts ultimate work philosophy and lays bare the opposition between the fragility of the research object ("the book") and the horrors that befell the book's authors and readers ("the people"): "Never stress the book—the conservator's chief commandment. But the people who had owned this book had known unbearable stress: pogrom, Inquisition, exile, genocide, war" (3, 20). This gap between the impersonal and personal adds to the quality of incompleteness and instability of history, and contributes to the realization that the possibilities of truly knowing the past are limited since there is no discursive certainty or wholeness and therefore no single, definitive historical truth.

2.3 Interstitial journeys and intercultural dynamics

The rigorous narrative structuring and impressive temporal and spatial scope of the novel, set in both imperial and post-imperial contexts signify the author's textual concern for exploring interstitial spaces between national cultures, histories and genders. The post-imperial context is carried through on multiple levels and consequently adds to the intercultural exchange. Namely, Hanna's mission involves historical research from a postcolonial and post-imperial position: she is an Australian employed by the United Nations, an institution which, ironically yet utterly plausibly, elected her as a neutral expert to do research of material traces of a colonial past. Such colonial legacy is inextricably tied to the history of dispossession and dislocation exposed in the novel, thus diminishing privileged discourses and empowering marginalized voices. As Homi Bhabha maintains, we have witnessed in recent times the dislocation of authoritarian histories founded on the assumptions of imperialism and the rise of "a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices—women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexuality" (1994, 6). The manuscript's bloody and brutal history that is the cause and object of some of the loftiest and lowest human traits provides a wide and diverse exploitation of both historical detail and exposition of the characters' inner lives. Most characters grapple with self-realization and a quest for identity; for example, Hanna, a seemingly hard-boiled Australian who resembles a forensic pathologist or a criminal investigator, has no remembrance of her father and no relationship with her absentee tough mother. When she decides to change her name to the Jewish name of her late father she never knew and to embrace the Australian indigenous culture, she performs an act of expiation and restoration of her self-confidence and identity, guided by a new ethnic and spatial

sensibility. This “return of the prodigal daughter” does more than convey nostalgia of bygone times—it is also an act of defiance of the superficiality, spurious identity makeovers, and desires for instant gratification that define the governing cultural logic of our time.

I’d spent so many years studying the art of our immigrant cultures, and barely any time at all on the one that had been here all along. I’d gone cross-eyed swotting classic Arabic and biblical Hebrew but could barely name even five out of the five hundred Aboriginal languages spoken here.... My job became the documentation and preservation of ancient Aboriginal rock art....

... I traded in my cashmeres and silks for servicable khakis, and...hacked off my long hair. New name, new look, new life (345–6).

Hanna’s reconsideration of her Australian identity and past is linked to British post-imperial conditions, as is the fate of a book of small size but large ethno-spatial implications within the framework of several empires. In an alternative reading it is possible to maintain that the narrator takes a Haggadah-centered view and reviews the implications of postcolonial approaches replacing an empire-focused reading. But the centre/margin binary as represented by the following exchange is a point where postmodernism and post-colonialism overlap; Ozren takes a stereotypical position towards Hanna’s background: “It seems a strange occupation for a person from such a young country, looking after other people’s ancient treasures. ...I suppose you were hungry for some culture, growing up there?” To this Hanna replies:

That young country-cultural desert stuff gets very old. Australia happens to have the longest continuous artistic tradition in the world—Aboriginal people were making sophisticated art on the walls of their dwellings thirty thousand years before the people in Lascaux chewed the end off their first paintbrush....you should consider that immigration has made us the most ethnically diverse country in the world. Australians’ roots run very deep and wide. That gives us a stake in all the world’s cultural heritage. Even yours (24).

This excerpt reveals his attempt at arbitrary qualification as part of a repressive discourse based on the binaries “old/young,” “cultured/rough” or “established/unrecognized,” and, ultimately, “first world/third world.” The response is an example of “the empire strikes back” – Hanna’s post-colonial position of the margin against the centre is one of defiance, albeit somewhat petulant in articulation.

Although the novel does not deal with maps *per se*, there is another spatial notion through intense exploration and alternative mapping in the quest for knowledge and some kind of ultimate truth, even of redemptive (although fictive) space, liberated from the contemporary oppression of inexhaustible duplication. Hanna’s self-exile into the endangered Australian outback and her remapping of that space is supportive of this argument. But perhaps the most accomplished chapter is one which describes Vienna at the close of the nineteenth century, a dramatic vignette evoking the otherwise illustrious imperial first city of Freud, Mahler and Klimt, also as the “capital of carnality, where scandal and gossip were the fuels that stoked the social engine” (110).

2.4 Intertextual encounters

Drawing on Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafictional texts that exhibit an interest in depicting research and the interpretation of documents, Suzanne Keen (2001) recognizes an incidence of archival research stories in both postmodern novels and literary fiction, as well as contemporary novelistic sub-genres such as detective fiction and thrillers which she dubs "romances of the archive." Among the characteristics of this type of fiction are scenes set in libraries or in other buildings housing collections of papers and books. In terms of the plot action they are characterized by research in documents and "designate a character or characters at least temporarily as archival researchers, as questers in the archive. They unabashedly interpret the past through its material traces; they build on a foundation of 'documentarism,' answering the postmodern critique of history with invented records full of hard facts" (1). This clearly departs from the deconstructionist approach based on the ideas of Michel Foucault (1969/2002, 3–19) in terms of what he calls "archive" as the sum total of our statements and actions rather than a physical place of repository. Although there are obvious departures from this pattern in *People of the Book*, starting with the different context as Keen analyzes British fictional text only, there are convincing overlaps. Specifically, the Haggadah is a rare book, and Hanna visits libraries, universities, and archives (even an improvised one at the Sarajevo National Bank vault). However, there is a radical difference between the categories of historiographic metafiction and the romance of the archive in that for the latter truth is worth seeking, as argued by Keen (58).

But *People of the Book* may also be seen, at least in part, as a family saga; even if Hanna's melodrama of her relationship with her mother seems to a degree overworked. Her mother is a bossy neurosurgeon, described by Hanna as "the first woman to chair a department of neurosurgery in the history of Australia, was a stranger to self-doubt.... she would never respect me for choosing to be a repairer of books rather than bodies" (21). There is also a dramatic disclosure regarding the identity of her father and of her own unknown ethnic background adding to the similarities to this type of fiction.

I have already pointed out some stylistic features in the novel that counter and revise traditionally entrenched notions of history, representation, and knowledge. The alternating histories, unraveled in tracing the fate of the book over continents and centuries, result in a multi-textured fiction and an intricate interweaving of past voices. This property reveals the tangential position of this novel when attempting its classification as adventure story or historical fiction. But this novel draws on elements of historical chronicle as well as plots about affairs of the heart. Besides complex emotional entanglements, there are episodes of sexual encounter but also violent acts such as the stunningly shocking descriptions of Inquisition torture in the ironically dubbed "relaxation room." In addition, the novel is a beguiling intellectual adventure with elements of forensic drama inevitably tied to Hanna's detective work. Interestingly, the detective-story plot received much attention in metafictional criticism for its mysterious commonality and endeavor to endow a sense to a world gone criminal. Patricia Waugh believes that this genre is similar to metafiction due to the foregrounding of identity issues since "[t]he reader is kept in suspense about the identity of the criminal until the end, when the rational operations of the

detective triumph completely over disorder. Thus the reader enjoys the triumph of justice and the restoration of order, yet until the end he or she has been able to participate vicariously in the anarchic pleasure of the criminal's 'run'. The detective story celebrates human reason: 'mystery' is reduced to flaws in logic; the world is made comprehensible" (82).

The many twists and turns of this tale are enriched with climactic discoveries and a curious heist provides elements worthy of a thriller, in the vein of John le Carré best plots. But the overarching theme is Hanna's quest for information about objects she found while examining the manuscript – a piece of an insect's wing and a hair and for those she didn't find but has indication of – the book's clasps. This detail is related to other topics of quest concerning religion and mystery, with elements reminiscent of *The Name of the Rose* or *The Da Vinci Code*, as in the following sentence when Hanna claims: "I know the flesh and fabrics of pages, the bright earths and lethal toxins of ancient pigments" (18), which a book reviewer (Maslin 2008) dubs "book-preservation exotica." Such an intertextual medley undoubtedly supports both the narrative pattern and dynamics of the novel, but complicates any attempts at designating it as part of one genre or subgenre exclusively. This position presents a challenge not only to classification of the novel but alludes to the inherent complexity of representing a unified, unchallenged history.

2.5 Making (no) sense of the trauma of the present

I have already traced how the novel's formula of the research quest combines with other ingredients connecting and spanning different historical periods of the far and more immediate past. Indirectly engaging with debates about the uses of the past through the above outlined strategies, Brooks implicates the inextricably connected issues of heritage and memory, exploring what Homi Bhabha (1984) sees as the fundamental role of memory – that of reflecting on the post-colonial condition. Alluding to the transformative, even therapeutic quality of memory in recreating a shattered self, Bhabha maintains that memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity. Therefore remembering "is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (90). Bhabha's reasoning here is founded upon the belief that memory is the lodged deeply and substantially in the heart of conscious existence.

The research and restoration of the Hagaddah as a cultural artifact linked to collective memory is paralleled by a process of burrowing in individual memory and identity. In order to solve the mysteries of the manuscript, Hanna engages in a self-reflexive and self-revealing examination of her own professional and private concerns that she hides beneath a caustic front of dispassion for anything but her work. For her scientific research Hanna considers material evidence, studies physical traces and interprets the visible clues but she also delves into recesses of individual and collective self-realization similar to those of the self-portraitist Zahra, the African slave, who inscribed her name on her illumination in the Haggadah. This inscribing of oneself into a text through re-inscribing history is an act of her re-memory; centuries later, as portrayed in the novel, Hanna takes Zahra's cue and leaves her imprint for another quester to interpret the traces of the past:

Just as a conservator in the next century, or the one after, would find the seed I dropped into the binding of the genuine haggadah, between the first and second quires. A Morton Bay fig seed, from the fruit of the big twisty trees that line the shores of Sydney Harbour... My mark. A clue, for someone like me in the far future, who would find it, and wonder ...” (368).

The transformations of the characters due to the experience of the research quest therefore have important ramifications both for the individual and the community.

The novel constitutes a tentative fictional contribution that complements the representation of a complex heritage behind the people of the book. It illustrates how an exceptional artifact of such magnitude and significance transcends borders and artistic value, only to rise into a powerful symbol of survival and deliverance. There are numerous properties that buttress the irresistibility of the story; small wonder then that a precious codex which survives against all odds gains additional importance as symbol of Sarajevo’s multiethnic tolerance. It seems that the fate of this sacred book has been a continuous collective trial, as if, in the words of a character, “the Haggadah came to Sarajevo for a reason. It was here to test us, to see if there were people who could see that what united us was more than what divided us” (361). Despite all persecutions, the manuscript has miraculously survived; certainly its destiny’s fictional reinterpretation connotes the potential of endurance and rescue for the troubled present. Or does it? Trauma remains, as part of both individual and collective memory, for those of us who lived through the horror of a book burning enacted hundreds of years after the Inquisition and over half a century after Nazi terror. On August 26, 1992, watching helplessly as the valuable holdings of the National and University Library in Sarajevo were reduced to a dirge of fire and ashes, few of us who revere books could remain untouched. Many of us felt like “people of the books.”

Like the fictional one, the real-life Haggadah is housed in a special safe room, where it continues to illuminate the paths of history and offer faith amid the sore contemporary plight of Bosnia and Herzegovina, ridden with complex unresolved issues. This is the Haggadah’s home, and its history is that of loss, dispossession and division, but also of histories of resistance, empowerment and subjectivity. *People of the Book*, as a fictional text is representative of postmodern challenges to the more traditional approaches to presenting the past, thus claiming a challenging position of interstitial fluidity transcending limitations of space and time. The manuscript tests (once again) a country where, increasingly and alarmingly, interfaith and intercultural understanding and diversity of customs and lifestyles are neither celebrated nor advanced. Although such liminality offers an emancipatory potential, it is often pared down to trite expressions. But the Haggadah is at home in this novel which promotes its prominence and significance in history. To quote Homi Bhabha (1984, 26–7):

When historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of memory and the indirections of art offer us the image of our psychic survival. To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed

in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity: ‘I am looking for the join ... I want to join ... I want to join.’

3. Conclusion

In this paper I have analyzed Geraldine Brooks’ novel *People of the Book* against the background of history and the process of its reconstruction. The authority of history and fixed knowledge has been in the foreground of postmodernist thinking and a subject of postmodern fiction, but traces thereof have been detected also in other texts, specifically in this novel. Related to the poststructuralist conflation of history and narrative, and the textuality of history, my analytical lenses in reading this novel include an inquiry as to how the histories of those traditionally excluded or silenced can possibly be recast and their past reconstructed. This paper thus traces attempts of different characters to re-imagine the past, attempts that are one of the postmodern challenges to more traditional approaches to presenting history. These preoccupations run parallel with the debate on the postmodern affirmation of a multiple and fragmentary self. The paper also highlights strategies for the introduction of voices of those who have been marginalized or left out entirely and how others have written their history to counter this invisibility and resist the male-centered control and colonial hegemony and legacy. Such a textual approach allowed for alternative, even multiple perspectives to come forth, and to enable intercultural engagement and interstitial fluidity transcending limitations of space and time. The process of re-envisioning the past, both collective and personal, is profoundly tied to memory and may contribute to the agency and power of individuals, but may also condition their chances to gain subjectivity. Or, as Bell Hooks reminds us (1991, 54), “[R]emembering makes us subjects in history. It is dangerous to forget.”

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