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Unmaking People: The Politics of Negation in *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*

Two hundred years after its first publication, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) presents an interesting paradox: it is pervasive in its impact while often remaining misread or even unread. The novel is now a foundational text that is almost mythic in its cultural functionality and philosophical range, as its dense relationships to its literary, epistemological, scientific, and social contexts have become more complex after each wave of critical study.¹ And yet the book has also been reduced to a form of shorthand in popular culture, in which the very word "Frankenstein," or its abbreviation of Franken-anything, may be used in complete ignorance of the actual text. Despite the wealth of scholarship that elucidates this complex novel, the dominant popular sense of *Frankenstein* revolves around a schematic example of ambition as hubris and of over-reaching scientists who want to play God. In fact, these tenets are not present in the 1818 edition. As contemporary critics have recognized, the original version of 1818 differs substantially from the 1831 reprint, when Shelley recreated the novel in a more Christian and respectable vein.² In the process, she altered key passages in the text and used her new "Introduction" to preempt our interpretation, exchanging the unapologetic tone and dynamic ambiguities of the original for pious and didactic proclamations.³

This essay proposes that Mary Shelley's 1831 changes obscure some of the book's political implications. In her introduction, Shelley offers a morally clear interpretation for the main mysteries of the novel, presenting a reading that focuses on issues of origin and Victor Frankenstein's ambition, and diverting our attention away from Victor's emotional and social rejection of the creature. This perspective informs the stereotypical readings of *Frankenstein* as a struggle of ambition and hubris, and it prioritizes the origins of the story and the origins of the monster. If, instead, we recognize the tenor of her intervention, we can see that animation in the novel is not a single event but a dynamic process that combines creation and negation. Shifting our critical emphasis away from how or why the creature is created and towards how and why the creature is rejected rebalances the main questions of the book. It also reveals how later cultural contexts and the sf tradition of artificially constructed beings absorb the energy of *Frankenstein* as a politically resonant text.

Animating stories hold great political power in modernity, as scenes of animation and de-animation become allegorical conduits for depicting the conferral and withholding of human rights. In fantasies of animation, the inanimate becomes animate, a process that may refer to legal and political processes of enfranchisement. They posit how an object might become a subject, informing stories of statues that come to life, robots that acquire human rights, and cyborgs whose self-consciousness and existential angst carry such pathos

that we cannot help but recognize their intrinsic humanity. But the other side of this conceptual cycle is also formative as the depiction of de-animation implies a subject who is being turned into or treated as an object.⁴ Both directions of this cycle are active in the sf tradition. For example, Isaac Asimov's story "The Bicentennial Man" (1976) illuminates the first part of the cycle, the animation/rights/subjectification process that gradually transforms a robot into a human being. *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975) offers an example of the second part of the cycle in its depiction of deanimation/disfranchisement/objectification as the women of Stepford are replaced by their mechanical simulacra. And, as I will discuss below, many texts include implicit or explicit versions of the complete cycle of subjectification and objectification, in what often functions as a political and existential meditation on the limits and definitions of human status.

What we must recognize, when we study the use of animation and rejection in *Frankenstein* is that, although both phases of this cycle have political implications, one is reaching towards ontological claims while the other is not. It really makes a difference in reading this book whether we feel we *can* explain why the creature is rejected, and on what terms. Is the creature rejected because he is artificially constructed? If so, then the discourse of *Frankenstein* engages with racist and epistemologies that align alienation and political disenfranchisement with spurious claims to ontology. Is the creature rejected for other reasons, for reasons that we cannot fathom, or for no reason at all? In that case, the mystery changes, moving away from the creature's origins and modes of construction, and towards two very different realms of ambiguity: the psychic interior and sense of horror that might explain Victor's reaction towards the creature, and the realm of legal and social definitions of being with all their problematic historical legacies of violence and arbitrary distinctions.

To trace these legacies, this essay echoes loosely both the concept of "making up people" as presented by Ian Hacking and Judith Butler's notion of "undoing" the human. For Hacking, processes of distinction and categorization have "made up people" since the advent of modern taxonomic processes in the human sciences and their tendency to medicalize, biologize, and more recently geneticize individuals and communities. For Butler, there is a productive space of investigation in disrupting the processes of both personal and institutional recognition that such categorizations posit, in order to rethink the limits of visibility and identity, and in the process "undo" constructions of the human. There is an uncanny similarity in these concepts despite their positive/negative construction. In the context of *Frankenstein*, the creature is "made" both by being constructed and by being delegated into a social category of otherness. In Hacking's terms, his making, as categorization, is also his unmaking in his rejection from the human fold. In Butler's terms, both the human and its other would have to be undone, challenged, and dismantled as operative categories in order to change the prioritization of recognition and visibility that proliferates the production of margins in political and social terms.

Considered in this light, the creature's unmaking, his social rejection, powers the text's epistemological and political investigations and invites close

critical readings of the racial imaginary at work in the novel, and certainly at work in the text's long historical aftermath.⁵ Contemporary approaches to *Frankenstein* map the novel's participation in constructing discourses of modernity. In tracing the relationship between race and technology, critics might focus on the made-ness of the creature, connecting artificiality to the invention of artificial racial categories, the policing of racial boundaries, and the emergence of the scientific and technological language that explains political oppression in biological and embodied terms.⁶ In addition, the structural injustices of *Frankenstein* bring up questions about the enslavement and abuse of people across the world and about the way modernity has depended on the abjection of others as the Enlightenment project of subjectivity and human rights coincides with global racial slavery, colonial abuses, and the institutionalized, legalized, and large scale dehumanization of people.⁷ The animating story contains both parts of this process. While the fantasy of animation is only possible in the imagination and in representational media, in literary, poetic, theatrical, cinematic, and other fictions, the process of political de-animation is in fact real, both in terms of the historical legacies of slavery and bondage and in contemporary processes of objectification and disenfranchisement. Stated axiomatically, in their cultural deployment and political energy, stories of animation contain the knowledge and memory of de-animation and the objectification of their subjects. Functioning as allegorical and historical conduits, artificial people such as robots, androids, and cyborgs carry this double trajectory in their stories.

This political reading of the novel gives new insight into the sf tradition of the artificial person that has emerged in part from *Frankenstein*. Specializing in defining and often policing the limits of the human, the discourse of the artificial person positions mechanical or constructed people as foils for the interrogation of human lives, emotions, traumas, rights, and identities. In its strange and dispersed wisdom, popular culture also retains the cultural memory of the circularity and double-ness of animation, in implicit or disavowed ways. Even when one dimension is more visible than the other, many texts contain both the quest or transformation of an object into a person and the memory or threat of the transformation of a person into an object. In this, the animating story and the stories of the robots, androids, cyborgs, AIs, and other artificial people that populate our cultural imaginary engage in a fundamentally political investigation. While the mystery of the beginning of life is transhistorical and the fantasy of artificial life in the novel is presented as a scientific pursuit, *Frankenstein* also encapsulates two modern ineffables: the mystery of the interior—evident in Victor's hysterical reaction to the creature and his unconscious or subconscious motivations—and the mystery of injustice and dehumanization, a pernicious aspect of the modern tendency to define the person as a conglomeration of rights that are, in fact, alienable. Just as the creature in *Frankenstein* is first made through science and then unmade through social and political rejection, so legal and social processes, colonial projects, racial epistemologies, sexist, racist, classist, genderist, and ableist discourses, as well as other forms of oppression, constantly make and unmake people. In the

novel's complex representation of circularity and negation we find an emotional and epistemological context for understanding modernity's political technologies of distinction, all the ways that we treat people as non-people.

Life and Death: The Circularities of *Frankenstein*. Although its main storyline revolves around the artificial construction of a new man, *Frankenstein* contains a number of animating and deanimating moments. Even before the creature's appearance in the novel, Victor Frankenstein is already on a cycle of life and death by destroying his youth and energy, losing "all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit," and suffering from a slow fever while also urged by an "unnatural stimulus" into frantic activity (35-36). The creature himself combines creation and destruction: he is made up of stolen cadaver body parts, created out of death in order to cheat death. He is animated through a mysterious process only to be summarily rejected by Victor, a negation that according to the creature's account causes his turn to violence. He then proceeds to unmake Victor's social network by killing those he loves, and by leading him to the ends of the earth on a frozen ocean, neither land nor sea. After each tragic event, Victor finds himself close to dying from despair, only to be revived into frenzy by thoughts of revenge. This animating and deanimating language replicates the terms of the creature's animation when Victor worked to "infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing" that lay at his feet (37). And the escalating rhythm of the emotional ups and downs of the characters becomes dizzying. In Walton's descriptions of Victor's last days, we see a man roused into exertion, with "a feverish fire" burning in his eyes, and then collapsing "into apparent lifelessness" (169). Walton experiences similar transformations, as his "fervent and vivid" desires for the success of his polar exploration make his heart "glow with enthusiasm" but then deplete him into depression (5-7). The encoding of the novel combines the alchemical echoes of "enthusiasm" with the electrical and galvanic potential of "stimulus" and represents emotions and drives as forms of dispersed energy that suffuse the body into new states.⁸ The effect is an ever-expanding cycle of emotional intensity, both high and low; the characters are possessed by joy, driven into despair, animated by enthusiasm, roused into action from lifelessness, absorbed by melancholy, invigorated by courage, overwhelmed by a maddening rage, and so on.

The proliferation of animating and deanimating language in the novel registers how animation is treated as a circular or palindromic process in *Frankenstein*, not as a single event. While the creature's awakening is a literal depiction of animation, all bodies in the novel are subject to being animated and deanimated from external agents, from emotions and mental states that are described as potentially pervasive but also independent of the self. This has important effects, not only in terms of epistemology (in how the novel treats matter, animation, and life) but also in terms of politics (in how the novel defines the human in political terms, as subject to recognition or rejection). In what quickly becomes an obsessive return to making and unmaking people, the novel traffics in both premodern epistemologies in which life and death may present a form of continuity or be generative for each other and modern ones which insist on binary oppositions and distinct states of being.

As I have explored in more detail elsewhere, animating scenes perform a double reversal of birth and death.⁹ Modeled on ancient rituals and origin stories, animating scenes usually depict an adult body awakening into life, consciousness, language, gender, purpose, and social position at the same time. The animating scene brings everything that is inside the body outside, replacing the invisibility and temporal extension of human conception, gestation, and childbirth with visible processes and instant gratification. The visual fascination of modern texts with the scientific and pseudoscientific *mise-en-scène* of such animating scenes extends an essential visual impulse, the expression of a desire to see inside the body, to see how things work. In addition, as the creature in *Frankenstein* quickly discovers, by being born adult, artificial people are not afforded the rights and protections a society should provide for children. Although artificial people are proverbial children, new to the world, they can immediately occupy adult positions in terms of purpose and labor, and they are thus immediately instrumentalized. Their adult gendered bodies align them with traditionally gendered forms of labor, creating stereotypes of a hyper-masculinized and hyper-feminized body. Their depiction in sf stories as robotic workers, mechanical slaves, artificial soldiers, sex workers, or perfect wives all stem from the fact that they are born adult.¹⁰

The second structural reversal we see in animating scenes is related to death. This tendency goes much deeper than Victor's desire to conquer death or the creature's construction out of dead body parts. Animating scenes are modelled on death scenes, indeed they *are* death scenes played in reverse. Instead of moving towards death, losing its identity, losing its faculties, and becoming silent and inert, the adult body moves towards life, acquiring faculties and focus, and awakening into awareness, mobility, and a form of identity. This reversal of narrative directionality reveals an embedded desire for the palindromic and the circular in fantasies of animation, which thus offer a fantasmatic recuperation of both birth and death. It is because death can be observed and has narrative and temporal extension that in animating scenes we see an observable and gradual depiction of birth.

In premodern epistemologies, this circularity is aligned with a focus on the continuity of matter, the sense that states of matter are temporary and may generate each other productively. While Victor Frankenstein's ambition is related to reversing disease and potentially bringing back the dead, his method is inspired by cyclical models of matter. This is a more foundational use of ancient material principles, dating back to Aristotle and Galen, than his overt mention of medieval and Renaissance alchemists such as Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus (24, 30). Victor's research is focused on the question of origin: "Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed?" (32). Yet as with the alchemists, his methods are death based: "To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death," by which he means not just anatomical study, but also observation of "the natural decay and corruption of the human body" (32). In his workshop, he studies putrefaction and decay:

I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain. I paused, examining and analysing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life, until from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in upon me.... (32)

Victor's insight about the origins of life is encapsulated in the one short phrase that presents the circular ideal, "the change from life to death, and death to life." The sense that life and death are interlinked or causal for each other becomes paradoxical in his phrasing. We could say that death is "caused" by life, because to be alive means to be susceptible to death, to be moving towards death. But is life caused by death? Various religious dogmas posit an eternal or more authentic life after death, but it is usually non-material, since the body has been returned to its essential elements, dust returning to dust in the words of the Christian burial service. As the alchemists proposed before the advent of microscopic and bacterial explanations, a decomposing body is a great tool for understanding the infinite activity of life, and to marvel at the continuity of matter, its generative and transformational power.¹¹ Forensic science calls this the cadaveric ecosystem, activated by bacteria, enzymes, and proteins, and attracting insects and scavengers. But in order for the cycle to work, one has to relinquish ideas of particularity: matter continues past the death of a specific being, but it never becomes that being again, and it only becomes decomposed matter, liquids, calcium, cartilage, soil, hummus, and carbon. Outside the microscopic and bacterial worlds, only plants and certain insects can reverse the entropic sequence and redirect decomposition towards new goals.

Critics have long identified the co-occurrence of life and death for Mary Shelley.¹² Since the publication of Ellen Moers's analysis of *Frankenstein* as "a horror story of maternity" (82), critics return repeatedly to the connection between Victor's artificial creation and Shelley's own experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. They note the psychological and personal impact of her mother's death only days after the author was born, her own experiences with having given birth to three children by the time of the novel's publication (one of which lived only 13 days), and the tragic suicides of her half-sister Fanny Imlay and Percy Shelley's wife Harriet (who was pregnant when she killed herself, and not by Percy).¹³ In the novel, the procreative urge may occasion the desire to reverse death, as in Victor's scientific experiments, or it may result in one's own death, as in the case of Elizabeth and the female creature whose deaths stem indirectly from their potential as child-bearers. Or one's birth may kill one's mother, as in Elizabeth's implicit responsibility for the death of Victor's mother, who nursed her through scarlet fever before succumbing to the disease. In the 1831 version of the book, Elizabeth is also responsible for the death of her own mother, who "had died on giving her birth" (196). There is little room in this novel for procreation as a natural process related to life. Instead, even when they are not instantly lethal, the different forms of generation presented in the novel are mutually exclusive, as their products threaten and endanger each other. Although he imagines his own experiments as a luminous and hopeful

enterprise that has the potential to “pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (32), Victor sees the creature’s descendants as “a race of devils” that threaten “the existence of the whole human race” (115). Even when the procreative desire is abstracted into ambition and a generalized sense of futurity, as in Victor’s expectation that he will be blessed by a “new species” (32), and Walton’s anticipation of “the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation” (8), it endangers both the explorers and the sailors and family members that surround them.

Victor’s is just one of the articulations of the novel’s death drive, its obsession with catatonic and lifeless states. In contrast to Clerval, who expresses the feeling of life as presence and pleasure (“This is what it is to live,” Clerval cries, “now I enjoy existence!” [119]), and the monster’s clinging on to life as precious and valuable, Victor seems unable to see life as presence. The drive towards suicide emerges frequently in the book when, after each tragedy, the characters wish for death as release and see life as the extension of suffering. The state of being alive is presented as an infusion of energy into something that is almost dead—and, as I explained above, not for the creature alone, but for all the characters. In fact, after his animation, the creature is the most solidly and self-consciously alive character in the book, the only one not seeking escape from the intensity of feeling and being. The creature also confronts Victor’s desire to kill him with a defense of life itself: “You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life?” the creature says. “Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it” (72-73). As is the case with later artificial people, the creature never takes life or experience for granted.

The creature presents an alternative mode of being and thinking from the human characters, not because he is artificial but because he is lively, energetic, active, and clear in his understanding of his social context. When he complains about his woes, he is very specific that it is isolation, abuse, loneliness, and rejection that make his life miserable, not life itself. “Every where I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded,” the creature says to Victor during their first meeting. “I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous” (73). If Victor’s perspective is presented in the language of material science, alchemy, Christian dogma, hysteria, depression, melancholy, and grief, the creature’s desires and complaints are overtly political and social. The creature does not describe his problems as problems of origin, constitution, or material makeup. It is not his artificiality that is at the base of his unhappiness, but his rejection. He knows that he is being abused and that his misery is not individual or self-inflicted, but political and social in nature. This dimension of the book presents the parallel track that is implicit in the life and death pairing, which revolves around political life and social death. And this is where we see the strange reversals that the book includes in its distinction between ontological and political states. Biological life is associated with death in the novel, and it remains driven towards death. Political life also starts from death but in a different sense: the creature’s isolation is a state of social death, and his desire for recognition and

acceptance are a quest for life, for a political and social life that is not obsessed with biology but with inclusion or justice.

What is interesting to note here is that the novel showcases two epistemological, political, and material models. The model of circularity I traced above characterizes the novel's treatment of life and death, materiality, and the strange interconnectedness of opposites. But this circularity does not extend to the granting of human status and social and political rights, and this in fact is the creature's demand, that Victor complete this part of the circle. In their conversations, it is clear that Victor and the creature talk about two different aspects of the animating process. Victor remains obsessed with questions of origin, with the fact that he made this being, and with questions of unconscious or subconscious revulsion and the deep horror that dealing with the creature activates. The creature on the other hand is focused on questions of sociality, on his rejection and its aftermath. This is an example of how the animating scene functions as an allegorical conduit in modernity for the language of humanization and dehumanization, the language of rights and oppression. The circular desires we see in *Frankenstein* reveal the premodern notion of continuity, for matter and for politics, and the desire that remains in stories of artificial people even when modern epistemologies move away from circular models.

Taken together, these examples of the novel's focus on circularity and reversal attest to the political potential of the animating scene. The creature's critique reveals the racist epistemology operating in Victor's approach: Victor seems to imply that the creature's rejection is a given, that it is necessary and required by the very fact of the creature's artificial origins. Victor thus connects political exclusion to origin and ontology, in a conflation of paradigms that evokes racist epistemologies and their claims for supposedly "natural" orders of being. In contrast, the creature recognizes that his disenfranchisement is not an effect of his mode of being, that categories of being are not stable and stratified, and that his oppression is not deserved or natural but unfair and arbitrary. Just as emotion or liveliness can be considered as separate aspects of the self in the novel's obsessive animations and de-animations, so too rights and social connections are not a given; they are given and can be withheld. The novel's focus on circularity thus reveals the way animating stories encode the politics of disenfranchisement. Stories of making people include the memory of unmaking them.

Unseeing Unmaking: Shelley's 1831 Revisions. Critical approaches to the political references in *Frankenstein* recognize the novel's complex contexts, elucidating its connections to the political theories of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, the radical politics of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the political philosophies of the Enlightenment which the monster studies in order to understand human culture, and the aspirations, political tendencies, and debates that Shelley witnessed first-hand among her circle of poets and writers.¹⁴ In addition to the many literary sources that inform the structure and imagery of the book, from Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* (ca. 430 BCE), to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Coleridge's *Rime of the*

Ancient Mariner (1798), Shelley draws from major political issues and questions of the day. By including the creature's education, and especially his study of Volney's *Ruins of Empire* (1791), Shelley also registers her own reaction to imperialist ideologies and racist discourses.¹⁵

The stereotypical reading of the book in the public sphere, however, bypasses this sophisticated network of literary and philosophical connections and instead seems to follow a smaller and simpler dramatic contrast between Victor and the creature. If we begin with the characters in a schematic way, our reading of the political layers of the novel depends on which character we follow. Despite their similarities and sometimes interchangeable positioning, Walton, Victor, and the creature articulate different visions of action, responsibility, and sociality. Walton's is the presumed objective and scientific gaze, as his position outside the embattled family saga presents him as the level-headed scientist and explorer on a serious mission. Shelley's depiction of the dangers of polar exploration and her implicit critiques of imperialism challenge this perspective later in the book. Victor's story is characterized by gothic unexplainability and modern trauma, as well as by the development of a point of view that one might describe as reactive, hysterical, and deeply psychological. His visceral rejection of the creature is an enduring mystery and one that prefigures theories of psychological space, of Oedipal conflict, sexual panic, and unconscious or subconscious phobias and drives.¹⁶ His actions are almost unexplainable in non-psychological language—and this is why Shelley spends so much time in her 1831 preface and textual additions explaining for Victor. Importantly, she brings in both religious and scientific propriety in order to stabilize Victor's motivations, actions, and reactions. These characters enact political issues and approaches in their outlook, ranging from Walton's imperialist ambitions, implicit capitalist expansionism, and heroic notions of exploration to Victor's self-positioning as the progenitor of a new race and the arbiter of fates and futures for the monster and his potential mate. Of the three characters, the monster's is the most clearly and self-consciously political view, with politics also presented here as the art of living with others. The creature trains himself in political theory, history, and ethics, sees himself in a social and political context, and is constantly aware of his rejection from that context. In contrast to the tendency towards solipsism that characterizes both Walton and Victor, obsessed with their singular quests, the creature is both self-aware and self-sufficient in terms of identity and also constantly seeking redefinition in relation to others. Most importantly, the creature recognizes his rejection as a form of social death.

If the dominant popular reading of *Frankenstein* privileges Victor's ambition and the creature's origin, this dimension focuses on Victor's recoil and the creature's rejection. Such a reading is more difficult in the 1831 version of the book because Shelley is invested in keeping the focus precisely on questions of origin and ambition. In fact, we owe the popular reading of hubristic ambition and the "overreaching" scientist to Mary Shelley's "Introduction" for the 1831 edition, which summarizes certain cultural trends towards the text, drawing from its first stage adaptation and structures the popular reading of the book

thereafter.¹⁷ At stake in Shelley's preemptive interpretation of the novel is not the process of the monster's creation, which requires a leap of imagination anyway (and which she does not alter at all in her 1831 edits), but rather Victor's motivations and reactions, both in constructing the creature and in rejecting him. Victor's research appears as an unconventional but rational scientific pursuit in the 1818 text, whereas thirteen years later Shelley reframes his experiments with natural philosophy as an example of the "unhallowed arts" (190). Her additions of Victor's admissions of hubris, guilt, and moral remorse misdirect our attention about what Victor has done. They invite us to wonder about how he came upon this plan and whether he should have undertaken this project to begin with, instead of wondering about his conduct within the project itself.

Shelley focuses our attention repeatedly on the moment of origin, as the preface is motivated by the question she imagines readers find most pressing: "How I, then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?" (186). Her articulation of the desire for a satisfactory explanation of origin is mirrored in Victor's research question: "Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed?" (32). And yet, we quickly notice that Shelley's question is laden with negative judgements, with an implicit excuse (I was young) and an admission of a certain guilt and a certain approach to the book (I, too, think this is a hideous idea). She uses the word "hideous" five times in the "Introduction" alone.¹⁸ Instead, Victor's question is open-ended and unapologetic. Victor is a misguided and arrogant experimenter in the 1818 version of the novel, but he does not describe his ambitions as hubristic and does not consider his studies on the principle of life as antagonistic to God or religion. The text does not judge him as anything other than myopic or overzealous. He ventures to "pursue nature in its hiding places" (35), a prototype for the scientist, not for the blasphemous egomaniac we have seen in so many novels and films thereafter.

Shelley's 1831 description of her primal dream of the "pale student of the unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together" also contains her retroactive explanation of this mysterious aspect of her novel, presenting the panic that forces Victor to recoil from his creation as a moral and religious given. "Frightful must it be," she explains, "for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world" (190). This is a clear interpretation that one *must* feel, *must* see Victor's project as blasphemous, his reaction as understandable, and his rejection of the creature as necessary. By treating the creature's negation as a moral requirement, Shelley interprets the most perniciously difficult event in the novel to explain and understand. Popular approaches to the book hinge on this moment of interpretation in order to produce the spectacle of the remorseful overreaching scientist, resolving the unruly problem of what motivates Victor at that moment. In fact, without this lens, the questions one might ask about Victor's actions remain unanswered, even unanswerable. Why does he never speak up or warn authorities once he finds out about the creature's violence? Why does he not defend Justine? And why indeed does he reject the creature so

violently? The preface and the textual alterations of the 1831 edition change the grounds for Victor's culpability and guilt, from social and political responsibility to the easily identifiable and highly individualistic problem of having had an impossible and improper ambition.

But adding this moralistic explanation in 1831 to Victor's undecipherable motives from 1818 does not fully foreclose the novel's depiction of injustice, and precisely because it purports to explain on one hand what remains unexplainable on the other. The novel is literally and figuratively "frontloaded" by Shelley's justifications, which preempt the contours of the story in the preface and focus primarily on questions of origin. The persistence of injustice in the novel and in the characters' later actions, however, is not easy to subsume under these preemptive explanations, and the creature's rejection remains inevitable and non-causal, unexplainable despite the author's efforts. Even setting out a powerful initial premise does not resolve the later conflicts of the novel, because this premise is too localized and individual and does not provide a strong enough etiology. The creature suffers a pervasive and irrevocable injustice that he cannot question or understand and that the readers cannot fully account for. As a matter of quick contrast, another novel that depicts a pervasive scope of injustice, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), uses this spectacle in order to criticize systemic violence and social corruption. In Godwin's novel a servant is hunted and persecuted throughout England by a powerful lord intent on preserving his reputation and hiding his crimes. The difference between the two books is that in *Caleb Williams* there is an interpretation of systemic injustice and class privilege. The institutions and established hierarchies that enact this violence become embodied, and we understand their self-serving and hegemonic motivations. In *Frankenstein*, the violence enacted on the creature seems unconscious and unpredictable, the visceral response of people such as Victor who act on impulse and what seems like an unconscious drive. Instead of being explained, logical, and understandable—a systemic effect as presented in *Caleb Williams*—this violence in *Frankenstein* is unexplainable and irrevocable, a hysterical effect. As such, it remains operative and bothersome in the novel despite Shelley's evocation of hubris and Christian piety.

Starting from negation, from the rejection of the creature in *Frankenstein*, thus gives us a different book, one that helps us to see the novel's commentary on and participation in understanding injustice and dehumanization. The creature is made by science and then unmade by social and political rejection. This doubling of the animating scene has both epistemological and political implications, in a process I have described elsewhere as a "substitution of mysteries" (Kakoudaki 33). While seemingly resolving the primordial mystery of origin by deciphering the principles of life, Victor Frankenstein infects this demystified scene of scientific animation with new questions. If the creature's animation holds promises of a sublime revelation, in which nature's secrets are exposed and allow us to witness the transformation of inanimate matter into a living being, his rejection presents three important issues for our reading of the book. We have to recognize, first, that in the 1818 edition of the novel the mysteries of the creature's rejection remain unsolved and unsolvable; second,

that Shelley specifically interprets this rejection in pious terms in the 1831 preface and her textual additions; and finally, that the rejection of the creature combines two important features of modern individual and social subjectivity: a psychological definition of the person as a bundle of unexplainable deep motivations, visible in Victor's recoil and horror of the creature, and a recognition that defining "human" is in fact a political project, not an ontological one. The creature is very clear on this point. He never worries that his artificial construction is what renders him ineligible for inclusion into the human fold. His debates with Victor and his existential angst are consistently political, the demands of a being that considers his rejection arbitrary and non-understandable. In all his speeches and actions, the creature undermines ontology, insisting instead that the way he was made is irrelevant to the more active, urgent, and salient question of what to do now, how to be fair to him now that he is alive, and a thinking, feeling being.

***Ex Machina* and the Politics of Distinction.** The circularity of *Frankenstein's* making and unmaking processes is endemic to narratives of artificial people, a symptom of the fundamental drive of the discourse to both enact categorical distinctions and to challenge or renegotiate the terms for these distinctions. Certain ever-present textual moments make a different sense when seen in this light. How many times have we seen characters unmade, thinking they are human only to realize they have been artificial all along? In *Blade Runner* (1982) Rachel is tragic in her memory of someone else's memories. Sharon "Boomer" Valerii in *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) discovers her identity as just another Number 8 Cylon clone when she sabotages her spaceship and shoots her beloved commander. All the Hosts of *Westworld* (2016-) each in their own way realize their position as artificial people in an artificial world. These depictions enact the paranoid vocabulary of much of late-20th century fiction and film, when who and what one is matters, where policing identities, political allegiances, and sexualities is presented as a matter of urgent national security. I have described this effect as an aggressive interpretation of Cartesian notions of being and self-consciousness: by realizing that they are artificial, these characters attain a more advanced, more conscious, and self-aware form of being.¹⁹ The phrasing we might use to describe their trajectory of self-knowledge, "I thought I was A but now I know I am B," works in such a structural way that B is always the position of more self-awareness. Thinking you are human is a delusion. Knowing that you are artificial presents a heightened sense of consciousness. The creature in *Frankenstein* displays this paradox very clearly in his self-awareness, both when he discovers his own mind and develops his learning, language skills, and self-consciousness, and as he becomes more aware of his social and political position.²⁰ He knows who he is. He has no delusions about his social position.

The textual operations of "unmaking" expose the possibility that what appear to be ontological differences in these narratives are in fact political differences and that they are arbitrary, externally produced, and enforced through violence. The recent television reimagining of *Westworld*, for example, revisits the questions of dehumanization, rejection, and denial that structure Shelley's novel,

showing us artificial people whose introspection, existential angst, struggle for recognition, and modes of consciousness position them not as robots or androids, programmed in how to think and act, but indeed as real people, coerced and traumatized into submission. Questions of consciousness and self-awareness, so evocatively presented in *Frankenstein*, are also obsessively explored in *Westworld*, where programming and repetition become akin to instinct or memory and inform the actions of both real and artificial people. In these complex texts, the often-fetishized difference between real and artificial people becomes elusive or evaporates altogether, a matter not of ontology but of legal and social violence.

Considering the philosophical principles and political effects of the circularity of animation and de-animation might also lead to recognizing unexpected nuances in texts that feature this narrative pattern. In *Ex Machina* (2016), for example, a human researcher, Caleb, is invited to examine an artificial woman, Ava, to determine if she can pass an undefined version of the Turing test. Designed by Nathan, Ava is so humanlike and Nathan so mysterious and occasionally ominous, that at some point Caleb doubts his own status and cuts himself in order to prove he is (still) human. This unmaking of Caleb is just one potential unmaking we see in the film. As is typical in stories of artificial women, Caleb is drawn to Ava's beguiling innocence as well as her physical presence, her body being a technological spectacle with a beautiful human face.²¹ Ava's visual depiction in a mix of mechanical innards, latex web-like surface, and human-like face and hands is appealing rather than fully uncanny, with some of her body surfaces also functioning as clothing, a crop-top t-shirt and boy shorts perhaps. The test process is confusing, but Ava is clearly self-aware and possesses hidden depths of motivation and action that are not revealed until the end of the film. By that time, she has manipulated, flirted, argued, conspired, and stabbed her way out of this maze/bunker complex, and escapes to New York, leaving Nathan dead and Caleb locked up by the house's robust security system.

The film sets up a narrative of subjectification, as viewers (along with Caleb) are invited to evaluate and categorize Ava's actions and reactions on a spectrum of vague and implicit benchmarks regarding humanity and human-likeness, but also artificial intelligence and its ideal states, whatever those may be. At the same time, we are invited to make this judgment through problematic presuppositions and stereotypes, as Ava plays out a number of fantasy roles: the child-like woman who needs to be guided to her own identity by a presumably experienced man, the ingénue, the pixie dream girl of romantic comedies, the fairytale maiden kept in the tower or dungeon by an evil parent or overseer, and also the not-yet-but-soon-to-be sexually available female robot. Any process of discernment for Caleb and for the audience must engage with this network of stereotypes, versions of both humanity and artificiality that revolve around the sexualization, oppression, exchange, and objectification of women.²² The test is ostensibly about whether Ava is a true AI, with her behavior and thought processes guided by a massive database of human user data that Nathan's company has collected and processed. But in the end, these AI processes are

there basically to train Ava to fit within patriarchal gender norms or to help her to evaluate which performances of scripted and stereotypical femininity would help her manipulate these men and escape.²³

And yet while testing Ava is proceeding in this fetishistic mode, right in front of our eyes a different artificial woman has already passed all the relevant tests. Nathan's assistant Kyoko has been there from the beginning of Caleb's visit, and is immediately considered human by him and by the audience without any worry or doubt—even when it is clear that artificial people can exist and be quite sophisticated in Nathan's world and in the narrative context of the film. Kyoko seems perfectly able to participate in everyday life as an assistant or domestic worker and perform a range of household duties, cook, dance, be Nathan's lover, respond to most everyday interactions with just minimal adjustment. The small quirks of her behavior are quickly explained: she does not speak, or she does not speak English. "You're wasting your time talking to her," Nathan quips at some point and continues to treat her in ways that are painfully human in their abuse of power and lack of concern for her feelings. Kyoko's objectification at the start of the film emerges from her human status. Her demeanor aligns her with yet more stereotypes of femininity as she becomes the sexualized seductress, the silent sidekick for an egotistical inventor, the objectified domestic worker, or a sexual slave. Because of her silence, she might also be revealed to be something completely different, perhaps a spy, a security guard, collaborator, secretary, partner, another engineer, or a psychologist evaluating Caleb in the kind of switch about who is watching whom that even *he* realizes may be going on in the house. She may be hiding any number of identities under the watchful silence and stereotypical appearance of the sexualized young Asian woman.

Just as Ava has to absorb or negotiate with gender categories and stereotypes in order to arrive at human-like status, Kyoko is assumed to be human through similar operations of stereotype. It is as if in order to position her *a priori* as a human being, the film has to present Kyoko through national, ethnic, social, and racial difference. In presenting these female characters as women who are also objects, *Ex Machina* literalizes the logic of objectification that is endemic to patriarchy. Critics quickly criticized the film for participating so blatantly in the sexualization and objectification of the female characters, and occasionally conflated the object status of Ava and Kyoko as robotic women with their object status as women. But the two are not the same. When Kyoko listens quietly during a meeting, she can just be ignored, not because she is an object but because she is a human being at the time and one whose social position allows others to ignore her if they choose. In LeiLani Nishime's discussion of the film, Kyoko embodies an example of contemporary racialized transPacific labor, the exploited Asian female domestic worker, while the film's focus on technology also renders invisible the labor of other bodies, the workers at a high-tech assembly line that produce technological objects today.²⁴ In a recent lecture, Teresa Heffernan also warns of the dehumanization of Caleb in the film, the human tech worker who has been data-mined, "reduced to the very data he must also generate." Testing Ava in order to ascertain her human or advanced AI

status is a fetishistic enterprise when seen against the reality of how endangered the humans are in the film.

The logic of objectification circulates dynamically through the film and informs or affects the depiction of both human and non-human characters. While the film fetishizes the Turing test and the processes and powers of discernment that Caleb supposedly uses to see if Ava is or is not sentient, conscious, or human enough, another woman has been perfectly human for all intents and purposes. She has already passed for human, satisfying the embodied and worldly version of any test. Her success far surpasses the limited text-on-a-typewriter test that Turing himself devised, which in fact she may not satisfy because she has no language skills, or the amorphous test that Ava and Caleb are playacting. When the film reveals that Kyoko is an artificial being, we have to adjust our sense of her presence, to realign her with artificiality instead of accepting her in the way we have already accepted her. The text asks us to police a boundary that is also already irrelevant. We have to actively unmake Kyoko, and the film helps us in the process by deconstructing her face and body. She peels off parts of her skin to show us the mechanical interior while looking in the mirror; later, when both Ava and Kyoko attack Nathan in their efforts to escape, she is hit by Nathan who destroys half of her face. Because she has been human, the dehumanization of Kyoko has to be brutal and violent.

Kyoko is not performing humanity because she is human for us when the film starts. The actual performance in the film is Ava's performance of being artificial, acting out the android role in the gendered choreography between humans and androids that Nathan and Caleb arrange. This also explains why Ava has to remain artificial-looking, with her interior electronics clearly visible, even when it is technologically possible for her to have human-looking skin, wear clothes, and have human-looking hair. Without these reminders of the mechanical, there is no test. Her visible mechanicity is the only thing that upholds a difference that the film has already made irrelevant with the character of Kyoko. Being human thus becomes a matter of positionality for Caleb, Kyoko, and Ava. And Nathan, who seems most confident in his position as the arbiter of who is what, is also the most entitled and cruel, the most used to using people. His treatment of Kyoko in the beginning of the film is already instrumental and utilitarian. We have the sense that this treatment does not depend on a being's ontological status, because it remains the same whether we see Kyoko as mechanical or as human. The social problem of how we treat people is hiding under the fetishism of the ontological problem of how we might treat artificial people. And at the end of the film, after she has killed Nathan, Ava stands in front of a closet that contains all his previous iterations of artificial beings, women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, different bodies in different states of destruction or disrepair, used and discarded. She picks arms, joints, skin pieces, hair, clothes from these earlier experiments, from her ancestors, recreating herself as a young woman who is now eminently passable as human. She becomes human in a new deployment of stereotypes and normative gender categories: she is white (although most of the skin pieces she picks were from the body of an Asian woman in Nathan's closet) and dressed

as a chic urban socialite in a white cocktail dress and high heels. This is an act of appropriation of other identities, and it is at once normative in its depiction of gender and highly individualistic. Ava does not turn around to reconstitute or help any of the other women to escape, revealing a lack of solidarity and collective action among the women in the film. In this poignantly political and existential scene, Ava fashions a female identity out of the detritus of what patriarchy has done to women.

The vocabulary of objectification plays a complex role in the film, as both human and artificial women are subject to its logic. Kyoko begins the film as a presumably human woman, and it is as a human woman that she is objectified and sexualized, treated as a person that can be used and ignored, sometimes as little more than another of Nathan's possessions. If we can picture her trajectory in the film on this axis, Kyoko is objectified in the terms that objectify human women, and when she is revealed to have been artificial all along, she is recognized as a different order of being and literally remade into an object. At the same time, Ava starts from the other point in the cycle, as a literal object that the film works to develop into a subject. *Ex Machina* thus presents both parts of the animation/de-animation cycle, as one character is presumed to be human until she is revealed to be artificial, while another manipulates the limits of both positions as she restructures herself in order to escape. The film also questions our fetishistic attachment to the act of discernment, the position that Caleb is in, a position of power and selection, of criteria and standards. In these depictions, and in the reversals of humanity and artificiality that such texts engage, we recognize the lingering insights of *Frankenstein*, the interrogation of the difference between ontological and political definitions of humanity.

NOTES

1. See Marilyn Butler and Guston et al., eds.
2. On the manuscript versions see Mellor "Choosing." See also Ketterer.
3. For the publication history of the novel, see Robinson.
4. For a discussion of the relationship between the robot story and the histories and legacies of enslavement, see Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot*, "The Mechanical Slave." On the political interpretation of the novel, see Baldick.
5. See Malchow, Mellor "*Frankenstein*," and Young.
6. See Chude-Sokei, Weheliye, Donna Jones, and Browne.
7. See Brantlinger.
8. On the religious and social implications of "enthusiasm" as a motivating force, see Cragwall. Shelley enhances the electrical reading of the novel in 1831 by adding specific references to Galvani's experiments.
9. See Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot*, "The Artificial Birth."
10. There are examples of artificial children in the discourse of the artificial person, such as David in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), but the majority are born adult. This is one of the most consistent and ancient features of the discourse.
11. The transformability of matter evident in putrefaction was considered by ancient, medieval, and Renaissance scientists as the foundational principle of life, and is also the process by which Paracelsus proposes to create a homunculus out of fermenting body fluids. On alchemy and the natural sciences, see Newman.

12. On the representation of childbirth, see Bewell. On procreation and suicide, see Sanderson.

13. Mary Shelley's recurring dream after the death of her first baby is echoed in the novel's descriptions. On 9 March 1815 Shelley writes: "Dream that my little baby came to life again—that it had only been cold & that we rubbed it by the fire & it lived—I awake & find no baby—I think about the little thing all day—not in good spirits" (*The Journals of Mary Shelley* 70).

14. See Graciun.

15. See Vargo. Also on Volney's approach to racial epistemologies and the civilized/savage divide, see Brantlinger 136-37.

16. On psychoanalysis in the novel, see Sherwin. On sexuality and monstrosity, see Halberstam.

17. The first stage adaptation of the novel, Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption; or The Fate of Frankenstein*, opened in London in 1823. Mary Shelley and her father William Godwin attended a performance on 29 August 1823. On other theatrical adaptations of the novel, see Forry.

18. On physical description and the creature, see Gigante.

19. See Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot*, "The Existential Cyborg."

20. For an analysis of Shelley's presentation of cognition and sensation in the novel, see Richardson, especially 160-63.

21. See Wosk.

22. See O'Hehir and Watercutter.

23. On the technological narcissism and self-absorption of the men in the film, see Nick Jones.

24. See Nishime and Roh et al.

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the circularity of animation and de-animation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) in order to investigate the novel's contrast between political and ontological definitions of being. Although its main storyline revolves around the artificial construction of a new man, Shelley's *Frankenstein* contains a number of animating and de-animating scenes. In what quickly becomes an obsessive return to making and unmaking people, the novel traffics in premodern epistemologies, in which life and death may present a form of continuity or be generative for each other, and also modern ones, which insist on binary oppositions and distinct states of being. Because of this ambivalent merger of old and new, the novel's focus on animation offers important insights for the way political categories of being are codified in the modern era, when scenes of animation and de-animation become allegorical conduits for depicting the conferral and withholding of human rights. As the monster in *Frankenstein* was first made through science and then unmade through social and political rejection, so do legal and social processes, colonial projects, racial epistemologies, and other forms of oppression constantly make and unmake people. In the novel's multiple scenes of negation we thus find an emotional and epistemological context for understanding modernity's political technologies of distinction. Through close analysis of *Frankenstein*, and drawing from contemporary sf texts such as the film *Ex Machina* (2014), this paper explores how the discourse of the artificial person specializes in defining and often policing the limits of the human.