HYPERTEXT AND THE POSTMODERN *FRANKENSTEIN*

Natalie King
Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada
Media in Transition 6
April 17, 2009

HYPERTEXT AND THE POSTMODERN *FRANKENSTEIN*

A myth, argues Chris Baldick, "is open to all kinds of adaptation and elaboration," while maintaining "a basic stability of meaning" (Baldick 1987, 2). The scientist and the patchwork monster of *Frankenstein* demonstrate this nature of the myth as they respectively walk and lurch from their shadowy 19th century textual setting into contemporary film adaptations, syndicated sitcoms and multiplatform video games that communicate the same basic story. Most recently, the Frankenstein myth has been adapted to the digital landscape. Mary Shelley's text is one of the literary inspirations for a best-selling hypertext novel, *Patchwork Girl,* in which author Shelley Jackson integrates themes and characters from *Frankenstein* with issues of identity and hybridity within a hypertext system. Almost two centuries after its creation, the heart of the monster continues to beat.

Patchwork Girl's female monster represents a postmodern reconfiguration of the Frankenstein myth. In Shelley's novel, the male monster pressures his creator to design a female companion to relieve his loneliness. Against his better judgment, Dr. Frankenstein undertakes this project and assembles a female in the image of the male monster; that is, from body parts harvested from cadavers. Regretting his decision and fearful of future implications, the scientist rips the unanimated body apart while his monster watches with rage. It is from these discarded body parts that Jackson creates her monster: part grave robber, part thrift-conscious recycler, Jackson metaphorically collects the body parts and creates a fictionalized Mary Shelley to stitch them together. Through a collection of voices and subjectivities, this hypertext novel explores the construction of identity. While gender has been the primary focus of research surrounding *Patchwork*

Girl, this paper examines the commitment of the novel toward illustrating the construction of racial identity, and the contributions of the hypertext system toward meeting those commitments.

Similar to the lab of Dr. Frankenstein but decidedly less sinister, Mark Bernstein's Storyspace, an Eastgate Systems product (1995), serves as the birthing room for Shelley Jackson's hypertext monster. Within the boundaries of this room, analogies between the narrative body (the story), the structure of the body (the hypertext), and the body of the monster come to life. This "body" is composed of *lexias*, a term used by Roland Barthes (1974) to define blocks of text, or "units of reading" (Barthes 13), and later expanded by George P. Landow to include other forms of media: "blocks of words, moving or static images, or sounds" (Landow 1999, 154). Teresa Dobson and Rebecca Luce-Kapler note that the *lexias* are joined to one another by 462 links, similar to a system of veins and arteries that create a nebulous network of paths through the text (Dobson 2005, 270). Together, the link and the *lexia* – the 'skin and bones' of a hypertext system – provide a story for the reader to explore. One can travel through this system, reading the *lexias* and clicking on links, to piece together the monster's story as well as her body. The relationship between the body and the written word is emphasized in this approach to story-telling, particularly in one group of *lexias* entitled "body of work," and their formation of *lexias* into five groups, the same number of human senses, fingers and toes (Dobson 2005, 270). With *lexias* representing the monster's body parts, and hyperlinks the seams of their connections, the network operates as a pluralistic group of systems: a body. Form and content become inseparable: Christopher Keep notes that the monster "is not simply a character in the novel, she is the novel" (Keep 2006, par.1).
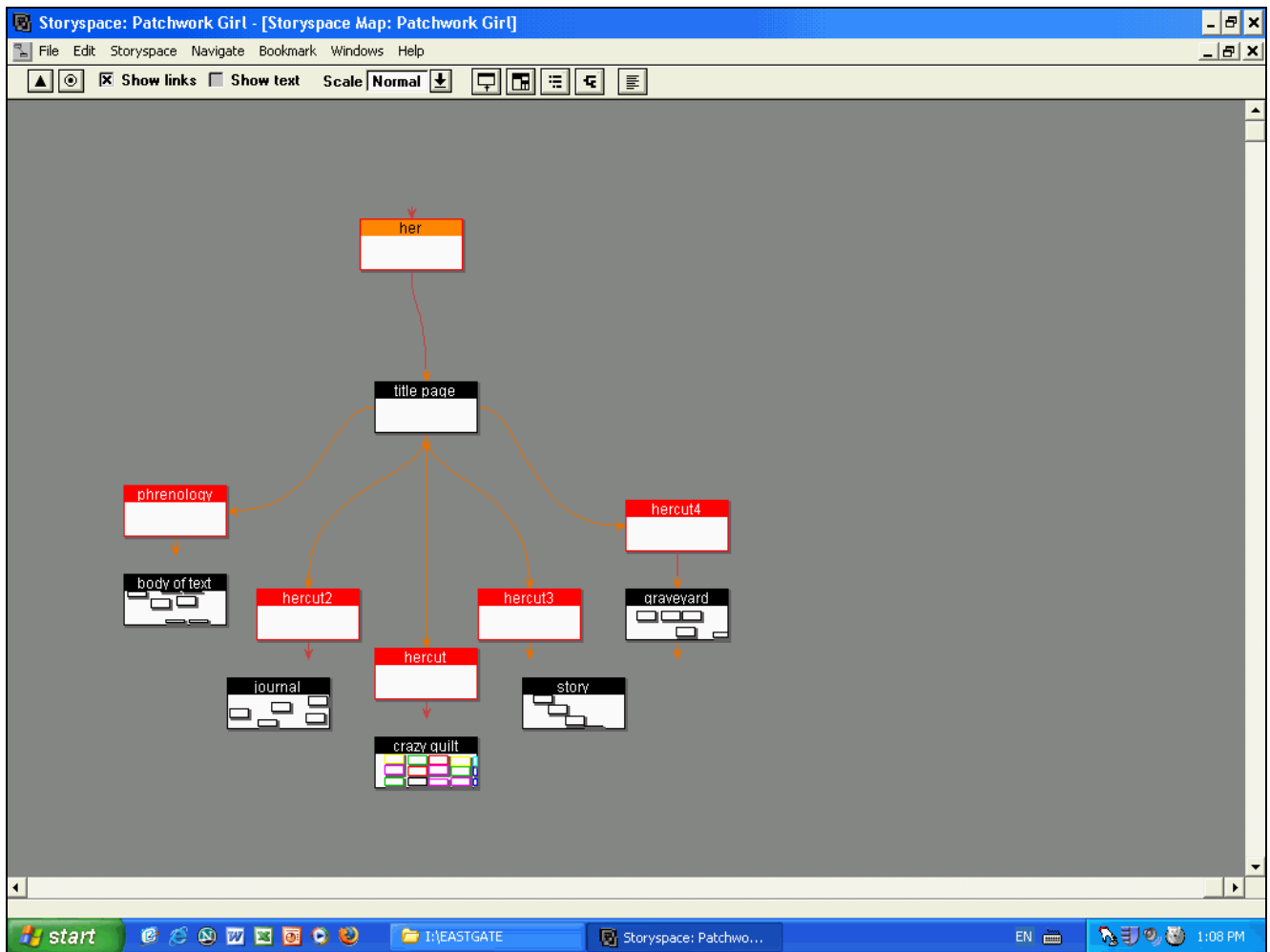
Figure 1: Storyspace Map indicating the five groups of *lexias*, from Shelley Jackson, *Patchwork Girl by Mary/Shelley and herself* (Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 1995).

This interweaving of hypertext, narrative and body parts is represented graphically through a black-and-white picture of the female monster's body. Cut into squares and re-shuffled into various remixes, versions of this picture surface throughout the story, symbolizing the fracturing effects of female embodiment.

Figure 2: Three versions of the monster's body from Shelley Jackson, *Patchwork Girl by Mary/Shelley and herself* (Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 1995).

A great deal has been written on the novel's preoccupation with gender, particularly because it follows the quest of one female and incorporates the groundbreaking work of another. Dobson and Luce-Kapler note that by writing *Frankenstein*, author Mary Shelley "[entered] the solidly male domain of writing for publication" (Dobson 2005, 268). Female-focused activities such as quilting, conservation and collaboration blend with quotes by female theorists Cixous and Haraway, advertizing the novel's preoccupation with feminism. Jackson's use of hypertext indicates her support of these feminist commitments; Barbara Page (1996) notes that hypertext offers some women writers "a means by which to explore new possibilities;" a tool of "resistance" that can be used to counter traditional writing norms (Page 1996, par. 1). She argues that,

> "[among] contemporary writers, women are by no means alone in pursuing nonlinear, antihierarchical and decentered writing, but many women who affiliate themselves with this tendency write against norms of "realist" narrative from a consciousness stirred by feminist discourses of resistance" (Page 1996, par. 1)

Indeed, hypertext can be of service to feminist writers who wish to resist the "realist" narrative form in their writing, and it may also offer an appropriate environment for expressing resistance against other limitations of social identity, but particularly those

signified on the body. Landow has pointed out that the examination of gender in this narrative harmonizes with Jackson's use of hypertext, and "enables us to recognize the degree to which the qualities of collage – particularly those of appropriation, assemblage, concatenation, and the blurring of limits, edges, and borders – characterize a good deal of the way we conceive of gender and identity" (Landow 1999, 164).

Because her body is a collection of 'scraps,' it does not signify a singular message, but a mosaic of fractured messages. Carolina Sánchez-Palencia Carazo and Manuel Almagro Jiménez note that many of the *lexias* that comprise her body reflect on her "fractured state" (Carazo 2006, 128): "I am made up of a multiplicity of anonymous particles, and have no absolute boundaries. I am a swarm" ("self-swarm"). N. Katherine Hayles notes that within the monster "multiple subjectivities inhabit the same body, for the different creatures from whose parts she is made retain their distinctive personalities, making her an assemblage rather than a unified self" ("Computer" 148). As a "mixed metaphor" ("metaphor me"), the monster encounters social difficulties related to her appearance. A tall and physically substantial creature, she claims that "women and men alike mistake my gender" ("I am"); "the curious, the lustful, the suspicious, and the merely stupid watch me wherever I go and some follow me, scribbling notes and numerals, as if translation into a chart or overview will make all clear and safe as houses" ("I am"). Their fascination stems from their inability to "know" her; to know whether she is male, female, transsexual, the product of inter-species cross breeding, or attempting to "pass" as one of these. They are unable to "know" her identity because her long dress obscures their view of her body.

Knowledge and vision in the Western world share a complex relationship that can be detected in certain English language words and phrases. One may offer a point of "view," resolve issues by "looking" into them, and say, "I see," in place of, "I know." Reading hypertext is a visual activity, and reading *Patchwork Girl* helps to construct the monster's body as a collection of visual signs of identity. Some signs mark the gender of the monster; other signs refer to her race, another visible area of identity that has been comparatively and inexplicably unexplored when the monster is so clearly a compilation of skin colors.

In a chance meeting between creator and monster in a forest soon after animation, the fictional Mary Shelley character describes the experience of seeing her creature's body for the first time in bright sunlight:

> She was stark naked. I noticed what I could not have seen in the dim light of my laboratory, that the various sectors of her skin were different hues and textures, no match perfect. Here a coarser texture confused the ruddy hue of blood near under the skin, there smooth skin betrayed a jaundiced undertone, there a dense coat of fine hairs palely caught the light. Warm brown neighbored blue-veined ivory. ("she stood")

The skin of the freshly-created monster is described as having "different hues and textures, with "warm brown" bordering "blue-veined ivory." The various hues could be associated with different races, but this issue remains unexplored. The "qualities of collage" that Landow believes "characterize a good deal of the way we conceive of gender and identity" perhaps do the same for the construction of race. Readers are told that the monster is made from various people, but, as in *Frankenstein*, no racial histories are described. The racial associations of these various hues are left to each reader's interpretation; the "warm" shade of brown could be interpreted as the skin color of a Caribbean slave, or possibly tanned Caucasian skin. If the metaphor of the racially

"mixed" monster is taken to its conclusion, one could expect her multicolored, crazy quilt body to showcase bodies of many races. However, unlike Frankenstein's monster, the female monster is intimately familiar with the stories of the original owners of her parts. Her body functions as an archive of body parts and their unique histories: "[each] part has its story, and each story constructs a different subjectivity" ("Computer" 148). Through her body parts, the original owners speak for themselves: her mouth, for example, had belonged to a woman who spoke a great deal, and now grants the monster the ability to speak up. In the group of lexias entitled "graveyard," she isolates the history of each body part and thanks its contributor. By naming the previous owner of her eyeballs, a historical tale is re-animated, reattaching a very old link between the Caribbean and the United States.

In the *lexia* entitled "eyeballs," the monster expresses gratitude for her "wondrously firm and spherical" eyeballs which provide "clear and sharp" vision: "I owe this to Tituba." Jay Clayton believes that Tituba refers to "the name of a West Indian slave jailed in the Salem witch trials" of the seventeenth century (Clayton 2003, 138). For decades her racial origins have been constructed and reconstructed by poets, playwrights and historians to reflect the racist notions of the day. In his article, "The Metamorphosis of Tituba, or Why American Intellectuals Can't Tell an Indian Witch from a Negro" (1974), Chadwick Hansen establishes that the real life Tituba was a "Carib Indian woman...and the slave of the Rev. Samuel Parris, who had brought her and her husband John to Salem Village from Barbados" (Hansen 1974, 3). However, many disagree with this assessment. Margo Burns believes that the woman known as Tituba Indian "was Amerindian, probably South American Arawak" (Burns 2004). The poet

Longfellow seems confused on this issue: his poem/drama, "Giles Corey of the Salem Farms" (1868), lists Tituba as "an Indian Woman" but Act III reveals her mother to be Indian and her father as a Black man (Hansen 1974, 6). Hansen believes that different people supposed Tituba's race to be different things; their assumptions are not based on opposing pieces of evidence but indicate racist leanings in "American historiography," particularly in cases where artists, and not historians, attempt to establish the race of Tituba (Hansen 1974, 3).

Audrey Smedley adds to Hansen's assessment in her article "Race and the Construction of Human Identity" (1998). She argues that the connection between a person's skin color and his or her race is a new, almost specifically New World, development that emerged in the last few hundred years. She states that "[there] are no "racial" designations in the literature of the ancients and few references even to such human features as skin color" (Smedley 1998, 693). Ancient peoples identified with their religions, communities, roles, and so on, until some time in the eighteenth century when the notion of race "developed in the minds of some Europeans as a way to rationalize the conquest and brutal treatment of Native American populations, and especially the retention and perpetuation of slavery for imported Africans" (Smedley 1998, 694). The layers of racial labels applied to Tituba by white people, from "Indian" (meaning "Native"), "Negro" to *mestizo* combinations, illustrates the subversive lure of racial identity and its necessary inclusion in a discussion of racial meaning in this narrative.

Jay Clayton argues that Tituba's sharp eyes help to 'focus' our attention on the connection between vision and race in this text (Clayton 2003, 139). Vision is ubiquitous in this work: in the "labor" *lexia* we read a description of the monster through the fresh

eyes of the creator: "I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open" while in "dreams" the narrator speaks of her "blurred vision" and the sense of being "haunted by the suspicion not that I am blind, but that I'm not looking properly...." Smedley defines the classification of "racial" groups as "the organization of all peoples into a limited number of unequal or ranked categories theoretically based on differences in their biophysical traits" (Smedley 1998, 693). Certainly the patchworked creatures of *Frankenstein* and *Patchwork Girl* experience a certain level of treatment because of their "biophysical" differences;" and it is key that the only person who treats the male monster kindly is blind. A touching scene occurs when the monster gains "an insight into the manners, governments, and religions of the different nations of the earth" as he watches Felix teach Safie from Volney's *Ruins of Empires* (Shelley 124). The monster "[hears] of the discovery of the American hemisphere, and [weeps] with Safie over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants" (Shelley 124).

The association between vision and racist notions regarding the "danger" of Black women is demonstrated through the sight-based accusations of witchcraft that were brought against real-life Tituba. As the story goes, Tituba was labeled a witch in Salem for causing "hysteria" in two young girls. The girls wished to use magic to "see" the professions of their future husbands. As Tituba was known to practice magic, the girls asked for her help in performing a vision-inducing activity. The activity was "an English folk method of divining" which involved placing an egg white in a glass and staring at it until a hallucinatory state was achieved (Hansen 1974, 4). In their visions, both girls claimed to see coffins and became ill as a result. One of the girls became so ill that she remained in an altered state until her death. Through her involvement, Tituba was

accused of fortunetelling. Hansen reports that of the many women accused at the time, Tituba was the first to come forward. In his words, "she ended her testimony of March 1, 1692 by saying, 'I am blind now. I cannot see.'"

The eye, visual perception and race are strongly linked in *Patchwork Girl* and its supporting text. The tears shed by the monster over the fate of Native Americans and Tituba's conviction for performing sight-based magic demonstrate how the eye contributes to social vision. Linda Alcoff believes that race and gender visually mark our bodies, and that "[in] our excessively materialistic society, only what is visible can generally achieve the status of accepted truth" (Alcoff 2006, 6). The fictionalized Mary Shelley ponders the relationship between truth and words: "Wasn't writing the realm of the Truth? Isn't the Truth clear, distinct, and one?" ("conception"). The association of truth with singularity is incongruent with the monster's hypertextual, hand-stitched existence, and results in a fractured identity that links to real life issues. She faces additional pressure as a woman of 'colors' because her "mixed" identity is visibly marked on her body. Some women of color whose bodies reflect their layered and sometimes complex racial origins, and resist simple deconstruction, face this stigma of truth and purity. Like her male counterpart, the female monster ponders the curious reactions toward her appearance: "I've learned to wonder: why am I "hideous"? They tell me each of my parts is beautiful and I know that all are strong. Every part of me is human and proportional to the whole" ("why hideous?").   The association of "multiple" with "monster" forms a shattered mirror which reflects the state of this monster's corporeal existence, history, and fractured identity. This multi-vocality emphasizes hybridity in the

novel: "I am a monster – because I am multiple, and because I am mixed, *mestizo*, mongrel" ("why hideous?").

Landow addresses the "monstrous" quality of Jackson's work, arguing that "[*Patchwork Girl*] permits us to use hypertext as a powerful speculative tool that reveals new things about ourselves while retaining the sense of strangeness, of novelty" (Landow 1999, 164). An example of a "new thing" the text leads us to understand may be the consideration that our exterior, although flesh and not words, is similarly seen and "speculated" upon, read, and constructed by others. Tituba surprised her neighbors when she "penned a history of the village;" her body deteriorated by old age, they wondered, "what could a poor invalid, confined to a chair, know of their doings?" ("eyeballs"). In the *lexia* ("I am") the monster describes the color of her 175 year old skin: "the motley effect of patched skin has lessened with age and uniform light conditions." While this implies that her skin has faded somewhat evenly, she is "still subtly pitied," suggesting unchanging reactions to her various colors. Apparently her skin patches continue to maintain their unique identities and resist assimilation. In fact, through the voice of the spiritualist Madame Q, this hypertext novel speculates that everyone exists in a mixed and unassimilated state, for "[we] are haunted by our uncle's nose, our grandfather's cleft palate, our grandmother's poor vision, our father's baldness" ("body ghosts"). Even if every leaf on the family tree is believed to have been accounted for, our future is unpredictable and our bodies have already been "claimed by future generations" ("universal"). The absence of a discussion about "mixed" races in a novel about fractured, multiple identities exposes our culture's unresolved anxieties toward the "impure" monsters among us – namely, ourselves.

The Frankenstein myth "explores the godless world of specifically modern freedoms and responsibilities" (Baldick 1987, 6). Connecting the natures of myth and hyperlink, Landow argues that the hyperlink represents freedom because readers can explore the narrative as they desire; theoretically entering and exiting anywhere in the narrative (Landow 1999, 154). However, although hypertext fictions generally offer flexibility in reading path selection, they still contain what Marie-Laure Ryan defines as multi-linear rather than non-linear narratives, meaning that there is a limit to the number of paths offered to a reader during a reading (Ryan 2004, 420). Ryan argues that multi-linear narratives "[trace] many pathways into a reasonably solid and chronically organized narrative core" (Ryan 2004, 420). While debate continues over the level of "readerly freedom" permitted by hypertext, *Patchwork Girl* freely expresses and acknowledges its feminist commitment toward examining the construction of gender and its fracturing effects as felt by the monster subject. On the other hand, the commitment toward examining racial identity is whispered in hushed tones, audible only to those listening closely. Perhaps the racial allusions discovered beneath the subcutaneous layer of this postmodern retelling of a western European story highlight the sometimes constricting link between race and postcolonialism. While hypertext may serve as an appropriate medium for reflecting the fracturing effects of a tumultuous historical connection within an individual, localized body, it might be limited in its capacity to express resistance against the assimilation of postcolonial concerns by postmodernity on a global scale. Future collaborative efforts between hypertext and multilinear postcolonial fiction would be enhanced by the addition of space for the purpose of

interactive discussion and dialogue; a new "narrative core" could be organized and the white background of the *lexias* modified.

In their introduction to Harold Innis' *The Bias of Communication*, Paul Heyer and David Crowley note the author's interest in the use of dialogue by oral cultures to maintain balance and foster "intellectual exchange" (Heyer 1991, xviii):

> For Innis, the important feature of an oral tradition is not its aural nature, as McLuhan has stressed, but the fact that it emphasizes dialogue and inhibits the emergence of monopolies of knowledge leading to overarching political authority, territorial expansion, and the inequitable distribution of power and wealth" (Heyer 1991, xvii)

Perhaps the monster's relocation to America at the conclusion of *Patchwork Girl* illustrates her readiness to jump from the black and white space of her hypertext motherland to a more expansive and colorful landscape.

Bibliography

Alcoff, Linda. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Baldick, Chris. *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth-century Writing.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

Burns, Margo. "Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*: Fact & Fiction." *17th Century Colonial New England* (25 Aug 2004). http://www.17thc.us/docs/fact-fiction.shtml (accessed April 14, 2009).

Carazo, Carolina Sánchez-Palencia, and Manuel Almagro Jiménez. "Gathering the Limbs of the Text in Shelley Jackson's Patchwork Girl." *Atlantis: Revista de la Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos* 28, no. 1 (2006): 115-129.

Clayton, Jay. *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Dobson, Teresa, and Rebecca Luce-Kapler. "Stitching texts: gender and geography in *Frankenstein* and *Patchwork Girl.*" *Changing English* 12, no. 2 (2005): 265-277.

Hansen, Chadwick. "The Metamorphosis of Tituba, or Why American Intellectuals Can't Tell an Indian Witch from a Negro." *The New England Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1974): 3-12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/364324 (accessed April 14, 2009).

Heyer, Paul, and David Crowley. Introduction to *The Bias of Communication.* Harold A. Innis, 1951. Reprint. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *My Mother was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Jackson, Shelley. *Patchwork Girl by Mary/Shelley and herself.* Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 1995. http://www.eastgate.com (accessed August 2, 2008).

Keep, Christopher. "Growing Intimate with Monsters: Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and the Gothic Nature of Hypertext." *Romanticism on the Net* 41-42 (2006). http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/013156ar (accessed April 14, 2009).

Landow, George P. "Hypertext as Collage-Writing." In *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media,* edited by Peter Lunenfeld, 150-171. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

Page, Barbara. "Women Writers and the Restive Text: Feminism, Experimental Writing and Hypertext." *Postmodern Culture* 6, no. 2 (1996). http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy. library.carleton.ca/journals/postmodern_culture/v006/6.2page.html (accessed April 14, 2009).

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Multivariant Narratives." In *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth, 415-430. Oxford: Blackworth Publishing, 2004.

Shelley, Mary W. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*. 1831. Reprint. New York: Noble & Barnes, 2001.

Smedley, Audrey. "'Race' and the Construction of Human Identity." *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 3 (1998): 690-702. http://www.jstor.org/stable/682047 (accessed April 14, 2009).