In this paper I wish to draw upon several ideas of "passages" in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, to compare masculine and female creation in terms of conventions, ideals and practices. The question I would like to raise is whether Mary Shelley’s work as a woman writer opens the way to a feminist figure of humanity such as argued for in Donna Haraway’s essay, “Ecce Homo, Ain’t [Ar’n’t] I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape.” Much is at stake in the creation of a new figure of humanity, Haraway declares. The humanist landscape that has given birth to individual rights and destiny, the flowering of civilization, scientific discoveries on land, at sea, in space, including atomic space, has also produced a history of suffering and annihilation, of physical as well as psychological enslavement, and dismemberment. A humanity developed at the expense of those who were considered less human or non-human. Until very recently, those who suffer, who do not own their own identity or property, are assumed to be voiceless, incoherent, capable at best of being represented by those who command the master-trope, the master-language (such as Shakespeare’s Caliban). Haraway, however, maintains a different premise by focusing on discourses of suffering—discourses that are constituted differently by those who have been dismembered or displaced. Second, Haraway warns that historical narratives, gendered masculine and dubbed modernist, are in crisis. One risks entrapment or

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1 I thank my colleague, Sandy Sterner, for reading and commenting on this paper.
annihilation, not just of select groups, but more, by reproducing established figures of a seriously curtailed humanity. Third, and here is how the warning can turn into hope: the “disarticulated bodies of history” can serve as “figures of possible connection and accountability.”

This paper will follow Haraway’s cue and explore a critique based on gender in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Mary Shelley seems to occupy a dubious place in feminist projects. In her essay, Haraway studies the examples of Jesus and Sojourner Truth as trickster figures who bear the signs of “a broken and suffering humanity,” yet whose power derives from generating a multiple discourse, “signifying—in ambiguity, contradiction, stolen symbolism, and unending chains of noninnocent translation—a possible hope” (p. 87). Mary Shelley’s text shares some of these ambivalent and multiplying features. The story, written in the gothic tradition, and narrated by three male personae, is replete with physical and psychological violence. Shelley presents herself in the preface as a highly diffident writer; yet she is read, more recently, as the monstrous autobiographical woman writer by feminist critics such as Barbara Johnson and Anne Mellor. Her “hideous progeny,” perhaps the most successful popular icon since the nineteenth century, continues to regenerate in contemporary cultures, with multiple implications. Could it be that Mary Shelley’s disputed standing as a feminist (contrary to her famous lineage) masks the birth of a new feminist figure? Haraway points out: “Humanity’s face has been the face of man. Feminist humanity must have another shape, other gestures...Feminist figures of humanity...must somehow both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility.” But before we examine the birth of something unnatural, something not representable in Mary Shelley’s discourse, let us retrace some masculine ideas of “passages” in Frankenstein.

2 The discourses of suffering follow a different principle of organization or articulation. In “Caliban and Ariel Write Back” (Shakespeare Survey, 48, pp. 155–62), Jonathan Bate analyses the collapsing of historical moments, the oral, musical, classical and vernacular amalgamation of sources, sounds and rhythms in Edward Braithwaite’s compositions. In Aimé Cesaire’s A Tempest, Caliban speaks a rich, highly charged poetry evocative of sex, violence and indigenous culture. Compare this with the primitive and infantile rendering of Caliban in Shakespeare’s The Tempest.

Masculine Creation

The novel begins with a literal passage. The first narrator, Walton, writes in a letter to his sister: “you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation, by discovering a passage near the pole to these countries” (p. 12). Walton is following his childhood dream, inspired by “all the voyages...of discovery [that] composed the whole” of his uncle’s library (my emphasis). By his own admission, his education had been partial. Driven by a single vision, he had toiled, braved, suffered: “I commenced by inuring my body to hardship...I voluntarily endured cold, famine, thirst and want of sleep” (p. 13). He asked rhetorically: “do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose. My life might have been passed in ease and luxury, but I preferred glory” (p. 13). This theme of the masculine quest, endured at great pains, and justifiable by the promise of glory is as old as the Odyssey. But unlike the epic, Mary Shelley does not offer us the diversion of endless adventures. In her novel, heroic quest is presented almost in naked parody. The artistry lies not in the embroidery of adventurous details. But more like Penelope’s art, each tale by the potential hero gets undone. I will return to this female art a little later.

In Walton’s case, nothing much happens until his sighting of the creature and Frankenstein, when his narration gives way to the transcribing of Frankenstein’s tale. Walton’s high-seas discourse is self-absorbed and rather boring. “I have no friend,” Walton complains. He discounts his shipmates who are professionally adept and upright in character, but who are not his social equal. “I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own” (p 15). The qualities that Walton lists as criteria for friendship, as Raymond Williams and others remind us, are keywords of an established, privileged order. The discourse of masculine humanity, intent on “conquer[ing] all fear of danger or death” (p. 12), is monologic. Walton’s story is told in the form of letters addressed to his sister, but we do not hear of any letter in return: “I may receive your letters (though the chance is very doubtful),” he writes (p. 18). There is no recorded place for the writings of Margaret Saville (initial, M.S.) in the voyage of discovery. With no true interlocutor, this singular, heroic discourse dwindles into melodrama: “Remember me with affection, should you never hear from me again” (p. 18). Masculine discourse is tired of its own company, but is capable of loving only the heroic image of himself. Walton is overjoyed when he finally encounters someone like himself—a quester, and someone from his own class and race. He describes the human wreckage that he saved from the Arctic sea: “He was not, as the other traveller seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but an European” (p. 21). Masculine humanity “has

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4 See also Terry Eagleton on the criteria of Enlightenment discourses in The Function of Criticism (London: Verso, 1984).
a generic face, a universal shape,” Haraway points out. From the beginning of Mary Shelley’s novel, masculine humanity only recognizes its own image on the basis of gender, class and race. The female, the socially inferior, and the non-European—these are excluded from the ideal and practice of generic humanity. Writing at the beginning of a century that was to launch successive modernist quests, Mary Shelley’s gaze is directed backward—she recalls a history of genocide and enslavement that resulted from insatiable quests:

“If no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed”

(p. 51).

Critics have cautioned about the ideological control behind the privileging of a domestic discourse, or discourse of sensibility in this period. The lauding of domestic virtues can signify backlash, political accommodation; and in some cases, sympathy for the enslaved or unfortunate “other” may mask an assumption of cultural superiority over the oppressed. But Mary Shelley’s text, written at the crossroads of the European humanist project (post-Enlightenment faith in human infrastructures, reactions to French-revolution hope and excess, the inauguration of the age of imperialism), uniquely combines both posthumanist and retrospective visions. From this ambiguous position, it poses the critical question: what constitutes humanity? By unravelling heroic discourses, her text causes us to look at the underside of progress, to reintegrate the voices of those who have been dismembered or displaced.

Passage, in the interest of exploration and trade, becomes much more ambitious in the case of Frankenstein, the primary narrator in the story. He announced: “Life and death appear to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (p. 49). The passage that Frankenstein seeks would lead to the generation of a new species, in this case, salvaged and resuscitated from the dead. It would challenge humanity, understood in its mortal condition. It would not, however, give rise to a new figure of humanity. For the creature was created to resemble, to reflect glory on his creator. Frankenstein’s interest in the scientific breakthrough is ultimately self-congratulatory: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source” (p. 49). It is science for the scientist’s

5 For analyses of changing discourses of feminism, domesticity and sensibility, see e.g., Stuart Curran’s “Women readers, women writers” in The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 177–95) and Anne Mellor’s “Am I Not a Woman, and a Sister?”: Slavery, Romanticism, and Gender” in Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780–1834 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 311–329).
sake, an ego-trip. Like Walton, Frankenstein’s quest takes him away from human society, from family and friends. His lone research in charnel houses and in his workshop was void of ethical considerations. He too had only one goal: “I was surprised that among so many men of genius…that I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret” (p. 47). He would steal not only the thunder of his fellow scientists, and of God the creator. But significantly, as in Walton’s narrative, there is no room for the female. The quest that would break the code of life and death, that would create a new species, is strictly masculine. “No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely” (p. 49), he boasts, for there is no other parent. His quest bypasses the female (as successive female figures are killed in the story).

Masculine creation in the novel is preoccupied with, and justified by “originality”—to “tread a land never before imprinted,” says Walton (p. 12, in other words, also never before put in print). In Mary Shelley’s story, creation takes on multiple senses, from scientific quest to reproduction of species, and creative writing. In each case, Mary Shelley describes the doomed trajectory of masculine creation that displaces the female, and that is premised on self-reflection. Twice, the 1818 and 1831 prefaces refer to the competitive genesis of the story. Mary Shelley, her husband, Percy, and their friends, Byron and Polidori, entered into a friendly competition to each write a ghost story. “The illustrious poets also, annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their uncongenial task” (1831 preface). Masculine creation, personified here by the two dazzling poets, Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, had little patience for the uncongenial task of raising their own children (according to biographical sources), or of completing the present project. The 1818 preface records: “My two friends left me on a journey among the Alps, and lost…all memory of their ghostly visions. The following tale is the only one that has been completed.” Masculine humanity once more sets off on a venture, while Mary Shelley, the only woman in the creative circle, and pregnant for the third time, labors to complete her project—we are told—in awe and anguish. Could the anguish be in part a recognition of the unequal task of parenting traditionally assigned to women? A task that parallels the overseeing of a literary progeny? As we shall see later, the disparity between masculine and female creation is repeated once more in the lifelong projects of Percy and Mary Shelley. In the novel, the author of the new species, the father who dispenses with the role of the mother, likewise fails to complete his task. Frankenstein is repulsed when the ghostly vision he entertained comes to life: “now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room” (p. 53). This paradigm of creation has significant repercussions.

In the novel, masculine humanity that has usurped the role of the female, and that has ruled the female outside the scope of accomplishment, can only produce something monstrous. The creature, we are told, has skin that “scarcely covered
the work of muscles and arteries beneath...his watery eyes...seemed almost of the same color as the dun white sockets in which they were set” (p. 52). But there is something even more monstrous than the creature’s appearance. Frankenstein has set about reproducing the ideal human figure. The creature’s “limbs were in proportion;” he “had selected his features as beautiful” (p. 52). The problem is, this ideal figure bears little in relation to reality. The whitest teeth, the most lustrous hair—perfect body parts are gathered, but without regard to how the parts would fit together into a composite, living whole. Universal shape (a pertinent example is the twentieth-century decolonizing pens that construct new geo-political entities, displace mass populations, and sow seeds of future discord, as in Palestine, India and Pakistan, central African nations, whose people suffer from generations of violence) fails to take into consideration the particular, the historical, as well as interactions of the multiple. Frankenstein’s creative vision does not tolerate, nor does it stand the test of what may challenge the “original,” drawing-board conception. In Haraway’s words, the ideal construction of masculine humanity does not allow for the “self-critical practice of difference” (p. 87). This practice of difference is by nature more complex, more unpredictable and messy. It means entering into relations with another in ways that exceed the limits of our knowledge, that may put into question previously accepted notions of identity or security (who we think we are, and who we think are our “enemies”). Twentieth-century history alone is full of examples of monstrosities (holocaust, genocides, discrimination) when we fail to develop the “self-critical practice of difference,” when self-identical exclusion of differences becomes the order of the day.

Frankenstein’s creature is literally created from the dead. Metaphorically, Mary Shelley makes an even stronger point about the social forces that lead to death. We have seen in Walton’s example how he could recognize and love only an image of himself, his own class, gender and race. In the case of the creature, difference from the “universal shape” is rejected finally because it violates the ideal, self-reflecting image of Frankenstein. To suppress the “untoward,” the “unseemly” means that certain groups are deemed “improper,” less worthy, and are legislated out of existence, in some cases, physically exterminated. More than a series of gratuitous violence as befits the gothic genre, in the novel, the violence of exclusion begets further violence. Abandoned by his creator-father, and repulsed wherever he turns, the creature is said to learn “the barbarity of man” (p. 109). Father and son, reproducing a partial humanity, come to share the same disorder of self-loathing and destruction. Mary Shelley, whose parents, Godwin and Wollstonecraft, were staunch believers in educational reforms, is careful to point out how education has the power to humanize or dehumanize the subject. The books the creature reads teach him about sensibility; they allow him to articulate his inclinations toward love and community. Injustices and repulsion by others prompt him to unlearn all this. He learns instead the language of solipsism and revenge. The creature recounts: “I am solitary and detested” (p. 136); “increase of knowl-
edge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was" (p. 137); 
"[my creator] had abandoned me, and in the bitterness of my heart, I cursed him" (p. 137). Similarly, we see Frankenstein embark on a path of alienation and despair:

"often, I say, I was tempted to plunge into the silent lake...Remorse extinguished every hope...My abhorrence of this fiend cannot be conceived...I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed"

(pp. 92–3).

In sum, the narratives of Walton, Frankenstein and the creature unravel as monstrous self-reproduction of pain, deprivation and mutual/mass destruction. Haraway calls this "entrapment in the stories of established disorders." Walton and Frankenstein recognize themselves in each other, in the cold, sterile Arctic. Frankenstein and the creature, likewise, become reflections of each other. They pursue each other in order to kill each other. The two become indistinguishable.6 The creature acts out what Frankenstein has done symbolically—the elimination of female figures as well as those who sustain life.

Female Creation

The destruction of one character stands out in this story, because of its incomplete status, and Frankenstein correctly perceives it to be a threat to the "established disorder." I refer to the female creature that is aborted in the novel. Frankenstein has yielded to the creature's request to create for him a mate. Halfway into the process, Frankenstein changed his mind: "I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged" (p. 179). We have an inkling of this thing that was not finished, not represented, when Frankenstein speculated: "she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a pact made before her creation" (p. 178).

The female creature was destroyed; but the novel, Frankenstein, was completed. I wish, therefore, to explore female creation in terms of the work of a woman writer. I do so by looking at several passages in Mary Shelley's writing.

In her introduction to the 1831 edition of Frankenstein, Mary Shelley conveys a sense of her ambiguity about writing: "It is true I am very averse to bringing myself forward in print." Recalling her childhood writing, she calls herself "a close imitator." She further refers to the conversations that took place between Percy and Byron in the summer of 1816, in which she was a "nearly silent listener." But at the same time, she lays exclusive claim to her authorship of Frankenstein: "I certainly

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6 In "The Politics of Monstrosity" (Frankenstein. Ed. Fred Botting. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), Chris Baldick reads the novel in terms of revolution debates in the 1790s—did the monstrosity of the ancien regime beget the monstrosity of revolutionary excesses?
did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband, and yet but for his incitement, it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world. From this declaration, I must except the preface. As far as I can recollect, it was entirely written by him” (p. 251). Contemporary scholarship reveals that Percy Shelley did in fact play an important role in changing the language of Mary Shelley's novel, substituting more complex diction, and more specific terminology in place of Mary's more unadorned, simple phrasing.7 Self-effacing, deferential, yet at the same time assertive—recent critics have advanced different reasons for Mary Shelley's ambivalent posture.8 I will focus on how this ambiguity articulates a practice of creation very different from the concept of "originality" played out in the novel.

Walton's presumption to find a passage to the East, to "tread a land never before imprinted" (with echoes of the "discovery" of America) is contravened by Mary Shelley who points to examples of imperialist tragedies. In the 1831 introduction, perhaps with unconscious irony, she actually borrows a creation-metaphor from the East: "The Hindoos give the world an elephant to support it, but they make the elephant stand upon a tortoise."9 Absolute originality, according to the Hindu tradition, is a myth. She backs up this idea of nonoriginal creation with her famous definition: "Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos...it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself." In comparison with the male creators in her life and fiction (Percy who aspires to images of light, who suffers from the ideal and its disillusionment; and Frankenstein who rejects his own unnameable creature out of fear), Mary Shelley is much more accepting of the dark, "chaos" and difference. She refers to her early novel with affection as "my hideous progeny." We have noted in the earlier section how she unravels the narratives that are based on self-identity, "originality" and suppression of the "other." In the larger context of her works, we notice that her boundaries of creation are


8 In The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer, e.g., Mary Poovey suggests that Shelley, bowing to conventional prejudice, is keen to adopt a self-deprecating and domestic position; yet writing is at the same time important to her as a means of self-definition. Put in social-economic terms, Shelley has to thrive, compete as a woman writer, without, however, alienating a generally conservative, bourgeois reading public, especially a growing class of women readers. On the significance of the changing class of female readers (from the elite Bluestockings in the 1750s and '60s, to bourgeois circles in this period), see Curran, "Women readers, women writers."

9 Cf. Atlas in the Greek myth, who carries the entire weight of the world on his shoulders, as punishment.
also more diffused. The creator of the novel, *Frankenstein*, owes her work to other people’s interventions and collaboration. Conversely, a good part of Shelley’s career is devoted to creating the works of her late husband.

I turn now to two prefaces that Mary Shelley did write—the prefaces to *Posthumous Poems of Percy Shelley*, published in 1824, and to the *Second Collected Edition of Percy Shelley*, published in 1839. Mary Shelley declares in these passages her admiration and love for Percy, and her commitment to preserving his work. I quote from the 1824 preface: “his fearless enthusiasm in the cause which he considered the most sacred upon earth, the moral and physical state of mankind, was the chief reason why he, like other illustrious reformers, was pursued by hatred and calumny...His life was spent in the contemplation of nature, in arduous study, or in acts of kindness and affection. He was an elegant scholar and a profound metaphysician.” The prefaces also reveal how these collected works came into being: “The Triumph of Life was his last work, and was left in so unfinished a state that I arranged it in its present form with great difficulty. All his poems which are scattered in periodical works are collected in this volume...Many of the Miscellaneous Poems, written on the spur of the occasion, and never retouched, I found among his manuscript books, and have carefully copied...I frankly own that I have been more actuated by the fear lest any monument of his genius should escape me than the wish of presenting nothing but what was complete to the fastidious reader.” In the preface to the *Second Collected Edition* (1839), she describes her motivation: “I hasten to fulfil an important duty,—that of giving the productions of a sublime genius to the world...In the notes appended to the poems I have endeavoured to narrate the origin and history of each. The loss of nearly all letters and papers which refer to his early life renders the execution more imperfect than it would otherwise have been. I have, however, the liveliest recollection of all that was done and said during the period of my knowing him...In other respects I am indeed incompetent: but I feel the importance of the task, and regard it as my most sacred duty” (my emphases). What these prefaces summarized was the laborious, virtually impossible task of copying and recreating the work of Percy Shelley, impossible because of the fragmentary, draft-conditions of many of his pieces; if the drafts were confusing to Mary, they would be virtually indecipherable to others; she alone was capable of compiling and “originating” the work of Percy, which subsequent editors were able to carry on. (On a related note, Mary Shelley’s father, Godwin, also bequeathed to his daughter the task of editing his life’s works. But Mary could not, or would not complete this other task.) These passages reveal a practice of female creation that differs sharply from the masculine creation depicted in the early novel. We saw Frankenstein and Walton back away when they saw what they had imprinted, when they realized what terrible mess they had got themselves into; in contrast, Mary Shelley stuck through her project for 17 years.
Toward a feminist figure of humanity?

I began this paper by raising the question: whether Mary Shelley’s work as a woman writer opens the way to a feminist figure of humanity? I wish to essay an answer by drawing several analogies, beginning with the character of Penelope in the Odyssey. Traditionally both Mary Shelley and Penelope are seen as figures of domesticity, while their husband sail off in search of original “passages.” Does Penelope represent female power (as figured by her constancy, her ability to survive, and preserve the household for 20 years)? or is she a passive figure who plays her prescribed role in patriarchal discourse? A significant clue, I think, lies in Penelope’s art. Her double act of weaving and unweaving holds the violent suitors at bay. And she is devious enough to coax gifts from them to replenish the dwindling estate. By virtue of her art, Penelope is able to play an active role in shaping her own destiny amidst predominantly masculine discourses. In a strikingly similar way, Mary Shelley’s art also consists of weaving and unweaving. As we see in her early novel, one by one she unravels the heroic discourses—the masculine shroud that betokens suffering and destruction; her later work, on the other hand, is a careful weaving of unreadable fragments and scattered pieces of her husband’s works into a coherent, redeeming corpus. In these two of her most important works, Mary Shelley reveals a different kind of creation that stresses not originality, but that strangely originates. The Frankenstein story is vital to this day (giving rise to multiple cultural expressions, morphing to fit into cultural debates on ethics, technology, politics, etc.). And but for her labors to present Percy Shelley’s writings to the world, the histories of Romanticism and radical reformism would have been written in a very different way.

Haraway has suggested that “feminist figures of humanity...must somehow both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new

10 For example, in grief, she interrupted the bard’s singing of the heroic exploits of the Trojan war, including those of her husband; second, she subverted the plundering suitors who sought to win her hand, and thereby the kingdom of Ithaca; third, she raised her son, Telemachus, to early manhood, and while she submitted to him who by law inherited the authority of her missing husband, the young master still showed signs of deference to his mother.

11 According to Susan Wolfson, Mary Shelley was instrumental in favorably altering Percy’s reputation, from someone who had been branded as “radical,” “heretical” and “immoral” to an “ideal humanist,” a “misunderstood” poet. Through editorial presentations and sympathetic interpretations, she was successful in gaining sympathy for Percy among significant Victorian poets, critics and readers. See Wolfson’s extensively researched “Editorial privilege: Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley’s Audiences” in The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein. Eds. A. Fish, A. Mellor and E. Schor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility.” I recall next the female creature who was destroyed and dismembered in the novel, and who therefore resisted representation. I have cited earlier Frankenstein’s reason for destroying the female creature. For the female writer who questions and unravels masculine discourses, the non-representation of the female creature also carries important implications. Had the female creature been completed, she would have been made to order according to the desire of the male creature. I quote the male creature’s request to Frankenstein: “I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself...It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account, we shall be more attached to one another;” “my companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare” (p. 153–4). (She was to be his reflection, much as the male creature was to reflect Frankenstein ideally.) It is possible to see Mary Shelley writing this passage with prior texts in mind, possibly with irony—for among the books the creature has read is Milton’s Paradise Lost, and through it, the prior creation story, Genesis. In one thread of the prior story, Eve was created from the side of Adam (“flesh of thy flesh,” “he/ Whose image thou art,” Paradise Lost, book four, 441, 471–2). In Milton’s text, the mother of human race was presented as follows: “Her unadorned golden tresses wore/ Disheveled, but in wanton ringlets waved/ As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied/ Subjection, but required with gentle sway,” book four, ll. 305–8, my emphasis). But Frankenstein’s creature ought to know that in the earlier story—what turned the world upside down, was that the female creature was not content with the same fare. The rest is history (including the history of misogyny). If women had been for the most part misrepresented in history as subordinate, or inferior to men, or polarized as either the extolled figure of virtue or the cause of temptation, how do women break through these images that are based primarily on masculine self-idealization? In what sense may Mary Shelley's text articulate a new woman figure?

Out of the dismemberment of the female creature, something “unnatural” came into being—Mary Shelley the artist, who likewise resists representation. Critics have speculated on Mary Shelley’s guilt for not living up to Percy’s figure of the ideal woman.13 Neither does she live up to the Romantic icon of an unworldly poet, nor for that matter, to images of a feminist writer. Who is Mary Shelley? In the chapter, “A Multiplicity of Marys,” for instance, Fred Botting examines

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the many biographical as well as literary relations that could have engendered Frankenstein. One of the perennial questions that critics ask is: which Mary Shelley wrote this novel? The daughter of the two foremost radical reformers? A member of the Shelley circle? (And what is her status, her role in this infamous circle?) Or is it a writer who has taken on a more conservative outlook, when she re-edits the novel in the 1830s? These questions yield multiple and elusive answers. A brief resume of Mary Shelley may include: a woman artist, a mother, struggling to support herself and her child, who undertakes diverse assignments—writing for popular magazines and annuals, such as *Keepsake*, translations, several volumes of *Lives of the most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men*; Mary the scrivener, editor, besides a novelist and short-story writer...Each category, each title potentially lends new shades, new complexities to this nineteenth-century figure who seems at once conformist and radical. I would argue that more so than her husband, she is much closer to the composite figure that Raymond Williams depicts: the Romantic artist who in everyday terms is deeply aware of, and plays a direct role in the ideological and material struggles in the early nineteenth century. She wrote in a letter to the publisher, Edward Moxon: “and don’t despise me if I say I wish to write for I want money sadly.” Still other evidence documents Shelley as a shrewd businesswoman, negotiating contracts, fighting for copyrights as editor of her husband’s poetry. Far from retiring, she gained influence in literary, intellectual circles; and used it to champion causes and friends. Her miscellaneous literary output, written out of a variety of resources, genres and motives, speaks of chaos and variable achievement. Yet, from the violence of her decentering (some would call it a lack of focus, identity and coherence), she effects the possibility of connection (with her deceased husband through creating/editing his body of work; by supporting herself, her son and a few relatives in need; and against all odds, forging a sympathetic reading public, by reinventing herself and Percy). The unrepresentable woman artist, like the female creature in the novel, is inconclusive. For this reason, she continues to divide and to be relevant.

13 Susan Wolfson argues that, in reaction to this guilt, Mary sets out to position herself as Percy’s “privileged reader,” through the editing and annotating of his works. As the volumes sculpt an image of an unworldly and frequently misunderstood poet, Mary Shelley becomes the mediator of his poetry through her prose, in addition, using to advantage her own reputation as a prose-writer.


Finally, I wish to draw a quick reference to Sojourner Truth who is Haraway's example of the "disarticulated bodies of history." Haraway reminds us that Sojourner Truth's question, "arn't I a woman?" has "more power for feminist theory 150 years later than any number of affirmative and declarative sentences" (p. 92). Sojourner Truth's discourse, which is a discourse of suffering, derives its power from the "radical dis-membering and dis-placing of...names and...bodies" (Haraway, pp. 88). I quote from her speech:

"I have plowed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and arn't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and arn't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and arn't I a woman?"

The power of Sojourner Truth's question is borne out of/by experiences of utter dehumanization (not unlike Frankenstein's creatures who are made of human scraps, yet whose power Frankenstein fears). As Haraway points out, this truth is errant, wandering. It refuses to stay put. It exceeds the prescribed place and boundaries drawn according to "universal shape," that are subsequently allotted to those who do not fit the "universal." Examples of such restrictions abound, from exploitative labor to cycles of poverty, from race-targeted immigration quotas to internment camps. The unsettling power of Truth's question is echoed nearly a century later by another black writer, Langston Hughes, whose poem, "What happens to a dream deferred?" further inspires Lorraine Hansberry's provocative play, A Raisin in the Sun.

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
Like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load. 
Or does it explode?

16 In "From Avant-Garde to Vanguardism," Gary Kelly compares Percy's Laon and Cythna and Mary's Frankenstein. He traces the ebb and flow of British cultural revolution from the 1790s to the 1830s, and argues that Percy's poetic-political reform becomes isolated vanguardism, whereas Mary "succeeded in reaching the 'large field of production'...to become part of the modern cultural mythology." Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World, p. 73–87.
Sojourner Truth’s speech carries the explosive power, the moral force of those who have been deprived of their humanity (from basic survival to matters of dreams and aspirations, as the works of Hughes and Hansberry illustrate). It is the discourse of the unrepresented, in a legal, economic and political sense. Her speech calls attention to three areas where women have traditionally been held in a position of disadvantage— in conditions of work, livelihood, and motherhood. From slavery to today’s sweat-shops, and even in higher education, women have to work as hard as men but generally receive less remuneration. Particularly in developing countries where resources are scarce, women often are the ones who are made to sacrifice in nutrition, education, and sometimes, where female infanticide is practised, the opportunity of life itself. The other gross violation involves the dehumanization of women as sexual objects. Pertinent to Sojourner Truth’s experience, Haraway cites Hazel Carby, that in the New World, specifically in the United States: “black women were not constituted as ‘woman,’ as white women were. Instead black women were constituted simultaneously racially and sexually—as marked female (animal, sexualized, and without rights), but not as woman (human, potential wife, conduit for the name of the father)” (pp. 93–4). Motherhood therefore confers Sojourner Truth no rights over her children. She was merely a vehicle of reproduction, of capital gains. On the subject of rights, Haraway points out that, for women of color today, “reproductive rights” go far beyond white women’s contests of conception, pregnancy, abortion, and birth, but “hinge on comprehensive control of children—for example, their freedom from destruction through lynching, imprisonment, infant mortality, forced pregnancy, drug addiction, drug wars, and military wars” (p. 95). The dismembering and displacing of women and their family, both physically and as social subjects, trace back to social-economic disparity. Sojourner Truth argues: “if my cup won’t hold but a pint and yourn holds a quart, would’nt ye be mean not to let me have my half-measure full?” Her question still echoes today in conditions of domestic and global inequalities. According to the United Nations Human Development Report 1998, two-thirds of the world’s population, about 4.4 billion people, live in developing countries. Of that 4.4 billion, one quarter lacks adequate housing, one-fifth is not educated past the fifth grade; one fifth is undernourished. Slowly, on the level of practice, some changes are taking place. There have been more attempts, for example, in the last two decades, among relief and development organizations, to channel resources to women who, as “figures of possible connection and accountability,” demonstrate a better record of effecting fundamental social change such as in nutrition, education and sustainable economy.

On still another level, Sojourner Truth’s speech marks the discourse of the unrepresented (in response, as it were, to Haraway’s call for feminist figures of humanity that must “both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes”). Sojourner Truth’s “arn’t I a woman?” is more than a rhetorical question. It does not presuppose an answer. Rather, it has the
power to disrupt the categorizing of women—whether it be the male physician’s challenge of her sex based on biological essentialism, or the myth of the self-identical woman (read “white women” and women of developed countries). Haraway quotes Trinh Minh-ha: “If feminism is set forth as a demystifying force, then it will have to question thoroughly the belief in its own identity” (p. 93). Sojourner Truth refuses to subscribe to a definition of “womanhood” based on sex. She refuses to be elided into the category of the “undifferentiated” woman.

Haraway’s point that there are significant differences between the non-freedom of white woman and the enslaved African woman is well taken. She reminds us that “free women in...white patriarchy were exchanged in a system that oppressed them, but white women inherited black women and men” (p. 94). She cites Hortense Spillers: “free men and women inherited their name from the father, who in turn had rights in his minor children and wife that they did not have in themselves, but he did not own them in the full sense of alienable property. Unfree men and women inherited their condition from their mother...Slave mothers could not transmit a name; they could not be wives; they were outside the system of marriage exchange” (p. 94). Mary Shelley, writing in a condition of want as widow of Percy Shelley, and mother of the later Sir Percy Florence Shelley, is very different from Sojourner Truth, whose life experience included being traded, raped, forced into union with another slave, and who saw most of her children sold. But on a discursive level, both women speak powerfully about hope and change. Like the dismembered female creature that figures an unrepresentable female artist, the “disarticulated bodies of history” can offer “figures of possible connection and accountability.” Haraway says of Sojourner Truth: “This decidedly unwomanly Truth has a chance to refigure a nongeneric, nonoriginal humanity after the breakup of the discourses of European humanism” (p. 96, my emphasis). Out of a history of enslavement, displacement and dehumanization, Sojourner Truth spoke with power about being human, the condition of slaves, the condition of women, the definition of women’s work, the ability of women to make a living. The account of the 1851 women’s rights meeting in Akron, Ohio, recorded that during intermission, and before her powerful rebuttal, Sojourner Truth was busy selling “The Life of Sojourner Truth.”

17 Cf. Gayatri Spivak reads the English lady (Margaret Saville) and the unnameable monster as both (escaping) outside the frame of the text. I quote from “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”: “It is satisfying for a postcolonial reader to consider this a noble resolution for a nineteenth-century English novel” (in “Race,” Writing, and Difference. Ed. H. L. Gates, Jr. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985, 1986. p. 278). Historically, slavery in England itself was abolished in 1772. But British engagement in the slave trade to the West Indies continued, fueling the British economy. The British aristocratic and middle class ladies would have benefited from the exploitation of the colonial “other.” Slave trade was legally abolished in 1807.
Perhaps from very different circumstances, Mary Shelley is attempting a similar project. This juvenile writer, with terrible anxiety, who unravels self-identical heroic discourses in *Frankenstein*, who later salvages the literary remains of her husband, and who cobbles a living by taking on miscellaneous literary tasks, is an artist of dis-articulation. Her nongeneric, nonoriginal "passages" may not aspire to her own immortality, but they constitute a writing of difference that "[p]refigure[s] a nongeneric, nonoriginal humanity after the breakup of the discourses of European humanism." Her discourse of dismemberment offers new turns of possibility, after the breakup of reflexive ideals that power European humanism—a practice of connection and accountability that creates and sustains new life.
Works Cited


