How to Explain This

and

The Construction of Disability in British Female Poetry in the

1990s-2010s:

How Susan Wicks and Jo Shapcott Typify the New Generation’s

Attention to Body and Difference

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the
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Abstract

This thesis is in two parts. The first section is a poetry collection called *How to Explain This*, and the second section is a critical essay that explores the questions of how Susan Wicks and Jo Shapcott typify the New Generation’s attention to body and difference.

My critical essay takes its cues from the academic fields of Cultural Disability Studies and Medical Humanities and understands disabled identities to be both constructed and porous. It considers the influence of cultural scholars such as Judith Butler, who influenced how we consider the fixity of boundaries and identities. By concentrating on the collections *Open Diagnosis* by Susan Wicks and *Of Mutability* by Jo Shapcott, it argues that both poets borrow from the context of Disability Rights and Culture, as well as the attention to the body that was popular among The New Generation of Poets in the 1990s-2010s. This period of social and legislative changes in British law meant that the attention on disabled bodies was increasing. Wicks and Shapcott’s collections incorporate the heightened visibility of disabled bodies in this period. They write authoritatively about their experience of illness and disability by encompassing multiple cultural, academic and legislative perspectives.

Additionally, by using scientific language and imagery Wicks and Shapcott present collections that incorporate a variety of perspectives on disability distinct to the strict demarcation of identities found in critical work. Instead, Wicks and Shapcott rely on the use of myth and culture to present rounded and complex illustrations of “deviant” bodies.

*How to Explain This* is divided into three sections and explores the interconnected themes of love, identity, and disability through a series of sequences.

This poetry collection incorporates similar ideas to the critical work, rejecting simple and straightforward identities. Instead, *How to Explain This* considers how disability is affected by relationships, family, and other life events, in poems which construct and reflect on difference and stigma.
Declaration

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How to Explain This

A Poetry Collection

By

Eleanor Ward
Part I.

2013 - Three-Hundred Afternoons at the Neurology Hospital

I.

You could be the same: offered the last few sachets, 
decaf that has creased in your bag: relief, in a teacup. 
Your opposite sits cross legged on her bed, starched sheets 
and blue blankets, torn holes at the corners, boil washed.

Voices echo against strip lights. You follow her voice, unnaturally bright, 
the corners of pulled and hygienic curtains block any line of sight, 
changes in nurse shifts at eight and eight, doctors rush in (a catastrophe 
for other inmates). She went to the same uni, you tell her of

tin can shaped lecture theatres, the dividing bridge they are slowly pulling down. 
Stories spark in the stuffed ward, stale air and reheated food. 
We have the same truths: misdiagnoses that signal delay, 
each year another scar. Cascade of blood and gore.
II.

The toilet is opposite a portrait of Princess Diana, relegated to the side of the main thoroughfare marked by scrapes of drip poles or rushed grabs on the way down.

Patients smoke tethers of old cigarettes, peering into the entrance, picking at the delicate, webbed bandages wrapped around wounds where they’ve been comforted by soft touch and care. N.G. tubes curl, milky, taped to cheeks. Monitors glance off the sun, implanted through skull; a chorus of pumps scream error, dragged on wheels, outside for a taste of the sour air. The square frames doctors on lunch, the picnics and breaks of the jailbirds.

Roses twirl, barbing. Hiding the circular central line, this week’s disaster – a see-through medal I’ve let them glue, tube and fasten.

The burn where stat-lock hits skin, twice. A careful spread of hives, no defence against dressings, the tingle of melting skin, cool fluids.

It all twists together at night, plastic loops in a ringlet from my neck, down the jugular vein drugs fall through to brush my heart.

Hold your hand, tighter, wavering in the face of crowds who spot a glimpse: the double lumen hanging by my ear, the red band with a mottled QR code, that knows my secrets and my failures.
III.

I’ve met them all, coiled opposite, waiting on the markers of time in hospital, the wet salads, refrigerated bananas, cradled in fresh sheets, holey blankets.

I frame the menagerie, the six of us cloistered in the corners of the brightly lit bay. I am hitched to drip pole, a slow dance towards the toilets.

Some have never been ill, before this terrible tragedy, laid up, scanning, unsure what the etiquette is, surprised. This is my second home,

I can get through three hospitals using the back corridors, never venturing outside in search of the best chips, the exotic cafeteria, I know the timetable, impossibility of anything happening. I have cried at the nurses, when my arm swelled up three times its size, sighed at doctors fallen asleep as relatives held my hand.

In the downtime I overhear histories clothed in hygienic, disposable blue curtains gather their stories, ugly, fresh, recited to a different crowd every day.

The screaming headlines of last night’s Evening Standards shield us in false securities, brought in from the cold. The minute details, rules are missing,

which nurse to call when things go wrong, as they will. Flurries of physios wrinkle their numb sides up, sit each patient perfectly straight

for an hour each day in a wheelchair. Visitors, unsure when it is time to come or go, are asked to take their grasped, infectious flowers home, gathering the cellophane noisily.
Waving when the time comes for freedom
knowing we’ll never see any of them ever again.
IV.

Yellowed consent forms have curled, warning you that this will be difficult. Those last attempts at weaving a needle into a vein at 4am, collapsing, ruined, means that you sit looking at disappointed-with-themselves doctors, agree to let them thread cannula into the jugular during working hours instead.

Encircled with I.D. bracelets, ankle and wrist, a nightdress means you bear NHS colours. Beauty is not even an afterthought. Your sister plaits your hair that you hope will separate it from the iodine and blood to come. Theatre is full of cold air, nurses who recognise you, from before, last time.

You are bathed in blue, drapes stuck and tented over your face, a sea for a square on your neck, vessels orange, then picked out with ultrasound. Snaking, opposing their incisions, their wish for an easy stringing; you pick a dot on the wall and listen as your heart indicates error on the ECG.

Blood cakes into your hairline in pulses, the tickle at the pit of your lung indicates they've gone too far, but they're in and pour glue over the sunset on your neck, rip off blue. Stat-locks bite twice, covered in plastic, you'll see the bruise.

If you are lucky, double-lumen tuck behind your ear, otherwise you are left trailing, pulling along, tripping over tubing, see-through connections. Nurses will get the crust of surgery out of hair while the I.V. pump gradually pushes at your neck, clocking each drug waiting patiently to be flushed through.
They collect your time each visit. Narratives change: you tell the same story of illness, again. The yellow lined paper scratched into by many hands, tattoos of pulse pressures. Attached by folds and treasury tags, wound round each set of letters and storied tale of admission plan and test.

Orange folders clasped in junior doctors’ hands tell of only mixed up pasts that cannot be amended with a post-it note addendum. Written by experienced physicians for new house officers, those who will only read five or six pages of summed-up history. You can’t undo the pretty tidiness of how it happened, now.

Someone backtracks to birth, until drips of faulty DNA worry you, and futures. You hope that new plots erase the past. If anyone were to thumb through histories, they would not assign new symptoms, crumbling bodies, to the dustbins we threw everything into.
VI.

I made my own waiting room
in the long corridor outside inpatient theatres,
borrowed a chair, sat opposite door four.
Waiting to be called in,
dust blowing tumbleweeds
at my feet as if
no one else paused long enough,
watched the scrub parade of doctors and nurses,
their Crocs brightly coloured and scuffing the floor,
on their way to wrench open bodies on black sterile tables
ignoring the anomaly out of bed waiting for my long vein
to be mid-lined.
VII.

They want History: I could tell them my grandfather grew twelve brothers next to him, mud-caked, potato-picking, stuttering on an Irish farm, his conversations like distant shots speckling fields. How the matchstick relics, meticulous brown crosses, cherished in London Irish homes, were counted, constructed by Uncle Willie; locked up, he sold lilies dripping white in the rain. We carried deep, wet, clotted mud, sprinkled it in handfuls on grandfather’s grave, ground all the way from Mooncoin:

*On the banks of the Suir that flows down by Mooncoin.*

Instead they want: to watch my heart blur new ECG print outs: electrical red. Parcel this month’s rain of medication in paper bags. Listen to me count out, recite, each hopeful molecule. Each wasted drip of blood, each slip of needle, fail to steam the vein flooding quick puddles onto pillow cases, the lattes that gather, the *running buffet* provided by the new-ones, making histories that prop up my head in a single, scratchy bed the accumulation of stories that start in the beginning, middle and end. leads me back again:

*On your green banks I wander where first I did join, Mooncoin.*
VIII.

We litter our lives with these misadventures: watching for the grey tips of fingers. Midnight erases each wispy breath.

We reach for phones. Wails, whoops, choke holds, before the sudden flooded intakes, and collapse.

Coughs riff the spasmodic scale. Bright sister, pale, air stale and uncanny, fill your damaged alveoli.

Fasten your grip on sweet gases, cold masks carry you along wrapped in a dressing gown,

catch the tie, clatter down stairs. Blue lights flick at the stars harnessed to air.
IX.

Doctors use *The Brighton Score* wisely; I know: the piece of paper in front of me pointedly sketches out women reaching arm to arm, joining up behind backs or thumb to wrist: hands to floor, abnormal positions, pencil diagrams screaming: this. is. it.

Not: crashing waves, blues, mauves, to be drowned in off the burnt, sodden pier, cordoned with blowing plastic tape. Scattered from lanes of *those kinds of stores*, arcades tunnelled up from the sea and a promenade, full of people, dodge them, talking about “The Brighton score.”

This. More than a cold hospital room, bent into a gown, fastened at the back: grasps of paper in clammy hands questions mock the positioning of your knees that bend backwards, and the *soft tissue injuries* that brought you here. Hold the leaflets to the wind: new diagnoses that whisper change.
2016 - Three-Hundred Days to Explain

I. The truth about your spine

He says it’s very rare
like it’s a comfort
no one else gets this kind of sick.

Twangs of the north drip medicine
into the prepared speech;
he calls me over to peer at my CT scan

looking into the depths of my brain,
the exchange, the hole
leaking brain fluid in waves

that flush through my nose.
Very loudly, slowly, he explains
how my spine and brain are bathed in it,

I know, I say.

I once watched a junior doctor
fish for it, in the small of my back,
a long needle and a promise for fluid or pain.

But he continues, unwavering from the script,
the complications of stemming it,
luminescence injected into my spine

stars in front of my eyes,
risks: paralysis, sickness, death,
from this fluorescent gathering.

It’s rare, but he’s practiced,
this speech, what he’ll do later,
he’ll do it soon, he says.
II. Intrusion

I’ve woken up unsure why I am without you, in a party of the admitted, huddled under starched sheets. Five blankets, to fight off the night-cold. The IV drugs feel frozen, flooding my heart

with a kick. Ergotamine is in rotation above me, whistling as it passes through the pump. Flushed into saline, it stings in pulses. Central lines force my head to the right, the forty-nine inch TV has been on,

full blast, all day, echoing in the corners of plastic curtains. It is August, my mum has forced up the sash window. I dream of the sun smothering us all one by one.
III. Normality

Clearing out the mouldy food, your housemate asks you, offhandedly, have you been away? Then: but are you better now? and you smile, nodding, I feel fine.

You’ve spent the previous two weeks staring at ceiling tiles, stained by water, then put back the wrong way round.

You’ve let nurses flutter next to you, waited for lines to be disconnected so you can change out of PJs, You’ve eaten jacket potatoes for every meal, stared at the snow you didn’t know was falling, outside. Hidden from Christmas, summer, spring crocuses that erupt in your absence,

while you submit to the assault of that hospitalised home.
2016-2017 Three-Hundred Days Outside the Neurology Hospital

I. Held

Mark each fallen month
by faints in the street,
swoons into unknowns
under orange lights.

On the long walks home
looped arms hold us up
to the sunlight,
wiping hasty rain
	off our glasses, catch
swinging limbs, acute stumbles,
The shifty perches
on the outside of patellas

falter, circling roundabouts
of joints. We reach out
and grasp at empty air
in blackened falls

to damp concrete:
one shade from doomed,
we count the days
of times past:

a stronger arm holding
you up.
II. Cystic breaks

Reach out for coffee with a claw, 
and strangers will climb downstairs with you

squinting from sleep. 
This is a sweet break in the cystic bone,

protected under a plaster cast 
decorated with hopeful doodles.

A slow-motion collapse on the pavement 
the blackened trauma of being unable 

to get up, pull yourself together. 
Your hand is out, reaching for finger holds.

Your wrist won’t bend when you 
need to pull yourself up or hug tightly:

arms perpendicular to bodies. 
You never knew it was strange before.
III. Born Lucky

I almost drowned
until they buried the forceps,
hooked bone, blood and bruise.

A crack off the soft shock of life
touched as fury and drew a bloody lump,
cephalhematoma swelled,
I pinched at strange gulps of air.

_I raised hell._

The small flurry
of apron, blue glove, latex-free,
a prod on the scalp and the periosteum.

The years have gathered other bumps
that would not budge
in the corners of my skull,
soft syllables in my mother’s mind.
IV. Structure

The bruise on my knee has coloured itself brown, purple lines and dots strike across it, the sky at night I carry on my side.

Brief missteps, falling out of the bath, up the stairs at the train station as commuters climb over my back, step on my dress.

This failure to structure collagen correctly rips my bones in and out of socket, no collagen to buffer this crisp fall.

Watching the swelling, I carry my joints upright, to my side, lift them above my heart as I climb down.
Part II.

September 2014 - How to Explain This

I. The Truthful Hour

I disclosed the facts:
tenderly at first.
It was an answer
to all the beginning questions:

deep curiosity
over A-Level grades,
missing years,
walking distances;

gradually, I poured
into the corners of conversations
the night-time whisperings,
when stories could change

in the truthful hours
between two and four am.
I shook out all the molecules
normally hidden in my pockets:

the tablet-stars we held up to the light
looking for flaws.
We put my spare walking stick in the hallway
declared it perfect.
II. Flaws

I have five tiny nicks in a row. He counted them as if they were sticks, in a river, blocking the flow.

We echo each other: pronouncing proprioception together, slowly running tongues.

Later, we conjugate the bruises on my legs, paint the muddy greens and purples.

Circle crumbling scars, these gracious pockmarks that clench cramped feet.

I tell him to move when after half an hour of sitting my hip gradually slips out of the socket.

When I tie my hair up I demonstrate how my scapula clips the joint.

My feet pronate until I slide off the edges, step into his arms.

Beautiful, he says.
III. Sleep-shapes

It took time, but I learnt to sleep curled into his back.

Curtains cracked light to the street offering just enough comfort
to wander corridors by touch without waking him up.

I had never seen him look so murky: pickled shadows melted off him in the near light.

I tried counting sheep: examined every nook in the painted walls that were coming alive in approaching dawn.

He cradled me when we woke up tangled,

let sun reveal how some stories offered hurt like fifty-pence bruises.

He got a cold among the total blackness,

I listened to him like a child convinced he was going to pause forever,

that I would lose the shape carved out on the left side of the bed.

I sniffed the darkness, wished the light would awaken the house.
IV. Guide wire

I look, opposite, at the dining room chairs, stained orange cushions, where we spilt remnants of French toast,

I whisper, *I’m always scared.*

They’ve let junior anaesthetists practice threading the twenty-centimetre guide-wires in my minute veins.

I’ve been awake while blood pulsed in droves, on pillowcases, laminating my hair.

Woken up alone in recovery rooms infused with Fentanyl, in other countries grasping for your hand.

You’ve asked me: *how does it feel,*
waiting for the answer, refusing to accept the *it’s fine* I offer the first few times.
V. The great flood

This is where we find a picnic, sprawled on sofas, candle lit, fitfully sleeping away catastrophe.

Water smells, the rain crawls in drops under my skin we gather in shopping from the car,

ingredients for piled up burgers, wine and ale. The patter of musty water lights up the kitchen,

disaster pours through a single light socket, a crack exposed.

Dripping into black buckets you only use for car-washing. You mop up every single leak, catch pocketfuls of moisture skimming the kitchen ceiling. Cradling tile with our bath towels, damp from the morning showers, You lever off wood and mop under the cabinets, reaching under to scoop out damp vapour, stomping leather shoes into the black puddle seeped into the carpet, blotched, imprinting feet. We lever open every single window.

Dry out the trickles that dissolve into the ceiling, I push against the fissure the watery world has fallen through. Four metres square we have saved.
VI. Accurate

At least once a week
you ask him the difference
between accuracy and precision
so synonymous
you can’t get your head around it.

Accuracy in touching my spine
in just the right place, down to the individual
nerve rattling out of its cocoon.
Precision when I walk into the same chair
repeatedly, the swings
of my limbs catch, inevitably, every time.

The same sentences in front of family
together or the “I love you’s” in the middle
of the night, when we wake up at exactly
4am. The kisses that run you in and out
of the house. The accuracy of ending up
in the same place, at the right time,

the precision of it all, amidst the chaos
or my crazy, unrestrained ideas of fate.
March 2015 - Reluctant

I. Worship

Follow me into shadowy side-rooms: things are unsure but hopeful, the upper hand someone else’s, not ours.

Four-hundred-kilo magnets shine off your face, fixing where atoms will fall. You talk about it with animation,

grab my hips as you point to every small piece of the instrument, each pipe, foil. Explain processes that I imagine: *twirl*, like us on spring evenings. I wish I knew more than the facts on my computer screen. Science, the cerebral spinal fluid that might be leaking out of my spine, the laxity of my joints; clotting processes, how blood falls when they meander lines up my arms.

You explain spectrometry one evening, magic flashes into my mind. You figure out the world’s minute properties, where small explosions mean more than I can comprehend, how light wiggles in mirages, off your face.
II. Churches

Curled into a nativity on Christmas Eve,
no seats left in mass, too ill to stand,
I perched my back against a cold,
stone, outside wall.

Watched the priest pick up
a plastic Christ from the straw
in front, nudging cattle
while he paraded him around.

During graduation, reciting prayers,
so I wouldn’t fall down.

I crept crookedly into the back of the Notre Dame,
only to look up in between the din
into shocking colour streaming
through windows from outside.
III. Side-views

If the helium is cut it will *explode* he reassures.
I count out my MRIs on my fingers,

almost run out of hands.
I know the rules, remove everything metal including projectiles,

bras just in case. I crinkle the paper on top of the moving table with my skin, cold, goosebumped, my pelvis encased.

Ear defenders press into bone jutting out below my ears. Quickening beats start to delete the pop playing underneath. I smooth the bell they’ve handed me for emergencies, until my hands slowly go numb.

Sudden shots shatter into lumbar spine. I open each lid, rammed shut in defence, to see black marks on white plastic.

I wait for a change in tempo, the end, three centimetres away from an encased plastic ceiling.

Walk out holding, grasping his hand find the beauty in the physics of the thing you were pushed inside of.

The current *switches*, hydrogen atoms are excited while the magnets swirl,

away from all that fuss.
June 2015 – Over my shoulder

I. Laguna

They offer Valium in preparation, outside the sterile room, so the edges of life begin to flutter.

A precursor to surgery, they induced fog, asked you if you were ok? Head-on-pillow, you were beginning to float.

Not like the comforts of home, the other hospitals, everything set out in crisp starched English a definitive process, never to see inside the OR.

Here, the lazy syllables tripped off every single tongue no sense to make of them: move over, move over, they drawled, as if you would understand,

shoving you across the bed, in this blue sea, this cloaked, marked, masked, operating room, in the middle of Laguna, where the tide drew patterns,

and you could be convinced you fell over the edge the twisting, dashes, that mark the brink of Pacific Coast Drive.
II. Decorating

You put a hummingbird on my coffee mug: they had floated next to me after each hospital admission that strange Californian year.

I could cup them to me, the soaring beaks. Splitting light as they darted out of the corner of my eye, over waffles and tramadol.

I collect them now in china: a cafetiere full all weekend, mocking your blank, lonely cup, the crack a slice through the handle, *an informed risk*, you said.

On Valentine’s day
we buy ramekins, cups to poach eggs in,
that second chest of drawers.

You let me cheer up the beige walls lacking art.
We find a scatter cushion, it hums in the summer colours of illness, a sound from back then.
III. Hummingbird

Summer came every day and if I took the car to Newport, I could dust hummingbirds from the plants, rumours in blues and purples.

Warnings would cross my mind when I changed across eight lanes to exit on Culver Drive or the night I called 911 and they turned up on a fire truck, and offered me no sanctuary, only: 

*ma’am, you are alive.*
August 2015 - Which Way is Home, Now?

I. Laid before Chirk

You pull me up the hill, peering for green,
our hands prickling red,
stamping feet on this Welsh peak.

We perch on the frosted ground.
I frame your face in the fortifications,
trail you around the courtyard,

hunting the stream.
We hide behind rounded topiary,
the intentions of statues,

creep down mottled stone steps,
then gravelled path, and the oak forest,
the hum of the castle behind us.

We pause from the sleet of it all,
washing our faces with cold,
get caught by our trousers snagged by thorns,

swing over
the boundaries, stone borders,
watching the valleys unseam below.

Inside: we pose in front
of old mountain pictures
that no one paints now.

The outside hung in deep black
where mothed-out rooms
met light.
II. Click

On the first spring day we take the hard roof off your car, with the click of two stiff clips the wind is sweeping my curls. We drive to the Co-op, buy pate and cheese, gluten-free bread, veg crisps.

I watch myself in your extra circular mirror, when you peer in the rearview. Fixed to the motions of driving, changing gear and holding my hand. The remarkable things have become so many we cannot count them on our fingers anymore.

We dwell in the weekends, waltz swiftly around the kitchen ignoring the purpose behind the lyrics in Taylor Swift songs, singing tunelessly along. We put a dining chair in the kitchen for me to collapse on top of. We sit cross-legged, explain our PhDs so we can laugh at xkcd. I nap wrapped up in the duvet, shivering after an afternoon in the Welsh sun.

You count off the to-do list you have scrawled on the back of your brain: admins of a weekend we click, tick, to the Monday alarm.
III. The call of the void

On swept roads, pared into valleys,
the oil on your sports car
speaks to corners, squeaks imprints of sound.
Or the curved branch at the edge
of canyons, hills that laugh
at the idea of “health and safety,”
unfenced freedom, pebbles
fall, clatter, kicked off laced ankle boots:
we fail to hear them connect with land.

*There’s nothing stopping us, you know.*
IV. Highlands

I know other people have dreamt here, without the duck-egg blue walls.
Laid twelve to a ward in fever hospital beds, rubbed fingers into jaundiced eyes, elbowed their bodies up in the morning scraping papery skin against starched sheets.

The kitchen spreads out bin-bound porridge while jam whispers in hope.
Tall sash windows flood the wards the noise of sun. I sleep-walk and find them, patients screaming in the coving; blood leaking into concrete over scrubbed-out pavilion names.

Peering at the pear-curve of road, shaped so patients have the ease of walking: the W9 bus, the gritting trucks, sweep the imperfections, the expectations of a circle that force a catch of the wheel. That is not us, the hospital, the listed ambulance bays, this is home.
V. New Home

We find out the smaller things
as time goes on,
the woodwormed panels where
we hang the pomanders at Christmas,
the random hooks and nails.

Fogged out double glazing
in the back window
so wide we need two pairs
of cheap curtains
for guests.

Silence pierced by a donkey’s laugh,
the footfalls of horses.
A rusted shower curtain rail
that flakes metal into the bath,
confetti that glitters.

At the backdoor I blink
forgetting to duck
looking up out of this
strange mismatch of rooms
where we thrive.
VI. Washed Clean

They only promise us rain
in droves that dismantle the skylight.
Wake me up in the quietest
part of life, threatening ice that will
break through the velux blind.

It climbs into bed with us where heat
lives. My nose has always truly
indicated frost,
the hot haemoglobin never
flurrying to the tip.

There is so much rain
you must lean on the door
with the sharp corner
of your shoulder to open
its swollen seal.

Press into the warmth
away from the river that
erodes the road,
pouring debris and water from
the hill on tarmac.

The rain scares, at midnights,
mornings, it has dripped through,
kissed my back until numb,
heralded ambulances, runs,
handholding in the back of taxis
while it repossesses leather seats
covers my glasses
tumbles in turns, somersaults.
VII. Breakfast

They tell me I’m crazy 
but five a.m. has a kind of charm, 
its nightliness. 
Street lights blend into dark.

The shower, porridge, tea 
sit so noisily, next to us 
while we try to figure out 
what direction to stumble in.

There are offerings:  
warm frothy milk, PJ’s,  
the pursuit of the day,  
the dustbin that stands

in the cold shivering,  
the bed covers pulled straight,  
the yellow spotlights  
turning into dawn

flick off, to sun.
VIII. Syrup Wind

Your fence has blown over: cracked along its wooden seam.
In bed, we watch each single piece of vertical
blind sigh in the breeze. We coil together.

You know me as well as my family.
The gasps at the clicks
of bathroom fans at night.

Strange slices of sun
in the morning, avoided in sleep.
In the middle of the breeze we climb the hill

observe my slight changes to pallid
on the peripheries of pain and tiredness.
Hold my hand in case I fall, standing stable

admire the river’s cut path. A weir smarts
against the water. Slowly rotting wood.
Every twenty metres the next oak bench for two,

stuck in the flanks of a garden.
We fold this into our Sundays:
watching daffodils stand and smile at the wind.
September 2015 - Unsharable Pain

I. Lessons in Darkness

Do you remember that morning?  
I saw this scramble before,

stared at you when they all told me:  
*it’s the worst thing to do.*

Two-hundred and fifty miles south,  
we made pinhole cameras,

invested in those mirrored  
paper-framed glasses

sold at the front of *Woolworths.*  
In the black and white of the day

the moon has folded itself  
on top of you, slithering white.

Imprint yourself on my cornea  
like black snow.
II. Next to

This is different. I move my body to one side
to make room for us both, lie my head on top of your chest,
the blackened, bruised throes. Today’s migraine

murmuring truths to you, passing each quarter of an hour,
marking changes in a pain score. You’ve shut the curtains,
 fetched water and those mysterious atoms

to feed these sneering dreams,
starred and space-like with auras.
I start to say Sorry. I knew this was inevitable:

the lights that charge across my retina, dazzling your face.
III. Cluster

In the middle of your mother’s house, 
neutral walls and country garden 
creaking with soft wood and herbs, it’s here.

They sometimes call them cluster attacks 
like cancer is a fight, battle 
or life is brave.

Flashes of silver, green and red, 
squiggles that appeared in swirls 
when we tempered chocolate,

screech before my view. 
My eyes refuse to smile at the edges. 
I follow silhouettes, snippets of conversation,

nodding in the wrong places, missing points. 
The country peeks into my business, fields and air, 
breeze dripping another tear over my face,

vicious red, sodden with pain.
IV. Gardening

We have mown the lawn with a rusty manual blade, aged ten years old, handles taller than us, slipping it across damp grass we raked the lawn clean into piles while dead ends flew up clinging to our pinafores.

We have played games of hurdles over flower beds with a ridge to catch a school shoe in, stumbled so that concrete and skull collide. Felt the mound on my temple, guessed at a new phrenology, the hour of shakes before two black eyes emerged.

We have watched you demolish brick and soil, anything I could fall over. Watched you remove yourself from your old home, bury a husband. Scared anyone would take a long run, a jump, bury themselves in the ground again.
V. Heal

This new scar, hemming
skin together
with scraggly edges, you kiss.

The red that refuses to fade
marking the surgeon’s
determination to lacerate

matches
the faded mangle where
luggage impaled itself

or the old, silver
surgical marks across my stomach
I never thought were beautiful,

this defect in collagen that
makes it impossible to heal over
each triumphant calamity.
October 2015 - Busy Grieving

I. Two of us

I am an adult now
sitting in the creaking, damp
car seat, next to you.

Wiping rain off wing mirrors
our faces blotched, racing
to be with others.

Twenty four hours ago
we can only imagine green-
clothed ambulance men

feeling a neck for a pulse.
Not sure when we became
old enough to phone coroners,

sit at the back of the registrar’s
office and witness swift confirmation.
I could prepare you

in stories, for the rituals to come,
but I’d never heard conversations
of embalming, pall bearing,

the false hips that don’t turn
to ash. We were children, before
we had to figure this all out.
II. Three-Piece Suite

I have to occupy his chair.

Sisters and brothers all avoid it
while pushing my body
subtly towards it, offering the seat.

I puff the nicotine from crevices,
sit perched at the edge of the old tapestry
seat, green stitched tar and dust.

Hover, not wanting to relax back
where only he sat, permanently
curved to the shape of skin and bones.

Pen marks star the arms
where he wrote the answers to questions
more complicated than yes or no.

I pretend it’s not strange to inhabit
this space. His body curled up
in the coroners.

While we drink tea,
chat.
III. Fourth Day

We take the curtains down last reasoning that it will protect us,

the flat is empty of people not things.

We use a magic eraser on the walls scrubbing off the uneven smudges.

Curdle the milk, use plates and glasses we will give away

to someone who collects the litter of life.

Stray kisses pass between us I ask the never ending question:

*Do you want this?*

Notebooks fall open, fluttering

in the hefty breeze. Conversations are scrawled, listening to his lack of speech,

and in the corner, by the hospital bed his false leg and a pile of stump socks

as a gift.
IV. Wash Five Times

I clean out the black mould
in the fridge, the burnt on
cooker stains that won’t rub out
with a wire wool.

I squat on the dusty floor
until it is clean or I am sure
I will faint.
The flat is small, strange.

There are cupboards
each as big as a single bed
but we can’t sleep here anymore.
We find five half-used bottles,

engine oil. Fill a cupboard full
of fishing gear. Transfer future plans
from the dogeared calendar, nailed to
the wall. It rains, we pile the car high,

drive to the tip to say goodbye,
breathe the emptiness of being together,
while the radio plays that catchy
Jess Glynne song.
Part III.

The Depth of Love

I. Archive

Build a pyramid, surround yourself with lives, 
the caught dust-smothered files collapsed 
into boxes, wound with single fraying 
pieces of string encompassing biography. 
Hard-backed written histories in long hand 
draw sign, symptom, cure, floating water and 
no hopes of beating rheumatoid with round sugar pills. 
Three pages stuck with the weight of sepia photos, 
an autopsy, aneurysm bulging - next to a prescription for milk. 
Now merely catalogue numbers, dashed and divided, 
you can stroke the indentations, red pen 
on blue collections. You continue to 
*step down* on each webpage, further inside, 
until you reach the single, bottom sleeve.
II. Bomb

We queue up: opposite old weighing scales, scuffed washing machines we are sure our grandmothers used to have. The silver-coloured plastic circling chipped, a smile, we imitate just at the edges.

On the corner, next to an old telephone switchboard, moaning with unkempt wires and a traffic light, screwed and secured with black cable ties.

Sawn off, all three lights missing protect-from-glare covers, wires reaching out to light, framed:

the no entry sign, bending at a jaunty angle.

This masterpiece, pulled from the ruins of 1996. Buried together, tagged and catalogued with brown paper. Marked as if they know where these little pieces of life come from.
III. Wheelchair

The shove-along, gaining momentum, unable to stop, or parked next to shopfronts, powerless to meander, browse, you crane your head to talk, sit trapped in the corner, out of everyone else’s way. You bite the ankles of the simple passer-by. to be pulled backwards in hospitals, with notes attached, you are nothing more than a legged and armed body wrapped around footplates and plastic that dips and scrapes crying to be stared at, as you wheel across laminate, out loud. You are *wheelchair-bound* and a *fate worse than death*, a simple look of horror when you stand. You have three options: NHS red, black or grey. You are endlessly frustrating, abandoned facing the wall, and pure independence, from everything, even while crippled, alone.
IV. Night Time Blood Run

Contusions erupt: purple, yellow-edged, blue. Junior doctors clasp arms at 3am, pull tourniquet tight plunge the sprouted needle, spreading constellations, spike marks, struggled, hesitant faltering. They root around in flesh, poke nerve, tendons, pray for the flash back: a drip of deep maroon that signals vein. I’ve used-up anatomy, so they move up sideways, search along the recesses of fingers: for infant vessels. Warm up feet, pile on blankets for the cruel meetings, barbs poise waiting the attack. Dappled, each blistering sunset climbs into the next haematoma until your arms are almost beautiful. This almost promise, novice attempt: digging for blood.
V. Things I Know

The smell I always thought was old-lady perfume.
Lilacs and lily of the valley, the heat of electrics burnt on
Grandma’s well-vacuumed carpets, in a house she had decorated
seven shades darker than when we had lived there before, bright blues.
That deep dank smell of deep-rooted well-made furniture,
velvet green covers pocketed with must.
The scent swirls, pushed up my nose as I lean on the wooden door,
the Celtic knocker we dragged from Waterford, now off centre, just so.
I realise, not suddenly, but with the gradual twist of the aroma up round my chest,
tightening, that this is the curled up chase of chain smoking,
nicotine that flattens itself against the folds in the curtains
streaks the kitchen walls.
I nod: look how the sun has stained my house yellow,
she says.
The Construction of Disability in British Female Poetry in the 1990s-2010s: How Susan Wicks and Jo Shapcott Typify the New Generation’s Attention to Body and Difference
Chapter 1: Introduction: Identifying Poetry: Reading Jo Shapcott and Susan Wicks in the Context of Disability Studies

Jo Shapcott and Susan Wicks exemplify a different way to write about disability in poetry. This thesis will trace how both of these poets incorporate multiple identities, and how these identities are complicated by the critical and academic discussions regarding the body at the time they were writing in the 1990s-2010s. These critical and academic contexts include Disability or Crip Poetics, and feminism. Wicks and Shapcott produce collections that utilise the power of the female disabled body without being defined by it. I will also show they are part of a larger group of poets called the New Generation who use a focus on the body as a way to develop poetry that discounts certain tropes and stereotypes.

Other poets such as Carol Ann Duffy, Kathleen Jamie, and Lavinia Greenlaw, who are part of the New Generation, and Gwyneth Lewis and Jackie Kay who were also writing in the 1990s-2010s all talk about the body with a similar specificity that disrupts singular senses of identity.¹ Lewis, for example, uses her experience as a carer to write about medicine in ways that pursue a closeness to the bodies contained within her collection *A Hospital Odyssey.*² This assimilation of multiple, complex identities is the foundation of how we can consider Wicks and Shapcott’s work as distinct to other disabled poets of the period.

This dissertation focuses on Wicks and Shapcott’s collections, *Open Diagnosis* and *Of Mutability*, which are reflective of the political and cultural situation of the time in which they were writing. Disability Studies as a discipline gained popularity in the 1990s, at a time when Wicks and Shapcott were becoming prominent as writers. Academics began to acknowledge the complexities that surround the study and criticism of disability, including “a trend towards rethinking disability” through unique approaches to the subject, by critics from feminism and queer studies, as well of those with social science backgrounds.3 The creation in the 1990s of places such as The Centre for Disability Studies at The University of Leeds had also led to an increase in the academic output in Disability Studies, and generated discussion between different academics, allowing debate about the merits of different academic ways of approaching disability.4

Throughout this thesis, and in line with Wicks and Shapcott’s more open treatment of the body, I will use the terms “disability” and “illness” interchangeably when referring to the ways Wicks and Shapcott consider their bodies. By using these terms interchangeably a wealth of experience that falls under the different understandings of these two words can be included. I acknowledge that this is broad and incorporates a variety of experiences that may not immediately be considered as part of the identity of “disabled.” However, I wanted to highlight how bodies marked by illness or disability, and identified as different still have valid

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4 “an international leader in the field of Disability Studies, drawing increasing interest and exchange from around the world.” The University of Leeds, ‘What Is the Centre for Disability Studies?’, in *Centre For Disability Studies*, (Leeds: The University of Leeds, 2016).
experiences. Although this is difficult to align with Disability Studies, where “disabled” or “impaired” would be more acceptable; I wish to incorporate the experiences of those who do not identify directly as “disabled,” but still experience the social and cultural impact of having a different body.

“Disability” is also a word with a variety of legal, social and cultural meanings, and has a canon of criticism that surrounds defining yourself as disabled, or otherwise. By using a wider definition of disability I hoped to avoid the political disagreements over its use as a marker of identity. The exacting language of Disability Studies can often seem absolute; arguing either you are disabled or are not. This thesis incorporates multiple identities as disabled, chronically and acutely ill, that all have in common a similar cultural understanding as marking someone’s body as “different” in ways that are subtle and distinct. These multiple identities can incorporate a variety of experiences on a spectrum instead of the binary idea of being either abled-bodied or disabled.

1.2 “Moving On” from Identifying Dysfunction

The influence of the Poetry Society’s “New Generation” poets, a collection of significant contemporary poets curated every ten years from 1994 onwards, highlights the distinct, new direction of poetry in the late twentieth century. Jo Shapcott is an integral part of the movement that incorporates the New Generation and other poets writing in the 1990s onwards. Simon Armitage describes the situation of the New Generation as, “Poetry was sexy, and suddenly there we were,
the 20 newest, poppiest, wittiest, most saleable and sexiest of them all.”⁵ Although overlooked for the Poetry Society’s promotion, Shapcott is widely considered an associated poet to the New Generation due to the context and themes of her poetry, which mirror other New Generation poets’ work as well as the tone of the writing, which is reflected in the attention to scientific and medical language in ways that was not considered previously.⁶ As Diann Blackley argues “limited space means there are many intriguing women writers among the New Gen—Jackie Kay and the Vogue-ites Kathleen Jamie and Jo Shapcott, to name only three.”⁷ As Blackley notes, Shapcott is considered without question part of this “refashioning” of the landscape of poetry, a reflection of the changing shape of society in the late twentieth century onwards.

*Of Mutability* is Shapcott’s fourth collection, and incorporates her experience of being diagnosed and treated for breast cancer. Shapcott’s previous collections also considered the body and its relationship with boundaries and identities, for example in her first collection *Electroplating the Baby* we see a similar focus on the body as in *Of Mutability*:

Strange to see these youngish hands,
with no puffiness or obvious veins,
repeat the banal and tiny motions
over days over weeks over months.
I ask too much and am too hasty;
this knitting is an exercise in trust.⁸

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⁶ Such as Gwyneth Lewis, Elizabeth Garrett, Lavina Greenlaw, Carol Ann Duffy and Jackie Kay.
As we can see here in the intervening years, the style of Shapcott’s poetry changes, and incorporates her own experience more clearly. This leads her to the creation of *Of Mutability*, which although not straight-forwardly autobiographical, is a meditation on her own body, experience, and illness.

The women of the New Generation reflect the sense that identity politics is unsettled in the 1990s, where cultural studies trouble the questions of how we identify as female or disabled.\(^9\) This thesis will consider how disruptions of identity are considered in poetry by Wicks and Shapcott, and how an understanding of how disability identity works is important in considering how poets like Wicks and Shapcott resist the pull to fully identify as disabled. Judith Butler’s work is apposite to my discussion of this work on identity, as when she argues, “If gender is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate various bodily beings, how might agency be derived from this notion of gender as the effect of productive constraint?”\(^10\) Butler is here pointing out what influence and power “normality” has on bodies. This need to achieve normality has a constricting influence on how we reveal our bodies and is crucial to the understanding of identity, where gender is another way of categorising bodies in relation to others.

Butler’s approach to gender has been expanded on by other critics to consider disabled bodies which, like female bodies, are considered non-normative.

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\(^9\) For example the groundbreaking work of cultural and feminist critics such as: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

and lacking power and agency.\textsuperscript{11} Agency is also a marker of normality, as Michael Davidson suggests “the healthy, preferably young body becomes a marker of political agency,”\textsuperscript{12} and the consequential mark of difference, which inevitably relates the body to politics, is what Shapcott and the other New Generation poets are resisting. The intertwining of gender, disability and difference is part of what this thesis will argue is essential to understanding how Wicks and Shapcott respond to the cultural, academic and social context of their poetry, which is inevitably occupied with identity politics.

How these disabled bodies, marked by difference, interact in the world is an important to consider as it allows us to dissect how this poetry is influenced by the critical and sociological views of disability.\textsuperscript{13} Davidson’s arguments regarding the status of Disability Poetics are essential to understanding the complexities of how poetry regards disability, he argues:

There are several levels through which a poetics of disability can be studied: metaphoric (tropes of blindness, lameness, illness); structural (formal variations produced by physical or sensory conditions); and sociological (poetry as resistance and community formation). Perhaps the closest link between poetry and disability lies in a conundrum within the genre itself: poetry makes language visible by making language strange.\textsuperscript{14}

These assertions are important to how we consider Wicks and Shapcott’s collections, which both touch on how the language of illness and disability

\textsuperscript{11} Notably the work of Margrit Shildrick, \textit{Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics}, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997).
\textsuperscript{13} For more information about the social model and the opposition towards it, see: Jenny Morris, \textit{Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability}, (London: Women’s Press, 1996).
negotiates the “strangeness” of different bodies. Consequently, although the New Generation writes poetry as if free of the perceived constraints of identifying as disabled, at least within the limits that Disability Studies allows for, they still interact with these ideas surrounding how to write poetry about disability.

Davidson’s comments are also essential to understand how Disability Poetics produces poetry that is shaped by disability. The language, form and imagery of poetry within Disability Poetics is part of its representation of disability, not just the subject matter. Jim Ferris for example, is a Disability Poetics poet who writes poetry that negotiates the political, physical and cultural impact of disability and reflects it in the form of his poems. In “Poems with Disabilities” he writes:

I’m sorry – this space is reserved for poems with disabilities. I know it’s one of the best spaces in the book, but the Poems with Disabilities Act requires us all to make reasonable accommodations for poems that aren’t normal.

In this poem Ferris plays with the political impact of disability, tying poetry and disability together through a refashioning of the People with Disabilities Act. Not only is this a tongue in cheek way to expose how disability appears to others, but the poem goes on to incorporate disability as part of the structuring of the poem when he states:

you’re reading along and suddenly everything changes, the world tilts a little, angle of vision jumps, your entrails aren’t
where you left them.\textsuperscript{15}

In these final parts of the poem the interaction between describing disability and how Ferris uses line breaks and form to provide humour and shock value to the reader is interesting. Ferris negotiates disability in distinct ways to poets like Wicks and Shapcott, who do no associate themselves with the imagery and politics so closely. Instead Wicks and Shapcott incorporate their experiences, while dismissing the identity of disabled.

Yet, the identity of “disabled” is part of what this thesis will trace, and as many critics within Cultural Disability Studies argue, the identity of “disabled” is constructed as a reflection of how society considers disability – often in negative terms.\textsuperscript{16} The risk to anyone who embraces a disabled identity is the attached stigma. As Shakespeare states: “opposition to labelling arises from an awareness of the stigma that can be a consequence of a particular label or diagnosis.”\textsuperscript{17} For poets like Ferris this “stigma” is an essential part of how they configure disability within their collections. For the contemporary British poets such as Wicks and Shapcott however, they contest this identity in many ways that they find liberating and allow the focus of their poetry to be language of disability, rather than the political status of the body and disability.

As Sarah Broom argues, the contemporary poetry of the 1990s onwards moves past these simplistic ideas of “identity.”

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. p. 95.
It is true that ‘identity politics’ can be restrictive and reductive, if one understands by this term the kind of discourses that claim absolute solidarity and uniformity around any given term of identification, whether it be ‘black,’ ‘woman,’ ‘gay’ or whatever. But this kind of identity politics has very much had its day, and political and activist discourses as well as academic discourses are these days much more likely to emphasise the multiplicity of subject positions which an individual simultaneously inhabits; the contradictory and plural identities which individuals acknowledge as their own.¹⁸

For Broom then, poetry has moved on from strict interpretations of “identity” and on to more diverse constructions of the self. This lingering need to identify as something “normal” versus the “new” way of throwing off identity and presenting bodies as part of a “multiplicity of subject positions” is what Wicks and Shapcott are pursuing. This stance is reflected in Shapcott’s work as well as that of the New Generation, where the emphasis is on the multiplicity of experiences, which is presented by the different speakers and perspectives that are incorporated in this poetry. Part of this change is what Thomas Couser points to:

One of the reasons it is no longer possible – or at least permissible – to objectify others is that those “others” have begun to challenge the cultural, political, and ethical authority of that objectification.¹⁹

This is what the change in poetry in the 1990s onwards hangs on, the movement of those with different bodies from objectified to active participants in their own representation.

1.3 Disability Studies and the Impact of Gender and Feminism

Before the 1990s, Disability Studies was largely united in pursuing the creation of laws allowing equal rights and opportunities. Throughout the 1970s there were legislative changes that ensured some rights for disabled people, and there were also concrete changes in the organisation of disability groups including the formation of The Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation, and The British People’s Council of Disabled Organisations. This led to the first official discussions about terminology, as well as explorations of the social model of disability and how it might further the place of disabled people in society.

The culmination of this work led to The Disability Discrimination Act (1995), which meant that some equality had been achieved, and popularised the social model of disability, which tackled the discrimination of disabled people by attacking the “social structures” that this discrimination stemmed from. Consequently, Disability Studies moved from this singular objective associated with law making, diversifying its output to include focusing on the problems with the social model, feminism and The Cultural Model of Disability. This movement considers disability as dependent on discourse and culture and furthered the view that “new” representations of disabled people were required. Colin Barnes had marked the

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difficulty of representing disability in culture as early as 1992, but Cultural Disability Studies began to actively encourage and produce new presentations of disability, through ideas such as Disability/Crip Poetics in the 2000s onwards. Although there is a connection between the disability legislation in the 1990s and the emergence of the Cultural Model of Disability, one did not cause the other. Instead the gradual changes in how disability began to be perceived by the public is part of how academics in Disability Studies were able to diversify their work to include how disabled people live with, and consequently write about, disability in this period.

During the 1990s-2010s, there was the continued emergence of Cultural Disability Studies, which concentrates on how culture can mediate representations of disability. Cultural Disability Studies is illuminating in how it identifies the past stereotypes and tropes of disability. It incorporates the social model of disability, that understands that disability is socially constructed and dependent on the identity politics of Disability Studies. The social model argues that society can provide equality when it understands that the barriers to disabled people are created by the social constructions of able-bodied ways to live in the world. The cultural model goes further than this and requires the cultural representation of disability to change to reflect the varied lives of disabled people. Both these forms of Disability Studies have had criticism levelled at them as they can be considered

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25 Including collections of poetry such as: Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus, *Cripple Poetics*, (Michigan: Homofactus Press, 2008); Bartlett, Black, and Northen.
26 Mitchell and Snyder, p. 3.
exclusionary to those who do not identify fully as disabled, or who have other identities that further marginalise them, such as women, ethnic minorities or lesbian, gay and transgender groups. As Liz Crow argues,

The social model works well on a large scale - it is succeeding in tackling discriminatory social structures and demonstrating our need for civil rights legislation. Where it currently lets us down is at the personal level – its capacity to include and represent fully the range of disabled individuals.27 Crow identifies here the difficulties with how Disability Studies was using the social model at the time, which although important to the legislative changes in society could not include all people who demonstrated difference.

The incorporated ideas of Disability Poetics also emerged from Cultural Disability Studies. Disability Poetics describes a particular approach to poetry by disabled people. It incorporates more than just a labelling of poetry written by disabled people, as Jim Ferris argues:

A definition I have given for disability poetry is "poetry that seeks to explore and validate the lived experience of moving through the world with a disability. Sometimes referred to as crip poetry, disability poetry embodies a disability consciousness; it is informed by and contributes to disability culture." That is a serviceable definition. But here's what I left out: the possibility, the edgy potential, the openness and even likelihood of transformation.28

As Ferris notes, Disability Poetry is not only marked by the subject matter, but also the attention to form and embodiment. The proliferation of poetry of this movement, by diverse writers such as Jim Ferris, Petra Kuppers, Larry Eigner, and

27 Crow, in Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability p. 56.
others included in the anthology *Beauty as a Verb*,
illustrate the type of poetry included within the critical field of Disability Poetics.

Additionally, as Michael Davidson notes, this poetry is often essentially political, he suggests that “’crip’ poets [see] poetry [as] an arm (or leg) of the disability rights movement.” This political urgency contained within Disability/Crip Poetics is something that I will argue that UK poets of the New Generation largely avoid. The American approach to Disability Studies includes poetry in a way that was not yet common in the 1990s-2010s in the UK, and their way of talking about disability within poetry is also distinct to how the British poets of the period such as Wicks and Shapcott describe their experiences. As Mark Burnhope expands:

> From my vantage point in the UK, if there is a ‘disability poetics’ movement, it is a light tremor. Nothing has gathered here with the same momentum as in the USA, where poetry is interlocked with our civil rights movement.

This distinction between the American and British approaches to poetry within Disability Rights is important, although both Disability Rights movements were happening at similar times, their particular *flavour* of Disability Rights was distinct, especially in regards to the approaches to disability through the arts. For the American Disability Poetics movement, the “community of cripples” was also an essential idea to identifying those who were part of Disability Poetics. As Petra Kuppers goes on to argue, “to claim disability as an identity, rather than a shape for

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29 Bartlett, Black, and Northen.
32 Kuppers.
an individual body, means struggle, submission, elation, comradeship and a location.” Wicks and Shapcott resist this identity as their poems do not resonate with these ideas of community and other forms of defining identity. Equally, the British version of Disability Poetics has only just recently begun to become more community based, with published anthologies such as *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled People Write Back* in 2017 increasing its visibility outside of disability culture itself.

The influence of Medical Humanities during this period was also important. Occupying the academic space between Disability Studies and Medicine, Medical Humanities has a greater focus on the patient and doctor relationships in medicine, as well as explaining how illness is represented in the humanities. Critics such as Arthur W. Frank represent “the ill” in ways that are distinctive to Disability Studies, by suggesting, “seriously ill people are wounded not just in body but in voice. They need to become storytellers in order to recover the voices that illness and its treatment often take away.” This view echoes the medical model approach to disability and illness that focuses on the tragedy of disability, the promise of a cure, and coming to terms with a loss.

Medical Humanities is useful as it helps us to understand one of the many ways to write about disability that was popular from the 1990s onward. That said, it does not include Wicks and Shapcott’s approach to

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33 Ibid.
writing about disability, that rejects this tragic view of disability despite also not identifying directly with Disability Poetics.

In the 1990s-2010s, Britain was impacted by the collective influence of feminism and Disability Studies. As Claire Snyder argues, third-wave feminism importantly “foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism,” and this critical position made it simpler to integrate the additional influence of other minority views such as Disability Studies by incorporating the intersectionality inherent within cultural studies. As Mitchell and Snyder argue “the definition of disability must incorporate both the outer and inner reaches of culture and experience as a combination of profoundly social and biological forces” and this assertion allows us to consider how disability fits in with other intersectional identities that are reliant on these “forces.”

This thesis will consider how these interactions and rejections of social and biological identities influence how Wicks and Shapcott speak about their bodies, which are by definition marginalised. It will explore how reframing and reconsidering their work as a reflection of multiple, complex ideas of identities, strengthens their position as poets writing from minority situations. Wicks and Shapcott, alongside other poets from this period, portray disability as a continuum and part of their rendering of their intersectional identities. The presentation of disability in culture was beginning to change in this period; Wicks and Shapcott’s collections are reflective of this process.

For poets like Wicks and Shapcott, the context of these political and cultural changes is important. Although neither Wicks nor Shapcott directly reference these ideas in their collections, they are part of a trend of disabled women who began to speak out about difference and disability. As Morris notes “gender and disability are both social constraints predicated upon physical characteristics,” and integrating the identities of “female” and “disabled” is important in how society treats and deals with women.\textsuperscript{39} The impact of intersectionality including third-wave feminism and Disability Studies meant a change in how we understand, define, and present difference. Poets such as Wicks and Shapcott incorporate just some of the spectrum of the positions surrounding Disability Rights, feminism and difference. Although this thesis will show other, stricter demarcations of identity in this period, the idea of a “spectrum” allows Wicks and Shapcott to incorporate these ideas, without identifying with them.

Cultural Disability Studies does not incorporate all perspectives on disability, however, this thesis will use the foundation of the approach, referencing the cultural influences that are found within it, including Judith Butler. For example, as Ian Hacking notes “classifications do not exist only in the empty space of language but in institutions, practises, material interactions with things and other people” and this summation of the boundaries of different classifications is essential to how we consider Wicks and Shapcott.\textsuperscript{40} Although these classifications appeared fixed to some, they can be made fluid, incorporating the intersectionality of having a

number of different identities. Lennard J. Davis marks the difficulty of negotiating the identity of “disabled” within Disability Studies.

Because the category of disability is porous, its contingent nature is all the more challenging to identities that seem fixed. In some sense, disability is more like class, which is more constructed but is not biologically determined. We might say that disability is a postmodern identity because, although one can somatise disability it is impossible to essentialize it the way one can the categories of gender or ethnicity. That is, although disability is ‘of’ the body, it is much more ‘of’ the environment which can create barriers to access and communication.41

Davis’ comments here are part of why it is complex for Wicks and Shapcott to define themselves as disabled. As Davis notes this identity is “porous” and one that people move in an out of throughout their lives. Part of the work of Disability Studies is observing these differences, and marking disability’s commonalities with queer studies and other minority studies where identity is less fixed.

The poems of Wicks and Shapcott demonstrate the cultural situation of women’s bodies in the 1990s onwards, and the act of reclamation that many female writers were engaging with. Wicks and Shapcott also demonstrate the move in poetry to focus on the detailed physicality of this body. These poets move to define female bodies away from traditional ways of classifying the body and femininity that was common before the 1990s. Criticism around the body may be affiliated with critics such as Judith Butler whose consideration of the body informs Disability Studies.42 In Giving an Account of Oneself Butler also talks about the importance of narratives and states “my account of myself is partial, haunted by

that for which I can devise no definite story.”43 Butler’s work here informs how we read the poetry of the New Generation where poets like Wicks and Shapcott offer incomplete narratives about illness or disability. These narratives are half complete because the experience is not straightforward.44

Questions about how to talk and write about disability continue. The fields of Disability Rights, Cultural Disability Studies and Medical Humanities continually reassess how to write about the disabled body, and critics have assessed this type of writing as essential and political. Fiona Kumari Campbell notes that “Instead of wasting time on the violence of normalisation, theoretical and cultural producers could more meaningfully concentrate on developing a semiotics of exchange, an ontological decoder to recover and apprehend the lifeworlds of humans living peripherally.”45 Campbell argues that Cultural Disability Studies has the ability to change how we understand disability by viewing the disabled body as part of a continuum instead of an individual “personal tragedy.” While generally acknowledging disability in society, Shapcott and Wicks resist any obligation to classify and reconsider their poems solely in light of disability and feminism; however, we cannot disregard the cultural influence of these particular movements.

All poets are impacted by the political and cultural movements of their generation, and although Wicks and Shapcott understand the powerful influence of these movements, they refuse to be defined by it. They are not political poets who foreground their work in Disability Studies. Like other poets at the time, they

43 Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself, p. 40.
44 Ibid.
display an attention to the body, and to the cultural impact of Disability Studies and feminism, but this is not what their collections are about. They both interact with ideas from the cultural model and produce a view of the body that is in some ways different to the “objective discourse on disability” that came before. Yet, unlike other poets such as Petra Kuppers, they are not defined by a political stance; instead, they offer close attention to the body contextualised by these movements. This echoes the way that other poets such as Greenlaw, Kay and Lewis treated the body in this period, understanding its political status, but also ignoring the “need” for it to be shown in a certain way.

1.4 Normal and Abnormal Bodies: How Wicks and Shapcott Explore Difference

Describing the body as “disabled” has a particular, specific legal meaning, as “a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities,” and this definition can be seen as one of the main ways to classify (or identify) disabled bodies. This way of describing disabled bodies presents disability in the negative so that as Tanya Titchkosky argues disability is often presented as: “the negation of able-bodiedness.” Wicks and Shapcott’s interpretation of disability in their poetry is different, encompassing more than this understanding, and presenting both the negative and positive perspectives.

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46 Mitchell and Snyder, Cultural Locations of Disability, p. 5.
The critical ways of examining disabled bodies often consider only the binary differences between what society considers an able or disabled body. This approach sees the subject from the “perspective of the other,” marking what the disabled body is lacking. Wicks and Shapcott, by contrast, describe the disabled body in multiple ways and do not only illustrate what it is missing. For example, in Wicks’: “your brain uncurling, tentative” or Shapcott’s poem:

So this is me. In the field after we got lost.
My eyes turned up to the right
and my mouth is a little open.50

Both these poems produce sets of imagery that show the body beautifully active and incorporate these powerful differences in the bodies as part of the normal environment. Their ability to contain more than simplistic imagery of disability allows them to expose how disability impacts other parts of their life, not just the vacuum of difference or abnormality.

Shapcott’s diagnosis of cancer is a crucial detail for her collection. It reveals an illness that can be cured, but the curative promise of this treatment can also lead to long-term disability. As Susan Sontag points out, cancer is a place where the metaphors of illness are prevalent; cancer is a “scandalous subject for poetry,” and often described as a “crusade” or a “fight.”51 Shapcott explores these (often oppositional), themes of illness and curative medicine throughout her collection. As this thesis will show, Shapcott’s use of medical language would be considered

49 Campbell, p. 4.
controversial in Disability Studies; however, it helps present another perspective on the body and dysfunction that emphasises the tension between medical and curative ideas of dysfunction and disability.

1.5 The New Generation and their “New” Bodies

Some of the most well-known female British poets of the New Generation, or those marked as part of a similar group of women writing in the 1990s onwards, regularly concentrate on science and medicine. Rees-Jones notes: “[Shapcott] attempts to “take on,” in every sense of the word, the discourse of science as a way of distancing [herself] from areas traditionally deemed feminine.” The work of the poets of the New Generation is concerned by how the bodies of the people in their poems are viewed by the public, and consequently how poets respond to this attention. This poetry also incorporates a syntax that includes medical and scientific words. *Of Mutability* incorporates this “scientific discourse” as a way to show authority in the collection, and as a way to create new and interesting imagery.

Gwyneth Lewis, although not strictly part of the New Generation, was writing poetry at a similar time with similar themes, much of which has an intense focus on illness and mental health. In her lecture “Quantum Poetics” she explores in great detail the connections between science and poetry.

Poetry is a form of science. The poet uses herself as an experiment; she’s both the observing mind and the sizzling substance in the test tube. This

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52 As Shakespeare notes: “medical approaches consider negative self-identity as an outcome of physical impairment, and focus on the need for adjustment, mourning and coming to terms with loss.” Shakespeare, ‘Disability, Identity and Difference’, in *Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability* p. 99.

double existence – as subject and object – is what makes poetry ontologically significant.\textsuperscript{54}

For poets such as Lewis and those of the New Generation, the interaction between science and poetry is a place for discussion and growth. Lewis is here pointing out the experimentation in poetry of the 1990s, and how this poetry was attempting to look at science in more diverse ways than had featured in poetry before. Perhaps Lewis’s most influential collection is called \textit{A Hospital Odyssey} (2010), written at a similar time to Shapcott’s \textit{Of Mutability}, Lewis uses a long poem divided into books to explore the experience of being a caregiver to someone in hospital. From the beginning of the collection:

before they ripened like fruit and fell.
Maris noticed box-lit X-rays
under a sign: \textit{Diagnosis Wall}.
Doctors peered at MRI
scans, each one looking intently
at portraits of internal cavities.
They issued their verdicts. Maris heard them whispering the simple litany:
‘Normal, not normal.’ Then, unperturbed,
they’d stamp a Latin medical word.\textsuperscript{55}

This section of Lewis’ poem reflects the larger narrative in the New Generation of presenting illness as a part of life. In many ways for poets of the 1990s – 2010s illness becomes less of an unusual experience, but instead is incorporated as part of their lives, as well as in their poetry.

In \textit{A Hospital Odyssey} scientific language and images are intertwined with the normal interactions between the characters in the poem. Additionally, such

\textsuperscript{55} Lewis, \textit{A Hospital Odyssey}, p. 10.
imagery is used for comic and ironic effect. For example a bit later in the poem we find:

[…] Dressed in brocade
with sequins, he bowed. ‘Put your hands together, ladies and gents, for our guests of honour.

First the bacteria: *Streptococci!*’
(I’ll translate as we go. Dental decay, sore throats.) ‘*Mycobacteria!*’
(Tuberculosis and leprosy.) ‘Pray stand for *Shingella!*’ (Dysentery.)

Here Lewis is using medical terms with ironic ease. By personifying these diseases, Lewis provides a comic look at bacteria that has a serious impact on someone’s life. Within the longer poem this also provides a break from the seriousness of the situation the people in the hospital find themselves in. Like Shapcott, this use of different idiom is integral to the changes in how illness is represented from the 1990s onwards. Here we see all the corners of the hospital and the impact that it has on other characters, but equally the ease and rhythm of the poem, points to the fact that this is part of life and not a drastically abnormal situation. This use of a multiplicity of perspectives and identities around illness is powerful and illustrative of the larger cultural interpretation of illness.

For Lewis, Shapcott, and the rest of the New Generation poets, science and medicine also serve as a place to mine metaphor from. Lavinia Greenlaw’s poem “Science for Poets” reflects a similar feeling to Lewis. Greenlaw is part of the New

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56 Ibid. p. 51.
Generation, and her collection *Night Photograph* is often cited as being occupied with science.\(^{57}\)

We drive to your laboratory
on a Sunday morning. Those incubated cells
are about to divide, and you must feed them.\(^ {58}\)

This poem focuses on the interaction between science and poetry. It is a love poem, infiltrated by the laboratory and scientific influence of the character within it. She talks about the scientist of the poem with affection.

Now, I watch you
measuring deep into decimal places to record
each molecular shift, in search of an answer.\(^ {59}\)

Like other poetry from the New Generation, the use of characterisation helps to present the impact of science on the speaker. The language in this poem is also important, and illustrates how poets in this period begin to use scientific language “normally” without the need to explain or highlight its use.

Furthermore, in the middle section of the poem we can observe this scientific language mixed with affirmations about science without explicit explanation.

I want Bunsen burners;
the surprise weight of a bottle of mercury,
its threat of death by cracked thermometer.

I want a scalpel, a bull’s eye,
its slit cornea and slippery lens, the grubby innards
of an earthworm pinned out on a board.\(^ {60}\)

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\(^{58}\) Greenlaw, p. 48.
\(^{59}\) Ibid. p. 49.
\(^{60}\) Ibid. p. 48.
We see “its slit cornea and slippery lens” a phrase that is violent and scientific. The metaphorical power and sound of these terms also provides a lot of impact, we have alliteration in the sibilance of the phrase, as well as the cadence of medical and scientific terms.

Throughout Greenlaw’s work there is a great attention to how words and sounds create an unusual background to the narrative of the poem. The “lab” here, allows Greenlaw to explore the potential of words like “acetone” “molecular” “innards” and “Bunsen,” and through these words produces a larger metaphor about the “eyes” and “sight” of the speaker and other in the poem, that allow them to see differently. By using half rhymes, the rhythm of the poem emphasizes the scientist’s ability to “miss” things.

or an answer that fits,
or else in hope of some wild enlightenment
that without your eye for detail, I’d surely miss.61

Here, we notice the half rhyme between “fits” and “miss” in the closing line, where the sounds of the poem attract the reader’s attention and emphasize the feeling of absence in “miss.” Greenlaw is pining after the precision and “eye for detail” of the scientist in the poem by commenting on how she seems to “miss” these details herself. Greenlaw is revealing as she uses similar characterization and language to the rest of the New Generation when dealing with science. This language provides distinct metaphor, as well as a place from where the poet and the reader can

61 Ibid. p. 49.
launch other imagery, playing with the idea of the authoritative and exacting
language of science, but not defined by it.

The New Generation helped to define a generation of poets who focused on
these smaller details of experience. As a framework they provide context on how
poetry was responding to the cultural and social changes in the 1990s, such as
feminism, multiculturalism and political changes such as New Labour. By being
identified as part of a collection of poets like the New Generation, Wicks and
Shapcott are associated with poetry that was concerned with the other influences
that this thesis will consider such as Judith Butler’s work and the influence of
Disability Studies.

1.6 Opening a door to disability

Wicks’ collection *Open Diagnosis* (1994) engages with competing views about the
body and politics. *Open Diagnosis* was Wicks’ second collection of poems, after
*Singing Underwater*, which also included a focus on the body and motherhood.62
*Open Diagnosis* is distinct in its focus on illness, framed by the cover photo of a
brain scan. It describes Wicks’ experience of Multiple Sclerosis, a chronic, often
relapse/remitting condition of the nervous system. Writing in the early 1990s,
Wicks’ collection reflects the changing status for disabled people at the time. Wicks
describes illness and disability in her collections, utilising the language and form to
illustrate the sense of alienation from your body that illness brings.

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Open Diagnosis also uses other people to acknowledge the estrangement she feels, for example Wicks’ references to her family: “now his only daughter / has M.S. [sic]” or “we sat in each other’s arms,” allowing the reader to identify a sense of “otherness.”\(^{63}\) Wicks populates her book with the people around her, as well as using their bodies to challenge the contradiction between presenting health and sickness simultaneously. Instead, Wicks considers the disabled body as one aspect of daily life. Wicks exemplifies the attention to the body that was beginning in society and culture in 1990s, without incorporating the more dogmatic critical perspectives of Disability Poetics.

Wicks’ diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis (MS) means she is legally disabled. Culturally and socially this definition is more complex due to the fact Wicks can “pass” as able-bodied.\(^{64}\) The reader also does not know the type and severity of her MS, and her collection reflects these facts, that blur the lines between healthy and ill, and look towards an uncertain future, where she is “measuring the white hiatus.”\(^{65}\) Her collection presents the feeling that her life is uncertain. This focus on the fragility of health is illuminating, and demonstrates the thin line between healthy and unhealthy bodies. Sontag notes:

> Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.\(^{66}\)

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\(^{63}\) Wicks, Open Diagnosis, pp. 28, 31.

\(^{64}\) See further discussion on this subject in: Jeffrey A Brune and Daniel J Wilson, Disability and Passing, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

\(^{65}\) Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 20.

\(^{66}\) Sontag, p. 3.
This idea of a division between health and sickness is part of what Wicks acknowledges, although largely then ignores, instead choosing to present the blurry middle ground between the two “identities.” Wicks presents the disabled body as having its own individual agency, the opposite to how much contemporary literature presents it, where Couser argues, “narratives of breast cancer generally have a public mission, an agenda that is in some sense political.” Wicks’ collection explores the idea of chronic and life-long disability, and how her speaker can acknowledge and ignore this idea, reflecting her idea of disability in relationships with the other people in her collection. Her complex rendering of disability acknowledges difference, but is not solely occupied by the social implications of this identity.

1.7 The Public Body in Shapcott’s Collection

Shapcott’s collection Of Mutability (2010) marks how poets were considering the different ways to write about the body in 2010s. The impact of Medical Humanities begins to increase the use of language that surrounds the medical model of disability, and attempts to demonstrate the personal impact illness has. Shapcott presents the changing situation of the disabled body with cancer in this period, and she cannot escape the cultural understanding of cancer as a diagnosis of a battle to the death. Shapcott is in conversation with memoirs about cancer, and the idea that “pathography is a genre that awaits its masterpieces,” and yet Shapcott finds

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69 Qtd in: Couser, Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing, p. 292.
a way to present the ultimate dichotomy: a personal and impersonal experience of
cancer that rejects the “doom and gloom” regularly presented by other writers.
Shapcott’s collection blurs the boundaries between different concepts of sickness.

Shapcott is illustrating many different perspectives on disability, yet she
does not focus on the “correct” ways to render disabled bodies. Shapcott points out
dysfunction, down to each single cell: “itching, feeling jagged, turning raw” without
relying on these types of images to communicate everything about cancer, instead
images like “Look down these days to see your feet” are shocking in their throw-
away nature of what it is like to live with the illness.\textsuperscript{70} Shapcott uses a variety of
perspectives to illustrate her experience of cancer without ever naming it. This un
named force feels impersonal and disregards what the name “cancer” has come to
mean in modern society (something pitiable, and crucially, a battle, fought to the
death).\textsuperscript{71} Conscious of the developing vocabulary around illness, Shapcott finds a
new way to register her experience of it.

1.8 Naming Disability: How Wicks and Shapcott Categorise Disability

The naming of disability is intensely important for many poets who are writing
about their bodies during this period, the act of declaring or refusing to declare a
characteristic that can be tied to identity, such as disability, is a powerful thing. This
reclaiming of identity occurs continually in Wicks’ collection. This is not always the
identity of being disabled, but identities tied to motherhood, family and

\textsuperscript{70} Shapcott, \textit{Of Mutability}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{71} Sontag, p. 57.
relationships as well. Wicks is able to move between these fundamental characteristics with ease, refusing to be defined by any singular one. In “Vocabulary” (which I will explore in more detail later), we can see the tension between the naming of Wicks’ butterflies, how Wicks “matches” them up to how they appear in a book. Wicks uses the declaration of “multiple sclerosis,” presenting her body as reflective of the butterflies themselves: “mounted” and “learnt from books.” She also reflects the dysfunction that is present in cells, with the use of the word “cholinesterase,” defined as: “An enzyme which hydrolyses esters of choline and which is concerned with the transmission of neural impulses,” echoing the medical understanding of MS as a dysfunction of nerves.

Wicks demonstrates how disability is a place of categories, and deeply connected with ideas about collectively understanding and naming difference. Wicks shows the reader how the project of naming illnesses and disabilities is complex; the naming of disabilities does not always help or illuminate the situation for the author or reader, as it adds expectations on what the narrative should say, or writes a history of how all people with “multiple sclerosis” for example, should be. Wicks uses her poetry to present a world where she refuses the black or white depiction of disability, instead presenting it as a continuum. How Wicks presents the body, is reflective of not only Wicks’ experience, but how most people know disability: from viewing it from the outside.

72 Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 25.
1.9 The Micro Details of Disability

This thesis will argue that Wicks and Shapcott exemplify a different way to write about disability, which is in some ways more complete in its resistance to a restrictive identity politics. Wicks and Shapcott illustrate a type of poetry in the 1990s-2000s that refused to be consumed by the politics of disabled female bodies, and that asserts the ongoing aim to change the perception of abnormality. Wicks and Shapcott, like many other writers at the time, do not consider being disabled as their single, overwhelming classification or identity. They are part of a set of disabled people that oppose the stigma that declaring themselves disabled involves, including “resisting or reversing the process of depersonalization that often accompanies illness.” Instead, Wicks and Shapcott acknowledge the cultural change and upheaval of how critics and writers came to consider female bodies through their language and form, but they resist the significance some critics argue is essential to furthering Disability Rights and feminism.

Wicks and Shapcott are still interested in the language that surrounds disability, and the power that names and words contain to describe disability. Yet, as the cultural model invests in disability identity politics, and there is a call for poets to “declare” themselves as part of this club, Wicks and Shapcott resist this concept. Wicks and Shapcott question the binary categorisation of “different” and “deviant” bodies, and their identity as part of a collective or “club.” They both

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75 For example, the poetry of critics such as: Kuppers and Marcus. Where the political ideas of the social model of disability and the cultural model of disability are at the forefront.
76 Shakespeare, Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited. As Shakespeare notes: “the basis of identity had to be found in shared resistance to oppression.” For Wicks and Shapcott this resistance and feeling of oppression seems absent in their work.
77 Couser, Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing, p. 29.
demonstrate that disability is a continuum, blurring the lines between sickness and health, and illustrating how different impairments can affect other aspects of life.

It is true that all writers or poets reflect the period that they are writing in, in some ways, the interesting aspects of Wicks and Shapcott’s collections are how they refuse to incorporate the major political ideas of their period; they do not identify as disabled, nor are they occupied with disability as a concept. Instead they present acute observations of the body and how they define their identities alongside disability, as mother or wife for example. Both Wicks and Shapcott acknowledge disability in the micro details of their collections, and they further the understanding of disability in culture, without concerning themselves with how Disability Studies suggests they should write poems.
Chapter 2: Introduction Susan Wicks and the cultural “myth” of disability.

Susan Wicks' 1994 collection *Open Diagnosis* focuses on the relationships between Wicks and her body. The collection also incorporates Wicks’ mediations on gender, motherhood and disability. Spilt into three sections, *Open Diagnosis* contemplates disability by depicting different identities and perspectives on the body. This collection uses Wicks’ diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis as a topic that infiltrates the other relationships in her life, she is a “cripple,” but also a “mother” and “daughter.” As stated in my introduction, like Jo Shapcott, Wicks is part of the New Generation of poets,¹ and many of her poems echo the way other poets of this generation are concentrating on revealing and reconsidering both their bodies, and identities at this time.

At the time of her collection, the critical response generally focused on her careful imagery “her poems usually proceed in a measured way” writes Peter Forbes in *Poetry Review*, but also that her treatment of illness is “imprisoning and liberating.”² This dissertation will consider a wider perspective on identity than this idea of binary oppositions that surround illness. As Ian McMillan goes onto argue “perhaps unfairly though, this book will be remembered for its vivid and moving poems about illness, a subject that’s another trap for the unwary, but which Wicks tackles with unearthly skill.”³ Again, much of the early criticism about *Open

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*Diagnosis* over simplifies Wicks' deft attention to illness, by focusing on disability as a place of pity and ignoring Wicks' other identities.

In other reviews of *Open Diagnosis* and Wicks' earlier work, particularly in *PN Review*, there is a focus on what David Kennedy considers is "essentially domestic verse" marking the difficulty Wicks' and other poets in the 1990s had with opposing the rendering of women's poetry as purely part of the domestic sphere. *Open Diagnosis* writes about a woman's identity without being constrained by the necessity to stick to this idea of "domesticity." These reviews exemplify the critical attention to Wicks' work including *Open Diagnosis*, which has been missing the focus on her representation of identity. Although there are many reviews of Wicks' work, she has received very little attention from the academy compared to others in the New Generation.

Wicks is inspired by how existing ideas about the body have been mediated by myths and the imagery that surrounds them. As Deryn Rees-Jones notes "women's subversive use of myth and fairy-tale is not simply a late 20thcentury phenomenon," yet in Wicks' case she builds on the previous uses of myth in dissident ways, so that disability can be represented differently. Consequently, Wicks produces a collection that considers how culture addresses the sick body, and is responsive to the gradual changes in society in the early 1990s, where ideas

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5 Rees-Jones, p. 148.
surrounding Disability Rights were emerging, even as the circulation continued of stereotypical images of disabled bodies.⁶

This emergence of Disability Rights in the 1990s, as well as being a growing cultural movement, marked the beginning of legislation that would go some way to provide equality for disabled people. Culturally, the visibility of disabled people was also increasing, both through the prominence of protests from groups such as Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC), and through a general increase of disabled people in the community because of changes to the care system that meant that the majority of disabled people were no longer institutionalised.⁷

These changes are integral to an understanding of Wicks’ work. *Open Diagnosis* was published in the year before The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) was passed into law and reflects the build-up to this event and the changing ideas about disability and the body in society. Disability Studies and culture in the UK was becoming more aware of how poetry could produce representations of the disabled body, especially through the increased visibility of disabled people in society during the protests leading up to the Disability Discrimination Act.⁸ As Colin Barnes and Geoff Mercer note: “Disabled people highlighted their everyday familiarity with social and environmental barriers, restricted life chances, and negative cultural representations,” through protesting against the out of date representation of disabled people in society and culture.⁹

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⁶ For further discussion on the harmful stereotypes surround disabled people in the 1990s, see: Barnes, *Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People*.
⁷ Barnes, *Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination: A Case for Anti-Discrimination Legislation*.
⁸ Barnes and Mercer, p. 175.
⁹ Ibid. p. 2.
Wicks, while not an activist, uses the images of illness, and becomes part of this refashioning of disability that was happening in culture and society at the time. This exploration of disability is distinct to the 21st Century understanding of disability, where I argue that the disabled poets in the 2010s such as Jo Shapcott are participating in a more established field that is becoming used to talking about the body. Wicks’ collection is best read as part of the history of a reconsideration of the body, including how it is reflecting the concurrent changes in culture and its reflection on the other poetry of the New Generation.

*Open Diagnosis* was published before Cultural Disability Studies had become a popular field of analysis. Cultural Disability Studies understands that disability is socially constructed and its imagery is impacted by the use of stereotypical imagery; therefore, it aims to “destabilize our dominant ways of knowing disability.” Cultural Disability Studies as a project begins in the late 1990s, with books and articles surrounding disability becoming more prolific as the decade continued, including critical work by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, as well as Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Lennard J Davis and Tom Shakespeare. Although Wicks was not directly engaging in the ideas of Cultural Disability Studies at the

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10 Mitchell and Snyder, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, p. 5.
11 Ibid. p. 4.
time, how Wicks writes about the body is an example of the complexities involved for anyone who was to engage with the constructed nature of disabled bodies.

Wicks’ poems refer to the cultural and social constructions of disability, and comprehend how these constructions are inevitably affected by the academic discussions at the time, especially those surrounding the interaction between different minority studies such as disabled, race, queer and gender studies. As Robert McRuer argues in his book *Crip Theory*.

These shifts have directly influenced the contemporary social construction and subordination of homosexuality and disability, my introduction thus examines the emergence of a more ‘flexible’ heterosexual and able-bodied subject than either queer theory or disability studies has fully acknowledged.¹³

This “flexibility” is important to my own reading of Wicks’ work, where I will identify how she treads the line between stereotypical representations of disability, and the irony of her push back against these ideas. As McRuer argues, the cultural situation of disability is more than the “negation of able-bodiedness;” instead the identity of able-bodiedness “still largely masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order of things” thus meaning bodies that are different to the norm are automatically considered “other.”¹⁴ If instead we read Wicks’ work as part of a continuum of disability, in a similar vein to how cultural studies can incorporate more than strict demarcations of identity, we can find the treasure trove that is Wicks’ focus and depiction of her own, distinct body.

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¹⁴ Ibid. p. 1.
Wicks uses a variety of perspectives that are contextualised by the history of disability, but also presents an innovative look at how the people around her view her body in different ways. The poem “Vocabulary,” shows the wide variety of metaphors that she uses to write about disability, presenting disability as part of a larger narrative of intriguing images.

These flora and fauna have no names: crimson-bodied, orange-throated, black-gold mosaic-winged, straight-stemmed, shrill-voices, they mass in skeins, packs, shoals, howl through dark or flash silver, bending, beating, reflected in still water. Later I learn them from books: cardinal, Indian paintbrush, coyote – match each with an image and mount it in sequence on blank paper: cholinesterase, multiple sclerosis, poison oak.15

This poem exemplifies much of what Wicks tries to do throughout Open Diagnosis when she references disability. As Mitchell and Snyder note “such a process embodies the materiality of metaphor; and literature is the writing that aims to concretize theory through its ability to provide an embodied account of physical, sensory life.”16 “Vocabulary” identifies these concrete images, and incorporates them into a representation of disability.

To begin with, “Vocabulary” seems to be about categorising butterflies - the “cardinal, Indian Paintbrush,” for example - but then it moves to a consideration of how Wicks can name things, acknowledging the difference between “learning” and

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15 Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 25.
16 Mitchell and Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse, p. 63.
“knowing” something. This concept is helpful for her discussion of disability, where there is an ongoing tension between directly experiencing disability and just sympathising with it. This is one example of how Wicks “sets up” disability in this collection. This poem acknowledges the need for categorisations, and considers how things “match up” in books, but Wicks ends the poem by dismissing this idea that the reflection of a butterfly (or indeed her health) is the same as the reality. Wicks also marks how these categories can be used to set up tensions between different images or ideas, the “black-gold” or “straight-stemmed” for example, represent the multiplicity of what everything is all at once.

Part of the difficulty of “setting up” disability involves acknowledging the status of criticism at the time, including the influence of critics such as Judith Butler. Wicks’ work incorporates Butler’s influence on stories. Butler considers identity and its connections to gender, but first I wish to reiterate the point that Butler makes in her ground-breaking work Gender Trouble (1990) that is part of the critical context of women’s writing and identity politics in the 1990s. In Gender Trouble Butler asserts,

Words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.\(^{17}\)

Butler is referring to the performativity of the female body here, which in turn is important to acknowledge in poetry. Butler’s discussion is also helpful to reveal the

\(^{17}\) Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, p. 185.
flexibility of gender. This discussion of performativity, reflected in the critical work of people like Judith Butler who were commentating on the connections between story and identity at the time, ties into the need to communicate and tell new stories, something that Wicks is integrally interested in.

2.2 Owning Stories: the Strangeness of Disability

By reading Wicks’ work in conjunction with Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*, we can observe how fundamental the concept of owning and identifying one’s story is, and how this is a reflection of self or culture. Butler argues:

> When the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist.

This reflects the complexities of explaining disability. Butler is referring to the difficulties of “narrating” the body in any form of discourse, which is aligned with the Cultural Disability Studies idea that discourse is integral to communicating more than difference. Wicks writes: “I have to remind myself that writing poetry is uncomfortable! The state appropriate to the writing of poetry is a state of non-resolution.” This is reflective of *Open Diagnosis* which is unsettled in tone, and is a text of non-resolution where the experience within the poems is ongoing, and raw. Wicks identifies her story, but encounters difficulties in narrating it in ways that

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18 Couser, *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*, p. 17. Also argues that “cultural representation mirrors daily life.”
20 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*.
reflect Butler, or the larger field of Disability Studies, where stories become political acts.

Wicks acknowledges how describing identity can often be incomplete and involve others. In “Ticking Hands,” the poem begins,

My limbs tick the hours, my left hand conscientious and companionable as Big Ben timing the tide-swing at Waterloo. The bridge slides under departures.  

Wicks builds her sense of identity: “conscientious and companionable” around notions that are determinedly social such as “Big Ben.” As Mitchell and Snyder note: “bodies function within specific social and historical contexts.” Images that are well-known like “Big Ben” help Wicks to communicate the juxtaposition between the stable world outside of disability and an image that makes the reader think about “going over” something, or reiterating her experience. This image also reflects how “bridges” show connections with others:

the bridge slides under departures, its narrow band of stiffness cracked and intimate as old leather.  

She demonstrates the cultural idea of a bridge as a passing place and a way to “go over” something. These structures are socially, culturally and historically positioned as much more than the physical structure we immediately think of, Riddell argues: “structures are perceived as the product of discourse.”

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22 Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 20.
24 Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 20.
between the constructed world and disability. Wicks even uses the lines “No Panic. / No pigeons.” which hints at the impact disability is having on her life.

Wicks is inventive in the way she draws our attention to difference and one reoccurring feature is her reference to pigeons at key points describing the effects of disability as a marker of difference. For example in “Communion” where “pigeon” is used to describe the “cripple / drawn up to the table.”26 “Communion” is a powerful poem that marks the body of the disabled person as different, and continues to use this image of “pigeon feet.” As Caroline Sylge notes in PN Review, (although regarding The Clever Daughter), the use of the image of “pigeons:”

Sums up a number of the major themes of the collection. The circularity of generations; the need to fly somewhere to escape pain or to remain safe; listening to what has not been said, or what the natural world is trying to tell us. Wicks finds a voice for the spaces outside action, situation, and indeed words.27

This image of the pigeon illustrates difference, as well as a type of exchange or escape, and reflects Wicks’ ideas of her unstable identity.

The way Wicks begins to construct a sense of her own story is reflected in what Butler notes as a complexity in explaining the experience of the self. This story is influenced by society, “the ‘I’ can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility” Butler states.28 This illustrates how showing experience through language is difficult. Wicks explains her disability through other concepts, the butterflies below her or the eyes of her father or her partner. While in places this type of imagery can be disempowering, it helps us to observe the

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26 Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 23.
27 Caroline Sylge, ‘Home and All the Rest of It’, PN Review, 23 (1997).
28 Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself, p. 37.
separation of what Wicks is trying to illustrate about her disability and the “voice” of others.

As well as Butler, critics such as Nancy Mairs have noted how this juxtaposition specifically applies to disability: “‘disability’ and ‘voice’ are related, indeed interdependent, with an intimacy that has for some reason, remained, until now, submerged below the surface of my attention” Mairs states.29 When Wicks writes about disability in *Open Diagnosis* we often witness the struggle between “disability” and “voice.” The imagery in “Vocabulary” for instance, stands in for an explicit description of MS:

The flora and fauna have no names:
crimson-bodied, orange-throated,
black-gold mosaic-winged,
straight-stemmed, shrill-voiced.30

Wicks uses “Vocabulary” to illustrate both the natural world in its references to “cardinal, Indian paintbrush” butterflies, but also how “poisonous” the world can be. There is stability in the names she gives nature and their links to her diagnosis.

The language in this poem is a good example of how Wicks interconnects “voice” and “disability” in *Open Diagnosis*. By using certain scientific terms, Wicks weaves in her story of disability through the observation of other natural things.

cardinal, Indian paintbrush, coyote –
match each with an image and mount it
in sequence on blank paper: cholinesterase,
multiple sclerosis, poison oak.31

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30 Wicks, *Open Diagnosis*, p. 25.
31 Ibid.
This is a significant part of the poem, as it describes a chemical that damages the nerves – echoing what is happening in Wicks’ body, but also begins to list other dysfunctions including “multiple sclerosis.”

However, the connection between “voice” and “disability” is not always straightforward. Mitchell and Snyder argue: “the relation between a body and the language used to describe it is unstable.”\(^{32}\) The metaphorical impact of butterflies is not just their place in nature, but rather how a butterfly can flap its wings – indicating chaos and change, or the idea of a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis which is often used as a metaphor to reassure people during hard parts of their lives. Consequently, the butterfly could be considered an old or clichéd image of disability. Wicks does attempt to turn it on its head at the end of the poem: “mount it” she says, effectively condemning the butterfly. Wicks observes the multiple ideas in the symbolism of a butterfly, including the “butterfly effect” which can be read to infer that disability is random. Nature is another place Wicks has to grapple with and include the influence of the previous conceptions of nature in poetry, because as Rees-Jones argues “women’s relationship to nature has historically been a difficult one because of the romantic positioning of nature as a feminised ‘other.’”\(^{33}\) The conditions that surround Wicks’ story are revealed as contingent on social and cultural constructions that provide context at a time when “coming out” with a disability was problematic.

### 2.3 “Marked” and “Stigmatised”: The Relationship Between Female Bodies and Language


\(^{33}\) Rees-Jones, p. 217.
Wicks’ description of her body as a disabled woman is crucial to how we understand her poetry about disability. Within both the criticism of contemporary poetry, and Disability Studies, the impact of being female is important to how disability is represented. Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein argue that female bodies are already considered inferior and “marked” and this “marking” of the body is part of how and why disabled women tell their story in complex ways. Wicks presents her body by illustrating how she participates as “passing” with a disability, what Goffman defines as a way to manage the stigma of disability. This “shame” of the body is a complex cultural issue in writing about disability. Nancy Mairs argues that disabled women have “the general shame of having a body at all, and the specific shame of having one weakened and misshapen by disease.” Wicks mediates the “shame” of her body by participating in declaring her difference.

However, the idea of shame is also part of why Wicks sometimes relies on myth to represent her experience of disability. Because of the interaction between culture and poetry on disability at the time Wicks is “marked” in multiple ways by being both a woman and disabled. By including her disability in her collection, she is also confronting the “shame” of revealing weakness. As Rees-Jones notes, there is a general sense of “embarrassment” about women’s bodies in the twentieth-century, and speaking of Anne Sexton, she states:

For the male poet the act of confession may be figured as a transgression against a preconceived notion of the masculine as controlled, ordered and rational. For the women poet, however, this transgression works on a double

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36 Mairs, p. 90.
model. On the one hand it offers a liberation from stereotypical representations of women [...] while on the other hand it may actually reinforce patriarchal anxieties about women’s fury and madness, desire and dirtiness and reinscribe them in the ostensible service of liberation.\footnote{Rees-Jones, p. 24.}

This view is compounded by the added complexities of disability or illness, and although references the confessional poets, is largely extended to female poets of the twentieth century. \textit{Open Diagnosis} includes the complexities of sitting between \textit{passing} and \textit{coming out} with a disability.

Tangentially, this shame is connected to (although not identical to) the more old-fashioned idea of “stigma” that arises from early Disability Studies and Medical Sociology. As an early idea, “stigma” sought to illustrate the feelings and representation of difference. Stigmatising images are found in Wicks’ literal and humorous descriptions of the disabled body. Yet, stigma is divisive. One of the most influential texts is that by Erving Goffman called \textit{Stigma}, it forms part of the academic discussions at the beginning of Disability Studies, because it was one of the first sociological explorations of what it means to be different. Goffman argues that Stigma marks people as different to normal, and furthermore suggests that these people are unable to get rid of these marks.\footnote{Goffman.} More recent criticism of Goffman, by female writers such as Susan Wendell argue however:

\begin{quote}
Because he [Goffman] does not question the social ‘norms’ that stigmatize people with disabilities, he tends to adopt a patronizing tone in speaking of people who do not meet them, and to belittle and underestimate their efforts to live by different ‘norms’.\footnote{Susan Wendell, \textit{Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability}, (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 57.}
\end{quote}
This is illustrative of how disability has moved on to incorporate the social model of
disability, and how Disability Studies no longer considers disability as independent
to the social circumstances that it is found within. For example, stigma would now
be considered more of the issue of how society is dealing with disability, than the
individual with the disability being indelibly marked. Wicks’ poetry demonstrates
both Goffman’s difference, but Wicks also carves out her own “norm” which reflects
the beginning of the changing attitudes towards disability. By using both words like
“cripple” and images like “the long left wrist / bent back” in the poem

“Communion,” Wicks shows how disabled people “live by different ‘norms.’”

Additionally, Wicks exposes the stigma that is attached to bodies that are
different through poems like “A disabled toilet is” where she describes how space
and boundaries can identify difference and disability:

wider than for ordinary
women because you would need more
space a sloping polished
rail in case you should suddenly
reach out.

This poem shows the bounded space of the disabled toilet, and how it offers
sanctuary, but also how its structure immediately illustrates disability. Instead of
hiding or disguising her disability, Wicks confronts its name and how it affects her,
as well as the new kind of places (in the wake of enabling legislation) in which she
finds herself, producing new images of disability.

This tension between “passing” and “coming out” is illustrated in Wicks’
collection where she uses a combination of declaring her disability and describing

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40 Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 23.
41 Ibid. p. 39.
how to “hide” it. “How to Become Invisible” is a reference to the “invisibility” of disability.

Dress carefully. Choose the faded childhood anorak, the torn skirt with the fringes.⁴²

This is a poem that compares the insidious nature of disability that the body cannot hide from or deny, with the real-life representation of it, which can be more murky and hidden. Wicks is exploring the tension of what an image indicates and what it could mean. A “torn skirt with the fringes” could call to mind poverty or fashion. Nothing is clear in this poem, and it is written as an instructional manual to “someone.”

Wicks explores the difficulty of “coming out” as disabled by demonstrating how things are rarely how they first seem, and imagining the continuum of experiences of disability. Within this continuum are places where Wicks appears at ease with the identity of a disabled woman. For example she writes,

Don’t look at the water. Be ill or crippled. Find a few children to skulk at your ankles like pickpockets.⁴³

This observation marks how the identity of illness is intertwined with other ideas and moments. Equally other imagery illustrates her uncomfortableness with a straight-forward representation of disability, “don’t look in the water” she asserts, asking the reader to look away from the “pitiable” elements instead. This move is part of Wicks’ use of language, which refuses the need to express emotion or be ornate about her experience. As Wicks herself states “I hope that in my best poems

⁴² Ibid.
⁴³ Ibid.
the ‘language’ almost disappears” marking her commitment to a simple and matter of fact way to write poetry.\footnote{\textsuperscript{44} Wicks qtd in: Forbes, p. 31.} This way of using language, means that straightforward representations of disability can be stark as well as a way to evade the emotional aspects of the experience, and lead to a more rounded representation of illness, that incorporates being uncomfortable.

2.4 Doing Disability Differently: Wicks’ Representation of Disability, Treatment and Iconic Images of Disability

How Wicks uses language and form is integrally important to this experience. Her collection is occupied with the theme of illness, and her poems frequently refer to ideas about “sight.” Additionally, reviewers have noticed Wicks’ attention to the visual world, as Ian McMillan notes “Wicks is writing in a special three-dimensional ink the rest of us are denied access to.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{45} McMillan, p. 3.} Sight is important to Wicks, because it reveals the different perspectives on her work, as well as illustrating the medical impact losing sight has on a person, a common complication of MS. In \textit{Open Diagnosis} there are two poems that present distinct ways of looking at “sight.” “When I am blind I shall” and “When I am blind I shall not” use the themes of sight to reminisce about the speaker’s views about her failing body. Wicks notes “as I touch here, and here, and here, as we used to / pin tails on donkeys,”\footnote{\textsuperscript{46} Wicks, \textit{Open Diagnosis}, p. 44.} illustrating the other senses involved in producing active and detailed imagery. These poems also often speak in the third person as if the speaker needs to be further removed from these complicated situations, emphasising Wicks’ discomfort in incorporating her illness into her identity, especially an illness such as MS, which is relapsing
remitting, as well as progressive, and will have gradually greater influences on her sense of self.

These two poems on sight illustrate the common imagery, form, and pace of Wicks’ collection. They both use run on sentences to expose the sudden feelings the speaker has about becoming blind, “hearing the birds / and the wind always”47 she states. In the first poem, we experience a narrative about painting, and consequently sight, where the speaker ends with the sense of “touch.” Common in these two poems is the rhythm of the short sentences. They both also finish with a thrown away image at the end, first “as we used to / pin tails on donkeys,” then “the beep-beep-beep of something reversing.” These images might appear to be insignificant, but Wicks places significance on them by focusing on them as her last image.

The use of other senses is also important here, we have smell in the “pungent” and the focus on “writing” and “the wind always,” which is a beautiful reference to the inevitability of the same experiences occurring whether the speaker has sight or not. These poems do not occupy themselves with the mechanics of losing sight or becoming blind. They do not focus on what becoming blind means outside of what the speaker thinks. Instead they illustrate the emotions involved in losing a sense, especially when these senses are so inherently linked to the identity of “poet.”

Wicks reimagines disability by mixing new images with well understood cultural myths. She juxtaposes the “grotesque” and “normal.” For example, in

47 Ibid. p. 45.
“Coming Out” she writes “never been good enough / at guiding food into my mouth,” thereby describing disability in reflection of a normal daily act of eating. In “Buying Fish,” Wicks describes disability by relating how “others” live like the “gentle and elderly.”

I am one of you, though you do not
Know it. We are all hesitant, we are all
Gentle and elderly. Together.  

Some of Wicks’ images reveal illness and gender in ways that are well known. Her references to before illness, “barren / as your other life” is a clichéd way to describe disability. However the unsettled nature of her collection allows her to reconfigure this imagery and make it relevant and ironic.

In “Plates” Wicks uses this back and forth nature of her imagery and language to reveal a relationship with her body.

When they gave you your plates
to hand to some new doctor,
you held them up to the window
and saw the sky in them.

Here the relationship between nature and disability juxtaposes how nature involves movement and growth, but disability is often stereotyped as stagnant. To oppose this stereotype Wicks uses active language to refer to disability; words such as “running” which juxtapose against the “slow” glide of the “snail.” We find:

the river running through your skull,
twigs meeting at the cerebellum,
your brain uncurling, tentative

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48 Ibid. p. 42.
49 Ibid. p. 37.
50 Ibid. p. 47.
51 Ibid. p. 19.
as a snail on its late glide-path.\textsuperscript{52}

This stanza is surreal and varied, and identifies some of the disparities she has when considering MS. The juxtaposition of activity and tentative movement, illustrates how she understands the different effects MS has on her identity, and how this can change. Wicks also uses connections in between lines such as, “since then I have often thought” to give herself space to breathe within the poem. This also marks a place where the poem returns to the idea of the window as a space to see through: “you held them up to the window” returns to the image of a “filter” at the end of the poem.

Since then I have often thought of snails and their reflexes, seeing a slice of America green through your head’s filter.\textsuperscript{53}

These last few lines continue to reference Wicks’ MS in the “reflexes” so integrally related to neurology. However, it also references Wicks’ sense of geography; America is a feature in many of the poems, using the landscapes of another place which is distinct from England helps Wicks to illustrate how disability can cross geographical fixedness: “some joker has given me a rainbow maker, / souvenir of America.”

In other poems we also read how disability illustrates slow movement, especially when mobility is affected. “Ticking Hands” demonstrates how: "My hands only twitch quietly, / measuring the white hiatus.”\textsuperscript{54} This is an image of the body

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
moving with relative slowness, as well as demonstrating how the body is waiting for change or to continue with the status quo.\textsuperscript{55} How Wicks describes disability demonstrates the constructed nature of disability and how it can be reimagined by innovative description.

Wicks’ use of different kinds of language is essential to how we understand her inclusion of disability in her collection. Much of the language she uses is ordinary “measured” language, as used to describe extraordinary circumstances.\textsuperscript{56} As Kate Clanchy argues in her review for Wicks’ later collection De-Iced, “Wicks' rhythms are generally muted and her language aspires to be affectless: after all, she is usually writing about the sublime occurring in ordinary lives.”\textsuperscript{57} As I argued in my introduction, Wicks and Shapcott’s use of scientific language marks them as part of a generation of poets that use this very precise type of imagery to give themselves authority over their bodies. In many ways this scientific language also incorporates Wicks’ focus on ordinary language, because scientific language is often seen as mundane and straight-forward. It is the use of scientific language in poetry that marks it as different.

How Disability Poetics has incorporated language is important to recognise too, as it has a focus on language and sound as a way to explore the physicality of poetry and its relationship with bodies. As well as moving towards more acceptable ways to describe people, Disability Poetics attempts to incorporate other parts of poetry, as Davidson argues: “[Disability Poetics] describes the degree to which

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. p. 20.
\textsuperscript{56} Forbes, p. 31.
poetry is constituted by and within ideas of embodiment, from the ‘oral’ tradition to the foot metric to the most recent versions of stand-up (or sit-down) performance."⁵⁸ Davidson’s point here is that Disability Poetics takes these disruptions to “normal” aspects of poetry and incorporates these differences within their work. Wicks goes some way to incorporate her different body in her use of the language and sounds of disability, but equally does not mark her poetry as clearly as Disabled Poets such as Larry Eigner who use the rhythms of their body to clearly indicate dysfunction.⁵⁹

The interest in language continues in the juxtaposition Wicks utilises between her own body and the bodies of others. In “Plates” the poem addresses someone other than the speaker. The addition of another person forces the poem to move between the “you” and “I” of how disability is experienced. This duality also interacts with how we construct Wicks’ identity, as it adds the perspective of the “other” and how they view Wicks (or how she views herself.) The juxtaposition of X-rays with other aspects of life: “seeing a slice of America,” gives further context to the poet’s current situation. This produces a new type of image. We see “twigs meeting at the cerebellum” and “snails and their reflexes.”⁶⁰ These are both images of the body that combined with nature reflect Wicks representation of disability as slow and consuming (in the movement of “snails”). Wicks also juxtaposes her body with the distinct geography of America, reflecting the further dualities of disability and life.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 597.
⁶⁰ Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 19.
We see the movement between how Wicks presents both the physical aspects of x-rays, which by their very nature are intangible things that cannot be seen or touched, the “head’s filter,” but also how she constructs a sense of identity in her presentation of the speaker of the poem who is “seeing a slice of America.”

Wicks also demonstrates how cultural constructions illustrate the Doctor/Patient relationship with the reference to: “When they gave you your plates / to hand on to some new doctor” signifying the hierarchical aspects of this relationship. This poem is crammed full of people, for example the references to “they,” “you,” “I” and “some new doctor,” and Wicks builds up a sense of the people that interact with disability. These different people are used to identify the perspectives on Wicks’ discussion of disability. The “some new doctor,” presents doctors as unimportant and anonymous. The variety of people contained within her poetry affirms Wicks’ disability through reflecting their feelings and as a way to explore the imagery and impact of disability on her identity.

2.5 Other Models of Disability: Wicks and Helen Keller

Wicks also uses the cultural power of other writers to influence her work, and powerfully aligns herself with one such figure. In “Seeing with Hands” Wicks recalls Helen Keller, who is identified as a cultural touchstone, and a shorthand for disability. By utilising powerful figures such as Keller, Wicks joins other writers who have considered disability and the different body.

She plays at Helen Keller, measuring the unfamiliar rooms, eyes shut, touching their dark furniture.  

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid. p. 4.
Keller’s name recalls the story of the deaf-blind woman who went on to gain a degree. The name also calls to mind the subject of sight that is common in Wicks’ work. The difficulties of using a name like Keller’s is the reliance on imagery that would now be considered out of date. This poem however, goes further to imagine Keller’s life and resists the temptation to represent her in only cliché, like the films and books of her life have previously done.\textsuperscript{63}

This poem is revealing for multiple reasons, not only does it rely on the “myth” of Keller, but it also confronts these preconceived ideas and turns them on their head by using a different speaker. The images of her experience are vivid and colourful, the opposite of the world of someone who is deaf-blind.\textsuperscript{64}

She walks stumbling on treasure –
a stamp, a coin, a needle –
crouches with spread fingers,
breathing the floor’s honey.\textsuperscript{65}

These intense images illustrate a world that many might not consider when reading about someone who is deaf-blind, and this effectively turns some of the stereotype of this identity on its head. That said, Wicks also utilises the stereotypical imagery of being deaf-blind, and writes:

Will she learn the stiff reek
of love on sheets, know the night rhythms, read the bumps on recurring faces?\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{63} See George Foster Platt, ‘Deliverance’, (1919).
\textsuperscript{64} There is a lot of scholarship on the unique status of deaf poetry, which I have no space to go into here, but is explored in: Sandra Alland, Markie Burnhope, and Daniel Sluman, ‘About the Anthology’, in Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back, (Wordpress, 2016).
\textsuperscript{65} Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
This stanza presents an out of date image, describing blindness through imagery such as “read the bumps” that is continually reaffirmed by popular culture (but not deaf culture). This poem illustrates how Wicks competes with the pervasive cultural ideas that surround disability, and attempts to turn them on their head, to show something different or new.

Wicks’ reference to Keller is integral to how we understand disability in *Open Diagnosis*. It is also a poem that differs from many of the other poems that have been written about Keller as a pervasive image of disability. Denise Levertov’s poem “The Well” for example, references Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller:

She stoops
to gently dip and deep enough.
Her face resembles
the face of the young actress who played
Miss Annie Sullivan, she who
spelled the word ‘water’ into the palm
of Helen Keller, opening
the doors of the world.68

This stanza is more directly stereotypical about disability, especially in the closing lines where Annie Sullivan is “opening / the doors of the world,” an image that infers Keller’s reliance and lack of independence. The canon of work on Keller, also includes writing by Helen Keller herself as well as poems by writers such as Langston Hughes who writes in a stereotypical way about her disability and her “inner power.”69 Although Wicks’ poem does utilise stereotype, the fact it falls within a collection that is testing the boundaries of a disability identity, means that it is

67 For example in Lionel Richie’s music video for “hello” which includes a blind woman, sculpting the face of the man she loves.
distinctly different in tone. Wicks writes about disability and consequently Keller in a way that marks the changes in the public’s approach to disability from the “pity” towards Keller, towards a state where she is presented as more independent, in Wicks’ work “She walks stumbling on treasure” and is beginning to find her own identity in reflection of other writers who have considered disability.

This formation of an approach to disability that reflects the changing attitudes in society, acknowledges the cultural constructions inherent to Wicks’ work. Wicks constructs disability as a new experience to her, and she uses her relationships with others to explain her embodiment of disability. Consequently, Wicks explores the details of disability in ways that were unusual at the time she was writing. These micro details of disability demonstrate a great attention to the smaller details of the body, rather than the sweeping and stereotypical tropes representing disability that were found in poems, like Hughes’ that came before.

2.6 Family History: Disability Close to Home

Wicks’ poetry does not shy away from autobiographical material, and indeed her next book after the publication of Open Diagnosis was the memoir Driving my Father. But her work is unable or unwilling to address the family life and events readers might expect in the post-confessional era. Disability figures largely, and in unsettling ways, in the way that she describes changing relationships with her father, friends and family. Wicks uses storytelling to “normalise” disability, confront and incorporate it into other stories and experiences. Wicks does this not just by using other people, but also through using allusions to other cultural ideas like in my discussion on Keller above. Through this Wicks acknowledges the stereotypical
history of disability and the complexities that surround the collection. For Lennard J. Davis, the difficulty is how disability becomes entwined with story (such as Tiny Tim in Dickens for example, who represents disability in a stereotypical way to further the ideas of pity within the story). Davis argues that there is a need to denarrativise disability and remove the association of disability with story.\(^70\) This is a crucial concept for understanding *Open Diagnosis* as it acknowledges how a fragmented sense of disability can actually be more effective than a fully formed “story” of illness.

Wicks highlights descriptive, cultural constructions of the body in her poems: the “raw fingers twitching”\(^71\) for example that thread into a narrative of cold, or the intertwined stories of her family in “Caul,” where she moves from “Now his only daughter has M.S. [sic]” to “He is old now.”\(^72\) “Propaganda” uses family to illustrate disability in a distinct way. Wicks uses her father’s story of World War Two to illustrate and embody her own disability. “Propaganda” is distinct because this poem relies on other characters which are revealed through the reflection of her father’s life.

Before I was born, you flew
over strange countries, mapped
strips of foreign earth and shuttered
cottages, plotting your course
by the stars.\(^73\)

\(^71\) Wicks, *Open Diagnosis*, p. 22.
\(^72\) Ibid. p. 31.
\(^73\) Ibid. p. 32.
This poem touches on common themes that occur in the rest of *Open Diagnosis* including “blindness” and her sense of family and “daughterliness” that help construct her identity of a disabled woman.

Or nothing,  
my head to the chute  
as I look down  
at the blind villages  
under my precious cargo.  

Here, the poem moves from the history of the father in the poem, to that of the daughter, burdened by her “precious cargo.” Even lines such as: “Now, in your peace-time / what should I drop on you?” reflect war and the “bomb” she drops on him in respect of her diagnosis. This imagery focuses on not just how culture understands disability and is changing through this confrontation of language, but how the people around her understand disability.

The impact of others on Wicks’ story is, however, important throughout.  

“Caul” is one of the places where we meet people on the peripheries of Wicks’ writing.

My father was born in a caul. For years  
my grandmother kept it in attics,  
shrivelled like a giant foreskin,  
against some future drowning.

This poem reflects ongoing discussions throughout *Open Diagnosis* with other characters about disability. Wicks states “my father was born in a caul” and this is integral to how she discusses with him her diagnosis of MS, where:

Now his only daughter

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74 Ibid.  
75 Ibid. p. 31.
has M.S. He still lights bonfires,  
potters to the back door for matches,  
coughs as swallows swim up in blue air.\textsuperscript{76}

This poem uses multiple viewpoints to discuss how “coming out” as a disabled person is different for father and daughter. By using third person Wicks speaks for the other people in her poem. Wicks’ poetry often involves a shift in subject. In “Caul” Wicks moves between her father as a baby, her illness and his experience of old age.

He is old now. I could almost blow dust from the wrinkles,  
stretch the small bag to cracking as it gaped to hold him,  
wrap his porous bones tight in a dry skin.\textsuperscript{77}

Wicks does this in other poems such as “Propaganda” which moves from “before I was born, you flew” and later refocuses on Wicks when she states: “Now, in your peace time / what should I drop on you.”\textsuperscript{78} Through moves like this, we can see how Wicks uses the voices and stories of others to illustrate the broader landscape of disability.

Further, we can see the importance of disability on Open Diagnosis through comparing “Caul” to a similar, but later poem. In The Clever Daughter (1996), a very similar description is used, but Wicks’ experience of illness is removed:

Is this my father’s skin  
or my grandmother’s twice folded  
in its blue envelope,  
like a promise of wings?\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. pp. 32-33.  
This poem still tells a story of the body and Wicks’ relationship with her father, but without the fragmented switching of subject. Although it appears the act of revealing her disability is contingent on others, Wicks’ speaks to both sides of this complex moment, by invoking her disability in the first poem and disregarding it to focus on her father in the second. This is revealing of the unsettled and playful nature of *Open Diagnosis* where imagery is less fixed than in her later collections.

The tension between two sides of a subject is explored through her own experience and how others react to her diagnosis in her poetry. “You Hate Me” is a good example of how Wicks illustrates the tensions between her own identity and how the people who surround her interact with that construction.

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Each night as we walk out
into the darkness, our combined shadow
mincing and scraping before us
on wet pavements. You hate me. You loiter
in shop doorways, duck into pee behind
thick hedges, call women from public boxes.
I memorise the wine-labels in the window
of the off-license, yearn between curtains
for the warm flicker. You hate me.  
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This poem both illustrates the relationship between the couple in the poem, but also reveals the complexities of the two characters and how they relate to each other. This poem obviously looks back to a time when the protagonists were younger, however it moves in between ideas of adulthood and times when the characters seem to be more teenagers, such as in the last few lines:

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Together we sit
on the kerb laughing and crying. You
hate me. I am sick
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80 Wicks, *Open Diagnosis*, p. 10.
into the gutter. We
turn
the key in our dark lock,
open the door, reaching for all the switches.\textsuperscript{81}

The repetition of the phrase “you hate me” is also illustrative of the tension in the relationship between these two characters, as it is largely ironic, the couple obviously do not really hate each other, and instead Wicks is playing with the idea of how these younger people relate to each other. This line is also integral to the rhythm of the poem, and alongside the other tools Wicks utilises such as short lines, and repetition of similar sounds in “sit,” “sick” and “lock” indicates the short powerful interactions this couple is having.

This poem represents the violence of this young relationship, through both the rhythm of the language, but also the violet and aggressive things the couple participate in, indicated by the continual repetition of verbs.

We kick beer-cans into the front gardens of semi-detached houses. Our fists rattle the metal teeth of slot machines, we spray ‘Fuck’ into the dark glass flank of a bus-shelter. You wrench sighs to unnatural positions, suck bollards from concrete. I decapitate daffodils, strip the green bark from saplings.\textsuperscript{82}

This poem reveals the “troubling” images of the relationships Wicks has with others and her body, where her “fists rattle” and “you wrench / sighs” these images continue to reveal the disjointed impact of her relationships with others, which is part of how she conceives her identity and consequently her disability.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
The themes of this poem, and much of *Open Diagnosis* are continued into her most recent work. In *Open Diagnosis* there is an anger to the poems; they are confrontational and raw. In later collections, while Wicks explores many of the same ideas, there is a sense of perspective that has changed from her earlier work. In her most recent collection *The Months* (2016) we see a similar poem to “You Hate Me” called “House with White Shutters,” but instead it marks the changes in her perspective on her relationships.

It was small, but ours – two up,
two halfway up, two down
and every forward-facing window
fringed with cosmetic shutters
that changed the look of the façade
the way two painted eyes
with pencilled eyebrows make a face
too wide awake
too soon.83

This poem is another that is occupied with places and the relationships of those that surround the speaker, but unlike “You Hate Me” this later poem illustrates Wicks’ understanding of the great complexities and maturity about how to present these images.

In a similar way Wicks’ non-fiction narrative about the death of her parents *Driving my Father*, is also relevant to this change, and marks her ongoing concentration on this type of imagery. These later collections appear to have softened imagery marking the changes in Wicks as a poet as well as cultural changes in how we view elderly and disabled people.84 Wicks’ questioning in this poem also

illustrates its maturity, where through questioning her relationship she reveals its victories as well as its flaws.

Yet we were happy, weren’t we? Those nights I cried picking up puzzle pieces, and the day I knocked the hi-fi on its shelf with the tube of the vacuum-cleaner so ever after the Maiden tripped on and on in her groove of drying and I seemed to see myself, my eyes squeezed shut, my back to the storage heater, chin on my knees. Then that other day of silent snowfall when I dragged the girls behind me up the slippery hill to school.85

Here, we find the colours of the house, the “Maiden that trips on and on” and the litter of everyday life. Her musings over whether “we were / happy?” are also interesting, as this type of voice differs from her earlier work twenty years before, where the images are more often brash and determined. *The Months* represents a renewed attempt to configure her feelings about time (another commonality with Shapcott’s obsession with “mutability”) and disease or old age. This later collection is revealing in how it differs in tone and perspective on dysfunction, but continues to include an emphasis on gender and maternity.

2.7 The Collective Language of Disability

While there is a determined insistence on the awkward individualist and of each iteration of disability, language in Wicks’ poetry also communicates collectiveness. In “Communion,” by using proprietary language like “cripple” Wicks links her poetry

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to a cultural understanding of disability as well as a political rendering of the disabled body. Because “cripple” is used mainly by those who are disabled and are talking about their own impairments, Wicks is linking herself to this historical understanding of disability politics.\(^{86}\) Williams argues that: “There is, therefore, no neutral language with which to begin the process of discussing chronic illness and disability, and language itself is central to any discussion of how we approach the problem of dealing with ‘disability’.\(^{87}\) When Wicks describes the body or uses politically charged words, she is writing herself into this history of disability culture. “Communion” demonstrates how language and voice are at the forefront of Wicks’ writing, she tries to communicate the instability of the disabled body, through irony and imagery.

We ate our last celebratory supper with a cripple drawn up to the table in a wheelchair, his little legs tucked under, pigeon feet strung inwards as if to touch each other, the long left wrist bent back, searching.\(^{88}\)

This poem is a good example of how Wicks is treading the line between producing images that contain stereotype, but also exploring how language can represent disability in new ways. Images like “drawn up to the table” and:

Tides of saliva sucked and fell, glinted at the edges of his laborious words.\(^{89}\)

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\(^{86}\) See previous discussions on Disability Arts.


\(^{88}\) Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 23.

\(^{89}\) Ibid.
Wicks’ poems can on occasion be read as part of the history of writing about
disability that intends to evoke pity – especially when she uses language such as “his
good hand,” inferring disability is “bad.” However, by using other language in
conjunction with this, “pigeon feet,” and “his creature voice” Wicks ironises the
other representations within the poem.

Wicks uses language here effectively to communicate the problems with this
kind of imagery, ironising how disabled people are viewed by others as less than
human, for example:

When we were all finished,
he still had a plateful
to guide upwards with his good hand.
When we fell silent
his creature voice croaked,
swelling in all our spaces,
the bright thread of his spittle
spinning in the air between us.90

Here showing how disabled people are considered slow, and lacking in agency
through how Wicks represents the disabled character as voiceless. Wicks also
utilises new images of the body. By writing herself into the history of disability,
acknowledging the stigma of the history of disability, but framing this stigma in
relation to broader ideas.

Wicks’ later collections such as *The Months* and *Lace*, explore difference in
increasingly delicate ways. Moving away from the bolder, and less introspective
nature of Wicks’ earlier work in *Open Diagnosis*, *Lace* uses references to illness as
subtle ways to consider the metaphor of “lace.”

Does she dare hold it to the light?
Against a window

90 Ibid.
it reveals its secrets, subcutaneous
and webbed with fissures, crackle-crazed,
carious as an old tooth.  

This poem is distinct in many ways from Wicks’ earlier work, in that although it returns to the same subject of “lace” this is distinct to *Open Diagnosis* where the return to the subject of illness is in a variety of bold and interesting ways and perspectives. *Lace* lacks the distinctive characterisation and language of *Open Diagnosis* which is in many ways easier to identify with.

*Lace* is bounded by its need to return to the same subject and it is also more questioning than Wicks’ earlier work, which is brash and determined in how it considers disability.

And what price truth?
*Oh, let my body go. Let there be numbness, paralysis.*
The pain flows upwards, spreads its capillaries
as delicate as cobwebs, grey as antique lace
inside the bone.  

This stanza reveals the difficulties with talking about pain. It also effectively uses colour to describe the gnawing pain that is occupying the speaker. Unlike *Open Diagnosis*, where the speaker uses colour to reveal something new and different (“I blink blue and gold,” for example,) in *Lace* this “grey” represents the absence of difference, and the “delicate” ways illness infiltrates our lives.

And she’s alone,
invisible, her future mapped
and veined like marble, foreign continent
criss-crossed by streams. She strokes the line

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92 Ibid.
93 Wicks, *Open Diagnosis*, p. 28.
of ingress, as an explorer might.\textsuperscript{94}

Finally, the poem turns to narration in the third person, as also occurs in \textit{Open Diagnosis}. This later poem waits until the end to move from the first to the third person, complicating the issue of identity and experience, which is unsettled and inaccurate through its rendering by someone else.

\section*{2.8 Images of Identity: Disrupting Conventions of Representation}

Wicks’ relationship with power in her poems allows her to develop new images of identity as it acknowledges the many people who interact in her collection. Cultural Disability Studies informs our reading of Wicks here through its exploration of power. As Hacking notes “it is widely taken for granted in constructionist studies that power is not simply experienced from above.”\textsuperscript{95} One of Cultural Disability Studies’ projects is to identify where power is found, not just in a hierarchical system, but also in its impact on how writers construct a sense of self. Cultural Disability Studies considers how history provides a sense of power, in language, or historical moments like the eugenics movement.\textsuperscript{96} The power in \textit{Open Diagnosis} is not illustrated clearly, but is part of how Wicks writes and reflects identities that are complex such as disability and gender. Identities that are inevitably caught up with ideas of power.

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\textsuperscript{94} Wicks and Clayman, p. 4.  \\
\textsuperscript{95} Hacking, p. 58.  \\
\textsuperscript{96} Mitchell and Snyder, \textit{Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse}, p. 15. 
\end{flushright}
Part of Wicks’ ideas about poetry include the political nature of writing as a woman, and how she can use this complexity to represent her experiences, arguing that the female body is always politically fought over. Wicks claims that:

It’s not the fact that I write about ‘women’s subjects’ – about parenting and illness, birth and death and yearning and interiors – it’s the way I write about them. I think it’s the way I question my own relationship with them, the way I still can’t take them for granted but see them as paradoxical and treacherous, as belonging to an area of experience which is essentially troubling, even, at times, slightly grotesque.97

Wicks’ argument here encompasses part of what this thesis is stating about her work, especially in Open Diagnosis where she grapples with how to represent this different female body. She highlights the importance of questioning her relationships with the world. However, Wicks notes that these images are at times “grotesque” and use “troubling” language that indicates how illness and disability was considered at the time, with less sensitivity, and consideration for the representation of identities (which is obviously at work in both criticism and Shapcott’s later work). Wicks’ questioning here also represents how her use of “women’s subjects” is more complex that some reviewers rendering of it as purely “domestic.”98

This “grotesque” nature of the body is another alternative perspective she employs. It begins to acknowledge and move past identities that were reliant on stereotype. Poems like “Bear Country” illustrate the bodies of others, which while beautiful, are also unsettling and shocking.

This is bear country, forest of eyes

98 Kennedy.
and fur, all the black rainbow
from coal-dust to cinnamon.99

This poem demonstrates how Wicks plays with the sonnet form. This is a love poem to nature and the connections between the bodies of mother and daughter. The Imagery is beautiful and troubling in places, like when the daughter “sniffs, grunts” in her sleep. “The brown skin of marshmallows / blister” is also a vivid and violent image that asks the reader to imagine the power of the “campfire.” This poem is a good example of how Wicks employs the body as a method to illustrate the tensions and relationships between natural and unnatural imagery. This is very effective, images like “coal dust to cinnamon” call to mind the fine powder that Wicks is surrounded by, and how minute objects still have power to change how we see the world. Here the mother and daughter are shown as:

In the tent my sleeping daughter
sniffs, grunts, rolls into dream again
under her borrowed ceiling of canvas,100

This poem also rejects straight forward identities or roles for the mother and daughter who are both illustrated in relation to nature, but not each other, similarly to how Wicks’ later collection The Months speaks about these relationships. For example in the poem “May 1978” where Wicks writes:

till our whole life seemed to be slowing down.
thinned to a single heartbeat, and we touched –
you rippling like a fish
through veils of seaweed.101

99 Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 3.
100 Ibid.
101 Wicks, The Months, p. 43.
In this section of *The Months*, Wicks represents motherhood and maternity through her description of her daughter’s pregnancy. Even in this later work, we find echoes of the “grotesque” imagery related to nature. The “grotesque” nature of her imagery is part of the incomplete or unsettled feeling *Open Diagnosis* has. This imagery is used to illustrate how uncomfortable and shocking these events are in both *Open Diagnosis* and *The Months*.

As Morris argues: an “unequal power relationship characterises [women’s] social experience.”102 Wicks depicts this inequality in her poems by presenting the confluence of disability and gender as a distinct experience. Through theorists like Morris and Hacking, we begin to develop a reading of Wicks that understands how disability and gender are interconnected through their similar imagery in the 1990s. “Breast Envy” is a crucial example of how Wicks presents the female body in reflection of someone else, but with minute detail.

At eight I already dreamed
of breasts, full warm moons
in eclipse like my mother’s,
her valley of skin, the unthinkable
red-blisters of sun-spots
at each nipple, the buried blue rivers
streaking the pale surfaces.103

This poem focuses on embodiment clearly and concisely. It describes the body and breasts in relation to nature: “the buried blue rivers” of veins. Wicks uses her mother as a way into this subject, but it is distinct from many of the poems focused

103 Wicks, *Open Diagnosis*, p. 52.
on disability in *Open Diagnosis*. Instead it focuses on breasts as a way to communicate belonging and uses her body as a focal point.

Breasts are also an important image through which we can consider stigma and the female form. Women’s bodies are seen as different in many ways, and breasts also allude to other differences such as cancer that can be tied into this focus on a unique body part. Wicks writes about her memories of being a woman and being different, conspiring to embody the feelings of childhood and growing up:

> I already had visions of how we would all possess them, every one of us, how we would snake across the playground in a milky galaxy, while you would all stand in your dark line for ever, with now a breast between you.

These images use childhood and her relationship with her mother to explore the impact of the idea of breasts on how women conceive their identities.

Wicks explores how to stabilise the body by understanding the symbolic power it holds, whether in distinct imagery like the breasts in “Breast Envy” or in its boundaries. In *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*, Shildrick argues that both bodies and health are part of what feminists identify as active in the “interplay of power and resistance.” Wicks’ poems echo this, as they often turn on the places where the boundaries and dynamics of power are active and these “interplays” can be identified. Wicks uses the power of resistance against a straight-forward rendering

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105 Wicks, *Open Diagnosis*, p. 52.
106 Shildrick, p. 22.
of her identity to begin to stabilise her body’s boundaries in poems such as “Imaging.” “Imaging” moves between a description of two characters watching the film 2001 and the speaker having an MRI scan. The influence on representation in the poem is marked in both the boundary that is described between the two different landscapes of the poem, home and hospital, as well as a commentary on the procedure after. Wicks writes:

We sat in each other’s arms
on the couch to watch 2001, the white planets
waltzing to Strauss, the weightless
travellers, their breath freezing
on little windows.107

This poem is an example of how Wicks uses culture to demonstrate how disability is constructed. This poem moves from the stereotypical representations of disability to the juxtaposition of these two ideas.

Furthermore, the use of colour illustrates the feeling of being in an MRI machine as well as connecting this medical procedure to the loss of eyesight in MS.

Tight in my time-capsule,
head taped to this strange pillow,
I blink blue and gold,
violet, magenta, as a well-placed mirror
shows me creatures from Jupiter
who move behind glass and measure,
then trundle me into sir again,
empty me into a strange century,
my brain imaged on a screen behind me.108

These images echo the film 2001 in the poem, the major cultural construction, but also the juxtaposition of colours that illustrate the road to remission: “the gift of so much colour.” The poem personifies the experience of an MRI machine as if it is

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107 Wicks, Open Diagnosis, p. 28.
108 Ibid.
embodied in the speaker: “I blink blue and gold” while reflecting the film within this and the ideas of space.

Like the juxtaposition of culture and disability, the characters on the periphery of the poem also have authority, by giving them presence.

I know what they see
of a woman’s head, poor world
careening into the dark,
white seeds sleeping under the surface:
they see the future, earth-landings, slow waltzes, time-travel,
while I still squint and blink
at the gift of so much colour. 109

In the third stanza we are returned to “slow waltzes” identifying others, even though they are inside the woman’s head, showing the influence of the imagination and what a “gift” they are. The power in this poem is found in the turn from a place of safety and “destination” to “strangeness,” or from culture to the “story” of disability.

Shildrick’s argument that a woman’s body is both more embodied, but also perceived as inferior to a man’s, is important to Wicks’ work here. 110 The identification of gender and its position in Wicks’ poetry is important: it is a “woman’s head” that we find in her poems and how she embodies this idea is integral to how we can see her poetry through feminist or Disability Poetics readings. Shildrick states: “the woman is a person marked by an absence,” 111 but curiously Wicks is writing about “presence” in her life, where the power of disability infiltrates it and others surround her. Our reading of Wicks reveals more about

109 Ibid. p. 29.
110 Shildrick, p. 13.
111 Ibid. p. 38.
power than Shildrick suggests. Wicks demonstrates how gender *impacts* power by making the disabled body present, and more than “inferior” and “other” despite the fact it is stigmatised. Wicks’ vibrant, animated and resonant images such as “gargle your saliva to a tune from *Carmen*”112 produce a reading of the disabled body that is a powerful force.

In addition to the concept of poetry involving a “marked” body, there is a push in Cultural Disability Studies to focus on imagery and meaning. Mitchell and Snyder assert that Cultural Disability Studies allows writers to produce “meaning-making itself.”113 This requires the production of images that are not stereotypical or discriminatory. Producing a written example of identity in light of having a disabled, female body is complicated by the fact that Disability Studies is split on how this identity will be defined or referenced.114 For some having a disabled identity is an important part of “belonging” and discovering what disability means to them. For others it is restrictive and discriminatory to define identity as a grouping of those with disabilities.115 Existing meanings of disability can be reframed, redefined and reimagined and Wicks acknowledges the complexities of constructing a definitive sense of identity, which can never be certain or fixed. In comparison with Shapcott, it seems Wicks is more open to identifying herself as disabled. Wicks’ poetry is a fight for an identity conceived in a reflection of a “broken body,”116 and produces a “broken” story, which contains fragments that

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112 Wicks, *Open Diagnosis*, p. 39.
114 Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited*, p. 95.
115 Ibid.
allow us to experience the nature of her disability, not a path from diagnosis to acceptance.

Wicks' diagnosis of MS is mentioned precisely, for example: “now his only daughter/ has M.S. [sic].” Wicks’ collection acknowledges the difficulty of describing the experience of illness politically and culturally, especially when a diagnosis is relatively new. It depicts the competing issues of identity and acceptance within the work, where Wicks shows the “gift of so much colour” interwoven with “My hands only twitch quietly, / measuring the white hiatus:” two images that begin to represent the space between how she constructs her disability and identity.

Wicks’ collection *Open Diagnosis* explores disability through language, imagery and form. The concept of an identity of a disabled woman is often reflected or mediated by others in her collection. *Open Diagnosis* is representative of the 1990s and marks the legislative and cultural changes to disability at the time. Although its response to disabled identity is complex, it allows Wicks to explore these boundaries that surround disability identity in her work, and like others in the New Generation, play with the “truth” of these ideas.

117 Wicks, *Open Diagnosis*, p. 31.
118 Ibid. pp. 20, 28.
Chapter 3: Jo Shapcott and a New Generation of Self-Identification.

Jo Shapcott’s collection *Of Mutability* was published in 2010 and is largely structured around the themes of illness and mortality. As I argued in my introduction, *Of Mutability* searches for a way to counter the cultural and social images of disability and illness in the 2000s. The poems’ employment of uncertainty and their sometimes obscure language are best understood in the context of issues around the developing orthodoxies of Disability Poetics. The book incorporates scientific language, which is useful in providing authority to Shapcott’s experiences, as well as adding authority to the wealth of imagery and metaphor Shapcott draws upon.

Shapcott moves from an interpretation of disability as oppression, towards a representation of illness as part of the larger constructions of how we consider our lives, replete with complexities and failures. The legal definition of disability, which at the time of Shapcott’s collection, understands disability as including any “physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities,” consequently includes cancer.¹ This is influential in how we consider Shapcott, and marks her as a poet with a disability, despite the fact that cancer is not always “fixed” nor “permanent” in the same way as paralysis for example. The medical language and experiences that are contained in Shapcott’s poetry are part of the larger confrontations between sociological and medical understandings of disability occurring at the time.

3.2 Criticism of Shapcott: An “Elastic” Cultural Poet

Shapcott’s voice incorporates illness without fully embracing the identity of a “disabled poet” and is echoed by other members of the New Generation. As Day and Docherty go on to argue, “a contemporary writer who has done as much as anyone to explore the elasticity of the poetic voice in the nineties is Jo Shapcott” and this “elasticity” is part of how Shapcott incorporates the many different tugs on her identity. That said, there is little scholarship on how Shapcott writes about illness or disability, the only notable work is by Iain Twiddy, who devotes a chapter to Shapcott in his book Cancer Poetry. Twiddy’s work is important, and touches on some similar observations to this thesis, however Twiddy’s approach is to discuss the representation of cancer in Shapcott’s work and others, which is distinct to my approach of considering how Shapcott’s realisation of this identity has the possibility to change her poetry. Twiddy explores Shapcott’s lack of “explicit attention to Breast Cancer” for example:

But why is pain – and an explicit attention to breast cancer – so scarce in Of Mutability? Perhaps because, according to the collection’s commitment to the physical realities of the biosphere, the cancer is such a small part of a whole life. The gratitude to the disease for opening up experience, and the rush of life force that comes with recovery, are too strong for the poet to indulge the problems it caused her; an accurate representation of cancer would perhaps be something always on the verge of a poem, hinting at its existence.

Twiddy describes Shapcott’s collection here as only touching the peripheries of cancer. My reading of Of Mutability shows that Shapcott goes further than just

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placing cancer on the “verges” of her poems and instead this experience reveals part of her identity as a poet.

Because of the incorporation of cancer in her collection, there needs to be a consideration of the political consequences of talking about cancer and disability in poetry. The political situation of cancer is discussed in G. Thomas Couser’s work. Couser is a critical writer that bridges the Medical Humanities/Disability Studies border, and is quite didactic in tone. In his book Recovering Bodies, he makes various claims about the writing that surrounds breast cancer, for example:

More than the narratives of many other diseases, then, narratives of breast cancer generally have a public mission, an agenda that is in some sense political. Indeed as an autobiographical sub-genre they have some affinity with slave narratives, which were also written in the hope of abolishing a threatening condition that their narrators were fortunate enough to escape. Thus survivors of breast cancer, aware that their individual escape may be temporary, wish to focus public attention and resources on their disease in the hope of minimising its potency.5

Couser’s argument here appears quite a reach. It is obviously written in the shadow of writers such as Susan Sontag, whose seminal work On Being Ill argues that the representation, myths and metaphors that surround cancer are unhelpful and damaging.6 However, Couser’s argues that narratives of breast cancer have a very public political purpose are obviously very distinct to what Shapcott is doing with her collection. Even if we consider Shapcott a “political” poet, she is obviously not in the ways Couser is suggesting is inevitable for writers about breast cancer. Work such as Couser’s is important as it provides context to the critical reception of cancer at the time. Knowing how Couser and others in Medical Humanities were

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5 Couser, Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing, p. 37.
6 Sontag.
talking about cancer can change how we consider Shapcott’s collection. Instead of writing the ‘inevitable’ narrative of cancer, Shapcott produces a distinct way to interpret and reveal breast cancer, comparably different to the politically fuelled work that Couser, and in some respect Sontag, are commenting on.

3.3 Shapcott’s Early Collections and the Language of Science

*Of Mutability* follows Shapcott’s four previous collections *Electroplating the Baby*, *Phrase Book*, *Motherland* and *My Life Asleep*, which explore similar themes about the body, but also concentrate on ideas of identity and place. In the collection *My Life Asleep* (1998), Shapcott foregrounds her physical body, using scientific words and phrases to highlight how she considers herself in a way that is distinct to “normal.” As an example of the New Generation, Shapcott deftly exposes her understanding of the “different” body, compounding each image with more complex ideas until it is untenable.

Her poem from this collection, "The Alchemist" opens with scientific language. These images trouble the typical or “ableist” way of observing bodies in literature, which is normally presented through binary oppositions such as sick and healthy, or abnormal and normal. Instead, even in this early collection, Shapcott presents a world where multiple perspectives on the body are encouraged:

I’ve waited my whole life for these few atoms
to swim, synchronised, into tetrahedra
(that’s diamonds to you, sunshine, crystal gold).
But it all goes pear-shaped or, at least, cuboid,
so I end up with prymites or galena

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or magnificent prisms of boring, boring quartz.  
But you, my auriferous lovely, have just to breathe 
and mica condenses in the very air.  
I’m the acolyte of your reticulations,  
a zealot for your material ideology.\(^8\)

The language of “The Alchemist” crucially demonstrates the intertwined themes of Shapcott’s poetry, which concern (among other things) disability, place, desire and gender. This poem reveals some of the quandaries that representing disability presents. By fighting against the strict labels and identities that are easily integrated into critical analysis Shapcott produces a perspective on the body that incorporates multiple positions and ideas, including biological determinism, social and cultural categories of disability.\(^9\) In “The Alchemist” for instance, “I’m the acolyte of your reticulations” forces the reader to consider both the robust scientific language that populates Shapcott’s poems changing the rhythm and sounds of her work, but also the references to religion and faith in the word “acolyte.” The incorporation of marginal perspectives is part of what makes Shapcott a successful poet. Her ability to represent a variety of sectional ideas bolsters her poetry, and in turn fights against the idea of a singular identity, for instance that of the “disabled” poet.

“The Alchemist” demonstrates Shapcott’s fascination with the cadence and form of scientific terms, which are used to illustrate the themes of love, and relationships. These terms also provide another perspective on Shapcott’s poems through the authority and reverence they provide to her writing. This poem explores marriage, and the traditions that surround it, phrases such as “I’ve waited

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my whole life for these few atoms / to swim, synchronised, into tetrahedra” is a wish for a diamond ring, compounded by the reference to “galena” a type of lead. By using these scientific terms, Shapcott confronts traditional images of romance; she has not been waiting for a princess cut diamond for example, but “atoms and tetrahedra.”

Later, in Of Mutability, Shapcott will use the same skills to upset the typical representations of disability and medicine. “The Alchemist” uses science and form to construct a distinctive way of considering the body. Through identifying the different qualities of scientific and non-scientific language, “The Alchemist” plays with the certainties that science can provide, juxtaposed against uncertain and unprovable things like love, which cannot be reduced to just a muscular contraction, or similar scientific terms.

Poems such as “The Alchemist” mark how Shapcott tests the breadth and depth of language within her work. These experimentations also begin to demonstrate her cultural position within a generation of poets that are preoccupied with the exacting language that science provides. As David Kennedy points out in Poetry Review, “poets’ use of science has been closely bound up with a rediscovery of poetry’s plurality of form and discourse.” Kennedy is identifying here not only the power of the language of science, but the structuring potential of using these influences, which mean that poets such as Shapcott present language and poems in ways that reconsider difference.

10Kennedy, p. 29.
Part of overthrowing the constructed identity of disability is by using, in *Of Mutability*, medical themed language and images that present disability differently. More so, it is not just the medical language, but how it works in combination with very specific imagery, in later poems in *Of Mutability*, such as “Viral Landscape” this is clearly and deftly used when Shapcott writes:

I went outside and found the landscape which had eaten my heart. I will lose my mean-time, and spruce and eye-water. The field was just mown and the summer.\(^{11}\)

These images are precise and complex to a degree that is common in the New Generation, and this accurate language has the ability to produce new types of metaphor that focus on the body, and go some way to “destabilize our dominant ways of knowing disability.”\(^{12}\)

In “Viral Landscape” we observe the speaker “going outside” to experience the landscape around her. This poem also heavily concentrates on time and the sense of space that it provides.

shockingly uni-green by contrast. Look further into the stands of trees and everything changes (my cerebral and visual cortex is as old as me.)\(^{13}\)

Here, Shapcott uses the imagery of her brain as a marker for time. The reference to medicine is also in parentheses “(my cerebral / and visual cortex is as old as me)” and is offered as a last thought. This image states the obvious in many ways, forcing

\(^{11}\) Shapcott, *Of Mutability*, p. 48.
\(^{12}\) Mitchell and Snyder, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, p. 4.
\(^{13}\) Shapcott, *Of Mutability*, p. 48.
the reader to consider if her brain and eyes had seen other things before now. Like many of the poems in the collection, there is a constant questioning in Shapcott’s world, whether it is about the body, nature, or the overwhelming theme of mutability. Even at the beginning of the poem the speaker says: “I will lose / my mean-time” noting that she is drifting away from the immediate sense of time that she is already experiencing.

“Viral Landscape” also illustrates how successfully Shapcott can use colour, another theme that is heavily incorporated into the collection.

so hot there was no green in it,  
layers of russets and yellows,  
and I was swelling with mosquito  
bites, and I was listening to Fado.

The trees around the perimeter  
were a block of solid colour.  
(my stomach fluttered at the sight – and  
gut epithelium is five days old at most).14

The poem provides glances of “layers of russets and yellows” and the “uni-green;” descriptions that help the reader to ground the poem in tangible imagery about the outside. Later in the poem we see how medicine can infiltrate this serene space, there is a feeling of nervousness on behalf of the speaker “(my stomach fluttered at the sight – and / gut epithelium is five days old at most),” an image that mixes medicine with the nature around her. It is also important to note that the medical references in this poem are presented as asides that do not fully become incorporated into the poem, distinct to Shapcott’s later work in Of Mutability.

14 Ibid.
3.4 Identifying as Disabled in 21st Century Britain

*Of Mutability* includes poems that present the power in self-identification and reinvention. It illustrates how Shapcott grapples with the identities of being “disabled” or “ill” through its reflection of a journey touching on the boundaries of disability. The collection *Of Mutability* also allows us to see the growth of Shapcott as a poet. In this later collection (2010), the scientific language in her poetry is used with deft ease, a stark comparison to some of the more difficult to digest images, compounded by the specific and complex imagery in poems like “The Alchemist.” “Of Mutability” echoes the idea of reinvention, and is bold and innovative in its decision to use no fixed identifying marks.

Too many of the best cells in my body
are itching, feeling jagged, turning raw
in this spring chill. It’s two thousand and four
and I don’t know a soul who doesn’t feel small
among the numbers. Razor small.
Look down these days to see your feet
mistrust the pavement and your blood tests
turn the doctor’s expression grave.15

Here Shapcott plays with the idea of boundaries. The speaker walks through illness, metaphorically and physically suggesting they “mistrust the pavement” and this is one of many phrases that unsettles the reader. The speaker is not identified as disabled here; instead the feeling is of being unsure: “I don’t know a soul who doesn’t feel small,” the speaker says, joining the emotions in the poem with a wider readership.

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15 Ibid. p. 3.
“Of Mutability” is similar to “The Alchemist” in a number of ways, it uses colours to present the outside world, the “sunshine, crystal gold” of “The Alchemist” is echoed in the colours contained in the second half of the poem.

Look up to catch eclipses, gold leaf, comets, angles, chandeliers, out of the corner of your eye, join them if you like, learn astrophysics, or learn folksong, human sacrifice, mortality, flying, fishing, sex without touching much. Don’t trouble, though, to head anywhere but the sky.16

Additionally, “Of Mutability” juxtaposes the language of science and medicine with everyday images such as “fishing,” meaning that the overwhelming feeling of “Of Mutability” is the speaker’s ability to skirt the boundaries of these experiences, not fully immersing herself in the specific meanings of using these words. Shapcott avoids describing cancer in the same modes that were common with her peers and predecessors.17

One of the main purposes of Disability Poetics is to challenge ideas about “different” bodies, which are often presented as “broken” or “damaged.”18 What is interesting for Shapcott, and the rest of the poets of her generation, is their ability to mark difference within a continuum. Shapcott joins other writers and poets to challenge the concept of a “single” disability identity. One of the major difficulties with movements like Disability Poetics is the use of identity as a totalising idea, incorporating a “type” of disability. When Jennifer Bartlett describes the selection

16 Ibid.
process for the first major collection of poetry in Disability Poetics she says: “we primarily chose poets who have a visible disability. In this the poets’ difficulty becomes twofold; a struggle with physical limitations (which, in themselves, can be a construction) coupled with society’s critique of the non-normative body.”

Although this approach is valid, to restrict Disability Poetics to those who identify as disabled using the social model of disability, is itself wrought with complexities and difficulties related to exclusion and division of these same bodies.

Shapcott’s work poses the problem: how do we write poems that are personal, but do not simply fall into the social and cultural categories of “disabled?” Even recent publications of Disability Poetics in the UK require self-declarations of a “disabled identity.” Resisting this identity means Shapcott produces poetry that explores a different spectrum of experiences of disability. Alongside other poets of the New Generation, she positions herself on the boundaries of “disabled,” working to straddle disability and wellness in “Of Mutability.” These opposing ideas are married through images such as “Too many of the best cells in my body / are itching, feeling jagged, turning raw” where she incorporates the idea of change, of the tiny cells being alive and independent of herself, and shifting slowly (while also offering a sly echo of Allen Ginsberg’s Howl).

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19 Bartlett, Black, and Northen, p. 15.
20 Liz Crow, for example, argues that the social model excludes the issues for women and those with chronic illnesses that lead to impairments. Crow, in Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability; Morris, Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability.
21 Alland, Burnhope, and Sluman. As stated in the call for submissions: “poets who self-identify as disabled, people with disabilities, crip, D/deaf, or any variation thereof, and who may consider their impairments and/or their disabled or D/deaf identity a key part of their thematic, conceptual and aesthetic practice.”
22 Allen Ginsberg, Howl and Other Poems, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956).
“Of Mutability” marks the oppositions between feeling different, down to a cellular level, but also just one of many, or “among the numbers.” Having cancer, is of course a common experience; however, this title poem begins to reveal how she illustrates illness and disability, but separates this from concepts of identity. It is always at arm’s reach, an afterthought that “your blood tests / turn the doctor’s expression grave.”

Shapcott writes poems that combine this imagery, with strict attention to form, highlighting different ways of reading the impact of illness on the speaker, as earthshattering, or close to normality, a minor inconvenience even.

The restrictive nature of Disability Poetics illustrates the complications for Shapcott who wants to illustrate the boundaries between disability and health. Critics such as Michael Davidson attempt to open these boundaries by arguing that “disability poetics does not describe a movement or an aesthetic so much as a spectrum of positions around embodiment,” and although partially true, Davidson fails to see the (enforced) categories that surround this critical perspective, which mark poets “disabled” or “normal.” Shapcott’s bodies in her collections, including Of Mutability, do not present a binary “normal versus abnormal” reading, but instead allow the reader to see difference as part of what bodies do. Although Disability Poetics produces an interesting way of reading poems by disabled authors, it is not the only way of understanding how poetry can change people’s perspectives on difference. Shapcott, and the rest of the New Generation, use the influence of Disability Poetics, but also feminism, queer studies, and race studies to

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23 Shapcott, Of Mutability, p. 3.
provide a way to talk about bodies that is less about stigma and deviance, but instead incorporates those feelings of indignity into how all people, but especially female minorities, talk about their bodies in contemporary British poetry.

3.5 Inspiring the Body: Multi-Dimensional Poetry

The attention to form and cadence of the scientific words and phrases that Shapcott uses within the collection are also part of how we can trace Shapcott’s growth as a poet. In Of Mutability this tight form and language reflects the changes in British poetry and the improved visibility of disability issues at the time. Many of the poems are in the sonnet form, or are short and concise poems relating to the body, nature and relationships, and this particular attention to how a poem looks on the page signals the importance of physical structures in Of Mutability, where the subject matter is often less concrete.

Of Mutability is notably inspired by Helen Chadwick’s work, an artist with a fascination with the body, and many of Shapcott’s titles are borrowed from Chadwick’s sculptures and include the physicality that the context of Chadwick’s work supplies. These poems also reflect the structures in society that define and allow identity to be framed and uttered. Structures which include the boundaries of disability and feminism, which as Margrit Shildrick argues are inherently complex and “unstable:”

Boundaries that organise us into definable categories are in any case discursively unstable, and it is not so much that resistance is required to override them as constant reiteration is needed to secure them. Just as we perform out sexed and gendered identities, and constantly police the boundaries between sameness and difference, so too the purity of the

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healthy body must be actively maintained and protected against its contaminated others – disease, disability, lack of control, material, and ontological breakdown.26

Shildrick’s perspective here is essential to understanding the complexities of Disability Studies at the time of Shapcott’s collection. The boundaries that surround writing about disability reveal other structures in her collection. This interaction between “sameness and difference” for example, is at the forefront of Shapcott’s work where we see glimpses of illness and ableness in the same poem, for example “Procedure.”

this tea, this cup of tea, made of leaves,
[...] takes me back to the yellow time of trouble with blood tests, and cellular madness.27

This is a poem that intertwines the ordinary and the extraordinary. Shapcott’s work also tackles the instability of the concepts of healthy versus unhealthy through representing cancer as an illness and disability, and as a reflection of one part of her identity, which also includes “woman” and “English.” Shildrick argues that the healthy body must be “maintained” and in Of Mutability the reader can experience what happens to healthy bodies that are “contaminated” by sickness, as Shapcott says “I said goodbye to the outside of my body” and we will all witness this same “contamination” sooner or later.28

The impact of feminism and identity on contemporary poetry is an important contextual critical perspective in the 1990s onwards. It provides a

26 Shildrick, p. 60.
27 Shapcott, Of Mutability, p. 53.
28 Ibid. p. 4.
background to how women were considering and writing about their bodies. In particular it is discussed by Gary Day and Brian Docherty in the book *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s*, where they argue that:

The current shift, then, in feminist criticism and in contemporary women’s poetry is in foregrounding the process of representation, rather than representation itself. Recurring strategies are the reversal of type; the revision of classical, historical and popular myths; the dramatic monologue, male and female, structural irony. Type is reversed through defamiliarisation of conventional gender behaviour such as the pregnant woman’s sexuality, or aging ... and through reversing the subject/object position so that the woman is observing the male looking at her.  

Day and Docherty’s observations here are partly true for Shapcott and the other New Generation poets who explore gender, but this argument is also illuminating as it demonstrates how women present bodies that are different from “normal.” In Shapcott’s work the “process” of representation is important and she resists being represented as merely a woman, or even further marked as a disabled woman with all the baggage that comes with that identity. Through the language that Shapcott utilises, her work considers bodies in a similar way to how feminism and contemporary women’s poetry is presented critically here. The creation of a different idiom in poetry through the use of scientific and medical language means that her representation of disability and illness pushes at the boundaries of how we categorise and understand the representation of disability in real life.

Additionally, Shapcott produces a collection that manages to attend to illness and identity, while also refusing to embrace the identity of “disabled” or “ill.” As I have considered earlier in this thesis, these identities are complex and tied to

29 Day and Docherty, p. 247.
problematic cultural and social ideas about what it means to be disabled. For Shapcott in Of Mutability illness is a tool that helps her to consider her own mortality. It is the way in to describing the other uncertain identities that surround her. As Day and Docherty argue “[Shapcott] not only enjoys giving voice to things that have previously been denied [her], but she seems to suggest that the poetic persona should ideally be as flexible as a character in a cartoon.”\(^{30}\) This flexibility allows her to play with the structures and boundaries that define illness and disability academically.

Shapcott’s use of scientific language further complicates this idea of ownership of one’s body and illness, as it allows her to speak authoritatively of something of which she is unsure. The poem “Composition” explores these competing views, and begins:

And I sat among the dust motes, my pencil (blue) sounding loud on the page, and a blast of sun hit a puddle.\(^{31}\)

The beginning of this poem explores the space around the speaker. It is vivid and easily imaginable, even the “loud” pencil is part of how Shapcott sets up her environment where she is paying close attention to the things around her. Later in the poem we see:

O my hips

ached from sitting. My brain’s not right really;
The latent inhibition so way out

that even a hangnail thrilled;
I was drowning in possibility

\(^{30}\) Ibid. p. 275.
\(^{31}\) Shapcott, Of Mutability, p. 51.
In these later stanzas Shapcott’s attention is focused on her body. Her movement from the less specific imagery like “my brain’s not right / really” to the immediately identifiable and powerful details like “a hangnail thrilled” sets up how she uses the combination of specific and general imagery and language to illustrate mortality and illness. When she says “I was drowning in possibility,” the specificities of the poem open up to a broader picture. At the end of the poem we find:

the changed cells gathered
and my hair was damp on my neck
and I prayed to be disturbed

and hurricanes whistled and hissed,
my noses itched, my ears hurt,
and then there was this.  

Here the reader is faced with the uncertainties of Shapcott’s position. “The changed cells” is a reference to cancer, where cells change and multiply without consent or knowledge. The other bodily changes she is experiencing reveal how different she feels compared to “before.” The final line where she says “and then there was this” leads the reader to consider if there is something more to what is going on, and asks why this is unmentionable by the speaker. Among the specific details in this poem, there is a lot of uncertainty and the speaker asks for the help of others, and even God when she “prays.” This poem is revealing as it tests the boundaries of illness and fades them into other aspects of life. It resists both the clichés of the representation of the female body and the politically instrumental language of

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
academic study, choosing instead to generate more uncertainty and doubt about its subject.

3.6 How Disability Poetics figures in Shapcott’s forming of Breast Cancer

Disability Poetics is at its source the potent idea that writing about disability can change its representation. It is a movement gathering strength academically and culturally, where representations of disability are constantly changing for better or worse. Shapcott often denied the influence of her own disability on her work when it was first published. In later interviews such as her appearance on The Verb she admits to the influential nature of the experience of cancer, but still does not include Disability Studies. This is a complication of avoiding the identity of “disabled.” Instead she is a feminist, an “English” poet, and even a “war poet,” before a “cancer poet” or a “disabled poet.”

In Of Mutability there is a focus on a distinct sense of place and time. The sense of where the speaker is, “on the slab for surgery” for example, is often more overwhelming than the contextual additions of illness or disability. That said, this allows Shapcott to negotiate the spaces between these places and the body. “I Go Inside the Tree” demonstrates these connections:

   Indoors for this ash
   is through the bark;

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34 As argued in cultural Disability Studies. Notably: Mitchell and Snyder, Cultural Locations of Disability.
35 As discussed in the Guardian article, the representation of disability in modern-day Britain is complex, to say the least. Lucy Catchpole, ‘I Love Channel 4’s Paralympics Advert. But We Can’t All Be Superhumans.’, in Opinion, (Manchester: Guardian Newspaper, 2016).
38 Iain Twiddy’s book goes some way to correct this. Twiddy.
39 Shapcott, Of Mutability, p. 53.
notice its colour –
asphalt or slate in the rain –

In this poem Shapcott uses a tight form with short and sharp clauses to talk about mutability and the life of a tree. The places of the tree and the body are connected in this poem, when she writes, “indoors for this ash / is through the bark,” she calls to mind images of an ash tree, via the phrase of “ashes to ashes.” The tree reminds us of the continuous memory of living things “tasting / weather in the tree rings” and these images are careful to register all the ways that bodies remember the infiltration of others, (and indeed medicine), through their physical actions.

then go inside, tasting
weather in the tree rings,
scoffing years of drought and storm,
moving as fast as a woodworm.⁴¹

Throughout this poem although the focus is the tree, it can also be read as connected to the speaker’s body, whose imagery reminds us of a pregnant mother:

who finds a kick of speed
for burrowing into the core,
for mouthing pitch and sap,
until the O my god at the heart.⁴²

Shapcott is focused on the mutable experiences of things in nature that can echo the experience of the body.

Shapcott is part of a group of poets unsettling the social concepts of disability that are being developed by the academic work in Disability Studies. By resisting Disability Poetics, which has its own social structures, Shapcott unsettles the status quo, producing work that resists the idea that writing about disability

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 39.
⁴¹ Ibid.
⁴² Ibid.
comes from a place of shame and stigma, or that it must be spoken about only in socially and politically necessary terms. For Shapcott, how Disability Studies struggles with the identity of “disabled” is important as it demonstrates the basis of her resistance to labels. As Sheila Riddell and Nick Watson note: “social structures are contingent and invented, they do not rest on a solid foundation, but are open to change, to local reading, to reinvention.”\(^4\) This reinvention is key to Shapcott’s writing.

Shapcott’s poems consequently represent disability as an issue of post-identification. Post-identification is a term I am using to encompass the ways that Shapcott writes about disability in poetry, which reflect how she rejects the identification of “cancer” as a defining cultural, and literary way to describe who she is. To follow on from the point Thomas Couser makes: “merely to have certain [medical] conditions is in some sense to be pre-represented;”\(^4\) Shapcott refuses the assigned stigma these conditions cause, and produces work that moves past a straight-forward identification with disability. Shapcott expands on the experience of having cancer to include other perspectives.

Shapcott’s poetry resists straightforward interpretation, and she moves past a poetry of trauma and produces poems that reveal and celebrate diversity. “Stargazer” is a good example of this:

If I’m not looking at you,  
Forgive; if I appear  
To be scanning the sky,  
Head throw back, curious,  
Ecstatic, shy, strolling  
Unevenly across the floor  
In front of you, my audience,

\(^4\) Riddell and Watson, p. 35.  
\(^4\) Couser, \textit{Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing}, p. 18.
Forgive, and forget what’s
Happening in my cells.
It’s you I’m thinking of
And. Voice thrown upwards,
To you I’m speaking, you.45

“Stargazer” is another poem that asks the reader to interpret how and why it is
talking to the reader. This poem also drifts between different emotions, the speaker
is first “Ecstatic” then later “hoping […] to stay present.” The use of many different
emotional perspectives means that this poem moves between a variety of
perspectives and feelings.

I’m trying to keep this simple
In the time left to me:
Luckily, it’s a slow
And selective degeneration.
I’m hoping, mainly, to stay present
And straight up despite
The wrong urge that’s taken hold,
To say everything, all
At once, to everyone, which
Is what I’d like if only
I could stay beyond this moment.46

Despite the speaker mentioning “I’m trying to keep this simple” it is far from a
simple poem because of its attention to complex language such as “degeneration.”
This juxtaposition with the speaker fighting “to stay present” and explain her
experience. This poem also plays with how it represents the “other” and reiterates
“to you I’m speaking. You” as a way to clear up confusion. The mention of medicine
in “cells” also throws a different light on the poem, as does her punning reference
to a “strong urge,” and her consciousness that her “hoping” may not be very
effective. How Shapcott presents her body in Of Mutability illustrates how slippery

45 Shapcott, Of Mutability, p. 52.
46 Ibid.
her images are compared with the outwardly bold and political poetry of Disability Poetics that is occupied with identity.

Alongside discussions about the language that Shapcott and other New Generation poets use to communicate their experiences, the influence of Disability Poetics in this period is integral to understanding how they present their experiences. My reading of Shapcott reveals her as a writer outside of critical frameworks such as those within Disability Studies, yet she is nonetheless influenced by the cultural impact this work has on society. Disability Poetics questions the cultural representation and impact of poetry by disabled people on society. However, it also is full of dichotomies and difficulties with translating this sectional type of poetry into poetry that incorporates multiple experiences of illness and disability. Its political slant is often restrictive and complex for those on the peripheries to interact with. Shapcott’s work tracks changes in British society, but is revealed as an unwilling participant in Disability Poetics.

3.7 The Linguistic Impact of Disability through the Inclusion of Science

Shapcott’s originality, her ability to evade the conventions or expectations of the reader is clearest when read against the historical impact of disability. Disability or illness as a subject has long been a place for poetry, and it is a popular place for the imagery of gore, destruction and difference. Away from Disability Poetics and its particular focus on the representation of disability, there is a canon of poetry that distinctly approaches illness from a medical, not sociological perspective, acknowledging the ongoing confrontations in academia over the correct way to
approach disability.\textsuperscript{47} For British poets in the 1990s – 2010s however, instead of using disability as a mark of deviance or difference, poets begin to use it as something that is purely part and parcel of life. This is also reflective of how society began to understand disability at the time, with leaps forward in terms of equality and presence in society during the 1990s, the move in poetry to “normalize” the disabled body is especially reflective of this wider feeling.

Considering other poets of Shapcott’s era is important, as it is revealing of the focus on identity and the body was changing at the time. Lavinia Greenlaw is a contemporary of Shapcott and writes on similar subjects, with the same attention to form and language. Her poem “The Innocence of Radium” for example uses the historical relevance of radiation to tell a story with a modern slant.

\begin{quote}
With a head full of Swiss clockmakers,
She took a job at a New Jersey Factory
painting luminous numbers, copying the style
believed to be found in the candlelit backrooms
of snowbound alpine villages.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

This poem focuses on the irony that using radium now has for modern day writers, as we know it is dangerous and damaging. This sense of historical representation is important in contemporary poetry where poets are trying to figure out how to produce new ways of identifying history in their work. For Greenlaw, these


\textsuperscript{48} Greenlaw, \textit{Night Photograph}, pp. 46-47.
historical references also reveal how she uses the authority of scientific words to confront the situation of poets in the 1990s. As Rees-Jones argues,

In exploring scientific discourse as both subject matter and poetic idiom, Greenlaw also offers a critique of patriarchy through an examination of scientific methods and the history of science, while also using science as a strategy which gives her, as a woman poet, a special and uncompromised sense of authority and detachment not usually associated – even in the 1990s – with a female poetic voice.49

This perspective is helpful as it is also what Shapcott is attempting to do with her use of scientific phrases in Of Mutability. This detachment allows her to write about a very personal experience in an authoritative way.

Returning to Greenlaw, we can see her skill in employing the scientific language in her poem, by intertwining it with the romance of working on clocks.

His dangerous bones could not keep their secret.
Laid out for X-ray, before a single button was pressed, they exposed the plate and pictured themselves as a ghost, not a skeleton, a photograph he was unable to stop being developed and fixed.50

Here, the poem uses powerful images to describe the destruction of the body, the characters of the poem “picture themselves,” almost foreseeing the future of the effect of radium on their bodies. Greenlaw also uses rhythm effectively, and the tone of the poem is one that hurries towards its inevitable ending that they cannot stop “being developed and fixed.” Greenlaw and Shapcott are part of a group of poets who have a renewed focus on science. As Rees-Jones argues “Shapcott and Greenlaw look to science as a way of rethinking fixed structures and empirical givens, using it simultaneously as a discourse of authority associated with

49 Rees-Jones, p. 228.
50 Greenlaw, Night Photograph, p. 47.
masculinity and well as a way of questioning that authority.”\textsuperscript{51} This confrontational and experimental nature of their poems reveals their ability to use the body as a way of personalising and distancing their experiences from their autobiographical selves.

3.8 \textbf{Gender and Disability in Shapcott’s Representation of the Body}

Shapcott’s representation of illness is complicated by the increased visibility of Disability Studies and feminism in the noughties. This scholarship begins to explore how and why women represent their bodies. In \textit{Of Mutability} we find examples of an interaction between Shapcott’s many identities. “Myself Photographed” for instance is infiltrated by illness and concepts of gender identity.

\begin{quote}
So this is me. In the field after we got lost.
My eyes are turned up to the right
and my mouth is a little open.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

This is another poem that has a focus on form, and is an almost sonnet, with its fifteen lines, and turn in the last few lines to the wider experience outside of the poem.

\begin{quote}
Perhaps I always look like this.
Perhaps it is an expression of surprise
that I am in the world at all, let alone
that this wrong turning resulted in an oak.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

The other integral details are the way that the speaker is continually hedging her opinion and ideas, including the use of the words “perhaps” multiple times.

\begin{itemize}
\item (I want to say lead, leaf); high grass (I want to say hay tickle); my dodgy ankle (I want to say friendly old pain); the warm tang
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{51} Rees-Jones, p. 217.
\textsuperscript{52} Shapcott, \textit{Of Mutability}, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
of saliva in my mouth (I want to say charged tongue); my body cells so new, fresh, and not disorderly at all (I want to say Hope) and O the weather there which was hot, so hot, so hot, so hot that day.  

The phrasing of “I want to say” is important as it means the reader is aware that the speaker cannot be sure or definite. This is a common theme in writing by women, and reveals the construction of the speaker’s identity as a woman, who hedges her feelings about her own body. The use of a photograph also reveals attention to the bodies of women, and demonstrates how Shapcott’s body is different because she is ill, “perhaps it is an expression of surprise / that I am in the world at all,” she states, also declaring that this “wrong turning resulted in an oak” referring to the strength of coming out of illness to the other side, where although she may be unsure, she is full of “Hope.” This poem is different to what Twiddy proposes when he writes cancer only sits on the peripheries of Shapcott’s work. It is clearly about the experience of cancer, and the power that experiences contains; Of Mutability is more revealing than others may suggest.

Much of the criticism that surrounds Shapcott’s work discusses her sense of place and geography, and the politics of her poetry.  

Shapcott is emblematic of the larger group of 20th Century female poets.

54 Ibid.
[I] focus at this point on the many ways in which women poets of the 1980s and 1990s sought to problematise the medium of English through which they predominantly write. I think about how this is linked to their gender (and the ways in which they negotiate ideas of femininity) but also their sense of national identities in Britain and Northern Ireland.\textsuperscript{56}

The use of the geography of the poet links to the larger struggles in this period to do with identity and gender. Although these tangents have a limited application to my discussion of gender and disability, they mean that there is much more to reveal about the way Shapcott coordinates identity and language in her poetry in \textit{Of Mutability} in ways that are connected to her identity. It is also important to identify these other “pulls” on Shapcott’s identity, as they affect how she represents herself.

As I mentioned when looking at Wicks, Disability Studies is part of a larger movement in the 1990s onwards that considers the intersectionality of identities, as Mitchell and Snyder argue “the exploration of identity crossings between disability, race, class, gender and queer identities forms a significant part of the contribution that cultural model disability scholars can make to the field.”\textsuperscript{57}

Additionally, these discussions are illuminating as they further reveal the importance of Shapcott’s preciseness over language, which can be extrapolated to apply to her poetry about illness as well. The language Shapcott uses is illuminating as it forces the reader to consider the ironies of claiming identity and the gaps that can be found between healthy and sick, rather than merely considering a strict demarcation of different identities and different bodies.

\textsuperscript{56} Rees-Jones, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{57} Mitchell and Snyder, \textit{Cultural Locations of Disability}, p. 17.
Greenlaw’s poem “Sex, Politics and Religion” names and describes the impact of cancer with minute detail, but she has the perspective of an outsider. As many critics in Disability Studies argue, the “outsider” perspective is not the best way to represent disability, which is an identity owned by the people who tell their own stories.\textsuperscript{58} Having others illustrate the struggle of disability is a complex idea, and has in the past led to representations of disability that would be considered harmful and inaccurate. Greenlaw’s poem is powerful, but removes the personal identity of disability.

Here features unfold as she lowers her head
Back against the basin. I play for time,
Getting the temperature of the water just right.
I have almost grown used to touching old hair
And have learnt to respect a customer’s face,
Clamping my free hand against the forehead.\textsuperscript{59}

This poem is straightforward and reveals both the feelings of the speaker and the appearance of the woman in the poem. There is an uncomfortableness to it because the speaker is removed from the experience, she “play[s] for time” for example, avoiding dealing with the diagnosis. Unlike Shapcott, Greenlaw names the medical problem that is plaguing the other person of the poem, “Cancer,” and consequently explores what this means to the characters in her poem.

In many ways Greenlaw’s poem is not as explicit about the experience of cancer, purely because the speaker is removed from the personal aspects of the disease, and is only an observer.

If I understood the words burped into shapes

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. p. 22.
\textsuperscript{59} Greenlaw, \textit{Night Photograph}, p. 4.
By her new oesophageal voice, I might
Ask about cancer and what would happen
If my hand slipped and the harsh foam
Dribbled comfortably down a network of gullies,
Or if a fly ... I have to get a look.  

Here, the poem is authoritative and curt. The “oesophageal voice” is haunting, but also very precise. The uncertainty of “ask about cancer and what would happen” is also revealing of the theme of this poem which is rather uncertain, juxtaposed with the scientific language of Greenlaw’s work, produces a dichotomy where “cancer” is both clear and obscured. Otherwise, this poem (published before Shapcott’s collection) is remarkably similar in themes to much of Shapcott’s work. Greenlaw focuses on the uncomfortableness of cancer, how to talk about it and avoid it.

The opening is neat and dark,
Framed by skin of an unbearable softness.
She has shut her eyes and is smiling
As I massage hard and keep my mind
On the three things I was told by my mother
That a hairdresser should never discuss.  

Shapcott’s collection avoids this confrontational way to talk about cancer and instead obscures these references to it, illustrating the difficulties in talking about it, by interestingly not talking about it.

This change in tone is also reflective of the 1990s onwards, where it became more normalised to talk about illness and disability. Many works in Medical Humanities including that of Couser directly reference the complexities and difficulties about “coming out” as a cancer survivor. Because of this, Shapcott

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60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Couser, Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing, p. 39.
acknowledges the difficulties by refusing the power of the word cancer, which by the 1990s has gone much further in its metaphorical power than even suggested by Sontag.⁶³

This is also reflected by other poets such as Floyd Skloot who have “come out” with a disability in their poetry. Skloot writes “If there’s one thing my damaged brain / has learned by now, it’s to make no plans, have no expectations,” demonstrating his matter of fact way of presenting and declaring his “damaged brain.”⁶⁴ Equally poets such as Paul Muldoon have written about cancer, but distinct from Shapcott, in more experimental ways, as Twiddy argues, Muldoon’s poetry uses “The structural principles of the disease – replication, invasion and metastasis – elicited mimetic correlatives.”⁶⁵ These structural elements of Muldoon’s poetry, do not reveal cancer in the same way as Skloot, but Muldoon uses poetry as a structuring device, and a way to return to cancer throughout his long poems echoing the influence of Disability Poetics and how the bodies and communities of poets have a structural impact on the work.

Shapcott uses cancer in a way that is distinct to these poets writing at similar times and incorporates the subject of cancer, not being direct like Skloot, but still revealing some of the experience of cancer in her poems. She allows the reader to ask what is real and what is assumed when we find out someone is ill by writing an experience of cancer that is far from straightforward. Shapcott’s stance

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⁶³ Sontag, p. 57.
on the body is deftly illustrated in how she talks about it critically as well as within her poetry:

From neuroscience and cognitive science we now understand that our thinking is ‘embodied,’ that the concept of body/mind duality no longer provides a satisfactory account of the way we perceive. I love this idea and its implications for language: that the images we invent are intrinsic to the way we see the world – according to thinkers like Lakoff, metaphors actually structure the way we think. All this puts poetry right at the centre of our (bodily) experience.66

This stance also allows the reader to be confronted by the ethical problems that are presented by Disability Poetics, asking how we should represent cancer, and how the body, and a woman’s body in these poems, is considered post-diagnosis – as part of the speaker or belonging to medicine.

Part of this unwilling participation in Disability Studies is revealed by Shapcott’s uncertainty in mentioning disability at all, knowing how freighted, like gender, it can be as a subject. Shapcott’s poem “Era” is where Shapcott skirts around cancer, and uses powerful and specific images and colour, to reveal the experience of illness:

The twenty-second day of March two thousand and three
I left home shortly after eight thirty
on foot towards the City. I said goodbye
to the outside of my body: I was going in.67

Shapcott uses a very specific sense of time here to ground the reader. This imagery illustrates the speaker’s control over where she is currently situated. The phrase “I was going in” reveals the end of this period of specificity, and looks to the uncontrollable things in her life. “I was going in” is revealing as it indicates she is

67 Shapcott, Of Mutability, p. 4.
giving up something, but it also references her body and the attack that cancer and medicine are soon to have upon it.

Next Shapcott moves to the other people in her environment:

The magpies were squabbling in the park.
The little fountain splashed chemical bubbles over its lip. Traffic swarmed and swam around Vauxhall Cross, like crazy fish, with teeth.68

This section is interesting because it begins Shapcott’s focus on birds and nature. It is also slightly more disorganised and random, with references such as “crazy fish, with teeth” and the comparisons to the traffic around her. It is as if the speaker is losing her grip on her own body and its experience here. Later on the poem gets even more abstract, when it continues:

And anything could be real in a country where Red Kites were spreading east and now we had February swallows. Planes for Heathrow roared not far enough overhead, shedding jet trails which pointed over there: those other places where all the frontiers end with a question.69

In the last section of the poem Shapcott begins to ask questions of herself.

“Anything could be real” she states, revealing how she feels her experience is unbelievable in some way. Additionally, the final line “those other / places where all the frontiers end with a question” is a reference to the hospital and how the boundaries and “frontiers” of her body have changed, and instead of being certain, are questioned. This is a revealing and intricate poem about the experience of going into hospital and surrendering to treatment.

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
Shapcott’s work in *Of Mutability*, marks how poets of the New Generation were tackling the influence of illness and disability in the 2000s. She uses the imagery and language of medicine and science to provide authority for her representation of her own experience. She also avoids using certain types of language, such as naming cancer, or using the words ill or disabled, as a way of indicating how she is avoiding the single identity of a disabled poet. Shapcott is deft and uses illness as a part of the larger narrative in *Of Mutability*. The form of her poems also provides additional insight to how she considers the boundaries of her identity and experience within the book. As readers we experience a large range of her responses to illness, and through other well critiqued areas of Shapcott’s work, such as her sense of place, and the political influence of her work (within her war poetry for example),70 can piece together the difficulties in describing and representing disability away from Disability Studies. As Philip Gross points out in an review of Shapcott’s earlier collection *Phrase Book*, “[it] is less a protest poem than one of those gifts of a moment when a writer’s personal concerns happen to be poised just right to resonate with world events.”71 This description also resonates with *Of Mutability* where the experience of illness reflects the changing attitudes to illness and disability. Shapcott incorporates the experience of disability, without being concerned with its representation. She produces a surreal and compelling collection, which demonstrates how to use imagery and language to push at the boundaries of how we might consider Disability Poetics.

70 Satterfield, p. 218.
Chapter 4: Conclusion: Shapcott and Wicks as examples of the New Generation

Jo Shapcott and Susan Wicks navigate the identities of illness and disability in their poetry in the 1990s – 2010s. As part of the New Generation of Poets, they typify this attention to the body, and incorporate scientific language with authority. The impact of Disability Poetics and Disability Studies should not be underestimated during this period, and they both find a way through the competing social and cultural “pulls” on their identities as disabled women, drawing on but refusing to conform to the academic ways of representing disability.

During the 1990s-2010s discussions around identity were fraught with difficulties, with many critics arguing about the boundaries of cultural identities such as disability, race and gender. Nevertheless, Wicks and Shapcott present a well-rounded consideration of dysfunction that is more than the “abnormal versus normal” rendering of disability.¹ How Wicks and Shapcott present the body and their illnesses or disabilities is part of the New Generation’s move to consider the body more closely, and although this consideration is impacted by changing disability culture at this time, it is not defined by these academic considerations, and often goes against the ways Disability Studies suggests to represent disabled bodies.

Wicks and Shapcott are not united, and do not aim to contribute to the production of a universal experience of disability, but instead incorporate diverse ideas about the body. Their books reframe illness and disability, and reconsider

¹ Titchkosky, in Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory p. 103.
these differences in identity as a complex reflection of their experience. In combination with other poets of the New Generation and beyond, they understand difference and dysfunction to be a powerful way to explore the continuum of experiences that women have with their bodies. This is clear in how they also focus on motherhood, gender and geography, and the impact of these subjects on their identities within their collections.

Wicks and Shapcott mark new ways of considering poetry alongside other New Generation poets, as they achieve poetry that is playful and ironic, while responding and reflecting on what could be considered as a primarily serious subject. Their focus and exploration of the body and difference also incorporates the history and myth of disability and illness, but as this thesis has shown, they are not devoted to disability as their only identity or subject. Distinct to other disabled poets emerging in the 1990s, their work incorporates multiple identities, which allows them to expose and play with the ideas of boundaries, fixedness and truth.

By drawing on other critics who are focused on the intersectionality of identities, this thesis has traced the complexities involved in writing about the self. I have argued that these boundaries of identity are pushed at by Wicks and Shapcott so that they can expose and question the usefulness of categories of difference. Wicks and Shapcott understand that an observation of language is important when criticising these categories, especially in poetry, where language is the bedrock of experience. The use of silence, metaphor and structure in both of Wicks and Shapcott’s collections is revealing as it is another way for them both to explore difference and reveal the constructed nature of illness, normality and abnormality.
By revealing and contesting these constructions Wicks and Shapcott disrupt these strict ideas of identity and instead incorporate the intersectionality of having a number of different identities, most of which are porous.

Through exposing and understanding how language categorises or constructs their experiences as women, and especially disabled women, Wicks and Shapcott can go some way to comment on the problems of identity, representation and experience in their work. We can see the culmination of the changes in attitude and perspective on disability through observing Wicks and Shapcott’s poetry side by side, echoing the state of disabled people in society, who were becoming more visible and less stigmatised in the 1990s onwards. Wicks and Shapcott use the political, cultural and social background of Disability Rights to explore the power of the body in this period, through utilising the language of science, and using new and interesting metaphors of illness and disability they demonstrate a detailed physicality of the body that is often ironic and contradictory.

4.2 The Voices and Stories of Open Diagnosis

*Open Diagnosis* presents disability in a way that is reliant on allusion and the “voices” of others. These voices are incorporated alongside Wicks who powerfully illustrates her own experience. In Wicks’ collection she writes about how disability infiltrates her other relationships. The collection represents Wicks’ identity as a disabled woman through embodiment and articulation of the gaze of disability. As this thesis has shown, this gaze is part of Wicks’ representation of disability, where Wicks plays with the idea of being watched, and what we consider secret aspects of our experience. Ironically as readers we are involved in considering Wicks’ body,
almost as a form of staring. For many disabled people, the act of being observed is a pervasive idea, as there are many examples of disabled people being stared at due to being outside the boundaries of “normal.” For example Rosemarie Garland-Thompson’s book on “staring” includes a discussion of disabled bodies. These acts of staring, or infiltrating someone else’s space are important to consider, as they also contain some fierceness to them. How people act and consider disabled bodies has often been centred around violence, whether it is through discussions of eugenics, or medical interventions for disabled bodies. In Open Diagnosis we can see the influence of this position and it is incorporated in a way that helps Wicks create a distinctive way to observe difference.

Wicks includes examples of how the disabled body is stigmatised and stared at throughout her collection, and this is part of how she represents existing ideas that surround the body in society. This also goes some way to represent Wicks’ ideas on identity, and how she incorporates different parts of her identity within her understanding of this experience, allowing a flexibility that was not common in critical and academic writing at the time. As this thesis has shown, disabled identity was often considered in binary ways, or rather, as “normal versus abnormal,” Wicks instead presents her sense of disability as influenced by both her relationships and society. This flexibility in her representation of the body allows her to consider the body as not merely abnormal, and explores the critical and academic ideas of identity or non-identity during the period, where Wicks’ middling perspective was distinct.

For Wicks the major breakthrough in this period is the ability to explore her story. Critics during this period had tried to steer the way stories are articulated. During the growth of Cultural Disability Studies and Disability Rights we find prescriptive rules on how to tell the stories of illness. Wicks however uses the influence of these ideas as a way to tell her stories from her own perspective. For Wicks for example, gender is integral to her poetry, and as we have seen, these multiple identities “mark” Wicks. However, Wicks uses this declaration of difference as illuminating and powerful; using it to tell effective stories about her own sense of self. In many parts of the collection she is angry, or confrontational, but this serves to add further complexities to how we consider her as a fully rounded poet, identifying things that are both uncomfortable and grotesque for some when talking about illness.

Wicks’ attention to language and how language can help define or reject identities has been one of my focuses within this thesis. This language allows Wicks to represent disability, but also question her own relationship with her body. How she writes her poems is essential to this idea, where her embodiment of language is in some ways reflective of Disability Poetics. That said, Wicks relies more heavily on incorporating cultural influences, such as Helen Keller, or the use of other characters such as doctors, who also mark positions of power and experience within her work. For Wicks’ this reliance on myth, and the juxtaposition between the cultural myths and imagery and her own story, provides interesting themes and ideas, it is however distinct to Disability Studies who were very focused on the

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1 Couser, Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing, p. 36.
precise nature of language, and how this language should be mediated to help further Disability Rights. Through Wicks’ use of multiple viewpoints we see a variety of ways to represent disability. Wicks also utilises proprietary language in terms such as “cripple,” which allows further juxtaposition between her representation and other poets at the time. This thesis has considered the incorporation of all of these perspectives on Wicks’ body, and my reading is that they all help to identify the symbolic power of women’s bodies at the time especially in relation to how difference produces challenging viewpoints on identity.

4.3 Resisting the Marks of Identity in Of Mutability

In comparison, Shapcott in many ways avoids direct references to illness and disability, and instead relies on the medical language she uses to communicate the violence of illness. Through this opposition between the fixedness of the words, and the confusion that they cause, she presents the experience of illness. Shapcott’s collection moves on from an interpretation of illness as oppression and instead, like Wicks presents illness as part of the spectrum of experience. Shapcott’s ideas of place and gender intertwine with illness to produce a consideration of identity that is intersectional and complex. These overlapping representations of different kinds of identities go even further than Wicks to incorporate multiple ideas about difference as they are influenced by the growing movements of feminism and Disability Rights in the 2010s. An added complication is how she resists the marks as a disabled woman with even more vigour than Wicks. Shapcott’s work is also marked by both the increased scientific language that is used, which adds to her authority, and the breadth and depth to her collection, as well as how she uses the
contradiction between the specificity of this language and her uncertainty throughout her experience of cancer to represent things as unfixed and uncertain.

As I have argued in this dissertation, *Of Mutability* represents disability as an issue of post-identification and Shapcott resists naming or identifying cancer in her collection. This is integrally part of the politics of Shapcott’s collection, and marks her distinction to Wicks’ work, which at times can be confrontational and raw. Shapcott instead, by using a variety of form, language, and subjects, takes a step back from the past representations of illness. She produces a new way to consider difference with an authority that refuses to reveal the boundaries of illness and instead incorporates the “elasticity” of Shapcott’s voice to resist a straight-forward interpretation of identity within her work.⁴

4.4 The “Next” Generations

These representations of illness as a spectrum of experience continues into the further generations of poets writing after Shapcott and Wicks. The New Generation of Poets in 1994 presented the beginning of what is now three decades of the scheme that highlights new and interesting poets. Wicks and Shapcott’s work acts as a bridge between the confessional style of poetry that came before them, where Sharon Olds and Sylvia Plath were among the earlier influences on how to talk about the female body; to the more modern freedom of talking about the body in Next Generation with writers such as Emily Berry and Melissa Lee-Houghton.⁵

These poets are influenced by the work Wicks and Shapcott had done to make

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⁴ Day and Docherty, p. 275.
illness part of their collections, in ways that did not define identity, but instead tested the boundaries of this experience in poetry.

The Next Generation Poets, and their peers, also begin to incorporate other dimensions of illness and disability, including an increased focus on mental health and invisible disabilities, echoing the ongoing changes in how society defines and views different types of disability. This is reflected in Wicks’ later collection *The Months*, where in the poem “Hanged Man” Wicks writes “on air and rope and rustling leaves and green / sunlight as he waits to be cut down” using similar language in the references to nature as *Open Diagnosis*, but in a way that is even freer in how she speaks about difference and the dysfunction of mental health problems. It is a step removed from the raw description of her own experience of MS.\(^6\) Similarly, in *Beautiful Girls*, Melissa Lee Houghton’s poem “Asylum Girls” is direct and explicit, it does not shy away from speaking about disability “the girls were taken to the infirmary in riot vans.”\(^7\) It presents an unashamed look at mental health, that occupies the collection, but remains, as Wicks and Shapcott, part of the spectrum of the writer’s experience.

It is also true that stereotypical ways of representing illness and disability in poetry and culture continue, and that Disability Studies is still fighting for the accurate representation of disability, especially within an age of austerity. Wicks and Shapcott exemplify the approach to disability within the 1990s-2010s when the changes in the visibility of those with disabilities was vast, the variation from locked

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\(^7\) Lee-Houghton, p. 17.
away to protesting on the streets for example. They manage to write with relative freedom about their own bodies because there was, at this time, a lack of work on what a British disability poetics would represent. In the middle of these distinct academic fields, they produce poetry that bridges a gap between the foundation of Disability Rights and Britain’s development of Disability Poetics. They talk about the body with honesty, and without being occupied with academic concerns regarding identity.

4.5 Conclusion

As we can see from the variety of approaches to the body, both in Wicks and Shapcott’s prior work, as well as Open Diagnosis and Of Mutability, they walk a comfortable line between being defined by illness or disability, and rejecting their own experiences. Both poets are marking the gradual changes in society from the 1990s onwards, where disability and difference were beginning to be considered differently and more complexly, with not one single way of interpreting these experiences. Against the background of Disability Studies and Disability Poetry, which are themselves in flux, they respond to the continuously changing legislative and societal contexts for disability.\(^8\) Both poets focus on the difficulties of writing about something that is so politically and culturally charged. Thus alongside other New Generation poets offer a distinct perspective on dysfunction without the restrictions of academic criticism. They incorporate disability, while resisting the identities this experience and language assigns to them.

\(^8\) United Kingdom Government, (2010).
The different perspectives on the body illustrated by Wicks and Shapcott are interesting. They both integrate a view on their own body as well as the bodies of others. This is perhaps more explicit in Wicks’ poetry, where she is surrounded by other characters who illustrate her disability as a reflection of their own bodies. However, both Wicks and Shapcott use the bodies of others to demonstrate different ideas and stories that are a step removed from their own. As I have stated elsewhere in my thesis, using the stories of others is complicated in poetry that is about disability, because it can remove the power of first person experiences. However, in both Wicks and Shapcott’s work, other identities such as motherhood, which is present in both Wicks and Shapcott’s collections, also provide distinctive ways to consider identity. Motherhood presents another identity that is life changing and complex for women in the era, where the competing ideas of independence and dependence are forefront, echoing similar discussions in Disability Studies regarding disabled people.

For both Wicks and Shapcott their collections are influenced by a variety of approaches to the body in the 1990s-2010s. They join the New Generation poets in marking new ways to write about and consider their bodies, and largely disrupt other critical and academic ideas surrounding the representation of disabled bodies. They both blur the boundaries that surround their bodies in society. By using other characters they produce a multi-perspectival version of identity. Further, they utilise scientific language to add authority to their work. Their bodies are public, and therefore in some ways political, but both poets resist a rendering of
their bodies as defined solely by a singular identity: disabled that is presented in specific and restrictive ways.
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