

THE FLUIDITY OF NORMALCY:  
DISABILITY IN ENGLISH-CANADIAN NOVELS, 1984-2007

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By

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## ABSTRACT

Even though persons with disabilities have had their rights enshrined in the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, they continue to be neglected, ignored, and mistreated. Persons with disabilities comprise one of the largest minority groups in Canada, yet Canadians' attitudes toward disability oscillate between what Michael Prince calls "pride and prejudice" (*Absent Citizens* 32)—that is, between progressive and discriminatory perceptions. These attitudes prompt a few questions: why is disability such a problem in Canada? Why is it riddled with uncertainty? How do we deal with this uncertainty?

To help answer these questions, this study analyzes seven Canadian novels published between 1984 and 2007 with the intent of exploring how they represent disability. The novels are Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy*, Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, Lynn Coady's *Strange Heaven*, Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*, Frances Itani's *Deafening*, and Arley McNeney's *Post*. Two key arguments arise from these novels: one, disability may be thought of as an identity rather than a stigmatized condition; and two, normalcy in Canada is not fixed, but fluid.

I begin with Mistry's novel, then proceed chronologically. While Mistry's novel conveys the tragic consequences of a rigidly defined conception of normalcy, it does not quite present a progressive portrait of disability. Mistry's depiction of Nariman Vakeel is a stereotypical example of the way disability is portrayed in fiction; in this manner, it serves as a foil to the novels that follow. Findley's novel, a parody of the biblical flood, allegorizes the German and Canadian eugenics movements along with the ambivalent attitudes that Canadians appear to harbour toward disabled people. Noah, the novel's cruel despotic figure, serves as an allegorical stand-in for German and Canadian eugenicists, while Mottyl the half-blind cat and the ape-

children Lotte and Adam serve as stand-ins for the victims of eugenics. Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy* presents disability within a complex and multifarious framework. Through the disabled narrator Harry Vincent, disability intersects with nationality, gender, and history; Vanderhaeghe's portrayal of Harry, a Canadian working in Hollywood, exemplifies the fluidity of normalcy. Through his interactions with Hollywood personalities, he demonstrates that disability, nationality, masculinity, and history are all fluid concepts, as much imagined as they are socially constructed. MacDonald's novel features another disabled narrator, Lily Piper, who reconfigures Gothic expectations surrounding the disabled body; through Lily, MacDonald challenges Gothic affirmations of corporeal normativity and offers a more fluid and empathetic model for conceiving the body in Gothic texts. In *Strange Heaven*, Coady demonstrates how a patriarchal society disables women; at the same time, she offers a fluid conception of mental illness. Bridget Murphy, the depressed protagonist, struggles within the Cape Breton society in which she lives. While the men in Coady's Cape Breton present obstacles that in various ways disable her, the Cape Breton mindscape blurs the lines between mental illness, eccentricity, and reason. It is difficult to tell who is mad, who is eccentric, and who is rational, and in this manner Coady's novel demonstrates fluid normalcy. Itani's novel presents the development of Deaf culture in parallel with Canada's development as a nation. Itani sets her story at the beginning of the twentieth century, and progresses through the Great War. Her protagonist, a Deaf woman named Grania, learns to speak and use sign language, and eventually marries a hearing man. Their marriage captures the fluid essence of Itani's novel: the text functions as a buffer zone in which both hearing and Deaf people can equally participate. McNeney's novel *Post* suggests that disability constitutes a type of normalcy. It presents the most overt challenge to a rigidly defined standard of normalcy: Nolan Taylor, a Canadian Paralympic basketball player, undergoes

surgery to correct her faulty hip. Her surgery launches her into an identity crisis, prompting her to realize that disability was her norm, and that able-bodiedness has disrupted her sense of self.

Overall, these novels, particularly those following Mistry's, offer dynamic portraits of disabled characters and, as a result, deviate from literary convention, which states that disabled characters typically stand on the sidelines rather than the spotlight. These novels offer new ways of conceiving the relationship between normalcy and disability, suggesting that normalcy in Canada is an imaginative construct that can be constantly re-shaped and re-imagined.

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## DEDICATION

For Debbie. Who else?

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## Introduction:

### The State of Disability in Canada

When the Government of Canada passed into law the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982, it was widely hailed as a watershed event. This legal document guaranteed the equal rights of Canadian citizens who might otherwise be marginalized; examples include “women, native people, [and] visible minorities (i.e., groups who are visibly non-Caucasian)” (Jongbloed 246). Unfortunately, the initial draft of the *Charter* neglected one of the most prominent minority groups in Canada: persons with disabilities. This neglect occurred despite the increasing presence of persons with disabilities as social and legal activists. Indeed, “the heyday of the disability rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s was marked by a proliferation of ‘models’ and ‘paradigms’ of disability” (Bickenbach 79) that sought to redefine disability as a social and legal position rather than as a medical condition. Unfortunately for Canadians with disabilities, discernible results in the form of legislated rights took time. As Geoffrey Reaume states, “it was only through the large-scale organizing and protests of people with disabilities that the exclusion of ‘disability’ from rights protection... was reversed and inclusion was guaranteed in federal law in Section 15 of the *Charter* which took effect in 1985” (“Introduction to DSQ”). Persons with disabilities, then, have had to struggle to be recognized as what Michael J. Prince calls “a socio-political” group (“Who Are We?” 165). According to Prince, “Inclusion in the

*Charter* has given weight to a pan-Canadian vision on disability issues, along with a general orientation, by many disability groups at least, to federal leadership and national standards in policy, and to the ideal of full citizenship as the ultimate goal” (165). However, despite inclusion in the *Charter*, and despite the pronounced redefinition and reclamation of the idea of “disability” orchestrated by activists and by theorists such as Lennard J. Davis, Tom Shakespeare, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Sharon L. Snyder, and David T. Mitchell, the weight Prince speaks of appears to be unstable. Indeed, these theorists put forth varying definitions of disability. Davis defines it as a socially created condition, where one becomes disabled when faced with a social obstacle (*Bending over Backwards* 41), while Shakespeare argues it is much more complicated than that: “disability is a complex phenomenon, requiring different levels of analysis and intervention, ranging from the medical to the socio-political” (“The Social Model” 221). The extent to which one is disabled depends on circumstances; one can be disabled, and one can be made disabled. It is impossible to impose a single definition of disability onto all conceivable conditions, which perhaps makes disability difficult to understand.

Such difficulty persists in Canada. The Canadian public’s approach to disability “is one of ambivalence, with an odd mixture of positive and negative attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, experiences, and behaviours” (Prince, *Absent Citizens* 48). Even though persons with disabilities have been included in the *Charter*, and even though Canada is home to prominent disabled figures Terry Fox and Rick Hansen, persons with disabilities are still among the most marginalized groups in Canada. It appears that Canadians have conflicting attitudes toward disability:

Most Canadians hold an affirmative image of their own views towards and experiences with people with disabilities; and they believe progress has occurred

over the last decade in the inclusion of people with disabilities in community life. At the same time, most Canadians believe that discriminatory attitudes and behaviours toward people with disabilities are still widespread. . . . The resulting public opinion environment is one of pride and prejudice. (32)

Persons with disabilities are thought of as what Prince calls “absent citizens” (48), for they continue to be discriminated against and subjected to neglect and abuse. This mistreatment occurs because of, among other factors, “public ignorance and lack of recognition” (48). Even though disabled people have made considerable progress in the last twenty years, forming arts organizations and fiercely advocating for equal rights, they have a relatively miniscule cultural and/or socio-political presence within Canada.

In light of these issues, this study considers seven Canadian novels published between 1984 and 2007 with the intent of exploring the various complexities surrounding disability in contemporary Canada. The novels are, in chronological order of publication, Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy*, Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*, Lynn Coady’s *Strange Heaven*, Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters*, Frances Itani’s *Deafening*, and Arley McNeney’s *Post*. As several scholars point out, disability is often articulated in contrast to normalcy; but if normalcy is destabilized, then the stigma surrounding disability diminishes, and we can begin to consider disability in new ways. Taking into account Canadian literature’s frequent questioning of Canadian identity and disability’s fluctuating status, these novels’ depictions of disability trigger questions regarding a Canadian idea of normalcy. By performing this vital function, portrayals of disability in Canadian fiction suggest that, within Canadian novels and Canadian society, normalcy is not

fixed, but fluid, and that disability constitutes a vital mode of being—a source of identity, instead of a social stigma.

Canada's vague attitude toward disability is well-documented. Despite the steps taken by disability organizations and the federal government to raise the profile of persons with disabilities, Tanya Titchkosky states that disability is often seen as a “problem” in Canada due to its fluctuating status (*Reading & Writing Disability Differently* 48); this status stems in part from disability's transferability, which is discussed below. Concurrently, in the introduction to a special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* that focuses on Canada, Reaume highlights the Tracy Latimer case, in which twelve-year-old Tracy was murdered by her father Robert, as an example of Canada's attitude toward disability:

Widespread disdain for the existence of people with disabilities was most recently evident in Canada in December, 2007 in regard to the public response to the National Parole Board's justified decision to refuse day parole to Robert Latimer. He has been in prison since 2001, where he is serving a ten year sentence for the 1993 murder of his disabled twelve year old daughter...a murder he refused to acknowledge was wrong. Erroneously framed as a “compassionate” murder by his supporters and by the perpetrator himself, the continuing widespread support in Canada for a man who murdered his daughter because she was disabled, is clear evidence of how people with disabilities, who are on the one hand protected by law from murder, are on the other hand faced with a large number of Canadians who want exceptions made when the murder victim is a person with a disability...

(punctuation errors left in)

Although the Latimer case is an extreme example that does not reflect the typical, everyday experiences of most people with disabilities, its fallout provides a clear indication of Canadians' attitude toward disability: the majority of Canadians agree with Latimer's actions (Krutzen 455). A national poll conducted in December 2014 revealed that seventy-six percent of Canadians agree that a person suffering a great deal of pain should be allowed to receive assisted suicide, while sixty-seven percent agree that anyone with Alzheimer's and/or fears of losing awareness and/or bathroom functions should be allowed to die (Brean). Another, less extreme example involves twenty-two-year-old Boglarka Kincses and her mother, Eniko. Boglarka and Eniko came to Canada from Romania, and, in January 2013, faced deportation because the Canadian government decided that Boglarka's cerebral palsy placed an "excessive demand" on health care resources (Warick, "Woman, daughter face deportation"). Even though Boglarka "requires no medication, has no unique health care needs," and has not "accessed any social programs," Citizenship and Immigration Canada determined that her condition demands more than the health care system can provide (Warick). Even though, thanks to over two hundred protestors, Boglarka and Eniko were eventually allowed to remain in Canada (Warick, "Deportation order lifted"), it is still troubling that a federal institution, an agency run by officials elected and subsidized by the Canadian public, made, by the standards of disability activists such as Reaume, such a questionable judgement. Kincses's and Latimer's cases demonstrate that persons with disabilities continue to be marginalized and are not, to borrow Prince's phrasing, "full citizens." Despite dozens of non-profit organizations and continuous legislation to try and improve employment opportunities, persons with disabilities remain heavily segregated and impoverished (Jongbloed 252).

The attitude of the Canadian public is not the only obstacle. Persons with disabilities can also frequently be uncertain about themselves, individually and socio-politically speaking. As Davis states, disability is a transparent category; anyone can acquire a disability, for it “permeates the already established categories of race, class, and gender” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 162). Disability complicates the question of identity, and this complication gives way to uncertainty. Persons with disabilities often have difficulty deciding where they fit: “[t]he boundaries of the disability community, then, are not always clear or agreed upon. Nor do those boundaries remain fixed” (Prince, “Who Are We?” 161). In the last twenty years, there has been considerable progress in creating disability communities, particularly in the arts, academic, and non-profit sectors. Within Canada, there are numerous artists and arts organizations dedicated specifically to creating works that express the complex beauty of disability, and there are hundreds of non-profit agencies working to improve the lives of disabled people. Yet more progress needs to occur to combat marginalization and ensure that disabled people become part of the mainstream, a vital identity among many vital identities. Garland-Thomson explains the initial difficulties of community formation by juxtaposing disability with more established categories:

Although categories such as ethnicity, race, and gender are based on shared traits that result in community formation, disabled people seldom consider themselves a group. Little somatic commonality exists among people with different kinds of disabilities because needs and situations are so diverse. A blind person, an epileptic, a paraplegic, a deaf person, and an amputee, for example, have no shared cultural heritage, traditional activities, or common physical experience. (*Extraordinary Bodies* 14-5)

In theory, disabled people lack community; in practice, community arises out of necessity, out of the need to feel wanted and be part of something larger than oneself. Garland-Thomson states that disabled people lack the physical and cultural capital that allows communities based on ethnicity, race, and gender to come together. While that may have been true in 1997, when *Extraordinary Bodies* was published and disability studies was first gaining ground as an area of scholarly inquiry, things have changed. Disability communities do exist and are becoming broader and stronger; the problem is the persistence of ambivalent and discriminatory attitudes toward disabled people. Those who conceive of and perpetuate rigid definitions of social normalcy have not been taught to think about disability in a way that encourages community and identity; as a result, social normalcy persists, and disability retains its ambivalence.

The uncertainty surrounding disability prompts a few questions. Why is disability such a problem in Canada? Why is it riddled with uncertainty? How do we deal with this uncertainty? One way to answer these questions is to address our cultural background, and study Canadian novels published since the *Charter*'s initial passing.

Such a study presents a challenge. Since 1982, several Canadian novels have been published that contain disabled characters; however, relatively few of them feature disabled protagonists, and, commensurately, few scholars have explored the impact of disability in such texts. Those scholars who have explored disability tend to adapt David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's notion of "narrative prosthesis," which states that "disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 49). Mitchell and Snyder's use of the word "crutch" is both ironic and telling. That authors lean on disability in such a manner suggests that their narratives cannot otherwise stand on their own, that disability provides a



stabilizing presence; yet the manner in which scholars discuss disability suggests that disability is unstable or, rather, destabilizing. For instance, in her study of Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy*, Nadine LeGier situates disability in relation to gender. Disability's presence as an "interruptive force" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 48) triggers particular significances within gender categories, acting as their crutch: LeGier writes that "Vanderhaeghe uses [the narrator] Harry Vincent's disability as a narrative device to critique the construction of masculinity in historical representations of the expansion of the American West" (244). While her study offers insight into how Vanderhaeghe depicts gender in the novel, it does not explore disability as its own category, nor does it address the uncertainty of what disability means in contemporary Canada. Even though this novel is set in the past—*The Englishman's Boy* jumps back and forth from the 1860s to the 1920s—it is studied as a cultural object that reflects specific contemporary concerns. To LeGier, disability is a narrative tool, and while it helps her concretize her argument about gender, it is only a device, and otherwise remains on the sidelines. Maria Truchan-Tataryn adapts a similar approach in her truncated study of various Canadian novels, "Life Sentences or Sentences of Death?" To her, Harry Vincent's limp "may well represent (according to convention) a moral flaw" (213). Her phrasing here is uncertain, yet instead of interrogating the harmful conventional and stereotypical significance of Harry's limp, Truchan-Tataryn succumbs to that significance; she leans on it. Both Truchan-Tataryn's and LeGier's studies leave disability fixed within a stereotyping literary-critical framework.

The novels studied here provide a diverse portraiture of disability. Each one features a different disability, ranging from deafness and paraplegia to mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities. Each novel circumvents the convention that "[i]f disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented. It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities"

(Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 41). By highlighting this fact, Davis “assert[s] that the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her” (41). The novel, like able-bodied society, upholds a standard of “universal” normality that disability disrupts. The reader is presumed to be normal, or able-bodied, and so the novel perpetuates and emphasizes that form of normalcy. To the contrary, each novel in this study features a main character with a disability, and, in doing so, circumvents conventions of the novel’s so-called “normativity.” In these seven novels, disability both disrupts and is part of their structures. For instance, in *The Englishman’s Boy* Vanderhaeghe disrupts standard formulae of the Western by employing a disabled man, Harry Vincent, as a narrator. Westerns are typically dominated by able-bodied men, yet Harry is not only part of the structure; he helps create the structure by telling the story. MacDonald’s *Lily Piper* and Coady’s *Bridget Murphy* function in a similar manner: MacDonald reconfigures notions of Gothic normativity by making Lily the narrator, and Coady confronts more serious depictions of institutionalization by placing Bridget and her outrageous family at the centre of her satirical narrative. Overall, these novels confront the notion of universal normalcy and suggest alternative ways of thinking about the relationship between normalcy and disability.

There is a certain catch to the convention defined by Davis, one rooted in the Canadian novel itself. To say that disability disrupts the normalcy of contemporary Canadian novels presumes that such novels are structured based on and/or perpetuate some kind of discernible normalcy. Several critics have certainly attempted to impose specific ideas and motifs on Canadian novels from which standards of normalcy might be discerned. Northrop Frye’s question “Where is here?” which emphasizes the importance of geography in forming a

Canadian identity (220), Margaret Atwood's "Survival" narrative, which states that "[t]he central symbol for Canada...is undoubtedly Survival" (*Survival* 32), and D.G. Jones's Old Testament metanarrative in which "the world of Canadian literature is...a world of Adam separated from his Creator and cast out of Eden to wander in the wilderness" (15) are but three examples. Frank Davey denounces such thematic criticism because it "is performed mostly to derive new catch-words and formulae" (3)—in other words, to reduce texts to simple ideas that ignore their inherent complexities. Yet the novels in this study largely reflect a discourse of difference rather than uniformity. Linda Hutcheon, whose work on postmodern theory helps frame disability's marginality, states that the novels growing out of this time period "[offer] different ways in which to explore different experiences with language and life" and that these "[v]oices, previously muted...[are] recognized as 'other', as new and contesting voices" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 188). In concurrence with Hutcheon, Martin Kuester writes that "Given the multifaceted nature of the novels written in Canada today, and given the changes brought about by the policy of multiculturalism and the departure from overly obvious national characteristics, the designation 'Canadian novel' has become particularly inclusive" (328-29). This inclusivity mirrors disability's transferability. If "the whole world is [the Canadian novel's] stage" (329), as Kuester writes, then disability plays a particular role in the Canadian novel. Disability mirrors contemporary Canada's transferability, its lack of a central identity, and, as demonstrated by its multiculturalism and what Kuester calls its status as "an international literature" (326), its lack of borders. In these novels, disability draws attention to the fluidity of Canadian normalcy, and so further upsets the convention of novelistic normalcy that Davis establishes.

The phrase "fluidity of normalcy" signifies a way of thinking about Canadian textual and social structures that incorporates inclusion, accessibility, and adaptability. It attempts to resolve

the rigid binary of normal and disabled by blurring them together. Rod Michalko asks, “How do we include the normal-order-of-things in disability?” (“Decentering the Disruptive Education of Disability”). He discusses how, because disability is not considered normal, it disrupts normalcy, so what is needed is a way of thinking about disability and normalcy that views them not as binary opposites but as cohesive ideas. The fluidity of normalcy, or fluid normalcy, draws attention to the underlying structures and attitudes within both Canadian fiction and Canadian society. It seeks to destabilize rigid conceptions of textual and social normalcy and replace them with a more open and fluid idea of normalcy. It discourages reliance on stereotypes, and recognizes the complexities of individual texts and individual people; there is no one single way to think about texts or identities. It recognizes that circumstances and contexts change, and that disability—along with gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and race—manifests in many ways. It recognizes disability as both a socially created condition and a lived experience. It considers difference to be part of the Canadian status quo of fluid and fluctuating identities. It stresses that disability and other marginalized categories can be sources of identity rather than social stigmas. It emphasizes a holistic method of textual engagement that focuses not only on disability, but on how the various elements of a text interact; in other words, it discourages the sort of paraphrasing that Davey criticizes. Finally, it promotes empathy over sympathy, compassion over pity.

The majority of the novels considered here offer glimpses of such fluidity; however, one novel, Mistry’s *Family Matters*, does not, or at least not as explicitly as the others. Mistry frequently portrays disability in stereotypical ways throughout his novels and short stories. Disability in his fiction is commonly associated with poverty, sacrifice, and/or despair, and *Family Matters* is no different. The protagonist, Nariman Vakeel, slowly wastes away due to

Parkinson's disease, and as a result places a large burden on his family. Nariman's slow decline functions as a bodily metaphor for the degeneration and breakdown of his family and his community, making his disability appear burdensome, tragic, and stigmatic. Although such a depiction may constitute a textbook example of narrative prosthesis, Mistry writes with a distance that suggests he criticizes the Indian society portrayed in the novel. When considering Mistry's status as a diasporic Canadian writer, it seems that, rather than simply portraying Indian society, he condemns the tyranny of social conformity that governs the Indian, and specifically Parsi, community depicted in *Family Matters*. Nariman's family's pessimistic view of him and his disability plays a part in deepening their troubles; thus social normalcy yields harmful and tragic consequences.

*Family Matters* serves as a springboard to the other six novels considered here. While Mistry may condemn Indian social structures that define disability as bothersome and burdensome, he does not quite present alternative ways of thinking about disability the way the other authors do. The other six novels circumvent narrative prosthesis in that they portray disability in unique and complex ways and do not lean on disability as a so-called narrative crutch. These novels also undermine what Ato Quayson calls "aesthetic nervousness" (15), a concept related to narrative prosthesis and which, by Quayson's own admission, borrows heavily from it:

Aesthetic nervousness is seen when the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability. The primary level in which it may be discerned is in the interaction between a disabled and nondisabled character, where a variety of tensions may be identified. However, in most texts aesthetic nervousness is hardly ever limited to this primary level, but is

augmented by tensions refracted across other levels of the text such as the disposition of symbols and motifs, the overall narrative or dramatic perspective, the constitution and reversals of plot structure, and so on. (15)

Rather than depict disability in narrow, discomfoting ways, the authors encourage the reader to empathize with their disabled characters instead of stigmatize them. While some able-bodied and/or able-minded characters are certainly put off by disability, these novels as a whole compassionately portray disabled characters in a way that overcomes aesthetic nervousness and promotes understanding. Findley, Vanderhaeghe, MacDonald, Coady, Itani, and McNeney discourage aesthetic nervousness in favour of empathy.

Even though disability is beset with uncertainty, that uncertainty is not entirely counterproductive. In his discussion of Canada, Robert Kroetsch writes that “[a]ll is periphery and margin, against the hole in the middle. We are held together by that absence. There is no centre. This disunity is our unity” (363). This instability provides an opportunity to question normalcy within a Canadian context, and to assert that disability constitutes a social and cultural identity. This notion of instability, of troubling and questioning, aligns disability with postmodern theory. Disability is frequently considered marginal and peripheral; to that end, Hutcheon states that “[t]he periphery is also the frontier, the place of possibility” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 3). She defines the position of the postmodern writer as an “‘ex-centric’ position” in that the writer “challenges any notion of centrality in (and centralization of) culture” (3). Like the postmodern writer, the disabled characters considered in this study challenge boundaries and provoke questions regarding the so-called centre. The novels following Mistry’s offer a refreshed view of normalcy as well as a reconsideration of the metanarratives that make Canada what it is. For instance, Findley’s novel allegorizes and condemns the Canadian and German eugenics

movements; Itani's novel shows how the national impact of World War One takes on a different hue when read through the lens of Deafness;<sup>1</sup> MacDonald's novel frames Nova Scotian and Canadian history through the eyes of a disabled narrator; and McNeney's novel offers an alternative way to think about disabled athletes, sidestepping such national icons as Terry Fox and Rick Hansen.

In addition to disability theory and postmodern theory, reader-response theory provides a useful background for analysing textual representations of disability. Reader-response theory, as provided by Georges Poulet and Wolfgang Iser, functions in a unique manner when used to scrutinize Canadian disability fiction. Although such criticism is often broad in application, it nevertheless helps frame the reader's relationship to the text when considering disability. In his essay "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority," Poulet describes what happens in the act of reading and how subjectivity is given:

Whatever I think is a part of *my* mental world. And yet here I am thinking a thought which manifestly belongs to another mental world, which is being thought in me just as though I did not exist.... [S]ince every thought must have a subject to think it, this *thought* which is alien to me and yet in me, must also have in me a *subject* which is alien to me. It all happens, then, as though reading were the act by which a thought managed to bestow itself within me with a subject not myself.... Reading is just that: a way of giving way not only to a host of alien words, images, ideas, but also to the very alien principle which utters them and shelters them. (44-5)

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with appropriate parlance, I use a capital "D" here to denote the Deaf as a cultural group. The term "deaf" with a lower-case "d" describes those who have lost their hearing. The nuances of these terms are explored in more detail in Chapter Six.

The act of reading, then, introduces or awakens thoughts and subjects of which the reader was not previously aware. This notion speaks to disability's transferability. Even though a reader may not have a disability, the potential for acquiring a disability is there, as is the potential for understanding the subjectivity of a person who is disabled; and even though I myself have a disability (hearing impairment), the act of reading allows me to experience, understand, and interpret other disabilities. My disability also lends me additional insight: if a reader can acquire one disability, he/she can acquire another. The reader is taught how to read from a different perspective.

Poulet's notion of the "alien" is also particularly important. Persons with disabilities are often thought of as "the stranger[s] in our midst" (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 43), the alien others. The act of reading disability in Canadian fiction therefore becomes a means of giving voice to the "alien principle"—in this case, the text and the characters—that delivers these different thoughts. Upon deliverance of these thoughts, and still within the act of reading, the characters and the text gain subjectivity, agency. Both Poulet and Iser comment on this notion. Within the act of reading, Poulet states that "I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me" (45). Iser concurs when he writes that, while reading, "we ourselves impart to the text the dynamic lifelikeness which, in turn, enables us to absorb an unfamiliar experience into our personal world" (62). Poulet and Iser underscore the transference of subjectivity from reader to character, and from character to reader. In the case of Canadian disability fiction, as I call it, the reader enacts the subjectivity of the characters, and within that generation plays a part in constructing selves for the characters. If, as Iser puts it, "the reader often feels involved in events which, at the time of reading, seem real to him" (54), then, given disability's uncertain socio-political status, the reader may therefore be compelled to grant the



characters selves, or at least see their experiences as “real.” Indeed, “by reading we uncover the unformulated part of the text, and this very indeterminacy is the force that drives us to work out a configurative meaning while at the same time giving us the necessary degree of freedom to do so” (Iser 62). Overall, Poulet’s and Iser’s work is useful in two ways: it emphasizes the individual reader’s perspective when interpreting disability; and it gives subjectivity to the disabled characters and to the texts. Ultimately, two “configurative meanings” arise in this dissertation’s analysis of Canadian disability fiction: the fluidity of normalcy in Canadian literature and in Canada itself, and the possibility of disability identity.

This notion of identity is tricky, particularly when considering disability’s transferability and the aforementioned difficulties with identity in Canadian literary discourse. Even though two characters may have a similar type of disability, their approaches to it—how they let it impact their selves—differ. For many of the characters in these novels, community is difficult to come by. However, while this abundant lack might initially induce anxiety, it presents an opportunity to evaluate the Canadian novel, Canadian identity, and the disability self. The seven novels featured in this study lack any sort of unity; indeed, they resist unity. None of their characters’ disabilities is the same, nor are any of their approaches to disability, nor are any of the authors’ techniques in telling their stories. Their lack of unity is symptomatic of their individuality. Because they resist unity, they resist identity, an idea grounded in commonality. They instead fashion singularly individual selves and come to rest on different points on the margin, where, according to Kroetsch, the power rests: “The centre does not hold. The margin, the periphery, the edge, now, is the exciting and dangerous boundary where silence and sound meet. It is where the action is” (357). In these novels, the sound and silence from the margin trouble and destabilize the centre, creating empowered individuals rather than affirming communities. To this end,

disability theorists have commented extensively on disability and individuality. Garland-Thomson provides insightful analysis on this matter:

Disability's indisputably random and unpredictable character translates as appalling disorder and persistent menace in a social order predicated on self-government. Furthermore, physical instability is the bodily manifestation of political anarchy.... The disabled body stands for *the self gone out of control*, individualism run rampant: it mocks the notion of the body as compliant instrument of the limitless will and appears in the cultural imagination as ungovernable, recalcitrant, flaunting its difference as if to refute the fantasy of sameness implicit in the notion of equality. (*Extraordinary Bodies* 43; emphases added)

Garland-Thomson locates disability within a socio-political framework. This framework, like Davis's notion of the novel, assumes a certain level of normalcy—of governance and order, of bodies that adhere to a certain standard. In the novels that follow Mistry's in this study, normalcy is fluid. The disability self is not out of control; rather, it is part of the population of different selves. Disability does not constitute the characters' entire selves; rather, it provides a corporeal vocabulary, a physical means of articulation. It also functions as a catalyst from which a self may be created.

The ideas governing this dissertation—that disability draws attention to the fluidity of Canadian normalcy, and that the possibility of disability identity grows out of that fluidity—arise in different ways throughout each of my chapters. Reading the texts from a position of fluid normalcy suggests that the texts act as buffer zones between the reader and the characters and their settings. If normalcy is fluid, then Canada's regionalism is a unique element of its national

character rather than an exclusionary aspect. By reading these texts, one imagines and, in imagining, participates in the texts. This does not mean that one becomes a Cape Breton citizen upon reading *Strange Heaven*; rather, it signifies an imaginative and empathetic engagement with Coady's depiction of Cape Breton. The borders dividing the characters do not necessarily separate the reader from the characters; the reader enjoys a fluid position in that she or he may inhabit whatever territories or, to borrow Poulet's term, mental worlds may be present in the text, whether they are landscapes or mindscapes.

After I discuss Mistry's novel in Chapter One, I proceed chronologically, so Chapter Two focuses on Findley's novel. In *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Findley allegorizes the Canadian and German eugenics movements along with the conflicting attitudes that allowed eugenicists to carry out their work. The disabled characters, Mottyl the half-blind cat and Lotte and Adam the ape-children, blur the boundary separating humans and animals, and, along with Mrs. Noyes and the androgynous Lucy, they struggle against Noah's brand of brutal patriarchal Christian hegemony, challenging his authority while trying to bring about a more open, inclusive, and fluid world. In Chapter Three, I explore how Guy Vanderhaeghe uses disability to draw attention to the construction of history, nationality, and gender. *The Englishman's Boy* features four disabled characters, ranging from Harry Vincent, the novel's limping protagonist and narrator, to Wylie, a supporting character with an intellectual disability. The four characters, which also include Harry's invalid mother and the deaf girl Selena, represent a palette of disability, laying bare the possibilities of character construction. With his fragmented narrative and multiple portrayals of disability, particularly his dynamic portrait of Harry, Vanderhaeghe suggests that disability, like history, nationality, and gender, is as much an individual notion as it is a socially created idea, as much imagined as it is experienced. In Chapter Four, I analyze Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on*

*Your Knees*. This Gothic story focuses on the Piper family, whose Scottish-Arab background and fiercely individual members mirror the diverse Nova Scotian community in which they live. Much of the criticism surrounding this text focuses on its Gothic configurations of sexual and racial diversity; I insert disability into the conversation, focusing on the character Lily Piper, the young daughter who is the result of an abusive and incestuous relationship between James Piper and his daughter Kathleen. Within Gothic texts, illegitimate children and children borne of incestuous relations are often portrayed as disabled and malevolent in literature, but even though Lily contracts polio shortly after birth, she resists narrative prosthesis and comes to embody empathy. MacDonald confronts prior Gothic depictions of disability and, by employing Lily as her narrator, reconfigures the Gothic tendency to reinforce corporeal normativity and suggests a more fluid model of normalcy in its place. Chapter Five focuses on Lynn Coady's *Strange Heaven*, which also takes place in Nova Scotia. Bridget Murphy, Coady's protagonist, is put in a mental institution for post-partum depression. Coady shows how fluid normalcy functions in a mental health capacity by blurring the line between mental health and mental illness. She also shows how a patriarchal society disables women by limiting their prospects, stunting their relationships, and treating them like second-class citizens. In Chapter Six, I explain how Frances Itani's novel *Deafening* is a unique contribution to Canadian fiction about World War One. The novel follows young Grania O'Neill, who, deafened by scarlet fever, develops her voice through both oral means and American Sign Language. Grania attends the Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and later meets a hearing man named Jim; she and Jim marry shortly before Jim leaves for Europe, where he experiences the cacophonous, deafening noise of battle. Itani adds something unique to the sub-canon of Canadian novels about World War One by framing Canada's participation within a Deaf context. The growth of the Deaf community parallels

Canada in that the Deaf seek independence from the hearing world, just as Canada in the early twentieth century seeks independence from Britain. Itani's novel suggests not only that Deaf culture and Canada mirror each other, but that the Deaf constitute a Canadian voice, a member of the national chorus that prompts re-evaluations of major Canadian events. Chapter Seven examines how Arley McNeney confronts able-bodied conceptions of normalcy in her novel *Post*: McNeney's protagonist, Nolan Taylor, is a former Paralympic wheelchair basketball player stuck between being able-bodied and disabled. She endures an identity crisis after she has surgery to correct her arthritic hip. For Nolan, disability is a normal state, and her surgery, which is meant to make her able-bodied, disrupts her normal disabled self. Her relationship with her able-bodied boyfriend, Quinn, grows tenuous, and she seeks the company of her former teammate, mentor, and lover, Darren, who is a quadriplegic. By challenging the way disabled athletes are often conceived as "super-crip[s]" (Goggin and Newell), McNeney suggests that disability is a type of normalcy. This study concludes by expanding on the cultural impact of disability portrayals and on Canada's current political and social background.

As one works through these chapters it becomes evident that these novels show an increasing acceptance of disability as an identity, along with normalcy's increasing fluidity. These texts, particularly those following Mistry's novel, circumvent one final disability convention. As is frequently noted in disability studies, disability is often associated with immobility and inability, whereas able-bodiedness is associated with agency, the ability to act; therefore, those who are able-bodied possess power, and those who have disabilities do not. In *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, Shelley Tremain writes that "[Michel] Foucault argued...that power is not something that is exchanged, given, or taken back, but rather is exercised and exists only in action" (4). The disability novels in this study are agents. They act.

They exercise power by offering alternative ways of rethinking the relationship between disability and normalcy. As Tanya Titchkosky writes, “Texts are action, thus active. Texts do not merely talk about the world; they are also part of the world. Dorothy Smith suggests...that texts act upon readers and so, through reading, meaning is made” (“Policy, Disability, Reciprocity?” 55). The Canadian disability novel does not sit still. It is active. It acts upon and through the reader by showing the possibilities of open and fluid normalcy rather than rigid and restrictive normalcy. In doing so, the Canadian disability novel demonstrates the power of narrative.

Chapter One:  
Age, Disease, and Disability  
in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*

Rohinton Mistry's 2002 novel *Family Matters* explores the physical and social impacts of age, disease, and disability against a background of political and cultural strife. Set in Bombay in 1995, the novel focuses chiefly on seventy-nine-year old Nariman Vakeel, who slowly wastes away due to Parkinson's disease and osteoporosis and, as a result, places a large burden on his already fractious family. His stepchildren, Jal and Coomy, have had a tenuous relationship with Nariman ever since he married their mother, and his biological daughter Roxana's family is financially strained. Family difficulties play out against Bombay's broader racial and nationalistic concerns: the Shiv Sena, a right-wing party (Morey 59), bullies Bombay's citizens into upholding its nationalist agenda, using extortion and violence to discourage such values as inclusivity and cultural diversity; and the Parsi community, an ethnic minority in Bombay of which Nariman and his family are part, struggles with a dwindling population. As Peter Morey points out, Nariman's physical degeneration mirrors that of his family and of Bombay itself: "the corruption and breakdown of family life is inextricably linked to the physical. Yet is it also connected to that other corruption infesting the social space and political institutions of Bombay"

(63). Nariman's condition has also been read as a commentary on the shrinking Parsi race: J.G. Duresh states that Nariman's age and disability are "symptomatic of the feeble condition of his community" (17). Nariman's slow degeneration therefore functions as a bodily metaphor for the degeneration of his family, the city of Bombay, and the Parsi community, narrowing any interpretation of age, disease, and disability to burdensome, tragic, and stigmatic. Reading the novel through a disability lens highlights other tensions that cast its ethnic and political themes in a different light. Writing from a diasporic position, Mistry shows the tragic effects of India's rigid social structures. He critiques the Parsi community's dismissal of aged, diseased, and disabled bodies, along with the tyranny of social customs that govern the Indian society portrayed in the novel. This tyranny manifests most prominently in traditional practices: arranged marriages, parent-child relationships, and cultural uniformity are all framed through Nariman's condition, and the accompanying oppression ultimately proves devastating to the characters.

*Family Matters* is the only novel by a non-Caucasian author included in this study. Mistry was born in Bombay and immigrated to Canada in 1975, and although the bulk of his fiction concentrates on the Parsi community in India, he stresses the universality of his writing (Kamboureli 387). According to Mistry, his characters' "dreams, ambitions, and fears...are as accessible to the Western reader as the Indian reader" (Mistry quoted in Kamboureli 387). Through his books' accessibility, Mistry exemplifies the fluidity of normalcy. To echo Kuester's comments about the Canadian novel, if Canadian normalcy is fluid, then it welcomes all people and encourages them to tell their stories. From his position as a diasporic writer, Mistry, who is Parsi, has cultivated distance between himself and his subject matter, and that distance—



Hutcheon might call it an ex-centric view—allows him to see and expose the faults in Indian society. From his Canadian vantage point, Mistry reveals India’s rigid normalcy.

Studies on Parsi culture tend to focus on its religious practices, its dwindling population, and its troubled relationship with other Indian communities. The Parsi cultural view appears to support the authority of purity, which manifests in youth, health, and able-bodiedness. Parsis practice the religion of Zoroastrianism, and “for a Zoroastrian dead matter, e.g. corpses, or any substance leaving the body, e.g. breath, spit, excrement, sperm and blood are contaminated” (Genetsch 142). Purity is the ideal state for Zoroastrians, who “abhor pollution...and maintain the strictest cleanliness in their persons and homes” (Boyce 245). With his aged, diseased, and decaying body, not to mention his struggles with tremors and incontinence, Nariman’s marginalization makes sense within the Zoroastrian view. Common beliefs within the broader Indian population reinforce stigmatization; as Barbara Harriss-White argues, “Physical and mental disability, as recognized clinically and legally, may be considered as ‘fitting’ retribution for particular sins...responsibility for which lies entirely with the individual” (136). Such a view helps frame Coomy’s combative relationship with Nariman: she may see Nariman’s condition as punishment for the death of her mother, which Coomy sees as Nariman’s fault. Indeed, “a degree of social stigma is attached” (Saxena et al 129) to the aged, diseased, and disabled, and Indian cultural representations tend to reflect such stigma. Joyojeet Pal writes that stereotypical portrayals of disability “are attributable to a reinforcement of patriarchy that has traditionally come from Indian literature and culture” (110). Such a view makes Nariman Vakeel’s case curious, since he is his family’s patriarch and becomes marginalized over the course of *Family Matters*. His position as patriarch is undermined, though, as his progressive degeneration diminishes whatever agency he may have (if he has any at all), effectively removing him from

any position of authority and reinforcing a hegemony in which the young, healthy, and able-bodied have dominion. David Gutmann posts that as men age, they typically “feel free to reclaim their passive, nurturing, contemplative qualities (attributes traditionally gendered ‘feminine’ and repressed by men during parenthood)” (quoted in Deats and Lenker 5). Nariman is certainly quite passive and contemplative—in fact, he does very little in the novel. His passivity and contemplation are not matters of choice or freedom, though. He appears to have little or no say in what happens to him and around him; for most of his life he is acted upon rather than takes action, so it is reasonable to say that Parsi hegemony, which manifests in the form of young, able-bodied people who adhere to social customs, reigns, and that Nariman is not part of it due to his age and condition, which disenfranchise him.

Mistry’s work prior to *Family Matters* suggests that his impulse to criticize Indian society is ongoing and perhaps even a driving force in his writing. His short story “Swimming Lessons,” which was published in his 1987 collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, is set in Canada. When the unnamed narrator sees an old man in a wheelchair in the hallway of his apartment building, he is reminded of his grandfather, who lived in Bombay and, like Nariman Vakeel, had Parkinson’s and osteoporosis (Mistry, “Swimming Lessons” 230). Like Mistry, the narrator looks back on India from his position as a diasporic Indian man in Canada. His view of Parkinson’s and osteoporosis appears to stretch across borders—and time. The similarities between the narrator’s grandfather and Nariman Vakeel are quite pointed. The grandfather broke his hip; Nariman breaks his leg. The narrator’s mother struggled to care for his grandfather, bringing him bedpans and dressing his bedsores whenever necessary; Nariman’s family struggles with him in a similar manner, helping him in the bathroom and grudgingly emptying his bedpan. That Mistry employs Parkinson’s and osteoporosis in similar ways in two separate works

published fifteen years apart suggests that his impulse to critique the Parsis' narrow view of age, disease, and disability is ongoing. Nariman is powerless, as is his predecessor. Within the Parsi Indian communities that Mistry depicts, age, disease, and disability appear to be fixed within paradigms of pollution and death. They are defined in contrast to a rigid standard of normalcy that frames the elderly, diseased, and disabled as burdensome and unwanted; as a result, disability in Mistry's fiction is riddled with both narrative prosthesis and aesthetic nervousness. His other novels, 1991's *Such a Long Journey* and 1997's *A Fine Balance*, are no different in how they portray disability. In these stories, Mistry links disability to sacrifice (*Such a Long Journey*) and poverty (*A Fine Balance*), meanings that, as Garland-Thomson states, are stereotypically associated with disability (*Extraordinary Bodies* 10). While Mistry's fiction exhibits what Garland-Thomson calls the "frequent assumption that a disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute" (12), his fiction does so deliberately. In conforming to their societies' expectations, the narrator of "Swimming Lessons" reduces his grandfather to his condition, and Nariman's family does the same to him.

While Mistry may pointedly criticize Parsi social uniformity, he does not present an alternative—or rather, he does, but his alternative view does not include disability. He offers fleeting glimpses of fluid normalcy: Mr. Kapur, the owner of a Bombay sporting goods store, puts different displays in his store window to celebrate the holidays of different religions; Yezad, Roxana's husband, tries to get his family to Canada; and Nariman was once in love with a non-Parsi woman. But where age, disease, and disability are concerned, Mistry does not provide alternatives. One of the key complexities Mistry misses in his depiction of Nariman is that age, disease, and disability are distinct categories with their own nuances. When Nariman breaks his ankle while he is out walking, and is brought home "a helpless dead weight" (*Family Matters*

43), it seems his age, his Parkinson's, and his osteoporosis are all to blame. There is little distinction between them, and by blurring these conditions together Mistry sidesteps their complexities. He reflects Sally Chivers's notion that "old age does not ever escape the stigma and restraints imposed upon disability" (*The Silvering Screen* 8). It is difficult to separate between age and disability, not to mention the various diseases that attend the elderly. As Robert Levine states, "People do not die of old age. Death is caused by various diseases that affect people when they are old" (31). Such thinking reflects a medical model of thought. A social- or humanities-based model, such as those found in gerontology and disability studies, asserts that age, disease, and disability are distinct categories that form complex relationships with each other and are all conditioned by social attitudes and physical and mental outcomes. Age and disease are not disabilities in themselves, though they can have disabling effects. Age causes the body to break down and makes it more vulnerable to disease and disability (Levine 31). A disease is like a disability in that it can be physical, mental, or neurological, and can be acquired at any time, but it is often defined solely as a medical condition rather than as a socially created condition. Susan Wendell distinguishes between people who are "healthy disabled" and "unhealthy disabled" (163). The healthy disabled are "people whose physical conditions and functional limitations are relatively stable and predictable for the foreseeable future.... [T]hey regard themselves as healthy, not sick, [and] they do not expect to die any sooner than any other healthy person their age" (162-63). The unhealthy disabled—that is, those with diseases—have "illnesses that do not go away by themselves within six months, cannot reliably be cured, and that will not kill the patient any time soon" (163). Nariman's Parkinson's is typically thought of as a disease of the elderly, though it can manifest in middle age, as shown with Canadian actor Michael J. Fox (Levine 36). Parkinson's can manifest in different ways: some people decline

rather quickly while others continue to function at a high level (36). Pursuant to the social model of disability, a disease becomes a disability when social obstacles and attitudes become difficult or insurmountable (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 2). As evidenced by his language and his characters' relationships, Mistry appears to understand that social attitudes attend these conditions, but those attitudes bring about stigma and marginalization. Nariman is a burden, someone to be endured rather than enjoyed.

Such thinking goes against the grain of prevalent scholarship on aging. Within the last fifteen years, studies on cultural portrayals of aging have focused on the more dynamic aspects of senescence. Scholars in the field of gerontology, which explores “the social process of old age” (Chivers, *From Old Woman* xxxiii), have sought to assuage the anxiety and discomfort—that is, aesthetic nervousness (Quayson 15)—surrounding old age. In doing so, they have often employed disability studies as a theoretical apparatus. In their book *Aging and Identity*, Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker write that “loss is only half of the picture, because aging can also bring growth, expansion, even emancipation” (3). Gerontologists argue that aging can be liberating, that “in their post-midlife years women and men achieve the freedom to develop their entire personalities” (5). A novel that explores the freedom that comes with age is called a “*Refungsroman*, or novel of ripening” (5), and Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* and Mordecai Richler’s *Barney’s Version* could be considered Canadian examples of *Refungsromans*. Nariman, however, enjoys no such freedom. As he gets older, and as his condition worsens, he becomes less and less free and more and more subject to the whims of his family—a natural occurrence, perhaps. Similar situations arise in *The Stone Angel* and *Barney’s Version*; however, the type of progressive gerontology that Chivers, Deats and Lenker describe does not appear to cohere with Parsi values. Old age can be liberating in that it can spur one to

tell one's story and it can be more permissive—one can get away with more than usual. In their own ways, Hagar Shipley and Barney Panofsky attest to these notions, but Nariman remains restricted to the margin. As part of his critique of Parsi society, Mistry shrinks Nariman's voice rather than develops it.

Nariman's condition functions as a narrative prosthesis that props up Mistry's critique like the aforementioned crutch. To that end, Mistry recycles his unnamed narrator's grandfather's disabilities and draws out their effects, emphasizing the rigid normalcy that appears to govern the Parsi community to which the novel's main characters belong. In contrast to Laurence's and Richler's novels, which are told in the first person and so offer intimate looks into the aging process, Mistry tells his story in the third person, subjecting Nariman to the whims of the normative narrator. At the beginning of the novel, Nariman is an old man trying to make the most out of the time he has left. He enjoys going for walks, despite Jal and Coomy's objections, and revels in the company of Roxana, Yezad, and their children Murad and Jehangir. Yet Mistry's language frames Nariman within a paradigm of misery and encumbrance. His description of Coomy's relationship with Nariman signals this paradigm: "During her girlhood, relatives would scrutinize her and remark sadly that a father's love was sunshine and fresh water without which a daughter could not bloom; a stepfather, they said, was quite useless in this regard" (Mistry, *Family Matters* 2). Right from the beginning, Mistry explicitly illustrates Nariman's uselessness, which characterizes the embittered relationship he and Coomy share. Nariman is unable to fulfill the fatherly role expected of him because he is not Coomy's biological father, so because he does not conform to familial normalcy, he is useless—one might say disabled—as a stepfather. Mistry then details their relationship from Nariman's viewpoint: "[Coomy] should have been a headmistress, enacting rules for hapless schoolgirls, making them

miserable. Instead, here she was, plaguing him with rules to govern every aspect of his shrunken life” (2). Two key ideas arise in this brief passage that set the tone for the rest of the novel. First, Coomy, a healthy able-bodied woman, establishes the rules that Nariman—and Jal, for that matter—must follow. Coomy operates within the paradigm of normalcy depicted in the novel. Jal, who is hearing impaired and wears an old hearing aid, constantly submits to Coomy’s will, and Nariman, who is old and enfeebled, has little choice but to succumb; thus youth, health, and able-bodiedness govern age, disease, and disability. Second, Mistry’s corporeal language highlights Nariman’s misery. The word “plaguing” suggests that Coomy’s rules have a palpable physical effect on Nariman. He has very little freedom, and so his life is “shrunken.”

Within *Family Matters*, youth, health, and able-bodiedness are frequently associated with freedom and power, while age, disease, and disability consistently signal restriction and misery. These associations carry forward and echo in motley ways throughout the novel, particularly with Jal and Nariman. Mistry’s language links deafness with powerlessness and obsolescence: characters’ words fall on “deaf” ears (265, 355, 463). Such language emphasizes Jal’s timid, submissive nature; although he occasionally attempts to dissuade the bull-headed Coomy from getting her way, he does not succeed. Nariman, meanwhile, forms the novel’s focus, at least in the first half, and his condition informs much of the novel’s social and political commentary. For instance, Mistry frames Nariman’s marriage to Jal and Coomy’s mother in disability terms. Nariman once wanted to marry Lucy, a Goan woman with whom he was deeply in love, but because “Zoroastrians are traditionally endogamous—that is, they do not normally marry outside their own fold” (Clark 112), Nariman relented and allowed his parents to arrange a marriage for him. Mistry’s language underscores Nariman’s position: as Nariman’s parents and their friends consider what sort of woman is best for him—Nariman is forty-two years old at this point—they

decide that either a widow “*or a defective woman,*” meaning someone “*cock-eyed, or deaf, or one leg shorter than the other...someone sickly, with a weak lung, or problems in the child-bearing department,*” gives him the best chance for marriage (14; Mistry’s emphases). Because his age and his previous relationship with Lucy taint him as an eligible bachelor, Nariman must accept a less-than-ideal marriage, and for his marriage to work he must shed his past, for his past, as his parents state, is his “*handicap*” (15). In his parents’ eyes, Nariman’s desire for Lucy disables him. It marks him as socially deviant and forces him to the margin: “The Parsis do not like to have any sort of contact with the outsiders” (Duresh 17). Nariman’s parents make what to them is the obvious choice: Yasmin Contractor, a widow with two children. Nariman’s parents and their friends then steer him through the marriage process “[*l*]ike an invalid steered by doctors and nurses” (15; Mistry’s emphases). Nariman is at the mercy of Parsi and Zoroastrian tradition. Mistry’s language suggests that social customs disable Nariman, and that Nariman’s parents and their friends, the doctors and nurses who exemplify normalcy, are expected to correct his so-called maladies of open-mindedness and love without borders. This marriage does not fix Nariman, though. Lucy is unable to let him go, and she drives both Nariman and Yasmin to distraction. Eventually, Yasmin confronts Lucy on the roof of their apartment building, and she and Lucy struggle against each other, and fall off the edge, plunging to their deaths (356). Yasmin’s death bears severe repercussions, driving Coomy’s anger toward Nariman and dictating their relationship from then on. Yasmin’s and Lucy’s deaths also indicate the destructive potential of rigid social customs that foster prejudice: “[a] Parsi can be a Parsi only by birth and not by adoption or conversion or a non-Parsi adoption. Racial and genetic purity is a command of Religion” (Special Committee, quoted in Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora* 123). It is disheartening that Nariman remains at the mercy of Parsi and Zoroastrian tradition, for he is



a sympathetic character. A former English professor, he yearns for an inclusive world that would allow him and Lucy to marry free of prejudice, but he cannot overcome the traditions of his parents. If Nariman is to be happy, he must be happy according to Zoroastrian tradition. Anything else is disallowed.

Much of the criticism surrounding *Family Matters* focuses on its ethnic and national politics, particularly the role of the Parsi community and the development of multiculturalism in Bombay. Rashna B. Singh writes that “[t]he novel, even while it exposes the pettiness of personal relations and the antagonisms that family matters often engender, celebrates the humanity and compassion of Bombay, the hybridized city” (39). Genetsch concurs, stating that the novel “emphasizes...[i]ntercultural understanding and hybridity” (189). A gerontology- and disability-focused reading of the novel calls these claims into question. These two critical positions suggest that the Parsi community depicted in the novel is governed by standards of normalcy that discourage diversity in several forms: ethnicity, age, health, and ability. One either conforms or one does not, and if one does not conform, he or she is punished. For Zoroastrians, “purity is the noblest condition to which [one] can aspire” (Clark 94-5), so Nariman, being impure due to his condition and his troubled past, becomes a carbuncle, a blister, an appendix. Within *Family Matters*, age, disease, and disability are characterized as miserable and burdensome, so as a result Nariman is cast out, ignored, or mistreated. Age and disability do not appear to be part of Bombay’s or the Parsi community’s diversity. Even ethnic diversity is suspect: after Mr. Kapur, Yezad’s boss at the sporting goods store where he works, hangs Christmas ornaments in the store window and vows to “honour all festivals, [for] they all celebrate our human and diverse natures” (Mistry 272), he is later threatened by the nationalistic

Shiv Sena, and then killed by them (376). Whether within the family, the city of Bombay, or the Parsi community, difference is not tolerated.

Even within his own flat, located in the inappropriately named Chateau Felicity building, Nariman's stepchildren cannot tolerate him. After Nariman breaks his ankle and his left leg is wrapped in a cast "from his thigh down to his toes" (47), he becomes disabled, "an almost dead weight" to Jal and Coomy (56), highlighting both his age ("almost dead") and his uselessness ("dead weight"). Jal and Coomy must help him bathe, move around, and use the commode. Seeing her stepfather's naked body disturbs Coomy, who explains to Jal, "I was already eleven years old when he became our stepfather. It was not like a baby growing up with her real father. I feel I'm looking at a naked stranger" (58). Her discomfort may be characterized as aesthetic nervousness, which "may be discerned... in the interaction between a disabled and nondisabled character" as well as within "the disposition of symbols and motifs, the overall narrative or dramatic perspective, the constitution and reversals of plot structure, and so on" (Quayson 15). Quayson further develops this notion:

Contradictory emotions arise precisely because the disabled are continually located within multiple and contradictory frames of significance within which they, on the one hand, are materially disadvantaged, and, on the other, have to cope with the culturally regulated gaze of the normate. (18)

Quayson borrows "normate" from Garland-Thomson, who defines the normate using Erving Goffman's terms: "a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports" (quoted in *Extraordinary Bodies* 8). Coomy, who possesses virtually none of these qualities except perhaps youth, nevertheless stands in direct opposition to Nariman in that she is

younger, healthy, and able-bodied. Her gaze regulates and fixes Nariman within specific frames of reference. In this scene she is the normate and experiences aesthetic nervousness not only because Nariman is disabled, but because he is her stepfather, and she is uncomfortable seeing him naked. Her discomfort only increases from this point: one evening after dinner, Jal and Coomy bring Nariman a basin with soap and water so he can wash up. Nariman “washe[s] his mouth, ha[s] a quick little gargle, and [blows] his nose. Little gobs of mucus [float] in the shallow water; Coomy look[s] away. Then a light spray [falls] upon her fingers along the rim” and she recoils and flees to wash her hands (64). Life then gets even harder: when their housekeeper, Phoola, goes into Nariman’s room the next morning to clean, she is disgusted by the room’s stink, and Coomy discovers to her horror that Nariman, who ““assumed it was just gas,”” has defecated in his bed (68-9). Phoola quits immediately, “crush[ing]” Coomy and draining “all optimism” out of Jal (69). Mistry’s descriptions of Nariman’s ailments emphasize the disgusting, miserable, impure nature of age, disease, and disability in the novel. According to the *Vendidad*, a Zoroastrian text, bodily effluvium and “physical aberration[s]” are signals of evil (Clark 83). To Zoroastrians, death is seen as “the ultimate pollution” (114), and Nariman’s aged and decaying body is a physical reminder of that pollution.

To alleviate their despair, Jal and Coomy decide to send Nariman to Roxana’s flat, spreading the disgust and discomfort throughout the family and straining Roxana and Yezad’s finances even further. Indeed, “Yezad regards the old and disabled man as an invader and thus as an unwelcome presence” in their home (Genetsch 185). Throughout Nariman’s stay, Mistry continues to highlight unpleasant corporeal details, deepening the text’s effect of aesthetic nervousness. To make his excretions and secretions easier, Nariman uses a bedpan and “a soo-soo bottle” (117). In one instance, Jehangir watches Roxana “put Grandpa’s soosoti into” the

bottle: “[i]t [is] small, not much bigger than his. But Grandpa’s balls [are] huge. Like onions in a sock....He wonder[s] if the size and weight of Grandpa’s ma[ke] it uncomfortable” (117-18).

Staying with blood relatives makes little difference with regard to discomfort. Nariman quickly becomes both a physical and financial burden: the smallness of Roxana and Yezad’s flat makes it impossible to escape the stink of Nariman’s bedpan; if Nariman needs to move, he always requires help; and Roxana and Yezad have to budget even more carefully than usual.

Nariman’s condition mirrors the degeneration of his family, the corruption of Bombay, and the diminishment of the Parsi people. As already noted, Morey and Duresh highlight these associations in their respective studies, with Morey focusing on family and city politics and Duresh exploring the extinction of the Parsi community. These themes become much more prominent when Nariman moves to Roxana and Yezad’s flat. Family corruption occurs on three fronts: Yezad, faced with more financial responsibilities, takes family money to gamble on the Matka, the underground lottery in Bombay; Jehangir, in an effort to lighten his parents’ financial load, abuses his role as his class’s homework monitor and takes bribes from his classmates to overlook their assignment mistakes; and Coomy, relieved that her stepfather is gone, comes up with a scheme to keep him away and knocks loose the plaster in the ceiling in Nariman’s old room. Like Nariman’s degeneration, each one of these situations ends in loss. The Matka is shut down by the police before Yezad can collect his profits (251); Jehangir loses his position as homework monitor, along with the trust of his beloved teacher, Miss Alvarez, who wants her students ““to resist the corruption in [their] society”” (261); and Coomy dies as a result of the ceiling damage. To ensure that Nariman never returns to the apartment, Coomy invites her building’s handyman, Edul Munshi, to work on the ceiling in Nariman’s old room. Coomy knows that Edul, who has a reputation for both incompetence and overzealousness, will make the

ceiling even worse, but when Edul tries to shift a beam, the beam drops, crushing Edul's chest and breaking Coomy's skull, killing them both (368-69). Like his family's moral degeneration, the collapsed room mirrors Nariman's old and enfeebled body. The room becomes a symbol of his broken relationship with Coomy: their relationship rests on a foundation of anger and bitterness, a foundation that Mistry shows to be untenable. Overall, moving in with his biological (which is to say natural, or normal) daughter makes things even worse for Nariman and his family.

The city of Bombay echoes the corruption of the family, albeit much more loudly, and like family corruption Bombay's corruption is often expressed through corporeal terms. The bulk of the corruption in the novel comes from two interconnected sources: the Shiv Sena and the Matka. The Matka "helps to fund the Shiv Sena machinery...[and] finances the organized crime that has infected the city and its institutions" (Morey 63). According to Yezad's friend Bhaskar, the Matka also funds terrorist attacks:

"You see the paradox? The enemies of the nation, and political parties that claim to be defenders of the nation, all rely on the same source."

"Problem is," said Vilas [Yezad's other friend], "so do millions of ordinary people. The numbers they bet each night give them reason to wake up next morning. In some ways Matka is Bombay and Bombay is Matka." (Mistry 191)

Vilas's comparison between Matka and Bombay demonstrates not only the hope that Bombay's citizens place in it, but also just how deep corruption runs in the city. As Morey points out, corruption "is inextricably linked to the physical" (63). Indeed, Vilas tells Yezad that the Shiv Sena "will spread such terror, we'll all be trembling like your father-in-law" (Mistry 301). City corruption is consistently articulated in physical terms, linking bodily decay and misery. At one

point Mr. Kapur, who is given to philosophizing about Bombay, tells Yezad that ““this dear, dear city languishes—I don’t exaggerate—like a patient in intensive care”” (147). The connection to Nariman, the old man with a disabling past, is obvious. Both are decaying. The comparisons continue, finding their way into Roxana and Yezad’s home. Because their flat is so small, it is impossible to escape Nariman’s stink when he uses the bedpan. One morning at breakfast, Nariman cannot wait to use the bedpan; Yezad is disgusted by the smell and walks out of the room, encouraging Murad and Jehangir to do the same (154). In response, Roxana states, ““Millions of people live in the gutters of Bombay....Eating and sleeping next to drains and ditches! This whole city stinks like a sewer! And you are worried about Pappa’s bedpan?”” (154). The initial effect is comedic: the smell of Bombay is apparently worse than Nariman’s, yet Yezad’s reaction suggests otherwise. On a subtler level, the comparison implies that one cannot go outside for relief. One must choose between the more tolerable of the two smells. Roxana also draws attention to Bombay’s poverty: according to Sujata Patel, half of Bombay’s ten million inhabitants either live in slums or are homeless (xiii). Within her comparison, Roxana links Nariman’s condition, bodily effluvium, and rampant poverty. By doing so, she suggests that all these things are a part of life in Bombay, and that Yezad and their family must deal with it. She implies that incontinence, disability, and poverty are normal, which suggests she accepts, or at least tolerates, not only her father’s condition, but the miserable state of the city. Unfortunately, her tolerance of Nariman is not contagious. Shortly after losing the family’s money in the Matka, Yezad scolds himself for giving up on his dream of moving to Canada: ““they would all be living happily right now in Toronto, breathing the pure Rocky Mountain air instead of the noxious fumes of this dying city, rotting with pollution and garbage and corruption”” (263). Two notions arise in this passage. First, Mistry shows the distance between himself and his narrative subjects

by poking fun at Yezad's ignorance of Canadian geography. Second, Yezad's opinion that Bombay is dying indicates progression from Mr. Kapur's earlier statement: the city has moved from intensive care into a hospice. At this point, Nariman has grown progressively worse. The smell never goes away, his Parkinson's worsens, and his uncontrollable bodily functions continually aggravate Yezad: "Non-stop he farts" (263). Nariman's decay runs parallel to Bombay's. Roxana and Yezad's flat is no longer a nursing home. It is a hospice.

Like Nariman and the city of Bombay, the Parsi community is disintegrating. Dr. Fitter, who helps Nariman when he breaks his ankle, laments that "Parsi men of today [are] useless, dithering idiots, the race [has] deteriorated" (46). Though his comments are directed at Jal, they describe Nariman just as easily. Later in the novel, Inspector Masalavala, the police inspector who helps Jal through Coomy's death, says, "The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left" (385). Dr. Fitter concurs, saying that the Parsis will be "[e]xtinct, like dinosaurs" (385). "[W]e are dying out," he says, "and Bombay is dying as well" (387). According to Dr. Fitter and, later, Yezad, the Parsis' population is diminishing because of mixed marriage. In the epilogue, set five years after the novel's main events, Yezad has become much more conservative than earlier on in the book. As a result of the novel's tragic events, he becomes religiously fervent and strictly traditional. To protect Parsi purity, he forbids Murad from dating a Maharashtrian girl (452), echoing the actions of Nariman's parents. Nariman, who has passed away by this point (446), functions as a corporeal metaphor of the Parsi community's future. His aging and weakening body signals what Yezad, Dr. Fitter, Inspector Masalavala, and Nariman's parents see as the Parsi community's deterioration.

Each of these three modes of degeneration demonstrates the prominence of narrative prosthesis in this novel. Mistry leans on age, disease, and disability to prop up his critique of Parsi society; as Mitchell and Snyder state, “[t]o prostheticize, in this sense, is to institute a notion of the body within a regime of tolerable deviance” (*Narrative Prosthesis* 6-7). Mistry’s portrayal of Nariman is tolerable because it functions as part of his critique, and it adheres to accepted, stereotypical views that characterize the aged, diseased, and disabled as dependent, incontinent, pathetic, and frail. Other portrayals, such as those that arise in the succeeding chapters, expose the prosthesis by challenging the way in which disability is typically portrayed in literature. Garland-Thomson states that “[b]ecause disability is so strongly stigmatized and is countered by so few mitigating narratives, the literary traffic in metaphors often misrepresents or flattens the experience real people have of their own or others’ disabilities” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 10). Mistry’s portrayal of Nariman draws attention to the difficult negotiation between ethics and aesthetics—that is, between reality and art. As Quayson writes,

the representation of disability oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical domains, in such a way as to force a reading of the aesthetic fields in which the disabled are represented as always having an ethical dimension that cannot be easily subsumed under the aesthetic structure. Ultimately, aesthetic nervousness has to be coextensive with the nervousness regarding the disabled in the real world. (19)

Quayson asserts that a literary work automatically takes an ethical stance with regard to disability. One is prompted to consider how the disabled are represented in literature because they are always surrounded by an ethical dimension; that is, a disabled character is not merely a character, but a reflection of or challenge to specific attitudes surrounding disability. The same



sort of idea may apply to aged and infirm characters; indeed, disability theory has been used in this manner (Chivers, *The Silvering Screen* 23). In this sense, writing is an ethical act; as a result, the reader should read carefully, actively questioning and confronting discomfort within the text. Mistry's portrayal of Nariman suggests that the aged, diseased, and disabled are powerless in Indian society, and that the social structures governing the Parsi community yield devastating consequences. Indeed, aesthetic nervousness arises not only within multiple levels of the text, but between the text and the reader:

[t]he reader's status within a given text is a function of the several interacting elements such as the identification with the vicissitudes of the life of a particular character, or the alignment between the reader and the shifting positions of the narrator, or the necessary reformulations of the reader's perspective enjoined by the modulations of various plot elements.... (Quayson 15)

Mistry appears to encourage identification with Nariman while discouraging identification with—and even demonizing—his parents and his stepchildren, especially Coomy. In this way, Mistry subverts the normality that might otherwise govern both the text and the Parsi society depicted in the novel. The stereotypical nature of Nariman's condition does not dissuade the reader from sympathizing with him; he is a good man who tries to do the right thing, but because of the way his society is structured, he ends up in a difficult position. Georges Poulet writes that, during the act of reading, “the consciousness of another...welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheard-of license, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels” (42). Mistry's portrayal of Nariman pushes the reader away from young, healthy, able-bodied characters such as Coomy or Yezad. Even though Nariman is old and disabled, and even though he incites discomfort in others, one can still identify with his struggle to find love and comfort;

therefore, by nudging the reader toward Nariman and away from many of the able-bodied characters, Mistry challenges corporeal normativity.

A closer look at Mistry's relationship with Nariman suggests a different level of aesthetic nervousness. Typically, aesthetic nervousness, which is to say discomfort, manifests between characters, within symbols, metaphors, and motifs, and between reader and text. Mistry's reliance on stereotypes of age, disease, and disability suggests distance between author and character—a distance that makes sense, given Mistry's vantage point in Canada. Nariman's function is not to ripen in the sense of *Refungsroman* or to help others understand the effects of age and infirmity, but rather to expose the Parsi social structures and “help the members of Yezad's family come to a deeper understanding of themselves” (Genetsch 189). Nariman's role in the novel is highly passive: he serves as a foil against which others can see and discover themselves. As the novel progresses, he sinks further and further into the background until his function is complete and he is hardly visible. Even though his bodily degeneration frames the novel's tragic trajectory, and even though a good bulk of the novel focuses on Nariman, one does not see his death. In this way, Mistry implicitly illustrates the teachings of the *Vendidad*, which excludes death, the ultimate pollution, from Zoroastrian life. If “death is the ultimate expression of impurity” (Clark 95), then Mistry excises the impurity of Nariman's death from his novel by avoiding any representation of it. It is mentioned almost as an aside, nothing more (Mistry 446). Aesthetic nervousness may therefore be found between the author and his character.

Another way of characterizing Mistry's relationship with Nariman and the text is that Mistry is, to tweak a phrase, narratively disabled by the Parsi worldview. Even though Mistry employs Nariman as a critical device, his narrative options appear limited. The Zoroastrian reliance on binaries—good and evil, pure and impure, clean and polluted (Genetsch 142)—

dictates Mistry's narrative options where age, disease, and disability are concerned. If he is to tell the truth about Parsi life, it is difficult to portray senescence as dynamic and complex, riddled as it with associations of pollution, corruption, and evil (Boyce 245). Other Canadian portrayals of senescence appear to benefit from a more open culture; as Chivers states, there are "a larger number of defiant characterizations in recent Canadian production than anywhere else" (*From Old Woman* x). Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and Richler's *Barney's Version* humanize old age and, in doing so, provide models for considering and representing the elderly. The contrast between these two novels and *Family Matters* illustrates the difference between worldviews. Laurence's 1964 novel features the "indomitable" (20) Hagar Shipley, the ninety-year-old narrator that "sets up the field of literary gerontology...precisely because of [the novel's] vexatious tension between advocacy for the elderly and denigration of old age" (20). In Hagar, Laurence provides a portrait of "a particular, historically situated, culturally determined individual woman in late life" (30). Although Mistry grounds his narrative in a particular place and time, Nariman does not possess the same complexity as Hagar. Richler's 1997 novel features the curmudgeonly Barney Panofsky, a sixty-seven-year old television producer who struggles against his advancing Alzheimer's and, in a rambling yet rollicking narrative, tells his life story. Wendy Roy writes that, through Barney, Richler "challenges if not entirely counteract[s] often damaging and inaccurate Western popular cultural representations" of people with Alzheimer's (58). If, as this study argues, Canadianness manifests in inclusive values, Mistry's Canadianness manifests in his sympathy for Nariman, in Nariman's love for Lucy, and in Mr. Kapur's openness toward different kinds of people. Mistry appears to look back at his old country with disappointment, watching its potential go unfulfilled as it continues to maintain rigid standards of normalcy.

Mistry's portrayal of Nariman in *Family Matters* frames age, disease, and disability within a restrictive social framework. The traditional customs and beliefs of the Parsi community prove as disabling as the Parkinson's and osteoporosis with which the elderly Nariman struggles. Chivers writes that "we need new stories and readings of growing old" that bring "together positive and negative elements of aging to the extent that it is difficult to determine which is which" (*From Old Woman* xxvi). Her words apply as much to the disabled as they do to the elderly, and while Mistry has not quite provided a more constructive portrait of disability, the authors that follow have.

## Chapter Two:

### Cruelty in the Name of Power: Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* as a Eugenics Allegory

Timothy Findley's 1984 novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage* presents the story of the biblical flood and Noah's ark as a parodic and provocative allegory on abuses of power. Within the story of Doctor Noyes, Mrs. Noyes, and their family's conflicts on and off the ark, Findley depicts several instances of cruel and inhumane treatment. Animals are experimented on, sacrificed, burned alive, and brutally slaughtered, while people are left behind to die in the flood, kept confined in the ark's dark and reeking cargo hold, and savagely murdered. The novel's treatment of its disabled characters, particularly the ape-children Lotte and Adam and the half-blind cat Mottyl, evinces a strong interest in eugenics. Eugenics is the science of "breeding a perfect race" (Brydon 43), which means strengthening the overall population by eliminating unwelcome traits such as disability, mental illness, and other so-called defects. The novel's portrayals of cruelty toward the disabled and differently abled suggest historical analogues different from the Jewish Holocaust, to which critics have already compared the novel. Reading the novel through the lens of disability history suggests that the novel allegorizes attitudes toward disability that brought about not only the Nazis' euthanasia program dedicated to the

extermination of people with disabilities, but also the Albertan and British Columbian eugenics movements that began in the 1920s and continued until the 1970s. By orchestrating the flood, wiping out almost all life on Earth, and keeping alive a select few people, Yaweh and Noah set out to create their own perfect, hygienic vision of humanity. They stifle any possibility of an inclusive world. Such a reading prompts a reconsideration of the novel's anomalous and deviant bodies, its distortion of the boundary between humans and animals, and its nationalistic criticism. Overall, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* allegorizes conflicting attitudes toward disability—namely the “pride and prejudice” of which Michael J. Prince speaks (*Absent Citizens* 32)—that remain in place in Canada today. The group that rebels against Noah—Mrs. Noyes, Mottyl, Lucy, and Emma—exemplifies fluid normalcy, or pride, while Noah and Yaweh exemplify binary normalcy, or prejudice.

Several critics have already touched on the novel's eugenics nuances, reading them as allegorical portraits of the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. Peter Dickinson goes so far as to describe Doctor Noyes “as a kind of Dr. Mengele figure” due to his experiments on Mottyl and her kittens and his “murder of the physically deformed Lotte-children” (130). Wendy Pearson writes that “[n]o apocalyptic fiction in this century can, without an overt commitment to racist ideologies, not make reference to the Holocaust” (128). She then builds upon the novel's genocidal foundation by reading it as an allegory of queer suppression: “Findley's fascination with eugenics, denoted in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* as Dr Noyes's obsession with genetics...can only be read, today, in light of the Human Genome Project, the search for the gay gene, and the genocidal potential of genetic engineering and biotechnology” (128). While Pearson is correct in identifying the novel's eugenics nuances, those nuances can be read as much more than just allusions to queer suppression. Eugenics appears to occupy a crucial space

in Findley's imagination, for the subject returns again and again in his fiction. In addition to *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, eugenics arises in 1967's *The Last of the Crazy People*, 1969's *The Butterfly Plague*, and 1993's *Headhunter*. As with *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, critics of these novels typically discuss eugenics within the context of the Jewish Holocaust, suggesting that it had an indelible impact on Findley. Very few critics mention the Nazis' euthanasia machine or Alberta's and BC's eugenics histories, and none of them locates *Not Wanted on the Voyage* within these specific contexts. In her discussion of *The Butterfly Plague*, Anne Geddes Bailey explicitly links that novel's eugenics nuances to both the Nazis' euthanasia program and to Canada's eugenics movement (69). She does not, however, make the same connections in her investigation of *Not Wanted on the Voyage*. Another critic, Sabrina Reed, mentions abusive Canadian psychiatrists and "the unethical mind-control experiments" that took place at the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal in her article on *Headhunter* (161), but she does not overtly discuss the Canadian eugenics movement.

The dearth of investigation into the imaginative impact of the Nazis' euthanasia program and the Albertan and British Columbian eugenics movement demonstrates how stories of people with disabilities continue to be marginalized. The horrors of the Nazis' euthanasia agenda, which as Suzanne Evans states facilitated the deaths of 750,000 people with disabilities (18), have been supplanted by the Holocaust: "while there are thousands of Holocaust museums and memorials internationally, it is exceedingly rare for any of them to give more than a passing reference to people with disabilities" (158). Indeed, as Snyder and Mitchell state, "one principal barometer in the contemporary history of disabled people has been erased, ignored, or, even worse, diminished" (*Cultural Locations of Disability* 102). While there have been countless books, films, television shows, plays, and scholarly works depicting, discussing, and decrying the

Nazis' treatment of Jewish people, there have been comparatively few works tackling their treatment of the disabled, and none has had anywhere close to the same impact as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, or Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Snyder and Mitchell provide an astute explanation for this neglect:

this erasure is a symptom of the failure of Western educational systems to engage in a thoroughgoing analysis of beliefs about disability. It results in the abandonment of disability to the deficit models that abound in the pivotal locations of medical and rehabilitation sciences....Our cultural ambivalence about the status of disabled people bolsters a desire to ignore the disastrous legacies evident in a history of collecting, defining, naming, measuring, and managing them as "feeble-minded," "subnormal," or simply "defective" humanity. (102)

Snyder and Mitchell's statement applies as much to Canada as it does to Nazi Germany.

Although Canadian eugenicists did not exterminate people with disabilities, they did sterilize over three thousand Canadian citizens (McLaren 159) as well as perform unauthorized, unnecessary, and inhumane experiments (Harris-Zsovan 89). Despite such cruelties, the stories of both German and Canadian victims remain peripheral. Evans writes that "[t]o this day the German state has not fully recognized or compensated disabled persons for the atrocities committed against them by the Nazi regime" and that "few people are aware that such atrocities happened" (19). The picture is very much the same in Canada, as Jane Harris-Zsovan states: "[t]o date, victims of the *Sexual Sterilization Act* have received little sympathy from the political heirs to the populist political movements that created and expanded the *Sexual Sterilization Act*" (7). The result is that, over time, these stories have largely faded into the background.



In both Germany and Canada, the cruelties stemming from these countries' eugenics programs constitute defining moments in their respective disability histories. Eugenics was a popular idea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; France, Britain, America, Germany, and Canada were all proponents of eugenics (Harris-Zsovan 106). International conferences were held to exchange ideas on how eugenics principles could be implemented, and by the 1920s both America and Canada (specifically Alberta) had implemented sterilization laws (Harris-Zsovan 120-21; McLaren 99). In Germany, Hitler was heavily invested in eugenics. He "believe[d] that the future volkish state should aggressively pursue pro-natalist policies based upon selective breeding and the eugenic elimination of the unfit in order to maintain the racial purity of the German state" (Evans 102). Shortly after the Nazi party came to power in 1933, Hitler "published a sterilization law" that "made it legally permissible to sterilize any person suffering from," among other things, feeble-mindedness, manic-depression, blindness, physical deformity, and alcoholism (Bryant 26). Under this new law, over 160,000 Germans were sterilized (Evans 109). The Reich then took eugenics ideas to their now-notorious extreme: in 1938, it began exterminating children classified as idiotic, deformed, or hereditarily disabled (22). In October 1939, Hitler issued a secret commission to his government, creating "Aktion T4," otherwise known as the adult euthanasia program (42). Under this particular program, "at least 275,000 German adults with disabilities were brutally and systematically killed" (42) by gassing, starvation, lethal injection, or experimentation. Homosexuals and gypsies were also included amongst the unfit (Bailey 69), all of whom Karl Brandt, Hitler's personal physician and the supervisor of the Nazis' eugenics apparatus, considered "poor miserable creatures" (Evans 149). The exact number of deaths has never been determined.

While Canada's eugenicists did not take such extreme measures, they did abuse, deceive, and dehumanize its disabled citizens. Canada's eugenics movement was limited to its two westernmost provinces due to protests from the Catholic Church in Ontario and Quebec; as Angus McLaren puts it, "[t]he weakness of the Church in the West clearly simplified the passage" of sterilization policies (104). Alberta implemented its sterilization law in 1928 (99), while British Columbia passed it in 1933 (105). The Alberta program, particularly the Provincial Training School for Mental Deficiency in Red Deer, is the most notorious due to the program's long duration, the number of people sterilized, and the cruel behavior of its most infamous director, Dr. Leonard Jan Le Vann. From 1928 to 1972, Albertan eugenicists sterilized 2,822 people who had been "labeled insane or mentally defective" (Harris-Zsovan 5). That the program continued well beyond World War Two is alarming. Former Saskatchewan premier Tommy Douglas was once a proponent of eugenics, but abandoned the idea after seeing its frightening effects during a trip to Germany in 1936 (McLaren 166). Dr. Le Vann no doubt played an important role in the Alberta program's longevity. A ruthless scientist, he ran the Training School like a despot. Patients were made to clean up the excrement of other patients (Harris-Zsovan 89), the School's wards were crowded and filthy (89), and several "patients were kept in solitary confinement for up to three weeks at a time" (121). Le Vann threatened disobedient patients with sterilization, and several patients "were beaten and used as guinea pigs in drug trials and laboratory experiments" (89). In one instance, Le Vann ordered that certain boys have their testicles removed so he could use their tissue in his experiments (116). Le Vann treated the patients this way because, as he asserts in a 1950 article for the *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, he did not see them as human:

Indeed the picture of comparison between the normal child and the idiot might

almost be a comparison between two separate species. On the one hand, the graceful, intelligently curious, active young homo sapiens, and on the other the gross, retarded, animalistic, early primate type individual. (470)

Like Brandt, Le Vann justified his mistreatment of the disabled by dehumanizing them. Unlike Brandt, who was executed for his crimes, Le Vann died before he could be prosecuted.

Le Vann's and Brandt's dispositions, their descriptions of the disabled, and their heinous cruelties find instant analogues in Findley's novel, particularly with regard to Noah, the Lotte-children, and the animal characters. Diana Brydon calls the phrase "Lotte-children" "a description that humanizes the clinical, assigning individuality to a condition that others might label 'developmentally delayed,' 'disabled,' or 'differently abled'" (82). The Lotte-children, Lotte, Adam, and Hannah's unnamed stillborn child, may therefore be read as allegorical stand-ins for people with developmental disabilities. By giving Lotte and Adam names, Findley humanizes them, whereas Hannah's baby goes unnamed, and therefore is dehumanized. Among the animal characters, Mottyl is by far the most prominent. She is rendered half-blind by Doctor Noyes's experiments (Findley 19), and serves as a reminder of Canada's eugenics past. Doctor Noyes, the novel's atrocious authoritarian figure, embodies all aspects of both the Nazis' euthanasia mechanism and the Albertan eugenics movement. In this way, he could be read as a fictional composite, an allegorical stand-in, of Brandt and Le Vann.

Like Brandt, Le Vann, and many other eugenicists, Doctor Noyes performs cruel experiments, killing Mottyl's kittens in addition to rendering Mottyl half-blind (Findley 19); he kills children he sees as unfit, including his own (173); and he segregates anomalous and deviant bodies, which are classified in the novel as "*the Lower Orders*" (302; Findley's emphasis). Donna Pennee posits that the ark is a type of body—specifically a matriarchal body, a womb

with many beings housed within it (89). The ark is also a physical manifestation of Doctor Noyes's hierarchical thinking. Just as the Nazis saw the state as an organism that must be cleansed of defects and maintained as "a 'healthy' body politic" (Snyder and Mitchell 101), so does Doctor Noyes view the ark as a body that must be similarly clean. Consequently, Doctor Noyes denies passage to "all the other creatures—human, animal, insect, 'pirate,' magical—that [are] not inscribed in Yaweh's edict" (Pennee 90). His hierarchical view of the world stems from what Brydon calls his "binary thinking" (83). Doctor Noyes sees the world in strict terms: male and female, good and evil, holy and pagan, human and animal, normal and abnormal. By asserting his own brand of patriarchal normalcy, he believes he is executing Yaweh's will; however, as Bailey points out, "[h]is prayers, sacrifices, and icons become the parodic signs of his own thirst for power rather than sacred signs of either God's vengeance or his salvation" (133). The novel's conflicts—namely the rift between Noah and his wife, the slaughter of the animals, the deaths of the Lotte-children, and the captivity of the Lower Orders—stem from Noah's desire to impose his will and maintain his rigid, unforgiving perspective. Anyone who is not a "normal" male human is seen as a threat. In this way, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* allegorizes both historical figures and broader concepts. In addition to acting as the fictional composite of Brandt and Le Vann, Doctor Noyes represents destructive intolerance, the cruel opponent of openness and inclusivity. The Lotte-children and Mottyl may therefore be thought of as allegorical stand-ins for German and Canadian eugenics victims as well as the disabled contingent of a diverse population that includes women (Mrs. Noyes and Emma) and homosexuals (Lucy). They embody the "pride" element of Canadians' ambivalent attitudes toward disability.

In addition to carrying out vicious cruelties, Doctor Noyes also acts as a one-man racial hygiene board. To begin with, his experiments on Mottyl's kittens have a devastating impact on her:

There was nothing she could do to stop him. She had bitten him and scratched him and bloodied him in every way a cat could find, but in the end he always won the day, no matter where she hid her nest or what her defenses were. She did, of course, have one way to stop him. She could give up having kittens—if only she knew how.

There was another way—and one she had considered. Kittens could be abandoned—left to die of starvation—victims of whatever birds or beasts might come. She had known this to happen when an animal was old, diseased or wounded. In the end, however, it was a plan Mottyl had given up, partly for the selfish reason that her milk would have driven her mad without kittens to suckle. But, more important, there was the undeniable fact: the young were sacred.

(Findley 19)

Noah's will is so powerful that Mottyl considers adopting the inhumane measures he espouses: abstaining from sex and killing her own offspring to prevent Noah from killing them. Mottyl, however, eventually goes into heat and has more kittens, and while the young are sacred to her, they are not to Noah, forcing Mottyl and Mrs. Noyes to hide the kittens aboard the ark. Several of Noah's actions throughout the novel are consistent with what is called "negative eugenics," which McLaren defines as "restricting the breeding of the unfit" (16). Indeed, "Noah wishes to kill imperfect children" (Brydon 82). While he does not castrate or sterilize anyone, he restricts, or rather directs, breeding in unique ways. He takes it upon himself to bring his son Japeth and

his daughter-in-law Emma together. Noah facilitates this coupling because, as Brydon argues, “the existence of Emma’s sister, Lotte, means that she will be blamed if their union produces another ‘Lotte-child’” (82). Noah’s motivation lies deeper than Yaweh’s edicts. When Mrs. Noyes attempts to bring Lotte onto the ark, she tells Emma, Lotte’s sister, the story of Adam. Adam and Japeth were born twins, but unlike Japeth, Adam was a Lotte-child. As Mrs. Noyes tells the story, Noah tries to cut her off, saying that Adam never had a name. Mrs. Noyes replies, ““You know damn well he did. His name was Adam”” (Findley 163). Noah attempts to dehumanize the child by resisting the impact of his name. Naming him humanizes him; that he is named after the biblical first man gives him a revered essence. Dehumanizing the child by refusing him a name and refusing to acknowledge him makes it not only easier for Noah to accept his death, but makes the world epistemologically clearer for him. If Adam is a child of Yaweh, then Yaweh, within the world of the novel, is defective, and the world becomes the sort of world for which the Lower Orders yearn, a world which allows “a reverence for life and for others, a relational and inclusive world view, and a capacity to imagine and thus embrace difference” (Pennee 87). If Adam is not a child of Yaweh, then Yaweh, and Noah by extension, maintain their authority, and Noah’s binary thinking remains undisturbed. Noah and Mrs. Noyes’s argument about Lotte is poignant because it is unclear whether Noah is ashamed of his actions or is simply obeying Yaweh’s edict by refusing to allow Lotte on board. Both notions are possible.

Mrs. Noyes continues her argument by describing the first time she saw Lotte walking with Emma’s parents. Her reminiscence reveals not only her regret, but her attitude toward disabled people:

“I’d seen them by the river—walking—with Lotte in between. And they looked

so happy...No. Not happy. Sad. *Sad*. And my heart went out—and my heart was broken and I thought how wonderful it was that someone else had the courage and the pride...the love, that allowed them to keep such a child. And I thought: Noah deserves to know there is another. He deserves to know that other people let such children live. That we are wrong. *WRONG!*” (163-64; Findley’s emphases)

Mrs. Noyes describes Lotte’s parents in contradictory terms, suggesting that she struggles with what she saw and what she wanted to see. She saw them first as happy, then sad, then wonderful, courageous, proud, and loving. Her heart broke because she and Noah did not have the courage to let Adam live: “We drowned him....Not there in the river. It wasn’t deep enough then. We drowned him in the pond” (165). At these words, “Doctor Noyes’s posture [is] noticeably affected. He slump[s]” (165). It is unclear whether he is ashamed or if he despairs because he is about to be blackmailed. Mrs. Noyes says to Noah that Emma “has to blurt it out once...and all [his] well laid plans go down the drain” (165). Noah at first acquiesces, and grudgingly allows Lotte on board; he then quickly separates Lotte from Mrs. Noyes and has Japeth slit Lotte’s throat (169). Japeth puts Lotte’s body into Mrs. Noyes’s arms, and Mrs. Noyes, mortified by her husband’s cruelty, wails, “There is no God....There is no God worthy of this child. And so I will give her back to the world where she belongs” (170). Japeth, meanwhile, echoes Le Vann’s thought process: “he did think it strange that so much fuss was being made. After all—he’d only killed an ape. And an ape was only an animal. Nothing human” (170). Noah’s and Japeth’s prejudice, which is fueled by binary thinking, has destructive consequences. Mrs. Noyes’s words implicitly address the issue of whether Adam is a child of God. He is not, for by this point in the novel, God, Yaweh, is dead; as a result, Noah has become the highest authority. There literally is no God, and Noah, the paragon of cruelty and intolerance, is not worthy of Lotte. Mrs. Noyes’s

words raise the question what sort of God is worthy of Lotte. The answer presented by the novel is no God whatsoever, for any God represents a patriarchal system that perpetuates harmful hierarchies. As Bailey argues, “God is privileged over man, man over woman, people over animals” (134). Yaweh was flawed to begin with: “He is not the ‘Alpha and Omega,’ but just a very old man—one who seems to be very much like his faithful servant, Noah” (133-34). Lotte, or rather Lotte’s body, belongs in the Old World because it permits her death, and the novel’s great tragedy is that, at the end, just as the new authority resembles the old authority, the New World is virtually the same as the Old World.

Aboard the ark, Noah remains a tyrant. He segregates those who might rebel against him by placing his wife, his son Ham, his daughter-in-law Emma, and Ham’s wife Lucy on the ark’s second deck with the animals, amidst the fetid stench and constant noise (Findley 197). In response to his wife’s protests, Noah asserts his authority:

“I am in charge here. You, madam, are not. You are nothing, now, but a fellow passenger, without station and without rank. And I would suggest that, on that note, we terminate this meeting.”

Mrs. Noyes was also on her feet—and furious.

“Meeting!” she shouted. “*Meeting?* What is this *meeting?* Have we become, in my absence, an institution?” (213; Findley’s emphases)

The ark is indeed an institution, of which Noah, the allegorical Le Vann, is the director. The lower decks are wards: crowded, dark, and confined. The Lower Orders, then, may be read as patients unjustly forced into an institution. The Canadian pride and prejudice of which Prince speaks is sharply divided between the upper and lower decks. Noah and his closest followers, Hannah, Shem, and Japeth, reside in the ark’s Castle. Noah, in his own words, is the “‘head’”



(213) of the family/institution, and so requires a residence that suits his status. In addition to assigning duties and giving orders, Noah also develops a keen interest in his children's sexual activities. After a short time on the seemingly endless sea, he grows tired of Japeth's sexual frustration, and, out of boredom and/or displeasure at being disobeyed, orders Shem to fetch Emma from the ark's second deck. Shem brings Emma up, and Hannah gives her a bath. Once she is clean, Noah inspects her. The scene reads like a doctor prodding his subject, testing her sexual fitness:

[Noah's] fingers rode up [Emma's] thighs towards her centre, soft as tongues in the oil. Emma pulled away.

“Stand still!”

The fingers of one hand reached the mark and the fingers of the other—seeking entrance—gently pulled to one side.

Emma wept. “That hurts,” she said. “That hurts.”

But one of Noah's fingers was already inside her—exploring.

“That HURTS!” Emma screamed—and pulled away so violently that she fell against the wall behind her.

But neither Noah nor Hannah seemed to be concerned with her hurt. All that Noah said was; “no wonder the poor boy can't get in. She's so thick and tight, a pin could hardly enter.” (263)

Noah maintains a physician's objectivity. He does not acknowledge or even notice his daughter-in-law's pain. He is only concerned with her ability, or rather inability, to mate. He wants Japeth and Emma to have sex not because he wants grandchildren, but because of “his inability to accept the fact that he carries the genetic imperfection” that results in Lotte-children (Brydon

82). In other words, Noah wants Japeth and Emma to have sex so that he may be absolved from the shame of producing disabled children. To facilitate sex between Emma and Japeth, Noah has Hannah bring the Unicorn from the lower levels, and uses his horn to rape Emma (Findley 264). The novel's broader allegorical structure comes to bear here: Noah kills the Unicorn because not only is he an animal and therefore expendable, he is a magical being. The Unicorn is the last of his kind (274) and represents the diversity and beauty and imagination that Noah simply cannot tolerate. As a result, Noah dehumanizes the Unicorn,<sup>2</sup> reducing him to an object in the same way he reduced Lotte and Adam to objects: the Unicorn's body becomes that "of a small and mutilated beast whose wounds [are] so bloody, no one [can] recognize or guess who it [is]" (276). Noah, "his voice the very sound of reason," provides a typical justification for his actions, telling Japeth, "'She is able to take you, now. It was not your fault, before—but hers. This was necessary....Nothing more than a midwife would have done: nothing more than the apothecary would have advised her mother to do, if her mother had taken half the responsibility that any decent mother takes'" (265). It is the women's fault, not Noah's. Like Karl Brandt, who testified at Nuremburg that he did nothing wrong when he killed "those poor miserable creatures" (Evans 149), Noah sees himself as blameless.

The novel's presentation of disability becomes even more complex when Hannah gives birth to a stillborn Lotte-child, of whom Noah is the father. When the child is born, Hannah is repulsed:

she screamed—though not because it was dead. Its death had long been known—and all her mourning for it had passed into time. But nothing had prepared her for the shock of seeing what she had carried all these months—nothing, for the horror

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<sup>2</sup> It may seem strange to use the phrase "dehumanize" when discussing the Unicorn, but most of the animals in the novel are anthropomorphized, so when one of them dies, it is not like a pet dying; it is like a member of the family.

of what it was in which she had invested all her ambition and secret love.

Noah was determined, of course, that the child's deformity was her responsibility alone. (Findley 341)

Noah is of course responsible for the child's deformation. He has already produced such a child, so it is clear he carries the gene for Lotte-children. His transgression with Hannah and the resulting child complicate the novel's portrayals of disability. Prior to this scene, the novel situates disability as part of a continuum of anomalous and deviant bodies, to which Mottyl, Lotte, Adam, Lucy, and Mrs. Noyes belong. The members of this continuum, particularly Lucy and Mrs. Noyes, yearn for an open and diverse world, "a social configuration that would tolerate difference and distribute power equally" (Lamont-Stewart 123). Disability is part of humanity, at least as far as Mrs. Noyes, Mottyl, and Lucy are concerned; however, Hannah and Noah's child is dehumanized. It has no name and it is not described except in the ugliest terms: "deformity," "contaminated," "curse," "monstrous" (341). This child suggests three possible interpretations. The first is that it symbolizes the unnatural, transgressive nature of Hannah and Noah's coupling. This child is their punishment for their extramarital, abnormal affair. Indeed, Bailey writes that the child is "a literal sign of both [Hannah's] own desire to escape her sex in order to be accepted into the halls of patriarchal power and Noah's deviant desire for his daughter-in-law" (137). Hannah cannot rise to power because of her gender, and this child is her punishment for her failure to realize that and her failure to empathize with and help the Lower Orders. Meanwhile, Noah cannot help but be human. He has impulses and desires, which means he is prone to hypocrisy, and his punishment is to be reminded once again of his own defective genes. A second interpretation is that Noah's, and by extension Yaweh's, authority is and has always been defective. This interpretation coincides with Mrs. Noyes's earlier statement that

there is no God, that divine power is a human creation. If divinity is in fact human, then it is prone to error, and the child is a physical manifestation of error. These first two interpretations suggest that, despite a lack of divine authority, there is some sort of justice in the world, and that disability signals failure, defectiveness, fault, and immorality. These interpretations are examples of narrative prosthesis, which posits that disability operates within texts as a simple metaphor or symbol, and “rarely...as an experience of social or political dimensions” (Mitchell and Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis” 222). If one accepts these interpretations, then Noah’s authority, ideas, and genes are defective, and cannot be taken seriously. While on one hand this notion is appealing because it underscores Noah’s wrongness, it also muddies Findley’s representations of disability. By suggesting that disabled children are little more than symbols of defectiveness, and therefore narrative prostheses, Findley complicates the humanity with which he endows Lotte and Adam. Are these children animals or human beings? At the very least, their status as vital beings worthy of life becomes questionable, as it does for animal characters, who also assume a place on the continuum of anomalous bodies. The third interpretation is that disabled beings have no place in the New World, which, like the Old World, falls under Noah’s patriarchal authority. Prejudice reigns; pride has no place. The New World will not have the sort of inclusive, fluid normalcy that Mrs. Noyes, Mottyl, Lucy, and Ham want. The stillborn ape-child, which Hannah throws overboard (345), confirms that nothing will change. While disabled beings were previously named and humanized by Mrs. Noyes and the Lower Orders, they are not by those in the Castle. The Lower Orders have by this point tried to rebel, and failed, and their journey on the ark, as evidenced by the diminished rainfall, has nearly ended. “And now,” Mrs. Noyes thinks, “Noah want[s] another world and more cats to blind” (352). Powerless to prevent another

such world from arising, all she can do is pray for more rain (352), for whatever world allows men like Noah to be in power is unjust.

By aligning biblical authority with eugenics, Findley deviates from disability history, which demonstrates that the Church does not condone killing disabled people. In both Germany and Canada, Church members actively protested against eugenics. In 1941, the Bishop of Württemberg wrote to the Minister of the Interior, ““What conclusions...will the younger generation draw when it realizes that human life is no longer sacred to the state?”” (quoted in Evans 50). That same year, the Bishop of Munster delivered a scathing sermon to his parishioners:

If one is allowed to remove one’s unproductive fellow human beings, then woe betide loyal soldiers who return to the homeland seriously disabled, as cripples, as invalids.... Woe to mankind, woe to our German nation, if God’s holy commandment “Thou shalt not kill!”...is not only broken, but if this transgression is actually tolerated, and permitted to go unpunished. (quoted in Evans 65-6)

As a result of these protests, Hitler was forced to temporarily suspend the euthanasia program. The program then carried on in secret; gas chambers were no longer used, but ““wild euthanasia”” ran rampant, with Nazis starving, asphyxiating, injecting, and even blowing up the disabled (Evans 67-70). In Canada, the Catholic Church prevented the implementation of eugenics policies in the eastern provinces, and while Catholics in BC and Alberta did protest, they did not carry enough clout to dissuade their respective legislatures (McLaren 104). While Doctor Noyes represents the meeting points of Christianity and science, he does not, according to Brydon, convey true Christian values. In Noah’s mind, science must serve what he views as

Yaweh's edicts; any other manifestations of scientific principles, such as those espoused by his son Ham, are worthless. Brydon writes that

[b]y opposing the Christian forgiveness and love of Mrs. Noyes and her supporters with the Old Testament wrath and rigidity of Noah and his God, Findley may be seen as an advocate of true Christian values. His attack on hypocrites such as Noah and the old pretender god he has fashioned in his own image can easily be seen as pro-Christian rather than anti-Christian.

The novel's stand on abortion and eugenics adds strength to this view. (82)

Brydon suggests that openness and love—central values of the New Testament—constitute true Christian values; however, Findley's overt challenge to biblical authority suggests that real openness to disabled people, homosexuals, and women occurs outside a Christian or rather Old Testament framework. Within the novel, there is no God worthy of Lotte, Adam, Mottyl, Mrs. Noyes, and Lucy. Indeed, the most empathetic and loving figures in the novel oppose Yaweh and Noah, and while the Church may condemn eugenics measures, it also tends to frame disability within a charitable lens rather than a humanistic lens (Davis, "The End of Identity Politics" 264); that is, persons with disabilities are objects of pity rather than human beings.

While Findley may assert inclusivity and love, and while he may attack Noah, he does not dethrone Noah, nor does he override the bible's authority with his own authorial control. Mrs. Noyes, Lucy, Emma, and Mottyl all challenge Noah's power; they embody the fluidity of normalcy through their femininity, homosexuality, animalism, and disability. Garland-Thomson states that "physical instability is the bodily manifestation of political anarchy" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 43), and in this regard, these characters are no different. In attempting to overcome Noah's authority, Lucy, Mrs. Noyes, Ham, Mottyl, and the other members of the Lower Orders

attempt to change the outcome of the story of the ark. Linda Lamont-Stewart writes that “Findley avoids substituting one hierarchical binary for another. This text persists in troubling and destabilizing the neat categories that enable the effective functioning of Yaweh/Noah’s authoritarian regime” (123). The text certainly attempts to trouble and destabilize, but the authoritarian regime remains in place. By framing the novel as a parodic allegory, Findley imposes a certain kind of normalcy on it. In Hutcheon’s estimation, “[p]arody is a typical postmodern paradoxical form because it uses and abuses the texts and conventions of the tradition” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 8). To that end, Findley abuses his source text by depicting Noah as a vicious despot, portraying Lucifer as the empathetic and androgynous angel Lucy, including contemporary show tunes and other anachronisms in the text, and anthropomorphizing animals, thereby troubling Genesis 1:28 by blurring the boundary between humans and animals: “And God blessed [men], and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply...and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” By deviating from tradition and convention, Findley’s novel defies his source text; however, a condition of parody is that this deviation can be only temporary. As Hutcheon states, a parody may not exceed its source material: “The parodic text is granted a special licence to transgress the limits of convention, but...it can do so only temporarily and only within the controlled confines authorized by the text parodied—that is, quite simply, within the confines of ‘recognizability’” (*A Theory of Parody* 75). Pennee states that “the whole novel is a *response* to a *text*” (81; Pennee’s emphases). If it is, it is a vivid, revealing, yet ultimately acquiescent response, for despite all the inventive changes he makes in fleshing the story out, Findley succumbs to the expectations of his narrative’s biblical impetus, illustrating the devastating impact of intolerance. The malice that the original story entails

remains intact: Noah remains in power by the novel's end, the world belongs to him, and his hierarchical thinking will carry forth into the New World.

In addition to allegorizing the German and Canadian eugenics movements, the novel allegorizes conflicting Canadian attitudes toward disability. Its two warring factions—Mrs. Noyes and company against Doctor Noyes and company—are literary manifestations of what Prince calls pride and prejudice toward disability—that is, openness toward disability and intolerance of it (*Absent Citizens* 32). One side fights for and welcomes disabled people while the other segregates, abuses, and kills them. This struggle is evident in Western countries, particularly Germany and Canada. Even though Germany has put policies in place to guarantee employment opportunities for people with disabilities, they are not always enforced (Evans 160). Attitudes that allowed eugenicists to mistreat and murder the disabled appear to remain in place: “in contemporary German society...many people with disabilities are treated like second-class citizens and are viewed as economic burdens and inconveniences. Discriminatory attitudes have resulted in acts of targeted violence, including public taunts, insults, harassment, attacks, beatings, and killings” (160). The situation is similar in Canada. There have been numerous recent stories about people with disabilities being harassed and attacked. In 2012, five teenagers robbed and brutally beat a disabled man after he left a movie theatre in Mount Pearl, Newfoundland; they stole his wallet and watch, and left him with a broken nose and missing teeth (CBC, “Disabled attack”). In 2013, the Begley family in Newcastle, Ontario, received a threatening letter directed at their then-thirteen-year-old son, Max. The letter viciously condemned the family for allowing Max, who is autistic, to run around the yard and make noise; the addressor suggested the family either move or euthanize Max (Bennett-Smith). Findley's allegory offers a valuable lesson about Canadians' pride and prejudice toward disability: as long



as such conflicting attitudes persist, abuse, intolerance, and violence against the disabled will continue. Such attitudes allowed the Albertan eugenics movement to continue for as long as it did; they prevented disabled people from being seen as what Prince may call full citizens (*Absent Citizens* 3), and created conditions for disabled people to be dehumanized.

Critics have declared and contested the novel's status as a particularly Canadian allegory. Brydon states that, in addition to allegorizing the Holocaust, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* is a Canadian national allegory. She argues the Findley "aligns himself with a particularly Tory streak in Canadian political ideology that remains suspicious of notions of progress and modernity, often idealizing a lost world of the past as offering greater potential for full human development than the contemporary social order" (76). Dickinson questions Brydon's argument, stating that "a provisional reading of the postcolonial/national allegories in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* reveals them to be profoundly ambivalent" (132). He in turn states that the novel "rewrite[es] the biblical flood myth as a narrative of both national ambivalence and sexual dissidence" (125). Dickinson borrows the word "ambivalent" from Homi K. Bhabha, who writes that "[I]t is the mark of ambivalence of the nation as narrative strategy...that it produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic, categories, like the people, minorities, or "cultural difference" that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation" (quoted in Dickinson 126). A disability reading of the novel suggests two things: that it is highly questionable to think of the novel as an allegory of conservative values, since progress and modernity have brought about the multiculturalism and inclusivity for which Findley advocates, and that the ambivalent attitudes the novel allegorizes—that is, the conflicting attitudes toward disability—fit within this broader ambivalence, that disability constitutes the sort of cultural difference of which Bhabha speaks. By allegorizing both eugenics and the attitudes that made it

possible, Findley depicts disability history and reminds us of the consequences of dehumanization and intolerance.

Eugenicists imposed particular meanings on disabled people based on what they thought was best for humanity, and Findley deftly captures their attitudes through his allegorical structure. One of the ways Brandt and Le Vann dehumanized disabled people was by thinking of them as belonging to separate species. As mentioned before, they both saw disabled people as separate from humanity, and Findley's novel illustrates that separation by animalizing disabled people. This animalization coheres with the novel's Judeo-Christian authority: George Woodcock states that "[t]he law of Yahweh establishes the rule of man over the realm of nature" (233) and that "[t]he privilege that Yahweh grants to the survivors of mankind is to be the curse of animalkind" (234). On one hand, Findley allegorizes disability by conveying disabled characters as animals, but on the other hand the novel's representation of animals—not to mention its deconstruction of Christian values—complicates the hierarchy that Woodcock discusses, thus complicating how one may read the way Findley allegorizes disability. Human beings are privileged over animals, yet animals are humanized, and humans, disabled and non-disabled, are animalized. Bailey writes that "one cannot help wondering how different the ways of being and knowing amongst the animals and humans actually are when the thoughts, desires, and fears of the animals are given human language and shape" (148). Animals such as Mottyl, One Tusk the elephant, Bip the lemur, and Crowe the crow have names, converse in clear language, establish friendships with members of other species, and help others with great compassion. Indeed, Woodcock calls Mottyl "the most constant perceiving consciousness in the book" (233). Conversely, disabled humans are called ape-children and non-disabled humans such as Mrs. Noyes, Ham, and Emma are ensconced on the ark's lower levels with the animals.

In addition, Japeth is portrayed as bloodthirsty and sex-crazed—that is, animalistic. The line between animals and humans is unclear, which makes virtually every single death in the novel epistemologically challenging. What is human and what is not human? Why are certain beings kept alive while others are killed? To say that it is Yaweh's/Noah's will is to accept hypocrisy, yet at the same time it is the best answer available because it gives the only explanation. It does not, however, lessen the novel's epistemological challenges. On a symbolic level, Findley's depiction of animals both challenges and coincides with disability's narrative prosthesis. Bailey writes that "animal communities are conventionally used to show *human* weakness, not realistic animal life" (quoting Swinfen, 148-49; Bailey's emphasis). Animals therefore share even more in common with the novel's disabled characters, for Findley depicts animals as both allegorical figures and as human beings. To borrow Snyder and Mitchell's phrasing, he depicts animal existence as an experience of social and political dimensions, chronicling the animals' emotions, thoughts, and interactions. At a categorical level, the challenges are more profound, for the way the boundary between animals and humans is blurred prompts the question of who exactly are the disabled in this novel. Animalism and disability are closely related, if not synonymous; to be an animal is to be diminished in status, segregated, and dehumanized. In this manner, Mottyl might be considered doubly disabled. Yet the label "animal" could apply to anyone in the Lower Orders, not just the animals. Lucy's androgyny—is she male or female? Angel or human? Good or evil?—is contagious. Despite Noah's best efforts to stifle it, inclusivity and equality—two key values of fluid normalcy—manifest within the Lower Orders. By portraying the camaraderie of the Lower Orders, Findley offers a glimpse of an inclusive world, but unfortunately it is only a glimpse.

One sequence of events in the novel's final pages illustrates the convergence of animalism and disability. Throughout the novel, Mottyl listens to what she calls "*whispers*" (138; Findley's emphasis), which often manifest as warnings prompted by both her animal instincts and her human common sense. These whispers steer her away from danger, particularly that presented by Doctor Noyes. Toward the novel's end, Mottyl, who has worn herself out with worry over her six kittens, and is now mourning one of her sons, loses her whispers:

"*WHISPERS?*" Mottyl howl[s]. '*WHISPERS!*' Nothing. Not a single response. They [are] gone" (331; Findley's emphases). Due to her blindness, these whispers are central to Mottyl's consciousness. They are her interior voice—her intuition, her conscience, the thing that mitigates her blindness and allows her to live a full life. Whispering and listening to whispers are also subversive acts; one listens to whispers so that no one else can hear what is said. Once Mottyl loses them, she is no longer self-reliant and no longer has any urge to rebel against Doctor Noyes. She folds into herself and sings a mourning song, the content of which is "only known to her. Her children, her Crowe and her *whispers* [have] all died before her. And now, the world [will] die" (332; Findley's emphasis). She is only an animal, a blind, unmoored, disabled animal. Shortly after Mottyl loses her whispers, Hannah throws overboard her unnamed ape-child, and shortly after this, Mrs. Noyes brings the sheep up on deck and, lifting a young lamb, resolves to teach it how to sing (345). She enlists all the other sheep, and asks them to join her. The sheep, who prior to this scene sang beautifully, respond with "Baaaa!" (346). They have lost their voices. They "[will] never sing again" (348). They are only animals. The New World will have none of the magic of the Old World. Mottyl's defeat, Hannah's unnamed child, and the sheep's loss come one after another: loss on top of loss. Animals will be voiceless, and the disabled, the

female, the four-legged, and the androgynous will have no dominion, and men will have dominion over all of them.

Chapter Three:  
Disability, History, Nationality, and Gender as  
Postmodern Constructions in Guy Vanderhaeghe's  
*The Englishman's Boy*

Guy Vanderhaeghe's 1996 novel *The Englishman's Boy* presents disability within a multifarious and complex ideological framework. At once a Western and a sophisticated critique of such Westerns, *The Englishman's Boy* features four disabled characters that, in their own ways, expose and emphasize the novel's national, historical, and gender concerns. The characters are Harry Vincent, the novel's protagonist and narrator who walks with a limp; Wylie, Shorty McAdoo's intellectually disabled sidekick; Harry's mother, an invalid living in a care home; and Selena, young Shorty's deaf lover. These characters' disabilities perform three key functions: they underscore the characters' marginalization; they emphasize the idea of Canada as a refuge from American commercial mythmaking and aggrandizement; and they represent a palette of disability, laying bare the possibilities of disabled character construction. Just as Vanderhaeghe unveils the processes of constructing history, films, and novels by moving back and forth through time and detailing Harry's work with Best Chance Pictures, he shows the possibilities of creating disabled characters by portraying them with various levels of complexity and

involvement in the narrative. Vanderhaeghe seems aware how disability typically appears in literature; also, given the novel's portrayals, he seems aware of how social attitudes shape disability. In *The Englishman's Boy*, he both portrays and challenges these attitudes to provide a dynamic, juxtapositional portraiture. With his fragmented narrative and multiple portrayals of disability, particularly his dynamic portrait of Harry, Vanderhaeghe ultimately suggests that disability, like history, nationality, and gender, is as much an individual notion as it is a socially created idea, as much imagined as it is experienced.

*The Englishman's Boy* is composed chiefly of two contrapuntal narratives. The first narrative, told in the third person, details a series of speculative events leading to the infamous Cypress Hills Massacre in 1873, a well-known historical event that took place in southern Saskatchewan. Vanderhaeghe recounts how a group of American wolf hunters, including the titular Englishman's boy, treks into Canada to find and kill the Assiniboine people who stole their horses. The second narrative is a first-person account told by Harry Vincent, a titles writer at a major Hollywood film studio in 1923. Harry, a Saskatchewan native, is recruited by studio head Damon Ira Chance to find a mysterious man named Shorty McAdoo and record his story for the purposes of making a movie. Shorty recounts the events of 1873; he is the Englishman's boy. Spurred by his increased salary, which allows him to care for his invalid mother, Harry coaxes out Shorty's story, and Chance subsequently alters the story to suit his own cinematic vision. Angry with Chance's changes, Harry abandons the picture; at the novel's double climax, the wolfers kill the Assiniboine and Wylie shoots Chance and his henchman on the red carpet of the film's premiere. These two narratives are bookended by a "frame narrative of the natives, Fine Man and Broken Horn, stealing the white men's horses and guiding them north to Canada" (Janes 89). Fine Man and Broken Horn appear only in the first and last chapters, which, as

Alison Calder states, serve “as a deliberate creative strategy designed to point to the absences in the narrative” (104)—namely the absences of Assiniboine voices.

By placing the two main stories side by side and in mostly alternating chapters, Vanderhaeghe draws attention to the processes of narrating history and of storytelling in general. The novel’s focus on portraying history—through oral storytelling, through film, and through the novel itself—suggests that history is a construction, a story, a fluid essence, something that is made as much of individual perspectives as of objective reportage. By writing the novel this way, Vanderhaeghe reflects what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls a postmodern “incredulity toward metanarratives” (73). Hutcheon defines metanarratives as “the received wisdom or the grand narrative systems that once made sense of things for us” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 15). Hutcheon’s language underscores the influence of metanarratives: they are overarching stories that have become accepted as central to a culture. If, as Hutcheon argues, “all cultural forms of representation...are ideologically grounded” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 3), then these “narrative systems” form the foundation of a region’s or nation’s history, and subsequently its identity. Such metanarratives, Bran Nicol states, “are a form of ideology which constrains and controls the individual subject. They are violent and tyrannous in the way that they falsely impose a sense of ‘totality’ and ‘universality’ on a set of disparate things, actions and events” (“The Postmodern Condition” 16). Individual perspectives such as Shorty’s challenge the official and supposedly objective version of historical events. In this case, Shorty’s version of the Cypress Hills Massacre “provides a powerful resistance both to seeing the history of the West (both Canadian and American) in terms of white triumphalism and to global cultural colonization—for which Hollywood serves as the flagship—in our own time” (Wyile, “Dances with Wolfers” 50). Shorty’s third-person version of the Massacre details the horror and injustice



that the Assiniboine people faced; his sympathies lie with the Assiniboine. By telling the story this way, and by pitting Shorty's story against Chance's filmic version, Vanderhaeghe troubles the established "white" version of this event while demonstrating and interrogating how historical events in general are reconstructed.

In addition to undermining the white imperialist version of the Cypress Hills Massacre, *The Englishman's Boy* explores the tension between Canadian and American identities. Like history, nationality—which is informed by and therefore not exclusive from history—appears to be as much an individual presentation as an objective social construction. As Calder writes, "Vanderhaeghe constructs Harry's national identity as performance, as a role that Harry can very consciously put on or take off.... Though he is vulnerable to exploitation by Chance, he can also exploit Chance by concealing his identity and performing Americanness" (99). Nationality is something the individual can exploit for his or her own purposes, and Harry is not the only character who does this. Chance consistently employs American rhetoric to describe his moviemaking ambitions: "Facts are the bread America wants to eat. The poetry of facts is the poetry of the American soul" (Vanderhaeghe 19). Chance's choice of words is ironic for two reasons. First, he is a rich, reclusive man who, despite having spent a large amount of time in Europe, pontificates about the common American spirit. Second, he changes Shorty McAdoo's story to suit his own purposes. Since, as Wylie suggests, one is meant to think of Shorty's story as a "true" story ("Dances with Wolfers" 32), Chance displaces fact for fiction, and in doing so, contradicts himself regarding the public's appetite for facts. By changing Shorty's story to portray the Assiniboine people as "weak" (Vanderhaeghe 252), Chance attempts to create a metanarrative—or, from a disability perspective, a standard of normalcy—based on white American superiority, which in this novel is a foundation for American identity.

To frame this identity, Vanderhaeghe, through Chance, invokes D.W. Griffith, the American filmmaker who created *The Birth of a Nation*. Chance fervently admires and seeks to emulate Griffith's film. Though enormously successful when it first came out in 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* also incited outrage for its blatant racism. The film portrays the Ku Klux Klan as martyrs and African-Americans (really white men in blackface) as dim-witted. Taking his cue from Griffith's film and neatly ignoring the fact that Griffith, to ameliorate his public image, released a film in 1916 called *Intolerance* ("D.W. Griffith"), Chance is demonstrably racist, as evidenced by his anti-Semitic remarks and his deliberate dehumanization of the Assiniboine people in his film, which he titles *Besieged*.

*The Englishman's Boy* consciously circumvents this American metanarrative. The novel destabilizes the normalcy that metanarratives impose. Harry's deep involvement in creating *Besieged* renders the enterprise suspicious from its inception: a Canadian gathers the narrative material for a movie meant to convey "the American soul" (Vanderhaeghe 108). Harry later conveys his uncertainty when he challenges Chance about how he portrays the Assiniboine people and when he eventually abandons the film. The novel ultimately suggests that the metanarratives that make up a nation are, at best, suspect—and incomplete.

In his study of the historical development of nationhood, Benedict Anderson writes that a nation is "an imagined political community" (15), an entity written into being and solidified by advanced printing technology and mass-produced texts: "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (49). For Anderson and other theorists such as Bhabha and Timothy Brennan, the novel helped bring the nation into being by "helping to standardize language, encourage literacy, and remove mutual

incomprehensibility” (Brennan 49). It also “allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation” (49). In Vanderhaeghe’s novel, film exerts a similar influence: Chance’s vision of what film can achieve can be thought of as a progression of Anderson’s and Brennan’s ideas on the novel. In one of several extensive monologues on America and film, Chance says

“Why have the American people produced no great art? The Germans gave the world their music. The Romans their architecture. The Greeks their tragedies. We recognize the soul of a people in their art. But where is the American soul? I asked myself. Then it dawned on me. *The American soul could not find expression in these old arts because the spirit of the American people was not compatible with them....* You see? The American spirit is a frontier spirit, restless, impatient of constraint....The American destiny is *forward momentum*.” (108; Vanderhaeghe’s emphases)

For Chance, film is the best way to present America to Americans, and his description of *The Birth of a Nation*’s effect on the American people could be read as a filmic reformulation of Brennan’s ideas:

“*Birth* became America’s history lesson on the Civil War. For the first time, everybody, rich and poor, Northerner and Southerner, native and immigrant, found themselves pupils in the same history class. A class conducted in Philadelphia and New York, in little Iowa theatres and converted saloons in Wyoming.... Think about it, Harry. If Lincoln was the Great Emancipator, Griffith is the Great Educator. Whatever bits of history the average American knows, he’s learned from Griffith. Griffith marks the birth of spiritual Americanism.” (107)

To Chance, the spirit of America coalesced through film—Griffith’s film in particular. The film medium has brought America together. To complement this notion, Vanderhaeghe frequently alludes to movie stars, directors, and producers who have become part of the fabric of American life: Charlie Chaplin, Louis B. Mayer, Buster Keaton, Fatty Arbuckle, Lillian Gish, Tom Mix, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford are just a few figures Vanderhaeghe names. Even though Chaplin is English, and Mayer and Pickford are Canadian, their names are synonymous with—and have been absorbed into—America. Their films form America’s cultural backdrop, and through his own film *Chance* seeks to reaffirm a particular idea of America as a nation founded on the frontier spirit and white superiority.

But just as a nation can be (figuratively) written or filmed into being, so can it be written or filmed out of being. That initial creation can be questioned, rendering it unstable. The fluidity of normalcy comes into play here. Commenting on the process of narrating a nation, Bhabha writes that “The nation’s ‘coming into being’ as a system of cultural signification, as the representation of social *life*...emphasizes this instability of knowledge” (“Introduction” 1-2; Bhabha’s emphasis). If, as *The Englishman’s Boy* suggests, nationality is a role one plays, then that role is fluid. It is subject to reimagining, to reinterpretation. Harry, as it turns out, sees no difference between Americans and Canadians: “I have found that Americans, by and large, recognize no distinction between us. Why should I?” (111). Because of this blurring of nationalities, he is unable to see the difference between himself and Chance, or rather he sees the difference and dismisses it as negligible. He plays a role—he acts, in essence—and, like a good method actor, inhabits his role. Harry believes that he is part of the circle of power, and that inability or refusal to see early on his role in the creation and perpetuation of a lie results in his selling Shorty’s story and compromising his morality. (Though he eventually sees the error of his

ways, he is too late to prevent Chance from being killed at the film's premiere.) Even after he has moved back to Saskatoon, he works as a film projectionist, "unwilling or unable to extricate himself from Hollywood completely" (Calder 99). Even as he occupies one space, whether Hollywood or Saskatoon, he is invested in another. He continually plays a role.

Vanderhaeghe's calibrations of disability, particularly Harry's, mirror this playing of roles. It is through disability that the boundaries separating America and Canada, and centre and margin become more palpable. When Harry first appears, he describes himself plainly:

I see myself in the windowpane, a tall, thin, gangly, big-nosed, big-eared young man nervously smoking and fidgeting with his wire-rimmed spectacles. A very ordinary, common young man whose only uncommon feature can't be detected in the glass at the moment. My limp. (Vanderhaeghe 7)

Harry's status as a disabled protagonist is an exception to Garland-Thomson's assertion that "main characters almost never have physical disabilities" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 8). Harry's self-description contains a few contradictions. That he is tall, gangly, big-nosed and big-eared suggests that he has not grown into his body the way other, presumably normal adults have. Yet he also says he is very ordinary and common, as though he is in fact normal. These contradictions subtly encapsulate Harry's relationships throughout the novel: he oscillates between the centre and the margin, between power and powerlessness. He has one foot in one space and one foot in another. In other words, his position is fluid. This position proves difficult for Harry to negotiate, though, as Vanderhaeghe illustrates when Harry, having started his work on Chance's movie, accompanies his friend Rachel Gold to the Coconut Grove, a popular Hollywood club. Harry, who relies on Rachel's glamorous beauty to get him in since he cannot "get past the door on [his] own" (Vanderhaeghe 128), is ill at ease in the Grove. The club is

filled with “pretty little things of both sexes cavorting like mad to dance music dominated by horns” (129), and Harry, a very ordinary and common young man, does not conform. In Hollywood, where rich, extraordinarily handsome and beautiful people are the norm, Harry is ordinary, a wrinkle, a spot of reality on Hollywood’s powdered complexion, and his disability underscores his ordinariness. By standing out amidst the rich and famous, he exposes Hollywood’s hubris.

While not nearly as complex as Harry, the novel’s other disabled characters emphasize marginality in their own ways. Wylie is a supporting character whose intellectual disability is implied by the way he talks and behaves. He never self-identifies the way Harry does. When Harry goes to Universal City looking for information about Shorty, he finds Wylie in the corner sitting on Shorty’s saddle. The men Harry talks to refer to Wylie and his twin brother in demeaning ways. One man calls Wylie ““simple”” (62); another man says ““maybe [the brothers] split a brain between the two of them because one’s every bit as identical dumb as the other”” (62). When Harry sets eyes on Wylie, he describes Wylie in equally demeaning ways: “The stray-dog air of him, the wistful, sad-assed, clinging-vine look of him had kept me clear. He looks like the sort of kid that a kind word will stick to you like flypaper” (62). Even though Harry has a disability, he does not want to approach Wylie; indeed, he is hardly able to empathize with Wylie, suggesting that, in this novel, disability is an individual experience that precludes commonality with other people with disabilities or, alternatively, that disabled people are so effectively marginalized that they are conditioned to segregate other disabled people. Wylie discomfits Harry, but because Wylie possesses Shorty’s saddle, Harry has to talk to him. Wylie further hints at his intellectual disability by continually repeating himself: ““Shorty said to me, he said, “Wylie, you look after this here saddle of mine.” That’s what he said, Shorty said.’

He commences to rock back and forth on the saddle-seat. ‘Shorty said that. I’m a-watching it for him. I’m a-watching it like a son of a bitch’” (63). That Wylie repeats himself suggests that he either wants to emphasize his point, or that he is uncertain and wants to reassure himself. With his “skittish eyes” (63) and stubborn repetition, both ideas are possible. Wylie’s intellectual disability also becomes a social disability. Because he does not possess the capabilities to question or resist persuasion, Wylie is quite gullible. Harry convinces Wylie that Shorty has asked for his saddle back, and then persuades Wylie to drive him to Shorty’s property. The task is easy: “Wylie takes it at face value” (64). Harry finds out where Shorty lives, and then, after telling Wylie that he has proven his loyalty to Shorty and does not have to give the saddle back, Harry turns and drives back to Universal City; later, thinking to himself, Harry mocks Wylie’s “stupid faith” (68). Combined with his physical disability and protagonist’s billing, Harry’s discomfort places him in direct contrast to Wylie.

While Wylie appears more often than Harry’s mother and Selena, and while he plays a critical role toward the novel’s end, he remains in the background for most of the story. In this way, Wylie, along with Harry’s mother and Selena, fulfills Garland-Thomson’s description of the way persons with disabilities usually appear in literature. Harry, however, does not fulfill the description. The differences in characterization between Harry and the three minor characters reveal the novel’s postmodern nature. As Hutcheon puts it, a postmodern text “both sets up and subverts the powers and conventions of art” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 2). Wylie, Harry’s mother, and Selena demonstrate or set up the convention of disability in literature, while Harry subverts it. By presenting four disabled characters that fulfill and subvert convention, the novel draws attention to how such characters are created while emphasizing the individual’s experience of disability. In *The Englishman’s Boy*, disability separates rather than brings people together.

It is perhaps a testament to the novel's Western framework that the female characters remain in the background. As Nadine LeGier points out, the Western is chiefly a male genre, dominated by such figures as John Wayne: "Harry's narrative evokes a time in the history of movies when the western emphasized (male) ability, strength, and potency and the figure of the movie cowboy suggested ruggedly individualistic masculinity. These westerns influenced moviegoers' deepest concerns about masculinity and marginality" (246). By emphasizing masculinity, femininity is marginalized. Indeed, all the novel's protagonists are male; female characters play limited supporting roles and so have limited impact in the novel's events. Consequently, within the subset of characters with disabilities in the novel, Harry and Wylie are by far the most prominent. They produce crucial tensions when set in contrast to one another, while Harry's mother, who says and repeats only one word, "'Home'" (182), in the whole novel, and Selena, who says and repeats two words, produce little tension. These two characters do, however, emphasize a particular disability narrative convention. Garland-Thomson identifies this convention, which states that characters with disabilities "usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens...eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 8). Harry's mother's invalidity and Selena's deafness emphasize the small role of women in the novel and in Westerns in general. Their disabilities could therefore be read as a critique of the male-dominated Western genre. Specifically, Harry's mother's invalidity could be considered an embodiment, a metaphor for the marginalization of women in Westerns:

my mother has been withdrawing further and further into a dense mist of apathy, eating whatever is put in front of her, going to bed when told, getting up when told, seldom speaking, never smiling. It is as if the rest of us are ghosts, shadowy



presences whose existence she cannot quite credit. Except for Rachel Gold. She is the most solid, the most real to my mother. (Vanderhaeghe 175)

This passage, taken from the one scene in the novel where we see Harry's mother in the care facility, illustrates the traditional role of women in Westerns. They are ordered around, typically by men, and told what to do and when to do it. In this way, Vanderhaeghe succumbs to convention rather than deviates from it. While one could argue that the novel's Western framework and the time periods and circumstances it depicts necessitate a male focus, Vanderhaeghe's progressive portraiture of disability suggests there is room to manoeuvre, so it is disappointing that women perform a limited function in the novel. Selena also functions in accordance with this pattern, filling the role of the sweet simple girl in contrast to young Shorty's coarseness:

Selena weren't like him. Every bit of hardness he'd ever been handed, he'd put on the back shelf and stored. But hardness seemed to pass through her like light through a windowpane. She didn't hold a particle of anger he held. Not a particle. She stored sugar like he stored hate, let out the sweetness bit by bit....She didn't favour you with a smile but seldom, but it was all the sweeter for it. Not one of them broad, false, whorey smiles, just a small and gentle and knowing one. (302)

Like Harry's mother, Selena appears only briefly in the novel. She is seen in only one chapter and says four words: she says and repeats "When?" in response to Shorty's promise he will return for her (303) and later says "No, no" to comfort the nervous Shorty as they begin to make love (304). Overall, the female characters—Harry's mother, Selena, Rachel Gold—have little impact on the novel's events. Rachel certainly is the most dynamic. She is beautiful, intelligent, and well-paid as a scriptwriter; however, like the other women in the novel, she is a

secondary character. This shared marginality perhaps explains why Harry's mother feels Rachel's presence the most. They share something that Harry does not and cannot possess.

The marginalization of women in the novel typifies a junction between disability theory and feminist theory. In her discussion of the similarities between disability and femininity, Garland-Thomson writes that “[b]oth the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 19). Vanderhaeghe's disabled women conform to neither the social norms dictated by men nor the female norms in their respective eras. Harry's mother does not compare to Rachel Gold, and Selena, “skinny as a barked rail” (Vanderhaeghe 301), does not compete with “the fat, red, German whores” (302) who work in the whorehouse where she lives. The two women do not fulfill their respective eras' definitions of beauty, nor do they conform to the normalcy of their surroundings. As a result, they are dismissed, and their disabilities underscore their dismissal. That they say so little further demonstrates their marginalization. They are largely silent, while the men make the most noise.

Even though Harry's mother has comparatively little impact in the novel, she does align with Harry and Wylie in terms of nationality. Harry's mother yearns for home, for Saskatoon, and, as discussed later in this chapter, Wylie invokes Canada just before he shoots Chance. Although Harry harbours an ambivalent attitude toward Canada, his mother and Wylie see it as a refuge, an escape from discomfort and from America. Unfortunately, escape is costly.

Harry's disability informs and intersects with his nationality in unique ways, particularly when contrasted with Chance. As shown in the quotation above, in which Harry describes himself, his limp cannot be detected when he is sitting down. His limp can only be revealed

when he walks—through motion, in other words. Despite his mobility impairment, he not only helps set in motion the novel's events, but helps create a motion picture. The difference between Harry's Canadian nationality and Chance's American cinematic vision augment the situation's strangeness. Chance unveils his vision in a clear evocation of the "Manifest Destiny" attitude that accompanied American westward expansion: "What the American spirit require[s] [is] an art form of forward momentum, an art form as bold and unbounded as the American spirit. A *westerling* art form! It had to wait for motion pictures. The art form of *motion!*" (108; Vanderhaeghe's emphases). In light of Harry's involvement, Chance's words prompt two questions. First, if America is a place of forward motion, what kind of motion suits Canada? And second, if films are America's art form, what is Canada's?

Harry and his disability cohere to answer the first question. Since Harry is Canada's most prominent representative in the novel, it seems that, if America is a place of forward motion, then Canada is a place of little motion, or rather altered or stalled motion. Calder characterizes America as "civilization" and Canada as "the land [which] conquer[s] the white man, rather than the other way around" (98). In America, people move forward with headlong momentum; few if any American characters exhibit patience. In comparatively uncultivated Canada, people—white people, specifically—are not as able to move forward. As he recounts his story to Harry, Shorty describes how the land conquered him: "lonesome country breeds lonesomeness. I sung every song I knew trying to drown out the Indian talking in my head. Every day I heard him plainer and plainer. The country done it to me. The sky was Indian sky, the wind was Indian wind, every last thing I laid my eyes on was cut to fit an Indian" (152). Overwhelming landscape, stalled motion: Harry's disability captures these ideas. Because of his limp, he is at the mercy of landscapes and geographic obstacles, and since Hollywood has been cultivated and

planed smooth, he is, at least physically speaking, better able to navigate Rodeo Drive than Canada's coarser pathways. (Whether he does so morally speaking is another story.) When he later leaves Hollywood and returns to Saskatoon, he is no longer in motion. At the novel's end, he writes "A couple of months after I'd settled back in Saskatoon, I landed a job managing a movie theatre. I've been there almost thirty years" (325). Every night he "stand[s] at the back of [the] theatre, watch[ing] spectres and phantoms slide across the screen. The picture done, the audience gone, [he] lock[s] the doors, go[es] out into the night" (326). Now settled in Canada, unmarried and alone, Harry is standing still, the ghosts of his Hollywood past still with him, his "limp a little worse each year" (326). Despite his role in Chance's ill-fated film, he regrets leaving Hollywood. He yearns to move forward again, but true to the notion of Canadian motion, does not, will not.

The second question yields broader implications about the novel. If, as Chance suggests, film is America's art form, then books—specifically documentary literature—may be Canada's. Documentary poems and historical novels form a prominent part of Canada's literary landscape. Examples range from E.J. Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike* and Dorothy Livesay's *Day and Night* to more experimental books such as Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and George Bowering's *Burning Water. The Englishman's Boy*, which like Bowering's book is an example of "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 64), fits within this group. Historiographic metafiction is "self-consciously fictional but also overtly concerned with the acts (and consequences) of the reading and writing of history as well as fiction" (14). As Hutcheon states, historiographic metafiction draws attention to the way that history is constructed: "No longer is history to be accepted as 'how things actually happened', with the historian playing the role of recorder. [Postmodern theorists] have studied the

implications of seeing history as a construction, as having been made by the historian through a process of selecting, ordering, and narrating” (14-15). Chance’s comments on the difference between books and films not only demonstrate his (and Vanderhaeghe’s) awareness of how history is constructed, but also hint at national differences:

“...there’s no arguing with pictures. You simply accept or reject them. What’s up there on the screen *moves too fast* to permit analysis or argument. You can’t control the flow of images the way you can control a book—by rereading a chapter, rereading a paragraph, rereading a sentence. A book invites argument, invites reconsideration, invites thought. A moving picture is beyond thought. Like feeling, it simply is. The principle of a book is persuasion; the principle of a movie is revelation.” (107; my emphases)

In a roundabout way, Chance seems to imply that Americans are simple. The world as presented through film is either one thing or another. While film moves too fast to be disputed, books are a slower, more introspective medium, and introspection and (physical) slowness characterize Harry Vincent. To further illustrate the alignment of books with Canada, as part of his cover Harry tells Shorty that he is writing a historical book rather than a screenplay:

“I want to write a book about the Old West. Everyone tells me you’re the man to talk to. That you have the stories. A writer needs stories. They all said talk to Shorty McAdoo if you want the real dope, the truth.”

Surprisingly, my little encomium angers [Shorty]. “I ain’t interested in all that old dead shit. I know the truth.”

“It’s history,” I say lamely. “It’s something we all ought to know.” (85)

Yet truth, of course, is subjective. It is fluid. It depends on who is telling the story. Harry knows that Shorty distrusts Hollywood, so he says he is writing a book, which to Shorty is acceptable. In a subtle way, Vanderhaeghe suggests that, in contrast to film, the book is the more truthful medium, a position complicated by Harry's lie and by *The Englishman's Boy's* focus on subjective truth and its status as historiographic metafiction.

In his examination of the novel's portrayal of historical events, Wyile questions Vanderhaeghe's representation of the Cypress Hills Massacre: "Vanderhaeghe generally sticks close to those details about which there is general historical consensus, but he also uses details about which there is uncertainty or contradictory evidence in the historical record" ("Dances with Wolfers" 35). Vanderhaeghe's imagination takes over when the details are disputed and/or unclear: "Ed Grace [is] shot in the throat with an arrow (instead of being killed by a bullet), and...the wolfers decapitat[e] Little Soldier and parad[e] his head on a stake (which may not have happened or may have happened to another Assiniboine leader)" (35). Wyile also states that Vanderhaeghe depicts "the wolfers [as] fundamentally responsible for the massacre, their leaders racist, belligerent, and brutal" despite "some [historians] arguing that the wolfers were not as bad, or as culpable, as they have been made out to be" (35). Vanderhaeghe calibrates his portrayal of the wolfers so they parallel Chance in terms of their racism and corruption; he means for the reader to demonize the Americans. In this manner, Vanderhaeghe does something similar to what Mistry does in *Family Matters*: he nudges the reader's sympathy toward a more open and fluid view of the world rather than a rigid and prejudicial view. He emphasizes a more inclusive Canadian view that facilitates sympathy for the Assiniboine rather than the American reliance on binaries that cultivates brutal racism.

As he pursues Shorty's truth, Harry Vincent uses what is available to him. As he moves throughout Hollywood to serve Chance's design, he acts with ease, manipulating both his nationality and his disability to suit his convenience. Quoting Calder, LeGier writes that "[a]lthough 'Harry can choose whether or not to reveal himself as a Canadian' ...he is, in fact, unable to make this same choice with his disability" (245). Harry can, however, manipulate the meaning of his disability; as he negotiates different spaces, the people in each space yield specific attitudes toward disability. As demonstrated by the following passage, Harry easily recognizes those attitudes:

the nineteenth century had wrapped a warm muffler of sentiment around the hearts of schoolmarms, Dickens having made cripples touching and lovable. I hated those female teachers whose faces went sweetly vacuous and temporizingly benign when they turned to me. Although they didn't mean them to, those looks thrust me on the outside. Outside became a state of mind. (33)

Here, Harry, as the self-reflexive ex-centric narrator, details the two typical reactions to his disability: pity and marginalization. It is a stretch to say that Harry choreographs the meaning of his disability as a deliberate reaction against this childhood experience; he does not mention or imply any such motivation. This passage does, however, demonstrate his keen awareness of how the people around him think about disability. He in turn exploits this knowledge to serve his (and Chance's) own purposes. He plays upon the attitudes of those around him, using his limp to set a bartender at ease and pretending his limp hinders his ability to drive a car, among other manoeuvres. By employing his limp this way, his disability acquires a shifting, unstable, and unusual complexity, unusual in that it is atypical among fictional portrayals of disability and that

it is imbued with several different layers of meaning. In this way, Harry circumvents the social model of disability, revealing that disability has several manifestations.

Part of his disability's complexity, in addition to the aforementioned layers of ordinariness and nationality, lies in how it functions according to gender expectations inherent in the Western genre. Shortly after he first begins looking for McAdoo, Harry enters a bar in Hollywood and asks the bartender if he has seen Shorty. The bartender folds his arms and responds guardedly: “[Shorty] ain't going to thank me if you're police,” to which Harry replies, “It's customary to hire cops with two good legs. You saw me cross the bar” (55). Harry chooses his words carefully. According to LeGier,

Harry transgresses the boundary of the bar by performing his disability. He uses his limp, making very pointed reference to it, to convince the bartender that he could not possibly be a police officer and that, therefore, he is not a threat. The figure of the docile, non-threatening disabled person, a representation regularly advanced by Hollywood and, indeed, by the westerns of the time, works to Harry's advantage here. (247)

Harry exploits the prevailing meaning of disability to gain favour with the bartender. To borrow Hutcheon's phrase, he “uses and abuses” his disability (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 53). LeGier correctly identifies this exploitation; however, she situates Harry's disability solely within an examination of masculinity. LeGier argues that Harry's disability “is a narrative device to critique the construction of masculinity in historical representations of the expansion of the American West and in the early American western” (244). While Harry does at times exploit masculine attitudes (as shown in his tryst with the Lillian Gish lookalike, detailed below), his masculinity is simply one layer of his character (unlike the women, for whom their femininity is



their only layer). The larger effect of Harry's disability, along with Harry's nationality and oscillation between margin and centre, is the way it draws attention to the process of its own construction. Harry performs his disability according to prevailing social attitudes. Case in point: the bartender buys Harry's performance, and tells Harry what he knows about Shorty.

Harry also uses his disability to gain sympathy from Wylie. After he asks Wylie to give Shorty his saddle back, Harry convinces Wylie to drive to Shorty's property by saying "Working the clutch is hard on this bum leg of mine. I don't drive unless I have to" (64). Even though Harry is fully capable of driving, he lies about the pain in his leg and tricks Wylie into driving so he can see where Shorty lives. Wylie does not question how Harry drove the car to the studio in the first place. In this instance, Harry not only exploits his own disability, he takes advantage of Wylie's gullibility. By doing so, Harry subverts narrative prosthesis, which asserts that "disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (Mitchell and Snyder, "Narrative Prosthesis" 222). The word "stock" makes it seem as though disability is a standard mode of characterization, that it is chosen without much thought, that it is a standard spice in the author's cupboard that produces similar, familiar results. But Vanderhaeghe's narrative palette is multifarious; he demonstrates considerable care and deliberation. Harry complicates whatever stock metaphorical value his disability may have. His actions and his role in the novel's events exacerbate this complication. To take the point further, Mitchell and Snyder assert that "[n]early every culture views disability as a problem in need of a solution" (222). Harry, however, does not want to solve his disability. It never occurs to him or to anyone else. There is never a single reference to getting therapy, a cane, or a crutch. Instead, Harry uses his disability as a tool to torque the sympathy and/or empathy of other characters.

At first glance, it would seem that, because of the way he performs his disability, Harry is an immoral character, someone who fulfills Lennard J. Davis's notion that "crippled or deformed people are either worthy of pity or are villains motivated by bitterness or envy" (*Bending over Backwards* 45). Harry is more complex than that, though. He resists pity and is not motivated by bitterness or envy; he is motivated by the increased salary that allows him to take better care of his mother. He is a marginal character who is given a taste of power: "for the first time in my life I [feel] myself gratefully moving to the centre of something important, admitted to an inner circle" (Vanderhaeghe 33). That taste, unfortunately, is fleeting, and he must return to the margin, his conscience injured but still intact.

Harry continues to perform roles throughout the novel, and in one particular scene he exploits prevailing masculine attitudes. At a party at Chance's mansion, Harry meets a prostitute who has been made up to look like Lillian Gish. Lillian Gish is his favourite actress, and, as it turns out, she was the star of *The Birth of a Nation*. The girl attempts to seduce Harry, but Harry resists. She says "Why? Because of your leg? I saw you limping. Does your leg hurt?" (248). Harry says his leg does not hurt, but offers no further explanation for refusing the girl. LeGier writes that

The implication here is that Harry cannot perform sexually, cannot be a "real man," because of his disability. McIlvenny writes that the disabled male body is "one that, unusually for males in Western societies, is often excused or excluded from carnal knowledge"....Harry is not culturally located in society's construction of manhood, and he is exempt from carnal knowledge by virtue of his disability. (248)

LeGier links Harry's disability to an inability to have sex, but there may be a simpler explanation. Harry resists the girl not because he is physically incapable of performing, but because she looks (and very well may be) fifteen years old and because his burgeoning guilt from stealing Shorty's story—an occasion for which the party is being held—weighs heavily on his conscience. Harry does, however, perform his masculinity (LeGier 248) when Chance knocks on the door. Throwing the girl off his lap, he tells her to get on the bed and undress while he unbuckles his belt and opens the door, giving Chance the illusion that he has been having sex (Vanderhaeghe 250). As LeGier states, "Harry's performances of masculinity and disability suggest the instability of both these identity categories" (248). Unlike the Lillian Gish lookalike, Harry is a good actor. Whether working as an American screenwriter or exploiting the sympathy of the people around him, he plays his role well, for the most part.

After Harry has recorded Shorty's story and given it to Chance, there comes a moment where Harry does not play his part well. At this point, Harry has realized his guilt in selling Shorty's story, and after protesting against Chance's intentions he abandons the film. To earn money, he accepts work as a movie extra, eventually landing a part in a film about the French Revolution. Harry's character is called André, and the director of this film singles Harry out for a specific scene in the movie:

André has to beg alms from a sneering, effeminate aristocrat who thrusts him into a puddle with his gilded cane. Then comes my big moment, a close-up of my mucky face passing from bewilderment to injured pride, to homicidal rage. This, the director has confided, is a critical moment in the picture, the moment I become a *symbol*, the moment I become the embodiment of the French people awakening to the dream of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*. (290)

Harry, however, does not perform correctly. Just before the first take, he experiences “[a] slow stain of misery,” as though “something is putting brutal thumbs to the back of [his] eyeballs” (290). And when the film rolls and he holds out his hand to beg, he “feel[s] fingernails scraping [his] throat” (290). He is clearly uncomfortable performing his disability this way, and his discomfort comes through in his performance: when the aristocrat shoves him, Harry lands on his back instead of his face (290). The filmmakers reset the background and recall the aristocrat’s horse-drawn coach and go through another five takes, each one “a greater failure than the last” (291). Harry’s internal reaction and outward performance show that he resists being turned into this specific symbol. By doing so, he resists performing his disability in a way that serves Hollywood. His guilt persists, clawing at his throat and preventing him from taking part in another film. Because he does not perform to the director’s expectations, he is fired.

From a disability perspective, this scene is a fulcrum, a pivot point. It signals a shift between Harry’s individual manipulation of his disability and other people’s imposing expectations; fluid normalcy and rigid normalcy collide. Prior to this scene, Harry is able to manipulate how others see his limp, but from this point on he is unable to circumvent the prevailing social attitudes toward disability. Vanderhaeghe demonstrates this inability toward the end, when Harry attempts to get into the premiere of Chance’s film. Chance has given Harry tickets, and despite abandoning the film, Harry dons a tuxedo and goes to see it. The crowd swarms; the flashbulbs pop; the fancy cars roll up; the brilliant marquee blares the film’s title, *Besieged* (314). Harry, however, never makes it inside the theatre. He watches the actors and personalities from across the street and, after being pushed up against the rope keeping everyone on the sidewalk, attempts to step over the rope toward the theatre. A cop approaches him and tells him he cannot cross the street. Harry shows the cop his tickets and says, “I’ve got a bad leg.

It can't take much more of this pushing and shoving'" (316). Harry could be lying; his interior narration does not suggest overwhelming pain in his bad leg. The cop says, "If you got a bad leg, take it home. Take it home or stay where you are'" (316). The cop wins. Harry stays where he is. Harry tries to exploit his disability but is rejected. He tries to literally transgress the boundary between ordinary and extraordinary, but he is turned away. His taste of Hollywood power is fleeting. His limp prevents him not only from seeing the film, but from stopping Wylie from shooting Chance. Because he is unable to get into the theatre, Harry is unable to get close to Chance. In this instance, his limp keeps him on the margin rather than allowing him a foray into the centre; he is cut off from forward motion, from experiencing the American art form, and the events that his limp helped him set in motion come to a violent close.

Wylie's biggest appearance in the novel comes at the premiere of *Besieged*. After the film is over, Shorty confronts Chance on the red carpet. As usual, Wylie follows. Harry watches from under the marquee as Shorty attempts to negotiate with Chance; the crowd remains an obstacle. Shorty continues to press Chance. Chance then calls on his henchman, Fitz, to take care of Shorty. Fitz seizes Shorty and begins shaking him, "snapping the old white head back and forth in a blur" (321). Fitz shakes Shorty unconscious. Wylie takes out Harry's pistol and shoots Fitz in the forehead. He then sees Harry and considers shooting him, too: "I understand Wylie is looking at me with cold hatred, that my own death is being debated in his slow, clumsy mind at this instant" (322). Instead, Wylie turns on Chance and invokes that northern refuge: "If you'd just only talked to him. We would been in Canada now. We would been in Canada...happy" (322). Then he shoots Chance, and Chance dies in Harry's arms.

This ending puzzles for a few reasons. At first glance, it appears fitting: Chance gets his just deserts for misrepresenting Shorty's story, and Fitz, his brutal goon, dies as well. Shorty

oversteps the boundary between margin and centre to face Chance directly; without Harry acting as a mediator, he gets shaken unconscious. On a symbolic level, though, Wylie's actions bear contradictory tensions. He uses Harry's gun to kill Chance and invokes Canada just before he shoots. For him, as for Shorty, Canada is a safe haven, a place to get away from Hollywood. Nationality is a key issue here. If Chance is a purveyor of American metanarratives, and Harry is the Canadian outsider who challenges metanarratives, what does that make Wylie? Wylie is American yet functions on the margin. He has a disability but does not play the same role as Harry. It seems there are two possible readings of this ending. First, Wylie finishes what Harry starts. While it is a stretch to suggest that Wylie is an extension of Harry's desire to prevent Chance from releasing his film—a stretch because Harry is neither violent nor mentally unstable—Wylie takes the negotiation between Canada and America, margin and centre, fluidity and rigidity, and disability and ability to a violent conclusion, a conclusion reflected by the Cypress Hills Massacre: “Shorty's reaction to the wolfers' violence toward the Assiniboine... is choreographed with his (and Wylie's) response to the violence that Chance has done to his story” (Wylie, “Dances with Wolfers” 25). In this moment, Wylie, like the novel's other disabled characters, exemplifies the shared marginality of disability and Canadian identity. While Wylie is American, he wants to go to Canada with Shorty, and he kills Chance with a Canadian's gun, so while the junction between disability and Canadian identity is subtler than it is with the other three disabled characters, the two ideas intersect nevertheless.

Second, Wylie is another character who generates suspicion of American metanarratives. He is not the common American that Chance originally had in mind, and he does not go to see movies and participate in the American culture that Chance seeks to influence, so he is exempt from the effects of “America's history lesson” (Vanderhaeghe 107). In this way, Wylie

acquires more resonance, for like Harry his actions betray suspicion of Chance's film and the racist vision of America it seeks to affirm. Wylie himself is not mistrustful; he generally follows Shorty's lead and takes at face value most of what comes his way. His actions, however, convey an effect similar to Harry's protests; in fact, Wylie's actions have a stronger effect, as Harry's protests did not prevent Chance from making the film. As we learn later, Wylie's actions prevent the film from reaching the broad audience that Chance envisioned: Harry recalls that the film "got pushed into oblivion; Chance's murder became bigger than the picture itself. As so often happens in Hollywood, scandal became the story, obscuring everything else" (326). Wylie's scepticism, then, lies in his actions rather than his thoughts.

The four disabled characters in *The Englishman's Boy* reveal a multitude of tensions, not the least of which is the novel's presentation of the creative process. As Daniela Janes puts it, "[t]he novel is metafictional in its obsessive circling around the themes of truth, fiction, and representation, because the complex relationship between these elements is explored both by the characters within the novel and by the novelist himself" (88). In *The Englishman's Boy*, the process of character construction occurs on two levels: author and narrator. Both Vanderhaeghe and Harry create, narrate, and construct, and as they explore the relationship between truth, fiction, and representation, they reveal their own processes and biases. As Davis states, "Novels do not depict life, they depict life as it is represented by ideology" (*Resisting Novels* 24). If metanarratives reflect a particular ideology, then the texts that undermine them do too. *The Englishman's Boy* offers a postmodern approach to ideology; according to Hutcheon, such an approach is characterized by "undercutting prevailing values and conventions in order to provoke a questioning, a challenging of 'what goes without saying' in our culture" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 3). Vanderhaeghe not only questions Hollywood's presentations of history, he

confronts literary representations of disability along with the social attitudes that accompany disability. By doing so, he challenges the social constructivist model of disability, which asserts that “it is society which disabled physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation quoted in Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model” 215). Many disability scholars base their work on this model. While it has merit in that it acknowledges the impact of social attitudes on disability, it also neglects the complexity of disability, particularly the “individual experience of impairment” (217). To subscribe to the social model means that “[i]t is not the disabled person who is to blame, but society. She [or he] does not have to change, society does. Rather than feeling self-pity, she [or he] can feel anger and pride” (217). Such a view completely absolves persons with disabilities of responsibility for their own impairments. Harry does not think of his disability as a weakness. He does not blame society. His disability is a source of neither anger nor pride. His disability is a characteristic, a part of his life, subject to shifting meanings like everything else about him. Sometimes he is in charge of those meanings; sometimes those meanings are imposed on him by others. That is the reality of disability—and in general. To illustrate how meanings are imposed on others, Vanderhaeghe, or rather Harry, portrays his mother and Wylie according to his impressions. Harry chooses what information to include, and so describes Wylie and his mother in demeaning ways, influencing how we think of them (and of Harry). Harry, and by extension Vanderhaeghe, shows how representation shapes reality. With his four disabled characters, Vanderhaeghe carefully constructs a unique and juxtapositional quartet: three individual background characters and a complex protagonist. These characters reflect crucial



representational concerns regarding disability, especially when considered from a postmodern angle:

What postmodern theory and practice together suggest is that everything always was “cultural”...that is, always mediated by representations. They suggest that notions of truth, reference, and the non-cultural real have not ceased to exist...but that they are no longer unproblematic issues, assumed to be self-evident and self-justifying. The postmodern, as I have been defining it, is not a degeneration into “hyperreality,” but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it. (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 33)

If everything is mediated by representation, then *The Englishman's Boy* suggests that each individual's experience of disability differs according to what representations one has encountered. Pursuant to fluid normalcy, one's experience of disability depends largely on context. It also suggests that disabled individuals must negotiate a plethora of social expectations, and that social constructions of disability, history, nationality, and gender are at best unstable.

Chapter Four:  
Disability and the Reconfigured Gothic  
in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*

In her writing, dramatist and novelist Ann-Marie MacDonald shows a tendency to play with and parody familiar narratives so as to expose restrictive social structures and give a voice to previously unheard figures. Her 1996 novel *Fall on Your Knees* details the troubled history of the Nova Scotian Piper family: James, his Lebanese wife Materia, their daughters Kathleen, Mercedes, and Frances, and Lily, the illegitimate daughter of James and Kathleen. The novel begins in the year 1900, at the tail end of the Victorian period, and ends in the 1960s, during which the struggle for social justice became prominent. As she tells the Pipers' story, which takes place chiefly in the burgeoning mining town of New Waterford, MacDonald retells Nova Scotian and Canadian history from a feminist perspective while exposing Gothic conventions. In novels such as *Frankenstein*, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*, women are oppressed, people of colour are cast as the Other, and, as Ruth Bienstock Anolik states, disabled people signal "deviation[s] that [seem] to remove the sufferer[s] completely from the human and thus from human intercourse" (3). *Fall on Your Knees* is a pointed response to such texts. Hilde Staels writes that it "critically reworks the Gothic mode to try and come to terms

with Canada's colonial past and its multiculturalism" (325) as well as to "celebrat[e] women's disruption of conventional sex-gender boundaries" (326). With regard to social justice, much of the criticism focusing on the novel examines how women, lesbians, and people of colour fight against discrimination; to this end, the novel has been called a "feminist postcolonial Gothic" (Kulperger 97). MacDonald's depictions of disability, however, have not been given the same level of scrutiny, even though her reconstitution of Gothic structures impacts her disabled characters in a manner similar to her female, lesbian, and non-white characters. Like Vanderhaeghe, MacDonald directly confronts history (both literary and Canadian) and presents a juxtapositional palette of disabled characters to demonstrate, within the Gothic genre, the possibilities of character creation. That is, her characters both conform to and deviate from Gothic convention: with Jeanne, MacDonald conforms to Gothic standards by linking disability and malevolence, and with Lily and Hector she deviates from Gothic tradition and presents disability in a more complex and progressive manner. In particular, her portrayal of Lily presents numerous challenges to Gothic conventions and to what Joel Baetz calls "Canadian cultural absence" (80), which in this case means the relative silence of disabled people in Canadian literature. With Lily, MacDonald complicates the Gothic expectation that the disabled are the grotesque, "uncanny" (Freud 219), and/or "abject" (Kristeva 1) Other. Rather than frighten people off the way Frankenstein's creature and Quasimodo do, Lily is welcomed by her community. MacDonald also gives Lily a voice the way she does her female, lesbian, and non-white characters; by doing so, she asserts that not only are disabled people part of Canada's diverse community, but that disability is a productive position for embracing and liberating the oppressed. Overall, MacDonald reconfigures the Gothic tendency to reinforce corporeal

normativity by making Lily the storyteller, thus lending a disabled person narrative authority and providing a sustained example of fluid normalcy.

Canadian literature features several examples of Gothic stories, for the Gothic provides an opportune vehicle for exploring Canadian experience and identity. Susanna Moodie, Margaret Atwood, Eden Robinson, and MacDonald are just a few authors who have written stories identified as Gothic. In his exploration of Canadian Gothic literature, Justin D. Edwards writes that Canada is a destabilized nation, “an in-between space. Caught in-between colonization and post-colonization, it is a site where cultures collide” (xiv). This lack of definition lends itself to the Gothic mode, the centre of which “is the shadowy, mysterious, and unknowable space inhabited by the inhumanly unknowable Other” (Anolik 2). Gothic fiction, particularly in Canada, explores fears and anxieties about the self and about the Other. Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte posit that “Gothic tropes have emerged in Canadian literature as integral to the postcolonial interrogation of national identity constructs and dominant representational practices” (x). By questioning what it means to be Canadian, these authors have helped shape Canada into an “uncanny” space, “a hegemonic power that is as ghostly and imagined as it is factual” (Edwards xx). Here, Edwards employs Freud’s notion of the uncanny, which, along with Kristeva’s notion of the abject, is often used to frame the Gothic. Freud defines the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”—that is, an unsettling blend of the horrifying and the familiar (“The ‘Uncanny’” 220). The abject, which builds on the uncanny, is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). Within such Gothic interrogations of Canadian identity as Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, the uncanny and the abject often manifest as

the stranger in our midst: the female, homosexual, and/or racial Other. With such narratives forming a significant part of both the Canadian literary canon and Canada's cultural makeup, Canada may therefore be thought of as a nation of ghosts, a nation of abjections: ill-defined, uncanny, uncertain.

Such a characterization of Canada arises in MacDonald's novel, which Baetz calls "a ghost story" (62). The characters in *Fall on Your Knees* are haunted in many ways, which Gabriella Parro lists in detail: "[t]here is a family curse, a haunted house, a young woman in peril of sexual violation, a concern for family bloodlines, spiritually hollow Catholicism, a woman confined to an attic, several dead mothers, family secrets including incest, and orphans who learn the truth about their parentage" (177). Interestingly, scholars discussing the novel's Gothic aspects leave out the "disfigured character" trope. Indeed, this trend appears to extend throughout Canadian Gothic scholarship: amongst the group of Others identified earlier, the disabled Other is conspicuously missing. Even though, thanks to authors such as Mary Shelley and Victor Hugo, disfigured and disabled characters appear quite frequently in Gothic narratives, critics tend to discuss the polio-stricken Lily only within other contexts, such as incest and femininity. Gothic literature tends to cast disability as grotesque and/or tragic. As David Punter writes, "the history of...dealings with the disabled body runs throughout the history of the Gothic, a history of invasion and resistance, of the enemy within, of bodies torn and tortured, or else rendered miraculously, or sometimes catastrophically, whole" (40). Punter's corporeal language, particularly his phrase "the enemy within," is reminiscent of the abject, which Kristeva contextualizes within a corporeal framework, using the analogy of vomiting to illustrate how one rejects the abject (2). The abject helps explain why disfigured characters in Gothic stories incite horror: "Abjection...is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred

that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it” (4). Within Gothic literature, disfigured characters tend to embody the ugliness in humanity: “disability is a free-floating signifier for evil and woe that envelops and diminishes the figures so that they tend to become gestures of human wretchedness rather than characters with whom readers might identify” (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 84). One recoils from such figures: Frankenstein’s creature and Quasimodo frighten nearly everyone they meet. To this end, disability in Gothic stories tends to incite aesthetic nervousness (Quayson 15), for it “categorize[s] human disability as a frighteningly inhuman deviance” (Anolik 6) that generates distance between the reader and the disabled characters. Gothic stories, then, tend to reinforce corporeal normativity. The disabled body represents the repressed self: the enemy within, the Other, the monster, the ghoul who can crawl out unexpectedly. The disabled body is a ghastly reminder that all bodies are vulnerable.

Of the three disabled characters in *Fall on Your Knees*, Jeanne, an invalid with a morphine addiction, conforms to Gothic expectations, and incites the most discomfort. Jeanne lives in New York City with her daughter, Rose, who develops a relationship with Kathleen Piper. When Jeanne meets Kathleen for the first time, she “scrutiniz[es] [her] like a bird of prey that’s too full with its recent meal to be bothered to eat what’s in front of it” (MacDonald 630). Her sinister, dissembling nature quickly becomes apparent. Kathleen falls in love with Rose, who is black, and Jeanne, who is white, grows jealous, sneering at Kathleen, who grows increasingly uncomfortable around her. Here, aesthetic nervousness occurs both between characters and between reader and text. Jeanne acts condescendingly toward Kathleen, calling her Rose’s “little friend” (628), and she is surrounded by both filth and luxury: velvet furniture, cigarette butts, jewellery, and dusty curtains (628). The apartment Jeanne inhabits is uncanny: “fancy and

shabby at the same time” (628). She reminds the reader of Miss Havisham from Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, and like Miss Havisham Jeanne induces unease in both Kathleen and the reader. Jeanne is used to receiving the bulk of Rose’s attention: Rose administers her morphine injections and helps look after her, while Jeanne earns money as a prostitute (650). Indeed, Jeanne is portrayed as a sinister woman who holds power over her daughter. Her desire to maintain this power, along with her dissembling nature, becomes evident when she sends James a letter explaining that Kathleen “is in grave danger” because she has “cross[ed] nature’s divide” and engaged in “miscegenation” (291). By sending this letter, she exploits what she correctly assumes is James’s racist attitude. James in turn travels to New York to bring Kathleen back to Nova Scotia—with horrific results. Curiously, Jeanne signs the letter “An Anonymous Wish-Wisher” (291), hiding herself from the proceedings. Like many female characters in Gothic novels, she is hidden in the background; unlike these characters, her anonymity is self-willed, at least in part. Her jealousy, her cruel and cowardly manner of excising Kathleen from her life, and her celebration of her accomplishment create a link between the disabled body and immorality. Jeanne therefore adheres to Gothic convention and incites aesthetic nervousness: she is an abject object, an immoral disabled figure meant to drive the reader toward the able-bodied Kathleen, thus reflecting the conventional Gothic novel’s normative structures.

The discomfort Jeanne incites is tempered by MacDonald’s more nuanced portrayals of Lily and Hector. Disabled figures present important challenges in Gothic literature, and Lily and Hector are no exceptions. As Anolik states,

[j]ust as the Gothic text almost always ends with the destruction of the walls of the castle and monastery that imprison the Gothic self, so does the text end with the disorienting suggestion that conceptual barriers have also been breached. The

Gothic project to resist limiting boundaries and defining categories thus aligns with the project of those engaged with the disability rights movement.... (5)

*Fall on Your Knees* is all about confronting and dissolving barriers, specifically attitudes that attend those of different race, gender, sexuality, and ability. MacDonald's palette of disabled figures presents and deviates from previous constructs: Jeanne represents the old Gothic, the selfish, immoral, disabled character against which MacDonald juxtaposes Lily and Hector. MacDonald then twists Gothic conventions by humanizing Lily and Hector and presenting them not as grotesque and sinister Others, but as complex figures who embody difference and acceptance within a fraught Canadian community.

These values find their most potent expression through Lily Piper. Lily resists outmoded models of interpreting disability, and so challenges Gothic convention, the uncanny, the abject, and patriarchal versions of Canadian history. The tragic circumstances surrounding her birth reveal the mechanics of MacDonald's Gothic parody: like Frankenstein's creature, Lily's conception defies the laws of creation, as she is the product of an incestuous relationship; and Kathleen's confinement and Lily's birth in the Piper family attic call to mind Bertha, the madwoman in *Jane Eyre*. Such a textual background suggests gloomy prospects: it is difficult to imagine the infant Lily having any kind of enjoyable life. She is burdened with the conventions of literary history, family strife, and, contracting polio shortly after being born, social expectations of disability. Hutcheon quotes Walter Bate in arguing that "[p]arody is one mode of coming to terms with the texts of that 'rich and intimidating legacy of the past'" (*A Theory of Parody* 4). In the case of Gothic stories such as *Frankenstein*, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Monk*, and *Wuthering Heights*, their rich and intimidating legacy stems in part from the way they reflect patriarchal and corporeal normativity. Through Lily, MacDonald directly confronts



this legacy, exposing the Gothic and social expectations surrounding disability while at the same time breaking them down.

A few years prior to Lily's birth, Materia has a child who "live[s] three days, then die[s], no one knows why. Crib death. It just happens, children die" (MacDonald 99). Materia names the child Lily (99), and a few years later, when Mercedes and James give Kathleen's daughter the name during the formal baptism, they are in effect haunting her. The first Lily, identified in the novel as "'other Lily'" (256), was not baptized and so to the girls her soul remains in limbo. By naming Kathleen's child Lily, Mercedes and James burden her with survival. In fact, she has three burdens: polio, the limbo and death associated with her name, and her incestuous origins. In his influential essay, Freud describes two things that generate uncanny sensations: doubles and death. He writes that the double, which may manifest as a twin,<sup>3</sup> disturbs the ego and, in fact, "becomes the uncanny harbinger of death" (235). Commensurately, "[m]any people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (241). Kristeva builds off of this notion by describing the abject as "death infecting life" (4). By naming the child Lily, Mercedes and James appear to turn her into a sort of ghost—an uncanny, abject, living-dead being. In this way, Lily embodies my earlier suggestion that Canada is a nation of ghosts. Indeed, Lily has a host of abjections to overcome. Incest and illegitimacy arise frequently in literature, and are often aligned with disability and tragedy. Oedipus and Frankenstein's creature are but two classic examples: Oedipus blinds himself after realizing his incestuous relationship with his mother, and Frankenstein's creature is unnaturally born and depicted as deformed and grotesque. With her

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<sup>3</sup> The double, or *doppelgänger*, arises frequently within Gothic scholarship. Many critics have suggested that Dr. Frankenstein and his creature are two sides of the same person: in her psychoanalytical reading of Shelley's novel, Mary K. Patterson-Thornburg writes that the Monster may be considered "a repressed, unacknowledged part of Victor's personality" (333).

withered leg and initially feeble nature—in her youth, she is quite vulnerable to illness—Lily appears to be a grim and ghostly reminder of her parents’ unnatural relationship. James calls his attraction to Kathleen “[h]is demon” (78), and characters with limps are often said to bear “the special emotional significance...of the Devil,” specifically the cloven hoof (Wagner 54). That Lily ends up looking very much like Kathleen only deepens the idea that Lily is the physical manifestation of James’s demon. Kristeva asks, “What is the demoniacal—an inescapable, repulsive, and yet nurtured abomination?” (107). Indeed, the Piper family’s standing in New Waterford and their salvation appear to rest on Lily’s shoulders—which they do in the end, but at that point Lily willingly takes on that responsibility. Susanne Becker writes that “the ‘monsters’ of the feminine gothic are among the most powerful female figures of literary history, representing forces which are among the most challenging to the structures both of the house of fiction and of the symbolic order” (56-57). Although she initially appears burdened with uncanniness, abjections, and tragic expectations, Lily overcomes the obstacles of birth and textual convention with strength and grace, asserting her humanity while exemplifying acceptance and love for all people.

In her youth, Lily appears to be a Canadian Tiny Tim, a stereotypical figure meant to incite pity. She walks with her leg in a steel brace and her disposition is characterized as innocent and delicate. MacDonald frequently shows six-year-old Lily playing with dolls while she “is dolled up” (223). Her life is carefree: “Lily doesn’t have to do anything but be happy” (224). She is kept out of school because “[s]he is crippled” and “[i]t makes sense that she would be delicate” (239). Whenever Mercedes, Frances, and Lily play together, Lily is “their doll” (245): when they act out scenes from *Little Women*, Lily is made to play “delicate Beth who was so nice and then she died” (245). These allusions to Dickens and Alcott suggest that Lily is either

not long for this Earth, or that someone has to save her. This attitude spurs Mercedes, the ardent Catholic, to save Lily. Mercedes, who like Frances acts as Lily's sister to hide the true story of Lily's birth, takes her cue from St. Bernadette, whose picture hangs on Mercedes's bedroom wall: "her eyes drift now to the picture of Bernadette in the grotto with Our Lady of Lourdes. Bernadette has been beatified. Someday she will be a saint. They dug her up and she was sweet as a rose—that's the odour of sanctity. She was a little crippled girl too" (288). Mercedes decides to save money to send Lily to Lourdes to be cured. Mercedes is quickly taken with the idea: "she has told Daddy and Frances about the Lourdes fund so that they may contribute, and she has told Lily so that Lily may have hope....Think how perfectly lovely Lily would be without her affliction" (338). MacDonald's language reveals a subtle tension: the phrase "perfectly lovely" suggests that Lily, who is already lovely, can only be perfect without her disability. Mercedes, then, imposes an ideal onto Lily. Because she is in Mercedes's eyes abject, Lily must be cleansed of her disability. The demon must be exorcised.

Mercedes's actions are not only reminiscent of Ebenezer Scrooge's motivation to save Tiny Tim, but also suggest a model of thinking about disability that is rooted in the Church. According to Lennard J. Davis, this model posits that "people with disabilities [are] seen variously as poor, destitute creatures in need of help of the church or as helpless victims of disease in need of the correction offered by modern medical practices" ("The End of Identity Politics" 264), or, in Lily's case, a miracle cure. Mercedes sees Lily not as a person, but as a "project" (MacDonald 371). She interprets Lily's disability, her lack of a mother, her pretty face, her sweet nature, and her manner of treating everyone with kindness as proof of potential sainthood. She begins keeping track of Lily's exploits, building a case for sainthood so that her family, which has been scandalized due to their troubles and James's employment as a

bootlegger, may be vindicated, redeemed, saved. By seeing Lily this way, Mercedes reduces her to a concept and ignores her humanity.

Fortunately, Lily possesses a strong sense of self. She resists Mercedes's perception of her and, in doing so, rejects her literary predecessors. After playing crippled characters several times, Lily eventually refuses to play them, no matter what her sisters say:

“Why don't you be the little boy saint who gets his hands and feet cut off but then he gets nice new silver ones?”

“Why don't you be Saint Giles, who was the patron saint of cripples, Lily?”

“Lily, do you want to be Saint Gemma, who had tuberculosis of the spine but Our Lady cured her?”

“No,” said Lily, “I want to be Veronica.” (247)

Lily rejects her sisters' view and asserts her own, insisting on playing “Saint Veronica wiping the face of Jesus” (247). Indeed, saintliness appears to haunt Lily, marking a curious progression: she goes from grim reminder of James's demon to potential saint. Within the Piper family, she appears to represent *Paradise Regained*. She treats everyone with kindness, which only feeds Mercedes's perception. Although she extends love and empathy to everyone around her, Lily is not a saint, and she is not naïve like Tiny Tim. A scene in the veterans' ward at New Waterford General Hospital reveals her awareness:

Lily is not repelled by the veterans. She feels badly for them, they've been terribly hurt, but pity is a poison unction. Lily has experienced pity but she didn't know what to call it, she only knew it made her terribly afraid. As if she had disappeared and become a ghost... [S]he is conscious of how important it is for people to be seen, so when she looks at them—even the blind one—she also looks

*for* them, just in case they too have got lost and need finding. (373; MacDonald's emphasis)

MacDonald's language, particularly at the end of this passage, is reminiscent of the song "Amazing Grace": "I once was lost but now am found, / Was blind but now I see" (Newton). The song, however, is told from the perspective of a passive speaker being found by God; Lily has found herself, and through her self-knowledge finds other people. Here, MacDonald again twists textual convention: unlike Frankenstein's creature, who after achieving self-knowledge seeks vengeance against his creator, Lily cultivates empathy. She resists divine interpretations of her actions, which are rooted in patriarchal Catholicism. In this manner, MacDonald sheds Dickens's influence and offers a more fluid and—one might argue—Canadian perspective. Her approach is humanistic: Lily makes the connection between her own experience as a disabled person and the veterans' experiences. She is able to find the beauty in others, for she knows what it is like to be pitied. She fears pity because it dehumanizes her; it makes her into a ghost. For that reason, she fears Mercedes more than anyone else, and refuses to go to Lourdes. She sheds the uncanniness that other Lily's death imposes on her and asserts her humanity in the face of fear and pity. Indeed, MacDonald characterizes her withered leg as a "valiant...limb, which has carried and marched beyond the call of duty....Her bad leg is special because it is so strong," and "[n]o one, not even Our Lady, will get their holy waters on her little leg" (471). Lily's leg is the source of her strength. Her disability has helped her empathy develop: she "knows that it is possible to love everyone the most" (375), regardless of colour, gender, sexuality, ability, or circumstance. Her grace arises through her disability.

Lily extends that grace to everyone in the novel. She does not need to be saved; rather, she does the saving. In the novel's final line, MacDonald reveals that Lily is in fact the

storyteller. By telling the story, Lily redeems the oppressed and exposes the harmful patriarchal and racist attitudes that have plagued her family: “[a]s a retrospective narrator, Lily brings the buried family secrets to light and lays the ghosts of the past to rest” (Staels 336). Lily also takes those ghosts and lays them against the legacy of the Gothic genre. She is able to weave Gothic allusions into her family’s story and juxtapose what happens to the Pipers against Gothic literary history. In this way, she is like Harry Vincent in that she chooses how to frame the story and what information to include; she rejects literary predecessors such as Tiny Tim, Beth, and Frankenstein’s creature. As a result, she shapes not only how we see the characters, but how her story fits into or rather contrasts with Gothic convention. If, as the case with Harry Vincent’s story suggests, everything is mediated by representation, then Lily’s story exposes the gaps in both Canadian and Gothic literary history, which had hitherto conformed to and reinforced patriarchal and corporeal normativity.

Even though Lily is not a saint, and actively rejects sainthood, she is a redemptive figure in that she redeems the oppressed—Kathleen, Materia, Hector, Teresa, and Rose, among others—through her storytelling. Indeed, she embodies and employs fluid normalcy; Hector in particular enjoys the benefit of Lily’s narration. Although he is a minor character that, like most disabled characters, “usually remain[s] on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures” (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 9), Hector, who is black and uses a wheelchair, quickly becomes more dynamic as the novel progresses. The central concern to his wife, Teresa, and to his sister-in-law, Adelaide, is whether or not he “works”—mentally and physically. While he is “still all there” mentally speaking, “all his language [is] in his eyes” (MacDonald 492). As a result, he can only speak “the speech of dogs” (500), by nodding or shaking his head. Thanks to Lily’s empathetic narration, the reader knows that Hector understands what is happening, but the

other characters do not; MacDonald employs this dramatic irony to full effect. When Hector's old rifle goes missing, he must communicate to Adelaide that Teresa plans to shoot Frances Piper, who has seduced Teresa's brother and Adelaide's husband, Leo. As articulated through Lily's storytelling, Teresa's hatred has hitherto restricted her view of her husband. As a result of her poor treatment by members of New Waterford, her anger clouds her judgement so that she is only able to see Hector as a victim of circumstance. The racism that surrounds her has "corrod[ed] [her] inside, leaching into the vital organs" (496). She could see him only as he was, not as he is. But once she is absolved, she can see Hector as he is; she no longer bears "[t]he hate that she prayed for Jesus to take away" (496). Hector in turn challenges the notion that disabled people are asexual (Shuttleworth 166), confronting both Gothic and general conventions surrounding disability. As a disabled black man, he would be doubly Other in a previous Gothic work, but within Lily's narrative embrace, he is not. Within Gothic literature, disabled characters either do not have sex or their sex is characterized as deviant, wrong, and unnatural, which partially explains why Dr. Frankenstein destroys his creature's potential mate and why Quasimodo and Esmeralda can never be together, except in death. In contrast, Teresa and Hector's sex is driven by their mutual desire to have a family. It is driven by love, connection, and openness, values MacDonald seeks to affirm throughout the novel.

MacDonald's placing of the previously oppressed disabled figure in a position of narrative authority most clearly demonstrates her reconfiguration of Gothic conventions. The narrative power structure, which as demonstrated in *Frankenstein*, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, and *Wuthering Heights* tends to reinforce corporeal and patriarchal normativity, has been altered; as a result, disability becomes an emancipatory narrative position. While Shelley gives Frankenstein's monster a voice, and allows him to tell his story, his story is mediated by two

other narrators: Dr. Frankenstein tells the story to Robert Walton, who in turn tells his sister. In Hugo's novel, the third-person narrator frames Quasimodo, Esmeralda, and company. In *Wuthering Heights*, from which MacDonald takes her epigraph, the housekeeper Nelly Dean tells the story of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw to Mr. Lockwood, who in turn tells us; the woman's story is enfolded within the man's. In *Fall on Your Knees*, all stories are enfolded within Lily's. Lily's position as the redemptive storyteller demonstrates the liberating empathy that disability can generate. Disability permeates all categories: race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. As Davis states, "disability may turn out to be the identity that links other identities" (*Bending over Backwards* 13-14). Lily embodies empathy, and develops her empathy through her disability. Because she understands the harm that pity can do, she seeks genuine connections with people; her approach coheres with fluid normalcy, and her connections with other characters are evident throughout the novel. There is hardly a single character that is not vividly drawn and empathetically portrayed; Jeanne is an exception, but her portrayal arises in Kathleen's diary, not through Lily's narration. The history of the Piper family is also the history of Canada, New Waterford and its citizens. Everyone in New Waterford is included, from the Pipers' neighbours, the Luvovitzes, to the immigrants who come to New Waterford to work in the coal mines. Many major events, trends, and inventions are detailed, from World War One and the emergence of automobiles to the rise of bootlegging and speakeasies. The scope is wide yet vivid. MacDonald, or rather Lily, describes Nova Scotian geography in a way that reflects the reconfigured Gothic: the Piper house begins as an isolated place, near a cliff, as in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, but as the novel progresses and New Waterford grows, the Piper house becomes part of the town, and the Piper family, scandalized though it is, becomes part of the community. The Gothic vision employed by Shelley, Radcliffe, and others, typically portrays the individual



isolated from society. MacDonald turns the tables and inverts the Gothic gaze: the disabled figure imposes her perspective on society rather than the other way around. As a result, the narrative perspective is empathetic, inclusive, fluid. Indeed, MacDonald and Lily are aligned in that they share the same goal of exposing and understanding a diverse range of people. Lily appears to know instinctively what MacDonald explicitly articulates: “nothing in life is not mixed” (688-89). People are varied, not different (693).

Such a position liberates disability from its previous Gothic archetypes, including the uncanny and the abject, and into a more empowered and complex framework. Admittedly, Lily appears at times to be dogged by uncanniness and abjection. She looks so much like Kathleen that, when she finds Rose in New York City, Rose’s neighbours believe that “[t]hat red-haired devil who ruined our Miss Rose has come back to life as a shrunk-down cripple” (665). She can never escape the sin of her parents’ incestuous relationship, she is burdened with limbo and with other Lily’s death, and, to top things off, she is disabled: “[t]he feelings of repulsion associated with the uncanny, *das Unheimlich*, the unfamiliar, are not unlike the emotions of the ‘normal’ when they are visualizing the disabled. . . . The disabled body is seen as *unheimlich* because it is the familiar gone wrong” (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 141; Davis’s emphases). Yet despite all these burdens, calling Lily uncanny and abject seems erroneous. To begin with, Lily’s disability is portrayed as a source of strength rather than oddness: her withered leg is a valiant limb. Also, whatever oddness her disability may signify is diminished by the oddness that surrounds her. There are many war veterans living in New Waterford, including James; there are people of several different races and cultures living there; and the Piper family is a veritable mosaic of races, backgrounds, and personalities. Calling Lily uncanny implies that everyone else is normal, or familiar, or the same, which is not true. To take matters further, Freud confesses that not

everything that seems uncanny is uncanny: “Not everything that fulfils this condition—not everything that recalls repressed desires and surmounted modes of thinking belonging to the prehistory of the individual and of the race—is on that account uncanny” (245). He then expounds on specific instances of uncanniness: “the condition under which the feeling of uncanniness arises” with the return of the dead “is unmistakable” (247). Frankenstein’s creature is an uncanny being: he is literally dead flesh brought back to life, and he frightens everyone he meets. Calling Lily uncanny because she is both living and dead ignores the very first line of the novel: “They’re all dead now” (MacDonald 1). In telling the story, Lily brings her family and her community back to life; in a sense, they are all the living dead, while Lily, the storyteller, lives. Rather than being a ghost, she manages ghosts. If Lily is in fact Kathleen reincarnated, or if she is a reincarnation of other Lily, then she may be considered an uncanny figure, but to say that she is nothing more than a doll-faced ghoul simplifies her character and reduces her humanity. MacDonald’s nuanced portrayal of Lily and Lily’s empathetic narrative authority diminish the frightful impact that the uncanny may induce. Indeed, Lily is not exactly frightening. While Mercedes and Frances distance themselves from Lily, they are not repelled by her. Frances, in fact, gives Lily the money she earns working at the speakeasy, which Lily takes on her journey to New York. While Frances appears ill at ease around Lily, her actions suggest that she loves Lily, and will do anything for her. The money is not for Lily to go to Lourdes; it is hers to do with as she wishes. It could be read as Frances’s response to Mercedes’s Catholic self-righteousness: the rebellious Frances sees Mercedes’s pity for what it is, and counters the Lourdes fund with money earned giving hand jobs (with her communion glove, no less) and singing bawdy songs.

Within the wider community of New Waterford, Lily does not repulse or frighten people; she does not incite aesthetic nervousness. Lily's relationship with Mr. MacIsaac, New Waterford's chemist, shows how not only how people accept her, but how she touches everyone she meets. Shortly after his wife's death, Mr. MacIsaac takes to drinking, and many people expect him "to follow soon at the rate he [is] going, constantly quietly soused" (MacDonald 375). MacIsaac, looking at the photographs of locals who have been killed in Europe (we might call them ghosts), mourns that he and his wife never had children. Lily says to him, "'I'll be your child'" (375). MacIsaac thanks her, and asks her to say a Hail Mary each time she passes his shop, which she does. MacIsaac then quits drinking, and lives "long enough to extend credit right through the Great Depression" (375). Lily helps lift his depression by managing his ghosts. Whether it is Mr. MacIsaac, strangers in the street, her own family, or her mother's former lover, Lily has a positive, even liberating, impact on whomever she meets.

With regard to the abject, another position conditioned in part by fear of death, Lily's journey to New York illustrates how she rejects this label. The story of Lily's birth is buried until such a time as she discovers it for herself. Until then, "the beneficent lie tells the truth about the child, which is 'you belong to this community'" (204). One of the key ideas behind the abject is the child's relationship with the mother. Kristeva states that the maternal body is an abjection that the child rejects: "Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body...[and] abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother" (79). When Lily discovers the true story of her birth, she does not recoil from it. She in fact seeks out her mother: with Kathleen's diary in hand and her old green dress hanging on her shoulders, Lily walks all the way from New Waterford to New York City so that she may meet Rose and finally understand her mother and the circumstances surrounding her

birth. When Rose sees her, she collapses into Lily; Lily, “in good shape from her walk” (MacDonald 666), holds Rose up as she grieves: “Rose soaks Lily’s neck and shoulder and groans into her ear as though something jagged and wrong were being drawn out of her body” (666). That “something jagged and wrong” is Rose’s love for Kathleen, whose name Rose speaks (667). Lily not only returns to Kathleen’s former home, she occupies the place her mother once did, as Rose’s companion. In a sense, Lily defies conditions of the abject and returns to the mother: she enfolds herself within her mother’s past while at the same time liberating herself and Rose from it. Whatever uncanny or abject significance Lily might have borne is diminished: she exorcises her own ghosts. From this moment on, she and Rose are no longer bound by any expectations. They are free. As she did for so many people in New Waterford, Lily comforts Rose; Rose welcomes her into her apartment, and the two live together the rest of their lives.

With her empathy, grace, and willingness to walk from New Waterford to New York City, Lily may seem like a disabled hero, a sort of Terry Fox-like figure. Indeed, it may seem that MacDonald substitutes one disability stereotype for another—in this case, the heroic super-crip for the innocent Tiny-Tim figure. A super-crip is a disabled person who is seen as heroic for overcoming his or her disability and doing extraordinary things (Goggin and Newell).

Christopher Reeve, the late *Superman* actor who, in 1995, became a quadriplegic, is often cited as an example of a super-crip and is said to have inspired the term (Goggin and Newell). In her article on Fox, Sally Chivers writes that, “[s]uper-crip representation, while inspiring, causes harm to circulating conceptions of lived disability in that it reinforces the idea that disabled people can only achieve *despite* their differences and also in that it sets an unreasonably high standard for usual activity on the part of disabled people” (“Ordinary People” 82; Chivers’s emphasis). Within the super-crip construct, a disabled person is worthy of attention only if he or

she does something extraordinary. While Lily's journey to New York City is extraordinary, and while her ability to empathize with virtually everyone is remarkable, she is not a super-crip, for she is able to do these things because of her disability rather than in spite of it. Chivers points out that Fox is viewed as heroic because he ran his Marathon of Hope despite having a prosthetic leg; indeed, "[t]he typical story of Fox focuses on his [cancer] rather than on his disability" (81). Lily's withered leg is not an obstacle for her to overcome. It is a source of strength.

Through Lily, MacDonald articulates a vision of Canada that soothes anxieties articulated in other Canadian Gothic works. From John Richardson's *Wacousta*, which Edwards calls "Canada's first Gothic novel" (2), to Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, "the Canadian gothic [is] an important textual mode for trying to come to terms with a postcolonial past and its multicultural and diasporic complexity" (xxi). In *Fall on Your Knees*, MacDonald not only confronts Gothic articulations of disability, but the way Canadians tend to think of disability. Through Lily, the novel "articulates the danger of repression and the pleasure of return, the repercussions of obedience and the inherent value in the recovery and maintenance of cultural diversity" (Baetz 80). As a disabled character, Lily offers a perspective that ultimately proves redeeming and liberating. Nothing is strange to her, for she has already endured strangeness. She is the very essence of fluid normalcy. She discourages pity and does not ignore the ghosts that haunt her and her family. She faces and even embraces them, and in doing so "encourages a Canadian reader's refusal to obliterate or ignore a so-called deficient cultural history" (80). With Lily, MacDonald establishes a precedent for Gothic (and, really, general) depictions of disability, providing an alternative literary model for addressing bodily difference. She also inserts disability into the conversation of Canadian diversity, suggesting that disabled people not only

make up a crucial part of Canada's populace, they have a voice that can impact the way one views the world.

## Chapter Five:

### Coping with a “Goddamn cuckoo’s nest”:

#### Mental Illness, Gender, and Fluidity in Lynn Coady’s *Strange Heaven*

Within both Atlantic-Canadian literature and literature exploring mental illness and institutionalization, Lynn Coady’s darkly comic 1998 novel *Strange Heaven* is something of an anomaly. The novel “challenges essentialist constructions of the East” (Wyle, “As For Me and Me Arse” 88) that portray Nova Scotians, specifically Cape Bretoners, “as a hardy, simple, innocent people, close to the land and unravaged by modernity” (86). Authors such as Jeremy Akerman and Alistair MacLeod have been responsible for creating what Harold Barratt calls “Cape Breton’s mystique” (191), which is the result of authors building their stories around the island’s landscape (191). Coady deviates from these expectations by turning her eye away from landscape and toward the mindscape of her characters. The novel’s protagonist, seventeen-year-old Bridget Murphy, is institutionalized for depression shortly after giving up her baby for adoption; she spends the first half of the novel in a psych ward, where she must deal with obstreperous wardmates, and the second half with her idiosyncratic family. The novel is a comic departure from more serious explorations of mental illness and institutionalization, such as Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, and Anthony Burgess’s *A*

*Clockwork Orange*. Just as MacDonald confronts prior Gothic depictions of disability, Coady challenges previous portrayals of madness. Unlike these novels, which Coady explicitly alludes to and which tend to fix mental health and mental illness within a firm dichotomy, *Strange Heaven* blurs the distinction between these conditions, and ultimately ridicules institutionalization as a response to mental illness. The novel's language and characterizations make it difficult to tell who is rational, who is mad, and who is simply eccentric. It cultivates an atmosphere of absurdity similar to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "we're all mad here" (Carroll 57). By blurring the boundary between mental health and mental illness, *Strange Heaven* exhibits fluid normalcy; however, the palpable gender and age divisions in Coady's Cape Breton mitigate whatever inclusivity it may offer. Coady's Cape Breton is a patriarchal society that favours adults; as a result, young people, particularly young women, are often disempowered. As Wyile puts it, "Coady's portrait of an oppressive, patriarchal small town, and the self-destructive adolescent histrionics its lack of opportunity breeds, lends itself to the obverse of the paradigm of Folk innocence: pervasive constructions of the East Coast as Canada's social, economic, and cultural basket case" ("As For Me and Me Arse" 94). Young women have few prospects, and their relationships are unstable, unfulfilling, and even dangerous. Bridget appears to be disabled more by her gender and age than by her mental illness; the social obstacles put forth by the men in Cape Breton disable her, and she escapes or rather alleviates her disability by embracing her madness.

The fluidity of normalcy helps situate Coady's novel within a broader Canadian context, alleviating concerns about whether the division between mental health and mental illness can be blurred within only a distinct and eccentric society such as Cape Breton. Although Coady deviates from Cape Breton literary tradition in focusing squarely on her characters' mindscapes,



she does not appear to deviate from the notion that Cape Breton is a unique society within Canada. Bridget's relationship with Alan Voorland helps illustrate this notion. Alan is an older man from Guelph, Ontario who works in the local mill. During his off-hours, he "wander[s] around town examining and exclaiming at everything like an anthropologist" (Coady 31). Coady's language distances Alan from Cape Breton; indeed, her depiction of Alan suggests that people who are not born in Cape Breton do not belong there, that non-Cape Bretoners cannot enter into its unique mindscape. Barratt writes that "[i]t is not an exaggeration to speak of a Cape Breton nationalism" (175), and with her portrayal of Alan and Bridget's family and friends, Coady appears to concur. Yet, as mentioned in the Introduction, reading the novel from a position of fluid normalcy suggests that the novel acts as a buffer zone between the reader and the characters and their settings. The reader may be situated anywhere, and if normalcy is fluid, then Cape Breton's regionalism, or nationalism, as Barratt calls it, is a unique element of Canada's character rather than an exclusionary aspect. Nationality, as indicated in the Vanderhaeghe chapter, is a fluid concept. It can be re-worked and re-imagined (Bhabha, "Introduction" 1). While Alan does not become part of Cape Breton's unique brand of eccentricity—in fact, he leaves after a local murder takes place (Coady 37)—this idea of fluid eccentricity which accommodates mental illness can be re-imagined elsewhere. Harry Vincent's ability to alter the meaning of his disability, masculinity, and nationality can be replicated, as can Lily Piper's ability to empathize. *Strange Heaven* provides a model of fluid normalcy that recognizes mental illness as a part of society rather than just a stigmatized condition. This model of thought reflects the aims of disability theorists, Mad Pride activists, and mental health organizations.

Within this study, *Strange Heaven* is the only novel that focuses on mental illness. The other novels concentrate on the body or, in the case of Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, present intellectual disability as physically discernible. To include a novel focusing on mental illness implies that mental illness constitutes a type of disability. Some scholars such as Margaret Price use "mental illness" and "mental disability" interchangeably (298), emphasizing that mental illness can have a disabling impact. Depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, and other such conditions can be disabling in and of themselves, and social obstacles can exacerbate these conditions, deepening one's experience of disability. The correlation between mental illness and disability poses certain difficulties, though, for several scholars have disputed such a correlation. Bradley Lewis states that "[s]ome disability advocates continue to harbor sanist style associations toward mental difference and do not wish to be associated or 'tarnished'" by mental illness (117). Conversely, people with mental illnesses "do not see their mental difference as a disability" (117)—that is, as an obstacle to participating in daily life. The terms used to describe mental illness make its definition as a disability even more difficult. Such terms include "psychiatric disability, mental illness, cognitive disability...mental health service user (or consumer), neurodiversity, neuroatypical, psychiatric system survivor, crazy, and mad" (Price 298; Price's emphases). In Canada, mental illness is discussed in a variety of contexts. Policy discussions and government research identify mental illness as an "'invisible disability'" (Environics Research Group quoted in Prince, *Absent Citizens* 36). The Bell "Let's Talk" program, one of the most prominent mental illness discussion forums in the country, also identifies mental illness as a disability ("Our Initiatives"). Yet the term "mental illness" remains contentious in that it "introduces a discourse of wellness/unwellness into the notion of madness; its complement is *mental health*, the term of choice for the medical community as well as

insurance companies and social support services” (Price 300; Price’s emphasis). The idea of wellness and unwellness implies that “a mad person needs to be ‘cured’ by some means” (300), an idea that diminishes the mentally ill person’s agency by casting him or her “into the ‘sick role’” (302). It also conforms to the medical model of disability, which disability scholars have shown to be harmful and outdated.

In the case of *Strange Heaven*, the idea of fluid normalcy helps determine whether mental illness is a disability. In Coady’s Cape Breton, it is difficult to distinguish between mental illness, eccentricity, and reason; therefore, in this fluid state, mental illness does not disable Bridget. It is part of the status quo. (In a society in which normalcy is truly fluid, there would be no such thing as disability.) At one point Bridget compares the mentally ill teenagers on the psych ward, who suffer from such conditions as depression and anorexia, to the terminally ill kids in the nearby hospital, who suffer from such conditions as leukemia and cystic fibrosis. To her, mental illness is not a “real” illness (84) in that it does not appear to have the same impact as a terminal disease. At times, Coady’s comical language appears to confirm the supposed triviality of mental illness: among other terms, she uses “loony” (41), “madhouse” (25), and “[g]oddamn cuckoo’s nest” (132) to discuss mental illness. Yet mental illness has a palpable effect on the novel’s characters. While the novel is comic, it is darkly comic: depression and death permeate the text. We are meant to laugh uncomfortably. Both Wyile (“As For Me and Me Arse” 93) and David Creelman (189) use the word “nihilistic” when discussing the novel, and Coady’s allusions to *The Bell Jar*, *Rosemary’s Baby*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Aliens*, and the Holocaust enhance the text’s grimness.

The way the novel portrays mental illness presents a different way of thinking about fluid normalcy. While MacDonald exudes fluidity through her empathetic narrator, Coady, who

narrates Bridget's story through a comic yet empathetic third-person narrator, presents fluidity as a part of Cape Breton's mindscape. Fluidity in this case is a condition of the mind, not the body; that is, it seeks to include people with different mental states as well as different types of bodies. Through Bridget's experience on the psych ward at the Four South children's hospital, Coady satirizes the psychiatric system while exemplifying fluidity, at least in terms of mental health. Bridget's time on the ward is meant to shelter her from her family and community while she recovers from depression (Coady 93); however, her institutionalization is quickly revealed as absurd, for not only are the ward's walls permeable, her wardmates are just as eccentric and obstreperous as her family. In this way, *Strange Heaven* deviates from past depictions of institutionalization. Kesey, Plath, and Burgess present institutionalization as consistent with Foucault's chilling summation:

*In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman: on one hand, the man of reason delegates the physician to madness, thereby authorizing a relation only through the abstract universality of disease; on the other, the man of madness communicates with society only by the intermediary of an equally abstract reason which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity. As for a common language, there is no such thing; or rather, there is no such thing any longer; the constitution of madness as a mental illness...affords the evidence of a broken dialogue....* (x; Foucault's emphases)

To preserve order in society, which is to say to maintain the prevalent power structure that excludes difference and purportedly keeps people safe, the mentally ill and the rational must be separated. Real and imaginative walls must be built so there is no communion between them. As

a result of such segregation, “incarcerated populations in institutions...are subjected to stripping of their identities and to processes of dehumanization. Also, especially for people with intellectual and psychiatric disabilities, their citizenship and personhood is questioned” (Goffman quoted in Ben-Moshe 135). Kesey, Plath, and Burgess vividly convey such dehumanization in their novels.<sup>4</sup> In *Strange Heaven*, however, the dialogue between the mad and the rational is so lively that they are difficult to distinguish. The walls of the psych ward are quite porous: “Because everyone on the ward [is] allowed to dress in their own clothes rather than hospital pyjamas, it [is] a small matter to simply shove your ID bracelet under your shirt sleeve and go wandering. And nobody [says] boo” (Coady 57). Bridget’s wardmate Mona is manic-depressive and given to dramatic mood swings; Byron, an acne-ridden megalomaniac, frequently expounds on his prodigious intellect and Bridget and Mona’s apparent attraction to him; and Maria, a fifteen-year-old anorexic, has rotten teeth and hair that give her the appearance of “an old, abandoned doll” (Coady 62). In the Murphy family, there is Uncle Albert, a “raving old fart” (93) who curses liberally and “always talk[s] about where people goddamn well belonged” (15); Uncle Rollie, a “retarded” man (75); and Margaret P., Bridget’s senile, bedridden grandmother. Although these characters’ conditions are not the same, they nevertheless make it difficult to discern what the standards for institutionalization are. Whether on the ward or at home, madness is all Bridget sees; therefore, the walls separating madness and reason are ineffectual.

Four South’s staff members, namely Nurse Gabby and Dr. Solomon, are just as ineffectual. As with other novels exploring institutionalization, authority manifests as medical professionals: doctors, nurses, and orderlies. “The power of normalization is cloaked by medical

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<sup>4</sup> In Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Randal Patrick McMurphy is given electroshock treatment and eventually lobotomized; in *The Bell Jar*, Plath’s Esther Greenwood endures electroconvulsive treatment and insulin shocks in two different institutions; and in *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess’s protagonist Alex undergoes brutal negative psychological conditioning to diminish his criminality.

notions of illness,” Liat Ben-Moshe writes (136). Wylie calls the Four South psych ward “an alienating, pathological institutional culture” that “evokes and alludes to” Plath’s, Burgess’s, and Kesey’s novels (“As For Me and Me Arse” 90). While *Strange Heaven* certainly alludes to these novels, the Four South psych ward does not quite evoke their grim environs; rather, these novels serve as counterpoints to Coady’s absurdist portrayal. Unlike the wardmates in Burgess’s and Kesey’s novels, who must wear uniforms and hospital pyjamas, Bridget and her cohorts are for the most part free to do as they please. The institution does not threaten their sense of identity. Whatever punishments the staff doles out—lost television and video game privileges, for instance (Coady 57)—are quite mild, reminiscent of parents punishing their children. As shown below, adult authority may be read as disabling for young people. The most coercive practice Coady details is recovered anorexic Kelly being force-fed with a tube through her nose (45), a practice done not to punish her, but to keep her alive and healthy. Electroshock and insulin therapy are nowhere to be found. Within and perhaps because of the comparatively loose institutional atmosphere, Bridget openly mocks Nurse Gabby, calling her “Nurse Ratched,” which Gabby and the other patients interpret as “Nurse Ratshit” (19). Here, Coady fully displays her satirical nuances: she takes the name of Kesey’s infamously rigid nurse and turns it into a joke, easing the tension and demonstrating the distance between *Strange Heaven* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. The contrast deepens with Gabby’s reaction: Gabby is easily offended by swear words and sarcasm, making it odd that she works in a psychiatric facility, where such language is spoken on a daily basis. She is not the imposingly efficient figure that her nickname suggests; she is thin-skinned and, at worst, incompetent. When Bridget asks for Epsom salts to help cure her constipation, Gabby makes a joke instead of helping her: ““Aw. That’s what’s got you bummed out?”” (46). The staff’s ineptitude bemuses Bridget: “Why? Why would they refuse

her Epsom salts? It [is] not as if she ha[s] asked for morphine” (46). “Hauling her hundred pound arse around the kitchen,” Bridget feels “that the ward and its methods [a]re as arbitrary as the days [a]re long” (46). The ward’s arbitrariness denotes a departure from the strict schedules that Nurse Ratched and her staff embody, and Dr. Solomon’s treatment methods seem equally arbitrary. Bridget quickly catches on to Dr. Solomon’s “psychiatrist trick[s]” (50) and often seems to guide Dr. Solomon rather than the other way around. In an attempt to show Bridget how far she has progressed, Dr. Solomon plays for Bridget a video of the preliminary interview from when Bridget was first admitted. The experience is painful: Bridget balks at how fat she was and how uncomfortable the interview made her (52). When the video ends, Dr. Solomon appears to expect Bridget to have an epiphany, or at the very least register some kind of growth: “‘Doesn’t seem like the same person, does it?’ [says] Solomon, encouragement of some kind in her voice” (52). Dr. Solomon seeks validation of her treatment methods. She wants approval from Bridget, who, mentally speaking, remains the same. In this instance, not only is Dr. Solomon ineffectual, she has forgotten that her purpose as a psychiatrist is to help others, not to help herself.

Throughout the novel, it often seems as though one’s age can be a disabling obstacle. Indeed, the plight of adolescents is one of the novel’s central concerns. Early on, people in Cape Breton are reported as asking “What [is] happening to the young people?” (9). The question arises after the death of Bridget’s schoolmate, Jennifer MacDonnell, who is murdered by her boyfriend Archie Shearer (7). This incident, which prompts Alan Voorland to leave, not only reinforces Cape Breton’s aggressive patriarchal hegemony; it also informs the novel’s depressive subtext and highlights the troubles of its young people. Like the other Maritime provinces, Nova Scotia has “struggle[d] against the economic hardships of underdevelopment and

underemployment” (Creelman 3), a hard fact that Coady adeptly captures. Cape Breton teenagers have few prospects for the future, and young women like Bridget have even fewer options. Menial jobs are all that is available: Mark, Bridget’s ex-boyfriend, works at Home Hardware while Bridget works in her father Robert’s shop, selling his and Rollie’s woodcarvings (Coady 115). Such dismal prospects lead to discontent, which results in or at least deepens mental illness and, at its worst, leads to murder. When Bridget is in Four South, she notices that “most of the people on the psychiatric ward, with only a couple of exceptions, [are] in their teens” (84). The adults, it seems, are immune to madness, or at least to institutionalization. Uncle Albert is a good example. In one scene, while Bridget is still in Four South, he calls the ward asking to speak to her: “of course the nurses, being psychiatric nurses, [aren’t] as quick to respond in the way that any one else in the same situation would, namely by hanging up on the raving old fart” (93). The phrase “raving old fart” reveals a few key tensions. The word “raving” implies that Albert may not be in control of his faculties, that he may in fact be mentally unstable. “[O]ld fart” is more comical, a dismissive phrase aimed at an elderly person. Put together, the phrase prompts the question of why is Albert not on the psych ward if he is a raving old fart. The answer perhaps lies within the word “old.” The ward is not the place for adults. For Cape Breton adults, especially men, mental illness, eccentricity, and reason are interchangeable. Indeed, raving often appears to be a manner of speaking, as Albert and Robert demonstrate. This manner explains why Robert can get away with cursing at a priest and why Margaret P. remains at home while Bridget is institutionalized. It also underscores the relationship between young people and adults: adults determine the standards of mental health to which young people must conform. Within the institution, Dr. Solomon, Nurse Gabby, and the staff determine how Bridget and her wardmates should behave, and outside the institution Bridget’s parents and Uncle Albert do the same thing.



Cursing at priests and banging bedpans against the wall is perfectly acceptable, but depression, anorexia, and megalomania—that is, clinically defined conditions arising from what Robert calls the “commie fag” discipline of psychiatry (127)—are not. In a way, Bridget is a female Holden Caulfield trying to negotiate the adolescent and adult worlds, except she cannot save the children from running through the rye and over the cliff (Salinger 173). She does not have to; everyone around her appears to have gone over. She can only try and save herself.

By ridiculing Four South and its staff, and by blurring the line between mental illness and mental health, Coady criticizes institutionalization as a response to mental illness. In this way, she aligns her novel not only with Foucault’s aim to diminish the boundary between madness and reason (ix), but with disability scholars who advocate for the restructuring and even abolishment of psychiatric institutions. Lewis states that while perceptions of mental illness have progressed over the last thirty years, “psychiatry has gone in the exact opposite direction” (122). He points to the “Mad Pride” movement as an example of progress,<sup>5</sup> and to psychiatry’s reliance on drugs and institutionalization as evidence of regression (122). Institutionalization appears to exacerbate mental illness rather than resolve it because, like the penal system, it is founded on principles of segregation and punishment rather than rehabilitation (Ben-Moshe 134). Coady juxtaposes the Four South psych ward with those depicted in Plath’s, Burgess’s, and Kesey’s novels to fully expose the folly of institutionalization. In these novels, institutions are either too brutal or too weak; either way they are ineffective. Bridget goes home still constipated and still depressed. She has neither improved nor regressed.

Solutions to mental illness are never simple and, as *Strange Heaven* shows, community- and family-based therapies are not always the best alternatives. Chris Drinkwater states that

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<sup>5</sup> The Mad Pride movement “is an international coalition devoted to resisting and critiquing clinician-centred psychiatric systems, finding alternative and peer-run approaches to mental health recovery, and helping those who wish to do so minimize their involvement with current psychiatric institutions” (Lewis 115).

“supported-living arrangements exemplify not an emancipation, nor even a humanitarian reform, as much as a new dispersal of power relationship, one that is entirely in keeping with the modern drive to greater efficiency” (229). When she leaves Four South, Bridget remains adrift, subject to the power structures that surround her. After meeting Dr. Solomon, Uncle Albert offers a frank appraisal: “‘Twat. Solomon? Jew. Ask her when she’s gonna send you home where you goddamn well belong’” (Coady 15). By pairing sexism with anti-Semitism, Albert displays the patriarchal Christian myopia that governs Cape Breton society. With behaviour like his, it is unclear whether Bridget belongs at home, particularly since she was initially institutionalized to escape her family. Wyile’s interrogation of Gwendolyn Davies’s notion of the “home place” (Davies 193), which Wyile argues is “a key trope in Maritime literature” (“As For Me and Me Arse” 86), highlights Bridget’s dilemma:

the Murphy home falls short (to say the least) of providing a nurturing, rehabilitative atmosphere. This is not, at first glance anyway, Davies’ Maritime “home place,” “a symbol of cultural continuity and psychological identification in the face of social fragmentation, outmigration, and a continuing hardscrabble economy”.... (Wyile 90)

In the Murphy household, the only form of continuity manifests in its similarities to Four South. Bridget’s mother calls their home a “‘madhouse’” (Coady 25) and her father calls it a “‘[g]oddamn cuckoo’s nest’” (132). As for her state of mind, Bridget continues to experience social fragmentation. Her development as a person is suppressed by her family and community, and her constipation acts as a bodily metaphor—one might call it a narrative prosthesis—for her suppression of her sense of self and of all the things that bother her. Her father’s reaction upon her return captures Bridget’s relationship with him and the rest of the family:

He had the cure for stubbornness, he believed. Stubbornness, in his mind, was eminently curable when Robert Michael Murphy was present to take it in hand. You kick their shitty arses into gear is what you do. Bridget was too stubborn to sleep. Bridget was too stubborn to take a dump. Bridget was keeping it all inside out of sheer perversity.... Bridget's arse needed kicking into gear no matter what the commie fag psychiatric sons of whores might have to say about it. (127)

To Mr. Murphy, it is Bridget's fault she is still depressed. From his privileged position as a Cape Breton male with no apparent knowledge of how mental illness works, his solution is to kick Bridget's arse, which will knock loose her backed-up, constipated self and allow her to heal. He casts responsibility onto her instead of acknowledging the possibility that his attitude might play a part. By doing so, he assumes a "well/unwell" perspective of mental health while reiterating Cape Breton's cultural myopia. His characterization of psychiatry as a "commie fag" endeavour suggests that psychiatry lies outside Cape Breton's heterosexual, Roman Catholic, and apparently capitalistic<sup>6</sup> hegemony. Even though he seems aware of how mad the Murphy household is—"Goddamn cuckoo's nest"—its madness is familiar. It is familiar because he is part of its *discordia concors*. As a male, he helps perpetuate and maintain this state. His vehement ranting, Margaret P.'s banging her bedpan against her bedroom wall and cursing her family members, Rollie's repetitive singing, and Albert's raving are all part of the strange, or mad, heaven that is the Murphy household.

Both the Murphy household and Cape Breton's broader social structure disable Bridget and other women. As Wyile writes, the novel "emphasizes the challenges of growing up female

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<sup>6</sup> Mr. Murphy shows his entrepreneurial side when he "[s]hrewdly exploit[s] the notion of Rollie as an *idiot savant*, as well as tourists' readiness to conflate price with quality" (Wyile, "As For Me and Me Arse" 99; Wyile's emphases) and sells Rollie's religious wooden sculptures (Coady 75).

in a small Maritime community” (“As For Me and Me Arse” 88). While Bridget’s mental illness does not disable her, she does experience disability as a result of the social obstacles presented by Cape Breton’s patriarchal culture. Iris Marion Young offers an astute analysis of the disabling effects of a patriarchal society:

The modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality...are, I claim, common to the existence of women in contemporary society to one degree or another. They have their source, however, in neither anatomy nor physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine essence. Rather, they have their source in the particular *situation* of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society. Women in sexist society are physically handicapped.

Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. (42; Young’s emphasis)

A patriarchal society disables women by restricting spaces and determining acceptable behaviours. Young’s statement that women are physically handicapped in a society that favours men helps frame Bridget’s constipation in another manner. In addition to functioning as a metaphor for everything she suppresses, Bridget’s constipation could be read as a physical manifestation of her disablement as well as a metaphor for her potential as a young woman. Cape Breton’s patriarchal society is stifling, or plugging, whatever potential she may have. Young’s description appears to cohere with the social model of disability, which states that a person with a physical or mental impairment acquires a disability only when faced with a social obstacle (Tom Shakespeare 215). “Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies,” Garland-Thomson writes: “Both the female and

the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 19). Women in Coady’s Cape Breton encounter many difficulties: limited employment prospects, lean pickings for friends, and abusive and even murderous boyfriends.

Bridget’s social circle, particularly Mark, presents obstacles to her recovery; that is, they stunt, or constipate, Bridget’s growth. Her friends, if they can be called that, seek out her company when she gets out of the ward, and she is tossed right back into the adolescent histrionics she had left behind. “Bridget’s plight,” Wylie writes, “feeds her friends’ craving for melodrama and excitement”; as a result, “opting out is difficult and unpopular” (“As For Me and Me Arse” 91). Bridget is stuck: “She c[an] never get out of the house enough, and for a while it seem[s] as if Mark [i]s her only way out of the house. Then it bec[omes] the case that she c[an’t] get away from Mark fast enough....There w[ill] always be people, inside and outside, always at her” (Coady 121). Life for Bridget reflects Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous phrase: “Hell is—other people” (47). There are several eccentric, even mad people in her social circle: the moody and possessive Mark; Chantal, whom Bridget thinks of as “a loony” because in grade ten Chantal once “waited for a rival after school with a pair of scissors and then jumped out and grabbed a handful of the girl’s hair, yanked the girl towards her so as to get hold of an even bigger handful, and then cut all the hair off as close to the scalp as she could manage” (Coady 41); and Tina, an older “midget” with two full-sized children (34). From a disability perspective, Tina especially stands out. Like Mark, Chantal, Stephen, Heidi, and all of Bridget’s other friends, Tina is part of their social circle despite or perhaps because of her oddness. The guys call her “Troll” and make fun of her because of her age and because she wears “such tight clothes and ha[s] so many

tattoos covering her little body” (34). She appears to provide Bridget with a glimpse of what her future might have been had she kept her baby. Tina is a single mother who eventually loses her children after her three-year-old, Christa, falls out the window (34). The novel’s pronounced juxtaposition of the sacred and profane, first indicated in its title, come to bear here: Tina is marked not just by her size and gait—she “c[an’t] walk well” (34)—but by her tattoos. She is meant to stand out. Her daughter, whose name bears obvious reference to Christ, is described as angelic, “with gold curls and round blue eyes, wearing an innocent white nightgown with angels on it” (34). When Christa falls out the window, she takes Tina’s state of grace with her. Within Cape Breton’s patriarchal world, Tina is a fallen woman because she has failed in her role as a mother. Adrienne Rich’s discussion of the female body helps frame Tina’s situation:

The female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, “the devil’s gateway.” On the other hand, as mother woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood—that same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification for life.

(15)

As a marked woman and a failed mother, Tina signifies the female struggle in Cape Breton. She is a narrative prosthesis, an ominous metaphor that encapsulates Bridget’s fears of living permanently inside Cape Breton and outside a state of grace.

From a young age, Bridget aspires to maintain a state of grace, which, as Tina shows, proves virtually impossible for women in Cape Breton. Bridget hopes to be a priest (Coady 13), then a saint (17), and then Jesus (155): “A religion teacher had told her that Jesus was perfect, and the more perfect Bridget was the more like Jesus she would be” (155-56). Her aspirations are

spoiled by her oncoming womanhood: “once Bridget hit fourteen, saw the lumps pushing their way up under her shirt...started cramping and bleeding, began to witness her parents’ horror...she knew she had left the state of grace and could get away with nothing any more” (156). If the fluidity of Cape Breton’s mindscape extended to the relationships between its men and women, the horror of menstruation would cease to exist. Bridget’s holy ambitions are ruined by womanhood, particularly her pregnancy; whatever sacredness she may have possessed as a child has been profaned. She is fallen. In this manner, Bridget’s story loosely parallels not just Tina’s, but also Rosemary Woodhouse’s. Twice Coady alludes to *Rosemary’s Baby*, in which the Catholic Rosemary gives birth to the Anti-Christ. *Rosemary’s Baby* frames Bridget’s story from both mental health and gender perspectives. Rosemary Woodhouse is (rightly) driven to paranoia and virtually imprisoned by her husband, her doctor, and her neighbours, all of whom deceive Rosemary so that Satan can conceive a child with her. Wyile identifies “Bridget’s sense of being scrutinized, assessed, [and] under surveillance” both on and off the ward (“As For Me and Me Arse” 91), language that could describe Rosemary’s situation as well. “[T]he object of discursive scrutiny and definition” (Berenstein 55), Rosemary is never at ease. She cannot relate to anyone around her; nor, it seems, can Bridget. Their so-called madness stems from their unease, their disjointedness within the patriarchies that surround them. Rich offers insight that helps frame Rosemary’s and Bridget’s discomfort:

The dominant male culture, in separating man as knower from both woman and from nature as the objects of knowledge, evolved certain intellectual polarities which still have the power to blind our imaginations. Any deviance from a quality valued by that culture can be dismissed as negative: where “rationality” is posited as sanity, legitimate method, “real thinking,” any alternative, intuitive,

supersensory, or poetic knowledge is labeled “irrational.” If we listen well to the connotations of “irrational” they are highly charged: we hear overtones of “hysteria” (that disease once supposed to arise in the womb), of “madness”....

(46)

A patriarchal culture determines what is rational, and anything derived from intuition, such as maternal instinct, is irrational, mad, mentally ill. Rosemary’s husband dismisses her suspicions about their neighbours being Satanists, telling her ““you’ve got yourself worked up enough....It’s not good for you *or* the baby”” (Levin 180), and after Rosemary gives birth, he tells her she had ““Prepartum I-don’t-know, some kind of hysteria”” (222). Like Rosemary, Bridget, whose family is Catholic, gives birth, but due to her age she must give the baby up for adoption. Although she has not been deceived or violated the way Rosemary has, Bridget’s motherhood, which patriarchy has determined to be her primary role, has been undermined and taken away from her; as a result, she is unmoored, and apathetically drifts through life. Rich’s notions of the female body apply here: the female body is both profane and sacred. Female destiny proceeds through the body. Bridget and Rosemary experience what may be called a variation of aesthetic nervousness: they are discomfited by patriarchy’s disabling influence. As women living in patriarchal societies, Bridget and Rosemary are expected to fulfill their destinies as mothers, but they must do so at the right time. Rosemary, a married woman in her twenties, fits the profile of a young mother, even if her child is the son of Satan; Bridget, an unmarried girl of seventeen, cannot keep her baby, even though Mark wants to. “Motherhood is ‘sacred,’” Rich writes, “so long as its offspring are ‘legitimate’” (24). Despite “[e]verybody kn[owing] that the girl [i]sn’t supposed to dump the guy after getting pregnant” (Coady 90), Bridget dumps Mark and “Mark’s reaction to her rejection exemplifies the town’s largely proprietorial and patriarchal attitude



towards relationships” (Wyile, “As For Me and Me Arse” 91). Bridget must conform to what her family and community want, but the trouble is everyone wants different things: her family wants her to give up the baby and avoid Mark and her friends; Mark wants to be with Bridget and the baby; and Bridget’s friends want her to get back together with Mark. Bridget ultimately listens to her family, but continues her fall from grace, distancing herself from Mark and her friends and struggling to recover. Margaret P. asks Bridget if she is “still in purgatory” (Coady 97), a surprisingly lucid question from the senile grandmother, for Bridget does indeed appear to exist in a purgatorial state, a state of uncertainty and insecurity.

To save herself, Bridget must try to return to something at least resembling a state of grace, which is to say a state of sanity. It will not be easy: not only is she a young woman in a discouraging patriarchal society, but she has cultivated a profound apathy from which she must rouse herself. Her apathy is understood as a symptom of postpartum depression (50), but it can also be read as a deliberate or subconscious refusal to participate in daily life, a psychological defence against whatever impact her wardmates, family, or friends may have. This strategy, unfortunately, malfunctions, though to her benefit. When she returns home, Bridget receives the Epsom salts she has needed for the last four months, and upon taking them “The day [goes] black” and she “[can]not leave the bathroom for hours” (122). This hours-long bathroom session marks the beginning of Bridget’s purgation, a unique penance she must endure to return to a state of at least semi-grace. As mentioned earlier, her constipation is a metaphor for everything she represses. After she relieves herself, she begins the process of extricating herself from Mark’s orbit, manoeuvring through her friends’ pleas for them to get back together.

This process culminates in a confrontation with Mark near the end of the novel. The town is struck by a snowstorm and Bridget and Mark and their friend Stephen, all of whom have been

drinking, huddle inside the local post office to ride it out. With the emergency lights glaring down on them, Mark stakes his claim: “If Bridget thought she could live in the same town with him and do whatever she pleased and fuck around with the likes of Dan the big fat fairy Sutherland and Troy fucking Bezanson she was fucking crazy” (191). “Mark’s concern,” Wylie states, “is not reconciliation but power” (“As For Me and Me Arse” 93). Bridget responds by patiently hearing Mark out. ““Do whatever you want,”” she says, feeling “suddenly benevolent and saint-like. She [is] allowing herself to be yelled at and abused just to appease the tortured soul across from her. It [is] for the greater good....She [is] above it all. She [is] like Saint Catherine of the Wheel” (Coady 192). Bridget assumes the saintly role she envisioned for herself when she was younger. Mark continues his diatribe, but Bridget maintains her patience. Earlier in the novel, shortly before giving birth, Bridget’s aunt and cousins “took her to see Mother Teresa when the ancient saint came to visit....All in white, Mother Teresa stretched her tiny hands out to everyone and said, ‘If people do not want the little babies, I tell them, give them all to me! I will take all the little babies’” (17). This visit inspires Bridget to become a saint, and this image persists during her confrontation with Mark. Mark says he is angry, and Bridget endures his outrage with saintly patience (193). As per Matthew 19:14, she suffers the child, so to speak. She then completes her purgation, and vomits up all the contents of the night’s festivities (193). This “physical punctuation of the exchange,” Wylie writes, “figuratively suggests that she has purged herself of [Mark] at last” (93). Her purgation is complete. She has extricated herself from Mark and her social circle, and returns home. There, she finds her father standing in the hallway in his underwear waiting for her (194). “Bridget,” Coady writes, “could only think to tell him she’d gone outside for a while, which was the truth. But it didn’t matter because she wasn’t even there anymore” (194). There are two ways to read this cryptic passage: one, Bridget is not there

anymore because her father does not acknowledge her due to Bridget neglecting her grandmother, who had been left in Bridget's care (194); or two, Bridget is not there anymore because she has distanced herself not just from her social circle, but from her family. She has reclaimed, or begun to reclaim, her sanity. She does this by embracing her so-called mental illness, by embracing her apathy, by distancing herself, if not totally disengaging, from all relationships. Instead of resisting nihilism the way Wyile (93) and Creelman (192) say she does, Bridget embraces it, enfolds herself within it. The novel's final lines indicate such an embrace:

If [Margaret P.] did die, she would of course be pleased—seeing all the cherubs flying about, and being with the old people who were once her friends, and meeting God who would remind her of her father. God would remind everybody of their fathers. And Jesus would remind them of their fathers, too. Margaret P. would take one good look around and know that it had all been worthwhile.

But she would not die, Bridget knew. Because there wasn't any of that. (Coady 196)

Bridget rejects her grandmother's view, along with its patriarchal nuances. There is no heaven. There are no friends awaiting Margaret P. There is no paternal God. There is only this mad heaven here in Cape Breton. As a result, Margaret P. will go on living, contributing to the madness of the Murphy household. Bridget has solved her ambivalence by embracing her own peculiar madness, which is both borne out of and different from Cape Breton's. To her, a nihilistic perspective that does not include God and in which nothing matters seems the sanest mindset to take. She becomes Saint Bridget the Apathetic, who sees through the absurdity of Cape Breton society.

Through Bridget, Coady appears to purport key values of the Mad Pride movement. Bridget rejects the individualism that “refers to the perspective that disability is a ‘personal tragedy’” and “undergirds a ‘hegemony of disability’ which views disability [and madness] as ‘pathological and problem-oriented’” (Oliver quoted in Lewis 116). She distances herself from institutionalization and medicalization and challenges her community’s restrictive notions of normalcy. By embracing her apathy, Bridget embraces not individualism, but individuality—that is, her own perspective and experience of the world. She separates herself from others and, by doing so, appears to achieve—not harmony, but certainty. In a small yet significant way, she takes a step toward what Foucault calls the “*zero point*,” the point “*in the course of madness at which madness is an undifferentiated experience, a not yet divided experience of division itself*” (ix; Foucault’s emphases). The zero point may be read as fluid normalcy in the realm of madness. Instead of fighting her mental illness, Bridget finds comfort in it. It helps her process the strange heaven that surrounds her. She does not quite reach the zero point, though. As a person who is mentally ill, she is part of Cape Breton’s mad mindscape; as a young woman, she resists and rejects Cape Breton’s patriarchy, which disables her. The experience of division remains. While fluid normalcy may apply to the novel’s conception of madness, it does not apply to its gender politics, which posit a clear patriarchy. Overall, *Strange Heaven* comically and vividly illustrates how various social structures can both enable and disable a person.

Chapter Six:  
Canadian Deafness and the “[H]earingness”  
of Narrative in Frances Itani’s *Deafening*

In her 2003 novel *Deafening*, Frances Itani provides a rich, detailed portrait of cultural Deafness and Canada’s experience in World War One. Set in Ontario at the beginning of the twentieth century and then progressing through the war, the novel follows young Grania O’Neill, who, deafened by scarlet fever, develops her voice through both auditory means and American Sign Language. Grania attends the Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and later meets a hearing man named Jim; she and Jim marry shortly before Jim leaves for Europe, where he experiences the cacophonous, deafening noise of battle. By setting Grania’s story and the story of Deaf culture against the backdrop of World War One, Itani reflects the narrative of what Tim Cook calls “Canada’s coming-of-age” (504). Several Canadian authors have written about World War One; Eric Thompson asserts that the works of Peregrine Acland, Charles Yale Harrison, Philip Child, and Timothy Findley “constitute the best fiction by Canadian writers about the experiences of Canadian fighting soldiers in the Great War of 1914-1918” (81). Whether it is Acland’s Nietzschean narrative *All Else is Folly* or Findley’s postmodernist exploration *The Wars*, the Great War constitutes a major subject in Canadian fiction. In addition to Hugh MacLennan’s *Barometer Rising*, Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*, Jane Urquhart’s *The Stone*

*Carvers*, and Jack Hodgins's *Broken Ground, Deafening* adds to the canon of Canadian Great War fiction in a refreshing manner. When Jim goes to Europe to serve as a stretcher-bearer, Itani juxtaposes the jarring violence of war against Grania's silent, peaceful world in Canada. Itani depicts cultural Deafness, which, unlike the lower-case "deafness" signifying loss of the ability to hear, denotes a group of people who possess a common language and history and identify themselves as members of that group; thus "Deaf" refers to the cultural group, while "deaf" indicates the sensory condition. Itani's pronounced focus on the tension between the hearing world and the Deaf world provides a different perspective on the impact of the Great War. Acland, Harrison, Child, and Findley all write about the war's physical brunt: "[e]ach novel echoes with the roar of bombardments, the cut and thrust of raids, and the unbelievable squalor of the trenches. The effect on the sensibilities after reading page after page of harsh description, presented with I-am-here immediacy, is unforgettable" (Thompson 88). Itani adds something new not only by providing a thoroughly researched depiction of the war's violence, but also by framing Canada's participation within a Deaf context. Her novel is not "a hopeful, though naïve, national romance" (74), as Neta Gordon suggests, but rather a sensorily unique presentation of a well-known event. The story of Grania and how she develops her voice mirrors Canada's development as a nation during the war. The novel's chapter epigraphs, plot, and underlying structure—all of which are conditioned by what Lennard J. Davis calls "the deafened moment" (*Enforcing Normalcy* 100)—indicate this relationship between Deaf culture and Canada. That is, the deafened moment allows for a more fluid and expansive reading of Itani's depiction of the Great War. The War prompted "the prospect of genuine independence" in Canada as well as "free[dom] from the imperial demands of the larger powers" (Thompson 82); in Itani's novel, the Deaf culture's need for independence from hearing hegemony runs parallel to Canada's

coalescence as an independent nation. Disability in this case does not disrupt the metanarrative; it adds to it, accentuates it. Grania's experiences, specifically the development of her voice and the struggle of the Deaf to maintain cultural independence in a hearing world, reflect Canada's coming-of-age in an imperial era.

That Itani portrays a key aspect of Canada's national narrative through a disabled point of view is not unique. As shown earlier, Vanderhaeghe performs a similar task with the Cypress Hills Massacre. Itani's novel, however, is different in that it provides a double narrative—that is, the narratives of two nations rather than just one. In this case, Itani traces the development of Deaf culture—one may call it a Deaf nation—and Canada. While it may seem strange to name a nation after a disability, and while a culture does not equal a nation, contemporary disability theorists frequently point out the nationalist qualities of Deaf communities. According to Davis, the Deaf see “themselves as a linguistic subgroup like Latinos or Koreans” (*Enforcing Normalcy* xiv) rather than a disability subgroup such as paraplegics or blind people. Participation in this linguistic subgroup depends on one's ability to use sign language; one might call sign language a citizenship requirement. In his discussion of Deafness and nationality in the nineteenth century, Davis cites critics such as Bhabha, Anderson, Immanuel Wallerstein, Etienne Balibar, and Hayden White, all of whom have written about and deconstructed nationality. Davis writes that their “reassessment of nationalism changes the discussion so that groups of people who see themselves bound by a common language, culture, and narrative are defined as nations or nationalities” (75). Bhabha in particular emphasizes language as a sign of nationality: “The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference” (*The Location of Culture* 208). The citizenry of a particular nation coalesces through its language. Through Grania and her experiences, Itani's

novel portrays the struggle and development of a Deaf nation situated specifically in Ontario. There may be as many Deaf nations as there are sign languages; just as there are regional variations of spoken English, so are there regional differences in American Sign Language. Just as the novel in general has often played a part in affirming the identities of nations, so does Itani's novel suggest a Deaf nation by placing the development of the Deaf nation in parallel proximity to Canada's development. As one nation develops, so does the other.

Grania undergoes the transition from disabled person to member of a cultural minority while attending the Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, where she learns American Sign Language and slowly becomes part of the local Deaf community. Throughout the novel, the Deaf struggle against the hegemony of the hearing. While Britain exercises its imperial power over Canada, the hearing hold dominion over the Deaf. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone and a known educator of the deaf, is portrayed in the novel as a sentinel of the hearing world.<sup>7</sup> Bell heavily favoured what is called the Oral Method, a means of educating the deaf by developing their speaking voices and discouraging sign language. In the epigraph of Chapter 4, Itani quotes Bell: "*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*" (77; Itani's emphases). Bell's condescending attitude toward those without hearing reflects the stereotype that deaf people lack language, and by extension humanity: "since language is seen as human, as 'us,' the deaf are seen as 'not us'" (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 113). Bell's assessment that the deaf sometimes sound like peacocks diminishes and dehumanizes the deaf. Indeed, in his time

Bell proposed that residential schools should be abolished, education through the

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<sup>7</sup> Nicole Markotic's *Yellow Pages* depicts Bell in a similar manner. Markotic's text focuses in part on Bell's relationship with his deaf wife, and condemns the impact that Bell has had on the Deaf community.



medium of sign language should be forbidden, and the Deaf should be prohibited from teaching the deaf. These steps are reminiscent of the measures frequently implemented by colonial powers seeking to dismantle the culture of a nonnational or indigenous people. (81)

Two key ideas arise in this passage: the separation between the Deaf and the deaf, and the connection between the Deaf and Canada. By distinguishing between the Deaf and the deaf, Davis implies that one does not have to experience hearing loss to participate in Deaf culture. Davis, who is himself a CODA, or child of Deaf adults, is an example of such a person. He is hearing, yet he participates in Deaf culture. Citizenship in a Deaf nation is therefore fluid; just as one can become Canadian by moving to Canada and participating in Canadian life, so can one become culturally Deaf by speaking the language and participating in the Deaf community. The connection between the Deaf and Canada is quite clear in the last sentence of this quotation. Even though Davis writes from an American perspective, his words can apply as much to early twentieth-century Canada as to the Deaf. As detailed below, several other chapter epigraphs and incidents in Itani's novel reinforce the expectation that the Deaf must conform to the hearing world, and learn to speak instead of sign.

In the face of hearing dominion, culturally Deaf people must assert their independence, which they do primarily through their language. Indeed, the notion of a Deaf nation brings about a re-evaluation of the concept of nationality, particularly with regard to the novel and the role it plays in affirming and constructing nations. Timothy Brennan writes that “[i]t was the *novel* that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles” (49; Brennan's emphasis). Brennan's reference to language dovetails nicely with the motley

linguistic strategies that Itani's characters employ. Grania and her family and friends communicate through spoken English, American Sign Language, letters, and other means. Benedict Anderson agrees on the novel's impact on nationhood—that is, “the novel” in general rather than Itani's novel in particular. Anderson argues that the nation grows out of print culture: by “connect[ing] through print...[readers] formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo for the nationally imagined community” (47). The notion of both the general novel and Itani's novel shaping a Deaf nation is unique since the Deaf do not possess geographical borders as Canada does. Their nucleus is their language, and their language—in this case, American Sign Language—is not limited by borders. There are regional variations, but these variations do not inhibit communication. Also, sign language is performative rather than textual. Its natural performativity lends itself more to video or stage than to text, and its grammatical structures are closer to Japanese than to English. For instance, when one wants to ask “What is your name?” he or she signs “Name-you” while furrowing his or her eyebrows; furrowing one's brows indicates a question. Writing sign language is therefore an act of translation, whereas writing spoken words is simply recording. Culturally Deaf people in Canada do read and write in regular English (or French), but sign language is their primary language; as a result, they tend to structure their writing according to sign language's grammatical structures rather than those of written English. Despite these complexities, a hearing reader benefits from Itani's descriptions of sign language, and a Deaf reader benefits from a visual engagement with the text. Itani's novel therefore functions as a buffer zone, an equal playing field between hearing and Deaf readers.

Grania's story does not serve only as a metaphor for Canada's development as a nation. The double narrative discourages such an interpretation: if the Deaf are a nation whose story is told in parallel with Canada's, they cannot act as a mere metaphor. Mitchell and Snyder's notion

of narrative prosthesis therefore does not apply. Itani does not use Deafness as “a stock feature of characterization” or as “an opportunistic metaphorical device” (Snyder and Mitchell, *Narrative Prosthesis* 47). Grania’s three-dimensionality as a character and the novel’s complex portrait of Deafness further negate narrative prosthesis. Grania’s Deafness does not “cannibalize” her, as Donna M. McDonald argues when she writes that “Itani’s novel portrays Grania’s deafness as an all-consuming shaper of her personality, a shadow that falls across her whole life. This has the effect of cannibalizing Grania—without her deafness, she would be an empty vessel” (466). Grania’s Deafness does not define her; while she may be a citizen of the Deaf nation, such citizenship is fluid. She marries a hearing man and maintains friendships with both Deaf and hearing people. Mitchell and Snyder state that “while stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions” (48). Through Grania, Itani not only portrays Deafness as a social and political experience, but she also captures the beauty of Deaf life, particularly its silence. Indeed, silence and Deafness bear multiple meanings in the novel, and are explored below.

The link between the Deaf and Canada is the overarching element of the text under which smaller but no less critical elements function. One of those elements is the novel’s chapter epigraphs. The epigraphs serve several purposes: to establish a chapter’s tone; to suggest what lies ahead in a particular chapter; to establish context for the action; to comment ironically on the novel’s events; and, as already demonstrated, to indicate the hegemony of the hearing. The epigraphs also reflect the link between the Deaf and Canada. Several chapters begin with quotations from *The Canadian*, a publication produced by the Ontario School for the Deaf and Dumb. *The Canadian* was originally called *The Canadian Mute*, but changed its name in 1913 when the Ontario School for the Deaf and Dumb dropped “Dumb” from its name (Itani 118-19).

In addition to emphasizing the non-verbal nature of the Deaf, the publication's original title unconsciously suggests that Canada was without a voice, and the changed title suggests a more confident and vocal Canada. The change of the school's name suggests the Deaf are not dumb, that they do in fact have a voice. The name changes exemplify the rise of Deaf and Canadian voices, diminishing difference in a positive manner. With this approach, Itani draws attention to the link between the Deaf and Canada.

In addition to *The Canadian* and Alexander Graham Bell, Itani takes her epigraphs from a variety of sources. Letters, rhymes, lecture notes, phonics texts, newspapers, council meeting notes, and advertisements all begin different chapters. The italicized epigraphs address topics ranging from the trials and tribulations of the Deaf community to the Canadian war effort. For instance, the epigraph for Chapter 1 comes from a lecture at the Toronto Fair: "*A deaf child will learn 300 to 500 words in a year if at all intelligent. First, the child is taught the sounds and then how to combine them*" (3). These two sentences not only lay the foundation for Grania's struggle with speech and hearing; they highlight the hearing bias inherent in educating deaf children. The first sentence also takes a dismissive tone by supposing that deaf children lack intelligence. Epigraphs like this frequently arise, and they contextualize the novel's action by underscoring historical attitudes toward the Deaf and by mirroring the conflicts between hearing and Deaf, sound and silence. The epigraphs concerning Canada's war effort indicate Canada's awakening national consciousness, and range in tone from inspirational and newsy to downcast and mournful. For instance, the epigraph for Chapter 6 highlights the efforts of the son of an employee at the Ontario School for the Deaf, who fought in "*the now famous battle of Langemarck where the Canadians so distinguished themselves*" (111). Having barely escaped death, the soldier "*is now in a hospital where he is doing well and hopes to be 'at it' again*"

(111). Such missives are meant to inspire pride, to give Canadians something around which to rally. The next chapter's heading is similarly galvanizing:

*We are coming, Mother Britain,  
we are coming to your aid,  
There's a debt we owe our fathers,  
and we mean to see it paid.  
From the jungles of Rhodesia,  
from the snows of Saskatoon,  
We are coming, Mother Britain,  
and we hope to see you soon.* (128; Itani's emphases)

This rhyme, borrowed from *The Canadian*, shows not only Canada's willingness to fight, but its subordination to Britain. This rhyme affirms that Canada, even after Confederation, is still considered a British colony, just like Rhodesia in Africa. The development of one's own voice is always ongoing. Just as Grania must navigate the Deaf and hearing worlds, so must Canada negotiate its colonial status and assert its national voice.

Developing a voice, whether individual or national, is a long and difficult process. Itani dramatizes this process through Grania's story. In the novel's prologue, which takes place in 1902 in the town of Deseronto, Ontario, five-year-old Grania converses verbally with her grandmother, Mamo. The novel's first words are Mamo's instructions to Grania on how to say her name: "Your name,' Mamo says. 'This is the important word. If you can say your name, you can tell the world who you are'" (xiii). Here, Itani aligns voice and selfhood. Grania then imitates Mamo, "bar[ing] her teeth," at which "Mamo laughs" (xiii). Mamo does not laugh maliciously, though. She encourages Grania to keep trying: "Don't try so hard. Say it easily.

Graw-nya. Over and over. Clearly and well” (xiii). In addition to underscoring her concerns with voice and identity, Itani’s language in this first scene and throughout the novel strikes a balance between the auditory and the visual, the visual being Deaf people’s primary means of engaging with the world. Even though the novel is told in the third person, it has a first-person intimacy, particularly when describing the world from Grania’s point of view: “[Mamo’s] lips shape the child’s name in separate parts. The way Grania sections an orange and puts the segments back together again to make the orange whole” (xiii). Even though Mamo engages Grania verbally, she uses a visual approach that allows Grania to comprehend what she is saying. The tension between exteriority (third person) and interiority (first person) echoes the tension between sound and silence in the novel. In the novel, sound is cast as an exterior sensation, coming from without, while silence is interior and grows from within. The novel’s separation between sound and silence arises again when Itani describes how Grania’s family members speak:

her older brother, Bernard, calls her Grainy....Bernard’s lips smile when he says the end of her name.

With her sister, Tress, it’s different again. When Tress calls her Graw, her jaw drops....

Mother’s lips make a straight line. She does not smile or laugh when she says That Grania must pay attention every second, every minute. (xiii-xiv)

Itani focuses on the mouth, the vehicle of words. She focuses not on how mouths sound, but how they look. The mouths are silent, yet active and revealing. Such is the view of the Deaf. The lips of Grania’s family members reveal both what they say to her and certain aspects of their personalities: Bernard’s lips convey playfulness, and Grania’s mother’s lips betray despair and

stubbornness, which is fitting considering her belief that she is responsible for Grania's deafness. Such description in the novel provides an inlet into Grania's world. The characters may speak verbally, but Itani describes how the words are viewed from a deaf perspective. Pursuant to the fluidity of Deaf citizenship, the words offer insight into the Deaf world.

As the novel progresses, Itani maintains her focus on Grania's voice. In the first chapter, Mamo teaches Grania how to speak using text. Having already taught Grania the alphabet, Mamo gives Grania a book called *Sunday*, and she says to Grania, "Every day, we will choose a page and you will learn the words under the picture" (4). In teaching Grania to speak using text, Mamo inverts the process by which children typically learn language. Normally a child learns to read by sounding out the words, but here the process goes the opposite way: Grania learns to speak by reading. Mamo reads the words and Grania watches, pointing at the page:

"BOTH AFRAID," Mamo reads.

The first sound erupts from Grania's lips. "BO," she says. "BO."

Mamo makes the *TH* shape with her tongue. "BO-TH."

Grania tries over and over, watching Mamo's lips. *TH* is not so easy. She already knows *AFRAID*. Afraid is what she is every night in the dark. (5)

Grania struggles early. At this stage, she is only able to imitate what she sees as best as she can. Her voice is unwieldy and she must work to control it. In the darkness, she cannot see movement and she cannot see what people say, so she must rely on other means of communication. Grania sleeps in a room with her older sister Tress, and the two create their own "hand language" (15)—not sign language, but an improvised system of gestures; for instance, Tress's "palm held high for silence" (15). At night-time, Tress kneels at the end of her bed and positions her face so that the light through the window illuminates it, allowing Grania to read her lips (15). A short time

later, the sisters anchor themselves to each other by tying a sheet around their ankles: “[Tress] reaches under the blanket and pulls out the homemade rope, tosses a looped end to Grania, loops her own end and ties it firmly around one ankle. Grania watches through the shadows and does the same” (19). The sisters then tug the rope—Grania once, Tress twice—and create names for each other (19). When she is tied to Tress, “Grania does not think about falling into sound....She is bound to shore, no longer adrift in the dark. She is not afraid” (20). In addition to being another mode of communication, the sheet symbolizes Grania’s attachment to the hearing world. She is not Deaf at this point. She remains at the mercy of the hearing, tenuously tethered to the world of sound.

Grania’s mother embodies the hegemony of the hearing. Despite Mamo’s suggestion that Grania attend the Deaf school in Belleville, Grania’s mother refuses to send her there, and in doing so stalls Grania’s educational and personal development. A pious woman, Grania’s mother believes that Grania will one day be able to hear again, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Itani exemplifies this belief in a scene where Grania’s mother brings Grania into the kitchen, blindfolds her, and drops a frying pan lid on the floor (20). Adrift in the dark, Grania must point out the direction from which the noise comes:

Her body sways and recovers. Shoulder blades are poised. There is tingling in her hands, her fingers, her calves. Her feet want to jump. Is Mother in front or beside or behind? Something shudders through her. She points to the left, behind.

Mother tugs down the blindfold. She is not smiling. “Two times,” she says and Holds up two fingers. “I dropped it two times. Back there, and close behind.” (21)

Itani emphasizes the tension between sound and silence, exteriority and interiority. Itani zooms in on Grania: her sensations, her focus, her awareness. One does not know when and where



Grania's mother drops the lid until after she lifts the blindfold. Like Grania, the reader waits to hear the lid drop, and then does not hear it. By withholding the noise, Itani deafens the reader; the reader experiences the same silence as Grania. As the novel progresses, Itani slowly widens the chasm between sound and silence, and so continues to deafen the reader.

After a few years of homeschooling with Mamo, Grania is eventually sent to a regular public school, where Tress cannot help her. She experiences more discomfort both in the classroom and out on the playground:

Grania sits alone and watches moving mouths and lips and tongues. Her teacher, a plump young woman with a round face and small pointed teeth, smiles at her the first day and takes her by the hand to her seat but, after that, she has no extra time to look in Grania's direction. Words fly through the air and fall, static and dead.

(43)

The teacher does not face the class all the time, so Grania cannot read her lips and understand what she is saying. The spoken words are dead. But while her teacher's words are dead, the words of Grania's schoolmates dig into her:

"What?" she cries to the circle of children, but her voice only makes them laugh.

*"When the children taugt, fight back," Mamo has told her.*

"Tell!" Her voice soars.

They are jeering now. They will never tell. "Dummy!" they cry. "Dummy!"

(58)

The children surround Grania, teasing her about her voice. Two things arise in this passage: the enhanced tension between exterior and interior, and the significance behind the word "dummy."

As Grania shouts at the children to tell her what they are saying, Itani provides a direct look inside her mind: “*When the children taught, fight back,*” *Mamo has told her.*” This italicized line is a memory of one of Mamo’s lessons. The word “taught” is actually “taunt”; “taught” is how Grania sees the word. Yet despite her misinterpretation, she is able to make the connection and correctly apply the phrase to this situation. What is outside her and what she perceives to be taking place have merged, creating a balance between exterior and interior, sound and silence; this balance becomes more pronounced when she attends the Deaf school. The word “dummy,” meanwhile, has particular resonance for Deaf people. The term stems from “dumb,” and, as Davis explains, “[t]he Deaf have always resented the term ‘dumb’ because of its double connotation of ‘mute’ and ‘stupid’ . . . the word reveals the audist bias that to be without spoken language is to be without intelligence, like a ‘dumb’ animal” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 118). Grania, however, trumps this notion because she is able to speak and, as Mamo recognizes, she is intelligent. As Grania develops her voice, she negotiates between the hearing and Deaf spheres.

In terms of both voice and education, Grania’s most significant gains take place at the Ontario School for the Deaf and Dumb. When her father and Mamo realize that Grania has lost so much time trying to learn the hearing way, they send her to Belleville. Grania initially resists going to the school. She is now nine years old and has never been away from her family, with whom she is comfortable despite her deafness. For the first two weeks of school, “Grania is the only child who cries without let-up” (Itani 77). Away from her family and now faced with the task of learning “the hand language” (79), her discomfort is magnified:

what she sees is a large vast room filled with strangers. It strikes her at this moment that she might as well be in an orphanage, her abandonment is so complete. There is no Tress to be her go-between, no older brother, no smaller

brother, no Father, no Mother, no Mamo to be her comfort. (79)

Grania experiences culture shock. Even amongst children who are just like her, she is isolated: “she is barely understood. She resolves to keep her voice inside, not to let it out” (82). Because of her lip-reading and the lessons Mamo has given her, she is placed in a “mid-level group,” where she is “taught a mixture of oral and manual training” (82), manual training meaning American Sign Language (ASL). In studying the teaching paradigms governing American deaf schools in the nineteenth century, Jane Berger critiques these schools using Michel Foucault’s work. With *Discipline and Punish* as the basis for her critique, Berger argues that such institutions “taught deaf youth that, although they were deficient, they might escape their stigma if they diligently conformed to mainstream values” (168). While this assessment may be true of American schools, and even though the Belleville school later considers adapting the Oral Method as its sole teaching paradigm, Deaf values persist in Belleville. Grania skids along, making little progress at first. She grasps little pieces of sign language, individual words that she cannot yet string together into sentences. In her descriptions, Itani captures ASL’s symbolic nature: “[Grania’s] small closed fist raps her temple for cabbage; knuckles rub an imaginary tear from the corner of her eye for onion....she grinds her palms together for cheese” (83). These are only descriptions though, mere translations. While Itani is quite adept at describing signs, she cannot fully convert ASL’s performativity and physicality into text. However, her use of sign language underscores three ideas that aid in understanding Deafness within the novel, both in terms of culture and the condition of lost or reduced hearing. To begin with, both the novel and sign language are typically engaged with in silence. Lennard J. Davis, who discusses at length the interaction between Deafness and text, writes that “[s]ilence is in the text. It is between each word, and in some sense, it accounts for meaning; it frames articulation” (*Enforcing Normalcy*

117). Reading is usually done in silence, in the interior space where the Deaf operate. In this way, all novels symbolically deafen their readers; Itani's novel simply makes deafness more explicit through Grania's story. Secondly, as mentioned before, Itani's novel equalizes the playing field between the hearing and Deaf worlds. Because sign language and spoken language are written, hearing and Deaf readers are equally able to understand what is happening. Just as "the novel mediates between silence and sound" (Davis 116), Itani's text mediates between sign and speech. The third idea conditions these first two ideas, and Itani's novel as a whole. This idea is an anomaly in the novel's underlying structure; it is best articulated as a critical position that Davis calls "the deafened moment" (100). This position brings into sharp relief the oscillation between sound and silence, hearing and Deafness; it also emphasizes Itani's novel's Deaf framework, through which Canada's Great War narrative is recast. As Davis explains,

the deafened moment is one that does not rely on either the Deaf or the deaf.

While the deaf moment does not rely on the Deaf, it exists in a dynamic relationship with that group. By the deafened moment, I am speaking (writing) of a contextual position, a dialectical moment in the reading/critical process, that is defined by the acknowledgement on the part of the reader/writer/critic that he or she is part of a process that does not involve speaking or hearing. I address this position because reading/writing has been unproblematically thought of as a process that involves hearing and vocalizing. (*Enforcing Normalcy* 100-101)

The deafened moment is a critical position that arises during reading. Davis points out that reading is often thought of as an extension of the hearing and vocalizing process; as one reads, one says the words in his or her head (100). Davis deliberately distinguishes between "speaking" on the page and "writing." By separating the two, he draws attention to how oral discourse

permeates written work. Davis bases his premise on the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jacques Derrida. In his book *Of Grammatology*, Derrida identifies what he calls “*logocentrism*” in Rousseau’s work: “the metaphysics of phonetic writing...which was fundamentally...nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world, control[s] in on and the same *order*” (3; Derrida’s emphasis). Rousseau asserts that writing grows out of speech; Derrida separates them. In fact, he claims that logocentrism has worn itself out over nearly three thousand years of speech-centred writing and that, with the “death of speech” in writing, “a new mutation in the history of writing” emerges (8). The deafened moment could be considered such a mutation. Indeed, the separation between speaking and writing constitutes the climax of the deafened moment, and in Itani’s novel this moment extends throughout the whole book, for Itani constantly differentiates between what is said and what Grania sees. Her use of sign language emphasizes this separation between the oral and the visual, and helps expand the deafened moment. By distinguishing between the spoken and the signed, Itani undermines what Davis calls “the ‘hearingness’ of narrative” (115) in favour of an altered engagement with the text, an engagement that challenges “the premiss [sic] that language is in fact sonic, audible, vocalized” (100). Within her novel, Itani negotiates between sound, sign language, and the written word to portray the Deaf. Typically, when a deaf character appears in a novel, he or she is not culturally Deaf, and so serves as “a reminder of the ‘hearingness’ of narrative” (115). Such characters include Mrs. Bates of Jane Austen’s *Emma* and Quasimodo of Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame of Paris*. Grania’s Deafness—in this instance both her condition of non-hearing and her cultural membership—allows Itani to circumvent the expected hearingness of the novel. The result is a Deafened and deafening text that equalizes the hearing and Deaf worlds and gives the Deaf a voice.

In the school, Grania continues to learn both oral and signed language. When her peers sign, “[a]t times she sees nothing more than a rapid blur” (Itani 83), yet she persists in her education. Her teachers push her to “anticipate, to see a signal that a word is about to form” (84) rather than simply to read lips. For the most part, Grania’s schoolmates do not speak; they use ASL when communicating with one another. As a result, initially “she is left out” (84). Then one day, she begins to understand: “missives that once tumbled incomprehensibly through air become single words strung together” (84). She begins to see:

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)

Even though he does not write about *Deafening*, Davis’s assessment of sign language is spot on: “Sign language occupies the interstice where space and silence come together; sign language is the locus where the body meets language” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 117). Itani describes the physicality of sign language: Grania’s hands send not just words, but ideas. Her body forms the spaces and commas and inflections when she signs. Her hands and body become vehicles for language. Itani’s second-to-last sentence harkens back to Grania’s fears about being adrift in the dark, with her ankle tied to Tress’s. She feared falling into darkness and floating adrift in the world of sound. Here, Itani says “She is falling into,” and then pauses mid-sentence, as though to correct herself. This pause is appropriate. What is happening to Grania is not an accident. She is not adrift. She does not have to fear falling into darkness, which for Grania is the world of sound, the world of dreaded misunderstandings. Under her own power, Grania “is entering a new

world,” and within that new world she joins a larger conversation, the conversation of hands that characterizes the Deaf nation.

At this point, Itani makes a small shift in her style. Prior to Grania using sign language, Itani uses quotation marks to notate verbal dialogue. When Grania engages with her classmates, including her new friend, Fry, she uses sign language, and sign language is punctuated the same way: “‘Tell me,’ Grania’s hands say. Since Fry has moved into the dorm, Grania’s own sign language has improved” (92). There are two ways to interpret this shift: one, that Itani is imposing the grammar of the hearing onto sign language; or two, that she is subtly suggesting that spoken dialogue and signed dialogue are equal. By presenting spoken words and signed words the same way, Itani both shows sign language in a manner easily understood by a casual reader and undermines the hearingness of narrative. Dialogue is often a signal for the hearingness of narrative; one is meant to hear the characters’ voices as they speak. By putting sign language into quotation marks, Itani maintains familiar grammar while portraying the unfamiliar conversation of moving hands rather than speaking voices.

While Grania enters the conversation of hands, she is never fully Deaf. She develops her speaking voice along with her ASL. Her teachers give the students speech exercises, which frustrate and fatigue Grania: “The days run together and she is instructed to use more voice, more breath, not so much breath. She holds fingers to her teacher’s lips and feels the puff of air with *beat* and *peat*” (87, italics left in). Her teacher, Miss Amos, tells her “‘Work at control. You must control your voice’” (87). Speaking is not enough; owning one’s voice is paramount. Eventually, the school year ends, and Grania goes home to her family, where she teaches Tress and Mamo sign language. When she arrives, something has changed. She now understands the separation that exists between her and her family, “that there are things she will never be able to

impart, things that will never be understood—not even by Tress or Mamo. Things that make up the portion of her life that is now lived, separate and away, at the institution in the land called *School*” (99). The sheet-rope that once anchored Grania to the hearing world has slackened. She now has one foot in the hearing world and the other in the Deaf world, a position she maintains for the rest of the novel.

In this manner, Grania maintains dual citizenship in the Deaf and hearing nations. Citizenship is fluid for her: like Harry Vincent, she draws on whichever identity she needs at a given moment. This fluidity demonstrates how loose borders can be, and draws attention to Itani’s broader theme of diversity and openness. The rigidity of the old world—the hearing world, the British empire—is diminishing.

At this juncture, the novel breaks and leaps ahead in time to 1915. Chapter Five’s epigraph from *The Canadian* immediately establishes the wartime context: it discusses the sinking of the passenger ship *The Lusitania*, which was torpedoed by a German submarine (103). In this epigraph, Itani signals the novel’s shift in focus from Grania’s Deafness to Canada’s wartime effort. Grania retains a starring role, but she shares the spotlight with her husband Jim, through whom the reader experiences the battle front. Within Grania and Jim’s relationship, sound and silence, exterior and interior, and hearingness and Deafness harmonize in a unique manner. When Jim sees Grania for the first time, “her stillness...compel[s] him to a halt” and he “fall[s] silent because there she [is], standing like a small contained island in the middle of the room” (107). As previously indicated, silence is a consistent presence in this novel. It permeates the text. It is not simply a condition of non-hearing, though; it is a dynamic essence. Earlier in the novel, during her struggles to learn language, Grania frequently retreats inward into “the place where her silence lies, the place where she is safe” (24). In the section leading to the war,



silence means safety. When Jim meets Grania for the first time, not only is Grania herself silent, but she provokes silence in others. Her silence is contagious. Jim's reaction anticipates two things: the intimacy that he and Grania will share when they are married, and the influence that Grania will have on him, particularly during the war. They fall into silence, into safety around each other, and out of that silence they create a unique bond that blends both speech and sign language. After their courtship, Jim proposes to Grania using sign language, and before he leaves for Europe, they develop name-signs for each other: Grania, because she sees Jim's name as "Chim," signs "a C turning over to become an H that tapped once over her heart"; Jim, "delighting in the new language of hands, return[s] a G close to his own heart" (132). The couple then deepen their connection by "creat[ing] a language of their own...an invented code no one would ever break" (131-32). This intimate language incorporates both speech and sign language:

*"Place your fingertips over my mouth. Lightly now. Feel the word. Now to my throat, back to the lips. Let the shape of the word fall into your fingers. Scoop it up with your hand."*

He ha[s] never known a language that so thoroughly encompassed love.

She ha[s] never felt so safe. (132)

Grania's world has broadened. She is safe not only within silence, but with her hearing husband, whom she lets into her silence. Rather than tethering herself to the hearing world, she welcomes Jim into hers.

Soon after their marriage, Jim leaves for Europe. A stretcher bearer, he endures weeks of drills until he can "snap open and kick shut a heavy stretcher with his eyes closed" (160). He learns how to apply dressings and tourniquets, bandage heads, and set broken bones (161). After his training ends, he leaves for France as part of the Third Canadian Division, and arrives on

April 8, 1916 (168). He and his fellows wade into the nightmarish war. The explosions never seem to end; the machine-gun fire is relentless; the casualties pile up. Jim works hard, and for a long time he is unable to send a letter to Grania, making her worry. Here, silence takes on another meaning. One evening, she walks to the tower of the building in which she and Jim live and

focuses until her thoughts are as sharp as she can hone them. She is aware of her heart pushing blood to her head, her torso, her limbs. She gathers her own silence, the comfort, the safety of it, the silence in which she lives. She expands this until it is outside of herself and fills every space around. She slides it past her fears about Jim—has he not promised that he will survive?—and pushes it beyond herself, and spreads it along the shore of the bay...past the cemetery...down the long waterway of the mighty St. Lawrence River, towards the sea. The more she is able to focus, the farther her silence extends, spreading slow and even, like moonlight over water. (196-97)

In a scene analogous to Grania's tether to Tress, Grania pushes her silence beyond herself across the ocean: "It searches for and finds one man" (197). Jim, worked to the bone, "two full days without rest" (200), seeks respite from the "roar so constant he crouches and squints" (200). He and his friend are told to go to sleep; to do so, Jim must shut everything out:

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. For a moment, a fraction of a moment, the entire world on both sides of the ocean is still. And Jim sleeps. (200-201).

Grania extends her silence, her deafness, to Jim so he can sleep. Whereas Grania formerly anchored herself to Tress and the hearing world, here she tethers Jim to silence. She and Jim are comfortable with silence, with each other. Her projection reflects the safety that everyone in Canada wishes for their loved ones in Europe—silence as protection. Davis writes that “[s]ilence can be punitive or transgressive. We can say that people who are silent are unfriendly, hostile, or passively aggressive, although silence can signal intimacy, but only because intimacy removes the public ban on silence” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 110). In this instance, silence is benevolent. Grania gives her silence positive meanings. Her projection also encapsulates the pervasive influence of deafness in the novel. Just as Grania’s deafness stretches across the ocean into Europe, the deafened moment, as a position of critical awareness, extends throughout the entire novel, enveloping hearing characters as well as deaf ones.

In a way, the deafened text informs Canada’s wartime narrative. Cultural Deafness challenges hearing hegemony and allows the Deaf to declare themselves; concurrently, Canada must assert its independence by challenging Britain’s dominion. To this end, Itani portrays Canada’s military exploits in a contrapuntal manner. The chapter epigraphs provide general commentary on the action, and Jim’s experiences ground the narrative in specific, often unsettling detail. Chapter 11’s epigraph quotes *The Canadian*: “*We know that our soldiers will bear themselves bravely and that where danger threatens they will always be there do to their part, battling for the Empire in this great world war*” (203). Chapter 14’s epigraph makes a subtle separation: “*It is just as pleasant and grand a thing to die for Canada and the British Empire today as it was for Rome in the brave days of old*” (262). This latter quotation separates Canada from the British Empire, yet they remain related the same way that the hearing and Deaf worlds are related for Grania. They exist in a state of fluidity: Grania negotiates between the

hearing and Deaf worlds, and so Canada must negotiate between the empire and independence. While like other colonies Canada was called by Britain to fight, it asserted its own character during the war. Quoting Lord Beaverbrook, Tim Cook writes that “the Canadian colonial spirit...had forged these frontiersmen into efficient soldiers” (505). Indeed, rather than “colonial cannon fodder,” the Canadians saw themselves as “partners in battle” with Britain, France, and America (505). The exploits of Jim’s unit dramatizes these developments. They slowly work their way through France and Belgium, persisting through the deafening noise of battle. The Battles of Ypres, the Somme, and Vimy Ridge pass in agonizing succession. Eric Thompson writes that each author who has written about the Great War “perceives that the bravery of the fighting Canadian soldier is founded on stoicism and an almost inarticulate commitment to endure” (85). This assessment applies to Jim and his cohorts in the Third Division. They do not brag; they do not celebrate their victories wildly; when they discuss their work, they do so matter-of-factly: “We’ve heard that counterattacks by our Canadians near Hooze on the thirteenth have been successful in taking back trenches. This news revives everyone, after the terrible losses” (Itani 216). The soldiers simply carry on and endure. They take and occupy “recently won German dugouts” (227) and experience heavy losses (260). Newspapers report “The Hun is on the Run” (323). The soldiers fight “alongside the British” (325); after so many battles, the Canadians and the British are now partners. As the novel marches on, so do the soldiers, equal in each other’s eyes.

Even as the artillery crashes through the countryside, and even as the planes wheel overhead and the commanders shout orders to their units, silence remains an importunate force. Silence may seem an ideal condition for a soldier, for secrets cannot get passed into the wrong hands if one does not speak much. Throughout the war Jim composes two types of letters: the

ones he writes in pencil and the ones he keeps in his head. The ones he writes in pencil are brief and often censored; he sends these to Grania. The ones he writes in his head contain much more information, which Jim cannot reveal. The censors silence him, so he composes in his head. In one such letter, addressed to Grania, he comes to understand more about his wife's deafness:

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 deafening noise of war allows Jim to empathize with Grania. Sound envelops him and his fellows. It indicates deadly force, whereas the silence he shares with Grania signals safety and comfort. At home, meanwhile, Grania struggles with new manifestations of silence. Every day she reads the newspapers and sees the “headlines of promise and victory...lined up side by side with obituaries and photographs of uniformed men who...died” (266-67). Having been apart from Jim for two years, Grania “hate[s] the silent proclamations, hate[s] the rows and rows of names of silenced young men” (267). In this instance, silence means death—a conventional wartime association, but unsettling given silence's prior association with safety. Silence also indicates trauma, which during the Great War commonly manifested in shell-shock. One of the more striking instances of trauma in the novel involves Grania's brother-in-law, Kenan. On a summer day in 1917, Grania's family receives a telegram. Grania finds Tress, Kenan's wife, crying. Seeing Grania, her mother's lips say ““Kenan, wounded”” (268). Her mother's right hand then spells “A-L-I-V-E with her fingers” (268). The news hits her mother so hard that she who

previously refused to learn ASL engages in the silent hand language. The news silences, but it does not muffle. Further news soon arrives: half of Kenan's face has been blown off; his left eye is blind; his left arm is useless; he has retained his hearing but he has not spoken. He has been rendered mute (273-74). When Kenan arrives in Belleville, he remains indoors. He "refuse[s] all visitors except family" and "remain[s] silent," his silence "spread[ing] like a fog through the small house...encompass[ing] Tress" (287). Despite her best efforts, Tress cannot get him to talk. He is physically capable of speaking, but the shell-shock has driven his voice far inward. Grania, who understands that inward space better than anyone, volunteers to talk to him. When she visits Kenan, the house is dark: "the curtains in every room of the house except the kitchen [are] tightly closed" (293). Grania beckons him to come with her onto the back veranda, where it is sunny (296). They sit down and watch the pleasure boats on the bay. Then "Grania's hands [make] the sign for *peace*, for *quiet*, crossing in an X shape and arcing down" (296). Kenan makes the same sign. Surprised and encouraged, Grania reaches far back into her childhood and recovers the phrase "BOTH AFRAID." She speaks it and signs it. Kenan mimics her sign (296). Grania then says "'Poom'" (297). "Poom" is her word for "fart," a password she, Tress, and Kenan used when they were children. Kenan repeats the word. Grania laughs, and "Kenan's face, for the first time since he...[came] home, crumple[s] in a half smile" (297). Grania continues teaching Kenan, using speech exercises learned at the Deaf school; eventually Kenan regains his voice. This inversion of linguistic acquirement deepens the deafened text: a Deaf woman teaches a hearing man how to speak. Not only can the Deaf teach the deaf, the Deaf can teach the hearing. It is an emancipation of sorts, similar to the student teaching the master: the Deaf take a step out of the shadow of the hearing.

Toward the end of the novel, Jim also experiences trauma, though not at the same level as Kenan. Jim's friend Irish, who serves as his stretcher-bearing partner throughout much of the war, is killed in Inchy, France (331). Immediately afterward, when Jim is trying to collect himself, a lieutenant asks him his name. Jim says "My name is Chim, sir. Jim" (332). His Deafened name, the name Grania has given him, precedes his spoken name. His Deafened name anticipates the silence that lies ahead. After Irish's death, he no longer talks to his fellows: "With the living, he [is] silent" (344). He talks to Irish instead, telling his dead friend about Canada's successes: "Cambrai was taken on the ninth. The Canadians, the Royal Naval Division to the south, everyone was so strong" (345). Despite his silence, he continues to work. The war is nearly over. Soon the fighting will stop, and the noise of jubilant celebration will rise, and after that the quiet of peace. When after three years Grania and Jim finally reunite on the train platform in Deseronto, Itani draws one last connection between the Deaf and Canada's wartime participation: "From her first glance, [Grania] understood. She [knows] now that it [is] like returning from the land called *School*. Only this time, Jim [is] returning from the land called *War*" (377). School is where Grania and many others developed their voices, and the Great War served the same purpose for Canada. The couple immediately resumes their familiar intimacy: "She shape[s] the *C* and the *H* and she [says] aloud, 'Chim'" (378).

Even though Itani's novel is set one hundred years ago, it reflects contemporary concerns. The struggle between the Deaf and the hearing is ongoing. No matter what significant steps Deaf people make to liberate themselves from hearing dominion, they never fully detach themselves. At one point Grania receives a letter from her friend Fry, who writes that

*there are rumours that the sign language will be phased out....Soon there will be no positions for deaf teachers. Superintendent says Oral Method is the*

*future.... Some teachers already discourage use of sign. Who can believe that deaf children will stop creating language with their hands? It's as natural as the air we breathe....Already, we hear of children being punished for using sign. (321)*

Similar issues arise today. Rather than enrolling their deaf children in sign language classes, parents give them hearing aids or cochlear implants and put them through speech therapy. As a result, the Deaf nation loses potential citizens. Canada also struggles with its own voice.

Although it is no longer a colony, it retains ties to Britain through its parliamentary system and its monarchist vernacular: the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Royal Canadian Air Force, the Governor General of Canada, and so forth. Canada has also cultivated a multicultural populace, which supports diversity yet makes it even more difficult to create a unified national voice. Northrup Frye, Margaret Atwood, D.G. Jones, and others have attempted to define the Canadian identity, but definition is difficult, if not impossible. In this instance, perhaps the most helpful theorist is Hutcheon, whose postmodern methodology contextualizes Canada's diversity:

The postmodern 'different' ...is starting to replace the humanist 'universal' as a prime cultural value....As expatriate Canadian filmmaker and critic Laura Mulvey has put it: 'Canadian culture is not yet a closed book. The historical anomalies that Canada has grown from make contradictions visible. Uniform national identity is challenged by a pride in heterogeneity and difference.' (*The Canadian Postmodern ix*)

If Canada is a nation of diversity rather than uniformity, then Itani's novel suggests not only that the Deaf and Canada mirror each other, but that the Deaf constitute a Canadian voice, a member of the national chorus that prompts re-evaluations of major Canadian events. As Bhabha writes, "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their



horizons in the mind's eye" ("Introduction" 1). The nation, whether Deaf or Canada, is an imagined and fluid essence that is continually re-imagined and re-shaped by emerging voices. This lack of a unified Canadian voice is not a negative thing; as Kroetsch points out, "disunity is our unity" (363). This lack exemplifies the fluidity of normalcy and allows us to see Canada as a chorus of voices. In terms of national development, for both the Deaf and Canada, the Great War was a step forward, a forceful and resonant comment in a broad national conversation that continues within Canadian literature today.

## Chapter Seven:

### Challenging Normalcy in Arley McNeney's *Post*

Of all the novels in this study, Arley McNeney's 2007 novel *Post* presents perhaps the most direct challenge to binary Canadian normalcy. A fictional autobiography, a sports tale, and a disability narrative, it tells the story of Nolan Taylor, a former elite wheelchair basketball player who has surgery to replace her arthritic hip. Nolan's surgery launches her into an identity crisis, causing her to confront and examine her relationships, her disability, and her womanhood. Over the course of the novel, Nolan reflects on her basketball exploits, her disability, her previous relationship with her mentor Darren, and her current relationship with her boyfriend Quinn. Throughout Nolan's story, McNeney draws attention to the construction of normalcy and how certain expectations are imposed on women and disabled people, particularly with regard to sexuality and athletics. Like Judith Thompson's plays *Lion in the Street* and *The Crackwalker*, *Post* is a rare Canadian text that portrays disabled people as sexual and athletic. Reading the novel alongside discussions of disability, athletics, and feminism suggests that McNeney challenges able-bodied hegemony by portraying disability as a type of normalcy. If, as this study has argued, normalcy is a fluid concept, then it is possible for disabled people to possess agency, privilege, and authority. Through her depiction of Nolan and her disabled peers, McNeney provides an alternative model for thinking about the relationship between disability and

normalcy by suggesting that the two do not have to be mutually exclusive; by doing so, she exemplifies the fluidity of normalcy.

Normalcy, like disability and femininity, is typically perceived as a social construct. Lennard J. Davis and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson state that normalcy and disability are typically defined in contrast to each other. Davis writes that “the way that normalcy is constructed...create[s] the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” and that “the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 24). Garland-Thomson defines normalcy, or what she calls the “normate,” as “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 8). A society constructs its own models of normalcy and, through repeated structures and discourses, invests those models with authority and subjectivity. As mentioned in Chapter One, social normalcy in North America is typically defined by white, able-bodied, heterosexual men (Goffman quoted in Garland-Thomson 8), and as shown in my analysis of Coady’s novel, such a construct shapes perceptions of the female body as well as disabled bodies. As indicated in Chapter Five, Garland-Thomson locates the disabled body and the female body outside the realm of corporeal authority and, by extension, social normalcy. In *Strange Heaven*, Coady shows that patriarchal society can disable women; McNeney counters that notion. As marginal positions, disability and femininity disrupt normalcy—that is, able-bodiedness and patriarchy—and provoke questions of “how normalcy came about or how it was constructed in the first place” (Titchkosky and Michalko 6). If normalcy is constructed, it can be deconstructed and re-imagined; disabled womanhood can be re-imagined as a type of normalcy, as part of a fluid status quo. Titchkosky and Michalko write that “the margins are not a ‘nowhere’ void of life and

culture, but are instead related to what is central—related to versions of normalcy, but are not the same versions” (6). As Hutcheon states, “[m]argins also challenge borders as limits” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 3). A truly fluid version of normalcy does not recognize a distinction between disabled and normal; the two cohere. McNeney fleshes out this idea: her portrayal of Nolan troubles the boundary between the margin and the centre. Disability comes naturally to Nolan Taylor; it is able-bodiedness, or so-called social normalcy, that discomforts her.

McNeney’s challenge to prior conceptions of normalcy applies as much to athletics as it does to disability and womanhood. According to Lisa M. Olenik, Joan M. Matthews, and Robert D. Steadward, the sporting world is typically thought of as “male-dominated” and “able-bodied” (54); as a result, a disabled female athlete’s difficulties of “[h]aving a disability and being in the world of sports are compounded by systemic barriers associated with being female” (54). One such barrier is that “participation in disability sport mean[s] that many women [are] possibly reinforcing an image of being ‘different’ or ‘disabled’” (55). In other words, playing a disabled sport draws one further away from the able-bodied centre, and being a woman only reinforces that difference. The prominence of Terry Fox and Rick Hansen, two of Canada’s most distinguished physically disabled citizens, helps illustrate the attitudinal barriers shaping how most able-bodied people perceive disabled athletes. Fox and Hansen are what Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell call “super-crip[s]”; as mentioned in the MacDonald chapter, super-crips are seen as heroic for overcoming their disabilities and doing extraordinary things—for achieving despite their disabilities (“Fame and Disability”). Although there are competing definitions of the super-crip,<sup>8</sup> this definition is by far the most common. The term frequently arises in a sporting

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<sup>8</sup> Carla Filomena Silva and P. David Howe write that “‘supercrip’ applies either to a person with a disability who performs ordinarily in his or her daily life or to people who really excel. [R.J.] Berger...presents supercrips as ‘those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible’” (174-75). For their analysis, Silva and Howe use the following

context (Hardin and Hardin), and while Nolan is a skilled athlete, she is not a super-crip. It is as though McNeney sets out to portray a normal disabled person, someone with some accomplishments who, like every other able-bodied and disabled person, has difficulties navigating daily life. Even though much of *Post* takes place in New Westminster, BC, where Fox died in 1981 (Scrivener 176), and even though Fox has a limp like Nolan does, McNeney appears to deliberately leave him out of her text; nor does she mention Hansen, who also lives in BC and was a Paralympic gold medallist before he became world-famous (Hansen and Taylor 66). By omitting these prominent disabled figures and their achievements, McNeney distances her narrator from the super-crip phenomenon. Nolan wins a Paralympic bronze medal with Team Canada, an impressive achievement that, when read against Hansen's narrative, distances Nolan from the super-crip, which, due to its lofty stature, apparently requires gold.

Another harmful aspect of the "super-crip" designation is that, like the medical model of disability, the term appears to be outdated. While Fox and Hansen have been called super-crips, more contemporary athletes resist the term. What separates Fox and Hansen from a contemporary athlete such as Paralympic gold-medallist Chantal Petitclerc is that Fox and Hansen did what they did during the 1980s, when disability activists were still struggling for recognition. In 1980, Fox undertook his iconic Marathon of Hope to raise funds for cancer research—a cause which, as Chivers states, has obscured his disability ("Ordinary People" 81)—while in 1985 Hansen completed his world-famous "Man in Motion" tour to raise money for "spinal cord research, awareness and rehabilitation programs, and wheelchair sports" (Hansen and Taylor 73). In the 1980s, people with disabilities did not have as much of a public presence as they do today; Fox and Hansen therefore appealed to the fear—or aesthetic nervousness

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definition: "supercrip implies a stereotyping process that requires an individual 'to fight against his/her impairment' in order to overcome it and achieve unlikely 'success'" (175).

(Quayson 15)—engendered by disability. The messages behind their fundraising efforts eased people’s fears: fund cancer research so nobody has to die young or have his leg amputated again; fund spinal cord research so nobody has to use a wheelchair again. Although Hansen also supports wheelchair sports, his first two funding goals speak primarily to able-bodied people in that they seek to correct, if not cure, disability. More contemporary athletes exhibit the progress that disabled people have made over the last few decades. They resist the term “super-crip” because they do not want to be seen as inspirational (Hargreaves and Hardin). In particular, female disabled athletes “do not like [the term ‘super-crip’]” because “they believ[e] it often leads women to face double discrimination in sports media” (Hargreaves and Hardin). This double discrimination arises from the standards of normalcy that favour able-bodied men (Hargreaves and Hardin). The “super-crip” label places unrealistic expectations on disabled people, functioning as a hero-making mechanism that elevates disabled athletes who achieve great things despite their disabilities. The super-crip is therefore symptomatic of the normate’s social authority, an authority which McNeney openly challenges.

*Post* presents several prisms through which to view and interpret the body, the most prominent of which are athletics, sexuality, disability, and femininity. In the process, the novel demystifies disability and, in an indirect way, rebuts the super-crip concept and the manner in which it tends to affirm male able-bodied hegemony. The novel’s title juxtaposes a basketball position with associations of immobility—i.e., “stiff as a post.” The “post” position in basketball is typically given to taller players who can seize rebounds under the basket; the position fits Nolan, who due to her height is known as the “Big Girl” (McNeney 72). The word also denotes a designated place—“do not abandon your post”—as well as a period of time, which in this novel signifies post-surgery, or post-disability. The novel could also be seen as an overtly postmodern

take on disability, in which, true to the fluidity of normalcy, margin and centre are often interchangeable. Taken together, these meanings suggest motion, immobility, turmoil, and fixity, all of which characterize Nolan's struggle. McNeney uses different techniques to present Nolan's story: although it is largely told in Nolan's present-tense first-person voice, it also includes many flashbacks, along with Quinn's, Darren's, and Nolan's father's voices. When the novel begins, Nolan is preparing for surgery. She is twenty-seven hours away from going under the knife, and she is rearranging her house so she will be better able to move around when she comes home afterward (8). She tapes down loose cords and cleans the walls and the fixtures, wanting them "to be white as bones, as if they'd never been exposed to light or human touch" (8). She constantly employs bodily terms. Just as she prepares her house, she prepares herself: "The surgeon gave me a manual to my new hip, outlining recovery right down to acceptable post-surgical sex positions" (8). The house has long been thought of as a metaphor for the body, as Shakespeare's "Sonnet 146" and Ioana Boghian's article on nineteenth century novels attest (Boghian 1), and McNeney establishes this relationship early in the novel. Indeed, Nolan sees her "hip as a bawdy house: skin like heavy curtains over the secret creaking of joints. [Her] hip with its red-light-district throb of inflammation when [she] walk[s]" (8-9). The house, which Nolan shares with her boyfriend Quinn, becomes a site of disturbance in the novel, just as her body (specifically her hip) does.

The house is not just a metaphor for Nolan's body; it is also a metaphor for her relationship with Quinn—the household, so to speak. The surgery is meant to normalize Nolan's body and their household, but in the end her body and the household reflect the difficulties the young couple endures. Quinn, who is able-bodied, is never quite comfortable with Nolan's disability. When he and Nolan first begin to know each other, he plays guitar in a punk band

called The Cripple Killers (93). While visiting Quinn at his apartment, Nolan notes the “the drum kit with the band’s logo: a punk pushing some guy with a blanket over his legs out of a wheelchair” (93). She questions Quinn about the name. Quinn responds, ““Well, we wouldn’t really hurt, uh, physically challenged...physically disabled...whatever you call them...people”” (94). This exchange establishes the awkward foundation for Quinn and Nolan’s relationship. Quinn has difficulty articulating disability in politically correct terms; he and his band mates use the term “Cripple” because it grabs people’s attention (93). His band, he says, used to be called “the Beaver Eaters, but some clubs wouldn’t put [their] name on posters” (93). To the clubs where the band plays, killing cripples is more acceptable than objectifying women. Quinn’s difficulty and his band’s choice of words may at first be read as ignorant youthful bravado, but given Quinn and Nolan’s difficulties later in their relationship, this exchange also exemplifies Quinn’s apparently deeply rooted attitudes toward disability. He appears to uphold the sort of outdated normalcy in which Fox and Hansen became heroes. His inability to properly articulate disability suggests aesthetic nervousness, and his continued discomfort with Nolan appears to support this suggestion. Nolan informs Quinn that she plays wheelchair basketball, and Quinn is taken aback, since Nolan can walk, but cannot run because of her hip. Quinn has a difficult time processing the information:

Quinn stepped back and looked at me. “What? You’re in a wheelchair?”

“Yes, I’m in a wheelchair. It’s a hard life. Makes it really difficult for me to stand here and talk to you.”

Quinn blinked. “Oh. Oh, yeah, I’m stupid. I’m sorry, I just—So you play wheelchair basketball, but you walk. Isn’t that a little, like, mean or something? To the people in the wheelchairs?”



“You’re the Cripple Killer.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Oh geez.” (94)

As in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* and *The Englishman’s Boy*, fluid normalcy collides with rigid normalcy. Nolan clashes against Quinn’s notion of what disability is supposed to look like. It is unclear whether she is able-bodied or disabled. To him, wheelchair basketball players are supposed to live in their chairs full-time. What he does not know is that one does not have to be in a wheelchair to play. Wheelchair sports use a classification system to measure the extent of one’s disability; the system measures a player’s ability to use her arms, legs, and core muscles. In wheelchair basketball, the system is used to determine which players may go on the floor (328). Nolan is “a class 4” (112) while others, such as Darren, who is a quadriplegic, are lower on the scale due to their limited range of movement (75). A class 4 rating means Nolan is close to able-bodied, but not quite there. The system, Nolan says, is “screwed-up” (328), for it introduces a “more disabled than thou’ hierarchy” (112) into the disability community. Those who are at the upper end of the scale are, as Quinn demonstrates, thought of as able-bodied. Nolan must therefore negotiate the relationship between able-bodied and disabled, troubling the power relations between them. She attempts such a negotiation in this exchange, using her scathing sense of humour to deal with Quinn’s perplexity: she sarcastically refers to using a wheelchair as “a hard life” and points out to Quinn the obvious fact that she is standing before him. Nolan then assumes control of the conversation by turning his own band’s name against him. Here, disability disrupts and re-appropriates the able-bodied status quo. Quinn and his band chose the name because of its controversial edge, but Nolan dulls that edge by exploding Quinn’s idea of what a “cripple” is supposed to be, and by making Quinn feel guilty about the name. She asserts the authority of disability in the face of ignorance.

Time does not change Quinn's discomfort. He himself goes through an identity crisis of sorts. Shortly after Nolan's surgery, he quits his office job and aspires to be a professional musician, but he must also help Nolan as she recovers from her hip surgery, something he is increasingly reluctant to do. He himself must negotiate the muddied boundary between able-bodied and disabled. Tanya Titchkosky succinctly frames the body's importance to identity, which is the central issue in *Post*:

[d]isability is made meaningful by the ways we say it to be and live its being. Annemarie Mol and John Law remind us of the importance of conceptualizing embodiment as a relation to the social fact that 'we all *have* and *are* a body. But there is a way out of this dichotomous twosome. As part of our daily practices, *we also do (our) bodies*. In practice we enact them'.... (*Reading & Writing Disability Differently* 12; Titchkosky's emphases)

The body is the nucleus to one's identity; accordingly, one's self is expressed through action. By quitting his job and pursuing his music instead of helping Nolan, who by this time is pregnant, Quinn demonstrates his discomfort. He describes his and Nolan's relationship with a revealing simile: "We're like those cartoon characters who can walk on air until they look down" (267). He goes on to say "[t]here's tons of stuff I'd change about Nolan" and that "she's not something to get excited about....With the bad hip, she's not exactly going to be a gymnast in bed. She's just not very...bendy. And she's smart but not driven career-wise and plays a weird sport no one watches" (268). He defines her according to her athletics, her ambitions or lack thereof, and her ability or inability to have sex, all of which are obscure to him. Nolan's body does not fit him. Nolan does not conform to his world, in which disability and able-bodiedness are clearly defined conditions. He clings to his conception of social normalcy, the conception that permitted him and

his band to call themselves The Cripple Killers. To him, wheelchair basketball is weird; that no one watches it suggests that because it lacks popular appeal—that is, appeal to the able-bodied population—it is inadequate. As a result, the household remains in a state of flux.

To find refuge, both Nolan and Quinn seek comfort from their pasts; to this end, sex and sexuality arise frequently in *Post*, conveying a host of different tensions. Disabled people are seldom thought of as sexual beings, the popular perception being that “disability cancels out sexuality” (Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability” 91). McNeney counters this perception by portraying Nolan and her disabled cohorts as sexually active. Nolan has two sexual relationships in the novel: one with Quinn, and one with Darren. These two relationships form a dichotomy that frames her identity struggle: disabled or able-bodied? What is her normalcy? Even though she stays with Quinn and eventually has a baby with him, she is clearly more comfortable with Darren, in the disabled world. Darren, Nolan’s basketball mentor, is the most prominent disabled male in the novel, and through him McNeney draws attention not just to disabled sexuality but to disabled manhood. According to Russell Shuttleworth,

[c]ertain typical masculine expectations such as initiative, competitiveness, self-control, assertiveness, and independence, incorporated as dispositions to varying degrees, manifest in bodily comportment and corporeal and interpersonal negotiations and practices and are critical aspects of...hegemonic masculinity.  
(166)

While Darren, who like Nolan plays for the national wheelchair basketball team, appears to conform to each of these expectations, and therefore exemplifies hegemonic masculinity,<sup>9</sup> his

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<sup>9</sup> Terry Fox and Rick Hansen also conform to Shuttleworth’s definition, although they are not discussed as sexualized men. In her article, Chivers never mentions Fox’s sexuality, and Hansen does not talk about sex in his autobiography, even though he is married. Fox’s and Hansen’s sexuality apparently plays no role in their being designated super-crips, despite the connection between sexuality and masculinity (Shuttleworth 170). For them,

disabled body and his sexual relationship with Nolan complicate this view. Darren subverts the expectations of normal masculinity that Shuttleworth outlines. Nolan and Darren's first sexual encounter reveals this subversion: in a flashback thirteen years before Nolan's surgery, the two sit beside each other in a weight room doing sit-ups. When Darren comments on his increasing weight, Nolan gets to her knees and playfully touches his belly. Her hand then "ma[kes] its unimaginable slide downwards, underneath his two elastic waistbands, [her] fingers following the dark line down to another texture" (McNeney 99). The slide is unimaginable because of the age difference—Darren is at least ten years older than Nolan—the public setting, and/or the inconceivable notion of two disabled people having sexual relations. Nolan gives him a hand job, and then shortly afterward two older women walk past "to compliment [her] on the service [she is] doing working out with disabled people" (100). The women see Nolan as Darren's care worker rather than his lover. In this instance, McNeney draws attention to the clash between social perceptions of disability and individual experiences. Nolan and Darren's "'incident'" (100) in the gym partly subverts expectations of disability and sexuality. Darren in this instance is the receiver rather than the giver. The women do not seem to notice Nolan's limited mobility; they see her as an able-bodied woman caring for Darren. They share Quinn's perception of Nolan—and Darren. Nolan also initiates the masturbation, yet it does not undermine Darren's masculinity. At this point, Darren and Nolan have already played against each other in basketball, and Darren is a divorcee, so there is no question of his competitiveness, initiative, or independence. Shuttleworth writes that disabled "men who are most successful in love assume a flexible gender identity and expand their masculine repertoire of orientative-ideals and embodied, interpersonal practices beyond those associated with hegemonic masculinity" (166).

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sexuality is not something they have to demonstrate to be successful; they assert themselves through their athletic achievements. Therefore, the super-crip label has another potentially harmful aspect in that it perpetuates the notion that disabled people, or at least disabled men, are asexual.

Even though Darren is a competitive athlete, he is just as comfortable receiving sex as he is in actively participating in it. He has a fluid view of sexuality. From a sexual point of view, his and Nolan's disabilities complicate hegemonic masculinity and femininity: instead of the man approaching the woman, the woman approaches the man.

Nolan's and Darren's disabilities de-familiarize sex—that is, they excise it from the able-bodied realm and bring it into the realm of disability. Their first full-on sexual episode develops further this idea of de-familiarized sex. When Nolan loses her virginity to Darren, McNeney curiously switches from the first-person to the second-person point of view, and demonstrates the comfort the two lovers experience with each other:

Looking back, you could never have imagined the first time with anyone but him.

His disability made him exactly right: narrow lower body fitting between the acute angle of your legs that the inflexible hip caused. Something about your bodies fit, though it was no position you'd ever heard of. You couldn't bend and he could bend too much and together you found a right angle. (McNeney 107)

At first glance, it appears as though Nolan and Darren are built for each other. During the act of sex, their bodies fit together in precisely the right way so that their disabilities become advantages rather than obstacles. Yet something is off. The distance of the second-person voice suggests discomfort, and as Nolan continues narrating she reveals that sex is not entirely comforting:

For the first time, you felt a little sorry for yourself, as if the disability had taken something. It suddenly seemed a shame that sex wouldn't be your first big hurt, that it wouldn't be demarcated from all the rest of your girlish pains, that the hip had shifted your sense of perspective. (108)

Two notions arise from this passage. First, the second-person voice generates aesthetic nervousness by marking a shift in Nolan's perspective, particularly regarding her disability and her womanhood. In this instance, the short-circuiting, or discomfort, arises in the interaction "between reader and text" (Quayson 15). Quayson elaborates on this idea by saying that

[f]or the reader, aesthetic nervousness overlaps social attitudes to disability that themselves often remain unexamined in their prejudices and biases....it is the construction of a universe of apparent corporeal normativity both within the literary text and outside it whose basis requires examination and challenge that is generally at issue.... (15)

With the pain of her first sex, Nolan steps outside herself. She is unfamiliar with herself, talking to herself as though she is a stranger: you, your, yourself. The "you" may also apply to the reader as well as to Nolan; McNeney turns the text around and concentrates on the reader's ability or inability to relate, to identify with Nolan. McNeney confronts the reader by putting him/her in a position of disabled first-time sex; she tries to cast Nolan's big hurt onto the reader. She allows the reader to experience a different way of being.

Another layer of the text in which aesthetic nervousness may arise is the internal discomfort of a disabled character. Curiously, Quayson does not explore how a text may be short-circuited when a disabled character confronts him/herself, which is precisely what Nolan does. She confronts her self as framed through her disability and her femininity, which leads to the second notion that Nolan's disability has denied her what she perceives to be a normal woman's experience—that is, normal in the able-bodied sense. Sex is a normal and normalizing ritual for young adults, yet Nolan's disability makes it unfamiliar. Her faulty hip brought about her first big hurt, yet she does not separate the pain of losing her virginity from her other pains.

This passage therefore highlights Nolan's disability and womanhood as the two nuclei of her identity, both conveyed through bodily pain. Her disability moulds and informs her womanhood. Her limp is her "body's accent" (McNeney 11), shaping her voice and her femininity. Her body and her self cannot be separated.

Throughout the novel, disability circumvents or re-appropriates structures and institutions more commonly associated with able-bodied social normalcy. Along with other members of the wheelchair basketball community in New Westminster, BC, Nolan practices in the gym at the church of Our Lady of Perpetual Salvation, nicknamed "Our Lady of Perpetual Smackdowns" (19). When they begin using the gym, Nolan and her peers encounter ignorance from church administrators: "The women who ran the church talked to us in low, sticky voices—enunciating each word as if they'd just learned the language—and called us The Handicaps" (19). These women remain unnamed and are mentioned only once more, in a fleeting moment much later in the novel. By representing a Church named after the Virgin Mary, they call to mind a patriarchal ideal in the form of the desexualized female body. Nolan, a disabled woman with an active sex life, does not conform to this ideal; indeed, she appears to rebel against it, for it represents both female purity and able-bodiedness, values that serve the normate's Christian patriarchy. Here, aesthetic nervousness is inverted: Nolan and her peers are discomfited by able-bodied normalcy and the condescending attitudes that attend it. The women in this case are presumably "normal," or able-bodied, because of the nickname they give. They have no names, no faces, and no characteristics except their unease and their ignorance. The effect is heavily ironic. Persons with disabilities are often ignored to the point of facelessness (Quayson 1). McNeney imposes a similar facelessness onto the two able-bodied women. She highlights their unease—their "low, sticky voices," their condescending manners, their derogatory nickname—and then dismisses

them: “We let them [call us The Handicaps] because they also charged us a third of the price out of charity” (McNeney 19). This last remark is not only ironic and comical, but it also both underlines and undermines the authority the able-bodied women have over Nolan and her peers. Charity is a common approach to disability, as Titchkosky points out: “charity and pity are typically interpretations taken by non-disabled people and bestowed upon disabled people” (*Reading & Writing Disability Differently* 182). Such charity is based on the stereotype that, because of their conditions, disabled people are unable to work and make a living for themselves. The church women’s charity, though, is unnecessary. None of the players is poor—Nolan, the daughter of a doctor and a non-profit administrator, attends the University of British Columbia, while Darren is a well-paid cryptologist—and so do not have to submit to the Dickensian notion of charity toward the disabled. Nolan and her peers could raise a ruckus and call the women on their ignorance, but they choose not to. They *let* the women call them The Handicaps so they can enjoy the satisfaction of getting a good deal on the gym. In this way, they destabilize the power of the able-bodied, and take back the power that the church women might otherwise gain. McNeney deepens this destabilization when Nolan and her peers embrace this nickname, using it as a team name for an out-of-town tournament:

“Why do we have such stupid names? I mean, The Handicaps? What kind of a name is that? It’s insulting.”

“It’s not insulting for gimps to call each other gimps,” said Darren. “It’s like how black people can use the N word. Plus, a little thing we like to call irony. What do they call it? There’s a word for it. Nolan, you’re in school. What’s the term for disabled people using the word ‘cripple?’”

“Reclamatory language,” I said.



“Right. It’s not rude, it’s *reclamatory*.”

“Okay fine,” [Erica, Nolan and Darren’s teammate] said. “I’ll settle for The Handicaps.” (McNeney 74)

This notion of reclamatory language occurs throughout the novel as McNeney continuously destabilizes the notion of able-bodied normalcy and promotes the disabled body and fluid normalcy in its stead. Nolan’s identity crisis after the hip surgery, a crisis highlighted by employment troubles, relationship problems, and physical discomfort, demonstrates her comfort with disability. For Nolan, Darren, and their peers, disability is their norm.

The players’ use of the church gym broadens this fluidity of normalcy. Wheelchair basketball is not seen as a “normal” sport (Olenik et al 55), even though able-bodied people are allowed to play it, and Nolan and her fellow players use the church gym for rough wheelchair basketball instead of more “normal” activities. McNeney’s depiction of the church signifies it as a symbol of rigid normalcy. With its bake sales, Christmas concerts, and saccharine paintings on the wall, it could hardly be more representative of the normate—that is, patriarchal, middle-class, Christian, white-bread. McNeney seems to mock social normalcy, as demonstrated by Nolan’s description of the gym:

Across the walls, someone had painted murals of children playing sports: girls in skirts and pigtails, boys in trousers and dress shoes. Behind one of the baskets, a Jesus complete with crown of thorns stood with his arms around a crowd of children who all wore skates and carried raised hockey sticks as if to cheer,

“Here’s the windup. Here’s the shot. Re—jec—ted! Jesus saves!” (McNeney 20)

McNeney draws attention to an almost outdated portrait of normalcy. The girls in the mural wear skirts and pigtails and the boys wear trousers and dress shoes, as though they have been plucked

straight from the 1950s. The children form a picture of traditional normalcy, reminiscent of the now-outdated nuclear family. McNeney then pokes fun at the painting of Jesus, and, by extension, the church itself. The children's raised hockey sticks create a comic image in Nolan's mind: Jesus is something of a spiritual goaltender who "saves" goals as well as souls. The parody undermines the supposed normalcy of the church and the church women. Disability is often considered the embodiment of anarchy and dissent (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 43), and to that end Nolan and her peers gleefully gallow in the gym, curling around one another in their built-for-speed wheelchairs, fouling one another constantly and using language hardly fitting for a church. If the church is a symbol of able-bodied normalcy, Nolan and her disabled peers deconstruct and re-appropriate it for their own purposes. In response to the anarchic qualities of disability, Garland-Thomson writes that

[t]he disabled body stands for the self gone out of control, individualism run rampant: it mocks the notion of the body as compliant instrument of the limitless will and appears in the cultural imagination as ungovernable, recalcitrant, flaunting its difference as if to refute the fantasy of sameness implicit in the notion of equality.... The disabled figure is the stranger in our midst, within the family and potentially within the self. (*Extraordinary Bodies* 43)

Nolan and her peers, however, are not strange to themselves, and they are not out of control; they form a solid, supportive group. They are not compliant with able-bodied life; rather, they construct their own spaces, their own communities. The novel is narrated and populated chiefly by disabled characters: Nolan, Darren, Darren's ex-wife Valerie, Nolan's friend and teammate Samantha, and other basketball players. Able-bodied people, including Quinn and Nolan's

family, play minor roles. In Nolan's world, disability is the comfort zone, and the disabled are discomforted by the able-bodied. Able-bodiedness disrupts disability.

Nolan's response to Jennifer, an able-bodied representative of BC Wheelchair Sports, further illustrates this discomfort. While Nolan is recovering from hip surgery, Jennifer calls Nolan and asks her to speak to children about wheelchair basketball and about disability in general. Despite working for a disability organization, Jennifer is not very well informed of the language used to identify paraplegics and quadriplegics:

“I just think that you people...well, athletes like you...of course you guys are athletes...have a real message of hope and inspiration to give to the children,” [Jennifer] says....

“I do have a physical disability, but I can still walk. I have arthritis. I just had my hip replaced, so I don't use a cane anymore.”

“Oh. That's too bad, dear. It's really too bad. When working with the, um, special needs athletes, we find that those who are in a wheelchair are much more popular with the children. Especially the guys who're missing a leg. Children love to see the stump. They just love it.”

“We actually prefer the term ‘disabled athletes,’” I say, since what I want to tell her would get me fired before I even started. “I'm more into giving a sports-related talk than a ‘look at how disabled I am’ talk. I don't actually have much to say about my disability.”

“That's fine, dear.” This woman can't be more than a few years older than I am. Dear. Fucking ‘dear.’ (McNeney 195-196)

This conversation is eerily similar to Nolan's initial exchange with Quinn. Jennifer is obviously befuddled by disability and does not know how to discuss it properly. Like Quinn, she has a fixed idea of what wheelchair basketball players should look like—amputees with stumps, people who use wheelchairs all the time—and so when confronted by Nolan, who due to her surgery describes herself as “[i]llegally disabled” (195), she lacks the language and the understanding to deal with it. To compensate for her lack of wherewithal, she condescends to Nolan, calling her “dear” even though, according to Nolan, she is hardly an elder. Privately, Nolan is angry, but resists lashing out at Jennifer because both she and Quinn are unemployed. She no longer goes to school and no longer plays for the national team. She tolerates the “dears” and accepts the job, becoming “the sole breadwinner” of the house (196) and, in doing so, becomes the centre of power in the household.

Despite Nolan's employment, the household remains in flux. “The house is too full of our bills,” Nolan says, “and Quinn's rehearsing” (271). The surgery does not solve Nolan's limp: a few months after the surgery, she remarks that “the limp hasn't gone anywhere, just the pain” (269). She visits her doctor, who tells her, ““You will probably never walk normally....After twenty-odd years of limping, it's all you know how to do”” (269). Nolan considers his words and thinks,

My gait is my body's bad habit and I've read that personality is nothing more than a series of habits, the same steps over and over. Skin sheds, hair grows, scars fade, this limp is in me deeper than flesh or bone. It tells me that the bionic hip hasn't changed anything. I'm above science. (269)

Her words demonstrate her comfort with disability; she seems to take pride in it. While Harry Vincent sees his limp as an “uncommon feature” (Vanderhaeghe 7), Nolan equates her gait with

her personality, making a direct link between disability and identity. Even further, her limp transcends physicality. It has become a veritable part of her, something that science cannot touch. She cannot be corrected. Her bad habit has become a crucial part of her. She might try to conform to what Quinn wants her to be, but her body will not allow it. Her surgery has relieved her pain, but it has not excised her sense of self. Her disability is too powerful to be overcome.

While from a disability point of view Nolan sees herself as above science, her pregnancy reveals that she is not entirely above it. Her pregnancy prompts a re-evaluation of disability's relationship with able-bodied normalcy. She becomes pregnant while she recovers from surgery, which is to say during her period of crisis. Initially, her pregnancy appears to trump the stereotype that disabled women are "unfit for motherhood" (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 26); however, the language Nolan uses to describe her pregnancy reveals attitudes toward pregnancy that complicate the novel's conception of disability as a kind of normalcy. She sees her growing belly as a deformity: "a birth mark, a scar, a second head [she's] grown" (McNeney 404). While before she characterizes her surgical scars as "maybe the best skin" she has (10), here she sees her pregnancy as a defect. She again connects disability and femininity, although the connection is not nearly as positive as it used to be. Nolan takes this idea further when she likens her baby to "a blood-borne virus" (416). The pessimistic way Nolan characterizes her pregnancy is puzzling given her positive reaction to being disabled. One might think that her growing belly contributes to her self-image, that she is circumventing expectations by being both disabled and pregnant; however, while both Nolan's faulty hip and her pregnancy impact how she sees herself, their effects are markedly different. There are three ways to interpret Nolan's reaction to her pregnancy. First, she is angry and directs her anger toward the baby by characterizing it as an unwelcome disruption—specifically from Quinn, the able-bodied Cripple

Killer. He has literally invaded her, encouraging her surgery and getting her pregnant, all the while troubling her sense of self. She and Quinn are still not bringing in money, and are forced to move from their house “into a 600-square foot apartment” (405). On top of that, Quinn leaves—temporarily (405). Their relationship is unstable, and she questions Quinn’s ability to be a father (417). Second, Nolan’s language regarding the pregnancy suggests that Nolan denies able-bodied womanhood. Pregnancy “is often seen as compulsory for women,” a social requirement “that some feminist thinkers find oppressive” (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 26). While pregnancy is also driven by biological and evolutionary pressures, McNeney focuses on the social aspects. Throughout the novel, Nolan consistently denies or de-normalizes conventional womanhood. She is a high-performance athlete who frequently competes against men; her disability prompts her to reconfigure her sexual and social relationships; and she is assertive, competitive, and independent, all qualities that Shuttleworth attributes to hegemonic masculinity. Her pregnancy signifies conformity to the normate view, and it makes her uncomfortable because she has lived as a disabled person since she was very young. Third, Nolan views her pregnancy as a social obstacle, as a hindrance to her disabled self. Her pregnancy presents unique physical complications due to her surgery, her arthritis, and her athletic injuries. Shortly after she becomes pregnant, her physician shows her an X-ray: ““See where there’s some arthritis on L5 on your spine because of when you fractured it? That’s exactly where the baby’s going to press on....Plus, the new hip. That’s a lot of pressure to be putting on a prosthetic device that hasn’t fully healed yet”” (McNeney 270). Toward the end of the novel, when the baby is on its way, McNeney makes a curious connection. Darren, not Quinn, drives her to the hospital to deliver her child; when they arrive, Darren says, ““In the movies, pregnant women get wheelchairs....Want me to get you a chair? I’ll push you”” (462). Here, McNeney makes a direct

link between pregnancy and disability. This link is quite puzzling. Up until Nolan's pregnancy, she presents disability as a positive thing, as an identity, as something to be embraced. Pregnancy complicates this view; for Nolan, pregnancy is an impediment.

It is unclear what McNeney is trying to convey with this relationship between disability and pregnancy. If pregnancy is disabling, then Nolan, who takes pride in her disability, ought to welcome it, but she does not. It is as though Nolan's womanhood clashes with her disability. Such a reading creates further problems, since McNeney frequently intertwines Nolan's womanhood and disability to the point where the two are inseparable. What is not muddled, however, is how central Nolan's body is to her identity, a point McNeney emphasizes in the novel's final pages. After months of struggle and therapy, Nolan, with Darren and Quinn at her side, gives birth to a daughter: "I thought of the baby slipping through me like a ball through a hoop: my body a net that keeps nothing. It's not like that. It defies metaphor. The birth is pure sensation, as if all the pain I'd ever had in my life had stayed with me and waited to be called upon" (468-69). Just as her hip pains had prepared her for sex with Darren, her disability has prepared her for giving birth. Immediately after linking disability and womanhood, McNeney reverses course and separates them: Nolan's hip causes complications, and as her "daughter wails her pure, pure lungs out," the doctors stitch her up (469). Despite these complications, Nolan seems relieved: "I am fine, self-contained. For the first time since the replacement, I am the only thing attached to me" (469). Now that she is no longer pregnant, she is free to be her disabled self. If one accepts that Quinn has invaded and disrupted her disabled world, she has for the moment excised his presence.

McNeney's novel cross-examines the manner in which able-bodied normalcy seeks to influence disabled people. With her portrait of Nolan Taylor, McNeney presents a fluidly normal

disabled person, someone neither extraordinary nor dull. By doing so, McNeney subverts the super-crip narrative that often frames disabled athletes and challenges normative notions of disability and femininity, recalibrating disability's position in relation to able-bodiedness and positing that disability is a type of normal.



## Conclusion:

### Toward a Fluid Vision of Canada

In an interview on February 2, 2015, David Onley, the former Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, called accessibility in Canada “a national shame” (Paikin). By using this phrase, Onley, who uses a wheelchair, drew attention not only to obstacles that persons with disabilities face on a daily basis in Canada, but to the deeper attitudes that remain entrenched in Canadian society. The pride and prejudice that Michael J. Prince identifies remain part of the fabric of Canadian life. According to Statistics Canada, about 3.8 million Canadians have a disability, which amounts to about thirteen-point-five percent of the population (“Canadian Survey on Disability, 2012”). Persons with disabilities aged twenty-five to sixty-four have a forty-nine percent employment rate, compared with seventy-nine percent for able-bodied people (“Study: Persons with disabilities and employment”). Only ten percent of Canadians believe that “people with disabilities are fully included in society. The majority of Canadians also want to help improve the lives of people with disabilities and agree the social benefit is worth the cost” (CBC, “12 Facts And Figures About Having A Disability In Canada”). While the majority of Canadians want to help improve the lives of disabled people, statistics show that having a disability presents obstacles for disabled Canadians. It seems that Canadians continue to maintain a nebulous attitude toward disability: while they believe disabled people should have a more prominent role

in society, their actions, or rather inaction, suggest otherwise. As a result, persons with disabilities are often mistreated and neglected, and social and political progress is frustratingly slow.

In August 2015, Americans celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Marsha Saxton calls it “one of the most far-reaching pieces of civil rights legislation ever.... This piece of legislation is the envy of the international community of disability activists, most of whom live in countries where disabled people are viewed with pity and charity, and accorded low social and legal status” (90). Indeed, André Picard, a public health reporter at *The Globe and Mail*, wrote a bracing article in support of a Canadians with Disabilities Act: “In this country, there is no comprehensive legislation protecting the rights of people with disabilities. What we have instead is a mish-mash of vague principles and tame enforcement bodies”; he goes on to say that “[i]n Canada, we continue to treat inclusion of people with disabilities as a privilege rather than a right. That needs to change” (“It’s well past time”). Even though the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protects persons with disabilities from discrimination, a Canadians with Disabilities Act would be a significant step toward a more fluid conception of normalcy, forcing “governments and private businesses to tear down barriers or face punishing sanctions,” as well as give “people with disabilities legal tools to demand change” (Picard). Unfortunately, there are no plans for such an act. While Canada has signed and ratified the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which took effect in 2008, there is no dedicated national legislation that provides persons with disabilities with social, legal, and political strength.

The perpetual neglect of Canadians with disabilities reveals certain implications about this country’s conception of diversity. With regard to popular media and public perceptions,

diversity in Canada appears to include race, gender, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity, but not disability. These other groups are highly visible in the media, thanks to protests, celebrations, pride parades, and other cultural events; in contrast, disability receives “sporadic and outmoded forms of media attention” (Prince, *Absent Citizens* 140). Whenever disability appears on the news, it almost always centres on either a feel-good story or a tragedy—that is, it reflects either pride or prejudice, and only serves to reinforce Canadians’ ambivalence toward disability.

Titchkosky writes that

[d]isability appears in the everyday life of text in a host of seemingly contradictory ways....A deep provocation lies in the fact that the very ways that disability is included in everyday life are, also, part of that which structures the continued manifestation of disabled people as a non-viable type. It is, for example, provocative to think about how disability is both excluded *and* included simultaneously in the interstices of our lives, or included as an excludable type.

(*Reading & Writing* 5; Titchkosky’s emphasis)

Disabled people are included in conversations of exclusion, but not within Canada’s broader conception of diversity. It appears there is a hierarchy of diversity in this country, with disability resting at the bottom. This hierarchy stems from able-bodied hegemony: disabled people are not as recognized as other groups. An inflexible conception of normalcy does not allow or recognize disability as a source of identity or community. Even the Deaf, who form communities based on their shared languages, struggle to assert themselves. This situation is quite disconcerting, given the progress that Deaf and disabled people have made in the last twenty years. Davis writes that “in multicultural curriculum discussions, disability is often struck off the list of required alterities because it is seen as degrading or watering down the integrity of identities.... A cursory glance at

books on diversity and identity shows an almost total absence of disability issues” (*Bending over Backwards* 87). The notion that disability contaminates or dilutes other identities reinforces able-bodied and able-minded hegemony and restricts the picture of diversity. In that sense, Canada’s multiculturalism policy may have played a part in shaping how its disabled citizens are perceived. Canada’s multiculturalism policy, which, like the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, was first produced by Pierre Elliot Trudeau, excludes disability from its vision of diversity. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which received Royal Assent in 1988, articulates diversity in racial, national, religious, and cultural terms:

the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada.... (Canadian Multiculturalism Act)

A disabled person looking in the Act for a place amongst other pointedly named minority groups will find none. The Act makes no explicit reference to disability, leading one to believe that disability is not as recognized as part of Canada’s multicultural population. Granted, this absence is only one of the Act’s many flaws, which have been well-documented by Neil Bissoondath and other political commentators;<sup>10</sup> nevertheless, the Act betrays “a vision of government, not content to let things be, determined to play a direct role in shaping not only the evolution of Canadian...society but the evolution of individuals within that society as well” (Bissoondath 39).

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<sup>10</sup> Among other things, Bissoondath criticizes the Act’s vagueness along with the way it ghettoizes minorities and “views newcomers as exotics and pretends that this is both proper and sufficient” (39). Journalist Richard Gwyn wrote that Trudeau’s policy was a knee-jerk response to accusations that Trudeau was “sloughing off the ethnics” (quoted in Bissoondath 36).

In other words, the Government of Canada attempted to establish a new norm through the Multiculturalism Act. This norm, unfortunately, is outdated and rigid (it leaves out the LGBTQ2 community, too). It appears that, as evidenced by the way disabled people have been consistently marginalized in Canada, the Act has been effective in shaping the evolution of Canadian society. Unfortunately, that evolution has not quite yielded the type of social progress that truly inclusive societies exemplify. Disabled Canadians remain absent or, at the very least, marginal citizens.

A fluid conception of normalcy would alleviate these difficulties and allow disabled people (and women, and homosexuals, and transsexuals, and people from racial minorities) to play more prominent roles in Canadian life. The novels included here provide suggestions and even blueprints for social and political change. Prince states that “[p]opular culture and the mass media are...important institutions for the discursive side of citizenship” (*Absent Citizens* 17). To that end, people with disabilities are often ignored, and these novels not only provide vehicles for them to be heard, but also propose more fluid models of normalcy. While Mistry’s *Family Matters* demonstrates the harm that discriminatory attitudes can inflict, the six novels that follow it challenge the status quo and offer new ways of thinking about disability, normalcy, and literature. Findley’s novel offers a glimpse of what might happen if disability were incorporated into a spectrum of diverse fluctuating selves. Findley sees disability as part of a continuum of difference that includes women and homosexuals. Disability also serves as part of Findley’s reshaping of biblical myth: he employs the story of the flood to allegorize the Canadian and German eugenics movements, forcing us to confront the devastating consequences of cruel and inhumane violence.

Disability is a productively disruptive presence in these novels. It interrupts textual conventions and allows authors to explore different points of view, thereby prompting them to

reconfigure genre and/or narrative expectations. In *The Englishman's Boy*, Vanderhaeghe challenges conventions of the Western by positioning Harry Vincent, a disabled man, as a storyteller. Westerns typically focus on able-bodied men, and by employing Harry as a narrator Vanderhaeghe deviates from standard Western formulae while at the same time interrogating the way narratives are constructed. Vanderhaeghe asserts that the process of creation—of self, of history, of nationality—occurs as much on an individual level as on a social level. Harry's disability is shaped as much by himself as by the people around him; therefore, disability is a fluid process, a continuous negotiation of hopes and expectations. MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* reconfigures Gothic conventions in a similar manner. Gothic stories are typically told from the point of view of an able-bodied narrator who affirms corporeal and textual normativity while at the same time casting aside and/or correcting, through death or other means, disabled and disfigured characters. In MacDonald's novel, Lily Piper presents her family's history from a disabled female point of view, employing her narrative authority to cultivate empathy for people who would otherwise be marginalized. By telling the story this way, MacDonald exposes the patriarchal and racist attitudes that have encumbered Canada's citizens, and like Findley she asserts that disability is part of Canada's diverse population.

By disrupting and reconfiguring textual conventions, the novels challenge prior portrayals of disability. To this end, they often engage in intertextual exchanges. Vanderhaeghe, MacDonald, and Coady all explicitly confront their predecessors: Vanderhaeghe liberally sprinkles his novel with Hollywood stars and Western film lore; MacDonald often alludes to *Jane Eyre*, *Little Women*, and other novels; and Coady confronts depictions of mental illness offered by Sylvia Plath, Ken Kesey, Anthony Burgess, and Ira Levin. Rather than follow her predecessors' examples and resort to a more serious and tragic examination of mental health,

Coady opts for comedy, ridiculing institutionalization as a response to mental illness while condemning patriarchy's disabling influence. By blurring the line between mental health and mental illness, she provides a fluid perspective of mental health and liberates mental illness from darkness. People with mental illnesses suffer in part because their conditions are often framed through tragedy, a frame created in part by prior cultural depictions; by allowing her reader to laugh at mental health issues, Coady makes them easier to talk about. *Strange Heaven* is, in a way, literary therapy.

A disability perspective also frames familiar events within an unfamiliar view. In the same way that Lily Piper's empathetic perspective helps liberate New Waterford's women and racial minorities from white patriarchal oppression, Vanderhaeghe's depiction of the Cypress Hills Massacre empathizes with the Assiniboine. Shorty McAdoo's third-person depiction of the Massacre, told within Harry Vincent's narration, counters Canada's Eurocentric version of history with a point of view that empathizes with Aboriginal people. Itani's *Deafening* does something similar in that it presents the Great War from a Deaf perspective. By framing the War through Grania O'Neill's eyes, Itani traces the development of Canada as a nation and of the Deaf community as a culture, if not a nation. The struggle of the Deaf to maintain independence within a hearing empire reflects Canada's struggle for dominion from Britain. Overall, Itani asserts that the Deaf constitute a Canadian voice, a community which has been involved in this country's development since its crucial moments on the battlefields in Europe.

Itani's and Vanderhaeghe's novels present differing models of nationhood, which influence how we may read their disabilities. Vanderhaeghe asserts that nationality, like disability, is as much an individual creation as it is a socially accepted notion, while Itani emphasizes that nationhood comes solely from communal engagement. Grania exhibits her

Canadianness by contributing to the war effort: working as a nurse and sending packages and silent messages overseas to her husband. In this way, she is like the soldiers in Europe who work as a unit: each person does his/her part. She exhibits her Deafness—that is, her Deaf self—by signing and engaging with the Deaf community. For Itani, it appears that acting for the common good affirms one’s citizenship, while for Vanderhaeghe citizenship is a constant negotiation of individual and social ideas, of imagination and reality. In this light, Grania could be read as fulfilling the duties of her two nations (Canada and Deaf) in addition to straddling the boundary between the Deaf and hearing worlds. She is uniquely positioned to facilitate relationships between Deaf and hearing people. Her nationality is fluid.

Each novel in this study presents different ways of confronting and rethinking able-bodied and/or able-minded hegemony, and none does so more directly than McNeney’s *Post*. Within this study, *Post* represents a key development in disability literary progress: the novels following Mistry’s exhibit varying degrees of openness toward disability, each one offering its own possibilities of disabled existence. Through Nolan Taylor, McNeney suggests that disability constitutes a type of normalcy. To her, disability is simply a way of being amongst many ways of being. While Nolan’s disabled self is challenged by surgery and her relationship with Quinn, she maintains her disabled state. Surgery relieves her pain, but not her limp. Her disability prevails.

These novels not only indicate progress in the way Canadian writers perceive disability; they allow us to understand contemporary disability issues. Even though the effects of eugenics have long been known, it is not a thing of the past. It has carried forth into the present day, forming a crucial “part of our knowledge base: science, history, social policy, and economics now reflect the idea that children should be brighter, more beautiful, and more gifted with every passing generation and that the ‘responsible’ thing is to ensure the ‘defective’ are either



not born or not allowed to reproduce themselves” (Harris-Zsovan 168). While policies such as the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* have guaranteed the rights of Canadians with disabilities, scientific advances such as genetic screening and prenatal testing have become commonplace, allowing eugenics to creep into contemporary discourse. As Ruth Hubbard states, “decisions about what kind of baby to bear inevitably are bedeviled by overt and unspoken judgments about which lives are ‘worth living’” (85). Indeed, it appears that many Canadians see persons with disabilities as less than worthy. In February 2015, shortly after Onley’s interview, the Supreme Court of Canada overturned the ban on assisted suicide, “recogniz[ing] the right of clearly consenting adults who endure intolerable physical or mental suffering who wish to end their lives with a doctor’s help” (Bryden and Kirkup). The language of the ruling is quite slippery: what constitutes intolerable suffering? How does one define clear consent? To make matters even more difficult, the Canadian public favours physician-assisted suicide so much that it “is not a controversial issue in Canada anymore” (Brean). A national poll has revealed that eighty-two percent of Canadians agree that a person with a terminal disease should be permitted to end his or her life; seventy-six percent agree that a person suffering a great deal of pain should be allowed to receive assisted suicide; and sixty-seven percent agree that anyone with Alzheimer’s and/or fears of losing awareness and/or bathroom functions should be allowed to die (Brean). While a terminal disease is not precisely a disability, it can, as the chapter on Mistry shows, have disabling effects. A terminal disease can cause one to become a wheelchair user, or lose one’s memory, or lose sensation in one’s extremities. Assisted suicide legislation creates potentially harmful associations in people’s minds, and inevitably prompts them to question whether a life of disability is worth living. Harriet McBryde Johnson states that “[t]he case for assisted suicide rests on stereotypes that our lives are inherently so bad that it is entirely rational if we want to

die” (515). Since the Supreme Court overturned the ban, disability organizations such as the Council of Canadians with Disabilities have condemned the legislation: “CCD opposes government action to decriminalize assisted suicide because of the serious potential for abuse and the negative image of people with disabilities that would be produced if people with disabilities are killed with state sanction” (“Euthanasia/Assisted Suicide”). The attitudes that brought about eugenics remain entrenched in Canadian society.

Such an attitude stalls progress in creating opportunities for persons with disabilities to fully participate in Canadian society. It also allows vulnerable people to be neglected and disability hate crime to occur. Since I began this study, I have read several stories about neglect and hate crime involving disability; one concerns the death of thirty-eight-year-old Guy Mitchell, a developmentally delayed man who in April 2012 was found dead in an underground water tank beneath his home in Hamilton (Richard J. Brennan). His home was found in a disgusting state: “police found the house had no running water or heat, and that feces, urine and vomit were everywhere. Toilets and tubs were brimming with human waste; the fridge ha[d] no food” (Brennan). Two days before Mitchell died, the social worker assigned to gauge his living situation gave the home a passing grade (Brennan). Another more prominent story involves Robert Latimer, who on November 29, 2010 was granted full parole after serving ten years of a life sentence (CBC, “Compassionate homicide”). Latimer maintains his innocence in the murder of his daughter Tracy, and the majority of Canadians continue to support his actions.

In the face of such attitudes, fluid normalcy may seem overly optimistic. I wrote earlier that a truly fluid society would present no barriers, that there would be no such thing as disability. While hoping for a truly fluid society may sound naïve, believing that Canadians can do better is not naïve. The ultimate aim of a fluid conception of normalcy is to provoke

Canadians into thinking about how their society is structured and what sorts of attitudes prevail. It signifies a method of reading both Canadian texts and Canadian social structures. It posits that, like a text, Canadian social structures can be read, imagined, and re-imagined.

Within Canadian fiction, the seven novels featured here present the most evocative challenges to able-bodied normalcy. In doing so, they cohere closest with my own outlook: as a person with a hearing impairment, I have to believe that a more fluid conception of normalcy is possible and that social, legal, cultural, and political conditions will improve for disabled people in this country. There have been some positive steps, with the Bell “Let’s Talk” program encouraging open discussions of mental illness, and the Saskatchewan government’s recently unveiled disability strategy, which pledges to create educational and employment opportunities for disabled citizens. But more needs to happen. Canadian citizens need to see the possibilities within disability rather than the stigmas. For true progress to occur, our conception of normalcy needs to change, and literature provides models for change. By portraying disability in nuanced ways, the authors featured here do not only offer different ways of re-conceiving normalcy and disability; they exemplify literature’s central values: that empathy and compassion are among the most important human qualities; that everyone has a voice; and that everyone is worthy of dignity and respect.

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