

**Dis-abling the Hearing Line: Deafness, Deaf  
Studies and Creative Nonfiction**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an investigation into the intersections of deafness and literature. It is concerned with the discursive construction of the deaf individual, and the potential representations of deafness in written prose. As a grandchild of two deaf adults, my lived experience and interaction with deafness significantly informs this work. I'm exploring, both through research and creative practice, my grandparents' lived experiences of being deaf in a hearing world, and the ways in which creative non-fiction writing might function as a unique form to represent this experience. My project involves a two-pronged approach that can be separated into an analytical critique of current literature, and a creative-practice research component, whereby I employ and experiment with techniques unique to creative non-fiction in order to produce pieces of critically informed personal narrative. The philosophical and political thrust of my study is grounded in a desire to illuminate the multitudinous ways of knowing and engaging sensorially with the world, in order to negotiate and narrow, the interstitial space between deaf and hearing people. Engaging with the field of Deaf Studies, I attempt to disrupt the hierarchical binaries of the able/disabled body and intervene in the various discourses that have constructed deafness as a form of depravity and deficit.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Acknowledgments**

Deepest thanks to my supervisor, Kate Rossmanith, whose help, energy and enthusiasm has made this project a pleasure. Thank you also to Nicole Matthews for reading my final draft and making suggestions. Biggest thanks and love to my family and especially my grandparents, without whom this thesis could not have been written. I am grateful and honoured to have the privilege of sharing your stories, and hope I have done them justice.

## **Introduction**

“Things come to matter and continue to matter insofar as they instigate stories that affirm those things in relation to how lives are lived” (Frank 2002, p.113).

I was three years old when I first realised that my grandparents were deaf.

Before then, I'd had a latent knowledge that they were somehow different to me, that there was a line that separated us: they didn't use the telephone; their doorbell had a flashing light and not a bell; and perhaps Mum and Dad had told me that Nanny and Grandpa couldn't hear.

But it was when I was three that I decided to experiment on my Grandma. She was stooped over the sink, washing the dishes. I stood behind her and screamed with all the force my little frame could muster. She didn't flinch. I howled, cried for help, thinking surely she'd respond to that. Nothing. In my childish indignation, my temper rose. I stomped on the ground, at which point Nanny turned around. “I hate you” I snarled, and watched as the colour drained from her face. I knew then that she hadn't heard me, but she'd understood.

This thesis attempts to give legibility to embodied, lived experiences of, and with, deafness. My investigation focuses on the intersection of deafness and literature, realising the written word as a powerful agent in constructing and re-constructing perceptions of deaf lives in contemporary (western) cultural consciousness. In negotiating story and its relationship with cultural narratives, I am concerned with the discursive construction of the deaf individual, and thus, turn my gaze upon existing, as well as potential, representations of deafness in written prose.

As a grandchild of two deaf adults, my lived experience and interaction with deafness significantly informs this work. As such, I'm exploring, both through research and creative practice, my grandparents' lived experiences of being deaf in a hearing world, and the ways in which creative nonfiction writing might function as a unique form to represent this experience. In undertaking creative writing experiments, I also attempt to narrativise and negotiate 'the hearing line' – the invisible boundary between deaf and hearing people.

My project involves a two-pronged approach that can be separated into an analytical critique of current literature, and a creative-practice research component, whereby I employ and experiment with techniques unique to creative nonfiction in order to produce pieces of critically informed personal narrative.

The philosophical and political thrust of my study is grounded in a desire to illuminate the multitudinous ways of knowing and engaging sensorially with the world in order to negotiate and narrow the interstitial space between deaf and hearing people. In doing so, I attempt to disrupt the hierarchical binaries of the abled/disabled body<sup>1</sup> and intervene in the various medical, social and cultural discourses that have historically constructed deafness as a form of depravity and deficit.

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<sup>1</sup> Many deaf people do not consider themselves to be disabled. However, I use these terms to acknowledge that deafness as a cultural/ discursive construction is often categorised as such.

In negotiating the identity politics that surround both deafness and hearingness, I seek to problematise the d/Deaf and h/Hearing dichotomies that arise in much contemporary Deaf Studies scholarship and community discourse<sup>2</sup>. Though often employed to demarcate audiological status as distinct from cultural and linguistic affiliation (and thus liberate deaf persons from pathologising scripts), I argue that such categories function to exclude particular practices and voices, as well as legitimise an elite form of Deaf culture in which people can be categorised as not ‘d/Deaf’ enough to be Deaf.

Furthermore, a subsidiary aim of the work is to institute a dialogue between the fields of Deaf Studies, Disability Studies, and fledgling research into creative nonfiction. Whilst acknowledging deaf people’s resistance to being classified as ‘disabled’, I suggest the value of engaging with Disability Studies in order to negotiate somatic difference on a broad spectrum. Moreover, I consider what it might mean, from an ethical and ontological standpoint, to make sense of, and represent, other people’s experience(s) and way(s) of being.

As several Deaf Studies scholars have explored, and as I will extrapolate in the following chapter, the history of deafness as a discursive construction is marked by suggestions of muteness, dumbness, infirmity and lack. As a condition subjected to the clinical gaze, deafness has been implicated in a long history of misguided philanthropy and paternalism that manifests itself particularly in the

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<sup>2</sup> It is common for Deaf Studies scholars to use the Deaf/deaf distinction to highlight cultural identity as distinct from physiological deafness. Some prefer to use capitalised ‘Deaf’ to refer to those who self-identify as part of a distinctive linguistic and cultural minority. Others, however, do not associate themselves with cultural deafness, and thus tend to use ‘deaf’ instead. Although I am largely using ‘deaf’ to denote the audiological condition of deafness, I use d/Deaf frequently to highlight the dual, and often mixed nature of the audiological and sociological conditions.



practice of deaf education and restrictions on (sign) language. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pathological perspective of deafness has pervaded western thought, and as such, conversations that swirl around the lexicon of deafness, disability and deaf lives continue to grapple with the notion of difference and heterogeneity. As Brenda Jo Brueggemann writes, “the very subject of [. . .] deafness has almost always been read - socially, educationally, linguistically, culturally, philosophically - as a trauma, both expected and repeated, both mitigated and amplified in the history of ‘reason’” (2009, p. 2).

In a literary sense, authentic stories of deafness are rare, almost ‘exotic’ entities in a population of texts that are limited in number, and exist in relative obscurity to the reading public. Indeed, when I began my research, I could scarcely recall a single story of deafness in all the novels, plays, and poetry I had read and loved over the years. I had stumbled across one or two autobiographies that my grandparents had lying round the house; but in bookstores and libraries, such texts were scarce and required lengthy searches to uncover. What’s more, it is frequently acknowledged that deaf narratives have typically fallen prey to a range of representational pitfalls that act to reify hegemonic scripts and assumptions about deafness that are at best problematic, and at worst, plainly offensive.

With so few narratives of deafness in existence - a problem compounded by the dearth of nuanced representations in extant literature - this thesis attempts to critically and creatively address a number of questions. I am interested in the ways in which western literature has traditionally represented deafness and deaf lives. Furthermore, I want to explore how creative nonfiction might

function to write deafness differently, and elucidate different ways of knowing and engaging sensorially with the world. Similarly, I investigate how creative nonfiction can enliven and animate interactions across and between the hearing line. In attending to each of these questions, this thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter one provides a review of current scholarly literature in the field of Deaf and Disability Studies in order to illuminate the central preoccupations of scholars in each field. Here, I explain and orient the reader specifically to the political project of Deaf Studies in order to contextualise a number of pertinent issues to the deaf milieu. In doing so, I make explicit the ideological, social and discursive structures that have pathologised deafness and impeded upon deaf persons. I highlight further, my choice to adopt a Deaf Studies sensibility in approaching my task, illuminating the usefulness of creative nonfiction for engaging with relevant discourses to the field.

In chapter two I explicate my methodological choices, articulating the value of a research practice that combines critical reflection and creative practice. I begin by outlining the political value of critical discourse analysis in making visible the hegemonic rhetorical scripts that exist in deaf narratives. I then provide a framework for engaging with the seemingly disparate, but nonetheless connected research practices of autoethnographers, immersion writers, and practitioners of creative nonfiction. I also explain and justify my choice to write within the genre of creative nonfiction over fiction or other literary genres. In doing so, I attempt to make evident the potential for social enquiry within this dynamic and experimental form.

In chapter three, I perform a deconstructive discourse analysis on a range of non-fiction texts, including biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and other forms of life writing. I investigate the ways that texts composed by both deaf and hearing authors variously function to reinforce, contest, and even reimagine deafness on the page and within the cultural imaginary. Furthermore, I briefly consider the role of familial narratives and their contribution to telling stories of deafness.

Chapter four is the space in which I experiment with a range of tools, styles and language devices that are features of creative nonfiction, as a means of depicting an engaging, immersive life-world for the reader. This collection of creative nonfiction writing experiments attempts to give narrative life to the specificities, peculiarities and complexities of my relationship with my grandparents, as well as their interactions with, and ways of being within a hearing-dominated world. I take particular care in these stories to allow my grandparents' voices to speak in conjunction with mine in order to provide insight into our lived and embodied ways of engaging with one another and the world. Throughout these pieces, I frequently invoke and problematise both hearing and deaf identity categories in order to generate a more fluid discourse regarding deafness, hearing-ness and the hearing line.

In attempting to articulate, as well as enact the potential of creative nonfiction for representing deaf lives, I hope to create a space in which to discuss deafness in a non-reductive and non-essentialist manner. Writing, and indeed narrative, is discussed and employed in this work as a powerful mechanism that attributes value and gives coherence to particular experiences. In recognising that the

stories we tell make particular lives and experiences visible, it is crucial that new ways of imagining and engaging with deaf literature are sought out and proliferated. In contributing an intimate and localised account of deafness, I hope to make the lives, and issues at stake, matter. As such, I attempt to deconstruct or 'dis-able' the hearing line: bringing into conversation deafness, Deaf Studies and creative nonfiction

## **Chapter One: Literature Review**

### **1.1: Introduction**

Writing about deafness, in various forms and across a range of literary genres, has historically been beset with a range of problems still to be negotiated by critics and writers alike. In recent years, a critical discourse has emerged both in Deaf Studies and Disability Studies, which engages with the representation of deafness and deaf persons in both fictional and non-fictional texts. However, the value of creative nonfiction to the philosophical and political project of Deaf Studies is yet to be explicated. Although significant work in the field of Disability Studies has begun to articulate the counter-discursive capacity of disability life writing (of which creative nonfiction can be considered part) to disrupt prevailing paradigms of disability (Mitchell & Snyder 2001; Finger 2005; Smith & Sparkes 2008; Couser 2009; Torrell 2011) as yet, there is limited enquiry within Deaf Studies towards this end.

Despite an increasingly rich academic culture around the representation of deafness in western works of prose fiction (Cranston 1991; Davis 1995; Pajka-West 2010; McDonald 2011), there remains little analysis of the value of creative nonfiction to the philosophical and political thrust of Deaf Studies. Furthermore, despite the proliferation of rigorous academic discourse dedicated to the study of issues related to deafness, 'Deaf Studies' as an academic field, remains relatively obscure within the academic institution and the general community (Bauman 2008, p. 3).

Certainly, the paucity of stories told about deafness and the invisibility (McDonald 2011) of extant narratives, speaks to a need for more complex and nuanced depictions of deafness in literary works. In producing pieces of creative nonfiction which explicate the empirical realities of deafness as it pertains to my deaf grandparents, my research functions to bridge the discursive gap between creative nonfiction and Deaf Studies, illuminating the ways that the form might serve as a vehicle for effectively exploring and disseminating pertinent ideas, issues and concerns relevant to the deaf milieu.

## **1.2: The Deaf Studies Project**

Deaf Studies is a counter-hegemonic discipline that provides an invaluable body of knowledge pertaining to the social, cultural and historical constructions of deafness in western societies. Emerging in the 1970s and 80s, it is a field of critical inquiry into constructions of language, identity and the body. To date, much of Deaf Studies scholarly literature has been dedicated to exposing and addressing the dimensions of individual, institutional and metaphysical oppression faced by deaf people throughout (western) history (Lane 1984; Baynton 1997; Davis 1995; Bauman 2004).

Though regarded as a separate field, Deaf Studies overlaps significantly with Disability Studies in its desire to address various forms of inequality. However, Deaf Studies differs from Disability Studies in its focus on issues pertinent to the deaf world such as: sign language and socio-linguistics (Klima & Bellugi 1976; Maxwell 1990; Senghas & Monaghan 2002); deafness and education (Erting

1992; Baynton, 1996); deaf society and culture (Atherton, Russell & Turner 2001; Eckert 2010); and studies of identity and the body (Davis 1995 & 2002; Thoutenhooft 2000; Leigh 2009). Another distinctive element of Deaf Studies is its resistance to the term 'disability'. Deaf Studies scholars are careful to acknowledge d/Deaf persons as belonging to a distinctive cultural and linguistic minority, rather than to a 'disabled' identity category. As Deaf Studies scholar Harlan Lane suggests, "[deaf people] are not handicapped in the usual sense; theirs is largely a problem of overcoming language barriers, not a problem of disability" (1984, p. xiii).

Irrespective of their specific focus, most scholars within Deaf Studies turn a critical gaze upon the cultures of phonocentrism and 'audism' - defined by deaf scholar Tom Humphries as the "notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of those who hear" (Humphries in Bauman 2008, p. 4).

A useful analysis of the individual and institutional oppression of deaf people can be found in the work of Dirksen Bauman. Bauman provides an historical overview of medical and pedagogical practices and discourses by which deaf people were "physically and pedagogically coerced into adopting hearing norms, whether they wanted to or not" (Bauman 2004, p. 241). As Bauman suggests, it is essential to recognise the prevalence of audism as a hegemonic ideological force. The roots of audism, he argues, "run so deep and are so pervasive that they have implications not only for deaf persons and those who work and live with them, but also for anyone interested in issues of language, human rights, and the question of human nature" (Bauman 2004, p. 240).

Several Deaf Studies scholars implicitly and explicitly discuss ‘the hearing line’: “that invisible boundary separating deaf and hearing people” (Krentz 2007, p. 2). The discourse over the hearing line, they suggest, pertains to all people and is as pervasive as discourses about race, gender, sexuality, class and disability (Krentz 2007, p. 5).

Within the field of Deaf Studies, much discussion of audism is grounded in critiques of ‘oralism’. Oralism was the predominant mode of teaching deaf people for most of the twentieth century, and was the method by which my grandparents were taught to speak. It is a medico-pedagogy which forbids the use of sign language, and enforces the use of speaking, reading lips and auditory training (Bauman 2008, p. 4). Though a belief in the value of oral methods persists in some medical and educational contexts, within Deaf Studies oralism is almost unanimously perceived as a paternalising mode of social control, indicative of a cultural obsession with ‘normalcy’ (Davis 1995) and spoken language (Baynton 1997; Markotic 2001; Bauman 2004 & 2008). The impact of oralism upon the culture and practice of sign language, and moreover on d/Deaf identity(s), cannot be underestimated. Bauman’s work articulates the intersection of oralism with audist assumptions about language. He states:

Before the 1960s, prevailing wisdom considered signed languages to be mere supplements to spoken languages, rudimentary ideographic systems, and collections of primitive gestures. As a result, deaf people were conceived as intellectually inferior and in dire need of acquiring speech and lip-reading skills. (2008, p. 4)

In a similar fashion, Douglas Baynton’s work on the history of the oralist movement illuminates the centrality of oralism to grander debates within Deaf Studies regarding human diversity, (in)tolerance and the oppression of the deaf



minority by the hearing majority. As Baynton suggests, “the history of deaf education is as much, or more, about concerns over identity and selfhood as it is about pedagogical technique or theory” (1997, p. 131).

Fundamental to the project of Deaf Studies, and indeed my own work, is the desire to challenge mainstream societal views of deaf people as disabled, in need of cure or patronage (Sutton- Spence & West 2011, p. 422). Numerous Deaf Studies resources illuminate a desire within the d/Deaf community to overturn the dominant ‘audist’ and phonocentric discourses that have failed to acknowledge deaf people as part of a linguistic and cultural minority (Davis 1995, p. 109; Thoutenhoofd 2000, p. 261; Senghas & Monaghan 2002, p. 70; Bauman 2004, p. 241; Eckert 2010, p. 317; Carty 2011, p. 1; Sutton-Spence & West 2011, p. 422). In order to grasp the political significance and impetus of Deaf Studies, it is crucial to realise that deafness, as it has been historically formulated, is a construct that is defined by lack (Thoutenhoofd 2000, p. 261; Senghas & Monaghan 2002, p. 70; Bauman 2008, p. 4). As the focal point of the clinical gaze, deafness has largely been theorised as a deficit, resulting in the pathologising of the deaf individual. The conception of deaf people as intellectually inferior has been expressed tirelessly in medical discourse, signified by the inaccurate and now outmoded conflation of deafness with ‘dumbness’ or ‘muteness’ (Bauman 2008, p. 4).

Indeed, as the work of Lennard Davis affirms, traditional modes of theorising deafness have functioned to configure the deaf subject as ‘other’ and even ‘animal’ - bereft of language and therefore of humanity (Davis 1995, p. 109). In his pivotal text *Enforcing Normalcy*, Davis offers crucial insights into the

peripheralisation of sign language and the perpetuity of ableism, stating “deafness has been a signifier for the absence of language [. . .] connecting deafness with muteness, only reinforces a tendency in our culture to denigrate disability” (Davis 1995, p. 106).

### **1.3: Literary Representations of Deafness**

My own work employs a Deaf Studies perspective in its objective to displace reductive stereotypes and audist assumptions about deafness. My research project seeks to consolidate and build upon the growing number of Deaf Studies papers that bemoan the dearth of nuanced deaf characters within western (fictional) literature. In writing about my grandparents, I hope to narrate complex deaf characters that function to deconstruct existing stereotypes and reject the deaf caricatures that prevail in much western literature.

Since the 1990s, a range of Deaf Studies scholars have entered into a critical discourse about the way that deafness is represented in literary texts (Cranston 1991; Davis 1995; Krentz 2007; McDonald 2011). Existing representations, particularly in the novel, have tended to narrate the deaf individual in reductive and denigrating ways (Davis 1995). It has been suggested that hearing writers portray deafness with “comingled desire and dread, an ambivalence that often amounts to abjection” (Krentz 2007, p. 17). Lennard Davis suggests that disability, and indeed, deafness, is rarely centrally represented in the (western) novel (1995, p. 41). Literature that does include deaf characters is often problematic and relies heavily on essentialism or a paternalising style of humour (Cranston 1991, p. 6; Davis 1995, p. 113). Davis’ assertion that “the deaf

character [in western literature] is often the butt off many ‘eh-what?’ jokes” (Davis, 1995, p. 113-114) reveals the superficiality and limitations of existing depictions of deaf characters. Davis has suggested also, that the structures of the novel are inherently ‘normative’, and thus, inadequate for representing ‘marginal’ characters (Davis 1995, p. 41). His historical analysis locates the novel as part of the project of ‘middle-class hegemony’ in which “the middleness of life [. . .] is created in symbolic form and then reproduced symbolically [. . .] Normativity in narrative will by definition create the abnormal, the Other, the disabled, the native, the colonized subject and so on” (Davis 1995, p. 41-42).

Although Davis’ engagement with the novel serves to problematise existing misrepresentations of deafness, what is absent from his assessment is a realisation of the possibility of deconstructing normative tropes within a creative literary space. While his work articulates the need for developing consciousness of disability issues through reversing the “hegemony of the normal” (Davis 1995, p. 49), Davis overlooks the possibility for literature to embark on this very project.

Most studies of literature in Deaf Studies tend to focus on the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel. There is very little analysis of contemporary fiction, and even less of nonfiction. Furthermore, an issue with Deaf Studies theorising is that literature is predominantly discussed as a transmitter of audist ideology - a perpetrator of offences against deaf people, rather than a space in which to ‘speak back’ and empower marginal voices (See Davis 1995; Krumland 2008). However, a few scholars have discussed the productive potential of literature. For example, Christopher Krentz has argued, “literature has the power not only to buttress

and affirm the hearing line, but also to offer opportunities for its effacement [. . .] [Reading and writing] offer a meeting ground of sorts between deaf and hearing people, a place where differences may recede and binaries may be transcended” (Krentz 2007, p. 16).

In the last ten years, scholars in Deaf and Disability Studies have turned to consider the role of auto/biography in disseminating stories of deafness and d/Deaf people. Though attention to this topic has been episodic and diasporic in nature (McDonald 2014b, p. 84), interdisciplinary fields such as Literary Disability Studies have emerged from such discussions and are beginning to argue for the value of disability life writing as a means of disrupting prevailing paradigms of disability (Brueggemann 2000; Smith & Sparkes 2008; Couser 2009; McDonald 2011). Amongst these voices is G. Thomas Couser, whose seminal text *Signifying Bodies* offers an invaluable insight that could be applicable to deaf narratives. Couser argues for the value of what he terms ‘auto/ somatography’ and the opportunity it brings for enhancing disability literacy in the body politic. He states:

auto/somatography [. . .] can play a crucial role by providing the reading public with mediated access to lives that would otherwise remain opaque and exotic to them. In a culture such as ours, which is at once fixated on and dismissive of bodies, narratives of anomalous somatic conditions offer an important, if not unique, point of entry for inquiry into the responsibilities of contemporary citizenship. (2009, p. 15)

Although Disability Studies and its literary strand provide an abundance of scholarly literature on representing difference through life writing, Deaf Studies has only recently begun to contribute to this conversation. Currently, very little has been written on the presence or function of life writing, or creative nonfiction for that matter, that deals specifically with deafness. Subsequently,

my thesis builds upon the work being undertaken by Donna McDonald and Brenda Jo Brueggemann - both of whom draw attention to the need for Deaf Studies to begin to realise the productive and counter-cultural capacity of telling 'deaf narratives'.

As Brueggemann contends, "not much is written about deaf 'writing'. Or rather: not much is written about deaf writing that celebrates its achievements or critically addresses its strengths and weaknesses, its absences and presences, on its own terms" (2006, p. 313). Couser too, has acknowledged the 'insularity' of the Deaf community and people's lack of concern with presenting themselves to the hearing world in mainstream media or genres (1997, p. 227). In a study undertaken by McDonald (2011), Gallaudet University Press – the primary distributor of Deaf Studies work – had a catalogue of only nine memoirs in their 'Deaf Lives Series'. From this, McDonald concludes, "the lives of deaf people seem to be invisible to the general population, and [. . .] the field of literary studies is largely silent about representations of deafness and deaf lives in all genres of literature" (2011, p. 64). Certainly, this speaks to a growing need for deaf stories to be told.

Both Brueggemann (2000, p. 317) and McDonald (2011, p. 89) acknowledge the promise of life writing for narratives about deafness. Brueggemann is particularly optimistic about the potential offered for the telling of deaf stories that would have otherwise remained 'silent' or unheard. She suggests a shift is upon us, altering our willingness – even in the academy – to consider hybrid texts. She states:

Heteroglossia is here [. . .] Our ability... to go actively seeking the both/and of “utterance,” the double (or more) stance, and the nearly infinite possibilities of multilingual, multicultural, multisensorial experience, all these, I think, will make space for deaf writing and deaf autobiography. (2000, p. 318)

I see my own creative writing work as a participant in what Brueggemann calls ‘heteroglossic space’: where textual hybridity, multiple voices, styles of writing, and ways of engaging sensorially with the world are represented in their deserved fullness. Creative nonfiction texts, based on lived experience and personal narrative can thus open up a space from which to more effectively discuss disability and deafness alike. Therefore, my work will attempt to enact the potential of this creative form to illuminate issues specific to the deaf milieu.

In her thesis *Hearsay: How Stories about Deafness and Deaf People are Told*, McDonald asserts the value of the role that literary works can play in enhancing literacy regarding deafness in the body politic. She states,

We can learn about the diversity of deaf experiences and the nuances of deaf identity by reading memoirs of deaf people and novels with deaf characters. Whether they are written by hearing or deaf writers, by providing different perspectives on deafness, they have something useful to say, demonstrate and illustrate about deafness and deaf people. (2011, p. 89)

It is useful to consider here that McDonald articulates the value of those works composed by hearing authors. Rather than precluding hearing persons from contributing to the discourse surrounding deafness and Deaf Studies, McDonald acknowledges the necessity for opening up a space in which multiple perspectives are welcomed, and embraced.

With regard to embracing a range of voices, I must broach the deaf/hearing dichotomy that exists in (some) Deaf Studies scholarship. Much Deaf Studies

work is premised on - and is at times uncritical of - the d/Deaf/h/Hearing<sup>3</sup> binaries that arise in the negotiation of selfhood, community, and belonging within the deaf milieu<sup>4</sup>. Strategic labeling is employed in the field in order to liberate and recover d/Deaf histories from oppression and discrimination (Sutton Spence & West 2011, p. 425). At times 'Deaf' or 'Hearing' can be invoked with political and emancipatory vigour. However, such binary thought can function to generate a politics of 'us vs them', essentialising both deaf and hearing cultures, excluding particular practices, and acting to homogenise identities. In emphasising a set of shared experiences through ideas of Deafnicity (Eckert 2010), Deafhood (Ladd 2003) or a Deaf Ethnos (Lane, Pillard & Hedberg 2011), a particular sort of knowledge becomes privileged and legitimised.

While conversations have taken place regarding the inclusion of hard of hearing persons within Deaf communities (indeed one can be classified as 'not deaf enough to be Deaf'), the role of hearing persons in Deaf Studies is particularly fraught, and currently under-discussed (Sutton-Spence & West 2011). From a Deaf Studies perspective, a hearing person is a member (perhaps necessarily and understandably) of the dominant, oppressive majority (Lane, 1992, Ladd, 2003; Sutton- Spence & West 2011). As Sutton-Spence and West discuss, "the problem of Hearingness remains the elephant in the room. A productive, (de)constructive exploration of the place of Hearing people within Deaf Studies has yet to occur"(2011, p. 425). Despite the prolific material Deaf Studies has

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<sup>3</sup> The h/Hearing distinction is similar to that of the d/Deaf distinction. One can be audilogically 'hearing' and culturally 'Hearing'.

<sup>4</sup> For a critical discussion of identity politics see Davis (2008)

produced, its dialogue can at times, turn inwards rather than outwards. As such, its reach has immense significance for d/Deaf persons, but often remains obscure to the hearing public who can play a significant role in the maintenance and disruption of problematic assumptions regarding deafness.

Couser highlights another key issue regarding access to diverse and counter-discursive stories of deafness. The literary marketplace, he suggests, can function to limit the dynamism and range of stories that discuss disability (and indeed, deafness) through the imposition of certain hegemonic scripts upon disempowered groups (Couser 2009, p. 32). People with disabilities, he suggests, may be granted access to the literary marketplace on the condition that their stories conform to preferred plots and rhetorical schemes – rhetorics that reinforce conventional attitudes and adhere to tropes of triumph, horror, spiritual compensation and nostalgia (Couser 2009, p. 34). Such formulaic representational modes are similarly critiqued in analyses of literature specifically about deafness. As McDonald warns, there is a “tendency by most writers and memoirists to portray deafness as a melancholy condition, or as a subject of caricature, or as a problem to be understood, overcome or resolved (2011, p. 11). She identifies the dominant tropes of deaf narratives to be those of grief, trauma and triumphalism (McDonald 2011, p. 14). Moreover, she articulates the difficulty in conveying the complexities of identity, and in particular, the elusive deaf identity.

There are however, works that succeed in providing a nuanced and even-handed approach to issues pertaining to deafness and the family. In discussing Leah Hager Cohen’s memoir, *Train Go Sorry*, Couser has remarked upon the



author's strategic and culturally conscious decision to narrate the political in the context of the personal. He suggests,

one motive of the book is to fix the evanescent narratives of deaf grandparents, whose stories otherwise will go unnoted or misrepresented [...] the retrieval or reconstruction of family memory here is part of a conscious effort to offset a kind of culturally induced amnesia. (Couser 1997, p. 260)

This analysis of the work of Cohen (who is also a granddaughter of deaf adults) speaks directly to my own aims in producing my writing experiments. In composing pieces of creative nonfiction, I hope to create a literary space for deafness to exist in a non-reductive and multi-faceted way.

It is worth mentioning the prevailing attitudes towards CODAs and GODAs (Children and Grandchildren of deaf adults respectively) that can prohibit many narratives from being embraced by the Deaf Studies academy. A resistance has emerged stemming from a range of CODA narratives written by hearing persons, that generally function to negotiate and sometimes bemoan the impact of deafness upon the life and identity of the hearing child (Couser 1997). As such, deaf narratives written by hearing people can be met with hostility or trepidation.

I acknowledge readily the precariousness of my position as a hearing person commenting on deafness and deaf people. I am particularly aware too, of the inherent tensions that arise in several memoirs written by daughters and granddaughters of deaf adults (See Couser 1997, p. 251). In his chapter 'Signs of Life', Couser alerts us to the problems of filial narratives. He explains that memoirs written by children and grandchildren of deaf adults are less likely to pathologise deafness (1997, p. 249), but that such acts of representation,

particularly by hearing persons, are increasingly subject to criticism on the grounds of exploitation or inadvertent objectification (1997, p. 252).

A risk is present in conforming to the perpetuity of narrative tropes that pivot on the victimisation of the CODA as a result of being deprived of a 'normal' childhood. Paul Preston sheds light on the number of 'victim memoirs' composed particularly by daughters of deaf persons. He articulates the phenomenon of hearing children speaking for and about deaf parents. According to Preston, it is common for a hearing child to become the 'designated family interpreter'. Gender, he suggests, plays a significant part in the adoption of such a role, with interpreting involving the sorts of selfless or relational behaviours that are typically gendered as female, and often result in daughters occupying a 'caretaking' position (Preston in Couser 1997, p. 249).

Indeed, I imagine my mother's narrative would be vastly different to mine. Perhaps, in some ways, and by no means do I wish to minimise her experience, her story would be more analogous to those discussed by Preston and Couser. However, a generation removed, and acutely aware of potential representational pitfalls, my writing experiments resist common 'victimhood' tropes along with those that depict deafness as an obstacle to be 'overcome'.

#### **1.4: Conclusion: A note about ethics**

In undertaking a study of this sort, it would be negligent to overlook a discussion of ethics. In order to circumvent any potential harm my work could cause to my grandparents, parents, siblings, or any other members of the deaf

community, I have sought permission from all relevant parties in order to include them in my work. Furthermore, all writing I produce has been read and approved by my grandparents, who are completely in support of the project, and who in many respects, I consider to be co-authors of the narratives I present. Indeed, as Donna McDonald suggests, “careless writing can reinforce stereotypes but thoughtful writing in any genre has the power to change attitudes” (2011, p. 17). It is with due care and thoughtfulness that I approach the subject matter of my writing experiments. It is my hope that in engaging with the political project of deaf studies, my work can resist onerous stereotypes and medical constructions of deafness, in order to produce pieces of critically engaged personal narrative.

The academic conversation within Deaf Studies stands to benefit from reaching out to other disciplines, particularly Disability Studies and its Literary Studies strand, in order to mobilise the political and philosophical issues at stake. As is being realised in Disability Studies, there is a need to look at what creative nonfiction writers do with the form, and consider its possibilities for Deaf Studies and conceptualisations of the deaf subject. What I propose is that creative nonfiction can employ fiction-writing techniques in order to represent the lived experience of deafness, and to inhabit the discursive gap between academia and the wider public, functioning to disseminate in an engaging and accessible way, the empirical realities of deafness within an audistic hearing world. In this way, we can begin new conversations about the hearing line, deafness, Deaf Studies and creative nonfiction.



## **Chapter Two: Critique and Creation: Methods for Deaf Studies’ Future**

What can a researcher in Deaf Studies gain from an engagement with critical discourse analysis and creative nonfiction? In this chapter, I make a case for both approaches and their associated research practices in negotiating the intersection of deafness and literature.

Because I am dealing with two distinct methodologies, the chapter is comprised of two parts. In part one, I argue for the political value inherent in conducting close readings of texts, particularly in exposing the hegemonic scripts that underpin problematic discourses of power and identity related to deafness. In part two, I explain my choice to work in the margins of creative nonfiction, memoir and autoethnography, illuminating the potential of such a move to produce new knowledge, and in particular, richly textured accounts that capture the depth and complexity of human experience and social life. Borrowing from the toolkits of creative nonfiction writers, this chapter will make evident the potential for social inquiry within story-driven nonfiction writing. Moreover, I make a case for the value of such narratives to the field and political project of Deaf Studies.

Both methodologies, I argue, speak to the future direction and potential fullness of Deaf Studies inquiry. Through the import and application of these approaches to Deaf Studies research, the need for politically engaged critique *as well as* creation becomes apparent. In placing literary criticism and creative nonfiction

side by side, I attempt to avoid what Deleuze refers to as the ‘practice of criticism without creation’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p. 28). By working within the hybrid literary genre of creative nonfiction, my writing simultaneously critiques and creates through the co-presence of personal narrative, political commentary and exposition.

An aim of this thesis involves exposing the lack of nuanced deaf characters in western literature. Thus, in chapter three I conduct a review of current literary work to reveal the need for new ways of thinking through deafness. While this is a crucial part of my thesis, it must be said that critical discourse analysis is already an established and significant mode of inquiry in Deaf Studies (see Lane 1984, Davis 1995 & 2002; Brueggemann, 1999 & 2009; Krentz 2007, McDonald 2011).

The methodological contribution of my work to the Deaf Studies project, thus lies in my choice to employ the creative nonfiction form to represent lived experience. Therefore, this chapter will attend to this decision in substantial depth. But first, let me briefly consider the value of discourse analysis in the study of literature and deafness.

## **Part 1. Extant Narratives and Critical Discourse Analysis**

A significant concern of my research is the extent to which social and medical notions of deafness as a pathology/physical/spiritual/cognitive deficit, appear in literature about the deaf. In order to engage with the ways deafness has been

discursively produced, I began this project by reading a range of literary texts that explored deafness and deaf lives. Initially, I read fictional narratives including *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) by Carson McCullers and David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence* (2008) in tandem with nonfictional narratives of deaf lives. However, I quickly recognised the need to narrow my scope.

I then elected to focus on works of nonfiction as this aligned with my research interest in creating writing experiments that dealt with lived experience. From here, my reading was centered on works that fell under the umbrella of life writing (which includes autobiography, biography, memoir, diary, letters, and increasingly, blogging and video-blogging). I was principally concerned, however, with the literary genres and therefore, my focus remained on more traditional forms such as memoir and auto/biography.

In making sense of the ways deafness is represented in nonfictional narratives, critical discourse analysis became an appropriate and invaluable tool for inquiry. As Wodak and Meyer make clear, critical discourse analysis is characterised by an interest in “de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic and retroductable investigation of semiotic data (written, spoken or visual)” (2009, p.3). Fairclough provides further articulation of the function of discourse analysis,

to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power. (1995, p. 132)

It scarcely needs to be said that discourse analysis was extremely useful for analysing and making visible the limitations of existing discursive and

representational modes that have impeded the deaf subject. The value of such an approach within a Deaf Studies context is manifest in the emphasis placed on hegemonic power and its intrinsic relationship to text. In realising language both as a reflector and creator of ideology, Deaf Studies stands to benefit from both the critique, and creation of literary works. Like Gee, who suggests that language is 'always political' and creates 'social identities' (1999, p. 1), I argue here, that language, when used self-reflexively, can also function to resist and problematise the existing hegemonic order. As Wodak and Meyer assert:

Power does not necessarily derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term. Language provides a finely articulated vehicle for differences in power in hierarchical social structures. (Wodak & Meyer 2009, p. 10)

In scrutinising the ways language functions as a social practice that acts simultaneously to stabilise and change hegemonic structures, Deaf Studies scholars can gain insight into ways that pathologising scripts, for example, can be discursively resisted and challenged.

## **Part 2: Creative Nonfiction: Towards a Definition**

Creative nonfiction writing can be a valuable vehicle for exploring notions of deafness in a complex and engaging manner. The form has been described as "an exciting and influential school of writing with a long and distinguished history of transgressing the divide between objective truth and imagination" (Alasuutari et al 2008, p. 607). It is an increasingly popular hybrid literary form - one that employs techniques usually associated with fiction e.g. first person narration, scene setting, imagery, and characterisation - in order to render true stories or events (Hackley 2007, p. 98). Often linked to the style and tradition of



personal essayists like Virginia Woolf and Michel de Montaigne (Lott 2000; Freeman & Le Rossignol 2011; Root, Steinberg & Huber 2011), as well as the rise of Anglophonic long-form journalism in the 1960s, creative nonfiction is valued for its capacity to communicate complex ideas in an accessible and engaging manner (Barone 2008, p. 114; Joseph 2010, p. 86). The idea that true stories can be read like a novel “to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally” (Wolfe in Joseph 2010, p. 83) is garnering interest from academics and writers alike.

Lee Gutkind has suggested that the primary goal of the creative nonfiction writer is to communicate information, just like a reporter, but to shape it in a way that reads like fiction (Gutkind in Singer & Walker 2013, p. 3). Creative nonfiction strives to show and not tell, appealing to the senses and the heart of the reader, making them feel as though they are ‘there’ witnessing the action (Gutkind in Singer & Walker 2013, p. 3). Although its roots are in journalism, the genre allows and encourages writers to become intimately involved in their stories and, as Gutkind asserts, “this interplay between the personal and the political provides deeper coverage, and a stronger connection to the reader than traditional journalism allows” (Gutkind 2009, p. x). Similarly, Robert Root articulates the full range of possibility offered in the ‘fourth genre’. He states,

[Creative] nonfiction is a literary genre as unbounded and expansive as any other. It is capable of drawing on the narrative, lyric, dramatic, meditative, reflective and referential modes available to other genres [. . .] Nonfiction is limited only by the imagination and insight of the writer; it can accomplish anything the writer -and the writing- needs it to do. (Root 2008, p. 201)

## **2:1 Why not fiction?**

In exploring the potential productiveness of employing creative nonfiction writing to the Deaf Studies project, I have asked myself, *'Why not fiction? Why don't I turn to fiction story-telling as a way to represent experiences of deafness and the deaf-hearing "divide"?' While I acknowledge of course, that fictional genres can also position the reader to navigate experiences of deafness, extant fictional narratives have been socially, culturally and discursively fraught.*

Although scholars like McDonald (2011) have discussed the value of novels in exposing readers to deaf lives, she acknowledges nonetheless, that 'exceptional texts prove the rule' (2011, p. 23). That is, most fictional representations of deafness have been problematic thus far. Deaf Studies has generally found conventional approaches to deafness in literature to be reductive, and at times, denigrating (Davis 1995; Cranston 1991). Most critiques are made of the novel, with some scholars suggesting its inherent normativity (Davis 1995, p. 41-42) and its emphasis on the universal quality of the protagonist. Marginal subject positions, argues Lennard Davis, are thus inadequately dealt with or simplified to the point of caricature (Davis 1995, p. 41). Perhaps then, we have little hope of representing deafness with complexity in fiction until we've found ways of representing it with complexity in nonfiction.

In rising to the task of depicting nuanced deaf lives, it is useful to consider that the cultural moment is such that early twenty first century readers are far more preoccupied with nonfiction than with fiction. Certainly in Australia, we exist in a time where there is intense public hunger for 'true stories'. When it comes to book sales and publishing, the novel has taken a backseat to nonfiction forms

(Joseph 2010, p. 84). Such a shift reflects a desire among the reading public for evocative ‘fact’ about the world they live in.

In my own writing, it is not my desire to produce or play into any totalising narratives about deafness or human experience, but rather, to provide an insight into the complexities and nuances of interactions across the deaf/hearing divide *and* to locate those complexities and nuances within real people. Perhaps then, because of its focus on ‘true’ stories and an engagement with ‘real’ subjects, creative nonfiction could offer a more fertile ground than the novel for engaging in a non-reductive fashion with issues pertaining to deafness.

The decision to write creative nonfiction is not only timely, but also generically fitting. Margot Singer and Nicole Walker suggest the inherent fluidity of creative nonfiction, stating, “creative nonfiction does not simply borrow elements from fiction and poetry, but bends and recombines them to make a hybrid that perpetually troubles and transcends generic bounds” (2013, p. 4). They argue that much creative nonfiction actively produces ‘unconventions’. That is, it is a fundamentally innovative form, which presents writers with fresh approaches to their material and new ways for the reader to see the world (Singer & Walker 2013, p. 4).

Other scholars have remarked on the ways in which the form toggles between research and reflection, makes imaginative leaps and resists strict classifications. Mary Capello, in her essay “Prepositions, Provocations,

Inventions”, articulates the non-prescriptive nature of a creative nonfiction approach. She states,

Instead of writing *about*, as in, “what is your book about?” it writes from. Or nearby, toward, under, around, through and so on. Rather than mean, it does. It animates. A process and a set of relations rather than any Thing. Creative nonfiction wants to put forms of wandering, exploration, and play back into the plodding unfolding of each day and of each form, of each life [. . .] The operative distinctions are “transform” rather than “transcribe”. Creative nonfiction remakes rather than reports. (Capello 2013, 67)

It is this flexibility, this resistance to simplistic ‘truth telling’ that makes creative nonfiction so appealing and appropriate for my project. Creative nonfiction thus, provides an ample space from which to experiment with and represent deafness – and moreover, negotiate the interstitial space between deaf and hearing people.

While creative nonfiction might not wholly escape the problems inherent in representing anyone’s experience (e.g. the fallibility of memory, truth etc), it is generally, however, more self-reflexive and honest about its shortcomings than other more traditional forms. The slipperiness of language is often foregrounded and is even a feature of creative nonfiction writing, distancing it from many of its fictional or journalistic counterparts, which are respectively, often immersive in an escapist sense, or tend to purport an illusion of objectivity in the rendering of fact. While I do not mean to dismiss the vital potential of other narrative forms in dealing with deafness, or perhaps even, for re-writing deafness in the cultural imaginary; creative nonfiction is however, more suited to my task. Through its animating quality that allows the personal and political to enter into dialogue, the lived experience that drives my work can be narrated here with detail and fullness.

## 2:2 Autoethnography, Memoir, and Immersion Writing

In employing creative nonfiction as my primary methodological tool, I have used research practices that have a shared application in autoethnography, memoir and immersion writing. Autoethnography can be defined as a “narrative form of writing and inquiry, and can be seen as a ‘way of knowing’ established through placing the self within a social context” (Dyson 2007, p. 40). Typical features of the genre include the explicit and reflexive positioning of the author within the text, the use of biographical material as social research data, and a subjective, first-person tone in writing (Hackley 2007, p. 98). Indeed, as Hackley suggests, “these features place auto-ethnography at an intersection where interpretive social research connects with popular writing genres such as autobiography and creative non-fiction” (2007, p. 98-99).

In his widely cited introduction to *Writing Culture* Clifford presents the idea that “literature and ethnography have grown together. The making of ethnography is artisanal, tied to the worldly work of writing” (1986, p. 4). I view my own methods as participating in this shared terrain. My project is certainly an attempt to draw these knowledges together, providing an in-depth account of various selves and the social world(s) that has produced them.

As part of my research process, I have drawn heavily on remembered childhood events and on family stories. In this way, my work could be classed as ‘memoir’<sup>5</sup>. I am, however, resisting this term ‘memoir’ as my writing does not centre on *my* life per se but on my relationship with, and reflections on, my grandparents.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, it was not necessary to obtain approval from my university’s Human Research Ethics Committee, as this committee does not see memoir as a research form that gathers ‘data’, but one that is grounded in the writer’s memory.

In developing my writing, I spent several hours in the company of my grandparents. While the emphasis was not on obtaining 'fresh data' but on collective re-memberings, where Nanny and Grandpa corroborated my accounts of the past, my shared time with my grandparents could none-the-less be considered as a sort of autoethnographic immersion<sup>6</sup> fieldwork.

In their discussion of creative nonfiction, Whiteman & Phillips note the need for an in-depth immersion in the phenomenon under study in order to develop a deep experiential understanding of lived lives. They argue that creative nonfiction can function as a "useful qualitative method for exploring empirical reality and pulling together fragments from fieldwork" (2008, p. 296). Certainly, the unique empirical knowledge(s) gleaned through spending time with others and rendered through creative nonfiction, can be of great value in exploring and representing the intricacies of issues relevant to Deaf Studies and the deaf milieu. Of particular worth is the degree of intimacy enabled through depicting the embodied quotidian 'everydayness' of deafness, hearingness and the deaf/hearing divide within a specific life-world. In writing from and about this 'between' space, i.e., the hearing line, a greater understanding of (and perhaps narrowing of) the interstitial space between deaf and hearing people can be produced. As ethnographer Kirsten Hastrup writes, the emphasis should be on dealing with the world between ourselves and the others (1992, p. 116-33).

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<sup>6</sup> Robin Hemley discusses immersion writing as that which "engages the writer in the here and now in a journalistic sense, shaping and creating a story happening in the present while unabashedly lugging along all that baggage that makes up the writer's personality: his or her memories, culture, and opinions (Hemley 2012, p. 8)

## **2.3 Critiquing and Creating: Creative Nonfiction as an Experimental Vehicle**

In my writing, I have experimented with language techniques and the affective capacity of literature in order to build a world for the reader, wherein they are asked to imagine, be immersed in, and navigate experiences of deafness and hearing-ness. Several narrative strategies have been employed to this end, with creative nonfiction acting as the vehicle in which such experiments take place. In responding to the discursive structures that denigrate the disabled body, my work actively resists a mere (re)presentation of existing models of deafness, and rather, seeks to re-imagine the deaf subject, and most particularly, the space between the hearing and non-hearing, as a site of 'creative becoming'. As such, I have attempted to challenge ready-made perceptions of the 'known' through drawing on a Deleuzian conception of art. As Deleuze & Guattari suggest,

Art undoes the triple organization of perceptions, affections, and opinions in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects and blocs of sensations that take the place of language. The writer uses words, but by creating a syntax that makes them pass into sensation that makes the standard language stammer, tremble, cry, or even sing: this is the style, the 'tone', the language of sensations. (Deleuze & Guattari 1991, p. 176)

In aligning with a Deleuzian sensibility, I attempt to stultify standard discourse, and institute through the language of sensations, a vocabulary with which we might begin to re-conceive of deafness and the [dis]abled body.

In my experiments I have interwoven personal narrative, political commentary and exposition in order to engage with the 'real' in new and vitalistic ways.

Through experimentation within such a dynamic and inherently personal genre, I have hoped to intimately and tenderly focalise my grandparents' experiences

of being deaf in an audistic and phonocentric hearing world. By the making public of private experiences, I am attempting to give narrative 'life' to lived experience and in turn, produce a space that realises deafness as a dynamic and productive alterity, rather than lack.

In seeking to tell fresh and authentic stories of deafness I have chosen to evoke and capture the 'everydayness' of the embodied lived lives of my grandparents, and my relationship with them. Furthermore, in order to distance my writing from the 'neatness' and predictability of narrative scripts that evoke either pity or awe from the reader, I have shied away from suggestions of melodrama or the epic. Not least, I have avoided the pervasive triumph over tragedy trope, as I do not wish to locate deafness as something that must be solved or overcome. Narrative tension, in my writing, is instead, located in the navigation and negotiation of the interstitial space between deafness and hearingness.

In order to create a hypersensory text-world and a deeply engaging and visceral reading experience I have employed various forms of imagery – predominantly visual and aural - in the creative work. Foregrounding the senses (visual, aural tactile, olfactory and gustatory) as ways of knowing or experiencing, my work encourages a consciousness and consideration of the senses. This evocation of the 'sensiness' of the world attempts to animate the text-world for the reader, acting to foreground the interactions between and across the hearing line.

While it may appear audacious to try and represent the lived experience of other individuals, I am attempting to institute a practice whereby imagination and empathy allow us to enter into a particular world, and the various of ways



of being within that world. Thus, despite my stories being shaped and unfolding through the narrative 'I', I have tried to ensure that readers are also privy to the perspectives of my grandparents. Frequently in my writing, I toggle between the subject position of the (hearing) narrator-self and those of my (deaf) grandparents.

In these co-produced narratives, I have combined a first person address with my grandparents' dialogue and occasional free-indirect style to provide the audience with different points of entry into the stories told. Literary criticism scholar James Wood uses the term 'free-indirect style' to refer to third-person narration that feels as if it could be first-person but isn't; when the "narrative seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking" (2008, p. 8). There are indeed, times where the narration bends to my grandparents. It swoops into their bodies for moments and animates the nuances of their particular voices, ways of seeing and being.

While some might find it problematic for a hearing person to attempt to negotiate deaf experience, in this case, the proximity of the relationship between grandparent and grandchild provides an empathic framework that encourages understanding and a narrowing of the gap between deaf and hearing identity categories. I am not meaning to suggest that simply because I am a grandchild of deaf adults I have an authority to speak on behalf of deaf persons. I mean to lay no claim to 'speaking for' or attempting to 'define' deafness. Rather, I wish to contribute a story of a particular localised experience in order to contribute to the heterogeneity of (deaf) stories and lives. The

epistemological intention of the work is thus to explore my grandparents' individualised ways of being in the world in order to provide different ways of engaging with, and 'knowing' deafness.

### **Chapter 3: Representations of Deafness in Nonfiction Literature, or, 'How Language Can Change Your Hearing'.**

In this chapter, I examine representations of deafness in nonfiction literature. I am particularly concerned here with the rhetorical tropes and devices that function to narrate deafness and deaf lives in literary works. Among the texts I engage with are works of auto/biography, memoir, immersion journalism<sup>7</sup> and ficto-criticism, each of which provide us with unique modes of telling and points of entry into the diverse d/Deaf world. In my analysis, I identify the key discourses operating within deaf narratives, particularly with regard to the 'triumph over adversity' trope, in order to examine the pervasiveness of medical discourse in shaping the ways deafness appears upon the page. Furthermore, I discuss the reductive and essentialising scripts that serve to depict deafness as a horrific affliction or lack. Of equal concern is the extent to which existing nonfiction acts to reimagine, challenge or overturn commonly held views about deaf lives. In performing a deconstructive discourse analysis on a range of late twentieth - early twenty-first century texts, I hope to examine the implications of the existing representational lexicon and in turn, carve out a possible space for new narratives of deafness and deaf identities to emerge.

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<sup>7</sup> Robin Hemley (2012) refers to Immersion Journalism as a participatory practice whereby the writer engages in the activity they want to write about in order to get an 'insiders look' at the subject. He suggests furthermore that immersion journalists consciously make themselves a part of the story. I refer to the term here to acknowledge the researchers' insertion of themselves in the story, as well as the participant observation involved in the interviewing and research process.

In his paper 'Why Study People's Stories' Arthur Frank makes a substantial claim about the value of story/narrative, and its function to render visible and affirm the worthiness of particular lives. He states, "narratability means that events and lives are affirmed as being worth telling and thus worth living. Being narratable implies value and attributes reality" (2002, p. 111). With Frank's statement in mind, it is thus concerning and somewhat problematic that so few stories of deafness exist upon our library shelves (Kisor 1991; Couser 1997; Bruggemann 2000; McDonald 2010 & 2011). Contemporary writers such as Kisor (1991) and academics such as Couser (1997), Brueggemann (2009), and McDonald (2011) have previously drawn attention to the dearth of literary work on the topic of deafness. They have noted too, several of the problems that arise in the few existing works that do attempt to narrate deaf lives.

As mentioned in chapter one, fictional representations, produced largely by hearing persons, have tended to employ deafness as a narrative device – as a symptom of human depravity or deviance (Davis 1995; Krentz 2007, McDonald 2010). As the work of Christopher Krentz reveals, nineteenth century stories, novels and poetry either romanticised or demonised deafness, presenting it as either innocence or a threatening savagery (2007, p. 17). In twentieth century fiction a similar predicament plays out; deaf people are either not present or hold minor roles, usually functioning as narrative symbols (McDonald 2010, p. 464). As Krentz acknowledges, "how authors wrote deafness and hearingness had a great deal to do with the destiny of deaf people [...] and this aspect of our [...] literature deserves more recognition" (2007, p. 17).

The nexus of deafness and nonfiction is similarly fraught with problems.

As Henry Kisor suggests, “other than modest and often artless testimonials, chiefly published by small specialty presses and marketed within the deaf community, little has been written by the deaf themselves” (1991, p. 3).

Similarly in *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places* (2009), Brenda Jo Brueggemann laments the paucity of writing about deaf lives. She states, “‘deaf lives’ and ‘writing’ placed together, have not been common or even probably condoned” (2009, p. 72). Many scholars note the difficulty of access for deaf persons to traditional modes of writing, discussing the problems of translating and transliterating deaf narratives from sign to written English (Couser 1997; Brueggemann 2007 & 2009; Harmon 2007; Stone & West 2012).

Moreover, while discussions are taking place regarding the possibility for digital narratives to enhance deaf storytelling (Matthews et al 2010; Lindgren 2012), deaf narratives remain, on the whole, largely invisible to the general public (McDonald 2010). Donna McDonald suggests, “if authentic stories of deaf people are routinely missing from the literature - memoir, biography, and fiction - [. . .] that absence [has] a constraining effect on the possibilities imagined for deaf people by readers, both deaf and hearing” (2010, p. 464).

Though scholars have been notably more enthusiastic about the possibility for the broad genre of life writing to discuss disability and deafness, nonfiction is prey to a number of representational pitfalls. Indeed, as McDonald illuminates, literature is both a ‘blunt instrument’ and ‘rich resource’ for depicting the elusive deaf identity (2010, p. 463).

In identifying and analysing problematic scripts that reinforce conventional attitudes about the (dis)abled body, I am interested in the ways in which discursive patterns and strategies - imagery, theme, voice and plot - come to position the narrator and in turn, the audience, in relation to deafness. Although others (Couser 2009; McDonald 2011) have identified a number of rhetorical scripts pertaining to deaf/disability literature, for example, those of triumph, grief, trauma, nostalgia, and horror, my focus is on those of triumph and horror, as they appear most regularly in the deaf narratives I have encountered.

### **3.1 Erasing Stigma? Auto/Biographical Anthologies and the Language of Triumph**

Perhaps the most pervasive and insidious of narrative tropes is that of triumphalism. In the triumph over adversity tale, the narrative trajectory moves from a place of tragedy, loss, grief or hardship, to a place of conquest, and invites the reader to admire the individual's success in surmounting the obstacles associated with their impairment. Such a narrative relies upon and is congruous with the medical paradigm that locates disability as an occurrence solely within a 'defective' or 'abnormal' body.

Whilst incredibly popular among publishers and the reading public for its 'inspirational' and thus palatable content, the rhetoric of triumph comes with significant risks. When placed in dialogue with deafness, it frequently (re)produces audist assumptions about d/Deaf lives. As Couser explains, such a trope presents disability/deafness as

A 'problem' that individuals must overcome; 'overcoming it is a matter of individual will and determination rather than of social and cultural accommodation. The reader is conscripted as an appreciative, admiring witness of this victory but is not encouraged to question the status quo. (2009, p. 34).

Highlighting the exceptional tenacity of the individual who overcomes their somatic condition might at first glance appear to reduce stigma for disabled bodies. However, in celebrating the super-human qualities of the individual who rises above their 'hardship', triumphalism functions to keep the hegemony of normalcy firmly in tact. That is, the stigma of bodily difference is left in place for others who do not similarly 'rise above' or normalise themselves in their trajectories.

Over the last twenty years, one of the key text-types to discuss deafness and deaf lives is that of the auto/biographical anthology. Such collections often appeal to a generalist audience and have an educational impetus. As such, it is useful to consider how deafness comes to be implicated in the triumphalist paradigm within these texts. Thus, I will engage with the following five anthologies of d/Deaf lives: *Movers and Shakers: Deaf People Who Changed the World* (1997) by Cathryn Carroll & Susan M. Mather; *Odyssey of Hearing Loss: Tales of Triumph* (1998) by Michael A Harvey; *Deaf Australian Story: The Struggles, Heartaches and Achievements of Thirty Six Remarkable Australians* (2007) by Carol O'Reilly; *Voices of the Oral Deaf: Fourteen Role Models Speak Out* (2002) by Jim Reisler; and *People of The Eye: Stories from the Deaf World* (2002) by Rachel McKee. A cursory glance over the titles alone reveals the prevalent language of triumphalism. References to 'struggles' 'achievements' and

‘remarkability’ among the blurbs belie the tenuous position of these texts as they walk a fine line between strategic positivity and dangerous oversimplification.

*Movers and Shakers* (1997) is one text that neatly fits into the triumph over adversity trope. The conventions of representing exceptional individuals who rise above and achieve ‘in spite of their deafness’ is both explicitly and implicitly at play throughout the twenty six biographical stories about people such as Helen Keller, Beethoven, Alice of Battenburg and Laurent Clerc. The book’s ‘Foreword’ section is telling in its overt invocation of triumphalism, describing “people whose lives were challenged [. . .] and how they met their challenges, overcame them, and/or used them to their advantage” (Carroll & Mather 1997, p. vii). While the focus on achievement is undoubtedly a strategic one, and there is, of course, political value in celebrating the achievements of deaf people (particularly in a dominant culture that has previously failed to do so), what is significant here is the language used to convey what it fundamentally means to be deaf, that is, it is a problem that must be overcome. The neatly packaged linearity of these ‘success’ stories, regardless of their political undertones, thus manages to eclipse any discussion of more complex issues at play within the lives of those discussed.

Another plainly triumphalist and problematic representation of deafness is found in Michael A. Harvey’s *Odyssey of Hearing Loss: Tales of Triumph* (1998). Harvey, a clinical psychologist, has assembled ten biographical narratives based on encounters with his patients. These stories, written from the therapist’s point of view, and thus largely through a clinical gaze, detail the “assaults to self-



esteem, the isolation and spiritual crises” (Harvey 1998, back cover) experienced by people with acquired deafness. It should be noted that this text deals with late-deafened persons and does not therefore, make claims to be representative of the wider d/Deaf community. However, I include it in my analysis as it nonetheless implicates deafness as a construction largely viewed as a ‘lack’ or deficit. Although Harvey attempts to mitigate against this pathological view, his negotiation is limited by his paternalism. Harvey is often compassionate and even sensitive to limiting views of deafness, making the admission that,

The ramifications of the so-called medical or pathological perspective of deafness are both severely debilitating and oppressive. Several professional texts [...] describe in pejorative terms “the psychology of deafness” – essentially that a deaf person’s psyche “doesn’t work right” or that it is “broken”. (1998, p.7)

However, the triumphalist rhetoric employed in framing his patients’ successes, suggests throughout, the value of engaging in therapeutic dialogue in order to alleviate the unfortunate ‘problem’ of deafness. Harvey’s text is thus, principally concerned with illuminating therapy as a way for people with hearing loss to ‘meet their challenges’ and ‘significantly improve their lives’ (1998, p. 6).

Similarly triumphalist, *Deaf Australian Story* is a collection of thirty six stories of deafness as told (predominantly in sign) to Carol O’Reilly, a Deaf Australian writer. The text is self-published with the aid of disability organisations such as *Disability Services Queensland* and the *Australian Communication Exchange*. I include it for consideration because of its self-purported aim to “inspire and promote greater awareness [of deafness] within both the Deaf world and wider communities” (O’Reilly 2007, back cover). Also, I believe it typifies the

ideological and hermetic 'speaking to one's self' that occurs in much writing and thinking about deafness.

The collection is undoubtedly novel in that it is the first of its kind in Australia. It is also a noble attempt to render visible the vibrant d/Deaf community of Australia, which, as McDonald highlights, is rhetorically speaking, largely invisible (2010, p. 463). Similar to *Movers and Shakers* and *Odyssey*, this text is compromised in part, by its default reliance on the triumph over adversity trope that frames the "struggles, heartaches and achievements" (O'Reilly 2007, front cover) of the d/Deaf individuals discussed, and which functions to locate deafness as a melancholic condition. Examples of triumphalism abound in the text. One individual references his 'position of hardship', his continued 'struggling' and eventual success in developing a career in computer technology (2007, p. 139). On another instance, a woman describes her husband as "an international inspiration for overcoming disability (2007, p. 173)", due to his academic success.

But, moreover, the text is largely inaccessible and at times mystifying to the hearing reader. At the beginning of each biographical story, a title page provides a perfunctory, passport-like overview of the individual being discussed. Here, a picture and a list of key details including date of birth, name of school, parents and communication mode are provided like orientation points for a life-map. Likewise, a list of personal achievements, and in many cases, entire curriculum vitae are provided at the end of the narrative. What is unusual about such a mode of representation is that the corresponding life-story makes no attempt to embellish or explain the significance of any of the information listed.

It should be noted here that deaf schools and modes of communication are central both to the ways in which deaf people socialise, and the ways they conceive of themselves in relation to d/Deaf culture and identity/s. Hearing people are positioned in such a text as outsiders, lacking in the specific literacy required to gain access to an exclusive arena. In failing to articulate the significance of deaf people's schools and modes of communication, both of which are pillars of self-identity and ideology in the deaf community, a general reader is left much in the dark about the experience of being deaf in a hearing world. Nor are they invited to consider different ways of thinking about or engaging with deaf persons. While I do not presume that texts on deafness need always serve to 'educate' a hearing majority, the simplistic and often pallid prose that accompanies these lists, nonetheless does a disservice to the complexities of deaf people's lives and experiences.

Two other texts that make significant contributions to representing d/Deaf lives are *Voices of the Oral Deaf: Fourteen Role Models Speak Out* by Jim Reisler, and *People of The Eye: Stories from the Deaf World* by Rachel McKee. Both texts break new ground in their representations of diverse deaf experiences. I attend briefly to *Voices of the Oral Deaf*, as I want to acknowledge the value of representing, even in a flawed manner, the little-documented oral-deaf culture. Often a diasporic group due to mainstreaming that has meant greater socialisation with hearing people and less with the culturally Deaf; the 'shadowlands of the oral deaf' as described by McDonald (2014, p. 184), have remained largely outside nonfiction literature about deafness. There is of course, political cause for such a void, namely that oralism was the dominant and much contested mode of

teaching deaf people in the twentieth century and its celebrants are often at odds with those that argue for sign language or 'total communication'. Reisler's text, however, makes a concerted effort to de-stigmatise those deaf persons who have grown up largely in the hearing world. By providing autobiographical success stories from oral-deaf persons such as Olympian Jeff Float and musician Evelyn Glynnie, the imperative of the text is clear: to educate and influence through the provision of role models for young deaf people and their families.

The limitations of the text are evident from the outset. In the 'Introduction', editor Jim Reisler suggests, wholly in the tradition of triumphalism, that the lives narrated are those of "extraordinary people who are deaf – people making a real difference, raising families and working in the community, in spite of their deafness" (2002, p. xii). Thus, although the individuals discussed may be liberated of stigma, deafness itself is re-affirmed as a problem, a barrier and a pathology that can be borne with resilience.

Breaking from the tradition of other anthologised collections of d/Deaf stories, *People of the Eye* (2002) provides a complex and nuanced view of deafness through engaging with a range of stories that resist the taint of triumphalism, horror or grief. The collection of sixteen auto/biographies from members of the New Zealand Deaf community capture the nuances of lived experiences of deafness amongst a range of different individuals. In the auto/biographies, McKee's competence in journalistic-style research is made evident, as well as her ability to translate with flair between New Zealand sign language and written English.

What is most interesting and compelling about McKee's work is that she includes a small excerpt of creative nonfiction in her preface: *A Moment in the Deaf World*. The piece details a night in the Auckland Deaf Club that is at once, visceral and engaging. Through her use of first person narration, scene setting and evocative visual imagery found in descriptions, for example, of "plates of food precariously juggled in one hand so that the other is kept free for talking" (McKee 2002, p. 9) or "red lights flashing insistently" (2002, p. 9) to alert club members to a speech, McKee invites an intimate engagement with the particulars of the deaf world. In subsequent sections, she provides erudite and illuminating prose that details key aspects of d/Deaf culture/s. Identifying common themes in d/Deaf experience such as choice of language, deaf schools, identity and diversity, McKee provides an historical overview of each theme and addresses moreover, the implications of pervasive social, cultural and medical discourses that have shaped common-sense understandings of deafness.

Through its literary prowess, *People of the Eye* acts as a powerful agent in enhancing literacy about deafness in the body politic. The absence of triumphalism or the positing of deafness as a 'problem to be overcome', functions not only to de-stigmatise deafness, but to realise it as an alternative sensory experience in its own right. McKee's text certainly gestures to new possibilities in the way deafness can be explored. Its generic hybridity seems to point to new avenues and modes of literary representation that have til now, remained peripheral to most writing about d/Deaf lives, and to the field of Deaf Studies. Indeed, the potential for hybridity and heteroglossia to intricately and viscerally engage with deaf narratives will be the focus of my own literary work, undertaken in chapter four.

### 3.2: Resistant Narratives: On Horror, Lack and Silence

Closely related to, and just as common as the triumphalist trope, is the iteration of deafness as 'horror' or 'lack'. As Couser explains, the rhetoric of horror characterises disability as a dreadful condition, to be shunned or avoided; "at worst [. . .] [it] encourages revulsion from disability; at best, pity for the 'afflicted'" (2009, p.34). Deafness is often seen as a physical, and at times, emotional, psychological or spiritual deficit. Some scholars (McDonald 2011) have noted the prevalence of narratives that present deafness as a condition to be pitied, borne or overcome. In presenting deafness as something that must be wrestled with, the medical model that sees deafness as a pathology based on lack is affirmed.

In this section I wish to consider the interplay between the rhetorics of horror and triumph, and their function in locating deafness as a melancholic condition based on lack. In doing so, I turn to a number of narratives that variously invoke, problematise and overturn such notions in their attempt to narrate deaf lives. McDonald (2011) and Couser (2009) both illuminate the interconnectedness of horror and triumph, noting their co-presence in tales where impairment is demonised and then corrected or transcended. That is, in order to 'overcome' deafness, it must first be represented as something undesirable, or even, in some cases, 'horrific'.

My focus here is on the memoir genre, and as such, I discuss three memoirs written by d/Deaf persons: *What's That Pig Outdoors?* by Henry Kisor (1991),

*The Cry of the Gull*, by Emmanuelle Laborit (1994) and *The Art of Being Deaf*, by Donna McDonald (2014a), as well as one familial narrative *Train Go Sorry* (1994) written by Leah Hager Cohen, a hearing granddaughter of deaf adults. I also look at two other texts - Andrew Solomon's *Far From The Tree* (2014) and Jessica White's *Body Language* (2010) - which can be loosely classed within the life writing genre. Each of these texts provides significant insight into the ways that traditional rhetorical tropes of deafness are being affirmed, but also, resisted and contested. Although I begin by briefly outlining the tradition that sees deafness as a lack, I am more concerned here with the texts that manage to 'speak back' against dominant paradigms, problematising the view that deafness is a condition worthy of pity.

Unlike the auto/biographical collections that largely suppress heterogeneity and the specificities of d/Deaf people's lives, memoirs on deafness generally provide more particular and localised accounts of deaf experience. They are not, however, exempt from adhering to problematic rhetorical tropes.

Henry Kisor's *Who's That Pig Outdoors* is one such example where cheerfully rendered triumphalism is evident. While wit and humour are used largely to keep the narrative upbeat and free from invitations of pity, deafness is nonetheless depicted as an adverse condition. Descriptions of his parents "robust self-reliance" (Kisor 1991, p. 17) in dealing with his handicap, tell us much about the ways that deafness is perceived as a problem to be overcome. Furthermore, in his metaphoric categorisation of deafness as a "wolf at the edge of the forest" (1991, p. 11), Kisor invites us to believe that through resilience, the 'horrors' of deafness can be "held at bay" (1991, p. 11).

In several texts, deafness is portrayed as a lack - an absence, rather than a presence. Nowhere is this more telling than in reference to silence. The sheer number of deaf-related texts that use 'silence' in their title is overwhelming. As McDonald has highlighted, the oppressive repetition of phrases such as "deaf as a post; from silence to speech; they grow in silence; broken silence; fitting into a silent world; her soundless world" function to "conjure up images of isolation, alienation, muteness, and a world of separateness 'endured' by people with hearing loss" (2011, p. 11). In *The Cry of the Gull* (1994), Emmanuelle Laborit invokes the motif of silence in order to contest and subvert the common conflation of deafness with notions of a silent existence. Hers is one of the few memoirs that narrate deafness as an experience rather than a lack.

Though she invokes the term frequently to refer to her limited use of language before the age of seven, she provides a stunning articulation of her personal experience with silence:

I've never lived in complete silence. I have my own noises that are inexplicable to hearing people. I have my imagination and it has noises in image form. I imagine sounds in terms of colours. My own personal silence has colours. It's never black and white. (Laborit 1994, p. 10)

Such a vivid validation of her unique sensory engagement with the world debunks our commonly held misperceptions of silence and its place within deaf lives. Laborit also employs the motif of music in order to further this end. In the chapter *Stomachs and Music* she recalls an incident from her childhood where her uncle instructed her to bite the neck of his guitar as he played. In describing her appreciation of his music she states, "I can feel every vibration in my body, both high and low notes. The music enters my body and takes up residence



there" (1994, p. 17). Through such references to silence and music, Laborit's narrative acts to subvert several misconceptions about the role of sound within the lives of deaf people. Furthermore, her exploration of her unique sensory engagement with the world serves to portray deafness as an experience rather than a pathological condition - as a presence rather than an absence.

Like *Cry of the Gull*, Donna McDonald makes significant strides in her representation of deafness as an experience rather than a lack. Her memoir *The Art of Being Deaf* (2014a) is both politically charged and deeply personal. As an oral-deaf person who was mainstreamed and taught to communicate in English, McDonald sets upon the task of negotiating the internal barrier she had constructed between her deaf-self and hearing persona. Her memoir gives language to the experience of "the forgotten generation, the oral deaf kids who no one wants to talk about" (McDonald 2014a, p. 59). Moreover, she directly confronts many of the pervasive and problematic constructions of deafness that persist in contemporary discourses. McDonald defines her deafness not as a loss but an experience (2010, p. 464). Her overtly political prose often critiques and draws our attention to narratives of triumph or tragedy, evinced in her claim: "the unfolding of my story is not about conquering battles, but about inviting the reader into my world to see what it feels and sounds like [. . .] I want to be recognized in all my complexity, not as an organism of failed auditory nerves" (2014a, p. 183-184). In a similar move to Laborit, McDonald addresses ill-informed perceptions of deafness through references to music. In her chapter 'Music Lessons,' McDonald speaks about her love of music, whilst acknowledging "the words 'music' and 'deafness' do not usually make happy

bedmates in the minds of hearing people” (2014a, p. 79). Descriptions of her bodily engagement with music function to illuminate the specificities of her lived experience of sound. She tells us of her listening habits, her love of reading lyrics and of listening to music through headphones. She states:

I enjoy it immensely, letting the pulse of the music play not just through my hearing aids and into my ears, but also beat across the soft skin on my chest, seeping in to the core of my bones. (2014a, p. 81)

Here we are invited to intimately engage with McDonald’s sensory adventures, and furthermore, asked to reimagine her deafness as a presence, rather than an absence.

As Couser discusses, familial narratives written by hearing persons have often been subject to criticism on the grounds of exploitation or inadvertent objectification (1997, p. 252). However, he acknowledges that Leah Hager Cohen – a hearing child of deaf grandparents – has produced “one of the best recent books on life in the deaf community” (1997, p. 259). A hybrid of memoir and immersion journalism, *Train Go Sorry* explores the politics of the deaf world through the lens of several individuals’ stories from the Lexington School for the Deaf, including those of students, her grandparents and her father, the school’s then headmaster. In these stories Hager Cohen negotiates interactions across the hearing line in a way that highlights the often-confounding exchanges that occur in the ‘contact zones’ between deaf and hearing worlds. Cohen’s unique position as a simultaneous insider/outsider provides invaluable insight into the ways that deafness is negotiated from both within and without.

Her positioning of her narrator-self as precariously balanced between two worlds is made rich with images from her childhood. One such image is

particularly resonant: that of a young Hager-Cohen placing pebbles in her ears to resemble hearing aids. In the opening chapter, the narrator's familiarity and sense of home within the grounds of Lexington is immediately established. "From the time we could walk," she tells us, "we were navigating forests of grown-up legs, ducking in order not to obstruct signed conversation and pausing to have our cheeks pinched" (1994, p. 3-4). Similarly, she provides tender accounts of her interactions with her deaf grandparents in order to stake out her claim to narration. As Couser affirms, Hager Cohen is "concerned that the lives of deaf people tend to vanish without leaving historical signs" (1997, p. 260). Her work can certainly be seen as an attempt to intimately and intricately narrate the stories of lives that would otherwise remain obscure and untold. Nowhere is this more poignant than in her description of her grandfather, Sam. In the chapter 'Words Left Unspoken', we are privy to her intimate knowledge of him, given in descriptions like the following: "his hands remained lithe, vital. As he teased and chatted and joked, they were the instruments of his mind, the conduits of his thoughts" (Hager Cohen 1994, p. 68). It is clear by the close of the chapter, however, that Sam's way of being in the world has until now, been largely undocumented. As Hager Cohen explains, "when I go looking for Sam, it seems I only come up with papers, sheaves of dry correspondence about him and for him but never by him" (1994, p. 82). In this way, her memoir functions as an attempt to remedy the hitherto invisibility of his life.

Other texts are beginning to emerge that actively and sensitively engage with the identity politics surrounding deafness and the d/Deaf community. Andrew Solomon's chapter 'Deaf' in his newly released *Far From the Tree* (2014) is one such example. Solomon's revisionist approach to historical and medical

narratives acts to debunk many of the mainstream ill-informed perceptions of what it means to be deaf. His work, which can be thought of as immersion journalism with biographical interludes, contains a deft theoretical exploration of pertinent issues to Deaf Studies, including: the history of deaf education; sign language, eugenics; cochlear implants, and the way each of these contributes, by and large, to central debates regarding identity. Solomon's prose is laden too, with the real-life stories of d/Deaf people and their families, providing us with an opportunity to engage viscerally with the lived experiences described. The chapter is rich with quotation, where deaf people and their family members function as a counterbalance for Solomon's own authorial voice. Here, the 300 interviews that were conducted in producing the book provide substantial biographical insights into a broad array of different lives.

Solomon's thorough and thoughtful investigation into deafness shines through in his elegant handling of politically combustible material. His acute sensitivity to the socio-historical issues at stake comes forth in his affirmation of deafness as a culture. He states:

Most hearing people assume that to be deaf is to lack hearing. Many deaf people experience deafness not as an absence, but as a presence. Deafness is a culture and a life, an aesthetic, a physicality and intimacy different from all others. (2014, p. 62)

Though his assertion may seem to hint at an attempt to broach a universal deaf experience or identity, his subsequent paragraphs, which detail the diverse and often conflicting perspectives of d/Deaf people regarding oralism and sign language, highlight that such a notion is simply unattainable and beset with yet another range of essentialisms. Far from any attempt to homogenise, this

chapter calls us to recognise, in all its complexity, the diversity of lives and experiences that fall beneath the d/Deaf umbrella.

Similarly, Jessica White undertakes exciting cultural and literary work in *Body Language* (2010), a ficto-critical engagement with ideas of deafness, language, feminism and identity. What is distinctive about White's representation of deaf experience is its complete resistance, both formally and ideologically, to generic boundaries and notions of fixed identity respectively. The work is a textual hybrid, with scholarly quotation, personal prose and elements of the fantastic fused together to create a non-linear, poststructural narrative.

White's playful approach is, moreover, exceptionally powerful and useful in deconstructing and reformulating notions of deaf selfhood, and identity more generally. Deafness, she shows through engaging with *écriture féminine*, sign language and their mutual 'writing of/on the body,' is a fluid and unique sensory experience of the world - one that is full of possibility. Referring to the rhetoric of loss and lack, White provides an observation that speaks right to the heart of much problematic writing on deafness. She states:

The difficulty is to avoid referring to the disabled person as having lost something. Of course, you can lose your hearing, but you gain infinitely more in other ways – your senses of touch, taste, smell and sight are augmented. (White 2010, para. 67)

*Body Language* sets a useful precedent in its representation of deafness in all its complexity. White's use of ficto-criticism as alternate mode of story-telling provides new ways of thinking and writing about the (dis)abled body. The polyphony and hybridity of her work speaks to Brenda Jo Brueggemann's assertion that "heteroglossia is here" (2000, p. 318), and furthermore, offers

new ways to deliver the “nearly infinite possibilities of multilingual, multicultural, multisensorial experience” (2000, p. 318). Indeed, the promise of more fluid and nuanced literary means of representation propels my own desire to experiment with creative nonfiction in rendering the lived experiences of my grandparents.

Hybridised, politically engaged and sensitive familial narratives such as these provide fresh opportunities and challenges in redesigning stories of deafness that are free of the taint of triumphalism or horror. It is in this tradition of storytelling that I undertake my own project of narrative experimentation, in the hope that new perspectives can contribute to representing the spectrum of deafness in all its fullness.

### **3.3: A Final Note: Deaf Studies, Literature and Embracing the ‘Between’.**

In *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places* (2009), Brenda Jo Brueggemann urges Deaf Studies scholars to embark upon a critical engagement with constructions of ‘deaf lives’. She suggests the need for a unique Deaf Studies approach to writing, one that is removed from the traditional stronghold of English departments, deaf education and socio-linguistics (Brueggemann 2009, p. 22). Not only do we need to establish a discourse around how deaf lives are represented, she argues, but we should also be encouraging the creation, production and reception of deaf lives through channels such as biography, autobiography, and documentary (Brueggemann 2009, p. 22). Articulating

deafness as “the subject that has more often than not found itself between” (2009, p. 3), Brueggemann suggests the need to discuss the relationship between ‘deafness’ and ‘disability’, between ‘Deaf culture’ and ‘Disability culture’, between Deaf Studies and Disability Studies (2009, p. 12). Indeed, as I argued in chapter one, there is much to be shared and gleaned from interaction between the two disciplines. Through the combined efforts of Disability and Deaf Studies scholars, we stand to gain substantial insights into the intersection of literature with various discursive constructions of the deaf/(dis)abled body. As the conversation around the potential for life writing continues to grow in Disability Literary Studies, Deaf Studies can benefit from engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue. Let us do as Brueggemann proposes and “let Deaf Studies take up the questions often left to the long legacy of Western philosophy - from Plato to Derrida and back again: What difference does writing make?” (2009, p. 220).

The degree to which writing matters can be seen in the ways in which narratives of deaf lives are conceived of, written about, received, and circulated. Various discourses and rhetorical tropes act upon the d/Deaf narrative, whether written by family members, or d/Deaf persons themselves. While some texts function to affirm long-engrained conceptions of deafness as an adverse condition that must be borne/fixed/overcome, there are many that contest such views and even act to reimagine deafness in variously nuanced and intricate ways.

In his discussion of difference, disability, illness and identity, Andrew Solomon draws our attention to the paucity of writing and ways of thinking about

‘otherness’ in our contemporary imaginary, pointing to the dangers of dichotomous thinking and over-reliance on binaries operating in existing discourses about disability. A problem of vocabulary seems to haunt many of the nonfiction texts that explore the various ways of being d/Deaf. There is particular weight to Solomon’s analysis that experiences of somatic difference (or indeed, being deaf) are starved for language. The absence of words, he reminds us, is the absence of intimacy (Solomon 2014, p. 5). Both the sheer lack of texts that deal with deafness, in conjunction with the problematic rhetoric employed in extant narratives, suggests a need for different stories, voices, perspectives and languages to populate the under-explored terrain of deaf lives and deaf narratives. Such a task might be taken up then, in the nexus of Deaf and Disability Studies, and furthermore, through experimentation within genres of hitherto unrealised potential, like for example, creative nonfiction.

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A few years ago, I sat in my bedroom with a university course reader spread across my lap. The spiral-bound collection held a number of exemplar pieces of ‘life writing’, and among them was Helen Garner’s essay *Labour Ward, Penrith*. In this piece of creative nonfiction, the reader follows Garner’s journey as an observer in the birthing unit of Nepean Hospital.

As I sat and devoured Garner’s work, I found myself immersed in a world. It was not a world of plot twists and elaborate narrative arcs; it opened the door to a scene, a vignette of a world so visceral that I felt I was present in the action, witnessing first-hand the sights and smells of the hospital ward. Garner’s prose,



I realised, gave language to experience.

As with Leah Hager Cohen, who went looking for her grandfather, and found only sheaves of dry correspondence, I find myself in search of language that speaks to my grandparents' experiences, and mine with them. When I began this thesis, I couldn't recall having read a single story - fictional or nonfictional - about deafness. I have since found many, but none, of course, that tell *our* story.

It is such that I embark on a quest to breathe narrative life into lived experience. In opening the door to the life-world of my grandparents and myself, I hope that I might capture, in as much fullness and complexity as possible, the particulars of the world we inhabit together.

## **Chapter 4: Creative Nonfiction Writing Experiments**

### **- A Symphony -**

#### **Movement 1: Nanny and Grandpa's House**

Ring the doorbell at my Nanny and Grandpa's house is a novelty for my family. As children we'd clamour from the car and race to the doorstep to press that button. It wasn't enough to press it once either. We would press that thing over and over til the shuffle of my grandmother's feet could be heard approaching the door. It's a 'Mountcastle Silent Bell' – a visual doorbell system designed for members of the deaf community. Connected to the main fuse box, it uses light to alert my grandparents to a caller at the door.

As I ring the bell, standing on the weather-beaten creel doormat, a light flashes in the living room. Though it doesn't make a noise, for me there's a musical quality to its mechanics – a familiar rhythmic, clicking-sound upon each depression of that little white button.

Nanny appears at the front window. She peels back the lace curtains, even though she's expecting me. She fiddles with the locks (the door is locked and deadlocked despite the broad daylight). She releases the latch and throws her arms round my neck, squelching a string of kisses on my cheek. She's been baking. The scents of lemon zest and flour are heavy on her skin. Clutching my hand like we're schoolgirl pals, she steers me to the living room.

My grandfather sits in his reclining armchair in front of the TV. He barely looks up from his recorded BBC program 'Eggheads'. Subtitles flash across the bottom of the screen. Grandpa continues to answer the questions aloud,

"I know this one! B! The answer is B!" he yells, oblivious to the boom of his own voice – a deep, gruff voice that comes from the pit of his stomach, peppered with British Black-Country inflection.

I stand in front of the screen and he manoeuvres his head to see around me. He waves his hand back and forth – a gesture intended to make me move. I put my hands on my hips. I raise my eyebrows. I waggle a finger in his face. He laughs and finds the remote to press pause.

Message received.

I'm ushered to sit on the lounge while Nanny scuttles off to put the kettle on. I can hear the water splash into the jug and the switch being flicked. A drawer is opened and slammed shut. Silver cutlery is rattled around and then placed on the table. A triplet of staccato 'beeps' interrupts the persistent hum of the fridge. Nanny has left the freezer-door open again. I go to the kitchen to let her know. I tap her on the back and she spins around. I close the door for her and take a seat at the kitchen table.

I pull the chair a little too hard and it scrapes against the linoleum floor before smashing against the skirting board. The impact makes the Ikea-wall shelves, full of angel paraphernalia and delft-style blue and white crockery, rattle.

The kettle boils and then switches itself off automatically. Steam spews from the spout and makes a sighing noise as Nanny pours the water into three china cups.

We sit in the living room. My spoon clinks against the sides of my cup as I stir a drop of milk into my tea. My grandfather is breathing heavily. His emphysema has worsened. He used to be a chain smoker, but Nanny has since converted him to chain tea-drinking.

Nanny wants to know what I want for Christmas. "It's only September", I remind her. She wants me to have something I'll really like. Grandpa hasn't been following the conversation. He stopped reading our lips. Nanny backfills for his benefit.

Grandpa puts the TV back on. He wants to show me a movie he's recorded onto DVD.

"What's the film?" I ask.

He doesn't answer. He wants me to wait for the surprise.

A cockatoo squawks outside the window and my eyes dart in its direction.

Nanny follows my gaze.

"What is it?" she asks by shaking her index finger from side to side.

"Just a bird", I say. "It's making a loud noise".

Her face relaxes.

"It was a cockatoo".

"What does it sound like?"

I pause. This is a problem I often encounter.

“Loud”, I reply. “It makes a screeching sound and it’s really loud”.

Nanny cocks her head to the side as though she’s trying to imagine. But she can’t. She went deaf before the age of one. Nobody is certain why, but after a bout of suspected pneumonia, Nanny stopped responding to her mother’s voice.

Grandpa has found the DVD. He pops it in the player and loses his footing on the way back to the couch. He stumbles, but his hand finds the recliner and breaks the potential fall. Nanny and I pretend not to have noticed. Grandpa’s bad balance is a lasting side-effect of the meningitis that also caused his deafness at the age of eight.

The opening credits for Charlie Chaplin’s *City Lights* roll upon the screen. Grandpa is watching for my response. I beam at him. We both love this. The camera shows us the crowd gathered in the city square. The pompous old mayor unveils the new monument and reveals the tramp curled up, asleep. The tramp scratches his unruly head of hair. His leg twitches like a dog’s. He sits up, tips his hat, and clambers down from his perch. His trousers get caught! He wiggles to and fro. Limbs flail about. Nanny and Grandpa are in stitches.

I begin to watch them rather than the movie. Nanny has her legs on the couch, tucked beneath her body. Her left elbow is propped on the arm of the chair, her palm nestled under her chin and her fingers curled over and resting on her lower lip. Grandpa has his legs firmly on the ground, shoulder width apart. He is stooped forward with his hands on his knees and the remote-control in his lap. Their bodies jiggle as they laugh. The blind woman selling

flowers appears on the screen. She throws water at the tramp. We all giggle. I readjust myself in my seat, and Nanny's head turns to follow my movement. She taps Grandpa on the back. He pauses the film.

"Thought you might like a copy", he says.

I give him a kiss on the cheek.

We sit down for afternoon tea. Nanny has prepared a spread of salads, cold meats and salmon. She's anticipated that I haven't had lunch. There's a 'lemon delicious' pie that I know has been baked for my benefit.

"Have plenty!" Nanny insists. I take another helping. "You know, Grandpa and I used to go to the cinema every week when we were young", she tells me. "When we first went out together, we used to meet at the foreign cinema in Birmingham".

"*The Cinephone*. That was the name of it" Grandpa interjects. "All the films had subtitles. That's why we liked it".

A smile spreads across Grandpa's face.

"When I was a boy", he starts, "I used to sneak into the cinemas half way through a film, and stay there til the loop was finished. They used to play films one after another. Once, my mother had to come in with the manager and fetch me out!" "How old were you then?" I ask.

"13"

"So that was after you went deaf?"

"Oh yes, I never got bored with the pictures", he says.

I ask him, as I've done many times about his memories of going deaf.

"I went home from the hospital in a car. I told my mother, 'This car must be very good. It's ever so quiet'. I didn't realise I'd gone deaf. Strange".

"Didn't they tell you at the hospital?"

"Well, no. I remember one of the nurses though. I heard a lot of noises in my head after - 'head noises'. I don't know what they call it now. I told the nurse, 'I can hear someone playing the piano under my pillow'. She said, 'Well, carry on listening'. She must have known. But she didn't tell me."

He shrugs his shoulders and goes quiet again. We finish the lemon delicious.

A few weeks later there's a family barbecue at my home and the three of us find ourselves nestled round the old mahogany piano in my lounge room. As I start to play, Nanny edges forward and perches on the lip of the lounge-cushion. Grandpa arches his back and yawns before sinking deeper into the sofa. After a few songs, Nanny wanders over and takes a chair closer to the piano. She drags it close enough to rest her hands - wrinkled and papery - on the keys. I stop playing.

"Your turn!" I tell her.

She shakes her head but her fingers remain on the ivory. I nod. "Go on!" She presses down. She jumps back.

"No, you play", she says and lays her hands on the wooden body of the piano. She can feel the vibrations, she tells me.

I play a song to myself. It's a sad song, one that I have written, full of minor chords with a lilting, melancholic melody. But Nanny and Grandpa aren't to know that.

My fingers flit over the black and white keys and my foot springs on and off the creaky sustain pedal.

"I would love to hear, you know", Nanny says.

"What would you like to hear?"

"Everything. Everything! The voices of my family, music, your piano and your singing. I really would". She pauses. She asks my grandfather if he would like to hear music.

"When I started school at 5 years old", he says, "We were listening to the piano and the teacher told me 'Close your eyes, you can hear the music better'. That's right isn't it? I remember that", he says. "I remember that".



## **Movement 2: Voicing**

“Music, after all, is not notes and tones, but the deceptively difficult act of listening” - Christopher DeLaurenti -

If my Grandpa were an instrument, he would be a trombone. His voice booms and reverberates in any setting, the sudden vocal outbursts, abrupt and horn-like. A few times, while in the car with him, I’ve been so startled by his bellowing of directions, I’ve near crashed into oncoming traffic. Post-lingually deaf, his voice has a broader range of pitch than my Grandma’s. Hearing people often understand him with ease. Nanny is softer, more monotone. Though she has neither the range nor the dynamics my Grandpa possesses, her voice, to me, has the richness of a cello.

When Nanny speaks, it’s as though she hums. The sound resonates in her throat and nose, propelled by air in the chest rather than the belly. There is a legato quality to her phrasing, a velvety warmth to her timbre. There’s a certain roundness to its sound – one you imagine being produced by a bow, not by the plucking of fingers.

To other people, Nanny’s speech sounds muffled, slurred, and inchoate – as though listening to a voice underground or in another room. A friend once remarked it was like “listening to a piano with the dampener pedal engaged”.

It often takes time for hearers to become accustomed to the peculiarities and nuances – the rhythms, cadences and intonation – of my grandparents’ voices. And within that interstice there is often bashfulness, sometimes a

misfiring and misreading of signals, and always a palpable self-consciousness for all involved.

Nanny is curious and shy about her own voice. She asks me on occasion what she sounds like, reminding me that though Grandpa is the better speaker, she is the better lip-reader.

When the two go out, they operate as a tag-team. Nanny will defer to Grandpa on occasions where her speech is misunderstood, and Grandpa looks to Nanny for translations of a hearing person's response. This symbiosis has become more pronounced in the last few years as a result of my Grandfather's blindness in one eye. A car accident in 2006 caused his retina to become detached, and despite seven operations, he remains without sight in his right eye. Wherever they go – the grocery store, the doctor's surgery, the chemist - they are always together, filling in the gaps for one another as needed. For the times their method fails, Nanny keeps a pen and a notepad in her handbag.

Like most children, I learned to speak by listening to and mimicking the sounds that my parents made. My first words were 'mama' 'dada' and 'baba'. My Nanny learned to speak with chalk-dust and mirrors. Her first word was 'pig'.

At her school in Birmingham, England, my Grandma was a star pupil. She attended the *Moseley Road School for the Deaf*, a day-school that came highly recommended by the specialist who diagnosed her deafness. Her education was rooted firmly in the tradition of 'oralism': a medico-pedagogy which forbids the

use of sign language so that pupils rely exclusively on speaking, reading lips and auditory training. Signing was banned on the school premises. If caught, you had to report to the headmistress. At the age of two and a half, Nanny began intensive speech and lip-reading classes.

When I ask her about her memories of these years, she pauses, then says, “We had to blend into the big hearing world. So we were taught to speak”.

She hesitates again, contemplating how best to explain, then leans towards me and takes my hand. She positions it on my nose.

“Say ‘N’”, she instructs, performing the motion alongside me. I make the sound and it rings in my nasal cavities.

“I learned about sounds through feeling, see?” She shuffles closer, and relocates my hand to my throat.

“Say ‘Mmm’”.

I bring my lips together to make the sound. I feel the vibrations ripple through my neck against my fingers.

At the front of my Grandmother’s classroom was a large mirror that sat next to the blackboard. Her English language teacher, Miss Rhodes, wrote letters on the slate and Nanny had to reproduce the associated sound, monitoring her reflection as she went. In these one-on-one lessons, Nanny remembers chalk power being sprinkled onto the back of her hands. This technique taught her the difference between a ‘b’ and a ‘p’ sound.

“Let me show you”, she says. “We had to have our hands like this”.

Nanny’s hand is flat – fingers outstretched, palm faced down. She brings it to her

mouth then splays her thumb and forefinger across her chin, her bottom lip nestled into the dorsal surface of her hand. I'm shown where the chalk was placed.

"Just here", she says, pointing to a patch of skin just before the wrist. The chalk, when a 'p' sound was produced, would scatter into the air. For a 'b', it wouldn't move. "That's how you knew you were doing it right", she tells me.

Nanny remembers the first time her parents heard her speak. She was three. The school organised a presentation day, and parents were invited to come and view their children's progress. "We had to go on stage" Nanny tells me. Each student was assigned a placard. Printed on its front was a word in capital letters.

"I walked down the stage and held up my sign. My word was 'pig'. I said it out loud. I saw my Mum and Dad in the audience. Mum was crying."

Nanny tells me often of her love for her old teacher. They kept in contact for many years after she graduated. They wrote letters to one another, even when Miss Rhodes moved to Scotland.

"I hate to say it" Nanny says with a grin, "but I was her pet".

"With other teachers it was different, more formal. They were lovely, but Miss Rhodes wasn't quite like them. I was happy to be with her. She used to hug me. We understood one another, no trouble".

For weeks, Nanny has been ruminating over a conversation she had with my

Auntie Ruth. In an attempt to quell anxieties about her voice, my Aunt told Nanny

“People just need to get used to you, that’s all”.

In order to be understood, Nanny and Grandpa travel kilometres out of their way to places where they’re “known”. Nanny queues for hours for her favourite teller at the bank, the one who smiles at her, and looks her straight in the eye. She buys wine from the more expensive local liquor store, because the woman behind the counter is always friendly. But away from their regular haunts, Nanny is wary of strangers. She falls silent, and if I am with her, asks me to speak on her behalf.

About a year ago, I brought my partner, Sean, back to the house for the first time. When I told him my grandparents were deaf, he was anxious about meeting them. He was petrified of insulting them, of staring blankly in their faces when he failed to understand. He stayed close by my side.

Communication was addled at first. I had to interpret for both parties. But as time has passed, the three have become familiar with one another, more at ease. Now I can leave them in the same room without fearing an awkward blunder.

In their exchanges are words and meanings that fall to the wayside. Sometimes, all six eyes will turn upon me, waiting for translation. But Sean knows to maintain eye contact, to annunciate clearly, not to yell, or turn his head mid-conversation. Above all, he knows to smile – that Nanny and Grandpa will read the quality of his voice – its tones and inflections, through the contours and expressions of his face.

### **Movement 3: Hands**

My grandmother has the hands of a child. Excepting the creases and wrinkles of her skin, the slight angulation of her arthritic fingertips, they are as soft and dimpled as a newborn's. Nanny has thick spatulate fingers, a cushiony palm and a broad wrist. Her fingernails are hewn right to the dorsal edge of the nailbed. Hers are busy, boisterous hands that accompany and animate her speech.

Though she rarely signs, except to Grandpa or with peers at her deaf craft-group, her hands are never idle. They are used to punctuate her sentences, sometimes filling in blanks where words don't suffice.

If Nanny thinks I look nice, she will give a compliment by way of pantomime. She will pose like a 1940's pin up girl, thrusting a hip to one side, primping her hair, flicking her thumbs out over her waist and rolling them down her body. Her hands will sculpt her impression of beauty, and she will wink as a final gesture of approval.

As a young woman, my grandmother worked as a typist. She was employed at the Cadbury Chocolate Factory in Bournville, Birmingham for six years. She was promoted four times.

"I loved that job" Nanny tells me. "I was working mostly with hearing people, but there were two deaf women working there too. We were all typists".

Leaning forward in her chair, Nanny tells how she studied at a typing

college and earned a diploma. When she graduated she could type 60 words a minute.

“You had to learn to type while blindfolded,” and she simulates the action for my benefit.

“My colleagues at Cadbury were clever,” she says before sucking air through her rounded lips. “There was one woman named Pat. She was completely deaf but could play the piano. Her parents taught her to keep in time with a... a...”. Nanny’s brow furrows. She can’t think of the word, but rocks her index finger from side to side to show me what she means.

“A metronome?” I suggest.

“Yes, that’s it! She could read music and I was told she was very good. She took my job when I left to get married. She was very skilled ”.

After my mother and uncle were born, Nanny returned to the workforce. She worked part-time for the local council, providing home-care and cleaning for the elderly. By the time Mum was in high school, Nanny was working as a cook at the school my Uncle attended. There she was under the instruction of a supervisor.

“Mrs Higman was her name”, Nanny says, grimacing.

“She always looked at me and said ‘*Well, I never!*’ I always wondered exactly what she meant. She said it all the time, after everything I did! She was a nasty woman. Maybe she thought I was stupid because I was deaf. But I was always thorough with my work. Perhaps that’s what she didn’t like about me”.

We laugh, and Nanny gives a dismissive flick of her wrists, rolling her eyes as

she performs the action.

I ask my grandmother about her most rewarding job. She tells me of her last employment before she came to live in Australia. Between 1984 and 1990, she was an employee at *Sense* – an organisation that provides supported housing and education for deafblind persons. In those years, she worked as a housekeeper, and for a while, as a teacher's aide. Nanny shakes her head and looks to the sky before telling me of her time with David.

“I sometimes dream of him” she says.

“He was partially blind and deaf. His body was deformed from birth. He was a beautiful boy. I would play with him, you know? He loved to be tickled! He laughed and laughed. He died when he was three. I loved him.”

Nanny looks at me and drops her hands in her lap.

“He had such a beautiful face. With golden, curly hair - beautiful hair. And blue eyes! The bluest!”

After David, Nanny was asked to work with deafblind adults. This required training and lessons in tactile sign-language. Her face brightens as she explains how she loved the intimacy of speaking with touch. She stands, shuffles to my side of the table, and with my hand in hers, shows me how she would sign upon palms.

“What did you want to be when you were younger?” I ask her.

“An air hostess” she says. “Or a library technician. I loved books, especially novels. But...” she points to her ears and shrugs her shoulders. “I told your Mum



the other day though, that I think I would have enjoyed being a teacher. I would have liked to teach deaf children”.

Nanny explains that, in her time, deaf people were not permitted to teach in UK schools. One of their closest deaf friends was forced to immigrate to America in order to work in his chosen career path. He taught in the US for 30 years.

“Things are very different now”, she says, disappearing into the kitchen to make a pot of tea.

When she returns, her arms are bundled with goods she has made for a Christmas charity drive organised by her craft group. She shows me the fruits of her labour; the hours of fine needlework that produced a pair of oven gloves and a set of placemats; the carefully knitted slippers, blankets, scarves and teddy bears; the patchwork quilts and table-runners that required days of intricate cutting, assembling and machining.

As she comes to the bottom of the pile, Nanny presents me with a gift. For weeks I have been grumbling about my cumbersome laptop bag and its weight on my shoulder. Having noted this, my grandmother has made me a new one. It is red and black, made from a lightweight material with padded lining on the inside.

“Thank you” I say, and Nanny reaches over to give a loving pinch to my side.

#### **Movement 4: Seeing Sounds**

When I was young, Grandpa's eye seemed permanently affixed to the viewfinder of his most prized possession: a black SONY camcorder. The device was one of many gadgets that I was forbidden to touch; the TV, DVD player, the computer, and later his Ipad, fell under his jurisdiction alone. But it was the hand-held video camera that I remember as an extension of my grandfather's long-limbed frame.

Grandpa filmed everything. He filmed our birthday parties and family functions, school presentations and dances. He filmed parades and street festivals. He had a penchant for videoing trains and boats. In his home-collection there are reels and reels of footage, now converted to DVD format, that document almost every incoming ship to Sydney Harbour in the 1990s. Grandpa's archives are meticulously organised, with a table of contents lining the insides of each DVD case.

I remember once, Grandpa filmed a convoy of ants carrying a crumb of food back to their nest. He hooked the camera up to the TV to show my siblings and me. Upon our viewing, my Dad scoffed in the background: "What the hell is he filming this shit for?"

I knew from a very young age that my Grandpa saw things in a way that I did not. I knew too, that his attention would always be caught by whatever marvels lay before that camera lens.

~

It's a Wednesday morning and Grandpa and I are having breakfast together while Nanny is at her weekly craft group. As I scroll through my Facebook news-

feed and munch on my raisin toast, Grandpa is on the floor, sitting with his discs splayed across the room. A new television unit has just been installed, and Grandpa's home-movies are in the process of being arranged on its shelves.

To attract my attention, Grandpa switches on the sound of the TV and turns the volume up loud. I look up to see my childhood self on the screen, singing songs from *The Lion King* into a pink microphone.

I laugh, and after watching awhile, move to the floor to join him. With permission, I open a few DVD cases and skim the list of contents printed on the little slips inside. The discs hold a range of family events as well as public broadcasts recorded from the TV. I come across a copy of Princess Diana's funeral, and footage from a military parade in Sydney's George Street; but Grandpa has planned what he wants to show me.

He presses play on the remote to reveal the Edinburgh Military Tattoo band marching with their instruments in the Sydney Cricket Ground. The footage was taken a few years ago after my mother bought him tickets to the event for his birthday. Grandpa watches the Tattoo on television every year. "I like the movements", he tells me. "I can't hear it, but I enjoy it just the same".

Grandpa shows me another disc. This time it's a recording of 'Last night of the Proms'. The camera pans around the Great Albert Hall - filled to capacity- to reveal the orchestra beginning to play. Grandpa likes to watch the horns and the drums. "Oh, but I like the singing and the words best", he says.

I'm asked if I know the songs. I don't. "William Blake wrote 'Jerusalem', Grandpa tells me. "The last lines are "Give me my chariot of fire". I watch as the lyrics appear on the screen in closed-captions.

"You like music, don't you?" he says, "Thought you might be interested".

Later, when Nanny is home, we sit in the sun on the back deck. Grandpa brings me a manila folder full of old song lyrics and poems he has collected over the years. As I pore over the yellowed papers, Nanny begins to tell me about the hymns she learned in school.

"We sang them every morning", she says, "And psalms too".

"Ooh yes, so did we", Grandpa chimes in. "We used to sing 'Bless this house'. Well, sing it or perhaps say it. I don't know how good we sounded!" he says with a laugh.

I pull out a piece of sheet music titled 'I've Got Sixpence'. Grandpa peers over my shoulder and erupts into song, bobbing and waving his hands like a conductor. He knows all the words by heart. I ask him how he remembers them all. He shrugs. "I can see them in my mind".

When I was younger, Grandpa would recite nursery rhymes and songs to us children. I can remember his voice and the words before bedtime:

"Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross,  
To see a fine lady upon a white horse;  
Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,

She shall have music wherever she goes”

Grandpa goes inside, and returns moments later with another song to be shared. He hands me a newspaper cutting that discusses the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *‘It’s a long way to Tipperary’*. Grandpa tells me his mother used to listen to it on the radio, and then sings to me once more.

“They say that’s the greatest song of all time” he says, “and your old Grandpa knows it”.

### **Movement 5: Sunday Night TV**

It’s a Sunday night at Nanny and Grandpa’s. I’ve stayed for dinner, and as usual, the TV flickers in the background, switched to mute. Black and yellow subtitles flit across the screen. The three of us exchange knowing glances at spelling errors and typos as they flash up. Nanny asks me, as she always does, if I’d like the sound on. I say no.

For some time I’ve been refusing this offer. At first, it felt polite, as though abstaining was a gesture of solidarity. Now, I genuinely prefer the silence.

Tonight’s television menu offers us slim pickings. Grandpa zaps between

stations. “Besides the news”, he grumbles, “It’s all rubbish, really. And even then...” He shrugs his shoulders and leaves *60 Minutes* to play.

The living room is removed from the maelstrom of my family home. The two houses are connected by the same roof, but might as well be separate planets.

Next door, my mother is probably yelling down the hallway to my adolescent brother, while rap-music blares from his bedroom. Dad will be cooking the dinner with *My Kitchen Rules* blasting from the adjacent family room. If my sister is visiting, my infant niece will be scrabbling on the floor with the dog, squawking away in high-pitched gurgles.

Here, the only sounds are those of our breath, and a light wind rustling through the fly-door.

There are three unspoken rules that govern TV viewing at Nanny and Grandpa’s.

1: No talking during beloved programs.

When watching something we enjoy, our concentration is directed wholly at the action unfurling before us. In order to communicate, we need to look at one another. In doing so, we end up missing crucial plot points and twists. To speak is to be left with missing puzzle pieces.

2: Refreshments are served only in ad-breaks.

Cups of tea, chocolate biscuits and donuts are able to be fetched ONLY during an

ad-break. Talking is permitted too, but rule one remains for all other viewing time.

3: Grandpa controls the remote. It is his TV, and nobody knows it better than he does. (This rule is relaxed when the TV 'plays up'. His Gen Y grandchildren are then permitted to come to the rescue).

Watching their TV is like reading a book with moving illustrations. Prose is delivered in fragments via closed captioning, transitions between camera frames like the turning of pages. It took me a while to absorb text and image at once, but my brain is adapting.

Something seems to happen when the noise is switched off. Images seem larger, grandiose, brighter somehow. I notice lines and crevices in faces I wouldn't normally see. Without the drone and the din, the barrage of obnoxiously loud advertisements, I feel less screamed at. I can drop in or drop out at any time.

By turning my head I can avoid the insipid chatter of morning-show hosts. By averting my gaze I can bypass the quiz-shows my grandparents love (and I loathe). My eyes provide escape routes where my ears do not.

The deaf brain, neurologist Oliver Sacks explains, is highly adaptive. Research shows that deaf people are hypervisual; in particular, they have much greater acuity for analysing what happens in the peripheral visual field. In the past, deaf people were denied licences. According to Sacks, they are in fact, the safest drivers on the road. They are more conscious of activity in the periphery than

any hearing driver. The parts of the brain that in a hearing person would be auditory, become re-allocated for vision. The brain evolves as a result of experience, Sacks tells us. "Given, a world of extreme visual attention, such as deaf people have, other parts of the brain are converted to visuality".

As a child, I often marvelled at my grandmother's sensitivity to light. Whenever I would stay the night, the glow from my reading lamp would creep beneath my closed door and wake her. I tried reading under the sheets with torches. This didn't work. Nanny would soon appear at my door and tell me to go to sleep. Even now, heavy curtains adorn the windows of my grandparents' bedroom. We live on a road with no street-lights, and still, the headlights of an occasional passing car can rouse her.

The noiseless TV continues to glimmer in the living room. Without speaking, Grandpa raises the remote and flicks to Foxtel IQ. He selects a recorded episode of *Miss Marple*.

Over the years I've developed an appreciation for murder-mysteries: *Poirot*, *Midsomer Murders*, *Foyle's War*, *Heartbeat*, *Murder She Wrote*, *Columbo*, *Hawaii 5.0*. There is, I've learned, an art to the viewing process. Figuring 'whodunit' requires a certain expertise. As Nanny, Grandpa and I watch the screen, faces and bodies are the objects of our scrutiny. We scour them for clues, for traces of guilt - the faint tremor of a nervous hand, the twitch of an eye. More often it's the stolid we watch most intently - the careful ones.

But my judgments are often clumsy. At times I'm fooled by the steely appearance of the perpetrator. I leap prematurely at narrative twists and red



herrings.

My grandparents though, watch intently, judge slowly. They absorb the entire picture, the action in the foreground and the margins.

## **Conclusion: A Line that is Permeable**

This thesis has set about negotiating or ‘dis-abling’ the hearing line through displacing commonly held assumptions about what it means to ‘be deaf’. Conceived in response to the lack of literature that deals with deafness and deaf lives, this thesis attempts to contribute an account of lived experience that foregrounds the many numerous ways of engaging sensorially with the world, in order to bridge the gap between deaf and hearing cultures.

In both the critical and creative components of this thesis, I have illuminated the value of creative nonfiction as a means of representing deaf lives in new and compelling ways. I have made a case for the analytical study of literary depictions of deafness, highlighting the dearth of literature that explores deaf lives, as well as the rhetorical shortcomings of extant deaf narratives. This thesis has drawn attention to the need for a range of voices to engage with discourses and issues relevant to the deaf milieu. It has thus attempted to locate creative nonfiction as a site in which such dialogue can take place. Through the execution of writing experiments that function to explore different ways of thinking about, and representing deafness, the usefulness of creative nonfiction to the political and philosophical project of Deaf Studies is made clear.

In producing pieces of critically informed personal narrative that tenderly and evocatively render the lived experiences of my deaf grandparents, I have sought to displace the pathological perspective of deafness that has long pervaded

western thought. Furthermore, I have attempted to disrupt the familiar, caricatured patterns of understanding deafness. As Lennard Davis writes:

“Characters with disabilities are always marked with ideological meaning [. . .] One of the tasks for developing consciousness of disability issues is the attempt, then, to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal” (Davis 1995, p. 49).

This thesis has embraced the task of developing a new vocabulary with which to discuss deafness. In this pursuit, I have taken to the dynamic, hybrid literary genre of creative nonfiction in order to generate new ways of thinking about and representing somatic difference.

Although the creative pieces are intended to be conceived as experiments rather than a complete narrative, I have attempted nonetheless to provide cohesion and unity through the use of the central motifs of music and language. Music functions in these pieces to demarcate, and then later collapse, the boundaries between our deaf and hearing subjectivities. Although I narrate the tensions that arise through my identity as a hobbyist singer/songwriter, and more generally as a hearing individual, I highlight the unique and counter-intuitive ways my grandparents engage with music – an experience that, for them, has nothing to do with pitch, melody or harmony, but rather is one of vibration, rhythm and pulse.

In movement one, for example, I narrate my grandmother’s engagement with music as she places her hands upon my piano. Such interactions with sound open up deafness as a condition of possibility within what is a seemingly impenetrable space for someone that does not hear.

In considering the nexus of music and deafness, there remains a great deal to be explored. This intersection could indeed, provide the basis for a whole new inquiry for researchers in Deaf Studies.

The notion of language features as another key concern of the creative work. Discussions regarding touch, gesture and sign language are coupled with the employment of communicative mediums such as television, film cinema and technology as motifs throughout the text. However, it is through the utterance of music as a language that I attempt the key deconstructive manoeuvre of the text. In drawing parallels between my grandparents' voices and musical instruments, for example, and electing to title the work 'A Symphony', I am attempting metaphorically, to acknowledge the artfulness of their lives and the dynamism of their unique ways of being in the world.

One of the primary aims of this thesis was to address how creative nonfiction might elucidate different ways of engaging sensorially with the world, and moreover, function to animate interactions across and between the hearing line. In my approach to identity politics, I have been wary of the essentialism that is so inherently part of the deaf/hearing binary. Although the dichotomy is invoked throughout the creative work to reveal the ideological structures that impede upon the (hearing) cultural psyche regarding deafness, I have similarly attempted to subvert, expose and play with such categories. In trying to source a language and an ethos that honoured and did justice to the complexities of the issues at stake, it was necessary to distance the work from existing scripts that ultimately do a disservice to our understanding of somatic difference.

Far from reifying existing paradigms, this project has sought to bridge the gap between deaf and hearing cultures in a way that does not simply highlight universal human experience, but that foregrounds and makes visible the unique and heterogeneous ways of seeing and being deaf, as well as hearing.

In my writing, I have attempted to depict each character in all their fullness, allowing for and thematising the tension that exists in the 'between spaces' of the deaf/hearing divide. It has been my goal to avoid oversimplifying or sacrificing variation upon the altar of 'sameness'. I have not sought to erase the uniqueness of particular 'deaf' or 'hearing' qualities, but rather to pay homage to such difference and allow it to 'be' without suffering the fate of reductive compartmentalisation. It is in this fashion that the hearing line is made permeable: not through totalising narratives of sameness, nor of difference, but through a respect for multiplicity, fluidity, and an empathic attempt to understand the world between ourselves and others.

It is my desire that these narratives provide a window to a world that may have otherwise remained opaque to a reading public. In making public the personal and intimate story of my relationship with my deaf grandparents, I am heeding the call made by scholars like Brueggemann and McDonald for more stories of deafness to be proliferated in the (largely hearing) cultural imaginary. Without such stories, deafness and deaf lives are at risk of remaining 'invisible'.

Immense opportunity arises in this interstice between literature and deafness. Future research would benefit from further inquiry into how narratives in various genres might function to depict deafness in hitherto unrealised ways.

There stands great possibility and challenge in the task of representing deafness in novel form, a task I have flagged in an earlier chapter as worthy of pursuit. Perhaps the most exciting project I envision, however, lies in extending and consolidating the relationship between deafness, Deaf Studies and creative nonfiction. It is hoped that this work offers a precedent as one of many compelling ways to engage with deaf lives and their representation upon the page.

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