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## “Like being trapped in a drum”: The Poetics of Resonance in Frances Itani’s *Deafening*

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### Abstract

This paper considers how Frances Itani’s *Deafening* imaginatively rethinks our understanding of the Great War in the age of postmemory. Seeing as the novel is set in Canada and Europe during the First World War and takes as its protagonist a deaf woman, the poetic attention given to the senses as a horizon of phenomenological experience magnifies the moral bonds that the characters establish in defiance of both deafness and death. Guided by the theoretical reasoning of Marianne Hirsch, Elaine Scarry, and Alison Landsberg as well as contemporary phenomenological thinking, most significantly that of Edward S. Casey, Steven Connor, Michel Serres, and Jean-Luc Nancy, this paper examines how the novel’s attentiveness to the materiality of the body in regard to the ethical collisions of sound and silence as well as life and death contributes to a poetics of resonance that generates prosthetic memories, turning the anonymous record of war into a private experience of moral endurance inscribed on the ear of historical legacy.

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Ours is an age without trumpets.  
We can now receive the gift of language,  
because we have silenced the world.

(Michel Serres, *The Five Senses. A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*)

Fictional accounts of the historical experience of the Great War in Frances Itani’s *Deafening* intertwine with a poetic attentiveness to the cultural construction of deafness in the narrative structure of memory. Consistent with using deafness as a trope of phenomenological relationality, a narrative conceit that binds the notion of silence to signification, this novel raises concerns about how embodied experience set in the past may be translated into embodied knowledge in the present. By taking issue with the dichotomy of sound vs. silence characterising the dominant Western discourse on deafness, I examine how Itani’s novel reconfigures the perceptual parameters of disability, so that both deafness and war injury connect to the body as a sentient source of textuality. In this respect, the

concept of disability itself can be thought of not only as a physical, but also as an epistemological, condition, one that recognises the moral implications of writing about the First World War in the twenty-first century.

## 1. Writing Postmemory

Like any work of art concerned with making sense of the past, historical fiction is grounded in the act of interpretation that measures facticity against the light of invention. At the heart of this enterprise we find an irresolvable preoccupation with referentiality and representation, testing the premises of our assumptions about truth and epistemological authority in the relation between mimesis and diegesis, experience and language. Nowhere has this been more foregrounded than in postmodern literature and theory, whose intellectual avenues have converged in Linda Hutcheon's notion of "historiographic metafiction" (20) characterising novels like Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* or Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. The collapse of old epistemological certainties in the second half of the twentieth century, which marked the ascendance of what Jean-François Lyotard diagnosed as "the postmodern condition" commensurate with "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), echoed in the rise of a new sense of narrative responsibility, one that was keen to debunk the idea of aesthetic sovereignty embraced by High Modernism and acknowledge the act of creation as political praxis. Hutcheon's theorising of postmodern poetics reflecting the internal contradictions of postmodern culture and the overlaps and confrontations between "various kinds of theory and current literary discourse" (15) highlighted the shift in the conceptualisation of historiography itself as a narrative means through which the past is given social meaning continuous with the dominant system of values underlying the ongoing cultural processes.

While borrowing from Hayden White's reasoning about history as narrative, Hutcheon's emphasis on the constructedness, rather than givenness, of historical truth brought to our attention the ideological links between history and fiction as signifying processes, which need to recognise their complicity in discursive networks that constitute the institutional mechanism of the legitimization of knowledge and power. To quote Hutcheon,

what postmodernism does is to contest the very possibility of our ever being able to know the "ultimate objects" of the past. It teaches and enacts the recognition of the fact that the social, historical, and existential "reality" of the past is discursive reality when it is used as the referent of art, and so the only "genuine historicity" becomes that which would openly acknowledge its own discursive, contingent identity. (24)

In this view, what is key to postmodern literature's engagement with history is its emphatic awareness of the problematic nature of reference and the production

of knowledge, resulting in a formal and ideological self-reflexivity that deploys (inter)textuality simultaneously to question the ways in which human subjectivity enters into contract with social norms and institutions and to maintain the recognisability of the dominant social order. A measure of significance is also derived from giving voice to “the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history” (Hutcheon 114), whose presence in official historical record is routinely obliterated by the need to install a totalising structure of a single, “objective” truth. By drawing our attention to marginalised subjectivity, historiographic metafiction opens up the epistemological gap between modes of memory and institutional inscriptions of historical experience, achieved often at the cost of the suppression of difference in terms of race, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, or age. In a figural system where emphasis is placed on the narrative act as a means of production of knowledge, the ex-centric subject offers a necessary degree of critical distance and resistance to ideological absorption when examining the signifying practices that bring the epistemological remoteness of the past into the hermeneutic fold of the present. Among other things, the ex-centric body intervenes into the economy of meaning where cognition is divorced from corporeality and highlights the correlations between memory and the lived experience that bear on our sense of self as both historical and political agents. While capable of ideological subversion, however, the ex-centric characters in the novels like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* or Susan Swan’s *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* do not stage a simple inversion of centre and margin in the dynamics of power. Instead, their ex-centric lens warps the dominant perception of past events and invites us to rethink the culturally operative categories of meaning which build the illusion of transparency surrounding the distinctions between fact and fiction, art and theory, social action and discourse. As Hutcheon insists, “To be ex-centric, on the border or margin, inside yet outside is to have a different perspective, one that Virginia Woolf [...] once called ‘alien and critical,’ one that is ‘always altering its focus,’ since it has no centering force” (67). This is why in postmodern theory and fiction historiography itself emerges as a discursive practice of ideological containment, which achieves institutional validity by eliding narrative contradictions, material contingencies, and disruptive singularities.

As an aesthetic mode of historical consciousness that attends to the agency of the body in the world, historical fiction entails a hermeneutic imperative to, what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls, being “sensitive to the text’s alterity” (271), calling for an ethical engagement with our assumptions about the texture of the past and the irreducibility of its meaning. War fiction, in particular, thinks in conjunction with the body, attending to the vicissitudes of trauma in the aftermath of military confrontations and physical and emotional violence. David Trotter has made a similar point in commenting on the British novels about the Great War in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, noting

that: “The First World War was a psychiatric as well as a literary war, and after it there may have been some collusion between these two ways of thinking about distress of mind” (49). This is to say that the appeal the Great War had to the literary imagination of the writers who lived in its proximity contributed to the expansion of the medical understanding of the complexity of moral and perceptual fibre of which the human body and consciousness are capable.

This has had important implications for contemporary literary reflections on war, especially in the “postmemory” (Hirsch 5) context of the centennial commemorative discourse linked to the legacy of the Great War. Commemoration, as philosopher Edward S. Casey reminds us, entails soliciting body and place in a communal effort to overcome “the separation from which otherwise unaffiliated individuals suffer” (250). The oscillation between continuity and rupture, connectivity to and recollection of the past in commemorative work brings into view the ethical dimension of the process of transmission that underlies the practices of cultural signification in the public domain. Given its conceptual reach beyond the “affiliative structures of memory” (21) bound to a single generation, Marianne Hirsch’s notion of postmemory seems particularly intellectually rewarding in how we approach acts of remembering that constitute contemporary historical fiction. Crucially, it untangles the conceptual knot of the problem faced in transgenerational acts of memory transfer: “‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that ‘the generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (5). For Hirsch, postmemory offers a “structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” (5–6), which can be enacted through affective relationships to “testimonial objects” (24) that demand recall as much as “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (5). How this bears on the literary scene is that unlike the verbal testimonies of, for example, Wilfred Owen or Robert Graves, who not only took part in combat, but also spoke to the readers directly affected by it, postmemory narratives signal “the absence of a first-hand empirical connection to the war” (Sokołowska-Paryż and Löschnigg 1) and thus face the problem of interpretation that involves responding not only to the epistemological distance that separates us from the immediacy of WWI, but also to the hermeneutic tradition through which the past addresses our current age. In other words, postmemory fiction is bound to the principle of reciprocity, wherein contemporary reflections on the past make manifest our conceptual situatedness in interpretative practices. Gadamer explains this process in terms of tradition:

[...] our usual relationship to the past is not characterized by distancing and freeing ourselves from tradition. Rather, we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process – i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a kind

of cognizance that our late historical judgment would hardly regard as a kind of knowledge but as the most ingenuous affinity with tradition. (283)

In regard to postmemory literature about the Great War, writing involves revisiting forgotten sites of lived experience, restoring the silenced (material) accounts, and revising the authoritative readings of historical records. Not only does this attempt demand understanding the complex political nature of past *events* in relation to the present, but also calls for ascribing meaning to *experience* and thus converting, by way of narrative means, empirical horror, the ordeals of the body, and the shortcomings of (post)memory into a mode of aesthetic encounter. It is in this light that Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż and Martin Löschnigg observe in their “Introduction” to *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film* that “Post-memory literature and film reinterpret and redefine the Great War but – at the same time – they create and perpetuate an emphatic connection with this past, and endow it with a significance for the present” (3).

The commemorative gesture of postmemory literature about WWI poses its own set of conceptual problems. One of them has to do with thinking about fiction as a place of memory where the durability of remembrance invested in material pages is shaped through the metaphorical act of resurrection, which is premised on the cultural rite of entombment. If we accept Robert Pogue Harrison’s phenomenological reasoning that “the act of blackening the page constitutes a gift of the dead to the future” (14), then we may forge an analogy between the earth, into which we submit our dead, and narrative texture that stores our being in time. This is to say that as a testament to human finitude, literature makes a pledge to the soil, *humus*, which conceives human subjectivity and houses mortal time, so that we can partake of the heirloom of the past and stand in the guardianship of cultural memory. To reiterate Pogue Harrison’s insight, literature evokes a burial place, which “marks the mortality of its creators even more distinctly than it marks the resting place of the dead” (20). Attendant upon this commemorative act, the war novel becomes a receptacle of (post)memory, whose material form – a monumentality of a kind – is elevated to a communal, public event inscribed with symbolic value that is suggestive not only of a moral bond between the present and the past, but also of the power of material commemoration to transcend death. This goes in step with Casey’s observation that “*commemoration, in honouring the past, revivifies the present, giving it a new birth – whether of a political or of a spiritual nature*” (237; original emphasis). In other words, the act of collective remembrance furnishes the agents of memory with a new capacity for life that sustains hermeneutic links between the living and the dead, the individual minds and bodies and the places they inhabit, and, ultimately, human interiority and the shared practices of meaning-making that belong to cultural life. As a site of embodied remembrance, the postmemory war novel unfolds a reciprocal relation between art and its recipients that may be compared to the intellectual and

emotional significance of monuments as described by philosopher Dylan Trigg in *The Memory of Place*:

The individual human subject stands before the monument. The object is neither passive nor indifferent to the viewer. But nor is the meaning of the interaction clear from the outset. A relation between self and world opens, whereby the monument not only empowers itself as transcending death, but also presents itself as an object to empower the viewer as a finite entity. Thanks to this dynamic, affective experience is framed by the aesthetic attributes of the monument. The monument becomes a site of affirmation and introspection, at once pointing to the anonymity of death but also to the singularity of individual finitude. (93)

Key to the phenomenological significance Trigg reflects on is the relay of intersubjective experience made possible by the aesthetic properties of the monument that structure the commemorative act-event. The materiality of the monument is shown to be able to accommodate both the shared knowledge of human mortality and the individual sensitivity to finitude as a source of signification.

I hope it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the power of durability and singularity Trigg finds in monuments can be extended to written accounts, which, as Pogue Harrison incisively puts it, are made of “this conservative element that outlasts its bygone worlds even as it allows for the opening of crypts and folds of human time in the midst of nature’s transcendence” (15). It seems to me that postmemory literature, in particular, recalibrates the past as a human foundation at the same time as it occasions a reflection on “the singularity of individual finitude.” Especially so as Trigg’s reasoning aligns with Derek Attridge’s observations about singularity as a seed of creative imagination:

[...] singularity, like alterity and inventiveness, is not a property but an event, the event of singularizing which takes place in reception: it does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter and thereby constitute it. It is produced, not given in advance; and its emergence is also the beginning of its erosion, as it brings about the cultural changes necessary to accommodate it. (64)

In other words, singularity itself needs to be thought of in terms of intersubjective experience, which reconstitutes our being in the world, relocating our place in relation to cultural memory and rearranging the contingencies of social life that bear on our conception of self as finite creatures. Far from being just enduring testaments to the material demise of human life, literary works bring home the reciprocal bond between human receptiveness of time and time’s power to inscribe life with meaning. What this highlights in postmemory narratives is the agency granted to the reader as a repository of “the cultural ensemble by which he or she has been fashioned as a subject with assumptions, predispositions, and expectations” (Attridge 67). Considered in this line of thought, reading reaffirms itself

as a practice of aesthetic apprehension and ethical vigilance correlative with the affective reciprocity that a particular creative engagement with the past calls for. Indeed, the epistemological distance inherent in postmemory literature makes the singularity of experience almost inevitable by virtue of the verbal communion between the living and the dead whereby the reader imaginatively reconfigures the past in the awareness of his or her own mortality. In Pogue Harrison’s words, “To be mortal means to *be* the place of [an] imaginary afterlife” (149).

## 2. Writing Deafness

Insofar as contemporary historical fiction sets the stage for re-imagining past events, *Deafening* (2004) by Canadian author Frances Itani offers a compelling example of postmemory literature that grapples with the experience of the Great War. Organised around the life of its deaf protagonist Grania in the small town of Deseronto, Ontario, the fictional narrative aligns the story of a female coming-of-age with the story of “the birth of the Canadian nation within the historical narrative” (Teichler 240). As Hanna Teichler remarks in her essay on Joseph Boyden’s novel *Three Day Road*, “Canada became fully independent in the aftermath of the Great War, due to its major successes on the battlefields, and entered the international stage as a ‘worthy ally’ and recognized nation. It was the moment when Canada could be regarded as a nation separate from Great Britain” (241). What links *Deafening* to *Three Day Road*, however, is not only their concern for the legacy of the Great War in Canada’s mythology of nation building, but also their attentiveness to the historical experiences that have been largely omitted from the master narrative of Canadian history: the sacrifice and service of Indigenous people in *Three Day Road* and the moral endurance of the deaf in *Deafening*. In fact, Anna Branach-Kallas cogently argues that Itani’s attentiveness to the experience of disabled bodies on the homefront marks an ethical shift in the representations of the impact of WWI, highlighting the concept of the periphery, which “acquires not only a geographical meaning (a small town in Canada), but a social one (a female perspective), and an ontological one (the point of view of a disabled person)” (129–130). Placing both Boyden’s and Itani’s novels, alongside Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, Kerri Sakamoto’s *One Million Hearts*, Camilla Gibb’s *Sweetness in the Belly*, and Gil Courtemanche’s *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, within the context of their critique of Canada’s contemporary discourse on security, Haike Härting and Smaro Kamboureli comment thus:

Concerned either with contemporary acts of civil war or the narrativization of hitherto marginalized experiences of the First and Second World Wars, these novels raise questions about the ideological and cultural function of narrating political or national identity formation through moments of a perceived national crisis, war, and heroic risk-taking. (674)



Arguably, Härtling and Kamboureli read this ethically and politically informed narrative perspective as suggestive of Canadian literature's critical response to Canada's identity as a peacekeeping nation. In fact, they point to the novels' power to unsettle "dominant legitimizing discourses of security" (676). Sokołowska-Paryż and Löschnigg, on the other hand, see it as endemic to the structure of contemporary postmemory narratives: "One can detect in post-memory literature and film a discernible need to include hitherto marginalized perspectives for reasons of race or gender, and restore the necessary prominence to unduly 'forgotten' Great War battlefields" (2). Inevitably, contemporary literary accounts of WWI are conceptually tethered to the current landscape of socio-political thought, which affects the discourse of commemoration and modes of imaginative "returns" that novels like *Three Day Road* or *Deafening* make possible.

One way to think about this is to remind ourselves of Hutcheon's notion of *ex-centricity*, through which she interpreted the ideological caveats of late twentieth-century historical fictions in English that highlighted the correlations between social divisions and institutional records of historical experience. Another is to consider Canadian historian Tim Cook's examination of the work of memory in Canadian historiography on the Great War. Cook observes that "Over the last hundred years, there appears to have emerged three dominant narratives on Canada's Great War, as played out in Canadian society, forged and remade with succeeding generations of participants, myth-makers, cultural creators, and historians" (417). The three dominant narratives postulate three modes of remembering that inscribe the Canadian experience of the Great War with collective meaning: "that of the war as a terrible and useless slaughter, the war as a nation-building event, and the war as a divisive event [...]" (Cook 417). Although the three interpretations do not shy away from acknowledging the different effects the war had on different fractions of Canadian society, in Cook's view, they consistently leave out the strand of memory of "the war as an absent event," which speaks of "the missing million males, aged eighteen to forty-five, who never enlisted for wartime service" (420). Seeing as this number does not include the young men who were turned down on medical grounds, there is still little known what motivated young Canadian men, beyond conscientious objection, to escape enlistment during WWI. For Cook, the question remains: "Did these men, all potential recruits, see themselves as soldiers of the soil and factory floor, or was the war simply an overseas event, to be followed in the daily papers with little inconvenience to oneself?" (421). As a master narrative of Canadian nationhood, the history of WWI is by no means lacking in mysteries and untold stories.

The collision of different, sometimes incompatible, memory threads in the archival fabric of the Great War finds a place in *Deafening* as well, what with the novel bringing together the war experience of a deaf woman in Canada and that of her hearing husband in the trenches of war-torn Europe. But Itani shifts the epistemological uncertainty and the ethos of narrative contingency that

characterises so much of postmodern historiographic metafiction in favour of modes of sensual engagement with the past as evoked in deafness as a metaphor for postmemory. In this respect, the novel opens as a “sensual recollection of the past” (Trigg xviii), where it faces a double epistemological limit in its attempts to represent both past events and the experience of suffering. The deafness of the female protagonist furnishes the perceptual structure of the First World War as a sonorous event, inviting a correlation between our act of making *sense* and our reliance on the *senses*. Listening by way of deafness in Itani’s novel emerges as a critical modality that rethinks the conceptual primacy traditionally attributed to vision, wherein deafness has been long considered not just a disability, but a form of intellectual defect or social deviance (Davis 2006, 6). In *Deafening*, by contrast, the deaf body operates as a hermeneutic agent, who is capable of grasping sense beyond sound and accommodating resonant meaning. If we accept philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s reasoning that “All sonorous presence is thus made of a complex of returns [*renvois*] whose binding is the resonance or “sonance” of sound, an expression that one should hear – hear and listen to – as much from the side of sound itself, or of its emission, as from the side of its reception or its listening [...]” (16), then Itani’s evoking of the Great War may be conceptualised along the lines of a poetics of resonance.

More precisely, the novel’s figuration of deafness as a reflexive mode of historical experience shows its concern for how the past *resounds* in us, creating a moral premise for remembering through empathy and thus generating what Alison Landsberg calls “prosthetic memories”: “privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person’s own archive of experience” (19). Guided by the idea of postmemory as sensual resonance, this reading of Itani’s *Deafening* examines the narrative forms of sensual repercussions and emotional ricochets which underpin both the traumatic effect of the Great War on the novel’s characters and the conceptual structure of sense as “the rebound of sound” (Nancy 30). As a consequence of thinking about meaning as “an arrangement of resonance” (Nancy 21), I suggest, the novel inaugurates a resonant subjectivity, which derives from the tensions of listening to the echo of the past, launching a singularity of sensual evocation where sense sounds and re-sounds in the act of reading as in a soundbox. In *Deafening* the subject of postmemory is not unlike the subject of listening, mobile in its singularity, “always still yet to come, spaced, traversed, and called by itself, sounded by itself [...]” (Nancy 21).

Given that Itani’s novel conveys the war experience by alternating the points of view of Grania and her husband Jim, who joins the war as a stretcher-bearer, Branach-Kallas has reason to point out that the two perspectives “complete each other, creating an image of war as a “total” conflict” (128). Structurally, the novel consists of five parts, covering different stretches of time from 1903 to 1919, of which the first deals with Grania’s life before the war, the second through fourth

tell us how WWI affects Grania and Jim, and the last part ends with Jim's return from Europe to Canada. Grania's deafness is the epistemological ground on which Itani gives us access to the experience of war at the beginning of the twenty-first century: like her, we are physically distanced from the frontline (Grania remains in Canada) and limited in our understanding of the events themselves and their significance in history (like Grania, we read Jim's letters and the bodies of the wounded). The hermeneutic mastery associated with the novel's female protagonist makes us mindful of the extent to which we too depend on sign language, which writing is, partaking of the subjectivity of the deaf in the postmemory reception of the narrative resonance of the Great War.

As *Deafening* opens in 1902 with Grania's grandmother teaching her to pronounce her name, we learn that her deafness is a consequence of scarlet fever: "But her older brother, Bernard, calls her Grainy. Has done since the week she was born, and won't stop now just because the scarlet fever she had last winter made her deaf'" (Itani xiii). This episode, narrated in the form of a prologue and thus preceding the novel's first section, which covers the years 1903–1905, highlights Grania's silence as a moral corollary to the noise of the machine-gun fire, the frenzy of explosions, and the delirium of violence and death that follow in Jim's experience of the trench horror: "There is a terrible whispering in the night that never goes away. Sound is always worse in the dark" (209). In the novel's figural structure, too, Grania's survival of the scarlet fever links up with the devastating effect of the Spanish flu in Canada at the end of WWI, both forming a narrative frame that highlights the perceptual content of the war and the significance of the body as a corollary of memory and meaning. Itani's tropological emphasis on the body as a place of memory and a passage of resonance ties in with Casey's observation that the body is an epicentre of memory work beyond the agency of the mind. For the phenomenologist, body memory is "a privileged point of view from which other memorial points of view can be regarded and by which they can be illuminated" (Casey 148). This is particularly true of traumatic body memories, which "arise from and bear on one's own lived body in moments of duress" (Casey 154). In contrast to "habitual body memories" (Casey 151), which provide orientation and consistency in action, traumatic body memories heave into view "the *fragmentation* of the lived body" (Casey 155; original emphasis) that undermines its sustainability as a coordinated whole. To quote Casey at greater length:

This is the body as broken down into uncoordinated parts and thus as incapable of the type of continuous, spontaneous action undertaken by the intact body ("intact" thanks precisely to its habitualities, which serve to ensure efficacy and regularity). The fragmented body is inefficacious and irregular; indeed, its possibilities of free movement have become constricted precisely because of the trauma that has disrupted its spontaneous actions. (155)

Within the context of Itani’s novel the range of traumatic experiences to which the body is exposed foregrounds a conceptual link between disability as a consequence of a medical condition and disability as a result of war trauma, bringing to our attention the impact that dominant discourse on disability has had on remembering the Great War. By doing so it also brings forth the interconnections between processes of physical and psychological rehabilitation, moral recuperation, and sensual recollection that accompany the kinship between the human care for the body and care about cultural memory.

A number of scholars working in the field of disability studies (Davis 1995 and 2006; Garland Thomson 1997; Hall 2016, etc.) have aptly demonstrated that modern attitudes to deafness, which insist on treating it as a form of physical lack, often also an intellectual flaw and moral deficiency, emerged in the eighteenth century, with the reign of Enlightenment emphasising the virtue and authority of reason as made manifest in the competent use of language. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, attitudes to deafness as a disability kept in step with the rise of statistical work and the pseudo-scientific discipline of eugenics, both of which, as Lennard J. Davis reminds us, “bring into society the concept of a norm, particularly a normal body, and thus in effect create the concept of the disabled body” (6). It is with respect to the cultural construction of normalcy that literature, too, falls under the radar of critique, where disability theory highlights the reductive nature of “narrative prosthesis” in which “disability metaphors are used to aestheticise and depoliticise disability issues” (Hall 37). Davis, in particular, finds fault with the narrative structures inherent in the novel, which promote a hegemonic imperative of the human body and “reproduce, on some level, the semiologically normative signs surrounding the reader, that paradoxically help the reader to read those signs in the world as well as the text” (11). However, in Itani’s literary universe, I would argue, the trope of deafness testifies to the novel’s capacity to upset the conventional marginalisation of “extraordinary bodies” (Garland Thomson 7), which favours able-bodied citizenship, and transform the figurative power of “narrative prosthesis” (Hall 37) into “prosthetic memories” (Landsberg 19) and morally-binding empathy. Central to Itani’s rethinking of our ethical relationship to the body is, on the one hand, her examination of the foil of social attitudes against which Grania constructs her subjectivity as a deaf woman, and, on the other, the novel’s dismantling of the silence/sound dichotomy in conveying Jim’s response to the war atrocities as the end of “normal” life. This is how, instead of a medical condition, deafness emerges as a critical modality, which gives access to the witnessing of social deformation that marked the reality of the Great War.

As a child, Grania does not perceive the silence, to which the scarlet fever relegated her, as a social handicap or intellectual impairment, something her grandmother emphasises by praising Grania’s expert lip-reading: “You could read lips before you were deaf. When your parents wanted to talk – grownup talk – they had to turn their backs to whisper because you were so nosy. Do what you’ve

always done. Before you were sick. You're the one in the family who sees" (Itani 8). Though elevating sight as a compensatory faculty, the grandmother nevertheless engages the whole of Grania's body as a participant in meaning-making: for example, the girl learns to "feel time" (12; original emphasis) by tracing her hand through "the pulse of the clock" (12) and differentiates between smells: "Father calls himself a wine merchant and sometimes he smells like wine, or damp fruit. His smells are different from everyone else's" (13). Grania's ocular, olfactory, and haptic engagement with the world enhances her body's capacity to feel "a density in depth" that Casey attributes to body memories by virtue of which the lived body not only moves through physical space, but also resides in "its own depth" (166). This is to say that in constructing Grania's subjectivity Itani conceptualises her deafness as intrinsically "depth-affording": her situatedness in the world calls for perspicuity that balances out the imperatives of "aspiring and anchoring," which characterise humans as "upright beings" (167). The sense of touch, however, is given a special significance in *Deafening* because it pertains to Grania's relationship to language as that which binds her simultaneously to herself and to others. For one, in teaching Grania to pronounce words, her grandmother explains them in tactile terms: "Mamo's palms press against her chest. *Close. Keep the words close*" (17; original emphasis). So much so that when Grania watches herself in the mirror, her physical attempts at articulation are compressed into a simile that calls attention to a sense of material separateness between herself and her voice: "She holds her voice as close to herself as she can. It is like pressing a pillow against her chest, the way the boy in the picture presses the book to his sailor suit. Grania keeps her voice close to the front of her body and makes it stay in that one held place" (17). To the extent that Grania watches her body produce and receive voice, she operates not unlike her own ventriloquist's dummy, an image that stands out in the insults thrust upon her: "'Dummy!' the taller boy yells. 'Listen to her. She's a dummy!'" (Itani 23). Indeed, as Steven Connor powerfully argues in *Dumbstruck – A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, voice situates us in front of ourselves by leaving ourselves behind: "As a kind of projection, the voice allows me to withdraw or retract myself. This can make my voice a persona, a mask, or sounding screen" (2000, 5). By drawing our attention to the arduousness of Grania's producing her voice, the novel foregrounds the significance of vocalisation in the construction of her subjectivity. Connor's reasoning here is unequivocal: "giving voice is the process which simultaneously produces articulate sound, and produces myself, as a self-producing being" (2000, 3). The material proximity of voice to the body as underlined by Grania's grandmother's teaching is in keeping with the aporia of voice as that which brings the speaker's world into being through simultaneous participation in the voice and parting with it. As Connor puts it,

My voice defines me because it draws me into coincidence with myself, accomplishes me in a way which goes beyond mere belonging, association, or instru-

mental use. And yet my voice is also most essentially itself and my own in the ways in which it parts or passes from me. Nothing else about me defines me so intimately as my voice, precisely because there is no other feature of my self whose nature it is thus to move from me to the world, and to move me into the world. If my voice is mine because it comes from me, it can only be known as mine because it also goes from me. My voice is, literally, my way of taking leave of my senses. (7)

Unsurprisingly, it is Grania’s senses that are put into question on account of her deafness and mispronunciation at school. When the other children warn her about the presence of a skunk on school territory, Grania cannot pronounce the word, succumbing to “weary speech”: “She has slipped back. She has used what Mamo calls her “weary speech” but she doesn’t care” (Itani 24). The adjectival modifier gestures back to the lived body, which mediates the phenomenological conditions of Grania’s vocal presence. Crucially, she learns vocal projection from her experience of other lived bodies, particularly her grandmother’s, which enable her to think of her own body as capable of meaningful sound beyond voice: “Grania walks along Main Street. It is late October, a sunny afternoon. She is wearing her white blouse and her navy skirt. Every time her foot presses down on a cedar board in the sidewalk, a trill enters her foot. Music, she thinks. My feet are making music” (Itani 49).

Anchored as it is in the material boundaries of the lived body, touch is the sense that modulates the secret language of rope tugs that Grania invents to communicate with her sister Tress before sleep: “She is one tug, Tress is two. She rolls on her side and stretches the rope until it is barely taut, just enough so that she can feel Tress at the other end. Now the rope name-signs are clear. Now the two create tug patterns, back and forth – patterns that are meaningless, that make them laugh silently to themselves in the dark” (20). Tethered to the materiality of the body, this language of signs perceptually differentiates Grania from other children at school, who go on teasing her about mispronouncing words:

“Say *spit*.”

“*Thpit*.”

“Ha Ha. You said *thpit*.”

Grania makes the crazy sign at them, her cupped hand wagging beside her ear. (57)

When Grania is sent to a residential school for the deaf in Bellville, she learns that her instinct about the creative potential of hand communication has been right all along: “Along with Grania, there are eleven other children in the room. Eight of these know the sign language. They signal to one another with animation; they prance like mimes” (83). Although initially struggling to emotionally adjust to her new circumstances and master the sign language, eventually Grania learns to listen to her own body and connect to others:

A language is taking shape, one in which, haltingly, she is beginning to take part. She misses and misunderstands, but puts meaning – right or wrong – to words that come at her in sign. Her hands, to her surprise, and jerkily at first, begin to send ideas out. Her face and body punctuate; her eyes receive. She is falling into, she is entering a new world. She is joining the larger conversation of hands. (84)

Itani foregrounds the body's capacity for connectivity and signification: what the signing hands do is translate human corporeality into an extended eardrum, vibrating in reciprocity to the world's presence. Far from being negatively defined by her deafness, Grania finds creative agency in her body, which hears and emits meaning through the material texture not limited to the ears. This is in keeping with Michel Serres' observation in *The Five Senses* that "We hear through our skin and feet. We hear through our skull, abdomen and thorax. We hear through our muscles, nerves and tendons" (141). In *Deafening*, though, hearing not only extends throughout the body, but also overlaps with body memory. When asked about what she remembers about losing her hearing, Grania's friend Fry answers in sign language: "I was sick – weeks in bed, not much remembering now. But I remember my heart pounding so hard I thought it would explode. First time I went outside, I felt my own footsteps walking through me. Like being trapped in a drum. I believed I was hearing" (Itani 92). For Itani, Grania and Fry's signing brings to light the sensual perimetre of the body as something like a soundbox or a tuning-fork, calling attention to the acoustic structure of memory in the affective economy of resonance.

What Fry hears may be approached in terms of what in *Listening* Nancy calls "the resonance of a return" (12), highlighting the phenomenological structure of hearing as a way of being in the world. In this conceptual framework, human subjectivity derives from the relation of resounding that connects human interiority to an acoustic source outside. Resonance, whereby sound travels through the body, awakens us to the formation of sense, which gives itself as sensing that binds a self to sound in the shared space of reference. To quote Nancy,

One can say, then, at least, that meaning and sound share the space of a referral, in which at the same time they refer to each other, and that, in a very general way, this space can be defined as the space of a *self*, a subject. A *self* is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a *self* is made of a relationship *to* self, or of a presence *to* self. (8; original emphasis)

Central to Nancy's conceptualisation of selfhood is the mobility of sense (both sentience and meaning), which rather than solidify our perception of a unified subjectivity, spreads it around, refusing any objectification of the self outside of its moving engagement with the world. Connor's reasoning about the dynamics of sound in organising our sense of self follows a similar line of thought:

A person is a throughput, a sound-through, and a through-sound. You become a person through sound, the word seems to say, through the sound that passes through you, circulating between the three grammatical persons that every person comprises – first, second, and third – pluralizing its singularity. We are persons because we are sonified, we are personifications of the sounds that we absorb and exude. Ego is echo, personhood is resonance, the resounding of the persona: “personance,” held together by a sort of persistence of hearing equivalent to the cinematic persistence of vision. (2011, 37)

Grania’s own sense of self, then, is inseparable from her experience of sounds in deafness as well as her memories of the sounds she heard as a child. Her physical engagement with the acoustic form of English also has important implications for how she perceives herself as a subject. Words resonate in the depths of Grania’s body and in reciprocating Fry’s story, she signs that she remembers “Sounds. I think there are sounds in my head” (Itani 92). By bringing forth the body’s ability to retain resonance, Itani challenges the view that the deaf live in the absence of sound, which prioritises acoustic language over sign language, and questions the system of values that endorses the dichotomy of sound vs. silence that underlies the dominant social attitudes towards deafness.

The joy Grania finds in becoming part of the community of sign language in Belleville is contrasted to her frustration over trying to control her voice in speaking. The teacher’s, Miss Amos’, technique is not very different from that of Grania’s grandmother, both emphasising the material weight of language: “Feel the word. Now to my throat, back to my lips. Let the shape of the word fall into your fingers. Scoop it up with your hand” (87). The novel’s reference to the social pressure to teach voice modulation to the deaf is reminiscent of the clash between the oralist and manualist culture in the education of the deaf in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Douglas Boyton explains, the orthodoxy of oralism, which remained in place in North American schools for the deaf until the 1970s, stemmed largely from the shift that had taken place in the social attitudes to deafness:

The meaning of deafness changed during the course of the nineteenth century for educators of the deaf, and the kind of education deaf people received changed along with it. 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. (Boyton in Davis 33)

Given the significance that is attributed to the ability to speak in Grania’s world at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that her mother spends a long time refusing to accept the fact of Grania’s deafness and even has doubts about sending her to an educating facility for the deaf: “Mother has not made up her mind about schooling. Twice a week, she goes to the Catholic church and



prays that Grania's hearing will come back. Even though the priest shakes his head, Mother has not given up hope" (Itani xiv). While Mother feels guilty about not having diagnosed the scarlet fever early enough to have prevented Grania's loss of hearing, her initial decision to school her daughter with the hearing children is also in line with the way her society lumps deafness and muteness together as coextensive categories of physical impairment. This is made especially evident in the title of the Bellville school, The Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, as well as the school newspaper, *The Canadian Mute*, both of which dispense with the reference to speech only during the outbreak of World War One. Cedric, a friend of Grania's and chief editor of the newspaper, we are told, brings to public attention the condescending implications of using "dumb" and "mute" in reference to the deaf: "'Dumb,' he once wrote, 'has the secondary meaning of dull, stupid, or doltish. The word *mute* brings forth the image of an attendant at a funeral'" (179; original emphasis). For Grania's mother, too, it takes the intrusion of the Great War to enable her to acknowledge the power of the sign language to express the fragility of emotion. She uses her hands to convey the joy of learning that Tress' husband, Kenan, is alive: "A-L-I-V-E. Not by air writing, not by printing. Mother, who had refused to acknowledge the sign language these many years, had used the single hand alphabet of the deaf and had finger spelled the word. Mother had sent a word to Grania in the language of hands" (268–269). In a subtle evocation of "narrative prosthesis," Itani dismisses the idea of voice as the ultimate source of self-extension, a *prosthesis* of self, and salutes the generosity of the body as a medium of sense.

Another way in which the novel measures the moral resonance of social attitudes to deafness is conveyed in the author's use of epigraphs, featuring excerpts from *The Canadian*, and fragments from letters, most of them written by deaf schoolchildren and scrupulously studied by Itani as part of her research into the crossovers between the education of the deaf at Bellville and the impact of the Great War on Canadian society. This is what the author says in her interview with Susan Fisher:

I set myself the task of reading the school newspapers printed at the school. I chose, in a more or less arbitrary way, the years 1900–1915 as a starting point. The newspapers came out of the school print shop and contained material of enormous interest to me. What fascinated me the most was what the children themselves had written [...]. I could see that they were, in many ways, telling their own stories in a unique language and from a unique time. Their voices literally shouted to be heard. (50)

*Deafening* is by no means documentary realism, but the threads of non-fictional accounts throughout the novel give epistemological balance to the actions of fictional characters, who confront social myths about deafness in their daily life. A conspicuous example is a quote attributed to Alexander Graham Bell, which opens Chapter 4: "*A number of years ago I visited a large school for the deaf,*

and taught all the pupils to use their voices. In a few cases the effect was decidedly unpleasant, the voice resembling somewhat the cry of a peacock” (Itani 77; original emphasis). Readers familiar with how Bell’s ideas link up with the eugenicist ethos (Davis 2006, 7) may interpret the epigraph as an ideological scene which awaits every deaf child as he or she enters the residential school in Bellville in the novel. The confusion Fry experiences when trying to work out the correlations between pronunciation and meaning, we understand, haunts all deaf people submitted to the rigours of oralism: “When I can’t find a word, I finger spell under the table like a little child. But some words still look the same to me. When I speak, I find out that the hearing say them differently. *Wind* and *wind*. *Tear* and *tear*. No wonder we get confused” (Itani 125; original emphasis).

Because Grania, unlike Fry or their friend Colin, who was born deaf, is adept at both lip-reading and voice control, she navigates between sound and silence in the Bellville school. For example, during her first weeks at school she recites her fears aloud before sleep to overcome her longing for her family: “Don’t let me live here forever. / Don’t let them lock the big doors. / Don’t let me be an orphan. / Let me go home again” (91). Significantly, though, her chant affects her whole body, taking hold of the hands that bear the weight of both sound and silence: “She chants to herself, her fingertips tapping the side of her legs as she throws her fears out into the dark. She inches her body down into the bed and even deeper into the place where her silence lies, the place where she is safe” (91). In time, sign language becomes a mode of social interaction that Grania comes to embrace as her own, even at the displeasure of her teachers:

It is years later, after Grania learns to *own* the sign language by taking it inside herself – though the hearing teachers will eventually forbid its use while she struggles to please them with her voice – it is years later when she realizes how close to the visual-gestural language she and Tress actually were with the childhood signs they once invented for themselves. (96; original emphasis)

Giving preference to oralism as a means of finding a place for the deaf in national unity has its own repercussions in *Deafening* when Canada enters the Great War. The profound effect of the war on the deaf proves to be its divisive character, which separates the deaf from the rest of Canadian society not only as disabled bodies, but also as bodies subject to suspicion by virtue of the invisibility of their disability. Nowhere does it become more apparent than in Colin’s persistent attempts to join up, at which point he is always told that “the army didn’t need deaf boys” (118). Yet in the eyes of the larger public, who are ignorant of his deafness, Colin is a coward, something Fry relates to Grania in her letter and “Grania felt her own anger rise on his behalf, but she knew there was nothing she could do” (186). Grania’s brother Bernard, who is barred from enlisting because of his lung condition, falls victim to a similar treatment when their neighbour’s daughter pins

him with a white feather as a sign of cowardice. Bernard feels humiliated, but is not vindictive towards the woman's ignorance: "She doesn't know anything about my lung, Grainy. There is no point explaining to her or anyone else" (252). His choice of silent endurance joins him in the ranks of the deaf in the novel, whose tenacity in the face of social ignorance and inexperience aligns with the moral fibre of the Canadian soldiers serving on the Western Front. In a twist of sad irony, the invisibility of the reason for which the deaf young men are not allowed to enlist in WWI brings to visual prominence in *Deafening* the agency of the able male bodies witnessing first-hand the harrowing violence of the trenches.

### 3. Writing the Body at War

Grania's husband Jim, a hearing young man, who joins the Canadian Army Medical Corps as a stretcher-bearer, is the novel's perceptual centre of the first-hand experience of WWI. In the narrative dichotomy of sound vs. silence he not only lives in sound, but, more importantly, arranges sound into song. His capacity for music is first foregrounded by reference to his hands when he learns that a son of a doctor with whom he works wants to be a gunner in the war: "At the word *gunner*, Jim looked down at his own hands. His grandmother, who had raised him, had taught him to play piano with those hands" (Itani 106). The implied opposition between a musical instrument and a gun, as extensions of human hands, becomes coterminous with the opposition between creation and destruction in the dynamics of sound and silence in Itani's novel. In Jim's courtship of Grania we recognise an isomorphism in his use of hands both for playing the piano and for the tactile language of love that binds their lives:

He did not need sheet music; he could play by ear. His grandmother had taught him the notes when he was a child, and he had learned to chord by himself. His long fingers looked as if they were floating across the keys. Grania had stood beside him and watched song come from his lips. She'd placed one hand on his shoulder and the other on the top panel of the piano. Her body had stilled as she'd allowed his music to enter her. (138)

Again, Itani places emphasis on the body's ability to store sound, so that the vibrations emanating from Jim's hands not only enter Grania's body, but also maintain their presence as an ontological resonance of feeling, to the extent that Jim's producing music may be interpreted as a metaphor for making love. The sound of music assumes the character of manual movement, thus allowing Jim to touch Grania from a distance, by dint of the resounding of his persona. Hands, we understand, bind one body to another, both in sound and silence: "Jim's message was always music. Her tapped words were a kind of music, too. Music for the upset or alone" (145). In other words, Itani invites us to think about music as analogous

to sign language, where the body conveys meaning by way of sensorial engagement, an act that is literalised in Grania’s engagement to Jim before he goes to war.

Jim’s musical deftness and Grania’s deafness coalesce in the sensuality of touch as evoked by musical performance:

Jim reached across in the dark and lifted her hand towards him. He traced a fingertip around the edges of her palm for several moments and she sat, motionless, scarcely breathing. She was afraid she would make a noise with her throat. They were surrounded by people on both sides, in front and behind. In that crowded place, every seat taken, Jim rested the back of her hand against one of his, and with the other he silently placed a word in her palm. She felt the flush in her cheeks. She did not see the scene change, not until the lights became brighter and the colonel stood on the stage to give the address. (143)

If we accept Serres’ contention that touching “is situated between, the skin is the place where exchanges are made, the body traces the knotted, bound, folded, complex path, between the things to be known” (80), then this scene, too, may be read along the lines of metaphorical love-making. In “placing” a word into Grania’s hand, Jim intimates his knowledge of the body as a medium of sensual heat, which reverberates in the young woman’s cheeks and her stifled cry of joy. For, as Serres notes, “Skin translates the amorous caress into arousal, subtly displaying desire and diluting listening and seeing to the point where they almost disappear” (71). At the same time, also, for us, this act reconnects to Grania’s own relation to acoustic language conceptualised in tactile terms. Like Grania in her childhood, Jim materialises language as a tactile gesture that inscribes human tissue with a quiet strength to connect and communicate sense. A steward of the senses, the body participates in constructing a shared sense of human experience of the sensual and sensible world. As Serres reminds us, “The skin receives the deposit of our memories and stocks the experiences printed on it. It is the bank of our impressions and the geodesic panorama of our frailties” (75).

The erotic dimension of corporeal life in *Deafening* unfolds in dramatic opposition to the narrative of war as a technology of the body. Early on, the beat of the drums in the station from which Jim departs to Europe anticipates the effect of the noise that pervades the trenches. As Grania accompanies Jim to the train station, her body is invaded by the sound of the drums: “[...] Grania’s body began to clench, a knot working its way inside. The band that had marched to the station platform continued to play and she felt the beat of the drums inside her” (149). In the unfolding of emotional resonance Jim responds through their shared language of hands: “He took her hand and held it firmly inside his own and she felt only the pressure of his skin on hers. *Don’t let go. The war is close. The war is closing in*” (149; original emphasis). Where love enables Grania and Jim to overcome the split between language and experience as well as hearing

and deafness, the war, which separates them both geographically and phenomenologically, exacerbates the inadequacy of the verbal medium which brings to light the witnessing of injury both characters go through.

Although initially Jim is eager to see “Mother England” (158) and fearful of not “getting to France in time to see action” (160), the harrowing reality of the trenches soon disabuses him of any illusions about the war he may have had. In contrast to the quiet strength of his life in Canada, the war assaults Jim’s senses in the form of ubiquitous noise. In one of his letters to Grania he writes: “Sometimes, I hear a sound like thunder. How can I describe this sound? An invasion in the dark, a pulse that grows in the head. It starts as a level throb and, after that, it weaves its way like a thread through every nerve in my body” (163). Jim’s perception of the overload of sound speaks of the power of warfare to disseminate itself acoustically by invading and incubating human subjectivity and subjecting it to gradual disintegration. For as Connor notes, “if sound suggests the idea of the exercise of power, this may be because it more fundamentally involves the subjection to it” (2000, 26). Jim ends his letter by signing “Chim,” visually literalising Grania’s voice as she pronounces her husband’s name. In the reciprocal structure of listening, this verbal signifier shows how Jim’s testament of love derives from the resonance Grania’s presence has in his selfhood. If we agree with Nancy that “listening is passing over to the register of presence to self” (12), then the body memory of his wife’s quietness, which enables him to hear himself, reveals itself as the key premise of Jim’s survival through the insanity of the Great War. So much so that Jim’s search for silence in the trenches aligns with Grania’s concentrated attention from across the ocean: “The more she is able to focus, the farther her silence extends, spreading slow and even, like moonlight over water” (Itani 197). Understandably, then, Jim’s relation to the suffering he witnesses is phenomenologically bound to the silent vigilance he associates with Grania:

He wonders what it would be like to shut his ears to sound – knowing that sound will enter him anyway, through his body. He is bloody and dirty and his eyelids are encased with soot and he forces them to close, and a silence – perhaps it is Grania’s silence, having searched and found – encompasses, creates a different sort of shelter, one that fits the contours of his lean young body and makes it safe. (200)

Jim’s resorting to silence eventually becomes a mode of accommodating himself to the destructive agency of the Great War. The longer he stays in the trenches, the more he longs for the sensual equilibrium he shares with Grania: “If it were dark, she would place her fingertips over his lips and she would gather his words into the place of their shared understanding” (205). Serres may have put it best: “Immersing yourself in silence is a form of healing; solitude releases silence from the control of language” (88).

Jim’s longing for Grania’s silent language of touch is opposed to the debilitating effect of the noise that constitutes war. The sensual joys of haptic experience aligns with Casey’s reminder about the body as a source of memory: “The bodily remembered touch is *intrinsically pleasure-giving*: the pleasure does not follow the experience but belongs to it as ingredient in it” (158; original emphasis). By contrast, the noise on the front is inherently traumatic as a result of the warfare metonymically distending itself through auditory means of hostile engagement. Itani calls our attention to how the body hears in spite of itself: “At times, the ground shudders beneath our boots. The air vibrates. Sometimes there is a whistling noise before an explosion. And then, all is silent” (Itani 285). In the middle of such devastating explosion Jim is seized of the significance of gestures that the medical officers employ to save the injured survivors: “Even so, the M.O. was motioning again with his hand. *Sign language*” (174; original emphasis). In an act reminiscent of Casey’s observations about the fragmentation of the lived body evoked through traumatic memories, Jim’s own hands respond in convulsive spasms to the pain-inducing noise that pounds in his ears: “His ears were tunnelled with pain, and he looked down at his hands and saw his own long fingers flexing rapidly as if conducting themselves through a bizarre set of exercises” (175). It is the image of the hands, in fact, that haunts Jim the most, amplifying his distress at his inability to save young men from dying: “If only he did not have to look at the hands. In death they told more than the face; he knew that now. It was the hands that revealed the final argument: clenched in anger, relaxed in acquiescence, seized in a posture of surprise or forgiveness, or taken unawares” (204). Metonymic splinters of lived bodies, the hands of the dead speak of lost human agency in the world, but for Jim, more importantly, they are a reminder of Grania’s hands and the promise of life they embody. In one of his letters he confesses to have finally understood her deafness as a hermeneutic:

One day you told me – we were sitting on the blue blanket – you told me about the way understanding for you is sometimes delayed. I know more about that now. More about the gap between what happens and what is understood. What is there and what is not. So much tries to make entry; so much is determined to invade. Sound knocks us over, blocks all thought, seeps into the body like deadly gas, seeps into everything around until there is no rift or fissure left unfilled. (260)

The war is shown to magnify the rift between our bodily experience of events and the meaning we ascribe to them. Jim’s rumination on noise highlights the fractures in human structures of perception where sound gains toxic agency at the expense of human sentience and finally transforms human subjects into nothing more than vibrating material tissues. Itani’s use of simile and prosopopoeia in describing the force of war sounds remaps the war itself as a process that turns abstract phenomena into agency and human subjectivity into thingness. The Great War in *Deafening* animates itself at the expense of human selfhood and

human life. This is why the image of human hands, a medium of world-making that preoccupies Jim's memory, reveals the extent to which the human world becomes unmade during the war. At the same time, the act of dismemberment that the image of hands as "testimonial objects" (Hirsch 24) evokes pertains to the novel's concern for the acts of transfer in postmemory contexts that Itani's readers inhabit. Material testimonies to the war trauma, the hands of the dead "thematize the act of *holding* – caring, protective, and nurturing" (Hirsch 99), associated as they are with embodied modes of knowledge that call for responsiveness and responsibility in recollection.

The ways to remember the Great War that Itani's *Deafening* hands down to us emphasise the tumultuous force pervading the trenches, which figures as a sourceless acoustic impact that annihilates, mutilates, and disfigures able bodies:

Men who have passed here before them have picked some of the bodies and tossed them over the side so they could get through themselves, and the ground is covered with more of the dead. The soldier they are carrying now has been shot through the face; half the face is gone; it is just missing. A terrible sound is coming from the place below the hole where his lips and mouth should be. (198)

In the novel's figural terms, on the frontline, the whole body seems to change into an extended eardrum, resonating, palpitating, and bursting with the noise that fractures the sense of self and sends soldiers into a state of shell shock. Jim gives an account of witnessing a young soldier suffering from this condition:

The boy's body was shaking; his head was twitching and his eyes rolling around without focus. His arms and hands and legs and feet had to be propped between the boys before they could drag him to a bed. This is a terrible sight that affects everyone. It is like watching a convulsion that never ends. (216)

The scene conveyed is not unlike a spectacle in which we observe the directorial activity of death, with soldiers as mere stage props or ventriloquist's dummies. The disintegrating body of the young soldier substantiates the spirit of slaughter that operates the novel's machinery of the Great War. By bringing our attention to his uncoordinated limbs, the narrative shows how his body communicates his broken sense of self: not only has he become a contracting mass of body parts, but his consciousness, too, has shrunk to a space of delirium, where "the only word he could get out was Mother" (216).

What is crucial to the novel's attentiveness to the suffering body is its recognition of the impossible task that the experience of pain poses to verbal representation. Jim's sense of the failure of language is conveyed through free indirect discourse, which brings forth the disconnectedness between what Jim went through, what he remembers, and what he can tell Grania:

He wanted to tell her how sorry he was that he’d left. He had been so hopeful, so filled with desire to help in the war. He wanted to do his bit like everyone else. But no one at home could have any idea of what this stretch of earth in the Salient now contained: scar, and death, and the memory of impossible acts. The terrible thing was that no one at home would ever know. Because what was happening was impossible to be told. (205–206)

In conceptual terms, it is worth recalling Elaine Scarry’s observations in her book *The Body in Pain* about the juxtaposition of the body and voice in the structure of war:

The essential structure of war, its juxtaposition of the extreme facts of the body and voice, resides in the *relation* between its own largest parts, the relation between the collective casualties that occur *within* war, and verbal issues (freedom, national sovereignty, the right to a disputed ground, the extra-territorial authority of a particular ideology) that stand outside war, that are there *before* the act of war begins and *after* it ends, that are understood by warring populations as the motive and justification and will again be recognized after the war as the thing substantiated or (if one is on the losing side) not substantiated by war’s activity. (63; original emphasis)

In Scarry’s reading, the tension between discourse and the body inherent in the structure of war is coextensive with the loss of agency in the experience of suffering. Because pain deploys the body as an agent of agony, it warps its perception of the world, depriving the suffering subject of the ability to verbalise the content of pain: “Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject” (Scarry 35). The body itself, rather than voice, becomes the material sign that substantiates the ideas for which the war was fought and human agency was handicapped

In this respect, the death that sweeps through the war trenches of Europe finds an analogue in the effect of the Spanish flu in Canada. Grania is one of the people in Deseronto to succumb to this deadly illness. Here Itani is mindful of how the body knows and communicates ailment in advance of the consciousness’ grasp of meaning: “Grania now looked at her reflection in the oval mirror and tried to steady herself. There were shadows under the eyes that stared back. Her skin was pale, and she wondered why she hadn’t noticed this the day before” (Itani 318). When she goes out for a walk, a raw pain attacks her from within: “A rawness scraped at her throat, and pain dug into her chest like a spade” (320). Eventually Grania’s legs give and she collapses to the ground:

She felt a gurgling sensation on one side of her chest, and in disbelief she lifted a hand and pressed it beneath her left breast. At the same time, she said, *Bubbles. How can there be bubbles in my chest?* Fluid tilted up and over her tongue and spilled onto her hand, which was now bright red. She tried to pull forward the last



few feet but sank to the earth, face down. Air moved in and out, past the gurgling in her mouth. (324; original emphasis)

In the novel's figural system, the image of the blood oozing from Grania's lungs aligns with the sight of bleeding bodies in Jim's care, amplifying the emotional resonance that the novel generates in the form of "prosthetic memories" (Landsberg 19) for the postmemory generation of readers. The analogies the novel draws between the lived experience of soldiers and the female protagonist on the home-front testify not only to the "profound transformations of a society which will have to confront the various disabilities of the homecoming veterans" (Branach-Kallas 131), but also to the memory work the narrative performs by negotiating the conceptual tensions between its figural, ethical and, epistemological terms. Itani's narrative engagement with historical suffering is emotionally enabling: to the extent that the deaf person may stand for the reader in print culture (Davis 1995, 113), the novel promotes empathy for Grania and, by extension, the characters she cares about.

#### 4. Writing Postmemory as Empathy

The dynamics of empathy in *Deafening* correlates with the work of memory in the clash between body and language. Where the war enables "the eventual disowning of the injury so that its attributes can be transferred elsewhere" (Scarry 64), Itani brings us back to the human body as "the original site of the wound" (Scarry 64). By doing so the novel dismantles the structure of the war and repatriates the sensual dimension of injury, thus reclaiming subjectivity for the soldiers and refiguring the body as a material source of postmemory and emotional understanding. This is especially evident in the parallels between Jim's experience of losing his best friend Irish and Grania's gradual recovery from the Spanish flu, whereupon she learns about the death of her grandmother. In both instances the body is given the properties of a soundbox, in which experience reverberates, listening to its own inability to comprehend and communicate. Irish disappears in the midst of a sudden explosion while he and Jim are carrying a wounded soldier on a stretcher: "There was a shout. It was Irish. And a sudden sound that forced Jim to close his eyes – only for an instant – and then there was a whoosh, a rushing sound, and something louder, an explosion that rocked him forward and sent him flying off both feet" (Itani 330) The destructive effect of the blast shoots through Jim's body in the form of a shock wave, fragmenting his body into metonymic signs: "He tried to get up; his body was in tremors; his spine was hunched and would not or could not straighten. The shock had entered him as a physical blow, and it vibrated his chest until he believed his heart would explode" (330).

Grania’s sick body, too, is conceived as a receptacle of sound: “Thunder, in her body” (333). When she wakes up from a long slumber, she can hardly remember what happened and tries to fall back on her senses: “Sometimes a shadow sat in Mamo’s chair; sometimes the chair was empty. Someone rocked, or the chair tipped back and forth by itself. There was a faint scent of Canada Bouquet” (337). For both Grania and Jim, the suspension of sight in favour of the other senses requalifies their bodily experience as an ambiguous agent of memory, magnifying the power of imagination to contribute to understanding. This may explain why Grania’s memory erases the boundary between experience and reverie, allowing her to remember her brush with death as a situation in which she and Jim try to save each other:

Someone was reaching for her, pulling her up, and she clung to the bank, half in and half out of water. When she looked back she saw that Jim’s legs, body and shoulders had disappeared. His face, above water, showed confusion, helplessness. He scrambled to get a finger-hold in drifting ice and pulled himself forward and tried to flip his body up and over the edge. He tried again. Grania, now safe on the bank, willed him to her side. She willed him to safety. (338)

Whatever its epistemological limitations, though, the body retains its memory in spite of the crisis of cognitive and linguistic agency. As Casey reminds us, body memory is “the natural center of any sensitive account of remembering” (148). For one, the body’s ability to remember in the novel attunes it to the motility of war itself. Here too the use of free indirect discourse highlights how disconnected Jim feels from his body as an agent of experience: “The body remembered slick and treacherous footing, shallow trenches, the danger of Blighty Bridge, mats and duckboards laid over the worst places, ooze seeping through the cracks. The body remembered the lurch and roll of the dead. Feet and legs had memories of their own” (205). Even though it is Jim who is the focaliser, the substitution of his name by a generic noun suggests that his body memory has been shared through trauma in a way that the memory itself has become communal, turning all bodies of soldiers into an object of assault and subject of recuperation. In the machinery of combat in *Deafening*, the body of the soldier operates in the capacity of a mnemonic device which produces war as narrative: “A sort of memory machine installed in the body: sturdy coordinated parts, well-oiled arms and hands and legs and feet” (205). None more prominently, perhaps, than the injured body of Tress’s husband, Kenan, who returns home alive, but with severe facial disfigurement and a phantom limb syndrome.

Having suffered a terrible head trauma, Kenan is sent back to Canada, but once safe at home he retreats into isolation, refusing to socialise with members of his community: “Kenan was speaking well, but he had not walked out of his own house [...]. Kenan never came to the door himself, never allowed himself to be seen” (300). Grania is the only one who finds access to his damaged self and we see Kenan’s injuries through her eyes:

What Grania was seeing was that Kenan's face was beautiful, as it had always been. Only now it was beautiful and terrible at the same time. He did not flinch under her inspection, and she *was* inspecting, looking into the ripple of scars, the obliterated eye, the deep folds on a surface that had once been smooth skin. *No one else looks at his face*, she thought. *He doesn't give anyone a chance.* (305; original emphasis)

What Kenan's mutilated face wears is a material record of the trenches, which separates him from his family and friends by virtue of pain's power to deprive man of language. His silence is tied to the agonising spasms he feels in the dead arm: "It had become apparent, too, that he suffered terrible pain, especially in his hand. The pain in the dead hand seemed, at times, to be unbearable. During the day, the hand was shoved deep into his pocket to keep the arm from swinging uselessly from room to room in the house" (287). In fact, Kenan's wounded body itself has become a metaphorical site of war: "His arm swings like a missile," Tress said. "The dead arm hits. He has no control over it" (286). In trauma, memory is shown to receive agency from the body by bending human subjectivity to its will. The weight of the metaphor that highlights the interchangeability of Kenan's arm and the gun he carried – "the iron weight of the arm he left behind" (287) – is such that it reveals the extent to which the war has robbed Kenan of his agency as a human being. As Scarry has noted, "War is relentless in taking for its own interior content the interior content of the wounded and open human body" (81).

The narrative's emphasis on bodily injury is crucial: the logic of metaphorisation here is at loggerheads with the principle of metonymy, thereby revealing the way in which relations of contiguity, which grant parts of the body the power to act in the capacity of the whole body, are sidelined in favour of relations of substitution, which divest the body of its agency and delegate fragments of the flesh to act in the capacity of an abstract force. In Kenan's case, the overriding of metonymy by metaphor in configuring his embodied consciousness helps to convey the crippling sense of alienation that Kenan feels with regard to his community, to say nothing of his own self. This may explain why he feels most comfortable with Grania, whose deafness stands in kinship to his own disability and whose stories about the community he has been absent from pave a way for the resurfacing of his own memories of trench horror. What haunts Kenan the most, we learn with Grania, is the memory of nearly dying at the hands of his own sentry, after having forgotten the password during a bombardment: "I could barely see. I said, 'Don't shoot me,' but I couldn't think what I was supposed to say. I knew then that I was going to pass out. I couldn't think of anything except, *Get past this man, Get past this stranger*" (Itani 306; original emphasis). Ironically, the word that saves him is the sound Grania used to make when they played in a dugout as children: "I heard my throat make – my mouth was full of blood – I heard my throat make the sound *Wooms*. Your sound, Grania. Our old password" (306; original emphasis).

Like Jim’s, Kenan’s experience of war is conveyed in terms of a perceptual collision of the senses:

We’d been sent out on a trench raid. But shells started bursting around us and we scattered and I was hit. I lost my way and came back at the wrong point, and I stumbled into the post [...] it was after midnight [...] it was so dark. So much noise. There was no silence in that place. The boys went mad from the sound. Some tried to dig their own graves. (305)

The disorientation, which results from the fraught relation between sight and hearing during the explosion, highlights the vulnerability of the human body to the onslaught of violence. Again, Itani calls our attention to the menacing presence of sound as it invades and inhabits human interiority, sometimes to the extent of causing insanity. Overwhelming, all-pervading, and sourceless, the noise latches itself to all orifices, transforming human bodies into loudspeakers to be appropriated by the parasitical voice of the war. The paradox of the soldier’s subjectivity is that by hosting the parasitical agency of the war in his body, he turns into a metaphorical parasite himself. Destruction and self-destruction on the battlefield go hand in hand. If we agree with Connor that “Sound, especially sourceless, autonomous, or excessive sound will be experienced both as lack and an excess” (2000, 23), then this aporia may help us understand Kenan’s agony as well: his memories of the trenches are both lacking in and excessive of meaning that could anchor him in the present. This syncs with Trotter’s observations about the significance attributed to noise in the British war novel: “Noise, especially loud noise, is always “agonistic”: it involves the maximum at once of arousal and of passivity. The sound of the guns, composite and sourceless, was a primary terror for the soldier in the trenches” (Trotter 38). In this regard, Kenan’s reluctance to expose himself to sight and hearing in *Deseronto* speaks of his uncertainty about being able to bring his first-hand experience of the Great War back in league with the experience of the people who stayed in Canada. He is torn between lack and excess in the circuit of memories and sense-making.

The capacity to communicate war experience to those absent from the sites of combat is crucial to the ethics of memory in *Deafening*. Itani measures the narrative power to elicit emotional response by appealing to the materiality of the body as a historical medium. In postmemory literature such engagement with the past realigns the relation between memory and empathy, inviting us to think about literature’s aptitude for creating “prosthetic memories,” which, as Landsberg maintains, demonstrate “the possibility that memory might be able to overcome biological logic” (35). For Landsberg, the advancement of technologies in transnational global capitalism has created “an emergent commodified mass culture capable of widely disseminating images and narratives about the past,” where memories need not be “natural” or “authentic” and yet “organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on” (26). At the heart of this structure

of remembrance lies the imperative to empathise, which, in Landsberg's reasoning, underlies the moral resonance of "prosthetic memories":

Prosthetic memories [...] have a unique ability to generate empathy. Unlike sympathy, empathy does not depend on a "natural" affinity, on some kind of essential underlying connection between two subjects. Empathy recognizes the alterity of identification and the necessity of negotiating distances and is therefore essential to any ethical relation to the other. (24)

In *Deafening's* economy of postmemory, too, there is an implicit recognition that the experience of others can be shared by way of sensual appropriation. Towards the end of the war, when Grania and Tress visit Toronto, they are reminded of a museum exhibition, which "included a mock night attack on the dugouts of the Hun" (Itani, 311). With Jim still overseas, Grania opts out of the visit: "Nor does she want to see blood-stained trousers that reveal the exact place a man's leg was torn off" (311). The epigraph that precedes this chapter in the novel quotes from a letter published in *The Canadian* that suggests what Grania may have missed out on:

*In the glass case I saw the blood on the Prussian soldier's overcoat, and on the British soldier's cap which had been struck by shrapnel. I saw a pair of Belgian trousers which were torn away by a shell. I think the Belgian who wore them lost his leg. I liked to see the wonderful things from the great war.* (307; original emphasis)

What the extract testifies to here, however, are the limitations, rather than infinite potential, of sight in bringing memory and empathy together. The viewing and writing agent in the letter has allowed sight to disconnect the material signs of the atrocities of war from their content, converting the work of death into a display of "wonderful things" rather than "testimonial objects" (Hirsch 24). Metonymic extensions of the bodies that wore them, the bloodied cap, overcoat, and trousers excite the eye, but fail to resonate in the depths of human interiority that relays the meaningfulness of the past.

Given the significance of resonance as a metaphor for postmemory in *Deafening*, it may not be surprising that the novel thinks of empathy along the same lines. Much like Jim, who learns in the trenches the nuances of Grania's experience of sound and silence, Grania herself is shown to rely on Jim's letters as a source of emotional resonance. Upon receiving a handkerchief in one of his letters, for example, she "raised the silk and pressed it to the soft spot below her ribcage, the spot at the centre. The place of the onset of breath before it becomes song. She held it there and did not move" (257). A metaphor for Jim's love as much as a metonymic sign of the proximity of his body, the handkerchief acts as a material conduit of emotion, which finds reciprocity in Grania's own embodied presence. When at the end of the novel Jim finally returns home, his body replaces the material

substitute, bringing forth the moral resonance of memories condensed into one word: “‘Sorrow,’ his lips said then” (378). As an emotional modality of prosthetic memory, for us, sorrow encapsulates the novel’s trust in the body’s capacity to endure and nurture the complex of meanings the past produces. Grania responds to Jim by evoking the capacity of the body to simultaneously carry and create memories: “*Sorrow can be borne*” (378; original emphasis). It seems fair to say that, for Itani, this remains a moral imperative for the present age of postmemory.

## Conclusion

The acoustic residues of the past, which appeal to the reader’s ear in *Deafening*, tie in with “the desire to experience or reexperience history, not to validate the past without question, but to put into play the vital, indigestible material of history, reminding us of the uninevitability of the present tense” (Landsberg 47). In highlighting the body’s capacity to both store sensual memory and take on “prosthetic memories” (Landsberg 19), Itani attends to the implicit prosthetic relationship between language, memory, and lived experience, as made manifest in the narrative construction of deafness and war trauma. While “giving voice to agents that have been silenced and marginalised because of such factors as geographical location, gender or disability,” *Deafening* expands “the notion of *total war*” (Branach-Kallas 131; original emphasis) engulfing Europe and beyond. Arguably, this sense of *totality* derives from the tropological powers invested in the figuring of sound through the oscillating use of prosopopoeia, personification, and metaphor, which manifest the Great War as panophonic presence. The dominant metaphor of noise, in particular, heaves into view the significance of the body as a phenomenological premise of war experience, showing how the acoustic friction of ontological transformations demotes human agency at the rate of the growing powers of violence conveyed through the idea of resonance. Itani writes against the abstraction of war terror: the Great War hijacks the human body, not only subjecting it to exterior torment, but also invading its interiority, ultimately divesting it of qualities that characterise a man as more than a thing. Conceived as a figurative soundbox, the disabled and traumatised body in *Deafening* is haunted by the sonorous presence of war long after the military conflict has ended.

In this respect, the poetics of resonance in *Deafening* suggests that the construction of the past is homologous with the construction of subjectivity, for as Nancy reminds us, “Resonance is at once that of a body that is sonorous for itself and resonance of sonority in a listening body that, itself, resounds as it listens” (40). The figural pattern of poetic borrowings and substitutions that characterises both the mechanics and aesthetics of war in *Deafening* embed the structure of resonance in the moral economy of human life, where our understanding of war narratives inevitably calls for a critical rethinking of human complicity in

historical agency. Insofar as Itani writes for generations distanced in time from the memory of WWI, resonance here moves in step with the imperatives of emotional reconnection and critical reflexivity in the narrative frame of postmemory. Itani's hermeneutic trust in postmemory takes root in the body's capacity not only to remember – often in excess of what the mind may allow – but also to extend itself, and thus its memory, through the practice of voice as a means of making sense through resonance. If we accept Connor's view that voice "actively procures space for itself" (2000, 12), then the voice of the past in *Deafening* conceives of its readers not unlike of "vocalic space" (2000, 12) to be inhabited and attuned like a soundbox. Ultimately, it is because resonance is aporetic in its constitution, being both disabling and enabling, both of the dead and of the living, that it binds the present to the past and the hollowness of forgetting to the depth of memory. For Itani, much like the listening subject attains its selfhood by the relay of resonance that ties human interiority to the exterior source of sound, so the present defines itself by listening to itself listen to the past in the hermeneutic act of remembrance. For readers of *Deafening*, especially, resonant subjectivity is a moral corollary of empathy that positions them in "the order of the posthumous image" (Pogue Harrison 149) in the age of postmemory.

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