

“TAWNY GRAMMAR”:
ANNE SIMPSON’S EXPLORATION OF THE OTHER

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Abstract

This study examines the poetry of Anne Simpson. Given that there has been no full-length study of her poetry, the thesis deals heavily in close readings of poems from all four collections: *Light Falls Through You*, *Loop*, *Quick*, and *Is*. Developing the term “tawny grammar,” used in her essays, I explore how this altered language requires Simpson’s poetry to develop “tawny” poetic forms and “tawny” movements of perspective. The shifting and unstable nature of the “tawny” allows Simpson’s poetry to address the Other, particularly the violent experiences of Others, in an ethical way. I suggest that Simpson’s punctuation, form, and movement create an ethically motivated encounter with the Other. Since her poetry deeply desires to protect the Other, yet is unable to alleviate someone else’s pain, Simpson often places the ethical responsibility on the reader by leaving the endings open, pivoting any given poem towards the desire for change.

Building on the philosophies of Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Maurice Blanchot, Simpson works within the belief that language is inherently self-focused, and so needs to be subverted. Since poetry exists in language, in order to overcome its self-centred nature Simpson also relies on form and movement to call attention to the dangers of a fixed or closed understanding of the Other, which also demands that the poem avoid finality. Relying on her understanding of Federico Garcia Lorca’s *duende*, Simpson creates poems that desire to exist between two opposites, allowing each to maintain their individual identity, yet since Simpson’s opposites are often self/Other, language/chaos, life/death, her poems consistently risk the subjectivity-free space of Levinas’s *il y a*, where the presence-of-absence is overwhelming.

Simpson continually emphasizes the necessity for a porous understanding of the Other. It is the shifting nature of the tawny that allows poems to grapple with suffering. Poetry can ethically encounter the Other when there is a consistent “tawny” oscillation in the work, which, taking into account the specific Other the poem considers, opens the poems up to multiple meanings, evident in language, form, and movements of perspective.

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Dedication

I also want to thank my family back home in Nova Scotia—Paula, Paul, Colin, and Camden Yarn.

This work is dedicated to the optimist—Jeremy.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
INTRODUCTION: Anne Simpson’s Poetry	1
CHAPTER ONE: Tawny Grammar	20
CHAPTER TWO: Tawny Form	45
CHAPTER Three: Poetic Attention and Tawny Movement	76
CONCLUSION: Tawny Grammar in Anne Simpson’s Poetry	105
Works Cited	115

Introduction

Anne Simpson's Tawny Grammar, Form, and Movement

Anne Simpson is the author of four collections of poetry, *Light Falls Through You* (2000), *Loop* (2003), *Quick* (2007), and *Is* (2011). In these collections she considers and confronts the Otherness of violence with the desire to glean meaning from, and contain an ethical response to, horrors. Simpson addresses events such as the Rwandan genocide, the Spanish Civil War, and 9/11, with the aim of empathizing, or even identifying, with those who have experienced them. Each of her collections strives to move poetry from a self-centred linguistic construction towards a “tawny” reflexivity. She continually demonstrates the necessity for a porous understanding of the Other, particularly in the poems that examine suffering and pain. In moving towards a fluid knowledge of the Other, Simpson develops poetic strategies that are evident in her grammar, form, and movement, each of which has its own potential rewards and risks. Simpson’s “tawny” grammar stands to gain a language able to point towards what has been lost through utilitarian usage, but it risks becoming both an incoherent language of chaos and an ordered, stiff utterance, killing what it desires to know. Her “tawny” forms stand to employ a structure that shields the Other from violence, while also allowing for interaction and connection with it; yet it risks a space, similar to Emmanuel Levinas’s *il y a*, that threatens to suspend the Other, and potentially the self, into a form that, moving away from subjectivity, continually withholds connection and hope. Finally, “tawny” movements stand to gain a poetic perspective that not only can grasp and simultaneously gift, thus avoiding the *il y a*, but also create a pivotal moment where the observed Other can move towards a release from suffering; yet it also risks creating a poem that cannot

be satisfied, a poem mired in hopelessness. The space between the potential gains and losses of a “tawny” poetry is what Simpson believes is Federico Garcia Lorca’s *duende*. Often found in metaphor, *duende* is what exists in a struggle between two opposites. Through continually maintaining their individual qualities, these opposites are able to simultaneously provide new insights. Although the *duende* inherently required in the use of “tawny” *grammar*, *form*, and *movement* does manage to create poems that, while unable to completely fulfill the removal of suffering desired, gestures to its own failing while still pointing towards hope. Simpson’s poetry, even the poems that are unable to provide access to, or enlightenment of, the Other, is a significant addition to the ongoing conversation surrounding poetry’s responsiveness to the Other.

The term “tawny grammar” has its roots in Henry David Thoreau, who translated *gramática parda* as “tawny grammar” to describe the Otherness of how nature expresses its wisdom (Marram 18). Although Thoreau uses the term *grammar*, evoking the rules that govern language and basic syntax, he does not elaborate upon it or connect it to literature in any form. Instead, Thoreau muses on the boundary between knowledge and ignorance, asserting that knowledge is often “positive ignorance” rather than a comprehension that can be grasped or possessed (Thoreau, 79-80). The openness of this “positive ignorance” or “Beautiful Knowledge” (Thoreau 80), allows Simpson’s employment of “tawny grammar” to be expanded to include her subversion of form and her shifting subjective, or thematic, movements, both of which also function as an attempt to explore the boundary between knowledge and ignorance when contemplating the Other. In the opening essay of *The Marram Grass*, “A Hundred Fifty Psalms at

Twilight,” Simpson considers tawny grammar’s application to language, specifically the language of poetry:

Tawny grammar, I think, would include beak and claw. It would be many-voiced, as if numerous strands of sound ran through it at once... it would be ever-changing, ever-fluctuating, it wouldn’t be fixed or closed. Because of its openness, it would be innovative and experimental, shifting and renewing its protean forms; it would work in all manner of roundabout ways, inquiring, speaking, shouting, begging, singing, berating, murmuring, coaxing – and calling out. It would sound like poetry. (18)

Simpson’s tawny grammar then requires, or perhaps creates, corresponding “tawny” forms and movements.¹

However, this “tawny” grammar relies on the conventionally defined, rule-oriented, grammar for its identity; a subversion of this grammar can only exist because grammar as we know it existed first. Simpson understands, as Friedrich Nietzsche does, that grammar is not only the rules and regulations of language but also the rules and regulations in which we have faith (20). This belief that we can find identity and safety within grammar is embedded so deeply within humanity that, paraphrasing Martin Heidegger, Simpson says that “we dwell within language as we dwell inside being, the home we possess” (20). Don McKay, whose essays become integral in the third chapter, understands “home” as what “makes possible the possession of the world, the rendering of the other as one’s interior” (23), and that language becomes a home when it is thought

¹ I have used the term “tawny movements” to describe how Simpson *moves* towards and away from her thematic subject or object, be it by shifting perspectives, physical distance, or time. This term dominates the third chapter.

of as “apparatus” (62). To understand and use language as a complex organizing structure is to “inhabit it with an awareness of residual wilderness” (62). So while even the most systemized language is not free of wilderness, or, as I’ve glossed the term, Otherness, it is capable of being “inhabited” like a home. However, Simpson’s development of a “tawny” language signals her desire for a “home” that is able to interact with the Other rather than just being aware of it. This interaction is required because she believes that the house of language, this place of faith and dwelling, is inherently self-centered; the very learning of our language springs from the self, since “the teaching of grammar begins with the self and then expands” (19). And so, any attempt to understand, and put into language, Otherness, will always be tainted by the primacy of the self that comes from our linguistic conventions. The flip side of the ordered system of grammar, in which we have faith in meaning and are able to find a self, is a terrifying “blizzard” of chaos. This space, Simpson says, would be a space “outside” memory, history, or time (23). Yet, it is in between these two spaces, inside and outside the house, that she believes tawny grammar can exist. Simpson asserts that this space is on the “edge of language, where syntax begins to slip from order into disorder” (28). Although it is the space where language is moving from meaning to meaninglessness, it is also the space where the Other can be reached. For it is just outside the “house” where language can be removed from its ontological purpose and able to “direct its energies away from the self” (29). When language becomes unable to carry coherent meaning, it is then removed from the purpose of language: to convey meaning, which in turn can house identity. Since language is rooted in, and expands from, the self, when it is used in a way free from the purpose of carrying meaning, it is then able to direct “us to the selfless” (29) or to the

Other.² Finding the balance between meaning and meaninglessness, chaos and communication, becomes the definitive struggle for Simpson's poetry.

Simpson's understanding of tawny grammar is foundational to many of the subsequent ideas that she develops through the rest of *The Marram Grass*. In the final essay, "Waterwords," Simpson makes the bold claim that poetry, through its metaphors, allows for author and reader to "become" the Other: "The thinking that allows us to hold the two-sidedness of metaphor in our minds... allows me to be [a] fourteen-year-old prostitute, and it allows you to be [a] fourteen-year-old prostitute" (147). While I return to this problematic statement later on, first I want to explore the startling nature of it in terms of its contemplation of the Other; often poetry that considers the Other laments the speaker's shortcomings in being able to interact and understand that which is not the self, and Simpson has already asserted that this connection is further hindered by language's inherent self-centered structure. So, although tawny grammar can attend to the development of "things-in-togetherness," a bridge between what is outside (the Other) and what is inside the house (the self residing in language), the distinction between self and Other is still clear. By using metaphors that force the reader to hold two things at once in a conceptual unity, Simpson asserts that the possessive qualities of language can be overcome and the boundary between self and the Other, in this case reader (or speaker) and the fourteen-year-old prostitute, can collapse. However, in many of Simpson's poems this collapse is not possible, for the possessive qualities of grammatical language cannot be overcome.

² This becomes problematic because a removal of the self, or subjectivity, is naturally a movement towards Emmanuel Levinas's *il y a*, a tension in Simpson's poetry that will be discussed later.

Simpson's distinction between grammatical and poetic language is in contrast to notions of language advanced by some other Canadian poets, like poet laureate John Steffler, who asserts in the essay "Language as Matter" that "[l]anguage... extracts essence from temporally – and spatially-rooted substance, and this allows people to condense the universe into a manageable, portable possession" (46). Steffler claims that "[l]anguage makes possible the definition of self and world, the stabilizing and mapping of phenomena, their preservation and manipulation and transportation" (46). While Simpson would agree that language affords the speaker the distinction between self and Other, Steffler's understanding of poetry's use of language would be too possessive and rely too heavily on closed "definitions." Influenced by Gerald Bruns's interpretation of Maurice Blanchot, Simpson interprets art as a parallel with Otherness, rather than the possession of Otherness. Bruns asserts that an object that has been made into an image is no longer "an object in the world but [is] a thing doubled, shadowed, followed by a semblance of its former self" (18). While images and poetry are very different, poetry can be seen as a part of this doubled relationship with the Other. Poetry, like objects made into visual images, contains "glimpses of Otherness" (*Marram* 98). These glimpses of Otherness allow both the poetry and the object or subject considered to reference their Other. Since the world, even in its most ordinary aspects, retains its ineffable qualities, then poetry, in the liminal state of tawny grammar, should always "bring a shadowy elusive strangeness to the ordinary world... [because] this otherness of the very pith of life" (38). So unlike Steffler's claim about language's ability to completely separate self and Other, Simpson's tawny language is employed to illuminate Otherness rather than obscure it.

Tawny grammar is then tasked with uncovering the Otherness from within (what is inside the house), and elucidating the Otherness that is outside the house, both of which are employed to give a fuller awareness of the self and the Other. Returning to *duende*, Simpson defines it as “a power and not a construct, is a struggle and not a concept” (38). *Duende* requires desire, and the consistent struggle between two opposites, in order to exist. Desire is what alerts the reader to the presence of *duende*, for when the two opposing people (or subjects, objects, ideas, or emotions) are collapsed, desire dissipates. Poetic language, or tawny grammar, then functions within the space of longing and tension as it points to the Otherness at the centre of the “ordinary.” Tawny grammar thus gets its power, its *duende*, by existing in the space between clear definitions and chaotic Otherness, and is successful only when it can embody in each its opposite-- definitions in chaos, self in Other-- without dissolving the opposites into each Other. Holding two opposites as one is often the work of metaphor, which allows for two disparate things or concepts to be held in the mind at once without losing their individual nature, yet the presence of *duende* within language and poetry, even within metaphor, can be troubling.

Duende often exists in Simpson’s poetry because it desires both a language like Steffler’s, one that is able to define the Other, and a language like Gary Snyder’s, that understands the reductive quality of language and its impact even on human thought. In his collections of essays, *The Practice of the Wild*, Snyder addresses the term “tawny grammar” from an ecological perspective, focusing on how humanity has used language, both spoken and written, to impose itself on nature. He asserts that it is a “delusion” to assume that language is a “unique human gift” that serves humanity; rather, he argues that language is interwoven with nature which has “given us thousands of tawny human-

language grammars” (83). Touching lightly, like Thoreau, on poetry’s position within the intersection of nature and language, Snyder disagrees that poetry, like the lion, “eats and intensifies natural speech;” instead, since “almost all our thinking is colored by language, and poetry is a subset of language use, that can’t be it [poetry cannot intensify language], I’d say it was the unconditioned mind-in-the-moment that eats, transforms, goes beyond, language” (76). Although Snyder believes that “[a]rt, or creative play” may move towards a “mind-in-the-moment” experience that is liberated from language, he is reluctant to assert poetry as the art form able to liberate. Poetry and language, since they are “herbivore” when compared to the “lion” capable of freeing language from itself, interact with the Other only because they both belong to the same “wilderness” (76), rather than interacting because language can convey the Other. So, while poetry does exist in between order and chaos, even if it can possess *duende*, its reliance on metaphors, and thus language, make poetry ill suited to consider Otherness.

Simpson’s assertions about tawny grammar’s place in poetry seem to exist between Steffler’s belief that poetry is able to define the self and the Other, and Snyder’s belief that poetry is too mediated by language and thus is unable to remove the anthropocentric barriers that stand in the way of understanding the Other.³ Perhaps the closest to Simpson’s understanding of tawny grammar, and subsequently tawny form and movement, is McKay’s understanding of nature poetry and poetic attention. In his collection of essays *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness*, McKay explores how poetry should operate so as to understand the Other, or Wilderness. This

³ For Simpson, when considering the Other of another human’s experience, these “anthropocentric barriers” would translate to language’s preoccupation with the self. Snyder’s understanding of language’s anthropocentrism is analogous with Simpson’s belief in language’s self-centred nature.

“Wilderness,” for McKay, is a complex Other because it is not only the space of what is not the self but is also an “endangered space” where “the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations” is unavoidable (21). He questions the extent to which humanity can actually “own” anything, including tools. While up to this point, Snyder, with his de-valuing of language (76) and privileging of nature’s ability to contain “thousands of tawny human-language grammars”(83), would agree with McKay’s assertions about nature’s ability to elude human appropriation and ownership, Snyder does not hold poetry, with its reliance on language, as an art that can carry meaning as separate from the self. McKay, however, asserts that, through art and poetry, we are able to “encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind’s categories to glimpse some thing’s autonomy – its rawness, its *duende*” (21). Poetry, and the language used in poetry, is able to occupy the liminal space between self and Other, conveying an understanding of each.

In order for poetry to facilitate this connection between self and Other, McKay believes “poetic attention” is necessary. While poetic attention is a mode of thinking rather than a mode of language, analogous to Snyder’s space of experience, it is what allows poetic language to connect with the Other. McKay describes this mode of thinking as “a sort of readiness, a species of longing without the desire to possess” (26). Yet inherent to poetry is what Levinas called the “primordial grasp,” where McKay says, “possession including knowledge begins” (23). Poetry, given its entrenchment in language, is always an act of possession, yet when rooted in poetic attention, the struggle between the desire to possess and the desire not to possess, is always coupled with a gift. McKay writes: “[b]eing language, it [nature poetry] cannot avoid the primordial grasp,

but this occurs simultaneously with the extended palm, the openness in knowing that I've been calling poetic attention (29). While nature poetry has its roots in the Romantic tradition, which has been widely criticized for elevating human imagination over the observed world, poetic attention is able to successfully call attention back to the reductive nature of language itself. Margo Wheaton, in an essay from *Don McKay: Essays on His Work*, believes that this calling attention to language's tendency to diminish its subjects develops a "longing" which "function[s] as an alternative to fear and to the subsequent defensive posturing and destructive attempt to minimize what is perceived as the threatening fecundity and foreignness of the Other" (Wheaton 123). While a mode of thinking can function within the desire not to possess, when this mode of thinking is translated into a mode of language, rooted in a longing, this language must call attention to the possessive nature of itself so as to subvert its grasping nature. This subversion of itself affords language, in this case the language of poetry, a gift, a connection or understanding of the Other that is free of possession.

While poetic attention can facilitate the reflexive action of grasp and gift within language, allowing the poem to celebrate the wilderness of the Other, McKay considers its use within the confines of the inanimate. Although McKay asserts that an ability of art, and poetry, is to "provide safe defamiliarizing moments, when the mask of utility gets lifted and we waken to that residual wilderness without the inconvenience of breakdown or disaster" (59), and while Simpson would agree that instances of violence can be considered without the threat of physical danger to the reader, her poems often risk a breakdown. Although Simpson does desire to lift the "mask of utility" and uncover the Otherness of what she had called "normalcy," much of her poetry addresses the

unfamiliar experiences of suffering, and so she questions the ethics of a poem free from the threat of danger. Also, for Simpson, since a mark of *duende* is the struggle of desire, a desire inherent to poetic attention, poetry must exist on the brink of destruction, for “without struggle, or the risk of destruction, there can be no *duende*” (Marram 39). So, in order to attempt an understanding with an animate Other, particularly a suffering Other, the *duende* risks Emmanuel Levinas’s *il y a*. This *il y a* is described by Simpson as “the presence of absence,” the terror, not of death, but of unrelenting exposure lacking “subjectivity and substantiality” (95). However, Blanchot believes that language removed from “grammar and rules” belongs to the “space or region” that “[l]os[es] subjectivity” (62). This loss of subjectivity is the space of the *il y a*, and while Simpson understands literature’s natural tendency towards it, the fear is that this space has the capacity to terrify us. While Simpson asserts that the *il y a* is most evident in fiction that involves the figure of the double, “the embodiment of that which cares not for the self” (96), her poetry, considering its desire to inhabit that which is outside the house with a language that attempts to erase the self, risks destruction.

Since the stakes of the struggle are so high, Simpson’s final essay of *The Marram Grass*, “Waterwords,” then becomes even more shocking as we return to the assertion that metaphor allows author and reader to “become” the Other, including the suffering Other, the example used being the fourteen-year-old prostitute. While the ability of the reader and writer to become the suffering Other seems like the ideal form of connection for Simpson’s poetry, the risk implied by the possession of *duende* is high, for if the poem contains the struggle of desire it inherently risks thrusting self or Other into a kind of *il y a*, a dangerous space indifferent to the claims of identity. However, further in the

essay “Waterwords,” Simpson tentatively moderates her belief in “becoming” the Other as she explores the practice of *tong len*; during *tong len* the observer is ethically charged to imagine “absorbing the suffering of an individual or individuals” (145). This internalizing is coupled immediately with “imagining the well-being of this individual or individuals,” and so is a kind of reformulation of the grasp and gift of McKay’s poetic attention. Poetic attention and *tong len* exist in the desire to uncover something previously shadowed. However, Simpson’s poetry is more complicated because where McKay often addresses things and nature, attempting to uncover the Otherness of the ordinary, Simpson addresses people, often the compromised and vulnerable subjects and objects of violence.

While Simpson’s collections have won many awards,⁴ there is yet to be a full length study of her poetry. Although she is included in many anthologies, including the well-received 2005 Canadian poetry anthology, *The New Canadian Canon: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*, edited by Carmine Starnino, Simpson has also been under-represented, or sometimes misunderstood within criticism. James Pollock, in his essay, “Book of Revelations,” enthusiastically reviews *The New Canon*, yet conspicuously does not count Simpson among the most promising poets included in the anthology. His objection to Simpson is noted in the essay “Still Out in Left Field,” where he criticizes Simpson’s sonnet sequence “*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*”:⁵ “several poets reveal

⁴ Simpson won the Gerald Lampart Memorial Award and the Atlantic Poetry Prize for her first collection *Light Falls Through You*, as well as the Pat Lowther Memorial Award for *Quick*. Her 2007 *Loop* also won the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize.

⁵ While it is MLA convention not to italicize poems from a collection, I have chosen to maintain Simpson’s original italicization for both the title of the sequence and each sub-title. Given that each sub-title is also the title of Brueghel painting, and painting titles are

themselves to be hopelessly addicted to the listless sentence fragment; these include Michael Ondaatje, Daphne Marlatt, Erin Mouré and Anne Simpson, the latter compounding the monotony by restricting herself for an entire interlocking seven-sonnet sequence to extremely short sentences and sentence fragments” (168). Furthering his criticism, he says that this practice comes from what poets “think... ‘sounds’ poetic. Perhaps it has to do with a certain ad hoc or auto-didactic rhetorical training, so that poets [are] unaware of the base range of possibilities” (168). While these criticisms, seemingly rooted in the desire for a more formalist Canadian poetry, may well be fair, they do not take into account the context and purpose of the sonnets, which attempt to understand mass atrocities.⁶

Pollock’s criticisms of Simpson, and perhaps his dismissal of her poetry, can be compared to his criticism of Karen Solie’s poetry. Both poets published their first collections within a year of one another: Simpson’s *Light Falls Through You* in 2000 and Solie’s *Short Haul Engine* in 2001. While Solie does not consider atrocity in the same manner as Simpson, Pollock seems to classify Solie’s “weak” poems as containing flatness, vagueness, and clichés (105). Although some of these criticisms may be valid, they seem to stem from Pollock’s inability to accept an open-ended poem, which, given Simpson’s fear of closed, and thus stagnant/dead, endings is probably his major

italicized, maintaining the italicization is important for establishing each poem’s corresponding painting.

⁶ Simpson’s “*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*” connects biblical stories of horror, like the Tower of Babel, the slaughtering of male children by King Herod after the birth of Jesus, and Christ and the Adulteress (the corresponding painting austere foreshadowing Christ’s violent death) to the modern day horror of 9/11 and the subsequent wars, connected and not, in Afghanistan and Iraq.

frustration with Simpson's collections. However, praising Solie's technical skill, Pollock writes that "alliterative pairs... liberal use of assonance, consonance, internal rhymes and off rhymes, and metrical oversteering... make the poem ["Thrasher"] a delicious pleasure to read aloud" (99). While Simpson does not have a direct equivalent for Solie's "Thrasher,"⁷ her poems are teeming with these poetic devices, as well as conventional and invented forms that are consistently used to reinforce meaning. It is surprising then that the technical skill of Simpson is passed over by Pollock.

Although Simpson's fragments may be frustrating for readers like Pollock, they exist to combine free-verse elements with rigid closed forms in order to enhance a poem's theme. "*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*," for example, mixes the typically free-verse fragment with the closed sonnet form. Two reviews of Simpson's Griffin Prize winning *Loop* address the tension between open and closed forms very differently. M. Travis Lane hails Simpson as a modern-day saint of closed forms, "bored with the openness and its now old-fashioned hippie connotations" of open form (163). Simpson, she asserts, "has the ability to use closed forms while retaining the emotional and intellectual validation of the form" (163-4). For instance, in the case of "*Seven Paintings*," Simpson does create an "attractively varied" iambic pentameter and uses the form to further her consideration of the *il y a* with the tension existing between writing in a language that clarifies and writing in a language that kills what it desires to understand, thus risking the subjective-less *il y a*. The sonnet, with its tight regulations, provides rigorous space for Simpson's consideration of the horrors of 9/11 and its aftermath.

⁷ Solie's "Thrasher" is a combination of the pastoral and a "thing" poem free of the lyric "I." Simpson's poems, while still considering subjects from an abstracted perspective are often intimately personal, and thus significantly different from Solie's poems.

However, the review of *Loop* by Kevin McNeilly asserts that even the “stanzaic forms” sound “neither free nor strict, but are really acts of grasping for form itself” (197). As an example he uses the final poem of *Loop*, “Trailer Park,” a free-verse poem, to note the “audible symmetry, a sound loop” where iambic pentameter seems to roll over line breaks that appear to fragment the poem and its coherence (198). “*Seven Paintings*” and “Trailer Park” represent Simpson’s skillful combination of both formal and free-verse poetry. The sonnet’s tight structure, in “*Seven Paintings*,” exists as an attempt contain the violence of 9/11 and its aftermath, yet through the use of the form in combination with the sentence fragment, the poem also explores the *il y a* that subsequently becomes possible. This use of form and fragmentation is in contrast to “Trailer Park,” where Simpson combines formal iambic pentameter and a free verse poem, with the iambic line continuing through the line breaks, to develop the overarching theme of *Loop*, the enduring nature of life (McNeilly).

McNeilly is quite right to say that most of Simpson’s poetry is not quite formal and not quite free verse, and this is perhaps because, as Peter Sanger notes, what the poem observes is often “fragments of an appearance and event” (8). Although Simpson’s poems often attempt to interact with and understand the Other, often the Otherness of violence and atrocity, the poem already exists in a compromised position. Sanger asserts that the “abstracted observer-speaker[s]” consistently “cry out for some kind of shelter in a morally comprehensible structure... [but] the observer-speaker refuses to or cannot supply such a structure overtly” (8). He makes the astute statement that speakers are often driven by an “ethical sense,” and understand that there is “something deeply wrong with the random patterns of cause and effect which an aesthetic of appearance invariably

presents” (9). However, he only takes this claim to a third of its potential, noting only that this tension is “echoed by the very forms of her poems” (90). The unease created by the aesthetic nature of poetry and its observed patterns is not just explored in the form of her poetry but also through her basic grammar and language use as well as her movement or “grasp and gift” of observation and attention. Although these elements are the building blocks of poetry, Simpson uses them only to subvert them, creating for each a tawny equivalent that allows for a connection with the Other.

However, these subversions of poetry’s foundations have not always been received positively. Zachariah Wells has criticized Simpson as a “tourist in the realms of human misery and suffering... miming her disingenuous incapacity for articulation through the excessive deployment of portentous full-stopped sentence fragments” (Wells 143). Ignoring the fact that all sentence fragments and, for that matter, full sentences inherently require a full-stop, Wells has missed the integration of theme and structure that runs through all Simpson’s poems. To write clearly and coherently about any atrocity, horror, or pain one has not experienced is to assume an understanding of the suffering Other to which she does not have access. While Wells believes Simpson’s incapacity of articulation is a negative trait, Simpson would agree that she is incapable of understanding or expressing the horror of September 11th with any coherence; in fact she would take this inability further, probably asserting that to write as though one does, or can, understand a moment of true horror is unethical. While it is also unethical not to contemplate the suffering and violence of the world, to believe one has the ability to fully understand and articulate this horror is unforgivably arrogant. So although Simpson believes that, through metaphor, author and reader can “become” the sufferer, as in the

case of the fourteen-year-old prostitute, Simpson avoids writing *as* the sufferer; instead Simpson continually, brokenly, throws out life-line metaphors desperately trying to grasp an understanding, to find an ethical space in which to exist amidst the horror. While this still leaves the fourteen-year-old girl abandoned, Simpson does the best a poem can do in finding an ethical space from which to direct the reader's attention towards real world change.

Beginning with grammar, the first chapter of this study expands from Thoreau's interpretation of "tawny grammar" as a traditional form of wisdom, situating Simpson between Snyder's understanding of language's inability to understand the Otherness of that which is "outside the house" and Steffler's belief that language can define self and Other. Simpson uses, calls attention to, and undermines grammar in order to create a space for an interaction with the Other. Working within the confined meaning that syntactically correct sentences force, Simpson creates double meanings around punctuation marks including the comma, colon, semi-colon, and the period, the latter becoming the symbol of finality and death, and the former becoming the symbol of everything and nothing as it is itself devoid of meaning while at the same time creating and shaping meaning. Simpson also questions the ethics of clear syntactical structure in conveying an understanding of atrocity, while at the same time does not completely place the fragment as the ethical mode of conveying understanding. She also blurs the distinction between subject and predicate, noun and verb, in order to call attention to the verb "to be." By adding, removing and calling attention to this verb, Simpson illuminates our preoccupation with "being" as what often bars us from an understanding of the Other, which no longer can "be." The creation of a "tawny grammar" allows Simpson's poetry

to exist on the fringes of language, floating between the self and the Other, order and chaos.

The second chapter examines the “tawny” *form* of Simpson’s poetry. In order to accommodate a “tawny grammar” the poem’s shape must change. While there is debate around how “closed” or “open” several of Simpson’s poems actually are, it is in fact her mixing of both closed and open forms that develops “tawny form” as a means of understanding the Other. Simpson’s “grasping at form,” as noted by McNeilly, is actually Simpson’s grasping to understand Otherness, to define it within a safe and knowable space. The *duende* inherent to this attempt is that creating a poem that “contains” or confines the Other subsequently forces it into the dangerous sphere of the *il y a*. By subverting closed and open forms, Simpson is able to expand both and create poems that have a “closed” or rigid form but also avoid conceptual “closure” and finality. In addition to the form of the poem, Simpson also develops a tawny version of the lyric, with personal and impersonal speakers functioning differently in her open and closed forms. The musicality of her lines in the traditionally closed forms, specifically the sonnet, often creates fragmentation and unease as the lines push away from a personal speaker and towards the *il y a*. Whereas the musicality in her open, yet often still rigid, invented forms, in combination with impersonal speakers, often creates the space for a dynamic, although not necessarily hopeful, connection with the Other.

The third chapter develops Simpson’s understanding of “tawny” *movement*. In an interview, Simpson hesitantly uses the term to describe how her poems develop and consider their subject: “poetry advances by leaps; it moves as an animal moves (a tawny movement?)” (Trussler 7). While she connects the term back to the animal, in the same

way Thoreau connects "tawny grammar" back to the leopard, the subjective movement of her poem can be understood as functioning to create a space that not only attempts to understand the Otherness observed, but also one that elicits the desire for pivotal change. The movements of her poem then become both ethical theme and formal principle and both are required to understand the Other. Formally, these movements are facilitated through a jumping or moving through time, a change in the speaker's position to the action, and a movement through layers of mediation. A reformulation of McKay's poetic attention and "grasp and gift," Simpson's tawny movements push and pull against the observed in a way that grapples with subjective satisfaction. McKay's "gift" seems to require a subjective satisfaction, whereas Simpson's movements and pivots do not require, and sometimes reject, such satisfaction. The tawny movements work in the same vein as tawny grammar and tawny form in that they use and subvert common techniques of poetry, in this case the use of time and perspective, in a way that requires a dynamic interaction with the Other. However, the tawny movement of her poetry outlines Simpson's belief, maintained in tawny grammar and form, that in order to understand the Other in a meaningful and ethical way, the individual, rather than the collective must be considered.

Chapter One: Tawny Grammar

“a language furred with moss, netted with lichen” (Simpson, *Marram* 15)

In the essay “Walking,” Thoreau evokes the rules that govern language and basic syntax when he translates the Spanish term “*gramática parda*,” meaning how nature expresses its inherent wisdom balancing between knowledge and ignorance, as “tawny grammar,” yet he does not elaborate on this term's connection to language or writing. As a poet keenly aware of language’s reductive nature, particularly dangerous when exploring the Other, Simpson understands “tawny grammar” as intimately tied to the language of poetry. However, Simpson describes a cacophony of sounds when she says tawny grammar “would sound like poetry,” asserting it would be “many voiced, as if numerous strands of sound ran through it at once... it would be ever-changing... innovative and experimental... work[ing] in all manner of round about ways, inquiring... shouting, begging, singing, berating, murmuring, coaxing” (*Marram* 18). Yet grammar serves a practical function within language, providing it with a systematic structure in which ideas can be clearly communicated. Building on Blanchot’s poetics, Simpson believes that poetry is on the outskirts of this structured language. Poetry, she says, has been “turned out of the house,” and thus is able to communicate with what is “outside the house” (29). Heidegger believes that language is what gives us, as Albert Hofstadter paraphrases, “the essential continuity of being, building, dwelling, and thinking” (Heidegger xiii). As poetry brushes along the edges of conventional language, which makes possible each facet of identity, Simpson says it eventually has to give up its communicative purpose and “point us towards the selfless” (29). Since language begins with the self, with the first learned verb being the auxiliary “to be,” poetry, existing in

language, is required to transfer information while attempting to relinquish ties to the self in order to understand the Other.⁸ Inside language, poetry exists in the tension between grammar, which allows meaning to be held and carried, and the belief that the rigid structure of this grammar forces a loss. Furthering Thoreau's assertion that a "tawny" grammar is needed in order to convey some of nature's inherent wisdom, Simpson believes that this "tawny grammar" can allow poetry to break the walls belonging to "inside" and "outside" of the house (language). Simpson's "tawny grammar" always aims to interact with the Other that has been forced "outside" the house and into the space of Nature's deeper knowledge, and what language has to give up in order to create a clear transference of meaning. Working from the tradition of language poetry, where poets attempted to develop a mode of communication that challenged the established mode of poetry that aimed to transmit an "experience" or "emotion" to a specified reader in "language which is neutral, transparent, [and] natural" (Hartley), Simpson is calling attention to the conventions through what George Harley calls Charles Bernstein's "mode-that-is-meant" (Hartley). This "mode" of language focuses on an intentional and meaningful use of conventional language which functions to draw attention to the conventions themselves. In order to create Simpson's "tawny" form of grammar, she creates double meanings for punctuation marks, questions the ethics of correct syntactical structure when considering atrocity, and blurs the space between subject and predicate, noun and verb, so as to create a tawny shifting communication able to point away from the self, thus allowing the reader an experience of the Other that ultimately, also, illuminates the self.

⁸ The issue of language's inherent selfishness arises in the second chapter with Simpson's use of lyric form coupled with her resistance to the lyric "I."

Light Falls Through You (2002), Simpson's first collection of poetry, is preoccupied with punctuation and typographical symbols. Given her belief that grammar allows "us the roads, streets, stop signs, and traffic lights of language" (Marram 18), these regulators are the way Simpson believes we approach the Other. "Usual Devices," one of the longer poems in the collection, is subtitled with these symbols, seven of them grammatical. Set within the Trojan War, the poem follows a linear plot from Paris's decision to seduce Helen to the Greek ships returning with their spoils of war. Although the poem does not carry a narrative plot per se, Simpson plays with the epic form, developing the metaphor of punctuation-as-epic. Simpson's invocation of the epic goes further than its obvious setting within Homer's epics, as she also references the Biblical "fall," and Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, as Paris's choice between the goddesses Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena is described as "an apple: heaven's usual device" (37, 21). It is Paris who "considers" and "marks each one [woman]" (37, 9). The women are "marked" grammatically: Hera in the past tense, Aphrodite in the present, and Athena in the future. This is Simpson's rejection of the epic form, and her establishing of punctuation as epic; instead of developing a narrative that explores a "hero[ic]... figure of great national or even cosmic importance," setting it in a huge "worldwide" context, and following "action involv[ing] extraordinary deeds in battle" where "gods and other supernatural beings take an interest or active part" (Abrams 98), Simpson develops how the small "marks" written onto the women fit into and shape the epics of the Trojan War. The punctuation marks become symbols for the women, the "epic" connotation being that they in fact shape the structure of the epics themselves.

The punctuation marks are also often connected to violence. In this first poem, subtitled with a comma, the comma becomes the symbol for the emotional pain experienced by Menelaus after Helen has left with Paris: "Gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone. / Comma's sharp point sinks into the place between words" (38, 11). The comma is the wound left by Helen, but, in Simpson's tawny use, the comma also becomes the mark of the small servant girl who, "curled small as a comma" (38, 5), takes Helen's place in Menelaus's bed. The servant girl's story is untold in the wake of his grief, yet at the same time his grief is shaped by her small mark, communicated and expressed with the comma. Although the servant girl falls into the wound left by Helen, the comma is not the mark of finality, and so it is clear that although there is a wound, the connection between Helen and Menelaus is not severed; rather, it is merely temporarily separated.

Gertrude Stein, in her essay "Poetry and Grammar," expresses frustration with the provisional nature of some punctuation marks. Specifically, Stein is hostile to the comma (included with the comma are often the colon and semi-colon) the question mark, quotation marks, and the exclamation point. Commas, Stein asserts, are "servile" as they "have no life of their own" (219). Her emphasis is on the consistent forward movement of the line of words, so words become "enfeeble[d]... by putting in a comma" (221).⁹ Helen and the servant girl associated with the comma are "servile," but also, as in Stein's work, unavoidable, as they significantly shape the words around them.

Exclamation points, while not "servile," Stein asserts, are "unnecessary, ugly, [and] they spoil the line of the writing" (215). In "!" the exclamation point becomes the

⁹ Stein admits that this is how she feels about punctuation in prose, rather than in poetry. While in her discussion of poetry commas are not mentioned again, punctuation is employed significantly in both the prose discussion of poetry and in the poetic examples themselves.

Significantly, the only semi-colon in the poem occurs at the moment of connection between the Greeks and Trojans as they fight over what is left of Achilles, presumably the armour made by Hephaestus: "The hero dies. Greeks and Trojans skirmish over the body; / something is lost in the dust" (44, 8-9). In the liminal space between the Greeks and Trojans fighting and the inevitable loss of life, hope, and love, the punctuation, or, symbolically, the marked women, Briseis and Helen, stand. The women are lost in the dust; the war is fought over Helen and Briseis and yet they are lost to the Greeks and the Trojans and the text itself. Although Helen is not the focus of this semi-colon poem, Simpson echoes Helen and the comma poem in the last stanza: "Helen, that bright conjunction between rival / nations" (44, 13). She is the conjunction needed after Menelaus's comma, instead incorrectly connecting two rivals.

In the next poem, Helen becomes connected to the colon. Various metaphors for the colon are offered, as its shape could represent "a snake bite" (45, 8), "two / people. Together, / apart" (45, 12-14) and "two cities separated by water" (47, 24). Syntactically the colon often functions to introduce a list, but everything offered to Helen is implicitly withdrawn as Aphrodite "whispers: Where would you go? / You have no home to go to" (47, 28-30). The colon, which would ordinarily introduce a list of possibilities instead introduces only the negation of possibilities, which then becomes embodied in "one beautiful woman standing by another, / telling her she can't compare" (47, 33). Helen has now become the comma, the semi-colon, and the colon, all being marks that Stein deems "servile" (218). These punctuation marks, Stein believes, exist for the author rather than for the words, and they "keep you from living your life as actively as you should lead it" (220). Helen also becomes parenthesis, where, instead of opening the sentence to

options, she contains information, keeping it separate from the rest of the sentences and the poem. Her parenthesis opens only to give Odysseus information that "a spy would want to know," but keeps this information from connecting to anything outside of the immediate space she has created for it, a space synonymous with her own body and position within the epic: "locked it shut again" (48, 21). By becoming each of these symbols, Helen becomes everything and nothing to the epic. She creates, shapes, and is nothing to the story, existing only ever in the liminal space between actions, between words.

Simpson removes the boundary between the semantic value of words and the punctuation that also shapes the meaning of the words. Just as Helen is everything and nothing, punctuation is servile and commanding. Language without grammar, Simpson says, would "discard" "the comma, semi-colon, and period"; it would "not give us history... it would not reveal beginnings or endings" (*Marram* 23). However, this completely fragmented language, while produced through "tawny grammar," is not how Simpson employs "tawny grammar." Although Trojan Mythology is not "history," Simpson's "tawny grammar" utilizes, rather than abandons, punctuation in order to avoid a "beginning" and an "end" inherent to a whole story or a history. Simpson's "tawny grammar," like Helen, exists in between strict communicative language and a language "outside memory, outside history, outside time," a language that is merely "a blizzard of scatterings" (*Marram* 23). In the final poem, titled for the period, Simpson paradoxically avoids a sense of finality. Stein agrees that the period does not necessarily mean an ending: "Stopping sometime did not really keep one from going on, it was nothing that interfered, it was only something that happened, and as it happened as a perfectly natural

happening, I did believe in periods and I used them” (217). For Simpson, the period also becomes merely “a pause in the march of words / all moving in the same direction” (*Light* 52). Simpson is hesitant to bring finality to the poem because there is a certain amount of stagnation and death that comes with a fixed meaning. Poetry, she says, desires “things-in-togetherness... the way one thing folds into another, without dissolving the individual into the multiple” (*Marram* 146). Her poetry has opened up possible meanings without coming to a fixed conclusion about the experiences of Helen, Briseis, the servant girl, and the Trojan woman “keening, high and wild” on the Greek ship (52, 15). By leaving the poem open ended, with the women’s voices crying out over the water, Simpson has avoided “marking” them like Paris, their crying separate from past, present, and future tenses as she avoids the “to be” verb form: “out on the water, comes a woman’s keening, high and wild” (52, 15). Subsequently, the presence-of-absence, or the *il y a*, is not evoked, for since nothing has been named, nothing has been lost.

Simpson’s resistance to finality is also evident in her poem “Grammar Exercise.” Like “Usual Devices,” it is a poem that takes place in something “known” or “knowable,” in that both poems exist within an external story or history. However, Simpson suggests a possible violence in the “un-tawny” communication of information that has shaped how we understand the historical massacre in which the poem is set. A female student is asked to correct the suicide note of Marc Lepine, who in 1989 shot twenty-eight people and specifically targeted female engineering students. “Grammar Exercise” is situated three years later, where in 1992 a female student has been asked to make Lepine’s uncommunicative final testament clear and knowable. However, as the girl is correcting, she begins to imagine the violent shooting; she is thrust into a vivid imagining through

the colon in the thirteenth line where she imagines the period as “a hole at the end of a sentence, incomplete / nightmare:”¹⁰ (12). Simpson’s metaphor becomes punctuation-as-violence, as the periods become bullets/bullet holes, and powerfully, the dash syntactically echoes the flung bodies: “lying — as if flung — on the floor / in awkward / syntax” (20-24). This metaphor calls attention to the ethics of understanding violence, as punctuation and syntactical clarity, used to give meaning to the horror, is a kind of violence.

By addressing atrocity in a way that resists understanding it, Simpson attempts to respect a position like Theodor Adorno's, who asserted that "to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (6). However, Adorno further developed this idea by adding that while that he does not “wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” he still concedes that art that does not address atrocity cannot “stand upright before justice” (6-7). By directly pointing to the failure of language to communicate horror, Simpson is creating a space to interact with the experience of the Other’s suffering without appropriating it or trying to make it knowable. To give horror a morality or logic –or a grammar—would be “barbaric,” exemplified when the girl’s attempt to force grammar on Lépine’s note thrusts her into a consideration of other horror:

she imagines blood
on pillow and sheets,
blankets, walls, ceiling,

¹⁰ While MLA would ordinarily omit this colon, and other end of line punctuation marks, since my focus is on Simpson’s use of punctuation this colon is conceptually central to my argument and should be included in the quotation.

even on her hands (14-17)

Simpson situates “Grammar Exercise” within the knowable, and the poem follows a logical series of events, but she uses a tawny punctuation to shift the poem in the attempt to question the place of a rigid factual understanding of historical atrocity, and communicate something that resists finality.

Simpson’s resistance to completely “ending” a poem is also powerfully evident in her second collection, *Loop*. As the title suggests, Simpson distances herself from conclusiveness (and thus certainty) through the establishment of loops, specifically looped structures; the form more than the physical grammar becomes a key element I will discuss in chapter two. However, a significant grammatical symbol is often employed to distance the poems from the violence they consider – the dash. “Remains” is a poem that details an ordinary experience of walking a dog and trying to keep it from playing with the carcass of an animal. However, the pun on “remains” connects to the theme of mortality, where something, beyond physical remains, does, “remain.” The stanza at the bottom of the first page uses the dash to pen off the consequences of violence. Simpson keeps these horrible consequences “-- / feral, bloody --” distant from the rest of the poem where she has established connection between the dead animal and our human fate:

... It's only fur and claws:

nothing at all,

but we've felt teeth at our own necks,

been dragged, bitten,

ripped open.

Staggering

to our feet --

feral, bloody -- we know how it ends.

And it ends. (*Loop* 11-19)

Although the sense of ending in these lines is intensified by their position at the bottom of the page, and the double, reiterative use of both the period and the word "ends," the poem does not actually end; instead, it continues on the next page with: "Still, there's a glitter."

The "it" that ends at the bottom of the first page is presumably life; however, Simpson's use of the unspecified pronoun "it" also creates a space for it to resurface in the actual last lines of the poem: "where it can't be seen, can't be heard, / can't be thought." (24-25).

This "it" is perhaps the previously mentioned "glitter," or the heron or turtle that moves in and out of sight, or it is perhaps the life that has ended earlier on the previous page. By separating with dashes the descriptors of ourselves, "-- / feral, bloody --," Simpson separates us (life) from both the "end" of death and the desperation for life, allowing then what "remains" of life to resurface later in the poem. Although the "it" of life is not pretty and is now moved into a completely wild state, it remains.

Simpson also uses dashes to avoid finality in "Written in Ice," from her third collection, *Quick*. The same line, ending with a dash that signifies an address, opens and ends the poem: "How to begin --" (1, 29). "Written in Ice" employs the first person voice of the wife of a man who, on "9th March, 1921," died trying to save the priest whose horse had fallen through the ice on his way from Pomquet, NS, to St Croix, NS. The woman oscillates between performing mind-numbing daily chores ("I'll knead the bread,

put it in the oven" [9]) and imagining her husband in powerful and vivid ways ("When he laughed, dancing Joseph on his / knee, he split the sky. North to South" [16-17]). She struggles to begin forging a life without her husband, and so Simpson collapses opposites in the last section of the poem: "a sleeper who can't sleep, who wakes/ herself by dreaming her life" (27). Simpson then refuses beginnings and endings by looping the poem back to the beginning and opening the ending up with the epistolary dash.

Emily Dickinson is, arguably, the poet that made the most of the dash. Cristanne Miller notes two ways in which Dickinson employed the dash. The first way is internally, the way Simpson has in "Remains," where the dash functions to isolate words from others thereby "reflecting the semantic content of the words they surround" (51). For example, Simpson is echoing Dickinson's dashes in a poem like "I watched the moon around the house," where Dickinson uses them to call attention to the differences between the speaker and the moon: "The Curiosity / Like Mine – for not a Foot – nor Hand – / Nor Formula – had she" (Dickinson 593). The speaker, in comparing herself to the moon, is dismembering herself syntactically in the same way that Simpson syntactically separates the *remains*, "feral and bloody," from death and life. The second way Dickinson uses the dash is as a replacement for other punctuation, most notably the comma, but also the period (52). Simpson, though she commonly ends her poems with a period, ends "Written in Ice" with a dash and a completely blank twenty-ninth page. By ending with the word "being" and the dash, Simpson resists finality, while at the same time maintaining syntactical regularity as the woman's desire to remember her husband and move through grief is clearly transmitted to the reader.

Dickinson's dashes also function to create fragments, confusing the grammatical subject and offering the reader a multitude of referential possibilities. Miller says that Dickinson's "irregularities of syntax call attention to bonds of relation but also stress the fragility of these bonds " (90). Dickinson's fragments often highlight how the lost bonds can be, as Miller says, "recovered" (29). Miller uses the first stanza of "This was a Poet" as an example:

This was a Poet – It is That
 Distills amazing sense
 From ordinary Meanings –
 And Attar so immense (20)

The fragment created by the first dash allows the first line to be "recovered" as "This was a Poet – It is [the fact] That [this was a poet which] Distills" or "This was a Poet – It [the poet] is That [which] Distills" (Miller 29). Simpson's fragments, while not always created with the dash, often function in the same way, avoiding permanent connection yet recovering the possibility; however, in "*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*,"- instead of opening up possibilities, the fragments close them. By avoiding connection, however fragile, the fragments develop the hopelessness of the human condition as violence begets violence. While I plan to discuss in detail the significance of the sonnet corona form of the poem in the next chapter, the poem's grammar, syntax and punctuation are worth noting in the present context. In these poems, the fragment becomes a way to echo grammatically the loss of connection felt by the dead the living after, presumably, the attack on the World Trade Centre, the event that Simpson suggests is prefigured in Pieter Brueghel's cataclysmic Biblical scenes, the obvious parallel being between his Tower of

Babel and the World Trade Centre. Although there are several clues to indicate the poems' representation of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Simpson says that poem can reference "atrocities in general" (Compton 39). The fourth sonnet considers the towers as they fall, and the phone calls that were made from the plane, but Simpson does not allow for connection and writes only in fragments: "Small / papers, white flakes. Last wish. Someone's cellphone. / ("Are you still there? *Are you?*") A voice falls. Stone" (22, 12-14). In her essay "A Hundred and Fifty Psalms at Twilight," Simpson says that when "language is at its most vibrant and dense, it is also, paradoxically language on its way to silence" (Marram 30). By resisting the logical progression of factual information, embedded in our media-obsessed culture, Simpson is able to focus in on the specific details, where fragmented objects stand like rocks densely creating a language that is situated between communication and silence.

These fragments place subjects and objects in a state much like Dickinson creates with "dashes, inversions, ellipses, and unexpected analogies" (90), where there is only the hint of connection: "Words and speakers lean towards connection in the poems, but stop short of what would seem irrevocable or conventionally natural relationships" (Miller 90). This almost-connection brushes against Simpson's understanding of Levinas's *il y a*, or "presence of absence." In *Time and the Other*, Levinas outlines a distinction between existing and the existent, wherein the existing is always possessed by an existent (45). This separation, he asserts, thus "dawns the idea of an existing that occurs without us, without a subject, an existing existent" (45-46). In trying to grasp this existing without existents, Levinas imagines "all things, beings and persons, returned to nothingness," and so the *il y a* is "[t]he absence of everything return[ed] as a presence" (46). This "fact of

existing” Levinas says, “imposes itself when there is no longer anything” and it “is impersonal like ‘it is raining’” (47). *Il y a* translates into English as “there is,” the imposition forced as it assumes an existent *something*, but forces it into a definition. For Levinas, and for Simpson, the “exposure to that which is incessant” (Marram 94) brings about a horror or dread. This fear of something “incessant” becomes particularly frightening when considering states of being, and so the insomniac space described in “Written in Ice” becomes pressed upon by the *il y a* which imposes a unceasing remembrance of “absence,” a reminder of what the woman is not.

Simpson says that “[l]iterature makes a movement towards the *il y a* out of “necessity, since its work is to press against the boundaries of subjectivity and the erasure of subjectivity” (Marram 97). “*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*” considers the Other of the dead victims and the Other of the grieving survivors, both of which are separate from most readers, Simpson, and each other. While Simpson does not allow hope to enter the poem, because no connection is made between the dead and the living and because the violence becomes continual, the fragmentary syntax parallels the theme of disjunction. However, these fragments also become referents for the *il y a* as the reader is thrust into a stuttering contemplation of a world without connection, a world where the subjects of the poem, the Others of the living and the dead, exist without existing. We can see this in “*Slaughter of Innocents*” where the enjambment separates the noun from the verb only to move to fragments created by punctuation which remove the verbs, the *existing*, entirely: “Oh Lord, those moans / will haunt us. This one. That one there. Brief / lives” (*Loop* 23, 3-5). In clarifying his understanding of the *il y a* from Heidegger’s *es gibt*, which signifies “to give,” Levinas asserts that the *il y a* is “[n]either nothingness or being”

(Levinas *Ethics* 48). While the *il y a* is a kind of presence, Simpson connects this haunting absence to the dead, who are unable to move into nothingness, a cessation of being, and the living, who, mired in their grief, are unable to go on and *be* alive. While the living and the dead are not strictly a kind of *il y a*, their liminal state reminds the readers of the painful space of the *il y a*.

In “Reliquary,” from *Light Falls Through You*, Simpson’s fragments also exist in a space between the living and the dead, communication and silence. However, in this poem, the fragments are able to open a door, a connection, between the living and the dead. The observer, the poem’s main speaker, is looking upon a reliquary containing the remains of the Rwandan genocide victims. However, other unknown fragmentary speakers, presumably the dead, interject to interrupt the coherent full sentences of the observer speaker. The form also contributes to the fragmented nature of the dead speaker, as the voices are often doubly confined by parenthesis: “(Get up and sing. Tell all.)... (Sing. Get up. Twirl once, lie down.)” (4). Simpson is calling direct attention to the living’s inability to understand (conjugate) the dead: “A skull is a verb that can’t be conjugated. Not *amo*, not *amas*, not *amat*” (32). Neither love nor grammar can cross the barrier between the living observer and the dead remains. However, the fragments open a space where there is a “tawny” connection.

In the final sections of the poem, of the eight sentences, each ending with a period, there are four fragments:

All of us luminous objects. Like rocks in the garden.

~

Light is an axe through the top of our heads. It splits us open, and for

one moment we see.

~

Then silence. A field of it.

~

The little door swings shut in the air. Here is a bone, a padlock. (37-41)

The first fragment removes plural conjugation of “to be”: “All of us luminous objects. Like rocks in the garden.” By removing our “first learned verb” (*Marram* 19) Simpson calls attention to its absence, thus making literal the subjects’ non-being. Since the state of being is removed, when it is brought back in the second stanza (“Light *is* an axe through the top of our heads”), the door between the living and the dead swings open, allowing for a connection; something is seen. Yet this connection is fragmentary: “Then silence. A field of it.” Again, the “to be” is removed; silence stands alone. However, the poem ends with the return of the “to be:” “The little door swings shut in the air. Here *is* a bone, a padlock” (57, italics added). By adding, removing, and adding “to be,” Simpson calls attention to how our preoccupation with *being* keeps us from an experience of the Other, her Other being the victims of genocide and the dead. Simpson does not allow the general plural pronoun “us” to have a “state of being,” rather it is “light,” and “bone” that are given this privilege. It is our preoccupation with “being” that keeps us from understanding the dead who no longer *are*.

Simpson’s most recent collection, *Is*, as the title suggests, focuses significantly on the auxiliary form of the verb “to be.” However, it is also her descriptive use and non-use of nouns and verbs that shows her attempts to, again, collapse the boundaries between the self and the Other. “Book of Beginnings,” the first poem of the collection, avoids the

idea of a beginning or an ending, much like her earlier poems. However, here Simpson is exploring *before* the beginning: “before you were a cell, dividing into cells and more cells— / before blue before blue deepening and unwinding inside blue...” (1-2).

Everything is made and subsequently unmade:

...dark before world not yet world

all undone and unmade...

...beginning and ending ending and beginning

woven and braided and woodsmoke fragrant and not woodsmoke fragrant...(6-11)

Bordering on a prose poem, “Book of Beginnings” has lines that are unable to be contained as they spill, enjambed, into the next without punctuation or capitals:

all undone and unmade thick and ancient furred by weather not yet weather

creased

and lined rock and water linen-thin water and rock unseamed bulky dense and

smooth not birth not death both icy and steamy sounds not yet sounds darkness

before darkness and light before light beginning and ending ending and

beginning

woven and braided.....

not furred lined creased steamy and icy smooth not bird not death all undone

done made and unmade (7-15)

Simpson explores a time before the self and the Other were separated. Expanding from Levinas’s understanding of the self’s responsibility for the Other, Simpson asserts that the self’s identity is consistently one “in-relation-to” the Other: “since the Other is infinite, it takes precedence, coming in advance of the self in order to situate otherness

within it" (*Marram* 84). Simpson asserts that the "bifurcation of the self by the Other comes *before* all else — before being, action and freedom" (84). Through the use of the general pronoun "you" in the subsequent poems, both the self and the Other are evoked.

Returning to Stein's arguments about grammar and poetry, it is important to note that in prose Stein favours pronouns over nouns because they "represent" but do not specifically "name" and thus have "a greater possibility of being something" (214). Stein's dislike of specific nouns comes from their inability to *be* something other than they are. In her discussion of prose, she asks: if a name is "adequate" then why write about it? Although Stein reclaims the noun in her poetry section, it only is redeemed because the love of this name should make the writing profess the name "more persistently more tormented" (232), which for Simpson would signal a faith in language's ability to carry the knowledge inherent in a "name" or noun. So, Simpson favours the general pronoun, which functions to *be* more than one thing; so rather than a singular repetition, it opens the possibility of meaning, yet this potential changes after the split between the self and the Other on the fourth page of the poem. This break is magnified as the stanzas move from the bottom of the page, white space on the top on pages two and three, to the transitional fourth page with "Now" on the top, white space in the middle, and "You are the world dividing" on the bottom, and finally to the fifth page with the stanzas on the top of the page and white space on the bottom. Simpson has created a visual divide, a separation akin to God's separation of water, land and sky in Genesis, evoked with the term "firmament" on the fifth page. Yet it is the division of self and Other, that creates a division within the world: "You are day divided from night, night from day, minute from minute, hour from / hour" (18-19). With this division comes an

overuse of pronouns and the introduction of punctuation, as commas stand to slice through time as commas stand to slice through time: “Time begins, sliced into now, and then, and meanwhile, and later, so a story / can be made of it” (19-20). This “story” turns into one with a plot, with the “other stories... becom[ing] indistinguishable subplots” (22). Although one plot rises, the plot of the self, the plot of the Other still exists, secondarily. While the co-existence of self and Other is similar to McKay’s belief in our “home” in language containing a residual “wilderness” (62), Simpson connects this co-existence to violence rather than a safe “home-like” space.

The division between self and Other, although both are still wrapped up in the general pronoun “you,” becomes violent on the seventh page with the introduction of vocabulary associated with trauma:

... You take command, expose dust in the corners. But / there’s something to one side that *needles*. A time before this. Before the *smear* on / the mirror. Before tinkering. Before the undulation of a *siren*. Before *scarlet*. Before *latches*. Before eyes. Before opening and closing. Before the *pecking* of this, this, this. (30-34 italics added)¹¹

The separation seems to have created the persistent feeling that “this, this, this” is damaging, the words “siren,” “scarlet,” and “latches” implying a trauma and perhaps a detainment. The space before separation becomes the ideal, for after the separation the self is denied a full verb denoting being.

¹¹ While this is not the correct margin for a block quotation, I have altered the margin smaller to accommodate the proper line breaks. This change occurs elsewhere in the document at my discretion.

It is possible that this seventh stanza is depicting the experience of death, for as we move into the eighth and ninth there is an after-death experience and a burial. On the eighth page, after this possibly violent death in the seventh, Simpson embraces, rather than elides, the auxiliary “to be,” asserting: “You are spaciousness” (8). The self is now able to have a state of being because it has moved past the body, and is now “above all things” without a “need to possess anything” (8). However, here Simpson does not use the auxiliary to connect with other verbs; the *is* does not function to go “beyond merely existing” (*Marram* 19), but merely to exist. After this death, the “you” is allowed an existence but not *for* anything. Simpson is not transcending existence, but meditating on it.

The ninth page moves into a kind of burial where “[y]ou are depth and more depth, earthing and earthed” (9). New life springs forth from this burial as, in a Whitmanesque fashion, grass grows: “Here, the grass, new blades. Grass and grass and grass, shoving forward” (50). Through this death, Simpson asserts “everything / becomes known to itself” (57-58). Simpson goes on to connect this existing self, “you,” to fire and water and a making and unmaking, a “beginning, ending, beginning” (10). However, Simpson resists an actual beginning or an ending as they are constantly folded into one another. The self and the Other are intertwined in this making and unmaking, containing violence and life. Although the self and the Other are divided throughout the poem, by focusing on mere existence Simpson meditates on how self and Other rely on one another. This is different from McKay’s understanding of the self being “aware” of “residual wilderness” within language, as the self and Other are a kind of identity-in-relation to one another; beginning requires the understanding of ending in order to exist,

just as the self requires the Other in order to exist. This requiring of the Other for identity, while a prime opportunity for Simpson to consider the dangerous *il y a*, seems to create within the poem a hopeful cyclicity, a give and take between the self and Other that allows for, rather than excludes, existence and identity.

Simpson continues to focus on this simple form of existence in the second poem of the collection "Cell Division." The poem breaks apart into two then four parts, much like the cells of early fertilization, and there is a near absence of the verb "to be." Similarly to the early section of "Book of Beginnings," the verb is elided: instead of "she is," it becomes "she's" (13). The focus of the poem is the noun, and Simpson moves towards increasing specificity, unable to, like Stein, find a name to say and love "tormentedly" (232). Simpson moves through nouns becoming more and more specific: skin to arms to wrist, stomach to spine, back to spine, mouth to tongue:

Tossed on a chair and *skin* against sheets her body opening his
 Body fine hairs on her *arms* and soft clefts in his skin puckers and
 Creases of skin and skin of a *wrist* thin skin *knuckle* skin raw silk
 skin of an *earlobe* the skin under his knee warm skin of her *stomach*
 the skin across his *back* the length of his *spine* unlocking the black
 sky bone under his *cheek* whorl of her *ear* a staircase inside a
 nautilus shell his *mouth* on her mouth his *tongue* inside her mouth (13, italics
 added)

However, Simpson is unable to reach the specific name to which she can call out. She is unable to go deeper into the experience between the lovers in order to find the one specific name. The attempt to find the elusive "name" is evident in the form as the poem

visually breaks apart under the weight of Simpson's scrutiny. Avoiding "to be" verbs, and in a way that forces attention on the nouns, effectively keeps the lovers within a "mere" state of being that is still, ultimately, unable to be named.

Simpson's frustration to name is expressed again in the poem "Is," where, instead of avoiding "to be" verbs, she bombards the readers with the third person singular form of "to be." Although Simpson is, again, trying to express experience, to try and name something fully and specifically the entire poem is denied a subject:

Is snow as years, lightly. Is your face back then, your hands.

Is mine and not. Is the low branch, ice moon split by the blade
of the love branch.

Is kill, cool kiss. Is snow. Is always

inside never. (1-5)

By leaving out a subject for what *is*, Simpson invites the reader to fill in the blank, complete the riddle; however, this omission serves to illuminate not just the Other, but also what individual readers think it could be, thus collapsing the boundary between self and Other. Although one would assume that verbs allow more access to knowledge of an Other because they provide information about what something *does*, what they are *beyond* the mere fact of existence, Simpson questions this assumption. Both "Cell Division" and "Is" have removed parts necessary to create a clear sentence in the hope that these broken structures, when unburdened by clarity of meaning, can gesture to a kind of knowledge separate from the self and language. Simpson asserts that:

even this layered, many-voiced language, full of fecundity, may not be
enough. Outside the realm of language is an infinitude that can't be

embraced... and so, finally there is a movement in poetry to relinquish its purpose, to give up the endless work of conveying, or carrying. It directs its energies away from the self, to the place where it verges on the non-self.

(Marram 29)

Although both "Cell Division" and "Is" fail in their attempt to use a fragmented language, without verbs and subjects respectively, to communicate the deeper meaning lost in clear syntax, both do point away from the self. The poem invites the reader's awareness of a stripped-down condition of merely *being* by withholding *states of being*, as in "Cell Division," and *subjects of being*, as in "Is."

Simpson's "tawny grammar" exists in the space between communicative and chaotic language. While Simpson makes the bold claim that metaphor allows both the author and reader to become the Other, since metaphor is employed by language, an inherently self-centred method of communication, she alters her use of punctuation and syntax in a way that considers the ethical factors of such a statement, and thus avoids allowing her poetic language to carry a full definitive understanding of the Other. She avoids the violence of appropriating the experience of the Other, or *becoming* the Other, by calling attention to the failings of language, and by refusing the concept of a concrete end. The Other's experiences of pain are often placed in a liminal state, like the experiences of the women in Greek mythology pertaining to the battle of Troy. Simpson connects these women to punctuation marks, where they stand for everything and nothing, allowing Simpson to explore their Otherness in a way that develops their experiences, at the same time avoiding making these experiences completely knowable. Other punctuation, like the dash, functions to avoid finality, creating fragments that open

up Simpson's poetry to consider the Other and the self, and exploring the necessity of both in understanding the self. Simpson shows us that syntax can do as much as metaphor to reveal how Otherness can be understood in and through the self. Simpson asserts that our desire to go beyond the fact of our own being to an intuition of Otherness is embedded in our language, and so she plays with grammar because it shapes how we understand the self. So, by manipulating the subject and the verb, or the self and what we desire to know about the other (what it *is* and *does*), Simpson forces attention on *being* in a way that points away from the self, towards an attempted understanding of the Other, but in a way that points to the conclusion that "Otherness" and self are as intertwined as beginning and end. This tawny, shifting language subverts its inherent self-centred nature to offer an interdependence of self and Other as an ethical way to consider suffering.

Chapter Two: Tawny Form

“a bridge from self to other” (Simpson, *Marram* 140)

Simpson’s understanding of “tawny grammar” is not limited to linguistic grammar. Another major aspect of this concept for Simpson is poetic form, which is also tied to tawny grammar’s attempt to understand the Other. She asserts, in an interview with Michael Trussler, that tawny grammar can be “revealed in terms of a poem’s shape or form, or in its music... I try to find the form that suits the movement” (7). The two opposing views surrounding Simpson’s use of form are that it marks a shift in Canadian poetry back towards traditional forms, and that Simpson’s poems are neither open or closed. Although Lane praises Simpson as pioneering the resurgence of closed forms, she notes that Simpson only uses them when a poem’s content requires it: “Simpson understands the use of closed forms and does not use it where the poem’s material does not respond to this tightness” (165). McNeilly, on the other hand, believes that most of the poems in the collection “sound... neither free nor strict, but are really acts of grasping for form itself; they describe an emergent poetic, a voice discovering and asserting shape in lived textures and untutored sensations” (197). Yet Simpson’s grasping for form is really a grasping to understand the Other; it is the expression of Lorca’s *duende* and Levinas’s *il y a*. Simpson’s traditional forms, while stretching the boundaries of forms like the sonnet and villanelle, often withhold a connection with the Other, as the musicality of her lines in these traditional lyric forms often creates fragmentation and unease as they push away from a personal speaker and towards the indifferent *il y a*. However, it is the stable meter of her open forms, in combination with their impersonal

speakers, that often create a dynamic, not to be confused with hopeful, connection with the Other.

Although Simpson's consideration of Lorca's *duende* and Levinas's *il y a* appear in two separate chapters of *The Marram Grass* they are inextricably linked within her poems. *Duende*, Simpson says in "Seasons of Ice" is "the mystery... which furnishes us with whatever is sustaining in art... *duende* then, is a power and not a construct, is a struggle and not a concept" (38). This struggle is fused with desire because to possess *duende* is to open oneself up to destruction, while at the same time resisting this destruction (38-9). Simon Critchley, while avoiding the term *duende*, uses the Orpheus and Eurydice myth to elucidate the artist's struggle with desire. Critchley asserts that "Orpheus' desire is not to see Eurydice in the daylight, in the beauty of a completed aesthetic form that has submitted to the passage by way of the laws of concealment, but rather to see her in the night, as the heart of the night prior to daylight... Orpheus does not want to make the invisible visible, but rather (and impossibly) to see the invisible invisible" (49). Contextualizing this impossibility in terms of language and the *il y a* Critchley says that "language," by way of dialectic domination, "is murder" (62), and that the *il y a*, in the context of Blanchot's understanding, can be described with terms like "absence, exteriority, *the night*, the neuter, the outside" (39 italics added). Orpheus then, impossibly, desires to see Eurydice within the *night*, just as Simpson longs to write about the outside without bringing it inside and killing it. Poetry, for Simpson, referenced through Critchley's interpretation of Blanchot, exists between two "slopes" of literature: the first which attempts to "reduce all reality to consciousness -- pure daylight-- through a labour of negation" and the second which "wants to achieve a total unconsciousness --

pure night-- and fuse it with reality" (Critchley 73). Literature then exists as an "ambiguity... the experience of being suspended between night and day," and it is within this space that the *il y a* can exist too: "The fundamental experience towards which literature tends is the ambiguity of the *il y a*" (74). Yet this *il y a* is terrifying, since it contains both Heidegger's fear of death, and Levinas's fear of never being able to die; as Critchley puts it, the ambiguity of the *il y a* "suspends" the writer between "*death as possibility and death as impossibility*" (78 italics in original). Moving out from death as the epitome of the *il y a*, Simpson understands poetry as moving towards this "space" whenever it attempts to grapple with what is Other (our version of Eurydice). Simpson says literature then moves towards this *il y a* when it attempts to go beyond subjectivity, or in the case of her own poetry, beyond the self (*Marram* 97). In doing this within the confines of poetic form, Simpson's poetry balances the rigorous closed forms of the "day" with a chaotic and fragmentary language of the "night," exemplified specifically within her sonnets.

Considering first Simpson's language, McNeilly pays specific attention to the metrical structure of Simpson's second collection, *Loop*. Although this collection contains most of Simpson's formal poetry, specifically the sonnets and villanelle, McNeilly argues that these forms are not Simpson's refusal of free verse/open form but rather are an attempt to establish loops and connection. He notes that even her open form poetry contains "sound-loops," where, when read across line breaks, Simpson's enjambment can be read as iambic pentameter (198). He admits that this is hardly a "force-fit" iambic pentameter of free verse, but rather it is a kind of metrical structure that allows "rhythm [to] emerge as a kind of learning curve, a training of human attention as it

learns to respond to, and speak with, its world” (198). As an example, McNeilly points to the longer poem “Trailer Park” where, although there are line breaks, iambic pentameter rolls over: “The symmetry / of details, things / that match” (198). He asserts that these structured elements of closed forms function to create, within open forms, the possibility for hope and goodness to remain: “This [the figure of a wife “awake and listening” to her husband “never coming back to bed” in the poem “A Moor, Rain”] may be a tragic image, but it also insists on the hope that inheres in acts of unrequited “attending” – both waiting and paying attention” (200). Significantly however, McNeilly does not consider the opposite, when open form elements exist within closed the closed forms.

Simpson’s sonnet corona, “*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*,” uses free verse fragmentation within the closed form of the sonnet, which, unlike “Trailer Park,” does not allow hope to exist. These sonnets are steeped in Simpson’s interpretation of *duende* and *il y a*, as she desires to understand the violence of 9/11. Simpson appears to yearn to go beyond her limited personal experience and touch the survivors and the dead. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Simpson writes overwhelmingly in fragments. This fragmentary language becomes a kind of *il y a*, where the “possibility of death, and impossibility of death” (Critchley 78) are manifested in the reader as connection only through experience, and the equally unnerving fear of never being able to connect with both the living and the dead. The dead and the living are equally affected by the *il y a* as the dead remain undead and the living unable to live; they are mutually “[n]either nothingness [n]or being” (Levinas *Ethics* 48). Simpson is also unable to give coherent meaning to the atrocities despite the order-conferring pretext of fixed form, which she simultaneously interrogates. Working within the metaphysical sonnet tradition, her

fragmented and “rough” language becomes a movement away from the structured iambic pentameter of the sonnet, as she aligns with the tradition by “flout[ing] rather than observ[ing] convention” (Schoenfeldt 871). Simpson’s attachment to the metaphysical tradition is also established by her rejection of the traditionally personal lyric; these sonnets, in the tradition of John Donne, reject the “idealized view of human nature and human love” (Abrams 193). Simpson’s thematic treatment of human nature and human experience in the sonnet corona is established through her titles, which reference the painter Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569), whose work often considers scenes of biblical catastrophes which Simpson subsequently parallels with modern atrocities in the attempt to create associations between ancient, sixteenth century, and recent history.

The whole sequence is extremely dark; in an interview with Anne Compton, Simpson confirms that “there is no light at the end of the tunnel for me in this corona. There might be little moments of uplift, but there’s not a lot. That’s the way I thought about that [the 9/11] atrocity, but also about atrocity in general” (39). The Brueghel paintings Simpson uses as titles reinforce her movement into darkness. The first six poems are titled with Brueghel’s landscape paintings that seem to move from violence (*The Triumph of Death*) to contemplation (*Landscape with the Parable of the Sower*), back to violence which begets violence (*Tower of Babel I*, *Tower of Babel II*, and *The Slaughter of Innocents*), and then to a reflection on how these atrocities create a disconnect among the living (*Hunters in the Snow*). These six culminate in the seventh, *Christ and the Adulteress*, which does not provide any hope. Considering the paintings, *Christ and the Adulteress* is unlike the landscape paintings in that it is monochromatic and lacks the overwhelming detail for which Brueghel is known. Each of the previous

paintings contains an accuracy that makes the paintings almost impossible to take in at one glance. Even books that consider the paintings are forced to fragment the paintings into individual scenes in order to comprehend the whole (Grossman); and so, Simpson's use of Brueghel is significant because, like the viewer of the paintings, Simpson is forced to fragment the 9/11 atrocity both in her language and in a seven part corona in the attempts to grasp, piece by piece, an understanding of the whole. However, *Christ and the Adulteress* lacks the multitude of scenes visible in the landscape paintings, forcing attention onto Christ in the centre of the painting. Unlike the colourful landscapes, which give movement and expression to individual faces, this painting is stone-like, and as Simpson says, "austere" (Compton 39). The painting is cold and still, with the face of the onlookers vacant and diminishing into specter-like shadows. Brueghel then, with the fragmentary nature of his landscapes, and the unyielding *Christ and the Adulteress*, allows Simpson to end the sonnets starkly, with the woman's fate, wrapped up in the fates of the living, unknown and with Christ's murder imminent, paralleled by the dead.

Metrically, the first sonnet, "*The Triumph of Death*," places stress on words that suggest death, loss, and time. Simpson alludes to the falling of the Twin Towers in the third line: "Gone. *Tick*. The towers. *Tock*. Of fire. A fold" (3). The first two lines of the poem establish the iambic pentameter, which, although halting, calls attention to the spondaic substitution in this third line. Time is also fractured as the horror is witnessed, with "the towers" situated between the "tick" and "tock" of time. Although the iambic stresses are discernible over the fragmentation created by the periods, this "sound-loop" hinders, rather than hints at, the possibility of hope. In this first sonnet, and in the corona in general, trochees seem to function to distinguish between voices and movements that

are not human. The lines on the plastic bag caught in the fence employ a trochaic substitution: “The gunshots: plastic bags on fences. Snapping. / Or loose. *Thank you – shop – at*” (11-12). Simpson's trochaic substitutions of the non-human machines that sift through the wreckage in the thirteenth line become stressed: “nothing. He plays a lute. She sings. Clapping -- / machines sift through debris for the remains” (12-13). These trochees, in combination with the halting but recoverable iambic lines, aurally echo the unnaturalness of the violence that has occurred.

Throughout the sequence, the last line of a sonnet, with occasional alterations, becomes the first line of the next sonnet. This repetition creates a predictable and persistent movement of time, while also allowing Simpson to avoid “ending” since each sonnet bleeds into the next. The second poem, “*Landscape with the Parable of the Sower*” metrically places stress on death, as the fractured second line's fourth foot spondee emphatically uses dashes to further separate it from the rest of the line: “has many hands. A stream – Fresh Kills – slides” (4). As the poem continues, Simpson brings in other speakers, presumably those of the dead, as the pronouns moves from the observed “they,” in the first sonnet, to the first person plural “we.” Cranes attempt to move forward and clean up the debris from the collapsed towers, just as Brueghel's farmer spreads seeds hoping for an eventual harvest, yet the dead speakers are caught and unable to move forward. In the iambic twelfth line, the rhythm suggests a gentle rocking of the boat the dead meant to take to, presumably, the underworld: “We meant / to go, but every boat was laden.” However, the poem's rhythm changes and instead of the dead being ferried into death, they are violently “pulled home, pulled here” in the spondees of the thirteenth line. The dead seem to move into a space outside of time, abandoning

language: “We take the shape of soil, abandon words” (14). Their movement away from language does not open any doors; rather, the abandonment of language, in the context of the paintings, anticipates the next two poems, which focus on the destroyed tower of Babel, where God, in Genesis Eleven, verses one through nine, scatters the monolingual humans so they are unable to make a “name” for themselves.

Although Simpson attempts to recall the dead, the more she reaches the more distant they become. The living and the dead become haunted by a kind of presence-of-absence as the poem moves towards the *il y a*, which ambivalently reminds Simpson of both Heidegger’s anxiety about death and Levinas’s fear of death as an impossibility (being locked into perpetual existence): the possibility of having the experience of the Other, or the possibility of never connecting with the Other. “*Tower of Babel I*” focuses on the shutting out of the dead speakers, as the fifth line has two spondaic substitutions stressing the spatial restrictions imposed on the dead: “All locked, shut down.” However, the most significant loss is the loss of a name, again stressing the presence (found in the existence of the nametag) in absence (since the name is withheld). Simpson establishes the iambic meter in the preceding line, rhythmically lulling the reader into the iambs, only to stress the fourth foot’s falling on the blank space of the name-tag: “A spackled light gets through. We merely craved / a taste. *Hello, my name is ____*” (6-7). Simpson sets up a space in between time, place, and language for the dead speakers: “Beyond Babel’s core” (9), and it signals the volta, where the poem begins to consider the space rather than its cause. In this space the dead desire transcendence (movement), in the same way that the builders of Babel desired to reach God. However, although they want to know this Other, the space the dead actually inhabit is terrifyingly vulnerable: “Behind

is Babel's core. Red as a heart / opened for bypass. Laid bare. Wind, idling. It's quiet. Still (9-11). Moving from the spondee to the iamb in line nine, "Réd as a héart" forces the two unstressed syllables to touch, aurally creating a space in between the stresses, between the living and the dead. This in-between space is without movement as everything is: "stopped. Each thing unclocked, undone" (13). The desire to move forward, to progress, has led to this space of in-between where Simpson is unable to communicate and the speakers are unable to die.

Moving into the next poem, Simpson deviates from the corona form and alters the last line of "*The Tower of Babel I*" from "A man who kneels to plead his case. Warm sun" (14) to "That man who knelt to plead his case, that sun (1) in "*Tower of Babel II.*" The movement from the present tense to the past tense, along with "a" present tense specific "man" suggests a significant passage of time between the two poems. The spondaic "Warm sun," is also shifted into the iambic "that sun." Although there is an attempted shift into order, the scene is still violent, as the "air hardens" and the scene is "growing dark" in a way that is reminiscent of the first sonnet. However, the danger is now distanced and observed rather than immediate and experienced. The violence occurs away from the living observer on the spondaic "TV," where "guns / talk to themselves" (2-3); the trochee to iamb movement here creates an unstressed distance between "walk" and "selves" which aurally echoes the distance between the observer and the war. Simpson is developing the disconnect that has happened in this passage of time. The collapsed towers have forced a retaliatory war; yet, although there is an attempted safety in the return of the iambic pentameter, there is something deeply disturbing about the scene. The living are now closer to the *il y a*: "forgotten. / Those painted clouds are

knives. Slipped in walls / between the ribs” (9-11). The counterattack has done nothing to ease the pain of loss: “This plot device rotten: / the thing exploded from within” (11-12). Their movement towards the space of the *il y a* is evident because they are now unable to fully live, locked into a state of constant grief (constantly reminded of the absent dead). The caesura with the subsequent clipped fourth foot of the tenth line, “between the ribs. This plot device: rotten,” marks the space between the violence as it forces two stresses side by side with the caesura in the middle; this space, created again in the spondaic third foot of line 13, “Last Wish,” forces the living between the grief and violence of 9/11 and the ensuing retaliatory wars the living witness on television: “papers, white flakes. last wish. Someone’s cellphone.” It is the space, again, of the *il y a*, where the presence-of-absence is marked by a constant fear of violence and death, and also fear of unrelenting grief.

The desire for connection in “*The Tower of Babel I*,” also confuses the living and the dead. Although the phone calls from the plane would have been made by the now dead, it is the living who are now reaching out amidst their internal “explos[ion] from within” as they imagine the scene again and again: “Small / papers, white flakes. Last wish. Someone’s cellphone. / (“*Are you still there? Are you?*”) A voice falls. Stone” (12-14). The trochee and spondees in these lines, although they do “sound-loop” back into iambic pentameter, highlight the brokenness of the once whole relationships. “*The Slaughter of the Innocents*” continues into a remembrance of these dead, presumably evoked by the watching of war on the television in the previous poem. However, the third line is uncharacteristically written in tetrameter: “Don’t watch. Go blind. Oh Lord, those moans.” The shortness of this line echoes the theme that the dead were taken too

soon. Everything seems to fall short for the dead: “a silence follows through / the rooms of when and how. Now up the stairs / a rescuer is climbing. But he’s too late” (11-14).

The living exist within an insomniac space, where the *il y a* is an overwhelming silence, the absence of their loved ones, a death they can neither follow nor wake up from.

The last line of “Slaughter of the Innocents” forces the specific personal pronoun into a fragment: “And look what happened. This. Short straw of fate” (14). By forcing the assumption of knowledge, found in the isolated “This,” into its own fragment it is both specific and vague, as it exists separate from its referent. The separation is reminiscent of Levinas’s attempt to imagine existing as separate from existents when describing the *il y a* (Levinas *Time* 46). The line shifts, as we move into the first line of “*Hunters in the Snow*.” “Who knows what happened? A short straw of fate” (1).

Although Simpson has removed the specific experience implied by the “This,” which stands for the empty experience of the absence of both the living and the dead, “*Hunters in the Snow*” is relentlessly negative. The shift from the assertive and knowing “And look what happened,” to the questioning “Who knows what happened,” calls into question both the validity of collective historical memory and personal experiential memory; the fragmented last line “And look what happened. This. Short straw of fate,” asserts knowledge, where the syntactically correct line “Who knows what happened? A short straw of fate,” while able to communicate clearly, instead actually questions memory.

In order for the living to move forward from atrocity, there must be a forgetting; the hypothesis is that this forgetting will be liberating. Simpson establishes the danger inherent to language, as the stresses of the second line call attention to the absence of the

unstressed second syllable. A combination of anacrusis and spondaic meter places these strong stresses together: “all that. Years ago. But now we’ve changed” (2). Simpson does seem to be moving the poem forward as the living attempt to move past the horror of the past; however, the forgetting required makes everything uncanny, as “the house looks strange. Each thing / deceives” (5-6). In discussing the nature of the “uncanny” or “*unheimlich*” Freud considers its opposite “*heimlich*,” which can be defined as homely/familiar or native (932). While *heimlich* can exist as something familiar and known, Freud notes that it can also convey that which “is concealed and kept out of sight” (933). For Simpson, the living are required to have a home that keeps history out of sight, which then allows the “home,” and its concealed history, to take on a kind of deception. The enjambment of the eleventh line furthers the theme of uncertainty as the word “lie” is connected to both history and to the beds: “And history has no place. Easy to lie / on queen sized beds” (11-12). The implication is that while the belief that history does not belong in the present is a lie told to soothe people, it is actually one that deceives them since it has made everything uncanny and unfamiliar. In this defamiliarized space, Simpson allows the voices of the dead to emerge through the italicized and trochaic voice of the non-human: “on queen sized beds, *dream a little dream*. Half- / heard phantoms speak” (12-13). Here the dead speakers are thrust back into the scene as they, trochaically and irregularly, speak, yet both the living and the dead are in the space of the *il y a*, where the presence of the (absent) dead represent the anxiety of being.

These dead speakers return again in the last line of “*Hunters in the Snow*” and in the final poem “*Christ and the Adulteress*” through the pronoun “we:” “We turn; we sleep. But once there was a prayer” (14, 1). Although Simpson develops the dead

speakers as seemingly freed from their liminal space through the image of the plastic bag now “freed from the fence, that snare” (3), metrically this “freed from” is still a trochaic substitution, unable to fit into the flowing connective iambic pentameter of the line. The poem's shift back into the iambic pentameter suggests lightly that the dead speakers could be free: “We translate into motes, / a glimmer in a shaft of sun” (4-5) and “A man makes notes in sand. The wind goes free” (8). Simpson also uses words like “absolved” and “dissolve” to suggest that the dead have been able to move forward, and she brings the “Tick” and “Tock” of time into the same metrical foot, in line ten, which is in contrast to the first sonnet “*The Triumph of Death*.” Although this could be seen as a positive change for the dead, the poem’s iambic structure does not suggest a hope for the living. This consistent iambic pentameter in lines eleven, twelve, and fourteen is undermined as it discourages reading a stress on “love” in the thirteenth line: “A touch: so light. Love’s breath. Things we can’t hold.” From the caesura in the thirteenth line Simpson moves back into the predictable iambic passage of time; however, it is lifeless: “Things we can’t hold: / these watches. Ticking. Still. Each hour is cold” (13-14). Although there is a clear attempt to bring a steady and stable metrical shelter to the poem, it does not protect the poem’s subjects or change its bleak themes. The cycle of violence will continue. Even if, like the Biblical story the title and painting reference, humanity were to “turn the other cheek” and forgive like Christ, that kindness would only bring more suffering, as Christ himself was crucified. The cold stone-like painting, although a beautiful moment of forgiveness, foresees Christ’s execution, just as the poem, although stunningly crafted, well rhymed, and, predominantly, if haltingly, iambic, uses metrical substitutions to develop the devastating space of the terrifying *il y a*.

Loop contains another powerful sonnet, “Yellow Cord,” that is also an attempt for the rigid sonnet structure to provide protection from the thematic content of the poem. “Yellow Cord” follows the same Shakespearian rhyme scheme as “*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*.” However, unlike “*Seven Paintings*,” which considers human nature and atrocity, “Yellow Cord,” considers rape through the metaphysical tradition as it separates sex from love while still using the form suggesting the courtly love tradition, with its exercises in unrequited feeling. However, in “Yellow Cord,” unlike “*Seven Paintings*,” Simpson does not write in fragments. Most of the metrical feet remain unbroken, likely because the poem is written overwhelmingly in monosyllables; of the eleven words that that are disyllabic only five have stresses in different feet, and only one foot is broken by punctuation. Timothy Steele, in *All The Fun’s In How You Say A Thing*, notes that a progression of monosyllables serves to slow down a line, whereas polysyllabic words tend to speed up a line (100). The speaker in “Yellow Cord” is attempting to slow down and process “your” rape as it is happening, while rendering it through a possibly disingenuous second-person. Simpson gives voice to a speaker desperate to separate herself from the rape. The entire poem is a matryoshka doll of successive confinements. The speaker is first confined in the car, then by the man, and even by the night that “shut[s] like a sash” (8). Even after the volta where the speaker manages to distract the man and free herself, her heart is still contained: “A spoon inside a jar” (14). The form then, is an attempt to control all of these confinements by restricting the event’s description through the tight rules of the sonnet. While the poem tries to shelter the speaker from the traumatic theme, paradoxically it points to the lack of shelter as it creates a space for the *il y a*.

Simpson notes that literature moves towards the *il y a* as it attempts an “erasure of subjectivity,” trying to reach the “limits of the human” (*Marram 97*). Although it attempts to erase the subjective, Simpson admits that ultimately, literature will fail to reach these limits. Both the sonnet sequence and “Yellow Cord” contain a tension between the traditionally lyric form and the resisted lyric, subjective first-person speaker. While Simpson does give personal voice to the dead in “*Seven Paintings*” it is always in the plural “we,” refusing the completely subjective “I.” “Yellow Cord” also refuses a subjective speaker in order to remain within the limits of the known, while at the same time pointing towards the danger of a knowable “personal” experience where “I” would have been raped rather than “you.”

The resistance of these closed forms to provide a lyric moment or experience, or something knowable, illuminates Simpson’s basic distrust of the genre in general. In an interview with Jeanette Lynes, Simpson says “I’m so in love with the lyric, but I resist it” (197). The lyric is generally defined as a short, musical, first-person, emotional poem. Helen Vendler suggests that the lyric is the “personal expression of a fictional speaker” (Jackson 833). Simpson’s use of the sonnet, the historical epitome of the lyric, immediately suggests her interest in lyric form; however, her withholding of a first-person speaker in “*Seven Paintings*,” and the intentional distancing of the speaker from emotion in “Yellow Cord,” show her tawny resistance to the subjective perspective of the standard sonnet. It is perhaps more accurate to say that Simpson does not resist the lyric itself, but the subjectivity historically inherent to it. This split between form and speaker is in line with Doug Barbour’s understanding of lyric/anti-lyric, developed in his essay, which, in the style of anti-lyric, presents a “signifier with a myriad of floating signifieds”

(31). While both “*Seven Paintings*” and “Yellow Cord” avoid a lyric “I” speaker, this creates a kind of “anti-lyric” that attempts to remove the speaker entirely and one where a speaker speaks to no one in particular (19), both of which, for Simpson, allow for a multitude of ethically responsible referential possibilities. In the manner of Robert Creeley and John Newlove, examples given by Barbour, Simpson’s poems “call attention to the lyric qualities it simultaneously denies and affirms” (20). By “affirming” traditionally lyric forms she calls attention to her withholding, or “denying,” of a personal speaker, thereby revealing the erasure of the self required to grapple with the Other.¹²

Jan Zwicky furthers the definition of the lyric by asserting in *Lyric Philosophy* that “lyric is lithe. It is poignant, and musical. It moves by association of images... Lyric is an attempt to comprehend the whole in a single gesture” (L73). Simpson’s use of the lyric sonnet, her adherence to the regulated rhyme scheme and variable use of iambic pentameter, then, work to illuminate the necessity of history in attempting to understand the “whole” within the single gesture of a poem. Simpson demonstrates that to “attempt to comprehend [a] whole in a single gesture,” she must develop a series of apparently random connections which, when explored, expand the poem’s reach. “*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*” is full of apparently disparate references including the lyric sonnet form, the painter Pieter Brueghel, the tower of Babel, Jesus Christ, 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, these references, although an attempt to capture a historical continuity by way of bringing together seemingly disparate things, serve to show the

¹² Avoiding the lyric speaker can appear to shift the weight of ethical responsibility away from the self, in that witnessing suffering does not produce an ethically motivated self. However, Simpson’s concern is that by having a lyric “I” speaker, thus focusing on the self, an understanding of the Other’s suffering will be negligible, and so any subsequent ethical motivation suspect.

brokenness in the world. "Yellow Cord," while not brimming with historical references, uses the traditional sonnet to intensify the horror of the rape since the sonnet form was historically associated with themes of love and, in particular, unrequited love. In "The Dark Side of Fiction's Moon" Simpson's understanding of the *il y a* is wrapped up in her discussion of the double, where the self and the Other come in contact and where the "struggle to the death" beings a "sense" of the *il y a*, or the terrifying presence of absence (96). By splitting apart the lyric form from its lyric speaker, Simpson is creating a space for the *il y a* as it points to the inability of both to bring a wholeness to atrocity.

Where these closed forms move towards the *il y a* and the separation of lyric speaker and lyric form removes the possibility of wholeness, Simpson's open forms create a tension that allows the poem to possess *duende* and allow for a connection with the Other. Simpson notes, in her Compton interview, Don McKay's assertion that there are two "wings" of her art: "one is the very rigorous, highly wrought corona and the other is a series of improvisations" (40). These improvisations, while apparent in the series "Gesture Drawings," fail to take into account her open and yet still strict forms. These often invented forms function to create a connection between contrasting ideas and subjects. A significant creative invented form is "Möbius Strip" from *Is*. Kate Braid and Sandy Shreve have defined it as a palindrome (131), inasmuch as it can be read forwards and backwards. Visually, however, Simpson takes this palindromic structure a bit further; like its tactile namesake the poem, by way of having an unbroken line placed between the two poetic lines that might otherwise be read as a couplet, loops back unto itself, each line of text appearing at some point both on top of and on bottom of the unbroken line. For example, the first line of the poem, appearing on top of the break:

“How it starts, how it ends: a wild tuft in the sky, a cloud. This blue” (54), also appears below the line as the final line of the poem. The turning over happens with the two lines that switch orientation over the typographic dividing line that separates top from bottom.

The first iteration reads as follows:

we’re filled, yet we tip constantly. Goodbye. As for happiness —

it spills itself. The petal of a violet, a blur ear, listening. How easily

it spills itself. The petal of a violet, a blue ear, listening. How easily

we’re filled, yet we tip constantly. Goodbye. As for happiness — (58-9)

The references to tipping and spilling come back to the initial metaphor: “we’re simple as cups:/ everything and nothing,” which is undone in its reversal “we’re simple as cups:/ Small, smaller on a white bed” (top to bottom 57, bottom to top 60-61). Through the doing and undoing of metaphors, Simpson is forcing the meeting of opposites within the poem. The very structure, looping back unto itself, reads both backwards and forwards, top to bottom, left to right, implying an unending, yet the first and last line, both by their very nature as the beginning and end of the poem and their overt attention to the “start” and the “end,” call attention to the finality of life: “How it starts, how it ends: a wild tuft in the sky, a cloud. This blue” (54, 63). The structure of the poem as it loops back into itself attempting totality, is Simpson’s *duende*. In order to create a visual poetic representation of both eternity and finality, Simpson requires the abandoning of human

interests and the privileging of nature, the clouds and the sky. While the removal of the subjective “we” in this privileging of the non-self could risk the *il y a*, Simpson avoids a complete removal of the subjective because as the “we” moves through layers of change, its subjects continually alter themselves: “We take whatever shape we find. We learn each fold in air” (bottom 54, top 63). Since the space is without the threat of violence, the subjective “we” is able to exist in the structural loop despite the absence of that pronoun from the beginning and ending.

While “Möbius Strip” attempts to contain the Otherness of eternity through a tension, *duende*, and is able to erase the subjective “we” without creating a threatening absence, it does not grapple with suffering or atrocity in the same way as “*Seven Paintings*” and “Yellow Cord” do. It is important to note that while “*Seven Paintings*” and “Yellow Cord” are working both within the fragmented metaphysical sonnet tradition of Donne and the (subverted) courtly love tradition of Petrarch, Simpson’s other innovative formal poems which move toward the Other of eternity seem to work within George Herbert’s tradition of metaphysical poetry. While Simpson does not keep strictly to religious themes, “Möbius Strip” and “Double Helix” bear a striking resemblance to the visual, concrete forms of Herbert’s “Easter Wings” and “The Altar,” where the shape of the poem echoes its content. Trevor James asserts that Herbert’s poetry is able to “show how a finely achieved ‘wholeness’ can exist without Donne’s sharply fragmented structure” (76). So where “Yellow Cord” fragments and distances itself from the experience of the rape through the removal of an emotionally subjective speaker and the confinement evident in both the experience and the form of the tight sonnet, “Double

Helix” integrates the reader to the Other’s experience of suffering, this time not a rape but the testing of inheritable genetic abnormalities.

With the overarching plot of a man going into the city for genetic testing, the poem’s form consists of seven lines contracting into a single word line from which the poem then begins to expand. The basic form begins to look like the double helix of a DNA strand that is being tested for hereditary abnormalities:

-- with the end poised inside the beginning.

First aria. In July, a leaf falling but not falling, one

finger’s length of scarlet about to skim the pond’s

ink. Foreshadowing, he thinks. An opening

into dense plots and subplots

of green. *My dear*

one –

Is it

a story at all

or glimpse there

from the window of a train? (In

her notebook, an aria written in Anna

Magdalena’s hand.) Out of the woods: whale

backs of slabbed mud, Tantramar’s tasseled grasses,

two kestrels stitching air. Sarabande. Here, the leaf’s

languid spin. Lavish, improbable. Moment before

the moment after: a dropped leaf on water.

This is what we're made of:

unlit dust of stars.

Blood,

Bone.

Salt

On skin. Taste (1-23)

This form, with its typical emphasis on the interrelatedness of finality and eternity, echoes back to “Möbius Strip;” yet where “Möbius Strip” attempts to loop back into itself, “Double Helix” focuses on what happens when the structure is broken, since, even in the above example, Simpson often places punctuation in the line separating the expanding and contracting stanzas to illustrate, visually, the brokenness of the DNA strand. Simpson further complicates the possibility of finality and eternity by developing them through the man going for the testing and his wife waiting at home. Both seem to be inside and outside one another “that self inside his own self, but larger. / Exploding the self he thought / he was” [...] “She’s inside, outside the self / he is now” [...] “falling – she lets him go. Knows that he / arrives, departs, within her. Married, unmarried” (79-81, 187-89, 201-02). By connecting the finite relationship between a man and a woman with their desire to endure through procreation, Simpson is able to consider the Otherness of their suffering in terms of the *il y a*, which threatens their desire eternally to live, through their offspring, yet to cease being, through their inevitable deaths.

Both the woman and the man seem to long for a child; however, if the tests come back positive, the “riddle in the genes,” the “broken” DNA that is “written in his cells” will be passed down to their child (87, 162, 189). The woman who has stayed at home tries to

maintain normalcy, as embodied by the quiet domesticity of the house cat, but becomes increasingly unstable. At first the cat is described as settled: "The ordinary settles into corners, a sleeping cat" (42), and she, presumably a pianist, is attempting to keep calm: "Contrapuntal self. She's playing the same / thing over and over. Difficult to slow it / down" (45-46). However, as the poem goes on, the cat, like her frantic repeating piano playing, also becomes increasingly wild:

*My love -- A woman's
body
making up a
story with or without her
consent. Yowling cat. Fingertips of rain" (91-95)*

Normalcy is threatened for the woman, as "[t]he cat, inside, winds and winds through her legs. / He's gone. Two loops, a figure eight. / Wet fur against her skin" (100-102). After the cat has left, the woman is plunged into longing:

She wants
to
be held... /
...Wants to hold a lover, a baby. Selves,
one inside another. Held within. Holding" (103-105, 109-110).

Eventually the cat, now wild and untamed, kills a goldfinch: "A woman / sweeps / a goldfinch into / the dustpan. The cat again" (86). This foreshadowed death of either the husband, or perhaps a child, is furthered when the woman buries the bird: "She tucks the sun- / bright, feathered/ body / into earth, cells / disintegrating. DNA -- broken / ladder"

(87-8). Although it is the man who has the genetic abnormality, Simpson explores the pain the woman will experience at the loss, since it is these stanzas, with their focus on the woman, which contract and expand unbroken, without punctuation.

In contrast, the stanzas that consider the man are frequently broken with punctuation, echoing the break within his double helix DNA strand. Simpson has intertwined the basic form of these stanzas into the plot of the poem:

Exploding the self he thought

he was.

His brother

smokes rolled cigarettes.

Steers the truck with one knee, runs his

tongue along the paper's edge. Uncanny likeness,

brother to brother. One of them off the hook, the other

with a riddle in the genes, hole in a pocket of their father's

navy jacket, hanging in the closet. Lost in the lining: (80-89)

Although the man wants to have children with his wife, he "knows what's growing deep / in his body. Three crows" (111-112). The man also foreshadows his wife's suffering by confusing his wife and his mother, as the first introduction of the mother is through the ambiguous "her." Given that the previous "hers" had referenced the wife, the reader can assume that the confusion is made because the man understands that the grief of his mother will be similar to the grief of his wife: "He gets out dazed, / recalls *her* at the inlaid Italian desk / after the funeral. Musk of lilies. His mother" (119-21 italics added). Unlike his wife, whose fear is continuously living alone, "playing the same / thing over

and over,” the man’s fear is of dying. Although much of the poem is fragmentary, like “*Seven Paintings*,” the open form of “Double Helix” does allow the alternating of syntactical continuity and fragmentation to echo the continuity of her suffering and the finality of his.

While it may appear on the surface that “Double Helix” focuses on the individual suffering of one couple, Simpson further aligns herself with the metaphysical tradition by creating a sustained conceit that exists to draw a parallel between the man’s broken DNA and the Spanish Civil War. Trevor James notes that the metaphysical poets, while rejecting musicality in favour of a compressed “rough, rugged, or irregular” metre, often employed conceits that “embod[y] and develop the thought rather than merely embellishing it” (33). These sharp conceits, he says, create “a style in which nothing can be taken for granted and where subject, tone, professed attitude and sentiments are all equivocal” (33). Where Simpson’s conceits in “*Seven Paintings*” are more obvious and serve to create the isolated space of the *il y a* for both the living and the dead, “Double Helix” obscures the analogy to create a bridge between individual suffering and mass atrocity. The connection between individual and collective pain, although fragile, allows Simpson to avoid creating the space for the *il y a* because she does not write explicitly about history’s connection to the present, thus linguistically killing it, nor does she intentionally sever the parallel, thus keeping both in the dark. The balance struck between transparency and obscurity is able to avoid the ambivalence of the *il y a* because the variations within DNA and historical events allow for positive possibility.

Simpson connects the individual suffering of the man and woman, caused by the broken DNA, to war, as both cause the loss of a generation. Beginning with the woman

trying to maintain normalcy while her husband is away for testing, Simpson brings in two disparate things: Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Federico García Lorca's death during the Spanish Civil War. Although not lyric in the traditional sense, and although still resisting the lyric "I," the poem works within Zwicky's "association of images" to create a whole (L73). As the woman plays Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Simpson creates a parallel between the "variations" within the thirty arias and the "variation" that has occurred in her husband's DNA. While the variation is imprinted on the music and in her husband, it is she who has to live out the consequences of the changes, just as it is she who brings the music off the page by playing it. The *duende* within the poem exists in the desire to understand the full nature of suffering, both individual and mass suffering, but to see it like Orpheus wants to see Eurydice: impossibly, within her opacity. As the woman plays the variations, she begins to think about the Spanish Civil War, which after the First World War became, as Eric Hobsbawm says, "the quintessential expression of this [transnational] global confrontation" and which "*instantly* mobilized the sympathies of both Left and Right in Europe and the Americas, and notably of the Western World's intellectuals" (156 italics in original). It is important to note that since the conflict in Spain was separate from the World Wars, it became an instance of mass suffering that, while other nations and leaders sympathized, did not include an overt participation of other nations.

As the woman is "recalling that / anguished letter about the Spanish Civil / War" she thinks on their individual suffering: "One priest killed after capture; the other shot / after they'd freed him, after they told him to get lost" (53-54). Her thoughts on these

individual war time sufferings become a veiled consideration of Lorca's death during the war:

What does her life have to do with the life of a writer,
 hauled off early one morning? Granada,
 1936. The writer, a teacher,
 and
 two *banderilleros*" (136-140).

The woman is trying to grasp how everything is connected, brokenly asking "what does one / life / have to do –" (148-150). As the poem continues, and normalcy is gone, everything in the woman's life seems to fold together:

The homemade cookies. Their lives might be nothing more
 than a history of cells. Diving, multiplying. Unless. *Canone*
all Quinta. Endings, melancholy. Muddied boots, a man
 walking, one step closer to a gun-crack, echoes. As if
 one person's life could be someone else's
 A bird's body in her palm. Candle
 Flare. *My love* – Folded
 And re-
 folded letter. (178-186)

By conflating the woman's husband and the individuals killed during the Spanish Civil War, Simpson is collapsing individual pain into mass atrocity. Both the genetic abnormality in the woman's husband and the Spanish Civil War have a prologue, a beginning, which develops into a plot played out through the death of individuals.

Although the man's death is written in his genes, and Spanish Civil War written onto individual lives, Simpson does not allow the inevitability of suffering to become suggestive of the *il y a*. Even when she allows for the possibility that life might be "nothing more / than a history of cells," a possibility full of the hopeless presence-of-absence, *il y a*, Simpson undermines it by connecting the woman's life, by way of the Bach variations, to Lorca. Although not hopeful, there is no sense of separation between life and living. Even if her husband is walking towards a death like Lorca's, and the tiny bird's body represents their loss of children, her pain is not the only facet of life:

folded letter.

She's inside, outside the self

he is now. Breaking him. His parents'

stories, written in his cells, aren't the only ones. (186-189)

The love between the woman and the man allows for a hopeful story, separate from his genes, to grow. While the poem ends with "A beginning / poised / inside the ending / poised inside the beginning –" (210-213) the woman has not been trapped into a cycle of pain like the living in "*Seven Paintings*" who move from the violent death of their loved ones to the horror of the subsequent wars with very little hope of an end to the bloodshed. The interconnectedness of beginning and end within "Double Helix" allows the woman to embrace suffering and also to let it go:

She gets up, wipes a hand

on her jeans...

He'll call; he knows the test results. Nothing as it was.

Clear. A slow line of notes; she remembers how it goes. (203-206)

Although the man and the woman may not be able to have children, his individual variation causing the loss of a generation, their lives are still part of a progression and a movement forward.

The idea of beginning and ending folding into one another, which consistently forces a movement forward, is Simpson's expression of Lorca's *duende*. The poem is able to connect with the Other of suffering because she collapses the boundaries between individual and mass pain into our fundamental DNA. Although anguish has a beginning that is inextricably tied to its end, it does not cut the woman off from life, as Simpson leaves the poem open to variations through the connection to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. These variations, while suggesting the cause of the genetic abnormality, are also a part of a larger whole that will continue, like Bach's work of art, and human DNA in general. Through the form we can see how life expands and contracts, and how life is the multitude and the individual, the self and the Other, as how life continues despite pain. Mass suffering then cannot be understood without looking at the individual; for its cumulative stories are played out through the singular, just as our cumulative genetic history is played out in our own DNA's double helix. It is the variations that change, but do not end, life, as they can be the death of the man or the conception of his child, the creation of a stable country or one vulnerable to a civil war.

The poem's form allows Simpson, like George Herbert, to give her themes a visual representation. "Möbius Strip" and "Double Helix" consider the possibility of eternity and finality, yet Simpson uses form in an attempt to contain both. However, Simpson's impulse is to consider and understand the Otherness of suffering and the experiences of it. For Simpson, fixed definitions of Otherness are terrifying, as evident in

her consideration of trauma within her closed form poetry. Her elegant “*Seven Paintings by Breughel*” considers the suffering of the dead and the living after the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centers. Written in tight sonnets, Simpson’s “*Seven Paintings*” follows the metaphysical tradition of Donne while appearing predominantly in fragments. Although she keeps a mostly regular iambic pentameter, this metrical structure is often broken by punctuation to emphasize the suffering and lack of connection with the Other of atrocity and suffering. Her metaphysical metaphors and conceits serve to create hopelessness as violence always begets violence, and love, demonstrated through Simpson’s consideration of the painting which considers Christ forgiving the woman caught in adultery, also leads to violence (as the painting and the poem both focus on Christ’s death without foreshadowing Christianity’s belief in the redemptive nature of this event). Simpson’s iambicism echoes the austere painting *Christ and the Adulteress*, since she refuses a stress on “love,” and thus love’s ability to end suffering. The sonnet form furthers Simpson’s understanding of the *il y a*. The Other of suffering in these sonnets is a constant “presence-in-absence” that prevents movement. The dead and the living are locked into Levinas’s fear of never being able to die, constant states of either eternal living, or eternal undeath. Through her work within the sonnet form, Simpson plays with the idea of lyric, separating the lyric speaker from the lyric form, as both “*Seven Paintings*” and “*Yellow Cord*” use the lyric sonnet form while resisting its personal speaker. The separation of lyric form from personal speaker allows Simpson to create the subjectivity-denying *il y a*’s “presence-of-absence,” as neither form nor speaker are able to give the poem a glimpse of the Other. Instead, their separation heightens the sense of containment and stagnancy.

It is Simpson's open form poems that create a space for interacting with the Other of suffering. While at first Simpson returns to the ideas of eternity and finality, both of which represent the possibility of terror, by creating strict but open form poems like "Far-Off World" and "Möbius Strip," these rigid forms, unlike the sonnets, attempt to remove the boundaries between these terrors without fragmentation and without relegating the attempts into the *il y a*. Although these poems are fairly successful in collapsing the boundaries between eternity and finality, it is "Double Helix" which creates a space for understanding suffering. "Double Helix," a visual poem created in the shape of a DNA strand, uses fragmentation to show the finality of the man's pain and his life, and the continuation of his wife's. As the woman grapples with trying to understand the massive consequences of her husband's genetic abnormality, Simpson connects her individual suffering to the Spanish Civil War. The poem possesses the push and pull of *duende* as Simpson develops a connection between beginning and end that avoids finality. Simpson's consideration of the woman's foreshadowed loss of her husband and children and the connection to the Spanish Civil War in combinations with the lack of ending may seem as though Simpson has created a space for eternal suffering; however, the continuation of the woman's life, and the fact that she is no longer playing the same Bach variation repeatedly, signals that while the variations can be negative, in the case of her husband's DNA, they are also the source of movement and change, which could be positive and which is impossible for the *il y a*. So rather than the fragmented and closed forms like the sonnets, which do utilize fragments that linguistically Simpson had been able to offer as an ethical way to communicate with the Other,¹³ it is the invented yet still

¹³ Here I am thinking of the poem "Grammar Exercise" which used the fragment to

strict forms that allow Simpson to create poetry that, while exploring suffering, gestures towards hope.

question the ethics of writing coherently about a violent experience one has not experienced.

Chapter Three: Poetic Attention and Tawny Movement

“here and gone and here again” (Simpson, *Marram* 149)

The term “tawny grammar,” given its reference to Thoreau, is inherently intertwined with the tradition of nature poetry; however, Simpson’s poems rarely focus on nature. Instead, her poetry is preoccupied with an attempt to comprehend nature as Other in order to find a “home” for the speakers. McKay’s *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness*, while foregrounding the tradition of nature poetry, makes the important assertion that poetry in general exists within the basic human longing to make the world “home,” meaning the development of “inner life finding outer form” (22). The major stumbling block for Simpson’s poetic figuring of inner life finding outer form is the existence of suffering. While Simpson’s grammar and form have been used to emphasize and enlarge the boundaries of the poem so as to develop a method for understanding suffering, it is the *movement* of her poems that dictates how she uses these basic tools. I use the term “movement” because Simpson often formally shifts and moves perspectives within a poem. This formal moving of perspective from close and detailed to distanced and abstracted allows for a kind of give and take within a poem, which is performed also on a thematic level. This movement is a part of McKay’s poetic attention that aims to “grasp and gift,” an experience of the Other (29). This chapter will focus on the question of how a poem both formally and subjectively *moves*. It will explore how the grasp inherent to poetry can give a subjectively satisfied ending that provides a release from suffering, and also how it can negatively affect the suffering observed.

Simpson's *tawny movements*, an adaptation of McKay's grasp and gift,¹⁴ facilitate through a consideration of the failure of formal and thematic movements a consideration of the suffering Other that, while not objectively understood or subjectively satisfied, is hopeful.

In an interview with Trussler, Simpson uses the term "tawny movement" to describe how a poem develops, while also distinguishing the notion of tawny movement from that of tawny grammar: "tawny grammar might be revealed in terms of a poem's shape or form, or in its language, or in its music, however dissonant. The other thing is that poetry advances by leaps; it moves as an animal moves (a tawny movement?). I guess I try to let my poetry move as freely as it can" (7). Although she hesitates to assign the term "tawny movement," I believe it is effective in describing her poetry as situated between the meditative nature poetry that facilitates McKay's "poetic attention," and a graphic, political poetry that aims to incite action, such as that of Adrienne Rich.¹⁵ While Simpson's poetry tends to exist in the context of suffering, she often attempts to undermine rather than emphasize the specific and visual details of it. While this quiet

¹⁴ McKay's grasp and gift subverts Levinas's "primordial grasp" by simultaneously "extending a palm," providing a poem with an "openness in knowing" that McKay calls "poetic attention" (29). While Simpson perhaps desires to leave a poem in this openness of knowing, which is not unlike Thoreau's "Beautiful Knowledge" or "positive ignorance," she also desires to consider the Other in a way that is ethical, thus aiming to shield it from further dangers.

¹⁵ Cynthia L. Haven's article "The Suffering of Others: On Adrienne Rich" considers Rich's consistent reliance on the gory and gruesome in order to create "shock value" in her poetry. Rich's poetry balances between, as she said in a 2006 Guardian article, poetry's either "inadequate, even immoral" or "unprofitable, hence useless" position to suffering. Poetry then that does not consider suffering is useless, and poetry that does consider is always inadequate; and so Rich's poetry, while perhaps as she implies is immoral, swings to this end in the hopes of inciting an emotional reaction spurring action in the observer/reader.

attention can be interpreted as normalizing pain in order to understand, it is actually a manifestation of McKay's assertion of the desire to find "home" through the "rendering of the other as [her] interior" (McKay 23). In order for this rendering to occur, McKay implies that a movement is required because the creation of "home" always uses a "primordial grasp" which moves in a way that "renders" the Other inside the self (23). However, this home-making becomes a kind of paradox because McKay understands the process as the self "claiming" place and also "becoming" a place within Otherness (23). Within the confines imposed by knowledge, poetic attention is used to counteract this "grasp" of home-making in order to "in some measure, give it [home] away with an extended palm" (23). Although the grasp and gift of tawny movement is brought about through poetic attention's desire to glean a fuller comprehension of the Other and the suffering inherent to it, Simpson's poetry goes further, desiring that her "extended palm," like Rich's poetic onslaught of violence, *do* something about the suffering considered. So while McKay's poetic attention is "based on a recognition and a valuing of the other's wilderness, it leads to a work which is not a *vestige* of the other, but a *translation* of it" (28); yet, given Simpson's uncertainty about language, her desire becomes not merely to translate but to change. Rather than allowing the poem's poetic attention to isolate a moment of celebration and renewed awareness of the Other (Wilderness), as McKay's understanding requires (26), Simpson desires a pivotal moment that creates a space for change.

Both McNeilly and Sanger have noted that Simpson's poetry tends to arise out of the desire to find a moral and physical stability within a setting that is consistently either unknown or dangerous. McNeilly notes that Simpson's poetic forms are often a grasping

at form (197), and Sanger asserts that the “abstracted observer speakers” seem to “cry out for some kind of shelter in a morally comprehensible structure... [yet] the observer speaker refuses to or cannot supply such a structure overtly” (Sanger 8). This grasping has been evident in the form and meter of her poetry, as both describe the poem’s temporality and its effort to come to rest; however, more than these forms and speakers, the movement in her poetry exemplifies a subjective dissonance that also expresses the speaker's desire to find home. Yet, this longing to be at home is consistently compromised, often impeded by perspective barriers inherent to the speaker’s position within the poem and arising from the observation of suffering. The movements, while varied, are always an attempt to understand the Otherness of suffering so as to find for the self a safe exterior to make its interior.

This home-making desire of poetry, as understood by McKay, cannot avoid the “primordial grasp,” which would then staunch the possibility for the poem to then *do* something about what it has grasped. This term is used by Levinas to describe the place where “possession, including knowledge, begins” (McKay 23). While this dwelling in language can be interpreted as the “home” space poetry strives towards, if language is used to observe the suffering of others it becomes implicated in the possession and thus inflicts a kind of violence itself. Simpson’s tawny grammar is an attempt to evade language and grammar’s possessive qualities, yet her tawny movements evade language’s possessiveness by “slicing through time [to] grasp the significance of laden moments, intensifying them with emotional nuance” (Marram 24). This intensification of ineffable moments is what allows a poem to “leap” and “jump,” as Simpson says, in a way that is startling to the reader. These leaps and jumps connect disparate things and move through

space and time to legitimize the ineffable impacts of words on understanding and knowledge, thus loosening the hold of language as the sole means to understanding. McKay echoes this philosophy in his definition of nature poetry and poetic attention, as both “acknowledge some extra-linguistic condition as the poem’s input, output, or both,” and by focusing on “wilderness” which he said can be “front lawn [or] back country” as well as “a car, a coat hanger, or even language itself” (26). Simpson then falls into this nature poetry category by infusing small moments with sharp resonant movements that celebrate the wilderness of the inanimate and the animate in a way that attempts to understand suffering in a way that evades a possessive grasp and creates a gift of change.

“White, Mauve, Yellow” from *Light Falls Through You* is a prototypical example of Simpson’s application of this poetic attention and her establishment of the foundation for tawny movement. In this poem, Simpson focuses on a neighbour's bed sheet drying on a clothes line. Existing in linear time, the bed sheet changes during the course of the day, shifting with the wind and the movement of the sun. Through the focused attention given to the specific subject Simpson is able to “show rather than tell” of the potential disharmony of the bed sheet’s existence in time compromised by the wind. The movement of the bed sheet is an objective correlative to the speaker’s desire to be at home within the domestic scene, and her struggle to arrive there. In the first stanza, the sheet is “suspended” and “rippling white” (1,2). It is full of life as it is “loosening,” “stretching,” and “singing white on that single / float of wind” (8,9-10) The sheet is in harmony with its surroundings; however, this safety is threatened as it is only “appearing whiter because of the mauve / shadow underneath” (10-11). The presence of something dark behind alerts the reader to the sheet’s vulnerability, which Simpson confirms in the

second stanza when everything is jolted by the dash and “—changes immediately” (11). As the wind subsides in this second stanza, the sheet is no longer safe and in harmony with its surroundings. Instead it has become “like a stranded piece of wind... the colour of / something caught, animal or bird / or even the skin at the wrist” (13-15). The unmoving sheet, newly vulnerable, is again attacked by the exterior landscape, the wind, as the sheet “snaps” and “slaps” in the gust (17,18). The third stanza moves into a consideration of the after-effects of this violence as it becomes a “painful white” (19) which calls attention to the mauve shadow. Although language is being used to describe the scene, there is little it can do to possess it in a way that can provide safety for the sheet even in the form of stable description. Suffering is a feature of even safe domestic experiences, despite the desire of the speaker to secure, in language, a subjectively adequate concept of “home.”

However, language in “White, Mauve, Yellow,” is able to temper the undercurrent of violence through metaphor. While Simpson technically employs similes, which, stopping short of full identification, often draw attention to the imperfect nature of the comparison, the function of these comparisons is the same as in metaphor. The first comparison describes the bed sheet as “like a body waiting for another body,” and the second describes the shadow as “long / and distinct as a memory” (7,25-26). This second metaphor complicates the poem because memories, by their nature, are not distinct, in the same way as the mauve of this shadow is not a specific colour, with its endless variations including opera mauve, mallow mauve, French mauve. The sheet, “the body waiting for another body,” is then compromised because the encounter with the Other it is waiting for will in turn change the shadow or memory. While Simpson does not give the reader

hints about the kind of memory considered, either individual or cultural, she calls into question our basic human ability to remember. In the final lines of the poem, Simpson formally moves the speaker out of reality and into an imagining of the neighbour “putting it [the sheet] on a queen sized bed, / briskly tucking it in, so that it is entirely / flat and smooth” (32-34). The shifting of the speaker from spatial and temporal observations into an imaginative consideration, while still an extension of the scene, draws attention to the fact that humanity desires an understanding that is ordered and knowable, in the same way they desire a bed sheet that is tucked-in and neat, “smooth and flat.” The desire to understand that which is separate from the self, in this case the sheet, and the sheet’s dangerous shadow, can only be satisfied in the answer of “cause of the effect,” and explanation that can then be laid out nice “and neat” on a bed. Simpson is able to quell the dissonance of both the objectively observed wind and subjectively felt shadow by returning the sheet to its utilitarian purpose. While the sheet’s Otherness and separateness has been established and celebrated, the dissonance of this Otherness has been satisfied within the poem through the parallel with the sheet that has been returned safely “home.”

However, Simpson’s poetic attention to the sheet considers the dissonant within the confines of an already safe moment. McKay believes that one of the abilities of art is to “provide safe defamiliarizing moments, when the mask of utility gets lifted and we waken to that residual wilderness without the inconvenience of breakdown or disaster” (57-58). Since “White, Mauve, Yellow” exists in an unprepossessing, tame space, it is a striking poem both within its collection and within Simpson’s oeuvre as the speaker is unattached to the dissonance observed, and also able to contain the dissonance

experienced. Within the collection *Light Falls Through You*, “White, Mauve, Yellow” further stands apart as an unexpectedly “quiet” poem, as the three major poems of the collection consider the violence done to the women of Greek myth, the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, and the general unease at the turn of the millennium because of the World Wars. The twenty-one smaller poems range in their overarching consideration of pain and atrocity from a man perhaps fatally cutting his leg in the woods, to cancer, a car accident, the Montreal Massacre, the St. Thomas Railway disaster of 1887, and a general consideration of death. “White, Mauve, Yellow” stands as a domestic, yet prototypical, example of how Simpson uses McKay’s poetic attention to consider suffering and create tawny movement. Simpson’s understanding of the tawny, with its emphasis on the erasure of the subjective, seems to always move towards the dangerous, the violent and the horrifying. Simpson’s tawny movements then function in moments that wrestle with breakdown and disaster. While tawny movements use the same formal and thematic movements apparent in “White, Mauve, Yellow,” they are unable to contain the subjective dissonance as both objective and thematic observations at best fail and at worst cause more harm to the subjects considered. The hopeful moments arise through the play of perspective, the rejection of finality inherent in a subjectively satisfied ending, and through the creation of a pivotal moment that moves past McKay’s still celebration of Otherness and anticipates change.

Where “White, Mauve, Yellow” considers the domestic and connects it to the unknown and violent, “*Viva Voce*” considers the unknown in the attempt to domesticate it and create a pivotal moment of change. Following the events of the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill, Simpson relies on allusions to connect the

reader to the environmental catastrophe, the deaths of the rig employees, and the suicide of a fisherman.¹⁶ The significant reliance on external historical knowledge grounds the poem in the known, and thus the reader expects a certain sequence of events, conclusion, and themes. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* notes that poems that depend on this kind of factual setting bring the "utterance," or poem, into a predetermined sense of validity because the reader's expectations will be fulfilled (54). Simpson's tawny movement is potentially threatened by this factual information, as it is difficult to move, or abstract, a factual event since the reader will anticipate, and correctly predict, Simpson's thematic movement towards a call for ecological action.

Although Simpson's readers may rightly anticipate her call for action and change, the way in which she communicates and evokes the desire for change is startling. Simpson uses an unknown first person speaker: "Under the surface: Mississippi Canyon 252. Where *I* begin speaking" (11 italics added). As the poem moves in the expected sequence of events, the speaker develops a non-human and prophetic voice: "[e]ven bronze hard hats will be commissioned in their memory, but not yet... I bloom / rust-brown, blood-brown. City state, kingdom, republic" (20, 29-30). Flouting the reader's expectation for a moralistic speaker, the voice becomes increasingly dangerous as it forces Allen "Rookie" Kruse to commit suicide during the clean-up (Hennessy-Fiske):

Fisherman, fisherman

¹⁶ Instead of providing the reader with the known name of the oil spill, Simpson gives the specific canyon number where the well had been, "Mississippi Canyon 252." While she does give the first names of the rig workers who died, her consideration of Allen Kruse's suicide is veiled.

Settling into him, the clotted ooze, settling into the sink, the shower, the king-sized bed in his bedroom, settling into his dreams. Into all he's given, dazzled with sea gleam, those mornings, his boat murmuring through a slit in the air between past and present

Gravedigger's work, the work the company assigned him.

He sends the deckhands to get ice, says he'll meet them by the fuel pumps. They wait.

I speak to him on the captain's bridge, above the wheelhouse.

I speak to the Glock handgun beside him. (48-56 italics added)

The speaker becomes omnipotent as well as dangerous. While the reader has anticipated a moral speaker, one calling out for humanity to protect the environment, instead Simpson gives the reader a voice that is ungoverned by morality and whose words exist as action within the poem.

Although it is possible that the speaker is Nature, or the contaminated water system, the most logical speaker is the oil itself. However, Simpson further complicates the voice and perspective of the oil as it does not speak freely; instead, it speaks through its visual representation in the media: "My speech continues... on Live View. It doesn't show blue crabs / bottlenose dolphins, giant halibut, reddish egrets, marlin, brown pelicans, bluefin / tuna, sperm whales, loggerhead turtles. But they're pulled by the undertow of my words" (57-59). Although the voice communicates knowledge that goes beyond the "Live View," its occasion for speaking is the images in the media. The

animals, the speaker says, are not affected “[w]hether I continue, or pause, or -- / Stop -- / Speaking altogether” (64-66). The oil knows that when the media coverage ends, its ability to “speak” to humanity also ends, for it knows its power over animals and nature will remain strong. Since the oil’s impact on nature is not dependent on human knowledge, even if the images and information presented in the media are skewed, the oil’s power is hardly diminished; the voice, given its authority, seems to mock humanity’s attempt to contain it: “Hush money to scientists... / The angles of containment. Photoshopped” (66-67). As the voice continues through linear time and humans attempt to stop the leak, “bullheading my [the oil’s] words,” the oil acknowledges that “[o]il is not the enemy” (76). Although the oil is dangerous and violent to both humanity and nature, its existence is only a symptom of the deeper problem. The stifling of the oil’s words thrust the poem into an unnerving unknown as Simpson seems to imply that the true issue is hidden from us, it is “hushed:” “The enemy — / At the time, at the time — / Hush” (76-78). As Simpson thrusts both the oil’s speech and the oil’s silence into the dangerous unknown, she too comments on the dangers of the media as the oil moves from “*viva voce*” to “*sotto voce*.” As the oil’s voice lowers, it is then sucked into the general current of the ocean and united with earlier spills. This melting into nature should bring a kind of natural easing of the dissonance created in the poem since the speaker is finally being brought into a natural cycle where it belongs, yet this connection only brings more dissonance. Although the oil’s dangerous and violent voice is quiet, Simpson moves it from the one calling to the one waiting to be called.

My voice slops in and out of your hearing, *sotto voce*. Chishui River, Great Keppel Island, Singapore Strait. And before that, Timor Sea, Norwegian Sea, Yellow Sea, any sea. Song over the waters.

Call to me.

I'll follow you (79-83)

This reversal from speaker to listener is unnerving because there has been no movement towards change. Although the suffering and violence caused by the oil's spill has been heard, it has not been understood enough to incite change. The oil, the voice that brought about the violent deaths of the rig workers, forced the suicide of a fisherman, and destroyed an entire ecosystem, has not been heard, and so instead the oil is now waiting to be called to something potentially more dangerous and threatening than itself because each of the bodies of water listed are locations of previous catastrophic oil spills. If the voice of the BP oil spill is any indication of the voice of the other spills, the reader can only extrapolate that the voice calling it is terrifying.

On the surface, Simpson has abstracted the oil by violently removing it from its natural location and giving it a voice; however, Simpson additionally isolates the speaker from the reader as the oil's occasion for addressing humanity is through images and articles in the media. As the media's attention diminishes, the voice too dissolves back into the natural, yet unnatural, movement of the ocean. Through this sublimation, Simpson is able to comment on the short attention span of the media and the fact that the dangers of these spills exist even if humanity does not see or hear. Although Simpson clearly uses poetic attention, she does not allow a movement towards a relief from the

dissonance. Even though the poem does end with an increased danger, the tawny movement still functions as an attempted alleviation of the violence, since the poem has exploited the reader's expectations, and has thus successfully evoked the reader's desire for the cleanup of the oil and the resolution of the crisis. The sudden shift from the voice as speaker to the voice as listener does function as a pivotal moment for readers as they are offered the opportunity to move from listener to speaker in order to be the voice the oil is waiting for. Although the oil does integrate into the previous spills, Simpson's tawny movement does not allow for a satisfied end like the shadow's dissolving into the bed sheet on the bed. This acceptance of dissonance in poetry is a refusal of full, subjective poetic closure; Simpson's poetry "moves" continually as the poet attempts to understand humanity's place in a natural world that must include the dangerous and the violent.

Tawny movement avoids assimilating these dangers into a coherent world-view. Instead, poetry's movements facilitate a grasping and gifting that, in Simpson's handling, allows the poem itself to risk a breakdown. Simpson's consideration of the Other's pain forces a kind of disintegration of confidence because the poem's movement does not end with relief or even a firm comprehension. The movement between objective observation and emotional consideration does not always allow for a sense of satisfaction because understanding, for Simpson, is not firm knowledge, but a fluid-like movement between indifferent factual information and a compassionate imagining of the Other.

Understanding requires a shift, or a pivot, in thinking. Her tawny movements in "*Viva Voce*" function to isolate and contemplate the catastrophe of the BP oil spill, and while she fulfills her poetic duty by giving the reader a fresh understanding of an environmental

nightmare, the dissonance created is not satisfied in order to create a space of change. By leaving the reader with a renewed awareness of the oil's potential for violence but in a space of the unknown, Simpson sets up a pivotal moment. The tawny movement of the oil's shift from speaker to listener allows Simpson to close the poem not with the *il y a*, which refuses movement and forces the constant imposition of the "presence-of-absence" (Marram 95), but with a lingering unease about where the oil is going and what dangerous voice has called it which effectively motivates the reader into desiring a change in human belief and behavior towards the natural environment. Although this space does not provide a relief from the suffering the oil has caused, it does create the pivotal space that points the reader in the direction of change or at least a desire for change.

In "*Viva Voce*," Simpson is clear to note that the damage caused by the oil spill and the oil's unnatural presence are intimately connected with its images, since the oil's occasion to speak is created by the media's photographs. Given that the speaker is oil, and thus is the cause rather than the observer of suffering, Simpson has limited the speaker's perspective and been able to avoid the complications that arise for a *witness*. Since the images of the oil are the images of an observable devastation, the oil as the speaker avoids becoming a witness, which in turn allows Simpson to develop the reader as the observer. By contrast, "*Life Magazine*" confronts the issues involved in being an observer of suffering. The series is a set of six connected poems grouped into three sets of two. The three poems on the right are each subtitled "photograph" and the poems on the left each subtitled "photographer," thus each set of two moves from a twice removed observation of the image of pain, the photograph, to the once removed observation of

suffering, the photographer who took the photograph. Simpson distinguishes between these two different kinds of removed observation by setting up a further removed omniscient speaker who observes a present day girl looking back on old magazine photographs documenting the Vietnam War and who moves to observe the photographer who took them. Through this distanced juxtaposition of images and witnessing observers, Simpson sets up a series of poems that consider the dangers and the responsibilities of witnessing, and attempting to grasp, suffering.

Given Simpson's strong visual arts background, many of Simpson's poems employ a striking visual language that critics have noted. Sanger places Simpson's poems at visual extremes of scale with her "observer-speakers... ha[ving] to cope with a world of telescopic or microscopic proportions" (9). While it is true that Simpson often places her poems within these extremes, her tawny movements do force a return of sorts to what Sanger calls "perspective." In "White, Mauve, Yellow" this "perspective" is felt when the speaker moves in towards the specific details of the sheet only to pull back towards the self as she imagines the sheet, and in "*Viva Voce*" when the oil moves from loud and forceful to silenced and listening. Following in this pattern "*Life Magazine*" also moves between a present day mediated objective observation of the sufferer and the subjective thematic observation of the photographer desiring to capture and transmit an awareness of the suffering witnessed. Although Simpson is unable to move back towards the poetic "self," the photographer becomes the proxy with the same desire to grasp and gift the suffering witnessed. The three Vietnam photo-journalists Simpson considers are: Malcolm Browne, Henri Huet, and Dickey Chapelle.

Before I consider each set of poems individually, I wish to emphasize that Simpson first uses poetic attention to remove each of the photographs from its origins. She defamiliarizes each image from its photographer and its place in time by de-emphasizing the value of these external details. For example, the first photograph Simpson considers is Malcolm Browne's "Burning Monk," and while she does use the words "monk" and "burning," alongside its earlier title "Saigon, 1963," these details seem marginal as the speaker negates their importance by asserting that the titles are what "[s]omeone had called the photographs the night before" (3). Someone else named the photographs, titles that further mediate observations, which impact the present-tense observer-girl. This distance from the original documentary context not only establishes the poem as a consideration of the Otherness of suffering, but also as a consideration of the role of images in understanding it from a distant time and place. Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, refers back to her earlier work, *On Photography*, where she asserted that "while an event known through photographs can certainly become more real than it would have been had one never seen the photographs, after repeated exposure it also becomes less real" (105). Sontag goes on to question her earlier statement with the caveat that it is the context in which photographs are considered that is the important factor: "[a]n image is drained of its force by the way it is used, where and how it is seen" (105). While "*Life Magazine*" is not a photograph, Simpson writes ekphrastically and so avoids expanding the details that place the photographs in their historically laden context, which could perhaps weaken the images' impact. Writing ekphrastically while avoiding historical weight is difficult because Simpson has chosen two widely known, award-winning photographs, and one lesser known photograph, though one taken by a famous

photographer. Although it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate the photographs from their context in order to understand the suffering they show, it is important for Simpson's poems to try because the photographs, when free from their metonymic and iconic referents, hold the key to witnessing, and thus understanding, suffering in a way that provides a pivotal moment containing objective knowledge and subjective compassion.

The first photograph Simpson considers is Malcolm Browne's Pulitzer-Prize-winning "Burning Monk." Through the undermining of specific details, Simpson is able to centre her attention on the individual Thich Quang Duc, and thus avoid considering the entirety of the Vietnam War, for which the photograph metonymically stands. The female observer-subject the speaker follows is looking at the photograph of Duc, yet the photograph seems to have trapped Duc into a scene of eternal burning: "She closes the magazine, index finger marking the place. / Opens it. The monk, still burning" (1-2). The girl swings between objectively observing the details present in the photograph like "a car nearby, hood gaping. Monks and nuns at a distance" (8) and emphatically imagining the things not in the photograph like how "[w]hen he died, they couldn't fit his body in a coffin" (6). However, she questions the ability of the photograph to mediate the moment of suffering because, as she looks upon it, although Duc is always burning, he is also always silent, "not making a sound" (10), which could not have been true at the moment the photograph was taken. Although the photograph is able to bring the suffering closer to knowledge, in that the girl is granted access to details previously difficult to convey in other media, she is barred from grasping it as Duc's heart remains "[a]fterwards...[an] [u]ntouched plum" (11). The photograph is unable to capture or grasp Duc's thoughts,

intent, or suffering; instead the photograph has locked him into an eternal moment of pain that no one is able to penetrate. Although Simpson is attempting to go further than the photograph through her poetic attempt to draw attention to the temporal restraints inherent to photography, she is unable to grasp Duc's suffering.

In the corresponding "photographer" part of the poem, Simpson turns her attention to Browne's attempt to grasp Duc's experience. Although Simpson's and Browne's desires are similar, as both want to give the gift of understanding to a reader/looker, Simpson portrays Browne's effort dissonantly. Significantly, however, Simpson does not name Browne in the poem; instead she refers to him only in pronouns: "It seared *him* after the fact. Six or eight rolls of 35-millimetre film" (12 italics added). Although unnamed, he is impacted significantly, almost violently "seared," by the experience of trying to convey the Other, in diction that brings him close to his subject, the burning monk. As Simpson allows us access into Browne as the witness, the reader gets a dynamic view of the event, which is in stark contrast to the discomfited stillness of the previously witnessed photograph:

.... A sequence,

from the beginning — shock in the monk's eyes as his face caught fire — through to the blackened corpse at the end. How he was prepared and not prepared. How the monk remained still throughout. Stink of gas and burning flesh. People wailing, prostrating themselves. (12-16)

Simpson is able to move in towards Duc, give the photograph context without historical/political references and provide it with temporality. Simpson provides the moment, witnessed through the photograph, with a context through a rounding out of

time, rather than through metaphorical or metonymic connections. In doing so, she is also able to expand from the moment and describe a before, during, and after, which the photograph was unable to provide, thus locking the subject into a perpetual state of suffering. Yet, the photograph is not without its historical importance, as Simpson notes that “[i]f not for the photographer, John F. Kennedy wouldn’t have had the picture on his / desk the following day, [he] wouldn’t have spoken to the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, / about to leave for Saigon” (17-19). Although Simpson does seem to imply that the photographer could have alleviated further anguish through his image, Browne, in his capturing of Duc’s suffering, instead becomes implicated in the violence:

... The year of
 what followed, and the photographer’s belief he’d had a hand in it, in someone’s
 death, as if he’d picked up the plastic jug that morning and poured a clear stream
 of gasoline over another man’s head. (19-22)

While the gift given to the world exists, in that the photograph had an impact on the president of the United States and action was taken, since Browne’s grasp at understanding is one of doubt and implication, so is the gift. Not only does the photograph implicate Browne in the death of Duc, but also in the contentious place the proxy-war held among the American people.

In second photograph considered, “Private First Class, Thomas Cole,” Simpson expands on the division the war created within the United States. Again, Simpson keeps the observation one step removed as the speaker follows the observation of the girl. This distance from the suffering allows the girl’s attention to be drawn from “a slim woman, with matching apron and / oven mitts, taking a pie from the oven” to “Private First Class,

Thomas Cole, a medic, who tilts a tin cup of water to the mouth / of Staff Sergeant Harrison Pell” (27-28). Although the photograph, one of Henri Huet’s most famous, is an image of profound pain, as both men are wounded and bandaged to the point of near blindness, Simpson avoids delving into a grotesque description. This avoidance attempts, unlike the juxtaposition of domestic and traumatic images, to give the reader safe access into the suffering of the Other. In contrast, the magazine’s juxtaposition allows her to become implicated in the young men’s pain as present and past consume each other:

The medic can’t see because of the bandage, but he holds a cup for the other, whose head rests on his thigh. Boys —
about nine or ten years older than the girl —
bound together. Ouroboros. (30-33)

This ouroboros, the symbol of a serpent eating its own tail, suggests the cyclical nature of suffering. Her observation, accessed through the magazine with its images of domesticity and suffering side by side, has allowed the past to consume the present and the present to consume the past, as the magazine functions as an object of consumerism that still bars access to understanding. Although the girl is able to interact with the photograph, inasmuch as she compares herself to the boys in age, Simpson does not allow a sense of association. The girl remains distanced from both the woman with the pie and the wounded boys, at the same time being both the consumed and the consumer of suffering.

Henri Huet’s taking of the photograph, and its attempted gift within the magazine, still has not conveyed an understanding; instead the photograph has, like Browne’s photograph, implied a continuation of suffering. However, this time not only is it the photograph that becomes a part of the eternal suffering, but also the observer of the

photographs. As Simpson moves from the photograph to the photographer, she examines the image of the photographer as a “split man” (36). She begins this section by moving back into a visual and specific consideration not of what Huet has photographed, but the imagined suffering of Huet himself. Graphically, Simpson attempts to elide Huet's photographs with the gory details of the helicopter crash that killed Huet himself. By collapsing story-teller into the story, Simpson further develops the motif of the Ouroboros:

The man who tells the story (see how the paratrooper's body in one of his photographs hangs on its cable, pulled up to the helicopter, turning drowsily as it goes) is the story itself. Part Vietnamese, part French. Split man, hanged man. Always his half-smile, withheld. His photograph of a body in air, slow-moving clock. And the one not taken, showing what hasn't happened yet... (34-38)

Huet's attempted grasp places both his photographs and himself in a dissonant space. He becomes a broken man because of his grasp of the suffering in Vietnam. Although the attempted capturing of the suffering does create a space for connection, inasmuch as the story-teller becomes intertwined with the story itself, the space is a dangerous one that, at one extreme, completely absorbs the teller, the price of identifying completely with what is witnessed. Simpson increases this dissonance through the helicopter's “drowsy” (35) ambivalence, a symbol of the war's indifference, to the suffering and the shadowy unknown of what has not happened yet. The motif of the Ouroboros is continued as Huet consumes the future: “[the] photographer's body, never found, except for bits of bone that might / have been those of other photographers. Teeth in the dirt, as if the past had / devoured the future” (40-42). Those who have witnessed have not only been barred from

understanding but also consumed and lost in the violence. There is no alleviation of Thomas Cole's, Harrison Pell's or Henry Huet's pain through grasp or gift; however, the poems' readers are clearly compelled to continue to witness, not necessarily only the original subject's suffering, but also the responses of previous witnesses, including the photographers. The poem is an accumulation of acts of witnessing, as it attempts to help the reader identify subjectively with the subject but instead, helplessly moves the reader through layers and layers of represented pain. Simpson's attempt to expand and contextualize the photographs and their photographers intentions only heightens the dissonance as a cycle of perpetual violence is developed which envelops the subject, the photographer, and any viewers of the photograph. And so the poems close without "rest."¹⁷

The final two sections of the poem are in contrast to the first four, as there are two photographs considered and the first is not an image of suffering, but is rather one of Dickey Chapelle's- landscape photographs, taken from a Marine Corps Helicopter: "This is the photograph she took from the helicopter, over the Mekong Delta / Not Wisconsin, but something that reminded her. Fields, afternoon" (47-48). Significantly this section seems free from the subject-observer girl because the "she" of the photograph could be Chapelle, rather than the girl. Both Chapelle and an external observer would be able to witness the seemingly harmonious landscape:

¹⁷ Since Simpson is considering suffering through so many perspectives, the photographer, the girl looking at the photographs, and the reader, finding who holds the ethical responsibility is difficult. While Simpson does place responsibility for the Other on the photographer, in that she holds them accountable for their ethical failures, this should transfer responsibility on to herself as poet since both desire the same understanding of the Other. However, Simpson avoids placing responsibility on the poet by erasing the poet as speaker, the removal of lyric "I."

Air. Piled up, downy.

And below, a sheen over rectangles of rice paddies.

But it's the clouds. Temples, each with its Buddha. Carved elephants, dragons, and chrysanthemums. Courtyards. Light. (43-46)

Although the landscape of clouds seems peaceful, the military operation of the helicopters becomes an intrusion, like a plague of locusts: “[o]ut of the clouds, a throng. / Swarm of helicopters” (49-50). The presence of the ambivalent and formidable helicopter foreshadows the death of Chapelle in the corresponding photographer poem. So although, this Vietnam photograph observed, through a closer, less-mediated perspective, is not one of suffering, the subjective dissonance is deeply rooted through the indelible connection to the previous photographs that have come to stand for the entire conflict, the entire place.

As we move into the second poem, Simpson does not consider Chapelle as witness, but rather Chapelle as victim. When Simpson writes of Chapelle's own death, Chapelle can no longer function both as observer and as sufferer. While there is still a mediation of perspective, in that Chapelle, our photographer, is still being photographed, the reader is still brought closer to both an objective and subjective consideration of the pain through the description of the image and Huet's shift from photographer to intimate “invisible friend” (54). Unnamed, Chapelle is first objectively and dispassionately described: “[w]ith pearls in her ears, a woman (photographer, pilot, one of the boys) lies on / the ground near Chu Lai” (52-53). Simpson closes in on the details of Chapelle's wounds: “[c]arotid artery torn open, blood seeping under her arm, / her face” (53-54). Since Simpson has been unable to demonstrate Chapelle as grasping like Browne or

Huet, she is then barred from being the connection between witness and sufferer.

Because Chapelle has not tried to contain the Other's suffering in a photograph she is also unable to provide its subsequent gift. However, this is hopeful because if Simpson were to create the space for Chapelle to truly grasp suffering she would be implying that only those who have suffered can understand it, leaving little room for empathy or a value in poetry to act as a kind of witness.¹⁸

The hope here lies in Huet, the “[i]nvisible friend, who takes the photograph as she dies” (54). Huet, whose earlier effort to grasp only forced himself, the reader, and his victimized subject into perpetual states of suffering, here is allowed access into an understanding of Chapelle's death without forcing himself, the reader, or Chapelle into the Ouroboros of suffering. The difference is that Huet is presumably without the desire to possess and capture Chapelle's experience. The earlier works of Huet, and Browne had desired to capture a moment of pain, infusing it with a narrative that was used, with or without their consent, to promote an agenda. The grasping of Chapelle's death exists separate from these aims because it is a tender moment capturing the loss of a colleague and friend, and Simpson contextualizes the moment as such.

When Sontag speaks to humanity's inability to concentrate on images of violence, she places the fault with the media and how the images are propagated. While she may well be speaking only of the overexposure of these images, Simpson implies that it is not only overexposure but also the desire to infuse photographs with a war narrative, thus having individual moments of pain metonymically stand for suffering as a whole, that

¹⁸ While Simpson's poetry cannot act as a witness in the traditional sense, in that neither Simpson nor the poem are present to see an event, I use the term to imply the responsibility inherent to it. Witnessing in this case is more than simply seeing, for it is holding a responsibility for what has been viewed, known, or learned.

contributes to the inability of the viewer to concentrate on images of violence. This cyclicity, caused by the desire to expand individual moments of pain to stand for suffering as a whole, is the failure of the photographer's grasp and gift. In the final essay of *The Marram Grass*, Simpson, while she does not contextualize it as such, explores the differences between capturing and observing suffering in poetry. Poetry, she says, should attempt to "absorb" that which it documents. The idea of "absorption" is in line with McKay's poetic attention, but also in agreement with Malcolm Browne's being "seared" by his observation. However, poetry's "absorbing" and photography's "searing" are dangerous because they allow for the possibility of becoming implicated in causing pain if the gift causes harm. The act of possession that the photograph enables, including the ability for the photograph to be physically acquired, is particularly dangerous because it does not require an understanding, and so the observer is not necessarily required to attempt to grapple with the suffering it has captured. Poetry, however, expands or *moves* out from a moment, contextualizing and creating connections that progressively widen the reader's comprehension: it requires a time-taking form of engagement.¹⁹

Sontag says that our notion of reality has been weakened by the misuse of photographs since they have created the need for every event to be "turned into a spectacle to be real... [and p]eople themselves aspire to become images" (109). Poetry, although rooted in the same desire as photography and able to describe objectively images of pain, should provide a gift of insight to the reader that moves away from spectacle and advances in the reader an expanded contemplation of what is subjectively

¹⁹ Simpson then places the ethical responsibility on the reader of the poem, rather than on the poet. Even if the poem fails to create a safe space for the victims of suffering, or appropriates the observed for its own gains, the reader is still responsible to engage with the art in a way that accounts for the Other.

seen and read. The grasp of Simpson's poetic attention in the final section of "Life Magazine" is an ideal example of a tawny movement because it moves to evoke empathy in the reader directed at the suffering of the individual, Dickey Chapelle. The tawny movement embodied in the chaplain not only grasps the moment of death, by examining the details of Chapelle's death and his action, but also gifts an understanding that, by way of the shifting emphasis on objective and subjective, avoids placing the observer into the cycle of violence. Tawny movement requires an attempt at detached observations that is coupled with emotional reflections; the movement between these perspectives, when focused on the individual, develops an expanding understanding of the suffering witnessed and also an empathetic longing for the suffering to end. So while both perspectives may be unable to provide subjective satisfaction to the suffering witnessed, does lead the reader in the direction of hope.

The movements Simpson has created in all three of these thematically varied poems comes out of the constant play of perspective that is rooted in her contemplation of the empathetic limitations of both objective and subjective observation. In the essay "Waterwords," Simpson describes *tong len*, a Tibetan word that means "giving and taking" (Marram 145). During *tong len*, a person "imagines absorbing the suffering of an individual or individuals... followed by imagining the well-being of this individual or individuals" (145). Although this sounds like the same formulation as poetic attention, the focus on the individual is significant, for even when considering the collective, it should be remembered that the collective is comprised of singular individuals. In the final section of "Life Magazine," Simpson is considering the final moment before the death of Dickey Chapelle. Simpson turns her attention to the chaplain whose "hand —

the vanishing point — [is] about to make the sign of the cross” (55). The chaplain, like the poet, should be solely focused on the individual. In this moment, his objective function is to focus on the suffering before him, and yet through this objectivity Simpson opens this vanishing point with his hands about to make the sign of the cross. This sign invokes Jesus, who, like the practice of *tong len*, is believed to have absorbed the sin and death of the world in order to give eternal life. The chaplain’s movement is in line with Levinas’s thoughts on “escaping” the *il y a*. Although Levinas “distrusts the compromised word ‘love,’” his focus on having the self take up a “responsibility for the Other” or what he calls “being-for-the-other” allows for a kind of “deliverance from the ‘there is’” (*Ethics* 52). The chaplain’s objective consideration of Chapelle’s suffering leads to a subjective longing to absorb it and provide its release: his existence takes up “responsibility” for Chapelle’s. This is the only hopeful moment of the poem, where Simpson allows the observer to access a moment of pain with the desire to relieve it, although with her characteristic evasion of finality evident in the “not yet” (58). The tender observation, with its objective “[s]trict perfection of the composition” (56), is contingent on the subjective consideration of the suffering, individual, Other. Chapelle does not stand for all other photographers, or for any other suffering. In order to interpret suffering, Simpson’s tawny movement requires a focus on the individual, or individuals, understood in their singularity which includes the temporal context in which their suffering existed.²⁰

²⁰ Although Simpson does place the ethical responsibility largely with the reader, the parallel between photographer and poet is significant. Simpson, as a poet, holds herself accountable. So although she avoids the lyric “I,” in the attempt to perhaps avoid appropriating the Other for personal gains, she understands that if the artist who attempts to grasp does not consider individual suffering coupled with the desire to relieve the

Each of these poems, “White, Mauve, Yellow,” “*Viva Voce*,” and “*Life Magazine*,” functions as an attempt to grasp and gift an understanding of the Otherness that confronts it. In the context of a safe space, free from a confrontation with suffering and death, “White, Mauve, Yellow” provides the blueprint for how formal tawny movement should function. Through a contemplation of an object, or rather, an Other, the bed sheet, Simpson uses poetic attention as an attempt to understand its Otherness. While there are troubling insinuations of violence, created through the aesthetic description of the colour of both the sheet and its shadow, Simpson is able to connect both the sheet and its shadow through cause and effect, thus collapsing the sheet and its violent shadow on a made bed. The subjective unrest created in the objective observation is satisfied when the tawny movement returns the sheet to its utilitarian purpose. Although both “*Viva Voce*” and “*Life Magazine*” use poetic attention and tawny movement in the same way, both conclude with the anticipation of satisfaction rather than a completed end because both consider, unlike “White, Mauve, Yellow,” powerful and jarring instances of mass suffering. Both have grasped an understanding of the suffering they consider, but both are unable to gift an alleviation of the suffering witnessed. The speaker and reader are both haunted by what is observed.

While the poems seem to be morally compelled to witness and grapple with the horror of the world, they are continually faced with an obstructed perspective in their attempts to understand suffering. The poem's movement then becomes a play of perspectives, or an effort to gain more than one perspective. “*Viva Voce*” is limited

suffering then the art will fail. The poet, like Huet, is only ethically upright when grasp and gift are united. When a work is unable to provide a gift to the sufferers considered, here the gift being the development of a metonymically free, pivotal moment charged to the reader, the artist becomes bound to the suffering.

through the unreliable speaker, the devastating oil, and “*Life Magazine*” is limited through a third hand, and highly mediated observation of suffering. While obstacles to understanding the traumatic experiences of Others will always be present, poetry must attempt to understand and pivot towards a release of the suffering observed. Working in the same observational method that had been effective in “White, Mauve, Yellow” each poem moves in and out of a detailed observation, abstracting with the aim of metaphorically connecting this suffering to something that can provide meaning or context. However, this formulation at best, as in “*Viva Voce*,” is unable to facilitate a witnessing and at worst, as in “*Life Magazine*,” causes more suffering. What is required to understand the suffering of others is both an objective and subjective consideration of the suffering individual. In “*Viva Voce*” the reversal of the speaker and listener creates an ethical movement in the reader now charged with responsibility. In “*Life Magazine*” the allusion to Christ and *tong len* through the chaplain allows the movement to a combined objective/subjective consideration of individual suffering, which then creates a space for the violence to be grasped in a way that refuses a dissolving of the individual into the multiple. So, instead of simply charging the reader with responsibility for the Other, Simpson’s poem creates the anticipation of the release from suffering through the desire evoked. Movement then is both ethical theme and formal principle, and a combination of both is required when attempting to understand the suffering of Others.

Conclusion: Tawny Grammar in the Poetry of Anne Simpson

“Are we known, I wondered, by the things that see us? Do we reciprocate,
by attempting to know what we see?” (Simpson, *Marram* 12)

Although Simpson has a large body of poetry from which a critic might work, including four collections and a book of essays, there has been no full-length study of her oeuvre. *The Marram Grass: Poetry and Otherness* establishes a prose form of her beliefs about language’s paradoxical self-centered nature and its ability to interact with the Other. Developing the language of Simpson’s essays into a close, contextualized reading of her poetry, we can see that she develops a “tawny” poetics. In order for Simpson to contemplate the Other, particularly the suffering Other, it is necessary for her poetry to engage with the language, form, and perspectives she uses. These “tawny” forms are steeped not only in the utopian desire to ethically comprehend the suffering Other but also in the desire to relieve the pain. Given that the aspirations are so lofty, and the language so limited, Simpson’s tawny forms often exist between two extremes. “Tawny” grammar, while yearning for a language able to illuminate what has been lost in our self-centred utilitarian language, exists between an incoherent language unable to carry meaning, and one so laden with meaning it is unable to gesture towards Otherness. Her “tawny” forms exist to create an impossible structure that shields the Other from violence while at the same time allowing for connection, and so the “tawny” forms Simpson utilizes contain elements of both closed and open poetic forms. Finally, her “tawny” movements desire a poetic perspective that can grasp an understanding of the Other, while simultaneously avoiding possessiveness and gifting to the Other a release from

suffering; in order to facilitate this “grasp and gift,” “tawny” movement exists between an impersonal objective and a compassionate subjective consideration of the Other.

Despite Simpson’s desire for poetry to relieve suffering, she expresses concern that even gesturing towards it can be dangerous. The presence of *duende*, which Simpson believes is inherent to poetry, requires the risk of destruction. *Duende*, requiring two opposites, often exists in Simpson’s poems as the self and Other. The push and pull of the struggle between these opposites becomes apparent in the application and removal of subjectivity. Yet, poetry that moves away from the subjective risks coming upon the potentially terrifying *il y a*, a space opposed to Simpson’s desire to relieve suffering. While the “tawny” poems she creates allow Simpson to walk the line between the self and the Other, they are only ever able to gesture, or pivot, towards hope. Simpson is also careful to avoid allowing these “tawny” forms to become a kind of praxis for engaging with the Other. For example, the poetic use of the fragment, while posited as an ethical way to write about atrocity in one poem (“Grammar Exercise”) becomes, in another poem (“*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*”), the obstruction to interaction with the Other. Her poetry calls for a dynamic and porous contemplation of the specific and individual Other; one that will lead the reader to an understanding that directs the reader’s desires towards change.

In order to create the space for a dynamic, shifting “tawny” language, able to ethically consider the Other, Simpson utilizes a language that calls attention to itself. In “Usual Devices,” Simpson overtly creates double meanings around punctuation marks, as Helen becomes the symbol of the comma, colon, and semi-colon. Through this technique Simpson is able to show how these women of Greek myth can be seen as both nothing

and everything to the violence that surrounds them. The traditional myth does not follow the perspective of the women, and so, since the words are not about them, they are very minor in the stories; yet, by conflating the women as the punctuation marks, Simpson is able to show that they actually shape the meaning of the words around them. *Duende* exists in the paradoxical nature of the women as everything and nothing, and the poem avoids destruction because Helen maintains her own identity and does not dissolve into the action or violence. By creating a poem that considers how specific minor characters of the myth fit into the story, Simpson has allowed for a multiplicity of meaning to develop which subsequently avoids creating a knowable narrative around the women's experiences.

These double meanings around punctuation marks also allow Simpson to call attention to the dangerous nature of proper syntactical structure. In considering the Montreal Massacre, a girl is asked to correct the grammar of Marc Lépine's suicide note. As the girl attempts to force grammar on the senseless violence, Simpson allows the horror to move from its historical context into the domestic and personal, indicative of any general suffering. Simpson is able to reflect on Others while still refusing to place the event inside the known, the "house;" by calling attention to the unethical nature of clear syntactical structure in communicating about pain one has not experienced, she is able to write about the experience of the Other in a way that avoids finality and a coherent morality. For to write coherently about something Other, would inflict further violence, akin to the correcting done by the girl. While the double meanings in this poem are around the dashes and periods, they also work within the poem to create fragments.

Simpson's fragments, like Dickinson's, often allow for an opening of referential possibilities. Although in "Grammar Exercise" and "Remains," Simpson uses the fragment, caused by the dash, to, as Miller says about Dickinson, "call attention to the bonds of relation but also stress the fragility of these bonds" (90), in "*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*" the fragments point away from the bonds of relationship and towards their irreparability. The dead and the living in the poem are eventually brought into the space of the *il y a* as they become stuck in ceaseless suffering. The movement away from subjectivity, caused by the separating of noun and verb (Levinas's existent and existing), also furthers the sense of *il y a*.

Yet, in poems like "Book of Beginnings," "Cell Division," and "Is," Simpson overtly moves away from subjectivity, yet avoids the *il y a* by gesturing to interdependence of subjects and verbs. In "Cell Division" and "Is," Simpson refuses to use verbs and subjects respectively. While this may seem as though this is the space of the *il y a*, since both existing and existents are removed from one another, Simpson avoids it by creating an identity-in-relation where both the self and the Other are required for their identity. Although she is unsuccessful in uncovering what has been lost through language, she is able to explore the Other-in-relation to the self in a way that still moves away from subjectivity while avoiding the *il y a*. Even though language springs from the self, our desire to go beyond this self is also apparent in our language. So while Simpson does assert that metaphor, facilitated through language, can allow the reader and writer to *become* the Other, the grammar of her poems only ever allows for an identity-in-relation to develop.

This same interdependence of identity is important in the form of Simpson's poetry. So while Simpson's combinations of free verse and closed form poetry has been called a "grasping" at form (McNeilly), it really is a grasping at Otherness. Simpson's use of the traditional sonnet, although it poignantly expresses the desire for connection and is combined with the free verse fragment, does not allow for a connection with the Other. Although *duende* exists between the form and the fragments, the subjects of the poem are consistently reminiscent of the *il y a*. Her "Seven Paintings," having moved away from the lyric and the subjective "I," has connected both the living and the dead with the space of the *il y a*, as the broken iambicism consistently functions to withhold connection reminiscent of what has been lost. The living are refused full being, continually locked into suffering, caused by the absence of the dead, just as the dead are continually forced into a state of being, unable to pass into the afterlife for most of the corona. Simpson's consideration of the violence of 9/11 attempts to grasp the "whole" by fragmenting individual scenes, in the same way the Brueghel paintings are often considered, yet this creates a cyclicity of violence and a fear of continuous being that borders on non-being. So while many of these elements have been successful in Simpson's other poems, in considering her poetry as a whole it is clear that she is wary of putting forward a consistent mode of language or form capable of considering the Other. However, this does not mean that each individual tawny alteration will successfully bridge the gap between self and Other.

Another major alteration in the form of Simpson's poems is her open, yet still strict forms, which are able to provide safety and connection for the speakers. "Möbius Strip" is an excellent example because it uses an invented strict formal structure which,

like its namesake, has an unbroken line placed between two lines of text that eventually loops back on itself, with lines once on top now on the bottom and vice versa. While the poem attempts a totality, thus risking perpetual exposure to the *il y a*, it thematically avoids the *il y a* by privileging the clouds and the sky free from longing; the subjective “we” in the poem moves through layers of change continually accepting its non-existence in the cycle of beginning and ending because the form has created a structural loop in which the “we” will always exist. Yet, for Simpson, this peaceful acceptance of the space free from subjectivity is made possible because the poem is free from the threat of violence.

This lack of a threat is in contrast to a poem like “Double Helix” which considers, and parallels, the genetic testing of a man and the Spanish Civil War. Although the conceit is buried in the poem, both the genetic abnormality within the man, and the war within the country cause the loss of a generation. While Simpson develops the finality of the man’s life in contrast to the continuation of his wife’s suffering, the wife’s pain does not move the poem towards the *il y a*, as the poem does not exclude the possibility of the hopeful *variations*. The woman, playing the variations of Bach’s arias, moves out of the experience of playing the same thing over and over, which signals that the “variations” in her husband’s DNA will not force her into the terrifying space of ceaseless suffering or Levinas’s anxiety of being. Simpson’s belief that mass suffering is always played out on the individual level allows a hope to enter the poem. Since the alluded-to death of Lorca during the Spanish Civil War can be interwoven into her story, so too can the husband’s abnormality; so while it will cause the loss of a generation, the abnormality will also

allow for movement and connection. The woman, unlike the living in “*Seven Paintings*,” has been allowed to grieve, suffer, and still have a future.

The movement of the woman’s perspective in “*Double Helix*,” with her focus first on the personal, then the global, and then the personal again, while not one explored in the third chapter, is also an example too of Simpson’s “tawny movements.” These movements often shift through time, desiring to provide disparate connections with aim to startle the reader, an expanded understanding of the Other, and an (unattainable) alleviation the suffering witnessed while avoiding the *il y a*. “*White, Mauve, Yellow*” stands as an example for how Simpson shifts perspective to develop a pivotal moment that allows the speaker and reader to emerge from the poem *changed*. Beginning with a focus on the singular Other of the bed sheet, Simpson uses poetic attention to understand its Otherness. So while Simpson uncovers the Otherness that can exist in a bed sheet, the subjective dissonance created by the metaphorical connection to how humanity interprets reality and history, is satisfied as the tawny movement imaginatively returns the sheet to the bed.

However, “*White, Mauve, Yellow*” can be satisfied because it only lightly touches on suffering. “*Viva Voce*” contemplates the catastrophe of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Rather than considering a peaceful scene, in “*Viva Voce*” Simpson takes a moment of violence and abstracts it from its horror in the attempt to understand it. Simpson further startles the reader by making the speaker the ambivalent oil. However the “tawny movement” develops in the last few lines when the oil moves from speaker to listener. The oil as listener thrusts the poem into an uneasy consideration of where the oil might be going and what dangerous voice may have called it. So although the poem has

an ambiguous ending, in that we do not know what voice the oil is listening for, it also does not exist in the space of the *il y a* because Simpson's understanding does not require contentment. Instead, the shifting voice of the oil creates the required pivot in thinking, where the readers are left in the direction of change, or at least a desire for change. However, this kind of tawny movement would not be effective when considering other events or experiences.

Significantly, "*Viva Voce*," by way of the oil as speaker, avoids the difficult space of witness when considering the Other. "*Life Magazine*" confronts the issue of witnessing directly. Existing in a compromised position, the poem moves between a third hand and second hand witnessing of violence. Simpson explores the dangers of attempting to grasp the suffering of Others through the photographs taken by Henri Huet and Malcolm Browne. Given that each photograph considered is laden with its historical context, Simpson attempts to defamiliarize each to the reader by separating it from its origin. Her movements between perspectives contextualize the photograph in ways that desire to relieve the metonymic implications that exist.

Although unsuccessful in alleviating the suffering witnessed, in that Browne, Duc, Huet, and the observer girl are thrust into a continuation of suffering symbolized by the self-consuming serpent, Ouroboros, the poem does contain a significant movement towards hope. The final section of the poem objectively considers the death of photographer Dickey Chapelle. The poem moves from a visually objective consideration to an emotionally nuanced one, as we gain the perspective of Huet, the one taking the photograph. However, the hope does not lie in Chapelle, who potentially has access into the Otherness of suffering by way of death, or in Huet's objective observations. Rather

the hope exists in Huet's tender consideration of Chapelle's suffering, one he does not desire to possess, and the chaplain, another first-hand witness of Chapelle's death. This interaction is hopeful because the chaplain is singularly focused on the individual Chapelle. Unlike the photograph's grasping, which inevitably forces the suffering of Others to stand for all, thus perpetuating pain, the chaplain's witnessing desires its end. The movement of the chaplain's hand about to make the sign of the cross, evokes Jesus, who like the practice of *tong len* (which couples a meditation on the suffering of *individuals* with an imagining of the release of suffering for *individuals*) is believed to have absorbed the sin of the world in order to gift eternal life. Chapelle is not allowed to stand for any other photographers, or any other pain. The chaplain's objective consideration leads to a subjective longing to absorb the suffering and facilitate its release. Levinas calls this "being-for-the-other," which is what allows for a "deliverance" from the *il y a* (*Ethics* 52). By forcing a movement that combines objective/subjective consideration of individual suffering, which avoids a dissolving of the individual into the multiple (by way of *duende*), Simpson is able to allow for the anticipation its release. Movement then becomes both an ethical theme and a formal principle when attempting to understand the suffering of Other.

This ethical theme and formal principle is the driving force behind Simpson's development of the "tawny." Her desperate desire to ethically interact with the Other requires a shifting formal principle embodied in her understanding of the "tawny". Expanding the term "tawny" grammar to include form and movement illuminates how Simpson's poetry desires to understand the Other. Since her poetry is ethically charged to consider the suffering of the world, each of her basic tools of poetry must be altered.

To write with the same tools before and after becoming aware of atrocity is impossible. The term “tawny,” with its connotations of variable colour and wildness, allows these poetic tools to be considered as alterable. In exploring how Simpson’s career-long attempt to balance the line between communication and chaos through language, safety and stannancy through form, and the individual and the multiple through movement of perspective, we can see how her use of these tools shifts to accommodate the Other she desires to understand.

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