

# Deaf Canada

## Disability Discourses and National Constructs in Frances Itani's *Deafening*

In its depiction of the sign language and oralism debates, which surrounded D/deaf<sup>1</sup> education in North America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Frances Itani's *Deafening* (2003) alludes to a historical link between nation and deafness. Grania O'Neill, a deaf girl from Deseronto, Ontario, reveals the existence of the "oral and manual training" (82) debates in her interactions with Fry, her best friend at The Ontario Institute for the Deaf in Belleville: "[Fry] was a good student at the American school and there is little she cannot communicate in the sign language. But her old school began to shift exclusively to the Oral Method, and it is for this reason that her parents have moved her back to Canada" (91). This shift to oralism may begin in the United States, but it eventually seeps into the Canadian education system, confirming Clifton F. Carbin's summation in *Deaf Heritage in Canada* that "the history of Canada's deaf people is closely tied to that of their counterparts in the United States" (12). As Fry explains: "*Superintendent says Oral Method is the future—now we copy United States. Some teachers already discourage use of sign. Who can believe that deaf children will stop creating language with their hands? . . . Already, we hear of children being punished for using sign*" (Itani 321).<sup>2</sup> Nation figures in these debates by revealing more than Canada's pedagogical reliance on the United States, however; the politics of nationalism additionally explain why "during the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century, sign language was a widely used and respected language among educators at

schools for the deaf, [but] by the end of the century it was commonly condemned and banished from many classrooms” (Baynton 33).

Douglas Baynton argues the movement toward oralism satisfied a US policy of national assimilation, which gained prominence at the end of the nineteenth century in response to an influx of immigration and attendant increases of diverse foreign dialects throughout the country’s linguistic soundscape. He explains:

Until the 1860s, deafness was most often described as an affliction that isolated the individual from the Christian community. Its tragedy was that deaf people lived beyond the reach of the gospel. After the 1860s, deafness was redefined as a condition that isolated people from the national community. Deaf people were cut off from the English-speaking American culture, and *that* was the tragedy. (33)

As a result, metaphors of deafness evolved from “ones of spiritual darkness” to “metaphors of foreignness” (40). In response, “educators worried that if deaf people ‘are to exercise intelligently the rights of citizenship, then they must be made people of our language’” (Edward C. Rider qtd. in Baynton 40) by abdicating sign language, perceived as yet another foreign dialect, and adopting spoken English. Therefore, Baynton surmises that “oralism was about much more than just speech and lip-reading. It was part of a larger argument about language and the maintenance of a national community” (40). As Jason A. Ellis confirms, “the methods debate has never simply been a question of pedagogical preference. It has . . . tak[en] on . . . national . . . overtones” (372).<sup>3</sup> Itani’s *Deafening* recognizes similar anxieties about national exclusion in Canada for the D/deaf. Although constructions of nation in Itani’s Canadian setting differ from those in the United States at the time—in that *Deafening* formulates “Canada” during a transitional moment between identification with the British Empire and Canadian cultural independence—the imperative to assimilate into an “abled” nation, what Grania calls “blending in” (Itani 371) by imitating aural proficiency, persists. As Grania concedes, “every deaf person was an expert” (371) at assimilating into his or her social environment due to very real threats of ostracism from a nation that does not accommodate bodily diversity.

The historical realism of *Deafening* is undoubtedly sensitive to accurate representations of D/deaf people and communities excluded from the nation; however, I argue the novel simultaneously engages in subtle historical revisionism by mobilizing disability discourses to suggest deafness as

able-bodied is foundational to Canada's national identity during the period. In doing so, the novel offers an idealized model of the Canadian nation, premised on the D/deaf, that is inclusive, not exclusive, of difference. Specifically, *Deafening's* historical realism recognizes the exclusion of the D/deaf from an "abled-bodied" nation. In Itani's novel, World War I and small-town hearing-abled communities particularly function as metonyms for a Canadian nation that enforces the medical model of disability, which inscribes a quantifiably "abled" or "normal" body and, thereby, marginalizes the D/deaf on the basis of stigmatized bodily difference. However, the novel simultaneously enlists disability discourses that characterize the deaf body as able—whether through a critique of silence as deficit, a challenge to the separation of the senses, or the rehabilitation of the wounded World War I soldier—that changes the contours of the nation in ways which unsettle strict historical realism. Rather than adhering to normative historical accounts, which recognize Canadian national constructs during the period as founded on principles of exclusion, Itani's novel uses Grania as a national metaphor to reimagine idealistically the early-twentieth-century nation as premised on the deaf body and, by extension, prioritizes the principle of socio-cultural inclusion. This intersection between nation and disability ultimately innovates conventionally narrow representations that either figure the "abled" body as the sole metaphoric manifestation of national fitness or use disability as a trope for ruined, broken nations; instead, *Deafening* celebrates a new configuration of nation where the D/deaf as able-bodied function as a metaphor for a fit, healthy, and adaptive Canada. In doing so, the novel risks reducing its D/deaf and disabled characters to simplistic national tropes; however, by offering a layered, dynamic depiction of deafness—as individual experience, communal affiliation, wartime coefficient, or social construct—the novel refuses to flatten deafness to a one-dimensional narrative function.

If deafness intersects with nation, then, the novel's historical realism configures the nation as "abled" through representations of the Great War and the hearing-abled small town, which operate as metonyms for a "fit" Canada that relies on the medical model of disability. Baynton's connection between deafness and nation finds support in disability studies. As Lennard J. Davis posits, "the disabled body came to be included in larger constructions like that of the nation. We have only to consider the cliché that a nation is made up of 'able-bodied' workers, all contributing

to the mutual welfare of the members of that nation” (*Enforcing* 74). Sally Chivers locates a similar national construction in the Canadian literary tradition, citing Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* as “invok[ing] a fit national body” (877). As Nicole Markotić puts it in *Yellow Pages* (her research-based, imaginative reconstruction of Alexander Graham Bell’s interventions in the Deaf community), “Canada is a mythical country where you get better if you’re sick” (12). In its historical realism, *Deafening* conforms to early-twentieth-century constructions of nation as “fit” and “able-bodied,” even if Canada was at a precarious moment of cultural transition between its status as a colony of the British Empire and an independent nation. It does so through its metonymic treatment of World War I and small-town, hearing-abled communities. The metonymic links between World War I and an abled Canadian nation are apparent in Grania’s hypothesis about her husband Jim Lloyd’s reasoning for joining the war effort despite her reservations: “It was someone else’s war. Grania knew what Jim would say: *This is our war, too. We are needed*” (Itani 185). The plural possessive adjective “our” refers to Canada, and suggests World War I belongs to the Canadian nation; in effect, participation in the Great War has a contiguous association with productive citizenship in Canada. Similarly, small-town Deseronto is also a metonym for Canada; panoramic spatial imagery makes the small-town “Main Street” conceptually contiguous with the whole nation: “A second bedroom window looks over Main Street and the Bay of Quinte, a large bay that slips in from the great Lake Ontario, which is part of the border between Canada and United States” (6). World War I and small-town Canada specifically function as metonyms for a nation that privileges the ideology of ability—what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson coins the “normate” (8), which is “the preference for able-bodiedness” (Siebers 9)—by relying on the medical model of disability. According to Sami Schalk, the medical model of disability “defines bodily and cognitive differences as individual medical problems to be treated and cured by professionals and obscures the various ways that society influences how bodily and cognitive differences are interpreted, valued, and treated” (174). Through explicit references to medical assessment and diagnosis, the novel reveals that both the war and the small town enforce able-bodiedness by practising the medical model. Colin, Grania’s deaf friend, attempts to enlist in the war by “using his considerable lip-reading skills” to bluff through

“the physical exam,” but the “*Doctor*” designates Colin unsuitable when he notices his deafness (Itani 180). Similarly, Grania’s mother, a member and representative of small-town life, relies on a medical determination to accept Grania’s status as “totally deaf” (70) and, thereby, not a member of the “normate.”

Because the medical model of disability underpins the novel’s metonymic treatment of Canada, the D/deaf risk exclusion from the nation as presumably unfit. As Davis explains, “the emphasis on nation and national fitness obviously plays into the metaphor of the body. If individual citizens are not fit, if they do not fit into the nation, then the national body will not be fit” (*Enforcing* 36). Representations of World War I in *Deafening* reveal the potential for this exclusion from the “abled” national body. Despite Colin’s numerous attempts to pass the physical examination, “even knowing that the army didn’t need deaf boys” (Itani 118), the military ultimately denies him access to the war and, by association, the nation. The “*white feather*,” which two women “*pinned . . . to [Colin’s] overcoat*” (183), encourages a diagnostic spectatorship that aims to shame him socially as a military coward; however, because Colin “wanted badly to do his bit in the war but . . . was not going to be allowed” (187) as a deaf man, the white feather is less a signifier of Colin’s cowardice and more a marker of discrimination: Colin does not fight because he is deaf and, thus, considered disabled. Although contemporary Deaf studies acknowledges the controversial implications of conflating the terms “disability” and deafness because the Deaf view themselves as a linguistic subgroup with their own culture, language, and community “within the larger structure of the audist state,” and so “do not regard their absence of hearing as a disability” (Davis, *Enforcing* xiv), the historical context of the novel makes clear that in early-twentieth-century Canada, the ableist majority defined deafness medically, not socially or culturally, and cast it as a deficit tantamount to disability. By conflating deafness with disability my aim is, thus, not to offend the Deaf but to register the historical discourse that underpins the novel. The construction of deafness as disability in this episode ultimately reinforces Davis’ assessment that those perceived as disabled by an ableist majority are “not of this nation, [are] not a citizen, in the same sense as the able-bodied” (91).

The small town as metonym for the nation similarly refuses to accommodate bodily diversity. This penchant is evident in Cora, the self-appointed

representative of Deseronto, whose authority her daughter, Jewel, reinforces through the value figuratively conferred by both Jewel's name and her residence in the political centre of the nation, "Ottawa . . . close to the Parliament Building" (Itani 250). In her disdain for Grania, the "very existence" of whom "seemed to offend Cora" (252), Cora enforces the reductive characteristics historically associated with deafness, which Christopher Krentz summarizes as "callousness, insensitivity, evil, insanity, isolation" (24); "weak[ness], stupid[ity], or savage[ry]" (29); "inferior[ity] or even malevolen[ce]" (46); "innocence" (103); "infantil[ism]" (105); "incomplete[ness,] and dependen[ce]" (108). Mamo, Grania's grandmother, attributes Cora's disgust to the dehumanizing limitations of stereotype: "Cora has a narrow way of looking at the world" (Itani 252). The essentializing power of stereotype is also apparent in the town's assessment of Grania as potentially "stupid" (xiv) and dependent (139). For the town, the deaf body is not only physically but also linguistically "other," which Grania acknowledges when she meets Fry and Colin on a Deseronto street: "The two friends were signing rapidly, Colin too. It was only after a few moments that Grania sensed the two women watching and looked up to see that they had stepped down to the cleared boardwalk and were staring as if the three friends were performing a sideshow" (364). The description of sign language as a "sideshow" echoes the earlier "spectacle of the strutting dwarf" who confidently walks "on his short thick legs down the centre of Main Street" (40): the town perceives both as exhibiting differences fitting of marginalization. In effect, Harlan Lane might recognize two competing constructions of deafness, namely, "deaf as a category of disability" and deaf as "designating a member of a linguistic minority" (80). However, the parallel between what the novel refers to as "dwarf" and the Deaf suggests that the small town and, in a broader sense, the nation conflate all those who diverge from the ableist norm, whether in terms of physical or linguistic difference, and designate them "as outside the citizenry" (Davis, *Enforcing* 78).

Although metonymic constructions of nation undoubtedly exclude the D/deaf, Itani's novel also reconfigures the nation in Grania, who functions as a metaphor for Canada. Scholars such as Clare Barker have connected disabled characters with national constructs: "disabled characters also have narrative and aesthetic functions. . . . 'Broken' bodies

may signify partitioned countries, troubled minds represent a nation's collective trauma" (106). Davis also suggests this link when he notes there may well be figurative meanings ascribed to deafness (*Enforcing* 81). *Deafening* makes possible an interpretive reading that ascribes Grania, and by extension deafness, the metaphorical status of Canada. Specifically, Grania's metaphorical national status is not solely restricted to concepts of D/deaf nationalism, what Michael Davidson recognizes as "a vital cultural heritage, forged through sign language" ("Cleavings" 5). As a cultural designation, D/deaf nationalism was initially "monolithic" and "based on signing," but more recently allows for "multiple constituencies of a post-nationalist Deaf culture" (5). However, in the context of this argument, Grania's metaphorical status extends beyond D/deaf nationalism to the broader national concept of an able-bodied "Canada." The novel's tendency to establish figurative links between character and nation as country is especially apparent in Jim's friend named "Irish," whose moniker has clear allegorical allusions to the nation of Ireland. The most overt connection between a nation and deafness is in monarchies where the "crown," a metonym for the monarchic state that functions as an engine of imperialist Empire, represents deafness; for instance, the novel mentions "*the 6-year-old son of the King and Queen of Spain*" who remains "*deaf and speechless*" (Itani 183) and "[t]he father of King Albert of Belgium . . . a deaf man. He was known as the Deaf Duke of Flanders" (269).

However, Grania's metaphoric links to nation are not so overt; they are, instead, the product of subtle allusions to the character of Anne Shirley in the *Anne of Green Gables* series, who is, of course, a well-known early-twentieth-century national allegory for Canada. As Cecily Devereux acknowledges, Anne is "a discursive site for what can be understood in ideological terms as the interpellation of national identity; 'we' read Anne as part of being 'Canadian'; 'we' recognize in Anne signs of 'our' shared 'Canadianness,' and in that process recognize (or constitute) ourselves as national subjects" (12). Grania may not exhibit Anne's garrulousness, but she does share her archetypal "red hair" (Itani 107), her intelligence (7, 78), and her resilience (137). Grania may not be a literal orphan—in fact, she enjoys a devoted family—yet once she enters The Institute for the Deaf, she must confront her feelings of orphan status. As her "Dulcie" interior monologue acknowledges, "*Dulcie was an orphan who lived at the school for*

*the rest of her days*" (88). Later, Grania "thought about the nights she had lain at the dormitory at school during her first year away from home. . . . [H]er lips raced through the chants: . . . *Don't let me be an orphan*" (342). The allusions to *Anne of Green Gables* accumulate in the character of Jim, Grania's husband, whom she internalizes as an intrinsic part of herself, "held . . . in her chest" (194): he is from "Prince Edward Island" (113), the famous setting of the series, and is an orphan (127). In keeping with L. M. Montgomery's reliance on the romantic formula of triumph over adversity, Grania, like Anne, is highly adept at absorbing recurring tutelage; adapting to her family, local community, and a larger social world; and overcoming both personal and social obstacles. Ultimately, Grania's name may mean "love" (36), but its spelling ties her to Canada: "*Gráinne*. But unless people were Irish they wouldn't know how to pronounce the name when they saw it written. 'We'll spell it the English, the Canadian way,' [Mamo] told Agnes. 'Grania'" (36).

If Grania is a metaphor for the nation, then, she, her deafness, and Canada intersect in positive ways: the novel characterizes all as highly *adaptable*. Grania's deafness is her defining trait; in fact, Donna McDonald argues that "Grania's deafness [is] an all-consuming shaper of her personality" (180). McDonald, a Deaf author and critic who has a direct embodied experience of deafness, has gone so far as to question the success of Itani's literary project by arguing that deafness "defines [Grania's] identity in its entirety . . . cannibalizing Grania by denying her . . . access to other elements of her persona" (182). In doing so, McDonald astutely suggests the novel veers dangerously close to equating personhood with disability. However, if we accept McDonald's argument that *Deafening* reduces Grania's character to a "one-dimensional" "cipher for deafness" (181), then, this analysis develops McDonald's reading further by asking: if Grania is deafness, what does her deafness mean in the novel?

I argue that if Grania is deafness, then the metaphorical links between Grania and Canada also extend to deafness and Canada; however, rather than adhering to derogatory stereotypes that figure deafness as lack and impediment, the novel foregrounds its status in Grania as able and productive. In Jay Dolmage's terminology, the novel can be said "to resist normativity through disability epideictic: searching for the refusal of negative disability stereotypes, praising and accentuating disability" and



“restoring the virtue of the denigrated” (223). In effect, the novel’s depiction of deafness in Grania disrupts the assumption that “the Deaf constitute a threat to ideas of nation . . . and good citizenship” (Davis, *Enforcing* 82); instead, Grania and deafness, much like Anne Shirley, are valued as exemplars of good citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Grania’s reminiscence about her and other deaf students’ patriotism exhibits their positive intersections with nation:

She thought of the children at school when Cedric [their teacher] had raised his ruler like a baton at the front of the crowded Assembly Room . . . One King, One Flag, One Fleet, One Empire. The children’s hands had shaped the signs of loyalty, their earnest young bodies standing smartly to attention. She had been one of those children. (Itani 186)

Similarly, in her interpretation of adept citizenship, Grania notes the superiority of Colin over members of the community who purportedly defend the body politic and brand him a coward: “It would take courage to ignore the insults of people who did not know half as much about conducting themselves with dignity as Colin did” (187). These episodes reveal that like those who view the Deaf as a linguistic subgroup, as opposed to a category of disability (Davis, “Deafness” 882), the novel’s treatment of Grania and the D/deaf “see[s] their state of being as defined not medically but socially and politically” (882). Thus, in its metaphorical treatment of Grania, the novel tends to rely on the “social model [of disability], in which disability is accepted as belonging to society as a whole, not just people with disabilities”; in turn, it interprets deafness as “merely a category of difference and not a pathology” (Wheatley 18). By focusing on disabling environments (such as the reductive medical assumptions displayed by the military and small town), as opposed to an impaired body, the novel emphasizes Grania’s ability and value. Ultimately, the parallel between Anne and Grania does not negate Grania’s bodily differences but highlights their status as equally able-bodied.

Specifically, the novel values Grania, and in a broader sense Canada, by reconsidering silence, a common metaphor for deafness, as a deficit. As Christopher Krentz explains, “the ubiquity of silence” as a “trope in nineteenth-century hearing accounts of deaf people . . . make it appear that deaf people live in an utterly soundless world and are soundless themselves” (76). The novel certainly conflates silence and deafness: “The silence [is] where [Grania] lived” (Itani 137). This association traditionally

has negative implications because, as Davis notes, “[s]ilence is the repressed other of speech. A brief scan of the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals the metaphorical use of ‘silence’ to stand for . . . death, absence, meaninglessness” (*Enforcing* 108-09). Even though silence, a “socially and ideologically determined” historical construct (Rosenfeld 318), “took on new contours” in the nineteenth century to “become a commodity, a form of luxury” (323) in the wake of increasing urban noise pollution, the novel recognizes the conventionally negative connotations of silence: it is tantamount to death (Itani 232, 267), threat (236), and the existential emptiness associated with deafness (77). However, *Deafening* simultaneously challenges these implications by acknowledging that silence and, more generally, deafness are not simply absence or lack; instead, silence also “protects” (171), offers “comfort” (196), provides “safety” (196, 200), functions as an intimate form of communication (143, 146), and enables personal and community connections (130, 184). Indeed, the novel challenges the tacit privileging of sound over silence in responses to deafness when it acknowledges that in the theatre of war silence is, at times, preferable to sound: “There was no silence in that place. The boys went mad from the sound” (305). In effect, the novel confirms Krentz’s conclusion that metaphors of silence “fail to represent deaf experience because they focus only on the inability to hear or speak, leaving out deaf people’s community, language, and manner of being” (76). The novel likewise reveals the limitations of the metaphor, for silence does not solely define Grania and the Deaf community. During Grania’s time at The Institute for the Deaf, students transmit sounds, breaking the silence that purportedly imprisons them: “They shout into the air” and “they roar out of the silence inside them” (Itani 87). The novel’s ambivalent treatment of silence, therefore, not only exposes traditionally reductive approaches to deafness but also encourages a reconsideration of silence as “death, absence, [and] meaninglessness” (Davis, *Enforcing* 109): silence can also be tantamount to life, presence, and meaning, attributes that characterize Grania, the D/deaf, and, as figurative extension, Canada.

Grania’s metaphoric national fitness is further apparent in her challenge to the separation of the senses, which relies on the notion, popularized in the nineteenth century, that the ear is the only organ that can process sound. Jonathan Sterne, in his examination of sound as “an artifact of the

messy and political human sphere” (13), posits that the contributions of Alexander Graham Bell, Johannes Müller, and Hermann von Helmholtz in the nineteenth century “mark a turning point in the history of ideas about hearing” (62). Their mechanical understanding of the ear and hearing meant that definitions of sound depended on the functioning ear (57); as Sterne explains, “Müller wrote over 150 years ago that ‘without the organ of hearing with its vital endowments, there would be no such a thing as sound in the world, but merely vibrations’” (qtd. in Sterne 11). As a result, “like Bell, Müller posited that each sense is separate because its data travel down separate nervous highways” (Sterne 60). As Müller puts it, “each sense is functionally and mechanically distinct from the others” (qtd. in Sterne 60). Itani’s novel alludes to this mechanical approach to physiology in its discussion of Bell’s “profound study of the human voice” where he “has actually taken apart the human larynx and all its accessories as if it were merely a telephone” (120-21), a machine. Helmholtz’s later elaboration of the mechanical function of sensory organs reaffirmed the separation of the senses: “each organ of sense produces peculiar sensations, which cannot be excited by means of any other; the eye gives sensations of light, the ear sensations of sound, the skin sensations of touch” (qtd. in Sterne 63). What Sterne terms “the separation of the senses” means that “each sense— hearing, sight, touch, smell, taste—[is] a functionally distinct system, [is] a unique and closed experiential domain” (62). Because “the separation of the senses” instrumentally links sound to the ear, “Bell understood deafness, fundamentally, as a human disability to be overcome, not as a condition of life” (39). Thus, in the “separation of the senses” paradigm, deafness is equivalent to deficit; it is the functional absence of the only organ—the ear—that can process sound.

However, Grania’s synesthetic visual engagement with sound challenges this understanding of deafness as deficit; her visual processing of sound reveals that the senses are not distinct but interdependent and compensatory because they can aid one another. Although Grania hopes that “Graham Bell’s] . . . profound study of the human voice” (Itani 120) will help deaf students “have a better chance for learning” (121), her response to sound does not conform to the nineteenth-century auditory discourses to which Bell contributed. Rather than designating Grania’s lack of a functioning ear a disability, as Bell would, the novel’s understanding of sound is more

in keeping with John Bulwer's much earlier assessment of audition. As Elizabeth B. Bearden explains, "Bulwer (1606-56), an English physician who . . . treated Deafness . . . contravenes disparagements of Deafness," first, by "refus[ing] to view Deafness as a privational defect of nature; he considers Deafness a natural variation of the human form with definite advantages," and, second, by "refut[ing] the exclusion of sign language and other forms of what he calls ocular audition from natural law" (34). Predating the "separation of the senses" in the nineteenth century, Bulwer's "ocular audition" emphasized the "interdependent nature of the senses for Deaf people specifically, focusing on techniques in which vision assists hearing, such as signing and lipreading" (38). In Bulwer's phrasing, "ocular audition" "may inable you to *heare with your eye*" (qtd. in Bearden 39). Grania exhibits a similar "hearing eye" (Bulwer qtd. in Bearden 41) when she desires "'to go to the ocean . . . to see that big sound'" (Itani 148) or when she tries "to see the sound of the wind" (322). When "Grania sees a word here and there as her glance flits from face to face" (63), she, to use Oliver Sacks' terminology, "*see[s] the 'voice' of words*" (Sacks 134). The consistent focalization of the third-person external narration from Grania's perspective also emphasizes her functional reliance on the eye to process her sonic environment. In fact, sound is not only visual for Grania but also tactile: "I feel your song. . . . I listen to your body" (Itani 134), she explains to Jim. Like the English writer Josephine Dickinson, whose Deaf poetics, according to Jessica Lewis Luck, reveal that sound is visual, Grania opens up a "hearing-listening space that incorporates more than the tiny organ of the ear . . . shifting the locus of sound experience from the voice and ear to other important sites of sound-processing" (Luck 171), such as the eye. In doing so, the novel challenges audist biases, which designate the ear as the sole receptacle of sound, and lauds the deaf experience as highly adaptive.

This capacity for adaptation becomes a crucial trait for rebuilding the nation, a strength apparent in Grania's rehabilitative interactions with Kenan, her injured brother-in-law. In the figure of the wounded soldier, two tropes for nation—deafness and World War I—intersect. Grania makes this connection when "she thought of the soldiers returning, the ones who had been deafened during the war. There were so many in this area of Ontario, classes were being held in the Belleville school, in the

same rooms in which she had studied as a child” (Itani 371). Arguably, the soldiers’ deafness represents the physical costs of war: in accordance with the medical model, World War I renders them damaged and, as a consequence, disables the nation. In A. J. Withers’ terminology, “the ‘fit’ soldiers, who were once “heroes for the nation,” “had become ‘unfit’” (36). Kenan’s injured body, shell shock, and “silence” (287) register the fall of the soldier as national hero. This transition is reminiscent of prominent British war poetry, such as Wilfred Owen’s “Disabled” (1917), which, Davidson explains, “regards the disabled veteran as a de-sexed, pathetic figure”; thus, “[w]hatever heroics serving his country offered to the young man, has become a cruel joke,” and “disability [in this war poetry] is the . . . figure of damaged embodiment against which the statistically normal body may be compared” (“Paralyzed” 84-85).

However, rather than using the soldiers’ deafness and Kenan’s injuries solely as tropes for damaged nations outside the “normate,” *Deafening* shifts the signification of disability by making it a rehabilitative site of empathetic identification and linguistic exchange. In David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s terms, “rather than signify disability as a symbol of cultural ruin” (13) or “social collapse” (165), the novel “narrate[s] the experience of disability as a social and lived phenomenon” (13) in ways that invest it with positive metaphoric contours for the nation. Specifically, Grania’s deafness facilitates Kenan’s recovery because she is able to identify with his feelings of emotional isolation and debilitating fear: “Both afraid.’ . . . Yes. He was afraid” (296-97). She also elicits his first communicative exchange since returning from the war by recalling her childhood neologism “poom” (297), her word for “fart.” Kenan responds to the memory with his first expression of mirth and a willingness to return to the world of signification by having Grania use sign language to teach him to sound out words: “Words tumbled from Kenan’s mouth. Lesson over for the week. They joined their right hands, and squeezed” (299). Kenan’s imperative to learn, articulated in the very mandate Grania used as a child—“*Tell*” (301)—becomes the title for Itani’s next novel, which charts Kenan’s development.<sup>5</sup> *Tell* clarifies the crucial role Grania plays in Kenan’s rehabilitation:

Grania had helped him to recover the language inside himself, the language of words he had not been able to utter after he had come home. He had heard people well enough. . . . But his own words had stormed and tangled inside his

head. He hadn't been able to separate them into patterns. In some strange way not fully understood, he'd had to relearn the language he already knew. The bridge between, while he was stuttering his way back to speech, was Grania's sign language. (16)

Grania and Kenan forge a powerful rehabilitative alliance that may aim to return Kenan "to speech" and, thus, a desirable "norm" of able-bodiedness but does not rely on "administrators and doctors" who, in the medical model, "became the ultimate experts about disability and disabled bodies, rather than disabled people themselves" (Withers 48). Instead, by collaborating in a lived experience of disability, they counter the "static" universalism of the "angry war veteran" stereotype (Mitchell and Snyder 25). Metaphorically, therefore, Grania and Kenan's therapeutic contract offers an idealistically imagined model of nation where deafness and disability enhance the body politic through adaptive healing.

By idealistically reimagining the early-twentieth-century nation as premised on the deaf body, the novel deviates from normative historical accounts, which recognize constructions of nation during the period as founded on principles of exclusion. In her study of disability in Canada, Maria Truchan-Tataryn acknowledges that "disabled experience has been omitted from th[e] fluid process of negotiating Canadian identity" (qtd. in Chivers 885). Chivers confirms that only "with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a shift begins toward a perspective of disability as part of the diversity that Canadian society embraces" (890). Specifically, Withers, who understands that "the concept of disability is socially constructed and historically contingent" (35), explains "how disability was discursively produced in Canada" during World War I on the basis of exclusion (33). The increased visibility of physically disabled veterans returning from the war meant that disability could not, as it had before the war, exist "secluded [and] hidden-away" (36); in response, federal policy and discourse constructed "citizenship as necessarily self-sufficient and disability as a loss in economic productivity" (33). By approaching disability in accordance with the medical model, Canadian federal policies socially excluded the disabled who could not "participate in the labour market" (38) on the basis of inefficient capitalist productivity (31). Such policies, therefore, perpetuated the principles of eugenics, "an increasingly dominant discourse with respect to disability" during the period, that "classified people into

two broad categories: those who were fit (generally white, straight, middle- or upper-class non-disabled people) and those who were unfit (everyone else)” (36). Unlike Grania and Kenan’s rehabilitative interactions, which anticipate the social model of disability by emphasizing collaborative responses to and destigmatization of the disabled body, the construction of disability in Canada in the early twentieth century emphasized diagnosing perceived pathology and correcting those who could enter the labour force. If, as Withers attests, “citizenship and economic productivity were interlocked” (44), then the disabled who were unable to produce found themselves outside the semantic field of nation.

However, configurations of nation as a narrative construct in the novel enable a reimagining of Canada during this period not as exclusive but as inclusive of difference. In keeping with the influential work of Benedict Anderson, who theorizes that the nation as a cultural construct manifests, in part, by its print culture, and subsequently of Homi Bhabha, who studies “the production of the nation as narration” (209), the novel presents nation as a story that is subject to change. In her contemplation of Ireland, Grania points to nation’s status as evolving narrative invention, what she terms a “word picture”:

The beautiful land called Ireland. . . . The picture she had always had in her head was the one her grandmother had given her through story. With the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Mamo’s word picture was being replaced by another, one that held murky waters and dark sea and drowning babies washing up through waves. (Itani 117)

Unlike this revision of “Ireland,” the novel’s retelling of “Canada” through Grania’s story does not opt for a macabre narrative but one of optimistic egalitarian inclusivity. This emphasis is, to a degree, apparent in the romance narrative between Grania and Jim, which resists the period’s discourse of eugenics that aimed to maintain a clear distinction between the “fit” and “unfit.” As Withers explains, “eugenicists attempted to steer human evolution by preventing or discouraging the breeding of those classified as unfit” (36). Alexander Graham Bell notoriously applied the same reasoning to deafness, so as Grania recognizes, he “worried himself over marriages between deaf people,” fearing they would produce deaf progeny, “even though he had worked with deaf children in Boston when he was a young man, and had married a deaf woman himself” (Itani 120). Unsurprisingly, Krentz notices that literary “male hearing narrators seem unwilling to contemplate a romantic

deaf-hearing relationship” in nineteenth-century American literature because it might risk blurring what had become a naturalized distinction between the abled and disabled (118). In the novel, Cora crudely iterates this assumption when she evaluates Grania’s prospects: “Who will marry that pitiful child when she grows up? . . . If they don’t find someone deaf and dumb, she’ll end up living with her mother the rest of her days” (Itani 55). However, Grania’s relationship with Jim resists the exclusivity in eugenics discourses and celebrates, instead, an inclusive deaf-hearing romantic attachment that was “full of hope” (113). Ultimately, if Grania is a national metaphor on the basis of her parallels with Anne Shirley, she does not conform to what Devereux believes Anne—at least in part—represents: an early-twentieth-century Canadian “ideological framework of emergent nationhood” (24) defined on the principle of exclusion. Instead, Grania as national metaphor encourages inclusivity of the D/deaf and disabled by drawing attention to their adaptive “fitness.”

By using Grania and her deafness as a national metaphor in this way, the novel risks reducing its D/deaf and disabled characters to simplistic tropes, using deafness as what Mitchell and Snyder term a “narrative prosthesis,” where “disability pervades literary narrative . . . as an opportunistic metaphorical device” (47). Mitchell and Snyder recognize this prosthetic function extends to national tropes, which typically depend on a binary logic that presumes national “health” is the antithesis of the disabled body: “One cannot narrate the story of a healthy body or national reform movement without the contrastive device of disability to bear out the symbolic potency of the message” (63-64). *Deafening*, however, skirts this kind of narrative prosthesis by not exploiting essentialized, derogatory tropes of disability as overdetermined metaphors for nation. Unlike Cedric’s editorials, which “flattened the [Deaf’s] voices until they merged to become one,” Itani’s novel highlights “the voices [that] refused to be flattened, [which were] what Grania looked for—voices that were too distinct to be made to disappear” (119). Grania not only seeks these voices; she is also a metaphoric embodiment of what these voices represent: a unique, able, and adept Deaf woman, not a “flattened” “opportunistic device.” While the novel might submit to stereotypes of the D/deaf as “stupid” (xiv) and dependent (139), it simultaneously challenges them by representing Grania as intelligent (7, 22, 78) and strong (137), thus offering a



nuanced, shifting depiction of her deafness rather than a default extreme in a binary spectrum. *Deafening* does not metaphorically belabour overt, stale tropes, but offers a tangible model of an able and inclusive nation through Grania and her lived experience of deafness.

Ultimately, while Grania and her deafness function as a subtle national metaphor, deafness is not reducible to nation; instead, deafness is layered and dynamic, whether as individual experience, communal affiliation, wartime coefficient, or social construct. Like the sign language Grania learns at school, deafness is an unstable signifier, “unpredictable” and “forever changing” (Itani 43). Thus, deafness might characterize Grania’s individual experience, but it also extends to the collective experience of the students at the school, which “contributed to the rise of a distinct . . . group identity” (Krentz 35) for the Deaf based on “concepts such as hybridity and affiliation” (14). The novel reveals not only this “hybridity” in the diversity of Deaf students’ life paths (Itani 113) and voices (119), but also their “affiliation” through shared education (84-85), publications (84), and employment (180). However, the novel also recontextualizes deafness by examining it within the theatre of war as both a physical and psychological phenomenon (272). These shifting configurations of deafness reveal, as Baynton recognizes, that “the meanings of ‘hearing’ and ‘deaf’ are not transparent . . . and cannot be apprehended apart from a culturally created web of meaning” (33). In Itani’s novel, these meanings intersect with nation but are not limited to it. Therefore, *Deafening*’s revision of Canada as a nation premised on Grania’s lived experience of deafness celebrates it as a vehicle with which to generate independence, pleasure, empathy, and responsibility, but does not reduce it to a single metaphoric function.

#### NOTES

- 1 My use of the terms deaf, Deaf, and D/deaf conforms to the definitions of the Canadian Association of the Deaf—Association des Sourds du Canada. The term “deaf” refers to “people who have little or no functional hearing.” It “may also be used as a collective noun (‘the deaf’) to refer to people who are medically deaf but who do not necessarily identify with the Deaf community. In addition, children who are deaf are usually referred to as ‘deaf’ because they may not yet have been socialized into either the Deaf or the non-Deaf culture. If they use Sign as their first language, they are referred to [as] ‘Deaf.’” The “big-D” “Deaf” is “a sociological term referring to those individuals who are medically deaf or hard of hearing who identify with and participate in the culture, society, and language of Deaf people, which is based on sign language. Their preferred mode of

communication is Sign.” The term D/deaf is “used as a collective noun to refer to both those ‘Deaf’ people who identify with the Deaf culture and those ‘deaf’ people who do not” (“Terminology”).

- 2 The frequent italicization in quotations throughout has been retained from Itani’s novel.
- 3 Ellis’ analysis of the oral-manual training debates in Canada generally conforms to Baynton’s findings. In nineteenth-century Canada, sign language was the preferred method of communication, especially in Quebec, because Catholic religious orders believed sign language would make “deaf French Canadian youngsters into good Catholics” (375). However, in the early twentieth century, oralism in Canada, like in the United States, gained prominence. In 1922, the Toronto Board of Education introduced into the city’s public schools “the pure oralist method of instructing the deaf” (371), which met with opposition from the Deaf community, particularly the Ontario Association of the Deaf (372). Like Baynton, Ellis recognizes the importance of nation in this shift, citing the British Royal Commission on the Blind, the Deaf and Dumb (1886-1889), which “raised fears that deaf people were . . . ‘a possible toxin to the state’” (377). However, unlike Baynton, Ellis emphasizes the influence of the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, held in Milan in 1880, as “a pivotal moment in transnational deaf history” (376) because “at Milan, the oralists . . . passed resolutions” that declared “their intention to suppress sign language” (376). After Milan, Ellis acknowledges, “signing declines over time in Canadian schools” (376). By 1907, the Ontario School for the Deaf (OSD) “had embraced oralism,” and “by 1927, there were just three teachers who used sign language left at the OSD” (376). See also MacDougall; Clarke and Winzer; and Beggs, who trace a similar historical arc in Canada.
- 4 However, inherent differences persist in the ways the two characters function as national tropes, particularly in their reception and symbolic function outside the novel. Whereas *Anne of Green Gables* “is one of the best-selling English-Canadian novels ever” (Devereux 12) and “Montgomery’s heroine has emerged” as a “national icon” . . . ‘right up there, with the moose, the beaver, the Mountie, and the Habs’” (13), Grania’s metaphoric national status is neither so ubiquitous nor so absolute. Unlike Anne, who has become synonymous with nation, Grania’s metaphoric national role manifests subtly in the novel and is but one of several figurative implications linked to the character. For instance, Rūta Šlapkauskaitė argues that “deafness [is] a metaphor for postmemory” in the novel: “The deafness of the female protagonist furnishes the perceptual structure of the First World War as a sonorous event,” revealing the novel’s “concern for how the past *resounds* in us” and “creating a moral premise for remembering through empathy” (209).
- 5 In this way, *Deafening* challenges the “‘kill or cure’ imperative” that “introduce[s] disabled characters only to ‘solve’ their ‘problems’” (Mitchell and Snyder 164).

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