

Plotting the networked self:
cyberpunk and the future of genre

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Abstract / Précis

Cyberpunk's attempt to imagine the futures that the expanding communications networks will shape, as explored in Sterling's *Islands in the Net* and Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*, discovers that the boundaries between the machine and human, the natural and artificial, and the past and present have never been as clear as the modern realist schematic has drawn them. Gothic literature represents transgressions of these boundaries as threatening to the self, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the node where the gothic is dismembered and sutured into science fiction, and the modern self faces its monstrous double. Yet if boundaries are represented as sites of interface, gothic threats become opportunities for growth and generation. Individual texts, even realist ones, have always sutured together intertextual ingredients. *Jane Eyre* offers an alternative model for constructing the subject through sorting texts, a technique which emerges through cyberpunk as the essential survival skill of the future self.

La tentative cyberpunk d'imaginer le futur que l'extension des réseaux informatiques formera, comme exploré dans *Islands in the Net* de Sterling et *The Diamond Age* de Stephenson, découvre que les frontières entre la machine et l'humain, la nature et l'artificiel, et le passé et présent, n'ont jamais été aussi clair que le schéma réaliste moderne les a dessinées. La littérature gothique représente des transgressions de ces frontières comme menaçant à l'individu, et *Frankenstein* de Mary Shelley est le noeud où le gothique est démembré et suturé en science-fiction, et l'individu moderne fait face à son double monstrueux. Pourtant, si les frontières sont représentées comme emplacements d'interface, les menaces gothiques deviennent des occasions pour la croissance et la génération. Les textes individuelles, même réalistes, ont toujours suturé ensemble les ingrédients textuelles. *Jane Eyre* offre un modèle alternatif pour construire le sujet en assortissant des textes, une technique qui émerge dans le cyberpunk comme compétence essentielle de survie du futur individu.

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Introduction

Some mon deal with information,” he told her. “And some mon deal with the concept of truth. But some mon deal with *magic*. Information flow around ya. And truth flow right at ya. But magic – *it flow right through ya*. (IN 151)¹

There never was a wilder story imagined, yet, like most of the fictions of this age, it has an air of reality attached to it, by being connected with the favourite projects and passions of the times. The real events of the world have, in our day, too, been of so wondrous and gigantic a kind, – the shiftings of the scenes in our stupendous drama have been so rapid and various, that Shakespeare himself, in his wildest flights has been completely distanced by the eccentricities of actual existence. . . . The very extravagance of the present production will now, therefore, be, perhaps, in its favour, since the events which have actually passed before our eyes have made the atmosphere of miracles that in which we most readily breathe. (*Edinburgh Magazine* 191)

This anonymous contemporary review of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* not only points out several of the important aesthetic criteria of the incipient science fiction genre – plausibility, basis in natural laws, wonder – it highlights just how little our culture has changed since the early nineteenth century. Just as they did, we define ourselves as living in an age of wondrous science and technology. Just as they did, we define our times in opposition to a gothic/romantic a-technological past, which we still frequently represent in the avatar of Shakespeare. Just as they did, we conceive of a wondrous and frightening present which makes real the fantasies of the past through technology. And we still find this surprising, somehow, even after nearly two centuries.

Compare Bruce Sterling’s 1986 cyberpunk manifesto: “The cyberpunks are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction but in a truly science-fictional world” (Preface xi). They were and are a generation for whom it seemed that all the fears and hopes of “golden age” science fiction had been concretely realized, and yet in an often perversely twisted manner – the moon landing becoming the challenger disaster, robotics and

¹ IN refers to *Islands in the Net*; F to *Frankenstein*; DA to *The Diamond Age*; JE to *Jane Eyre*

automation leading to massive unemployment; acid rain, Love Canal, microwave ovens, VCRs, MTV, and the Sony Walkman – the “science-fictional” eighties were uncannily like and unlike the utopic visions of bourgeois leisure promised by the works of Hugo Gernsback and other golden age writers. Yet, while the cyberpunks may have been the first generation to grow up within a “science-fictional” world, they were emphatically not the first generation to recognize their world as technologically radically different from that of their cultural past. Mary Shelley could not describe her world as science-fictional, because the term did not yet exist, but if it had she most certainly would have. The generation who witnessed the advent of gas lighting, steam locomotion, and guerilla warfare saw their world as scientifically enlightened, technologically advanced, and fantastically modern. As Brian Aldiss notes:

The Byron-Shelley circle understood themselves to be living in a new age. They felt themselves to be moderns. The study of gases was advanced; much was understood about the composition of the atmosphere; that lightning and electricity were one and same was already clear – although that it was not a fluid was still so indefinite that Mary was able to use that misconception as a metaphor. Shelley had a microscope while at Oxford, and the study of morbid anatomy was well advanced. Mary lived in a thoroughly Newtonian world, in which natural explanations could be sought for natural phenomena. (40)

With Napoleon’s lingering exile and repeated attempts to regain power, the end of the Napoleonic Wars must have seemed to the English of the early nineteenth century every bit as ambiguous, unstable, and un-final as the end of the Cold War seemed to Americans in the late nineteen-eighties. Because Mary Shelley found herself without a literary form for dealing with this particular situation of an increased technological impact on lived daily existence, she had to invent one.

Shelley’s text lies at the heart of this exploration as the embodiment of the paradox of the modern self, it describes the limit where utopian desire for a better future through technology is

horrifically transformed into the gothic by the inescapable persistence of the past. This paradigm has remained latent within SF throughout its history, at times repressed by the clinical method of extrapolation, at times rearing up as the paralysing fear that subjectivity might dissolve under the tyranny of the object, the fear that the machine might conquer the human, or the fear that it already has. Through her portrayal of the modern man's horror at the sutured and discontinuous subject he constructed in his own image, Shelley gave a name to that fear, though she denied one to her creature, and it is the name of Frankenstein that SF gives to its own limitations.

In 1970, Alvin Toffler proposed another name for this syndrome: "Future Shock." Like the cyberpunks and the Byron-Shelley circle, Toffler perceived that his times were radically different from those of the previous generation. *Future Shock* warned North America that the pace of technological change was rapidly accelerating, as it had been accelerating since the dawn of human history; but that now that acceleration had reached the point where it was pushing the limits of human psychological capacity to cope with the ceaseless change in their daily lives, in everything from work environments to milk cartons:

The assertion that the world has 'gone crazy,' the graffiti slogan that 'reality is a crutch,' the interest in hallucinogenic drugs, the enthusiasm for astrology and the occult, the search for truth in sensation, ecstasy and 'peak experience,' the swing toward extreme subjectivism, the attacks on science, the snowballing belief that reason has failed man, reflect the everyday experience of masses of ordinary people who find they can no longer cope rationally with change. (325)

Toffler's wide-ranging study explored the ramifications of accelerated change in terms of culture, human relationships, economics, demographics, architecture, etc. *Future Shock* was in essence a history of the near future. Toffler proposed that the way to successfully ward off future shock was through an investment in what he called the "heritage of the future" (423). Through sustained,

imaginative engagement with the future, people would be able to become familiar with its incarnations, to get used to the faces of tomorrow, as it were:

Today as never before we need a multiplicity of visions, dreams and prophecies – images of potential tomorrows. Before we can rationally decide which alternative pathways to choose, which cultural styles to pursue, we must first ascertain which are possible. Conjecture, speculation and the visionary view thus become as coldly practical a necessity as feet-on-the-floor ‘realism’ was in an earlier time. (463)

Toffler was calling for SF to become a realism of the future, and this is the call that cyberpunk answered, as John Brunner notes in the acknowledgements of *The Shockwave Rider*. At the same time, Toffler’s vision of “Imaginetive centers” and “sanctuaries for social imagination,” which would be “places where people noted for creative imagination, rather than technical expertise are brought together to examine present crises, to anticipate future crises, and to speculate freely, even playfully, about possible futures” (464), foresaw an expanded role for science fiction in society. Rather than remaining a marginal, somewhat embarrassing, pulp genre, SF could take on a central role in smoothing the path of the future.

Sterling’s cyberpunk manifesto, the Preface to *Mirrorshades*, articulates the enthusiastic sense that the cyberpunk writers were achieving real innovation in SF, and addressing a real and present need. Sterling argues that cyberpunk was responding to an increase in the intimacy of the relationship between humans and technology: “Eighties tech sticks to the skin, responds to the touch: the personal computer, the Sony Walkman, the portable telephone, the soft contact lens” (xiii). It was no longer tenable to conceive of the machine as being entirely separate from the self, as traditional SF had portrayed. According to Sterling, in golden age SF,

Science was safely enshrined – and confined – in an ivory tower. . . . For the cyberpunks, by stark contrast, technology is visceral. It is not the bottled genie of remote Big Science boffins; it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next

to us. Under our skin; often inside our minds. (xiii)

Yet rather than figuring this penetration as an invasion, cyberpunk explorations reveal that these intimate and complex relationships were always there to begin with. I do not believe there was ever a time when science was “safe.” Still, there is something striking that emerges from the cyberpunk reappraisal of the links between media technology and the human self. Instead of strict delineations and binary oppositions, the boundaries between the body and the mind, between the human and the machine, between objective reality and subjective experience, become a matter of interconnections and hybrids. Boundaries begin to emerge as permeable membranes, the sites of connection and interface rather than separation. The network replaces rational causality as the model for plot.

It is the contention of this project, then, that cyberpunk’s attempt to create a realism of the future gives rise to an unexpected rethinking of realism, a realism achieved by – of all things – restoring the gothic, and particularly the gothic heroine, to the worlds of science fiction. This very ambition demands a return to the sites in literary history where these terms are most contested if the significance of cyberpunk is at all to be measured. If the resulting comparisons place cyberpunk in deep historical perspective (a perspective increasingly adopted by its practitioners), it is my hope that they also return us the vital strangeness of a literary history that can never be fully past. What these narratives finally share with my own project is a recognition of radical re-sorting as the survival skill of a female subject who has never fully been modern.

Figuring the present as the gothic past of the future, *Islands in the Net* features a distinctively permeable realism, which suggests, through the unexplained irruption of the supernatural into lived reality, that the expansion of technological networks exposes the inexplicable real, and that rational logic may be little more than rationalization – a mechanism for coping with the gothic’s threats to

the self. Yet *Islands* becomes trapped when it attempts to confront this monster, and its heroine becomes captive in the received plots of the past. Reaching toward a solution through the integration of magic into the networks of technology and the recuperation of monsters into social networks, *Islands* ultimately hits the Frankenstein barrier in the form of, on the one hand, an atomic bomb, and on the other, male chauvinism: *Islands* attempts to imagine a future in which both of these are things of the past, but ultimately can only imagine one where they are circumvented.

The Diamond Age, on the other hand, is more successful at imagining a future that overcomes some of the traps of the past precisely through its integration of the past into the future. Rather than imagining history as something to be conquered, *The Diamond Age* posits the past as an integral part of the future. Rather than rejecting rational logic on the basis of its inability to account for the real, *The Diamond Age* makes room for another kind of logic that, while no less natural, extends itself through the body and through the unconscious, through association and metaphor. The uncanny and the gothic take their place within the network of remade reason and are no longer destructive but constructive. The networks of nanotechnology connect ideas to things and blur the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, while the encounter with the foreign reveals that the subject is always already a construction. Selves are always provisional, hybrid, and sutured together out of received texts. Through its networked plot structure *The Diamond Age* celebrates the role of narrative fiction in the development of the self, finding that it is fiction that provides the individual with the flexibility to cope with ambiguity and contradiction. *The Diamond Age* also attempts to imagine what kinds of forms narrative fiction might evolve into, given the expanded possibilities offered by communications technologies and media networks, suggesting that a remade fiction might create a remade self.

But *The Diamond Age* is by no means the first novel to explore the relationship between narrative and the development of the self. Given that we are discussing the construction of little girls, what happens if we apply *The Diamond Age*'s insights to the nineteenth-century novel of female education? The choice of *Jane Eyre* here, is both pointed and arbitrary. One could imagine a version of this project tracing the connections between *The Diamond Age* and Dickens or Eliot, and exploring the generic influence of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and perhaps any or all of these should be attempted in the future. For that matter, any of Stephenson's later novels might have been substituted for *The Diamond Age*. Yet Jane suggested herself in the peculiar shape of her plot, in the peculiarly fraught role she herself plays in narrating that plot, and in the connections she draws between the gothic and reality, and between reading novels and making oneself. As the narrator of her own autobiography, Jane Eyre constructs her self through a dialectic of other texts, making her as artificial a human as Frankenstein's monster. Reading Jane as a cyborg highlights the connections between all of these novels and allows us to situate her within our own network of received texts. Jane is not entirely sure she is modern, though she insists she lives in the natural world, and so she has fewer difficulties accepting her own magical powers of self-creation than those who have insisted that textual worlds obey the rules of rational cause and effect. As such, she may yet have something to teach us as we learn to develop a remade reason and attempt to suture together a future we can live with.

The future is history that hasn't happened yet.

....

You don't have to wrap the year 2001 up in mylar to make it seem exotic. Believe me, by the standards of the year 1851, we are radically exotic. We are really out there. We're mindblowing. (Sterling, "State of the Future")

Chapter 1
Islands in the Net and the resurgence of the gothic

Selous thought it over. Laura could see it working in her face – wondering if Laura was insane, or she herself was insane, or whether the bright television world was brewing something dark and awful in its deepest voodoo corners. “It’s just as if they’re magicians,” she said at last. “And we’re just people.” (IN 327)

The connections and boundaries between information technology and the supernatural form one of the networks that cyberpunk texts, from William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* to the recent *Matrix* movies, explore most extensively. The insistent presence of the supernatural in a literature that has always considered itself as a subspecies of science fiction is striking, as is the degree to which cyberpunk looks to other genres for inspiration, forms, and styles. Among the threads critics have teased out are hard-boiled detective fiction and film noir,² and a certain engagement with mainstream “serious” literature that is unusual in science fiction,³ but I would like to focus here on cyberpunk’s foregrounding of the gothic elements that have always been latent in SF. Speaking of Gibson’s work, though his comments could also be applied to Sterling, Paul Alkon remarks on “the degree to which very distinct genres of Gothic and realistic fiction have been combined with other modes in what, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s terminology, could be called dialogic relationships centering on an ambiguous return to the marvellous” (76). It may be that realism, science fiction, and the gothic do not share textual quarters very comfortably, but they are all part of the interwoven textual networks of cultural history, and thus fair fodder for the cyberpunk forge.

Tom Shippey connects cyberpunk’s generic interplay to the practice of *bricolage*, by which the detritus of the past is collected and rebuilt into something useful for the present and future. *Bricolage* becomes a central part of the cyberpunk aesthetic, both as a theme within the stories

² See Joseph Nazare

³ See Brian McHale

themselves, for example in Gibson's *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and in Sterling's "Green Days in Brunei," and in terms of the construction of those stories through collaborative authorship, borrowing and sharing of *topoi*, and hybridization. Sterling calls this process "retrofitting," while Gibson has provided the sweet epithet: "the street finds its own uses for things" ("Burning Chrome" 199). Yet, the genealogy of bricolage does not explain why cyberpunk stories seem to form a strange kind of consensus that the expansion of technological communications networks is connected with magic, often expressed through the magic of Voodoo, nor their stubborn unwillingness to remove the suggestion of the supernatural from their stories, despite criticism from within the SF community. Magic is not just a metaphor in these stories, though it is not unambiguously embraced as real either: cyberpunk stories work to preserve a sense of hesitation and ambiguity that undermine such distinctions to suggest that the individual self in the information age lives perpetually in that lurch of ontological confusion.

It is almost a tautology to say that communication technology plays a fundamental structural role in *Islands in the Net*. Set around 2020, the novel's premise is an extrapolative exploration of the idea of "the Net" or the global telecommunications network that links telephones to text to video to databases – which we must remember was still a futuristic concept in 1988, although it was a future so near as to be almost indistinguishable from the unknowable present. Communications networks are at once technological, that is real artifacts that are invented and built; social, in that they enable and are enabled by relations between people and thus the circulation of power, money, love, etc; and textual, in that they are media for the representation and communication of ideas. It is impossible to separate any one of these characteristics definitively from the others. The network then, constitutes a powerful model for the representation of a human world, both its observable

characteristics in the circulation of objects and its less easily represented relations – it is an excellent framework for science fiction’s world-modelling endeavour. *Islands in the Net*, while not the first novel to make use of this framework, is one of the first to adopt it explicitly as a paradigm.

The introductory sequence in which Laura Webster trips over a VCR, buried by a hurricane twenty years before the events of *Islands in the Net*, is arranged as a kind of over-determined emblem for the story as a whole and is worth quoting at some length:

She ran in pure animal ease, like an antelope.
The beach leapt up and slammed against her.

.....

Something had snagged her foot. It was a black, peeling length of electrical cable. Junked flotsam from the hurricane, buried in the sand. The wire had whiplashed around her left ankle and brought her down as neatly as a lariat.

.....

She followed the frayed cord half a foot down, to the peeling, chromed edge of a home appliance. Its simulated plastic wood grain crumbled under Laura’s fingers like old linoleum tile. She kicked the dead machine several times to loosen it. Then, grunting and heaving, she wrenched it up from its wet cavity in the sand. It came up sullenly, like a rotten tooth. (my ellipsis⁴ 1-2)

Laura’s story will apparently be one where her happy, “animal” life is unexpectedly interrupted by the intrusion of communications technology. This technology is figured as an active force which has the agency to “whiplash” and “bring her down.” It is malevolent and “sullen,” but it is also “dead” and “rotten,” invoking a gothic association of the malevolent activity of inanimate objects with death.

The passage also represents this intervention in terms of time: the past rises up to ensnare the future. This too is an essentially gothic structure: “the present can never detach itself from the past” (Kilgour 36). Laura’s tale begins in a world where nuclear arms have been successfully abolished,

⁴ Sterling uses ellipses frequently to represent the halting, provisional quality of his characters’ statements. Unless noted as mine, an ellipsis in a quotation originates in the text.

a peaceful, stable world, if one that has buried secrets; and it ends with a (failed) nuclear attack and the revival of the arms race. The Cold War has never truly ended, it has simply been buried, repressed. It re-erupts all too easily, as the Vienna agent notes, “Because you stepped into the rubbish left over because your grandfather didn’t like mine” (64). The reader’s present, or at least recently lived past, the Cold War, is thus figured as the gothic past of *Islands in the Net*, a repressed past which erupts into the future.

However, this gothic eruption is expressed and made literal through technology, rather than through the supernatural, as it generally is in gothic fiction. The past which ensnares Laura is a physical object – a piece of junk – a relic – an example of the literalization of metaphors that cyberpunk is so fond of. Similarly the ultimate threat in the plot is also a technological relic: a nuclear warhead. The objects of the past, the media technology, the bullets, the guns, the warheads persist in existing past the point of their usefulness, and this persistence makes them dangerous: “An unfired bullet has a kind of evil pressure in it, don’t you think? Something in it wants to be fired. . . .” (IN 65). Political and ideological climates change, but ghosts remain in the objects that times produce: in a world which wants to believe that all that matters is discourse, the mute persistence of the physical is frightening. But rubbish, while it can present the gothic trap, can also be retrofitted into something new, and *Islands in the Net* does not relinquish all of its faith in the possibilities of retrofitting to remake the future.

Though conversing with objects such as clocks that speak with the voices of friends is still a little unsettling, talking to objects is quite normal in Laura’s world. At the very beginning of the novel, after Laura digs up the VCR she looks for a trash can to dispose of it, and spots one, “loitering near a pair of fishermen, who stood in hip boots in the gentle surf. She called out. ‘Trash can!’ The can

pivoted on broad rubber treads and rolled toward her voice. It snuffled across the beach, mapping its way with bursts of infrasound. It spotted Laura and creaked to a stop beside her” (2). Almost everything around Laura seems to be voice-activated and semi-intelligent in this way, and she is so accustomed to it that it has become automatic: upon waking, Laura always reflexively calls out “Lights! Turn on!”

In a gothic story, this ability of objects to move would be sinister and ghostly, even terrifying; if the environment reacts to a character’s desires it is similarly “unnatural.” But here, under the conditions of advanced technology, this ability is perfectly “natural” in the sense that it is rationally explicable, and the characters do not regard it as unusual. To the reader, however, such semi-autonomous appliances still represent a fantasy of technology – a fantasy that is at once the dream of the eradication of meaningless labour and at the same time, the nightmare that our dependence on autonomous technology dehumanizes us. The slight cognitive jolt that occurs when we read that a trash can is “loitering” is a big part of the reading pleasure of cyberpunk, and of science fiction generally, the jolt that says that the technology we interact with on a daily basis has an effect on the ways in which we live our lives. *Islands in the Net* explores the ways in which these incidental technologies form the fabric of daily life. The watchphones that Laura and her husband David wear become their multipurpose devices for opening doors, storing information, communicating verbally with one another, scheduling their activities, and sending and receiving text messages. They use them a thousand times a day without thinking about it at all, and with a freedom and integration that seems utopian from the perspective of 1988 when cellular telephones were still a relatively new and uncommon technology and PDAs were just a pie in the sky.

Yet *Islands* is not a naive fantasy of technological utopia – it explores the subtle ways that the

communication technologies of their time shape Laura and David's lives, particularly focussing on the ways that technology impedes communication and relationships as much as it helps them: "Television. A kind of shellac of television surrounded and shielded both of them. It was like reaching out to touch someone's face, but feeling your fingers hit cold glass instead" (96). For example, in the Net, both men and women wear makeup most of the time, not to appear attractive to one another, but so that they look normal on video. These characters are accustomed to a level of media immersion that makes every communication a performance, using the strengths of the medium to convey their message, and attempting to correct for its weaknesses through signals and conventions. Because communication through technology is imperfect, because video does not capture people as they really look, the characters must modify their lives off camera in order to compensate.

In this way, the unreliability of technology forms a kind of undercurrent in *Islands in the Net*. These incidents, such as when the staff complain that a drinks trolley has "Been chasin' us around all day" (85), are often comic, even celebrated as a kind of SNAFU existence. Technical difficulties abound throughout the novel. For instance, the Grenadian terrorists launch a drone to write in the sky over Singapore: "3 A 3 v _ O \ " and "= A _ _ S" (262). People wonder at the possible significance of this enigmatic message until someone realizes that the mystery stems from a programming error which failed to produce vertical lines in the letters – the message was intended to read "BABYLON FALLS." The error renders an event that might have taken on supernatural significance harmless: "'Invisible finger, writing in blood on the sky . . . probably would have scared the living crap out of people, if they hadn't fucked it up.' He chuckled. 'Murphy's Law, huh? Now it's just more weirdness'" (262). Murphy's Law seems to act as a kind of saving grace

in this novel, in this case preventing the chaos in Singapore from escalating. At the end of the novel, Murphy's Law causes the atomic bomb to fail to detonate, and instead just tumble uselessly into a tea-garden in downtown Hiroshima, enabling the world to locate and capture the rogue submarine without any further loss of life. Thanks to Murphy's Law, catastrophic events become merely uncanny: "more weirdness." Miscommunication and malfunctions become subject to a kind of carnivalesque pleasure in the chaotic, reminding us with Mel Brooks' *Darth Helmet* that "even in the future, nothing works."

This principle that most information is received as at best a muddled miscommunication, and that this chaos is a natural, even fortuitous state of affairs pervades *Islands*. Most interactions with the great intertext of history and culture take the form of vague attempts to retrieve extraneous bits of information: "(something something) for you, dear . . . buh buh buh booooh . . ." She could almost identify the singer . . . from old movies. *Cosby*, that was it. *Bing Cosby*" (106). Later in the novel, when someone refers to Bill Cosby, David corrects her: "You mean 'Bing' Cosby" (184). Dropping one letter creates a kind of hybrid between Bill Cosby and Bing Crosby. For the reader, this confusion is jolting and strange because Bill Cosby is the reader's contemporary, while Bing Crosby is some guy from old movies. But to Laura, they are both some guy from old movies and thus easily confused. History is a network of rumours vaguely misremembered, and then cut up and remixed into the flow of interpretation. Through the accumulation of inconsequential mixups like this one, Sterling highlights the sense of confusion, rumour and essentially random misinformation that governs most of the interactions of culture.

But while miscommunication is comedic in *Islands*, the lack of the ability to communicate is no laughing matter. It is when Laura finds herself in the belly of a plane, where nothing responds to

her technical commands that we know she is really in trouble: “She tried variants of the lighting command. She asked for general systems help, in English and Japanese. Nothing. She was cargo – no one listened to cargo” (298). Up until this point, Laura may have been captive, but she could still negotiate with her captors, still interact. Here the inability to communicate with technology renders Laura completely powerless, a subject perceived and treated as an object, and so she will remain throughout the long imprisonment section of the novel. Deprivation of her connection to others, through the technological Net, is for Laura the essence of imprisonment. This is the culmination of an anxiety that plays out through the early portions of the novel.

Laura leaves for Singapore blithely saying “Hell, Singapore’s just a phone call away. I’ll call David from there every day” (191), but almost as soon as she arrives she loses touch with David because Grenadian terrorists disable the Singaporean phone system. In fact, she never receives the last message of their marriage, since it is delivered in a code she cannot decipher. Laura’s panic at being disconnected from the Net is at once irrational and real:

“They’ve killed the phones!” she said, realizing it again, but with a real pang this time. “The Net’s down! I can’t get on the goddamn Net!”
 Suvendra stroked his pencil mustache. “So very important is it? In your America.”
 She slapped her own wrist, hard enough to hurt. “David should be talking here right now! What kind of jerkwater place is this?” No access. Suddenly it seemed hard to breathe. (213-4)

Essentially, Laura spends most of the rest of the novel looking for a phone, a way to contact David and let him and her colleagues at Rizome Industries Group know she is alive. She does not achieve this until her interview with Jonathan Gresham is beamed to the Russian Space Station and from there released into the Net, a hundred and fifty pages and nearly three years later.

It is understandable then, that during the Grenada mission “going offline” or losing their audio-

visual network connection to Rizome produces an acute anxiety:

Static roared in Laura's head. "Jesus Christ!" David said, clutching his earpiece. "We just went offline!"

Andrei glanced once, over his shoulder, skeptically. "Relax, yes? It's only a moment. We can't wire everything."

"Oh," David said. He glanced at Laura. Laura stood clutching the tote as the elevator descended. Yeah, they'd lost the armor of television, and here they stood helpless: Andrei and Carlotta could jump them . . . jab them with knockout needles. . . . They'd wake up somewhere strapped to tables with dope-crazed voodoo doctors sewing little poisoned time bombs into their brains. . . .

Andrei and Carlotta stood flat-footed, with the patient, bovine look of people in elevators. Nothing whatever happened. (110)

It seems silly to get so worked up over a few moments of disconnection, but the Websters are in a potentially threatening situation and the 'armor' of media is really the only protection they have. The Grenadians may have little patience for "these little quibbles of security" (112); but the following day when Laura removes her rig, the data pirate Sticky Thompson threatens to rape her, grabs her arm and Laura nearly kills them both by stamping the jeep's brake: "Both acting like raging drunks when the Net was gone" (139). The constant public surveillance that is so uncomfortable for Laura that it makes her want to "jump in a shower stall and soap down" (112) and practically destroys her marriage, is the only thing that holds them all to responsibility for their actions. In *Islands*, privacy comes at the price of exposure to violence, and while the Net's surveillance may not be comfortable, it does offer some security for exposed heroines.

The next time Laura goes offline in Grenada, the gothic propensities of disconnection become much more explicit. At some undisclosed point during her testimony before the panel of data pirates, the pirates have substituted a false signal for Laura's transmission, feeding Rizome a simulation while they attempt to seduce Laura into defecting to their cause: "None of this exists, you see. We haven't been existing for some time now" (149). When they reconnect her real signal,

the pirates have all left the table, so from Rizome's perspective they have simply vanished: "[‘One moment they were sitting and talking, and the next, the chairs were empty and the air was full of smoke.’] . . . [‘Like a video special effect. Is that what you saw, Laura?’]" (my ellipsis 152). It is in some senses a video special effect, but Laura does not explain what she saw to Rizome, because it was even stranger: she saw Eric Louison, prime minister of Grenada, materialize at the table, share a pipe of marijuana with the other pirates, and then vanish into thin air.

Tzvetan Todorov's exploration of the fantastic concludes that the fantastic can only exist within a kind of uncertainty, "a hesitation common to reader and character" (41), concerning whether the events of the narrative can be scientifically explained or not. According to Todorov, the moment a character decides how to make sense of events, be it by deeming them to be supernatural in origin or by explaining them rationally, we leave the realm of the fantastic for what he calls the marvellous on the one hand, or the uncanny on the other. In *Islands in the Net* there are several plot events for which, like Louison's manifestation, no satisfactory explanation is really provided. Nearly all of these events are connected with the Grenadian data pirates, who refer to these abilities as Voodoo or through the quasi-supernatural phenomenon of the Optimal Persona.

The Optimal Persona phenomenon is comparable to UFO sightings in the 20th Century, some sort of mass hallucination that is not espoused as real by rational people, but yet is never satisfactorily explained and simply lingers in the collective network of culture. Louison "had made a passionate speech in Vienna, demanding investigation of the 'Optimal Persona phenomenon.' It had earned him a lot of uneasy derision" (83), and Laura shares in that derision, deeming him to be "in the unhappy Afro-Caribbean tradition of ruler-patriarchs with heavy voodoo." According to Carlotta the witch-whore-nun, Louison has the ability to call up his Optimal Personas at will, sending them

out around the island while he himself never leaves the fort. Carlotta claims a Persona has “no substance, time and distance mean nothing to it. It can look and listen . . . spy on you. . . . Or maybe walk right through your body! And two days later you drop dead without a mark on you” (105). Essentially, an Optimal Persona is a ghost of a living person, a kind of doppelganger, but it can also be considered as a kind of video projection, a corporeal hologram minus the hologram generators.

Laura, being a sensible person, does not believe in this superstitious nonsense, so what she sees Louison do causes her quite a bit of consternation. The incident unsettles her so greatly that she does not tell anyone about it, not even David. Her instinct is to check the video evidence: “There was bound to be a flaw in them, she thought. Somewhere a little flicker, or a misplaced chunk of pixels. Something that would prove that they were faked, and that she wasn’t crazy” (159). She accepts Rizome’s suggestion that it must have been some kind of video special effect, telling herself, “I’m sure if I could reach that ceiling and dig around behind those lights, I’d find holograms or something” (152). But a light show cannot drink from a real cup of coffee or smoke from a pipe, and holographic marijuana smoke does not smell. The image that Louison projects is corporeal, material, real; as real as Laura herself. Though Laura’s conscious mind demands a natural explanation, the one she provides does not make sense in the context of the story. It is enough to allow Laura to shrug off and repress the incident for the time being, but it is not ultimately a satisfactory explanation for the reader.

Given her scepticism it is of course only fitting that Laura see her own Optimal Persona at some point. Laura’s OP experience occurs late in the novel, when she is extremely ill, having suffered a terrible beating in an African prison:

A woman sat across the cell, sitting in Jofuette’s bunk. A blond woman in a blue

dress. How old – forty, fifty? Sad, composed face, laugh lines, yellow-green eyes. Coyote eyes.

Mother . . . ?

The woman looked at her: remembrance, pity, strength. It was restful to look at the woman. Restful as dreaming: *she's wearing my favorite shade of blue.*

But who is it . . . ?

Laura recognized her self. *Of course.* Rush of relief and joy. *That's who it is. It's me.*

Her Persona rose from the bunk. She crossed the cell, drifting, graceful, soundless. Radiant. She knelt silently by Laura's side and looked into her face: her own face. Older, stronger, wiser.

Here I am.

"I'm dying."

No, you'll live. You'll be as I am.

The hand stopped an inch from her face, caressed the air. She could feel its warmth – she could see herself, face-down on the bunk, beaten, paralyzed. Sad Laura. She could feel the warm torrent of healing and sympathy rush in from outside, Olympian, soaring. Poor beaten body, our Laura, but she won't die. She lives. I lived.

Now, sleep. (317-318)

This experience is ultimately never rationally explained within the world of the novel, nor is it finally attributed to any supernatural agency. Laura rationalizes the incident by believing that she misinterpreted the image of a woman medic as her double: "She'd just slotted it in, dreamed of seeing herself. That was probably all that an Optimal Persona ever was, for anybody: stress and illusion and some deep psychic need" (318). However, Laura later meets the only other white woman in the prison, and she is indeed blonde and a doctor to boot, but she firmly denies ever having seen Laura before. Once again, Laura's proposed explanation is shown to be merely a false rationalization, and the event is retrospectively thrown back into that lurch of ambiguity that, according to Todorov, defines the fantastic, and simply left there.

The Grenadian data pirate terrorist Sticky Thompson also behaves in some ways like an Optimal Persona: he has the ability to dematerialize at will. When Sticky has Laura captive in Singapore, he vanishes before her eyes, and then reappears when she calls to him. Despite the continued

suggestion that this phenomenon is associated with television or video special effects, the text insists on Sticky's corporeality:

He vanished before her eyes. It was quick, and simple. He gave a sort of sideways jump and wriggle first, as if he'd greased himself to slide through a hole in reality. Gone.

She rose from her chair, legs still a little weak, a pain behind her knees. She looked around herself carefully. Silence, the sound of dust settling, the damp warm smell of garbage. She was alone.

"Sticky?" she said. The words fell on emptiness. "Come back, talk to me."

A rush of human presence. Behind her, at her back. She turned and there he stood. "You a silly girl," he said, "somebody's *mother*." He snapped his fingers under her nose. (226)

It is clear that this is no video special effect – Sticky Thompson is simply capable of dematerializing corporeally at will. This time the text offers absolutely no explanation, but it frames the incident so as to make an explanation unnecessary. Laura is drugged before these events, and then again at the end of this passage here. Because of the drugging, the reader can simply skip over the fantastic event, needing to attribute no explanation because it simply didn't happen – Laura's got it all muddled up, she's an unreliable narrator and this is another case of the text falsely representing events by framing them from Laura's perspective, like when the "beach leapt up and slammed against her," at the beginning of the novel. Yet the text never settles on a conclusion; this incident persists and through accumulation with the others, it is the rationalizing process which becomes suspect.

All the other unexplained fantastic events in the story relate back to Sticky Thompson and the Grenadians. The laboratory creation of the Grenadian Houngans – Voodoo drug designers and technological magicians – Sticky is capable of changing his body: his skin tone, his build, the timbre of his voice, his accent, even the bone structure of his face. He is a human chameleon, modified

through biotechnology to become the ultimate undercover agent: “he can eat a carton of yogurt and it turns him into a killing machine. . . . fast – strong – feeling no pain, no doubt at all” (170). Sticky is *Islands*’ version of the characteristic cyberpunk concern with prosthesis and enhancement of the body: “at what point does a human being cease to be a human being and begin to count as a machine?” (McHale, “Elements” 160). This question is an inversion of the classical SF question “at what point does a machine begin to count as human?” Described in the text as a “monster” (169), an “armed warhead” (170), and a “demon” (223), Sticky moves through the story like a demon, appearing in disguise wherever trouble breaks out, and tellingly, wherever Laura goes. An unabashed terrorist and hitman, Sticky Thompson is, by any definition, a monster.

Yet Laura’s approach to dealing with this monster is rather different from the traditional isolate, lynch, and destroy approach that fiction and film have generally taken towards monsters. In the passage above, though she is horrified by his acts, she calls him back with the plea “talk to me.” When he raves about “Jah fire! Thunder!” (225), she tries to reason with him, to convince him that “you’ve got to think it through” (226). She tries to understand his perspective and negotiate with him to prevent violence, and she is at least partially successful. She first earns his respect as “a brave enemy” (141), and they gradually develop a relationship of mutual respect through a kind of paradoxically honest enmity – unlike everyone else they deal with whose motives are hidden and whose actions are unpredictable, Sticky and Laura are open and honest in their opposition, and their attempts at persuading each other are genuine. When she wakes up from his drugging, Laura greets him almost as an old friend: “You know something? I’m goddamn glad to see you. I don’t know why, but I am” (221), and Sticky affirms, “You, I trust” (221). Though she does not succeed in stopping his campaign against Singapore, Laura does manage to convince Sticky that she and her

people are not his enemy. He comes to regard her as a well-intentioned fool, whose campaign for peace may be doomed to failure, “But I don’t think you ought to die for tryin’. It’s not righteous” (141). Consequently, Laura becomes a bit of a problem for Sticky, because she is “not in” (223) his orders. He is repeatedly forced to reevaluate his tactics and adapt his terrorist plots to avoid harming Laura, and this leads him ever so slightly to question his allegiances. He cannot join Rizome, being too monstrous for total rehabilitation, but the text places a distinctive value on the relationship of tolerance that he and Laura build.

It is at this point, where the novel both fully admits the possibility of Sticky’s demonic qualities, and the necessity of re-planning his attack to protect Laura, that the plot of *Islands in the Net* begins to take on a strange repetitive quality. Sticky’s rescue of Laura outside the Bank is almost mechanically repeated as Laura falls into a series of violent situations, culminating with her imprisonment in Mali. This sequence has lead feminist critics to dismiss Laura as “hapless” (Nixon 224), “hopeless” (Cadora 358), and “perpetually in need of rescue from prisons, would-be assassins, and terrorists” (Nixon 223). Upon close examination of these incidents, the men who rescue Laura tend to have directly created the situations which require her to be rescued in the first place. It is Sticky, after all, who has incited the street violence at the Bank. After Sticky releases her, Laura’s pacifist Rizome-Singapore group requests civilian arrest and evacuation by the Singaporean army. Instead of evacuating her, the Special Forces Colonel kidnaps Laura and uses her as a hostage. She escapes by tricking him into taking her into an ambush, and running out into the very battle from which he was supposed to be rescuing her. When the ship she escapes Singapore on is torpedoed, the F.A.C.T. agent who rescues her is the one who ordered the attack. Finally, when Jonathan Gresham pulls her out of the machine-gunned prison truck and agrees to save her wounded friend,

it is he and his group who ambushed the truck and shot her. Laura moves through her story as an anomaly that the terrorists, secret agents, and demonic soldiers of *Islands in the Net* had not considered, forcing them to change their tactics. She is the face of civilian casualties and collateral damage that they do not want to acknowledge, because this would take the fun out of war games. The circular plot dynamic at work here seems to be a kind of breakdown in the novel, whereby the plot ceases moving forward through Laura's developing narrative and simply repeats itself, like a record skipping. The conflict is in some ways between the novel's realism and its fantasy, but it is also specifically a gendered phenomenon: something strange happens when you insert a psychologically realistic female protagonist into the boys club plots of pulp fiction.

The rescuing men are presented through a kind of parody of macho-male heroism. The Special Forces Colonel, for instance, is described essentially as a monster: "Six and a half feet tall, well over two hundred pounds. Arms like tree trunks. She'd almost forgotten how big Caucasians could be. With his thick black boots and heavy, elaborate gear, he was like something from another planet" (238). His nostalgia for the good old days of fighting "for Queen and Country" is equally monstrous, as his jovial repartee describing the Singapore riot as "theater" dissolves and his true brutality is revealed: "You're a cute little blonde who looks real nice on telly. But if you muck about with me, I'll blow your brains out – and say the rebels did it" (242). The F.A.C.T. agent, is even more monstrous, insisting that she play the dumb damsel in front of his crew and thank him for both rescuing her and for carrying out the massacre, claiming to be "the global good guys" (284). But the gentleman spy looks more like a sociopath and an egomaniac to Laura, and she reacts with horror to the entire concept of good guys and bad guys which reduces the reality of global warfare to an abstract game: "it was a waking nightmare. She would have understood it if they'd been heel-

clicking Nazi executioners. . . but to meet with this smarmy little Frenchman and this empty-eyed good-old-boy psychotic. . . . The utter banality, the *soullessness* of it . . .” (284). This string of monstrous rescues has the uncanny mechanical quality of clockwork as Laura is tossed from one psychopathic megalomaniac to another, and it is easy to see why Nixon and Cadora read her as an essentially passive protagonist. However, I believe that to read her this way is to confuse pacifism with passivity.

For Laura’s goal is not at any point in the novel to win the war, but to stop it. She is a new kind of hero, born out of the technological and textual networks of cyberpunk. Her quest is not an attempt to penetrate anything or to win a boon, but to mediate: she negotiates between rival factions as they attempt to destroy one another in a futile game, the consequences of which far outweigh the causes. Laura is a detective figure of sorts, searching for the answer to the mystery of who shot Winston Stubbs in her house, but this search is deliberately not figured as a penetration into the unknown, or even a gathering of clues, rather it occurs as a series of transactions and exchanges of information. Ultimately the “truth” of who shot Stubbs is never even firmly established. Laura finds only a circular web of accusations, schoolyard bullies each pointing fingers at the others, with the blame eventually resting on a splinter group that never even appears in the novel: the mystery of who-done-it is really not important in the end. For Laura is not exactly a detective figure, though she is a gatherer of information: Laura is a web-ster, a networker, the new kind of worker produced by the information age who is part hacker and part socialite – the one whose skill at connecting to others allows the sharing of information. But Laura is not simply a passive conduit for information, since all of these transactions are predicated on and through her struggle and determination to understand and sympathize with those whose viewpoints are not her own. Her ultimate political

act consists in an act of self-narration that is also an act of war:

She looked into the world's glass eye. "My name is Laura Day Webster. I'm gonna start with what happened to me on the *Ali Khamenei* out of Singapore . . ."
 She became pure glass, a conduit. No script, she was winging it, but it came out pure and strong. Like it would carry her forever. The truth, pouring through.
 Gresham interrupted her with questions. He had a prepared list of them. Sharp, to the point. It was like he was stabbing her. It should have hurt, but it only broke open the flow. She reached some level that she'd never touched before. An ecstasy, pure fluid art. Possession. (357)

Laura lets her story loose into the Net and it topples the political order of her world. It is as though the destructive potential of her words, the gothic horrors of her past, make her into a kind of oracle of truth and transcendence. Yet this transcendence is short-lived, and the revolution her words inspire seems ultimately futile, since the suspicion remains that although one threat to world peace has been removed another will just pop up in its place, and the best Laura can do is isolate Gresham and Sticky through her group's protection, in the hopes that they will just leave the rest of the world alone. It is a tense co-existence, and an anticlimactic ending, but it is the best Laura can manage.

It seems significant, given the narrative's respect for its gothic monsters, that Laura's OP incident occurs directly after the jail beating. At this point in the narrative Laura has been made to endure some of the most horrific experiences imaginable, and the Malian jail sequence is the culmination of her trials: "She was in a cell. In a prison. In a fascist state. In Africa. . . . Could anything be worse? Yes, she thought, she could be sick. She began to feel feverish" (303). The novel seems to pile misery after misery on its pitiful protagonist until the act of reading (and of writing) the story seems almost sadistic. After the OP experience, however, the plot moves towards Laura's increasing freedom and comfort and ultimately towards her victory, ambivalent as that may be. The chapters describing Laura's long, solitary imprisonment are uncomfortable to read. Sterling forces

the reader to maintain the identification and experience it right along with Laura both by representing the sanity-threatening boredom of imprisonment directly in the text, and through describing her mechanisms for coping psychologically, such as composing and memorizing advertising brochures entitled “Loretta’s hands and feet.” Remembering the baby is too painful, but by breaking her down into inanimate composite body parts, Laura can think about and re-member her, while dissociating herself from the pain of separation from the whole human she loves. There is something striking in this act of loving dismemberment, and we will return to it later, but for the moment, we are interested in the way that Laura’s solitary confinement is represented as the maddening absence of plot. For the reader these passages generate a sense of frustration and anger with the narrative that is recognizable as a mirror image of the character’s own feelings of boredom and frustration. Just as the record’s skip disturbingly reminds the listener of the technologically mediation of music, the breakdown of plot breaks the illusion of realism in the novel’s construction of the self. The reader’s simultaneous dissociation from the narrative and increased identification with the character creates an uncanny reading experience which culminates in the beating.

Laura provokes the beating almost deliberately by smashing a VCR. While linked to the one from the introductory incident, this particular VCR has been brought in as some sort of palliation in return for her good behaviour. The twentieth-century Hollywood movies and football games she watches are a painful reminder that the world outside her cell exists, but when she discovers a list of the names of political prisoners held in the jail inside a tape case, the VCR further provides her with the first communication she has had with someone other than her captors in two years. Thus the VCR is in several ways, the communications technology which helps Laura to reconnect with the Net and escape her current situation. It stimulates her out of numbed stasis and into action. She

smashes the machine. The goons beat her up. And then she sees her Optimal Persona.

If we look again at Laura's OP experience then, it seems that the OP incident is an attempt to intervene and wrest Laura's plot away from the repetitive monstrous rescues that seem to be leading toward her death. The impetus of the novel's realism seems to require Laura's death in the prison, but the identification between reader and character would make this intolerable – we want Laura to survive. The only way for this to happen seems to be through an intervention of the gothic double, causing a temporary breakdown in the boundaries of the fictive world and in the integrity of Laura's self. This is the only place in the novel where the narration slips into the first person. The stream of consciousness-style representation of Laura's interior experience is at first set off in italic type, and Laura's voiced speech is set inside quotation marks. But the Persona's speech is set as regular text: it is the narrative itself that is speaking. The boundaries between Laura and her Persona break down as she momentarily gains an exterior perspective on herself:

The hand stopped an inch from her face, caressed the air. She could feel its warmth – she could see herself, face-down on the bunk, beaten, paralyzed. Sad Laura. She could feel the warm torrent of healing and sympathy rush in from outside, Olympian, soaring. Poor beaten body, our Laura, but she won't die. She lives. I lived.

The orderly procession of tenses depicts a narrative – the poor beaten body won't die, lives, lived. The perspective that she gains is precisely that of a reader as the character comes to see herself as “our Laura” and “she” melts into “I”. The “warmth” and “sympathy” that come from “outside” must spring from the reader's forced identification through the hellish prison sequence, culminating in the brutal beating. Enough! The reader says. We have to find some way to get this poor woman out of this prison. It is as though becoming her own reader, gaining a view of her life as a narrative allows Laura herself to control that narrative and escape the situation. Her eventual release is

secured through the collective prognostication: “She lives. I lived.” On the next page, the bombs start falling on Bamako.

Darko Suvin laments the contrivance that characterizes the final third of *Islands in the Net*:

It speaks well for Sterling’s ideological instincts, but badly about his narrative framework, that he was on page 292 (out of 348) forced to bring out of nowhere an anarchic rebel, extrapolated from T. E. Lawrence, to save Laura and let her properly inform the world, in a triumph of media freedom against international UN bureaucracy. (Suvin, “On Gibson” 362)

The introduction of a fairly major character this late in the story is indeed rather unusual and abrupt. However, if we read Gresham as the latest incarnation of the monstrous rescuers it conforms to the pattern of the second half of the novel – this novel is full of characters who appear for a chapter or even a few pages and then disappear as Laura hops from island to island. Gresham is different from Laura’s other rescuer/captors because like Sticky Thompson and unlike the others, he does not claim to be on her side: “We did our best to kill everyone in that convoy. We raked that truck with machine-gun fire, three times. I don’t know how the hell you lived” (365); but more importantly because he respects her freedom as an individual, and though he thinks the attempt to save Katje is misguided, he goes along with it: “‘Okay,’ he told her. ‘It’s your decision.’ She felt the weight of his words. He was telling her she was free again” (332). Gresham is yet another terrorist monster, a crazed creation of the system of world warmongering, but he also bears some of the burden of responsibility for the creation of the others, since it is his theoretical study, *The Lawrence Doctrine and Postindustrial Insurgency*, that serves as the strategy manual for both F.A.C.T. and the Grenadians.

As a penitent “cultural meddler” (364) however, Gresham has traded in his own gun for a video camera, acting as journalist, spokesperson, and network technician for a band of Tuaregs who are

attempting to resuscitate the Sahara through green technology and a return to their ancestral nomadic ways. Their “retrofitted” traditional song provides a powerful note of hope within the grim war-torn world of *Islands*:

For a thousand years we loved our herds,
For a thousand years we must praise the grass.
We will eat the *tisma* food to live,
We will buy Iron Camels from GoMotion Unlimited in Santa Clara California (363)

Tisma means “the secret craft of the blacksmiths,” that is, both magic and technology. Thus the ultimate hope for the future in *Islands* is comes through the network connection of high technology to natural magic, but also through Laura and Gresham’s ability to become lovers despite their political enmity. When Laura returns to Atlanta, Rizome is setting its sights on Gresham as the next big threat to their global economic democracy. With her special knowledge and appreciation for this monster, Laura proposes that instead of attacking him, they protect Gresham from the interference of other groups, take over GoMotion Unlimited, and market his image to “every would-be tough guy and rugged individualist and biker lunatic on this planet” (391). The Net wins through the co-optation and absorption of rogue elements – through loving its enemies.

Islands in the Net ends with a decidedly ambivalent stance: Laura has survived her ordeal but lost her family along with her youth and beauty in the process; she has gained special knowledge about the mysterious and dark networks of the world, but she uses this knowledge for clearly exploitative purposes to increase her group’s power; and she clings to Rizome’s quasi-socialist ideology not because she is sure it is right, but because: “I have to. It’s all I have left” (395). *Islands in the Net* sees power in the possibilities of communications networks and retrofitting to shape a future that overcomes the conflicts of the present, but the novel is ultimately unconvinced that such a future

will really be able to escape the gothic past which persists in the pieces that make up the *bricolage*: “One could, in fact, say that *bricolage* could also be called ‘Frankensteining’” (Shippey 214). The danger of making monsters is still inherent in the attempt to fashion the future. The return to the marvellous evident in *Islands* thus remains ultimately ambivalent. While the demonic chaos of miscommunication is to be celebrated as carnivalesque, the violence and greed that underlies the pirate networks must be firmly rejected. The expansion of the Net through Laura’s ability to understand others offers the possibility of distributed diplomacy as a prophylactic against mass death, yet this expansion seems to carry with it a kind of homogenizing effect, not to mention the taint of imperialism. Gresham warns “I stink of the Net, Laura. Of power and planning and data, and the Western method, and the pure inability to let anything alone. Ever” (366). As each island is incorporated into the Net, it loses its individual character, and Laura leaves every island she visits in chaos or ruins. *Islands* breaks down in the face of this dilemma and the insight of Winston Stubbs resounds: “One world means there’s no place to hide” (191).

Chapter 2

Frankenstein, or rejecting our sutured future

The event on which the interest of the story depends is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment. It was recommended by the novelty of the situations which it develops; and, however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield. (*F* 5)

In the Preface to his young wife's first novel, Percy Shelley highlights three of the threads that are tangled up in *Frankenstein*, its criticism, and legacy: science fiction, the gothic, and psychology. After all, an event that is "impossible as a physical fact" but not "a mere tale of spectres or enchantment" (gothic) is the special province of science fiction. Yet the excuse Percy Shelley provides for the depiction of impossible or extraordinary events is not one that is generally ascribed to science fiction: the fantastic is better for depicting "human passions" or psychology than realism. At the origin of a genre that purports to eschew interiority, we find a gothic psychomachia that George Levine calls "the perfect myth of the secular, carrying within it all the ambivalences of the life we lead here, of civilization and its discontents, of the mind and the body, of the self and society. It is indeed, the myth of realism" ("*Frankenstein*" 30).

The case for *Frankenstein* as the first full-fledged science-fiction text has been well argued by Brian Aldiss and others, and only requires a short recapitulation here. According to Carl Freedman: "Though some literary elements prominent in SF are doubtless as old as literature itself, I do not think one can name an important text earlier than *Frankenstein* that contains every formal characteristic that can reasonably be held to mark science fiction as a genre" (253). It may be that other, earlier texts may be cogently championed as the progenitors of SF, but it matters less that *Frankenstein* was *the* first, than that it is clearly perceived, then and now, as a novel unlike others

of its time, and that it is perceived internally within the modern SF community as a progenitor in theme and structure.

Aldiss argues that *Frankenstein* is science fiction quite simply because Victor Frankenstein uses the principles of science to construct his creature. Despite Victor's early forays into alchemy: "Frankenstein's ambitions bear fruit only when he throws away his old reference books from a pre-scientific age and gets down to some research in the laboratory" (Aldiss 39-40). Internally, the novel as a whole presumes a universe which functions according to natural, Newtonian laws of cause and effect, rather than a supernatural world of spirits and demons – all miracles, all daemons (as indeed the monster is called) are the work of human agency. Finally, the events which occur in the narrative are, within the context of its contemporary science, plausible. This quality of plausibility, as opposed to realism, is highlighted by the first sentence of Percy Shelley's preface to the 1818 edition, as Freedman notes:

Not of impossible occurrence: these four words point to much of Mary Shelley's stunning originality and, in particular, to the way she decisively broke with the Gothic and other supernatural literary traditions by which she was so heavily influenced in order to invent science fiction. The crucial issue is not, exactly, the technical or pragmatic feasibility of Victor Frankenstein's project (the operational details of which remain indistinct), but the fact that the whole book breathes a rational, scientific atmosphere informed by such recent or contemporary scientific luminaries as Erasmus Darwin, Benjamin Franklin, and Sir Humphrey Davy; and that the novel (explicitly and implicitly) offers its imaginings as well within the possibilities of cognitively based speculation as established by the most advanced science of the day. (253)

It seems that a plausible relationship between the internal world of the fiction and exterior perceived reality is the core aesthetic criterion of SF, and science fiction is less perceived and evaluated on the basis of its *mimesis* of reality, than on its representation of an acceptable distortion of that reality.

Defined by Darko Suvin as “the literature of cognitive estrangement” (4), SF is properly considered in terms of what it does, rather than what favourite tropes, images and settings it contains. Robert Scholes considers the work of what he terms “fabulation” to be “fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way” (29). But these definitions do not ultimately make any distinction between SF and other types of imaginative fantasy, such as the gothic, or even conventional historical fiction for that matter. For this reason I find it useful to think of SF as speculative fiction, that is, a hypothetical answer to a “what if?” question, that works itself out through a presumed direct and observable relationship between causes and effects. As Thomas Keeling has it, “Science fiction begins with a “What if?” proposition, locating its speculations in the future, in alien worlds, or in a past modified or reinvented by science” (117). To be more precise, the “location” itself in time or space is irrelevant – it is only necessary that this location bear an identifiable and sustained relationship to our own perceived reality. SF is therefore a form of realism, with the one acknowledged and special exception of each story’s speculative “novum” (Suvin). This speculative relationship between the fictive world and extratextual reality is a site of tension and always under scrutiny – it is the source of SF’s sense of purpose and relevance.

The “what if?” or “suppose?” question that lies at the heart of SF is subsequently coupled with an inevitable deductive “then.” An “if → then” scheme of cascading cause and effect, familiar to computer programmers, propels the fiction forward from the novum. All good coders know that the best attempts at a rational if → then progression are still susceptible to unexpected bugs in the system. A bug is a minute cause that has disproportionate effects – an error in syntax can bring down an entire work. Yet the coder does not reject the entire premise of code on the basis of the

existence of bugs; the coder works to untangle these bugs painstakingly, one by one, often discovering new and unexpected properties of code in the process. Searching for bugs, then, might be a good analogy for the work of criticism.

Frankenstein is a good example of both this kind of speculative mechanism, and one of its bugs. As another anonymous contemporary reviewer notes: “Grant that it is possible for one man to create another, and the rest is perfectly natural and in course” (*Knight’s Quarterly* 198), and by Mary Shelley’s own account in her Introduction to the revised 1831 edition, this was the idea from which she began to construct her story: “I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion” (Shelley⁵ 22-23). Shelley thus began her fiction from this one “not impossible” act – of a student creating an artificial man and imbuing it with life, and worked the rest of her story out from this novum. How did this situation come to be? Why would he do this? What happened after the creature stirred? What is the result of a creator being disgusted by his creation? All of these questions radiate out from the moment of animation to form the rest of the novel through a logic of if→then causality. *Frankenstein* is thus a scientific project of sorts, a thought experiment.

However, along with cautious definitions of what science fiction *is* come much more passionate and interesting abrogations of what it is *not*. Listen to Suvin on the subject of fantasy:

Even less congenial to SF is the *fantasy* (ghost, horror, Gothic, weird) tale, a genre committed to the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment.

⁵ Parenthetical references to Shelley are to the 1831 Introduction. In general, I will prefer the livelier 1818 text, as is the accepted scholarly practice, and unless otherwise noted references to the text of *Frankenstein* will be to J. Paul Hunter’s Norton Critical Edition of this text, which I will simply indicate as *F*.

Where the folk tale is indifferent, the fantasy is inimical to the empirical world and its laws. The thesis could be defended that the fantasy is significant insofar as it is impure and fails to establish a superordinated maleficent world of its own, causing a grotesque tension between arbitrary supernatural phenomena and the empirical norms they infiltrate. (8)

Egads! interposition, inimical, impure, maleficent, infiltration – apparently strong and remarkably defensive words are necessary to exorcise fantasy from SF. Keeling is less hysterical, but still goes to great lengths to show that “the three *essential* elements of the gothic’s generic paradigm – demonic agency, pandeterministic causation and a clear Manichaeian moral perspective – are, at best, accidental characteristics of science fiction” (116). Why such anxiety and fervour? What makes the gothic so threatening to SF?

The problem is that if we accept *Frankenstein* as SF, then we must deal with the equally strong claim of the gothic on the novel. We must deal with the well-known story of the novel’s creation: Mary Shelley’s assignment was to write a *ghost* story, but when pressed to devise a story “which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror – one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart” (Shelley 22), she found the possibilities of science more terrifying than the recurrence of the past. It seems then, that her invention of SF was almost accidental. Like her protagonist piecing together his “new species” (*F* 32) out of the carnal remains of other bodies, Mary Shelley constructed her new kind of text out of the dismembered tropes of the gothic, and the gothic remains vital within her reanimated species.

SF’s gothic origins are less of a problem for Aldiss, who shares the writer’s knowledge that “Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos” (Shelley 22) – that an individual work is always in some way hybrid, and a developing genre even

more so. In essence, Aldiss argues that science fiction ate the gothic:

The Gothic novel was part of the great Romantic movement. Its vogue declined early in the nineteenth century. But terror, mystery, and that delightful horror which Burke connected with the sublime – all of them have remained popular with a great body of readers, and may be discovered, sound of wind and limb, in science fiction to this day. (36)

He notes that “Other planets make ideal settings for brooding landscapes, isolated castles, dismal towns, and mysterious alien figures” (35), and advises the writer that “if something unlikely is going to happen, better to set it somewhere where the reader cannot check the occurrence against his own experience” (35). But Aldiss’s playful connections seem to have given the SF community a kind of indigestion requiring the powerful emetic measures evident in Suvin and Keeling’s arguments.

The problem stems from SF’s self-defining alliance with science, its self-definition as a literature of the secular, rational, natural world, positing that hope for the future lies in throwing off the shackles of the superstitious past. As a “thought experiment,” SF takes on the qualities of a modernist project in itself, objectively considering the possibilities technology may offer and preparing the populace for their gloriously enlightened future. In contrast, the rise of the gothic novel is generally regarded as a reaction to the Enlightenment, and against scientific rationalism in general, as Kilgour argues:

The rise of the gothic thus suggests a resistance to the ideas of rising, progress, and development, either historical or individual, which lead to the attainment of individuation and detachment. It suggests that the present can never detach itself from the past: the gothic from its precursors, the adult from his childhood self, the Protestant middle class from the Catholic aristocratic ancestors it demonises. (37)

The persistence of the past makes a mockery of the myth of progress, and so the gothic undermines the very premises of SF. It becomes imperative, then, that science fiction throw off and shun this connection with the fiction of the past, and particularly with its supernatural features. For if we are

to maintain SF's relationship to the real extra-textual world, then to admit the gothic into SF might make it necessary to admit the supernatural into the real, and that would indicate the failure of the rationalist project. Yet, as is evident in *Islands in the Net*, the conventions and structure of the gothic persist in haunting SF despite all attempts at exorcism.

Some writers, particularly Isaac Asimov and his followers, have seen this lingering taint of the irrational as a stain that science fiction, and indeed human society, must work to eradicate. They see the gothic as a persistent bug that fouls up the orderly code of SF. However, like Aldiss, many of the genre's most influential practitioners have acknowledged and accepted the connection between SF and the gothic with a shrug of nonchalance. H. G. Wells explained his own use of science fiction as a technique that would make his stories more believable: "by the end of the last century it had become difficult to squeeze even a momentary belief out of magic any longer. It occurred to me that instead of the usual interview with the devil or a magician, an ingenious use of scientific patter might with advantage be substituted" (qtd. in Aldiss 8-9); while Arthur C. Clarke famously claimed: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (189). For magic is in essence the ability to transform ideas into objects and back again, to influence the external material world with the powers of the mind, or vice versa. Science obtains the same results in the transformation of natural phenomena into theories of nature, and in the engineering of technologies from theories – it is only in their methods that science and magic differ. But for science, the method is everything, and so these kinds of statements are shocking to the SF community – in 1933, in 1972, or in 1986. The proximity of the gothic is a knowledge SF must continually repress.

In a familiar argument, Anne K. Mellor claims that in *Frankenstein*, Shelley "contrasted what

she considered to be ‘good’ science – the detailed and reverent description of the workings of nature – to what she considered ‘bad’ science, the hubristic manipulation of the elemental forces of nature to serve man’s private ends” (“Feminist Critique” 107). This argument would render the novel an indictment of engineering as opposed to what we now consider to be “pure” science; that all is well as long as we don’t attempt to apply any of the scientific knowledge we gain from the reverent study of nature, because we may not be able to control the results of such an application. This is the reading of the novel which coincides most closely with the popular conception of the story, and that which is represented in most film and stage adaptations. The creation of a technology that escapes human control is the myth which will forever be associated with Shelley’s novel. The novel is thus a reworking of the overreacher myth of Prometheus and Faust in terms of modern science, as indeed it announces by its subtitle: “the Modern Prometheus” (3).

That myth has endured and paradigmatically underlain much of twentieth-century SF, forming what Slusser calls the “Frankenstein Barrier.” According to Slusser, SF always arrives at a moment when “The creature of the future is now present as object of horror in the eyes of a humanity that cannot accept its futurity” (48), or in other words the speculated future of SF becomes inhabited by the relics of its gothic past, the real readerly present. Thus the return of the repressed gothic past has been internalized within the science fiction paradigm as a fear of the real: *Frankenstein* is a bug within the code of SF, but that bug is also present within the text itself. Slusser wonders whether this intellectual impasse can be surpassed or, “whether SF’s vaunted ‘sense of wonder,’ that which caused Victor Frankenstein to want to create new things in the first place, must always and ‘eternally’ come to rest here, at the Frankenstein barrier, where the present, lurking all along, rises up to avenge the sins of our uncreated future” (71). Although Terry Castle’s terms are different, the

problem she explores is the same: “Until it is possible to speak of the ghost inhabiting, as it were, the mind of rationalism itself, this sense of being haunted is likely to remain – far more than any nervous fear of the police – the distinctive paranoia of modern life” (189). SF’s problems with its persistent gothic past are therefore indicative of a much larger cultural impediment which has come to be called the “Great Divide” or the “crisis of modernism” (Latour 12).

Castle has proposed that the drive toward enlightenment explicability itself produces the inexplicable:

that the eighteenth century in a sense “invented the uncanny”: that the very psychic and cultural transformations that led to the subsequent glorification of the period as an age of reason or enlightenment – the aggressively rationalist imperatives of the epoch – also produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement, and intellectual impasse. (8)

We can conceive of this relationship through the metaphor of reason as “enlightenment”: as a light source is brightened, intensified and directed, shadows grow larger, darken, and multiply; thus the intensification of the “light” of reason through the scientific method itself produces the shadows and strangeness of the gothic and of the unconscious. The irrational bug is a product of the system of the rational, rather than an intrusion into that system – we may not be able to debug this code.

Along with Castle, Friedrich Kittler, Mladen Dolar, and many others have recently begun to explore the notion that psychoanalysis itself was born out of a historically-situated scientific desire to form a rational, scientific, mechanistic model of the irrational behaviours of the human mind. Psychoanalysis is thus precisely the point where all of these discourses – science, literature, the rational, and the irrational – meet. Famously, the source material from which Freud built his mechanical model of the mind was literature – both literature *per se* and the stories Freud himself produced through his case studies. As such we can also conceive of literature as a kind of storage

medium for constructing and deconstructing the self. The theory of psychoanalysis tells the story of a threat to present cognition caused by the irruption of the infantile past in the mind of an individual, a gothic tale in essence, and through Freud's insight that repression is the mechanism by which civilization occurs, the necromantic aspects of psychoanalysis are bound to wider social processes of taboo and sublimation. As Kilgour points out, "Rather than being a tool for explaining the gothic, then, psychoanalysis is a late gothic story which has emerged to help explain a twentieth-century experience of paradoxical detachment from and fear of others and the past. Both are symptoms of the alienation peculiar to a modern bourgeois society" (221). Or put another way: "the uncanny itself first 'comes to light' – becomes a part of human experience – in that period known as the Enlightenment" (Castle 7). Thus the human mind itself changes with its historicity, is constructed differently and thus reacts differently depending on its discursive environment, rather than being some kind of historically transcendent object that required the insight of science to truly understand.

Castle's insight can help to explain why science fiction writers and critics have been much more hostile than other literatures to the various forms of psychoanalytic criticism that have arisen in the late twentieth century. Even while discussing the prominence of such introspective writers as Ray Bradbury, Stanislaw Lem, and Philip K. Dick, science fiction criticism insists that:

Science fiction's vision extends outward, away from the interior man, exploring instead man's relationship with his natural and artificial environments. . . . Even when science fiction appears to deal with the interior of a single psyche, its actual focus shifts from the mind *per se* to the mind as it responds to or is modified by some technical or scientific innovation (Keeling 116).

For SF, psychoanalysis is inextricably linked with the gothic, tainted by the irrational past, and can have no place within a literature of the rational and of the future. The necromantic aspects of

psychoanalysis, the knowledge that one can never escape one's past, is inimical to the progressive ideals of science fiction; while at the same time, the modification of the mind by technology, or the knowledge that the psychoanalytic model of the mind is a product of history and not a transcendent fact of nature, is one piece of knowledge that psychoanalysis must itself repress. SF and psychoanalysis seem to be mutual uncanny doubles which are forced to confront one another in the cultural legacy of *Frankenstein*, and perhaps the secret to the bug lies here, in this mutual blind spot.

Instead of reading the monster as the all-too-factual result of Frankenstein's overreaching, psychoanalytic readings of *Frankenstein* tend to explore the monster as an aspect or projection of Frankenstein's self. Margaret Homans, for example, argues that "the demon substitutes for the fruitful interchange of family life the fruitlessness of self love, for what Frankenstein loves is an image of himself" (105); while Peter Brooks claims, "in destroying the daemonic side of himself, [Frankenstein] will destroy the whole self" ("Godlike" 214). From this perspective, the novel is read as though the monster does not actually exist, and is some sort of hallucination of Victor's. After all, as Victor notes, he was seriously ill at the time in question:

I remembered also the nervous fever with which I had been seized just at the time that I dated my creation, and which would give an air of delirium to a tale otherwise so utterly improbable. I well knew that if any other had communicated such a relation to me, I should have looked upon it as the ravings of insanity (49).

Victor also tends to faint or become otherwise incapable of self-government every time the monster appears. Furthermore, after the murder of his brother, Victor's imputation of guilt onto the monster is highly suspect: "*He* was the murderer! I could not doubt it. The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact" (48). Victor himself reads the creature as "my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me" (49). In such a

reading, the monster is a doppelganger or alter-ego that Victor has created to take the blame for his own unacceptable desires, and it is Victor himself who desires the deaths of his brother, friend, and bride.

Yet the psychoanalytic focus on Victor's mind ignores the body of the monster. In some ways the novel sets up the dichotomy between Victor and his creature as one of mind versus body: "There is no physical description of Frankenstein, and again one might say that he has no physical body, he is all spirit and restless, inquiring mind" (Small 207). The monster, on the other hand, is all body. His insistent corporeality is a feature of both his greatness and his monstrosity, and the text dwells on "its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect" (48), "His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath" (34). How could it be otherwise with a creature made from the parts of dismembered dead bodies? Mary Favret sees the plot of *Frankenstein* as a "'conceptual' tug-of-war. . . the struggle of moving *ideas* into and out of the *body*" (51), which features a "movement from concept to conception" (53), the most striking example of this movement being Victor's creation of the monster out of the ideas of chemistry. This is in essence a magical transformation, a violation of the division between matter and spirit, but it is also the dream of science as we have seen. While at once the embodiment of ideas, the creature is also the result of a horrific process of hybridization and suturing, disturbing evidence that even the "natural" body may be in essence nothing more than a machine roughly hacked together out of spare parts.

Reading the monster as an abstract product of Victor's self-construction, as psychoanalytic criticism tends to do, ignores this emphasis of the text on the monster's grotesque corporeality, and in fact repeats Victor's own error of attempting to will the monster into non-existence. It is Victor who wishes that he were insane, or that all of this could somehow be explained away. The monster

does in fact prove to be guilty of his brother's murder. Furthermore the ultimate demonstration of the creature's corporeal existence is his appearance in Walton's cabin after Victor's death – it is possible that Walton's entire function in the text is to establish that the monster is *not* a figment of Victor's imagination. To read the monster as such a figment, while it usefully focuses interpretation on Victor, deprives the creature of his bodily reality, and of his independence and agency. Victor's error in overlooking the monster's murderous agency costs the lives of everyone he loves, and it is not an error we should repeat.

Yet the psychoanalytic approach's shift of focus away from the creature to Victor has helped to highlight *Frankenstein's* exploration of the construction of the self. This has led in turn to a renewed appreciation of the text's focus on self-construction through autobiography. In telling the story of his life to Walton, Frankenstein is re-membering that life, giving shape to it, and suturing the fragments of its meaning together into a whole self, just as he sutures together the monster. According to Gilbert and Gubar, "Reading and assembling documentary evidence, examining it, analyzing it and researching it comprised for Shelley a crucial if voyeuristic method of exploring origins, explaining identity, understanding sexuality" (225). Victor and Walton both begin the accounts of their lives with an account of their reading as Peter McNerney explains: "Like Walton's, Victor's initial aetiology of motives consists of an annotated bibliography, a report of reading: he searches his reading to compose a picture of himself" (464). Victor ascribes the genesis of his downfall to an error in reading. First he chose to read the wrong texts, Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus; and secondly his father while dismissing the "sad trash" (21), failed to inform him that these theories had been "entirely exploded" (21), that is that they should not be taken as literal, factual truth. This error of Victor's is not effectively corrected until the

arrival of M. Waldman, and the replacement of the texts of alchemy with those of science. But like the gothic within science fiction, Victor's alchemical mis-education remains bubbling underneath his scientific studies, directing his scientific method toward the alchemical end of "the animation of inanimate nature" (Buchen 104).

While the monster literally reads the tale of his own origins in the account of his manufacture contained in Victor's laboratory notes, he also learns to represent himself through the experiences of the characters in *Paradise Lost*, *Plutarch's Lives*, *The Sorrows of Werter*: "I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own" (87). He admonishes Victor through such references: "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel" (66). For all of these characters, identity is formed through the collation of texts, sewn together through the act of self-narration. According to Eleanor Salotto, in the moment of the creature's animation, Frankenstein "looks into the mirror of his subjectivity and sees a discontinuous image, which he does not want to claim as his" (191). The text of *Frankenstein*, then, constitutes an exploration of the relationship between reading, writing, and the construction of the self. Victor frequently refers to himself as the creature's "author" (60) and the creature is as much Frankenstein's text as his son. Rather than existing as a transcendent whole, the self is sutured together out of texts, through the processes of autobiography.

But the creature in *Frankenstein* surfaces as the return of the repressed: the dismembered or fragmented self that cannot be incorporated into a fictional unity. . . . Instead of coalescing the fragmented self, the mirror here accentuates the creature's alienation from himself; the text thus lifts the veil from the fictionality of representation that traditionally seeks to suture identity. (Salotto 192)

The suturing processes of autobiography are therefore always partial, the self hybrid, and the seams that attest to this suturing will always to some degree be evident.

Dismembering and suturing are thus crucial aspects of the aesthetic of *Frankenstein* – Frankenstein is baffled when, though the parts with which he made the creature are “beautiful” (34) and “in proportion” (34), the animated whole turns out to be hideous. Taken separately, the parts that make up the creature are not threatening to Frankenstein, despite their gruesome origins, but the whole taken together is catastrophic. To the modern, scientific mind, death holds no terrors, being simply the final separation of mind from body, but self-making, now that is the stuff of nightmares – it might be possible to break a human being down into component parts, flesh and spirit, object and subject, but to put one together still requires the supernatural catalyst of soul. Ultimately, Victor cannot love his creature because he cannot believe that a technologically constructed self could be human – one is either born and a person or made and a machine, not both. Just as Laura in her jail cell in *Islands* found it easier to deal with her separation from her baby by dismembering her into separate fictions of her composite parts, since no piece of her would represent the human that Laura loves, the creature becomes terrible when it is formed into a subject-object through the suturing together of disparate body parts. According to the modern constitution, the body can’t “mean” the body just is. But once animated, this body attempts to mean something, to read and think about reading, to narrate its own story, to form itself into a self.

Victor Frankenstein’s fundamental error, then, does not lie in his seeking out the secret of life or in making the creature, but in his failure to act afterwards, to take responsibility for the consequences of his actions, to parent his progeny. This error stems from Victor’s mistaking the creation of the monster as “the end of my labours” (*F* 42); or as Susan Winnett has it, “his indulgence in the retrospective mode of ‘male’ sense making keeps him from acknowledging his ongoing responsibility to the birth he clones as well as from seeing that henceforth his plot

inevitable involves the consequences of an act of creation that he regards as a triumph in and of itself” (510). In his horror, after the animation of the creature, Victor retreats into his bedchamber to sleep, essentially childishly hoping that the creature would just go away, cease to be. But what is monstrous about the monster is that, like the gothic past, it continues to exist, and when Victor wakes from a nightmare, “by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. . .” (35). Once again, Victor flees, this time outside where he eventually runs into his friend Clerval. He dreads, “that the creature whom I had left in my apartment might still be there, alive, and walking about” (37). From the moment of animation to the meeting on Montanvert, Victor represses his knowledge of the monster in the hopes that this will get rid of the actual, bodily monster. And he succeeds for several years. But the modern world is not a world of magic, where words can make something appear or disappear, as much as we and Victor might like it to be, and inevitably, the repressed real, that physical material *res extensa* which is not accounted for in the discursive systems of *cogito*, must resurface. This is what is essentially frightening about the uncanny double: its impossible corporeality. The double should not exist, according to what we know about reality. Yet it does anyway.

Mladen Dolar links the creature’s status as Frankenstein’s double to a Lacanian understanding of the uncanny. According to Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, when we recognize ourselves in the mirror, simultaneously becoming subjects and separating ourselves from objective reality, we lose something in the equation – what Lacan called the “object *a*”:

It is the loss of the object *a* that opens “objective” reality, the possibility of

subject-object relations, but since its loss is the condition of any knowledge of “objective” reality it cannot itself become an object of knowledge. . . . Lacan uses the gaze as the best presentation of that missing object; in the mirror, one can see one’s eyes, but not the gaze which is the part that is lost. But imagine that one could see one’s mirror image close its eyes: that would make the object as gaze appear in the mirror. This is what happens with the double, and the anxiety that the double produces is the surest sign of the appearance of the object. (Dolar 13)

Every time Victor is confronted by the monster, the text consistently connects Victor’s horror to the monster’s gaze: “I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs” (34); “his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me” (35); “I saw, by the light of the moon, the dæmon at the casement. A ghastly grin wrinkled his lips as he gazed on me” (115). It is the monster’s gaze which makes him an impossible subject-object, and unknowable object *a*. The monster can then be understood as an “eruption of the real in the midst of familiar reality; it provokes a hesitation and an uncertainty and the familiar breaks down” (Dolar 21). The creature is what is not accounted for in the summation of its parts, the uncanny product of a system of knowledge which cannot wholly represent itself.

Even more than his gaze, the text represents the monster’s uncanny properties through his movement. The creature moves with “superhuman speed” (65), is able to scale perpendicular cliffs (48), and to “descend the mountain with greater speed than the flight of an eagle” (100). Victor himself identifies the creature’s ability to move as the thing that made it monstrous: “but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (35). In the passage quoted above it is the idea that the monster may be “walking about” (37) that makes Victor shudder. Furthermore, despite his lack of access to the technological means of transport that Victor employs (primarily boats and “diligences” or stagecoaches), the creature reappears wherever Victor goes, be it Inglestadt, Montanvert, Geneva,

the Orkneys, Ireland, or Evian. This seeming omnipresence is part of what makes the creature appear to be merely some sort of hallucination of Victor's – though corporeally real, the double is bound to Victor and apes his movements like an uncannily independent mirror image.

For much of the plot, the monster follows Victor like a rather independent shadow that *nearly* matches Victor's movements, just as Sticky Thompson seems to follow Laura in *Islands in the Net*. Yet sometimes the monster gets ahead of Victor in the story, arriving in Ireland and murdering Clerval before Victor accidentally drifts ashore there. The two doubles are only truly in the same place at the same time at three points in the novel – the monster's animation; the meeting on Montanvert after the murder of William and consequent execution of Justine; and in Walton's cabin after Victor's death. Montanvert is the only moment when the two doubles communicate face to face, since in the earlier meeting the creature did not have access to language, and in the later one Victor is dead. They come close to each other at two other junctures – the destruction of the second creature and the murder of Elizabeth – but they cannot speak to each other. Montanvert is thus a special point of temporary stasis in the plot which allows the creature to narrate his tale to Victor and make his demand that Victor create a mate for him. The creature's act of self-narration is in this way highlighted as the central confrontation of the text.

For Mary Shelley's novel does not trace the same story as most films based upon it, of the Promethean overreacher and the abomination he creates, or rather that story is only one part of the novel. *Frankenstein* is not just the story of Victor Frankenstein's creation of an artificial man: it is also the story of the creature's experience of rejection, isolation, and education; and it is also the story of Walton's attempt to make sense of and represent both those stories. The sense of ambiguity and ambivalence that governs *Frankenstein* is created through the narrative structure of a concentric

series of overlapping first-person narratives. The novel advertises itself as the collated package of Walton's letters to his sister, Margaret Saville. These letters contain the account of Walton's meeting with Victor Frankenstein and Victor's tale. Victor's tale in turn contains the Creature's tale, which contains the tale of the De Lacey family and Safie. Through these overlapping first-person perspectives, Mary Shelley carefully ensures that no one position can be made to stand unequivocally in the reader's judgement. In one sense, Walton, Victor, the creature, even Justine and Elizabeth all speak their own case for themselves, and yet all of these first-person narratives are passed back through the mediation of Walton's letters, and Frankenstein's critical revision of those letters lest "a mutilated one should go down to posterity" (146).

Had Shelley intended the novel to be read as a wholesale indictment of Victor's project, why would she have made the creature such a sympathetic and reasonable figure? This is the problem with the SF reading of *Frankenstein*: it tends to read the creature as that-which-is-created, an object, which is another version of Victor's mistake. When read as either the object of Frankenstein's creation, or the representation of his repressed desires, the creature's own subjectivity is lost. In Shelley's novel, far from being a mute body, the object of *Frankenstein's* gaze, the monster is the most eloquent narrator of all. The creature claims that he was not "born" a monster, but that humanity's rejection of him has made him monstrous. Even given his experience with the De Laceys, even with the knowledge that humanity will never accept him, the creature claims he might still be reconciled to peaceful existence if Victor would accept him and "do your duty towards me" (65). In this central act of narration, the creature attempts to persuade or "seduce" his creator, as Beth Newman shows, into sympathy with his plight and the consequent "duty" to provide him with a future and a place in the network of society. As a thinking, feeling, essentially human being

despite his technological origins, the creature claims a right to gain “the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events from which I am now excluded” (100). Given bodily existence through his manufacture, and subjective existence through his education – the creature’s version of *cogito* is “I read therefore I am” – the creature now desires the recognition of others and a place within the social network of history, essentially he desires textual existence.

Though he succeeds in temporarily winning a recognition of their relationship and of Frankenstein’s duty, ultimately the creature fails to persuade Victor to love him. Victor’s refusal to accept the monster’s story and acknowledge his subjectivity is bound up in his failure to provide his creature with a name. Without a name, the monster’s selfhood will always be provisional and hypothetical. Unlike Frankenstein and Walton who collaborate in the production of their own text, the monster cannot represent and construct his identity through autobiography because he lacks the legal, textual, status of personhood that a name would accord him. The creature’s tale will always be an “as told to” report of hearsay. But the very existence of the creature’s tale within the text shows that we cannot simply conclude, as Victor does, that the creature should not have been made in the first place. The text is neither a condemnation of science and technology, nor a simple ghost story with scientific trappings, but a complex meditation on the consequences of technological and ontological change.

The monster fails to convince Victor to love him, but he has been more successful with recent readers and with his textual author who admits to an “affection” for her “hideous progeny” (Shelley 23). The advent of discourse analysis, post-structuralism, and feminist criticism has made us “excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body” (Haraway 157),

and thus much more disposed to the creature's side of the story than the text perhaps warrants, but this embracing of our cyborgs is a necessary and beautiful misreading, and part of the solution to overcoming the Frankenstein barrier. That is, in order to avoid repeating Victor's mistake, we must try to understand why he cannot love his creature – we have isolated that error as the bug in *Frankenstein*. Yet Lipking is quite right to point out that this penchant for loving the monster “does not have much to do with the novel that Mary Shelley wrote” (319), and to reposition the novel's perspective as fundamentally ambivalent. Rather than siding with or condemning either the monster or Victor, Shelley's novel creates a strong sympathetic bond of identification with both of them, in the process generating a kind of cognitive discontinuity:

to sympathize with Frankenstein is to disbelieve, as he does, the sincerity of the monster's promise to exile himself with a newly-made bride far from human society, while to have sympathy for the monster is to brand Frankenstein heartless and cruel for his skeptical treatment of him – yet this is exactly what the novel asks us to do: sympathize with both characters. (Schug 613)

Contrary to Keeling's assessment, this gothic text is marked by the disturbing absence of a “clear Manichaeian moral perspective” (116). This paradox of sympathy is the essence of the Frankenstein barrier, the bug in *Frankenstein*, and it manifests within the text as a breakdown of plot.

After they symmetrically destroy each other's brides, Victor and the monster become locked in a mad chase toward their mutual destruction that has been described as “both futile and compulsory” (Schug 615), and “a grim, machine-like acting out of revenge, retaliation, and pursuit” (Buchen 105). The mechanical quality of this section of the plot is somehow uncanny in and of itself, like the “skipping record” portion of *Islands in the Net* that throws Laura from one captivity to another, until she wrests herself out of the death plot through the destruction of a machine, and the intervention of her gothic double. Victor pursues the creature who once pursued him, while the

creature, rather than attempting to escape, leaves clues, sustenance, and taunts for his hunter: “Come on, my enemy; we have yet to wrestle for our lives” (142). Neither creature nor creator appears to truly desire the meeting they both strive ceaselessly towards, as Victor explains: “I pursued my path towards the destruction of the dæmon more as a task enjoined by heaven, as the mechanical impulse of some power of which I was unconscious, than as the ardent desire of my soul” (142). It seems that in this section, the “machinery of story” (Shelley 21), is laid bare and what is revealed is not, as Peter Brooks supposed “desire *for* the end” (*Reading for the Plot* 52, original emphasis), but a futile and compulsory mechanism pushing the protagonists toward death, oblivious to their own desires. There is no meaning to be garnered from Frankenstein’s struggle against his creature or his creature’s struggle against him – it is simply a consequence of their relationship – the story becomes emblematic, static; while at the same time exhibiting a relentless mechanical movement in place. Rather than being driven by a desire either of character or reader for meaning, both *Islands* and *Frankenstein* seem to become trapped in a repetition of undesired inevitability – they get stuck in neutral – and ultimately simply dissolve.

This bug seems to be a result of the gothic - SF tension: that once the gothic irrupts within the process of if → then causality, we lose the ability to close a story in any meaningful way, but simply reach a place where the text’s desire for meaning and interest runs perpendicularly to the onward-marching impetus of realism, and we wind up going in circles. There is no right way for this story to turn out. The monster cannot be allowed to “win,” because he is monstrous and a murderer, but he cannot be disposed of either, he is just too sympathetic and interesting a character and as a parentless child his culpability is at best partial. Just as the expected nuclear attack at the end of *Islands* both fails and occurs anti-climactically off-stage, *Frankenstein* ends with an anti-climactic

lack of closure. There cannot be a definitive or cathartic closure because that would necessitate a condemnation of either the creature or creator – that delicate ambivalence which Shelley worked to create would be destroyed. So, the expected “grappling” between the foes never occurs. Frankenstein dies in Walton’s cabin without completing his quest, and without achieving any understanding of the meaning of his life, while the monster does not even die at all. He claims he will destroy himself, but this death is not represented in the text and the creature is simply “lost in darkness and distance” (156). So the creature may be out there still.

I wonder if we can imagine another ending to *Frankenstein*, one in which Victor accedes to his creature’s wishes, adopts him as his son, and finds or creates him a bride. Something like James Whale’s *Bride of Frankenstein* but where Victor and the bride are willing and loving – a happy ending for the creature. Within *Frankenstein* this outcome is undesirable because the creature is, irrespective of our sympathy, a murderous monster. As such, his “new species” might seek to replace or destroy the old according to the laws of mechanical cause and effect. An anti-human revolution might occur, and human beauty might be replaced by grotesque machinery. If the nightmare future where object triumphs over subject must be avoided at all costs, then the technologically constructed subject cannot be wholly admitted into a text which draws a clear line between matter and spirit, between the subject and object. But what if the creature were instead to turn to his creator and point to the seams where Victor was sewn together? What if the new species were simply the old with a slightly altered understanding of its own technologically and textually constructed nature? Such a fiction just might make it past the Frankenstein barrier.

Chapter 3
The Diamond Age: permeating boundaries and teaching craft

I want to begin my analysis of Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* with the passage that made me laugh out loud the first time I read it, and still resonates with me as a kind of emblematic "byte" for one of the novel's facets. Confucian Judge Fang and his cohorts, faced with the complication to Harv's trial offered by Nell's bond with the stolen book, retire to consider the question over lunch at Kentucky Fried Chicken as is their habit:

The House of the Venerable and Inscrutable Colonel was what they called it when they were speaking Chinese. Venerable because of his goatee, white as the dogwood blossom, a badge of unimpeachable credibility in Confucian eyes. Inscrutable because he had gone to his grave without divulging the Secret of the Eleven Herbs and Spices. It had been the first fast-food franchise established on the Bund, many decades earlier. Judge Fang had what amounted to a private table in the corner. . .

Word of their arrival preceded them; their bucket already rested upon the table. The small plastic cups of gravy, coleslaw, potatoes, and so on had been carefully arranged. (*DA* 102-3)

What is striking here, not to mention funny, is the sensation of experiencing something completely familiar to Stephenson's North American readership – a fast-food lunch – through foreign eyes. Several inversions are operating: eating fast-food is treated as a valued cultural experience, as North Americans might value dinner at a French, Italian, or dare I say it, Chinese restaurant, instead of as a social ill or sign of cultural devolution. An advertising slogan is treated with the respect reserved for myth. The Colonel, whose image is associated at the least with the hollowness of consumer culture, and at the worst with white supremacism (through an urban legend that Sanders left his fortune to the Ku Klux Klan), is here valued and revered as a role model by a very sensible Chinese judge. The Colonel's beard is particularly admired; the goatee which is regarded in American iconography as somewhat sinister, precisely because it is coded as foreign – specifically, Chinese.

Is the humour that is operating here simply a racist humour – one that laughs at a silly, strange, stereo-typically Chinese error in value judgements? Partially, perhaps – certainly the novel's uneven ethnic dynamics have provoked criticism from those who “remain disturbed by the culturalist assumptions about China that, ironically, go unchallenged in Stephenson's narrative” (Longin and Oakes 53), while a 1997 review cites the presentation of China as “unintentional racism” (Berends 18). It is easy to see how the charge of racism or culturalism can be levied at *The Diamond Age*: the *foreignness* of China is emphasized everywhere. Yet it seems to me that the issue is not so much the difference between eastern and western cultures *per se*, as the idea of celebrating cultural porosity and heterogeneity. Far from “unintentional racism,” I would argue that *The Diamond Age* is a study in the radical possibilities unleashed through the encounter with the foreign. This study takes as its centre the knowledge that one can never see beyond one's own cultural predilections, but that both the self and collectivities are permeable to contaminating influences from the outside, and that such contamination is ultimately beneficial. This contamination can take many forms: cultural, technological, biological. In Donna Haraway's terms it is an attempt to imagine a cyborg future, a myth “about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (154). According to Haraway, “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (154). In *The Diamond Age*, the encounter with the foreign is an erotic exchange of information which carries with it unexpected consequences for the body and the self.⁶

⁶See Barbara Browning's study of *Snow Crash* for a neat discussion of Stephenson's connection of computer networks to AIDS. Some of the same ideas are circulating here.

One of the most important features of *The Diamond Age*'s geo-cultural divisions or "phyles" is that membership is generally chosen, rather than dictated. Some phyles are divided along racial lines, such as the Ashanti, the Boers, and the Han Celestial Kingdom, but for most phyles, race is only one of the factors influencing an individual's choice of phyle. Hindustan, Sondero, FDR, CryptNet, and New Atlantis are all multi-racial clones, whose membership is essentially based in shared ideological stance, and the novel implies that an unlimited number of other phyles are competing for members, resources, and geographic space within the crowded network of early 22nd Century⁷ Earth. Lord Alexander Chung-Sik Finkle-McGraw himself, one of the most powerful and founding neo-Victorian Atlantans was born "genetically Asian" (18) in Korea but was adopted and grew up in Iowa raised by an indeterminately heterogeneous couple. In this Anglo-Irish-Chinese-Korean-Russian-Jewish-American family, racial and cultural boundaries become so completely blurred and meaningless as to make Finkle-McGraw into the embodiment of the phrase "citizen of the world."

While most Diamond Age people remain a part of the phyle they are born to, the most intelligent, adventurous, or as Hackworth puts it "interesting" (23) people seek a different one. Judge Fang, for example, grew up in New York a phyle-less "thete" but chose the Confucian way after youthful indiscretions were revealed as a dead end. He begins the novel as a judge in the Coastal Republic

⁷There is a question about the novel's time-setting. Most people assume it to be the 21st Century, since characters discuss the 20th Century. But the text itself gives an explicit date of "the -- day of --, 21 --" (176), setting it in the 22nd Century. Yet Carl Hollywood's grandfather was an adult in the 1990s. There is also a suggestion that the aged Miss Matheson is none other than *Snow Crash*'s Y.T. (320), and *Snow Crash* is set in the early 21st Century. Either the novel is inconsistent in its situation in time, or these characters are particularly long-lived. The latter is not all that improbable – given the nanotechnology and advanced biotechnology proposed for the Diamond Age, life spans of more than a hundred years would not be inconsistent.

– a buffer zone between the East and West – but ultimately chooses to join Dr. X in the Celestial Kingdom. Like Fang, Hackworth has chosen to take an oath of allegiance to the restrictive and highly structured New Atlantis phyle after a misspent dissipated American youth – and he too is no longer quite part of his adopted phyle by the end of the novel, having been “polluted” by his involvement with the Middle Kingdom and the Drummers. But as we shall see, it is the cultivation of this contaminating influence that drives Finkle-McGraw to commission the creation of the Primer, and launch the events of the plot. He observes that children who are raised within the neo-Victorian society do not achieve the heights of success that are accessible to those who have joined the phyle by choice. He determines that individuals achieve their greatest potential only when they lead “interesting” lives, and this interest is connected with both the beneficial contamination from contact with the foreign and with “subversiveness” (81), an idea we shall return to later. The novel celebrates Finkle-McGraw’s heterogeneous heritage and Hackworth’s wandering as the source of their interest and success.

To return to the House of the Venerable and Inscrutable Colonel, it seems to me that this passage is genuinely enjoying the experience of Kentucky Fried Chicken, and showing that the Colonel is as worthy of esteem as any other cultural icon – the KKK affiliation is as ephemeral and insubstantial as the Fu Manchu aspect of his beard. What winds up looking strange is not that the Chinese value the experience, but that the West does not. It is strange that in North America we vociferously repudiate what, to judge by our practices, we actually hold most dear, and this passage refreshingly and playfully reveals this attitude to be not cosmopolitanism but an affected self-hatred – we are the foreigners here. The estrangement technique, old as science fiction itself, asks us to see through the eyes of the other in order to see our selves from the outside. Here estrangement is

combined with the celebration of the aesthetic experience of “low” culture to take the next step to examine the foreign or other within ourselves.

Julia Kristeva connects the experience of the foreign to Freud’s articulation of the uncanny, despite the fact that Freud himself does not discuss the foreign: “Delicately, analytically, Freud does not speak of foreigners: he teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves” (191). According to Kristeva:

such a return of the repressed in the guise of anxiety, and more specifically of uncanny strangeness, appears as a paroxystic metaphor of the psychic functioning itself. The latter is indeed elaborated by repression and one’s necessarily going through it, with the result that the builder of the *other* and, in the final analysis, of the *strange* is indeed repression itself and its perviousness. (184)

Thus the encounter with the foreign teaches us to recognize that it is the construction of the self which creates the foreign in the first place, and this recognition of our own foreignness causes the entire category of “foreign” to dissolve: “By recognizing *our* uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners” (Kristeva 192). This is precisely the pleasantly uncomfortable cognitive jolt produced by the House of the Venerable and Inscrutable Colonel. The novel plays with this movement of the foreign into the self, the transgression of boundaries which collapses categorical differences, on several levels, but it is particularly interested in the permeability of geographical and historical boundaries, and of the boundary between the natural and the artificial.

The novel collapses the space between mutually foreign cultures through the technological plot device of nanotechnologically grown “smart coral” islands. Most of *The Diamond Age* takes place on one of several smart coral islands in the bay of Pudong/Shanghai, joined to the mainland through

an umbilical causeway which both allows human traffic and communication with the mainland, and carries the Atlantan “Feed” into China. The boundary between the natural and the artificial is thrown into question, since the islands are designed by engineers and “built” from the molecular level creating essentially organic coral that has been induced through nanotechnology to grow in a particular desired fashion. Is this manufacturing or horticulture?

The ability to grow these islands enables the Atlantans and other phyles to live essentially anywhere they like and manufacture the real estate to their liking. Consequently, the geographical distance that once separated the ancestors of these cultures is erased. On one level this means that, once all people in the world can interact with one another, the idea of the geographically defined “nation” becomes less and less meaningful, forcing groups to find other ways of defining their boundaries. Other avenues for group identification and affiliation begin to compete with the nationstate, such as the multinational corporation, the organized crime syndicate, or clandestine spy network. At the same time, each of these phyles develops an “island” mentality turning inwards to define their identity through the exclusion of what is outside: “Outside the comfortable and well-defended borders of our phyle is a hard world that will come and hurt us if we are not careful” (323). Both *The Diamond Age* and *Islands in the Net* suggest that the creation of islands or at least of island mentality is a direct consequence of the expansion of technological networks. They suggest that increased contact with the foreign and the dissolution of spatial boundaries through technologically mediated communication causes cultures to turn inward to seek to shore up their increasingly permeable boundaries, producing not a mass of undifferentiated homogeneity but an aggregate of increasingly distinct and specialized microgroups. Perhaps *Islands’* fear of the Net’s homogenizing influence, making every island “Green and pleasant and controlled, and just like

everywhere else” (366) is unfounded, or rather that fear is a symptom, instead of the result, of the networking process.

The name “New Atlantis” points to the island mentality of the culture in which *The Diamond Age* is most interested, and it also surrounds this civilization with an air of impermanence, given the demise of the Atlantis of legend. Although these Atlantans raise islands from below the waves instead of themselves sinking beneath them, the name suggests that this is a kind of resurrection, a deliberate and purposeful raising of the past, of ghosts, of the repressed in defiance of death. It speaks in a metaphorical way of the acknowledged tenuousness of the link between the “neo” and the “Victorian” in this fiction – this particular fiction does not conform very well to SF’s aesthetic criterion of plausibility, nor does it pretend to. The choice of Victorian England as a model for emulation, though defended in the text as a consequence related to the novum of nanotechnology, is clearly and self-consciously more of a literary game than anything else. The novum provides Stephenson with the framework in which to play with the interaction of the past and future – to show the future as a time both like and unlike the past which is both like and unlike the present – and to represent the multiloquy of history.

The foreign is encountered by travelling in time as well as in space, and the irruption of the past into the future in *The Diamond Age* is treated in the same way as crossing a geographic cultural boundary instead of as a gothic horror. Different times are thus mapped onto the geography of the novel as if they were places – some of these are presented as “natural” and continuous, such as the persistence of peasantry in mainland China, some are “artificial,” such as the Atlantans. The future and the past are nothing to be feared, they are simply countries one has not yet visited but heard some things about, full of people who are both like and unlike oneself. To visit either of them is

a boundary crossing and an encounter with the foreign, but no more and no less so than to cross a geographic boundary.

Hackworth's encounter with the foreign is occasioned by the criminal act of creating for his own daughter, Fiona, a copy of the Young Lady's Illustrated Primer, a sophisticated computerized story-book he designs for Lord Finkle-McGraw's granddaughter, Elizabeth. Therefore from the first, it is occasioned by the initial transgression of his tribe's morals – theft of intellectual property – but pursuant to a desire which is inculcated by those same morals – fathering. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the very authority from whom Hackworth is stealing has commissioned him to create this book in order to inspire subversion; and has selected him as the artifex, or engineer-designer, specifically because he is “capable of being deviant” (23); and they are inspiring this subversion in order to enable the production of properly moral individuals. Morality must be transgressed in order to make morality? A strange conclusion to be sure, but according to Finkle-McGraw the straight and narrow education within the morality of his phyle is producing unimaginative and cowardly people and leading to the stagnation of the culture.

The missing ingredient that will give Hackworth's daughter “the pluck to take risks with her life,” and make Finkle-McGraw's granddaughter into an effective leader is deemed to be “subversiveness” (82). Children so taught may grow up to leave the phyle or act ways that seem contrary to the phyle's espoused credo, but this will mean “that they have outgrown youthful credulity and no longer wish to belong to a tribe simply because it is the path of least resistance – they have developed principles, they are concerned with their personal integrity. It means, in short, that they are ripe to become members in good standing of New Atlantis” (365). Like *Islands* there is a sense of reversion to the centre evident in *The Diamond Age*'s effort to yoke punk individualism

to a wider sense of social responsibility, but Stephenson's novel takes this a step further to consider that the formation of the free individual thinking subject is the fundament of western culture, a value that is more clearly articulated through punk's irreverence than through the lack of personal responsibility that is enabled by conformity. In this way "naughtiness" becomes divorced from the simple Manichaeian morality of left versus right and tied to the idea of the trickster: "As technology became more important, the Trickster underwent a shift in character and became the god of crafts – of technology, if you will – while retaining the underlying roguish qualities" (107). The ambiguity is expressed in the word "craft" which means both technical skill and deviousness. This connection is also suggested in *Islands in the Net* where Laura is always described as having "coyote eyes" (7). Technological innovation requires the same combination of acuity, creativity, and daring that is involved in tricking. It follows that a society which depends on having skilled technologists must raise their children to be "crafty."

Now, how do we go about inspiring deviousness, subversion, and craftiness? Finkle-McGraw suggests that Hackworth consider a gothic poem: Coleridge's "The Raven." This nihilistic and ghastly tale is just the sort of thing that might excite tut-tutting from grey-haired moralists, and incite giggles from children. It is easy to picture how a teller's eyes might widen and voice lower as he or she pronounces the final line "REVENGE IT WAS SWEET!" It is, in short, deliciously evil. But why should evil be delicious? Does this principle apply to all literature, or just to gothic romanticism? Why do we threaten our children with being eaten by bears and wolves? And why do they laugh when we do it? Bruno Bettelheim has shown that these kinds of tales play a specific role in the psychological development of children. Bettelheim connects fairy tales with the child's sexual development, but *The Diamond Age* suggests that they might also function to inspire a

healthy subversiveness, and that reading gothic tales has a role in developing craft in the individual.

In order to make his monster, woops, I mean raise his daughter, Hackworth must visit the mysterious Dr. X who has access to an unlicensed Feed. To do this, he must cross the causeway into China and expose himself to the foreign. The method Hackworth uses for smuggling the Primer's plans out of Atlantis is within nanomites – microscopic critters, in this case shaped like a cocklebur, which stick to his skin, each of which contains the code blueprint for reproducing the Primer. Again, when technology plays out at a molecular scale, the division between artificial and natural becomes blurred, for a millimetre square patch of Hackworth's skin contains dozens of both artificial and natural mites. Moreover, most of the artificial mites come from the Atlantan "immune system" or distributed security network and have been given the capability of essentially evolving on their own through natural selection – Dr. X's main activity is collecting, documenting, and exploiting the "natural" evolution of "artificial" nanomites "like some batty Victorian lepidopterist" (76). The text features nanomites which have evolved along the same paths as nature, such as those with bat-like ears that navigate by echolocation (113); nanomites that are deliberately designed to mimic nature like the cocklebur; and nanomites whose evolved functions simply defy human understanding, like oddities of nature.

These artificial/natural mites take on a kind of uncanny creepiness, particularly through their association with insects, which have always seemed a little too mechanical for comfort. Thus technology, when reduced to the molecular scale, takes on gothic qualities, while abilities which have been superstitiously regarded can be naturalized through an understanding of technology: "The hyena will always see us, even in the dark, because it can see the infrared light that comes out of our bodies" (224). Just as the encounter with the foreign collapses the category of "foreign,"

nanotechnology collapses the distinction between natural and artificial. The natural and the artificial are thus best understood not as discrete categories, but as a continuum permitting all kinds of strange and wonderful combinations – cyborgs of every description.

The concept of the “ractive” is an example of Stephenson’s skill at imagining the complex ways that media technologies flexibly integrate themselves into human culture. Instead of passively watching plays or movies, Diamond Age people desiring entertainment immerse themselves in interactive texts, or ractives – which, like today’s video games, allow the participant to take up a role in the story and sometimes in more sophisticated ractives, dictate the course of the plot. These ractives can take many different forms and fulfil many different functions, since the participant can interact with any number of computerized characters, other participants, or professional ractors. The ractive can be anywhere from a completely unscripted chat session to an essentially monologic plot, like Harv’s Burly Scudd series; and the level of immersion within the ractive varies too, from fully ractive virtual reality pornography to the nearly “dead” narrated prose of a book or newspaper. To become a professional ractor, Miranda has a network of nanosites implanted into her body which capture her motions and speech and map them onto the ractive character. While the ractive client usually interacts on a purely mental level, wearing goggles and sensory input simulators for example, Miranda is more properly a Haraway cyborg, taking technology into her body, “a new bodily system overlaid and interlaced with the nervous, lymph, and vascular systems” (88), and then broadcasting both her body and mind into the digital network. All different kinds of media in *The Diamond Age* become interrelated rather than discretely delineated, and everything from fully immersive virtual reality theatre, to a poster on the wall, to *The Times*, to the pattern on Fiona’s dress is connected to the same network of shared information.

However the conditions of nanotechnology mean that, contrary to the rules of modern realism, the information network does not stop at the border between ideas and things, between representation and reality. In *The Diamond Age*, nanotechnology has enabled humans to manipulate individual atoms – drawing the constituent bits of matter out of the air and sea, separating them into usable components, and then recompiling them into whatever thing is needed. Hackworth is an “artifex,” that is, he is both a skilled engineer and a designer or artist – he can write orderly instructions that tell a “Matter Compiler” how to build a desired physical object, be it a mattress or the Young Lady’s Illustrated Primer, out of component atoms. Once the program is written by Hackworth, anyone can instruct the M.C. to carry out the operation without needing to understand the process itself. The media network of entertainment, ideas, and information can thus be projected into matter itself through the mediation of the hacker (or trickster engineer/artist) to the Feed and Matter Compilers – abstract craftiness becomes the craft that is the manipulation of matter. The separation between the world of ideas and the world of things, or between the mind and the body that is such a problem in *Frankenstein*, is thus undone under conditions of nanotechnology, and without the need to resort to a supernatural intervention as was necessary in *Islands in the Net*. We can no longer consider these things as separate or ignore the realities of the interconnecting networks, nor do we need to represent those connections in terms of the supernatural – the natural incarnations of the artificial are weird enough.

The Diamond Age’s collapse of the distinction between things and ideas, and the natural and the artificial extends into the human body where it further collapses the distinction between the body and the mind. Consequent to this visit, Hackworth is arrested, tried, and convicted by the converted Judge Fang, and his bloodstream is impregnated with haemocules, microscopic devices that are

capable of interacting with the systems of his body, be it his immune system or his brain. Some attach to neurons and become permanent “nanosites,” or neural-media interfaces, while others circulate in his blood stream exchanging information with whatever other haemocules they happen to meet:

The devices lived in the blood of the human race like viruses and passed from one person to the next during sex or any other exchange of bodily fluids; they were smart packets of data, just like the ones traversing the media network, and by mating with one another in the blood, they formed a vast system of communication, parallel to and probably linked with the dry Net of optical lines and copper wires. Like the dry Net, the wet Net could be used for doing computations – for running programs. (495)

When Hackworth comes into contact with others who have been similarly “infected,” the nanosites in his brain communicate with those in the brains of others, linking them into a collective mind – but also linking his mind directly with the media network of information, for instance allowing him to react in Fiona’s Primer. Thus the transgression of one boundary – between “lawful” and “unlawful” – leads to the breaking down of several other boundaries – first between cultures, then between the natural and the artificial, and between the body and the external world – and ultimately leads to the dissolution of Hackworth’s conscious self within the collective hive of the Drummers.

Hackworth’s tale might easily become a gothic nightmare of the dissolution of the self through the invasion by or immersion in the foreign and the artificial, and by extension a cautionary tale about the dangers of nonconformity, if it were not for his peculiar ability to return from the Drummers: “John Hackworth, somehow, was better than anyone else at making the transition between the society of Drummers and the Victorian tribe, and each time he crossed the boundary, he seemed to bring something with him, clinging to his garments like traces of scent” (434). Though he returns a radically altered man, Hackworth is able to recover his subjectivity, and to

bring a boon to his society – encryption keys that enable the novel's one explicitly self-described hacker, Carl Hollywood, to locate Nell and Miranda. Rationally, this should not be possible, but the collective mind of the Drummers processes information in non-rational ways – both through performing dream-work on the collective material of the media network, and through bodily computation – the irrational psyche and the non-rational body both offer liberating alternatives to western monologic. Hackworth is adept at both rational logic and associative and metaphorical non-rational logic, if we can imagine such a thing, and this quality is what enables him to design the Seed – a utopian technology that will eliminate the need for the regulated Feed which gives his society its power over the other phyles.

This is subversion in the extreme, and like the averted nuclear war at the end of *Islands in the Net*, the final computation for the Seed is never completed, because it would have required the sacrifice of Miranda. Nell intervenes just before the computation/infection/combustion and inoculates Miranda by passing the anti-virus from her own blood to her surrogate mother. This is kind of a strange ending, because essentially what happens is one plot stream trumps another and prevents its closure. It looks, from the standpoint of the novel's utopian desire, like a failure – either that or the triumph of imperialism. Yet the sacrifice of Miranda would be absolutely unacceptable, given the novel's celebration of the individual, and just as *Islands in the Net* needed Laura to survive, *The Diamond Age* needs Miranda: technological advancement can no longer be bought at any price, and cyberpunk is convinced that the cyborg female above all must be preserved and cherished. All of the component information for formulating the Seed computation are still present, and perhaps in the future, Nell will find a way for the program to be run without the human sacrifice. This would require a remade reason, whereby the re-inclusion of the nonrational, foreign,

or other would not represent the destruction of the self, a reason that welcomes cyborgs and fruitful hybridity rather than banishes monsters.

Bruno Latour suggests that the way out of the crisis of modernism has been before us all the time in the realization that modernism has never really existed. That is, modernism itself depends on a blindness to its own underpinnings: modernism is defined by the absolute separation of the work of purification from the work of mediation and translation, and the simultaneous though separate pursuit of both. The work of purification pursued through the sciences and social sciences strives to arrive at a better understanding of the natural and social worlds without allowing for any movement or connection between those realms. A thing must be either natural and therefore transcendent or social and therefore historically constructed, never both: “The moderns indeed declared that technology is nothing but pure instrumental mastery, science pure Enframing and pure Stamping [Das Ge-Stell], that economics is pure calculation, capitalism pure reproduction, the subject pure consciousness. Purity everywhere!” (Latour 66). At the same time the work of mediation and translation fosters the profusion of hybrids and monsters and networks connecting the natural and the social worlds. As these hybrids multiply, it becomes more and more difficult to ignore their existence and the modern outlook seems increasingly untenable: “Look around you: scientific objects are circulating simultaneously as subjects objects and discourse. Networks are full of Being. As for machines, they are laden with subjects and collectives” (Latour 66). According to Latour, if we simply accept the existence of hybrids and networks and admit this interconnection, the crisis of modernity disappears along with modernism itself – the worlds were never separate, and purity was an illusion – we have never been modern.

The reason this is difficult to accept, according to Latour, is because of the third facet of

modernism – revolution. Modernism models historical change as revolution, and insists that the present is entirely different from the past. As we have seen with *Frankenstein* and *Islands in the Net*, the irruption of the past into the present is therefore fundamentally threatening to the modern self. As a prophylactic against this tainting, the past must be bracketed, historicized, and thus ultimately effaced from real existence, but as we have seen, this abolition is never wholly successful, and the uncanny past persists:

If I explain that revolutions attempt to abolish the past but cannot do so, I again run the risk of being taken for a reactionary. This is because for the moderns – as for their antimodern enemies, as well as for their false postmodern enemies – time's arrow is unambiguous: one can go forward, but then one must break with the past; one can choose to go backward, but then one has to break with the modernizing avant-gardes, which have broken radically with their own past. This diktat organized modern thought until the last few years – without, of course, having any effect on the practice of mediation, a practice that has always mixed up epochs, genres, and ideas as heterogeneous as those of the premoderns. If there is one thing we are incapable of carrying out, we now know, it is a revolution, whether it be in science, technology, politics or philosophy. But we are still modern when we interpret this fact as a disappointment. (Latour 69)

In order to avoid interpreting the impossibility of revolution as a disappointment, we must find a new way to look at history. Latour proposes the model of sorting – retaining what we like from times and jettisoning what is not relevant or has proven to be a dead end. Once the sorted past has been incorporated into the networks of the present and the future, it ceases to be gothic, and becomes ripe for use as the building blocks of bricolage and retrofitting.

This is precisely the attitude *The Diamond Age* takes toward history. The neo-Victorian society does not represent an anti-modern return to the past, and the novel is far from naive in its treatment of Victorian imperialism and racist oppression. The characters of the novel self-consciously and deliberately choose the Victorian model for emulation because, ironically, its rigid structure offers

them flexibility:

Not even the most literal-minded neo-Victorian could take that stiff-upper-lip thing seriously; Carl realized now that it was all done with a nod and a wink. It was not Colonel Spence's way of saying that he wasn't scared; it was, rather a code of sorts, a face-saving way for him to admit that he was terrified half out of his wits, and for Carl to admit likewise. (484)

These neo-Victorians follow Victoria II, not Victoria and Albert, whose subjects they describe as "the original Victorians" or "the first Victorians" (190). A glimpse at the curriculum in Miss Matheson's Academy for girls shows that rather than limiting itself to a nineteenth-century outlook, the Atlantan culture is fully immersed in its own time:

For example, they counted how many species of plants and animals could be found in one square foot of the forest behind the school. They put on a scene from a play in Greek. They used a ractive simulation to model the domestic economy of a Lakota band before and after the introduction of horses. They designed simple machines with a nanopresence rig and tried to compile them in the M.C. and make them work. They wove brocades and made porcelain as Chinese ladies used to do. And there was an ocean of history to be learned. (312)

The structure of this curriculum is hardly the rote learning and drills that made up the historical Victorian education, yet it is not far from the ideal systems of education that Victorian novelists (I am thinking of the Brontës, Charles Dickens, and L. M. Montgomery) imagined in opposition to what they actually saw in their culture. This curriculum embraces the interconnectedness of the various subjects and skills, while at the same time preserving the unique and individual nature of each situation, rather than attempting to present everything as part of the same totalizing framework. This sorted world of the novel then amounts to a rich carnivalesque celebration of temporal, technological, cultural, and geographical heterogeneity.

Consequently, the network is the model for the underlying plot structure of *The Diamond Age* even more than it was for *Islands in the Net*, and networks permeate through every level of the text

and spread out from the central nexus of the Primer. The Young Lady's Illustrated Primer is essentially built as a network within itself – the base structure is a simple fairy tale, but this story is connected to all kinds of other information, such as reading lessons and martial arts lessons, atlases and other reference works, tools like telescopes and microscopes, and it is capable of improvising such appendages whenever they are needed. As Nell describes it, “she had known, from the very first day Harv had given her the book, how the story would come out in the end. It was just that the story was anfractuous; it developed more ramifications the more closely she read it” (343). The story splits off into other kinds of stories, lessons, or tools according to both Nell's commands and the Primer's internal program as designed by Hackworth. This internal network is in turn connected to the media network which permits its voice to be performed by a ractor.

From the nexus of the Primer, the network also spreads from the external world of others into the internal world of the self. After all, the Primer is from the outset designed and created in order to be an aid to creating a person – to mould the soul of a little girl into the shape considered desirable by Hackworth and Finkle-McGraw. Like Hackworth's wife's exercise equipment and personal trainer, necessary to hone her into the model Atlantan woman, the Primer is supposed to be a machine for turning little girls into upstanding citizens. From one perspective this is not very unlike Frankenstein's egomaniac utopic project to create an ideal species: “many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (*F* 32). But of course, from another perspective this is the natural duty of every father – and the fathers in *The Diamond Age*, unlike Victor Frankenstein, take this responsibility with the utmost seriousness. They may be in error like Elizabeth's father; surrogate, wounded and inadequate like the Constable; or be physically absent and emotionally remote like Hackworth; but they are committed to their role in educating daughters

and inspiring subversiveness, regardless of the possible monstrosity of their creations. This is already an improvement upon the conditions of *Frankenstein*. A shared, collective and decentralized responsibility for monster-making will help preclude the easy out of making Victor a scapegoat: it takes a village to raise a child, or in the Diamond Age, a network.

The Primer's particular guise as a book helps to establish its hybrid essence as a human-creating-machine and to contextualize information technology within the history of subjectivity. First and foremost, the story-book disguise makes this machine seem less threatening, alien, and well, technological. Who could begrudge young, lonely Nell her storybook? Had the Primer taken a form more overtly like a video game, well then, Dinosaur's violence might be a desensitizing and monster-creating anti-social horror! In fact, the Primer does incite Nell to violence, teaching her how to defend herself against bullies, as well as the contexts in which such a resort to violence is appropriate. This kind of subject matter seems to be more acceptable for discussion when it appears disguised in storybooks, since wolves and dinosaurs and honourable combat have formed a core component of early childhood education for centuries.

Yet the connection between machines and stories in the Primer highlights a preexisting cultural network connection, just as nanotechnology did for craft. Has not education always been the organized effort to take "raw" children and make them into "finished" selves, and particularly into the kind of subjects that are considered desirable? From this perspective, education is already a kind of machine. Debates about education, at least since the Industrial Revolution, often take the metaphors of industrial production and worry over what kind of society the "system" will "produce," and Stephenson here is picking his argument with the very terms of that debate,

following of course, Dickens.⁸ Is not a conventional storybook, considered through the metaphors of psycho-mechanical education, one machine that is part of a vast network that itself acts as a machine for producing subjects? In many ways, Nell's book is not terribly different from an amalgamation of all the possible books a child might have access to, specially selected and oriented for her understanding by a fatherly program. Insidiously, then, Stephenson is able to frame the discussion of the formation of the technologically constructed subject through the, at once old and new, technology of the narrative.

For the novel is, at heart, a media technology for constructing subjects, and *The Diamond Age* offers an interesting perspective as to why a long, strange, and fantastic novel might be of more use for producing an enlightened subject than either overt moralizing or rationalist if → then causality:

There was a Chinese belief that demons liked to travel only in straight lines. Hence the bridge zigzagged no fewer than nine times as it made its way to the center of the pond. The bridge was a demon filter, in other words, and the teahouse demon-free, which seemed of only limited usefulness if it still housed people like Dr. X. But for Judge Fang, raised in a city of long straight avenues, full of straight talkers, it was useful to be reminded that from the point of view of some people, including Dr. X, all of that straightness was suggestive of demonism; more natural and human was the ever-turning way, where you could never see round the next corner, and the overall plan could be understood only after lengthy meditation. (127)

The ever-turning, subversive way is therefore preferable for achieving an appreciation for the nuances and complexity of human existence. This esteem for the ever-turning way and subversiveness is similar to the chaotic miscommunication and celebration of Murphy's Law in *Islands in the Net*, since both find value in accidents, but *The Diamond Age* extends this valuation into a model for constructing the cyborg self. The self who has accidents and makes errors, learns

⁸ An early review of *Diamond Age* quotes Stephenson on the deliberate Dickensian influence: "I read several Dickens novels – *Little Dorrit*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Old Curiosity Shop* – when getting into the mood for *Diamond Age*" (Carroll).

from the experience, and develops a wisdom that cannot come from abstract principles alone. Thus, when offered the choice between “conformity or rebellion,” Nell rightly asserts “Neither one. Both ways are simple-minded – they are only for people who cannot cope with contradiction and ambiguity” (356). Nell’s subversive novel has provided her with the flexibility necessary to make her a true human self, rather than a machine that simply reacts to stimulus in pre-programmed ways.

The experience of novel-reading has always been tied to subversion, particularly for girls. Girls reading have caused discomfort and anxiety about what they might be reading and what kind of effect it might have on their morality since at least Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752). In 1882, Dr. J. H. Kellogg called novel-reading “one of the most pernicious habits to which a young lady can become devoted. When the habit is once thoroughly fixed, it becomes as inveterate as the use of liquor or opium” (qtd. in Golden 37). Perhaps the discomfort is due to the unique and intimate relationship the novel creates between reader and text. The *Young Lady’s Illustrated Primer* extends this intimate relationship into a reciprocity, whereby each reader literally reads a different text, constituted from the same elements, but “mapping the universals onto the unique psychological terrain of one child—even as that terrain changes over time” (107). Finkle-McGraw’s project is a success, although a predictably unpredictable one – Nell, the unintended recipient of the stolen Primer develops into “a most promising young lady” (367), but rather than becoming an upstanding Atlantan, she founds her own phyle. The other two girls are less successfully moulded, however, Elizabeth becoming rebellious and self-centred, Fiona becoming “a classic manic-depressive artist” (367). The difference seems to stem from the ractors who performed the voices of the Primer – a wide variety for Elizabeth, her plugged-in father for Fiona, and Miranda for Nell. Nell herself attributes the sense of confidence she gains from the Primer to “some essence in the

book, something that understood her and even loved her, something that forgave her when she did wrong and appreciated what she did right” (403). *The Diamond Age* is not entirely sure what makes Nell so much more successful than the other Primers’ girls – it might be thanks to the rigours of her childhood, or to some innate intelligence in Nell, but it might have something to do with love.

The Primer teaches Nell to read and to express herself in the style of the Atlantans; being designed for a neo-Victorian child, it teaches her programming and martial arts, but more than this, it teaches her how to be self-reliant and gives her the “pluck to take chances with her life” that Hackworth had wished for Fiona. Drawing on the insights of Judith Butler, Michael Longan and Tim Oakes discuss how the Primer highlights the importance of language in subject formation: “In ‘reading’ the Primer, the subject ‘speaks’ itself into existence, makes itself intelligible and develops the capacity for action” (41), and the “result is not a subject seeking liberation through rationalized programmes, but a subject that embraces paradox and ambiguity in the name of freedom” (50). It is narrative which develops the ability to take the ever-turning path, confidence rather than panic about not knowing what lies around the bend, and patience for the meditative understanding of the overall picture. It is narrative which instills the flexibility of character necessary to cope with an increasingly hybrid, plural, ambiguous, and permeable world.

The Diamond Age suggests that the possibility of non-rational reason, a logic of the body, of the unconscious, of hybridization rather than monstrosity, of distribution rather than deduction, might offer some hope for a future that is no longer subject to the crisis of modernity, as long as the natural individual self is carefully technologically crafted and cyborgs and monsters are loved. If we recognize that we have never been modern, the Frankenstein barrier evaporates and the no-longer-gothic past takes its place among the relics from which the future is sewn together as a constituent

element of the code rather than a bug. It was not possible for Frankenstein to love his monster, for the modern man to accept the subject he had constructed in his own image, but it may be possible for one cyborg to love another once we recognize that we are all hybrid.

If Ian Watt is correct, and the novel developed concurrently with the modern subject, then something like the *Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* might truly create a new kind of human subjectivity – I will, following Latour, not call this postmodern – but a different time, with different challenges and different ways of being and seeing. This new self would be more flexible and permeable than the modern subject, less inclined to believe in the legitimacy of the sharp binary distinctions that create the foreign, more agile at following networks and manufacturing tricks. Laura Webster caught a glimpse of this self as her Optimal Persona, but refused to accept her as her own trickster self and chose instead to substitute an Other. *The Diamond Age* has higher hopes for Nell. In direct contrast to the last sentence of *Frankenstein* where the monster is “lost in darkness and distance” (156), *The Diamond Age* ends with an image of unmistakable hope: “Then he saw shadows descending from above, dozens of naked girls swimming downward, garlands of silver bubbles streaming from their mouths, their almond eyes excited and mischievous. Carl and Miranda were gripped by many gentle hands and borne upward into the light” (499).

Chapter 4

Jane Eyre the cyberpunk, some connections and conclusions

“This idea, consolatory in theory, I felt would be terrible if realised.” (*JE* 13)

“If SF has a real lesson, any truly profound insight to offer, it’s that reality truly is weird.” (Sterling, “The State of the Future.”)

The Diamond Age’s insight into the role of narrative in the development of the flexible and permeable individual subject suggests that we need to follow the intertextual networks beyond the boundaries of science fiction. The novel of education has one of the richest traditions in literature, but if we are considering particularly the education of girls, we are immediately presented with the fraught *ur-text* of *Jane Eyre*. Hybrid, ambiguous, troubling, and monstrous, Charlotte Brontë’s wandering tale of girlish becoming has a paradigmatic status in our culture – a myth that has been all the more potent for its apparent problems. How do we reconcile Rochester’s dastardliness, with his status as teleological “prize” for our heroine? Moreover, what are we to make of the continual incursions of the supernatural into a purportedly realistic textual world?

Ontologically speaking, the world of *Jane Eyre* is as confusing as any in literature. The novel insists on its realism, that it occurs in an anti-romantic prosaic world that so closely mirrors the real world that its settings have to be obscured by a “— shire,” lest idle tongues blur the distinction between fiction and fact and libel suits ensue; and yet this world is inhabited by demonic madwomen, predatory lovers, omens and signs, ghosts, fairies, vampires, *ignis fatui*, prophetic dreams, and telepathy. According to Jerome Beaty, the reader’s experience of *Jane Eyre* proceeds as a dialogue of novel genres – the governess novel, the gothic novel, the domestic novel, *bildung*, among others – interlaced with fairy tales, songs, and all sorts of cultural noise. Perhaps even more than *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, and consequently its narrator/character, is a text that is pieced and sutured together out of other texts.

This dialogism is further enhanced and complicated by the competition and occasional hybridization of the mature narrator-Jane with the younger experiencing-Jane.

The simultaneous presence of three voices, the polysemic refraction of the situation in the context and competing languages of the contemporary novel, makes it difficult for readers to know just what kind of novel they are reading but makes it equally difficult for them to ignore the generic signals. What is new in *Jane Eyre*, then, are the dialogic voices which not only complicate the reader's expectations but also problematize – at least for a time – the moral universe of the novel. Despite the familiar materials, a new species of novel, an original is before us. (Beatty 61)

The reader is continually prompted to compare Jane's experience to a variety of received texts and to predict what shape the plot will take, which genre will become dominant, in effect to create all kinds of misreadings along with the Janes as they follow the ever-turning way and figure out what kind of story her story is. Brontë plays the different kinds of story that Jane's might be off one another, telling the reader 'well, in this genre of novel, this is how it would be, but here is how it really was' from the opening double negation, "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day" (5) and "I was glad of it" (5). This generic dialogism, the assertion that this text is not exactly like any other kind of text, amounts to a contention that this text is somehow outside genre altogether, not a fiction at all, and thereby creates the effect of realism.

Jane's role as a reader, and ultimately as a narrator and constructor of her own text, have been extensively explored in criticism. After all, the novel opens with Jane reading and closes with her reading to Rochester and writing for him, though as Lisa Sternlieb makes clear, "Rochester never has and never will read the novel to which the reader is afforded such intimate access" (475). In the opening chapters, we are given three explorations of Jane's reading skills: with Bewick she chooses not to read the text, or even look at the main illustrations, but focuses on the introductory descriptions of "forlorn regions of dreary space" and the "vignettes," that is, she chooses or sorts

what she likes out of the text. Next, the reader is shown how Jane is learning to apply her reading to her life when she deems John Reed a tyrant:

‘Wicked and cruel boy!’ I said. ‘You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!’

I had read Goldsmith’s ‘History of Rome,’ and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, &c. Also I had drawn parallels in silence, which I never thought thus to have declared aloud. (8-9)

Finally, after the red room incident, Jane asks Bessie for a favourite book, *Gulliver’s Travels*: “I considered it a narrative of facts and discovered in it a vein of interest deeper than what I found in fairy tales” (17), and her enjoyment is largely predicated on the basis of this mistaken assumption:

Lilliput and Brobdingnag being, in my creed, solid parts of the earth’s surface, I doubted not that I might one day, by taking a long voyage, see with my own eyes the little fields, houses, and trees, the diminutive people, the tiny cows, sheep and birds of the one realm; and the corn-fields forest-high, the mighty mastiffs, the monster cats, the tower-like men and women, of the other. (17)

That is, for Jane, a book is only interesting to the degree that it is realistic. Jane also informs us that she had grown up to the point that she no longer believed in fairies, but not so far as to not make the reading error of taking Swift’s fantastic fiction as a documentary travelogue. However, Jane’s own traumatic experience of the gothic in the red room transforms her reading: what had once held “marvellous charm” is now “eerie and dreary” (17), that is, her lived experience of gothic horror throws every other experience of the fantastic into the gothic. It will be Jane’s task for the rest of the novel to find a way to narrate her fantastic experiences as realism, and therefore interesting, but to do this she will face the horror of the gothic. As Mark Hennelly shows “the novel itself never tires of emphasizing the various noetic meanings of ‘read’ in order to suggest that understanding *Jane Eyre* requires the same reading skills as understanding the mysterious text of life itself” (710). I would add that the novel also reverses this correlation, insinuating that the ability to read novels

creatively provides one with the skills to understand life. By the time we reach *The Diamond Age*, this has indeed become a powerful model for the creation of a subject through reading and sorting other texts.

As an extended example, let us look closely at the first time Jane hears Bertha laugh. Jane has just finished teaching her first day of lessons to Adèle and we (as imagined first-time readers or authorial audience) are comfortably ensconced in the realistic and morally didactic domestic governess novel. Mrs. Fairfax is leading Jane on a tour of heretofore unvisited rooms for the completely plausible and prosaic purpose of dusting the furniture. The conversation turns to the as yet unmet master of the house, who we know is not often home, but we now learn is given to unexpectedly appearing. Jane quizzes Mrs. Fairfax as to Mr. Rochester's "character," but the housekeeper is exasperating in her inability to narrate anything, and she simply restates their economic relationship over and over. For Jane and for the desiring reader the crumbs of information she drops "He is rather peculiar, perhaps" (89) are teasingly few, and give us little characterization of her employer, but tell us much about Jane. That is, Jane is not the sort of person "to have no notion of sketching a character" (89), and we suspect that she, along with the reader is longing for there to be something more "interesting" about Rochester than that "he is a very good master" (89). That is, eighteen-year-old Jane wishes her situation to be romantic and fit to be narrated, but is repeatedly confounded in this desire by the ordinariness of her life. For the Jane who left Lowood for "the real world," believing "that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils" (72), Thornfield is, at this moment, proving irritatingly lacking in perils.

Jane and the housekeeper then proceed to the third floor, a kind of repository for out-of-fashion

furniture:

bedsteads of a hundred years old; chests in oak or walnut, looking, with their strange carvings of palm branches and cherubs' heads, like types of the Hebrew ark; rows of venerable chairs, high-backed and narrow; stools still more antiquated, on whose cushioned tops were yet apparent traces of half-effaced embroideries, wrought by fingers that for two generations had been coffin-dust. All these relics gave to the third story of Thornfield Hall the aspect of a home of the past: a shrine of memory. (90)

A twinge of the gothic emerges through the material persistence of the past, and Jane reflects that these things “would have looked strange, indeed, by the pallid gleam of moonlight” (90). Here again, it is Jane who is projecting a gothic possibility on the prosaic environs out of boredom, and she seems quite disappointed at Mrs. Fairfax’s denial of the possibility of a ghost. From thence, they proceed up onto the roof and survey the view, which while not as exciting as a ghost, satisfies Jane’s imagination: “No feature in the scene was extraordinary, but all was pleasing” (91) – perhaps reality is interesting enough when viewed from the correct vantage point.

As Jane descends back into the attic however, her reality-dazzled eyes cannot see in the attic which now seems “black as a vault” (91). Suddenly the Hall is described as “Bluebeard’s castle” (91) and Jane hears the “preternatural” (91) laugh for the first time. Though it has been longed for, the irruption of the gothic back into the text which has been assuring us that this is a banal world is sudden and traumatic. But before the gothic can take over the text completely, it is evaporated through the ridiculously prosaic reality of Grace Poole’s face: “any apparition less romantic or less ghostly could scarcely be conceived” (91). The sinister event was merely the creation of Jane’s silly imagination. This is quite similar to Jane Austen’s parody of the gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey*, and yet as George Levine points out, “the guidelines according to which Jane Austen constructs her world are less ‘reality’ than the opposites of the position she is attacking; she implies an alternative

ideal which requires an alternative literary program – the ideal of practical, rational sense” (358). Realism is thus constructed not out of reality itself, but in opposition to other texts. The difference for Jane is that unlike Catherine Morland’s, Jane’s imaginative suspicions will turn out to be at least partially correct: there is after all, despite the narrative’s current disavowals, something strange going on in the attic of Thornfield Hall.

This is ultimately the effective *frisson* of *Jane Eyre*: that within a “real” world, she yearns for romance and adventure, as far as the limits of modesty will allow, and receives the gothic instead – it is as if her desires and ambitions, be they sexual, revolutionary, or economic, create Bertha in the first place. Sandra M. Gilbert has famously read Bertha as Jane’s “dark double” exploring how “every one of Bertha’s appearances – or, more accurately, her manifestations – has been associated with an experience (or repression) of anger on Jane’s part” (Gilbert and Gubar 360). Though there is no overt expression of anger on Jane’s part in the passage we have just explored, her frustration and desire for stimulus are prefigured here and it is not inconsistent with Gilbert and Gubar’s reading that the retro-echo of future plot events be heard here. Bertha is at once a manifestation of Jane’s own feminist angst, and a great big Blue-bearded warning of the very real dangers inherent in unequal power distribution under marriage. Bertha’s role in Jane’s tale has been so well explored by Gilbert and Gubar, Elaine Showalter, and others and these arguments are so well-known that I will move on to consider other aspects of the gothic in Jane’s tale. I wish only to mention here that like Frankenstein’s monster, Bertha can be read as the production of Jane’s mind, but that at the same time the text insists on her excessive corporeality in terms that are strikingly similar to *Frankenstein*. Jane fears most “the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments” (242), and particularly notices the “lips were swelled and dark” (242), just as

Frankenstein feared his creature's "dull yellow eye" (34), the movement of its "muscles and joints" (35) and how, "A ghastly grin wrinkled his lips" (115). Rochester retorts "ghosts are usually pale, Jane" (242), but *Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre* articulate the fear, not of disembodied ethereal spirits since these would remain safely textual or theoretical, but of reified corporeal unignorable intrusions of the real. Speaking of another Victorian imprisoned madwoman, Maggie Kilgour suggests the possibility that "reality is worse than fiction or, rather, that for women reality *is* gothic" (82).

So the gothic in *Jane Eyre* is effective precisely to the extent that the narrative can convince us it is occurring in a non-gothic (modern and naturalistic) world. From this perspective Brontë's realism can be seen as a strategy for making her ghost story scarier, like Mary Shelley's substitution of science for necromancy – a modern setting and a presumed naturalistic causality of events allows for a deeper relationship between reader and text and makes the intrusion of the fantastic a true ontological rupture. This principle works for SF as well, according to Bruce Sterling: "I found that my science fiction got a lot more effective and spooky when it was set in places like Chattanooga rather than the rings of Saturn" ("State of the Future"). The use of familiar settings and integration of the readerly "real" present as history are some of the most effective strategies of cyberpunk. So it is essentially the same relationship of referentiality operating in all of these texts: the continuity of historical times locates the past within the modern in the gothic, and it posits the cyberpunk futures as real inheritors of the present.

Jane articulates this in the epigram at the beginning of this chapter when for the first time, her gothic imagination threatened to escape into the real world. Locked in the red room where her uncle died, stewing over the injustices of the Reeds, Jane muses that her uncle would have been more sympathetic and that his ghost might even be angry with the Reeds for their treatment of her.

Essentially, she conjures his ghost herself, but like Frankenstein cannot face the reality of her own creation, and Latour's insight shows us that this is because under modernism, the worlds of theory and practice must be kept absolutely separate. Angels, spirits, ghosts and demons are all well for the abstract purposes of Providence, for taunting one's lover or comforting a friend, but for the spirit world to reenter the natural one in fact would be "terrible." That is, this apparition would rupture the realism of Jane's world, and essentially remind her of her own narrational self-creation out of texts. As Lisa Sternlieb and Alison Case have shown, Jane's struggle is fundamentally over her ability and power to narrate herself. It is as Ruth B. Yeazell argues: "The true magic of *Jane Eyre* is not so much a matter of mysterious voices and providential fires as of a vision which thus dialectically unites independence and love and creates a world whose outward design mirrors the internal progress of the psyche" (130), but we must remember that the "vision" which "creates" this world is Jane's own. As a child perennially accused of "plotting" (Case 92), young Jane is here terrified of her own power to conjure her uncle, but in time she will learn to use her textual magic to make herself, though as the narrator of that self she must hide the seams that would delegitimize her work as unreal.

Regardless of whether the ghost of her uncle actually appears in the red room or whether it is a "gleam from a lantern, carried by some one across the lawn" (13) as narrator-Jane somewhat lamely surmises, in effect her dead uncle's intervention does secure Jane's release from the torment of Gateshead and ejects her into her quest. In *The Diamond Age*, Nell's release from an abusive home comes through an intervention that is in some ways very different, but functions in a similar way. After a savage beating at the hands of her mother's umpteenth violent boyfriend, the Primer, with Miranda racting, tells Princess Nell in the story that "the time has come for you and Harv to flee

from the Dark Castle!” (202). Nell does not immediately apply this advice to her own life, though she has long recognized the parallels, renaming Baron Jack “Burt,” and translating events from her real life into stories in the *Primer* and vice versa. Instead, Nell misreads the narrative and interprets Dinosaur’s preparations of a sharpened stick as a cue that she should attack Burt directly. For Nell, the projection of spirit into matter is not in itself a problem, she has the M.C. produce a screwdriver, with which she attempts to blind Burt à la Odysseus and the Cyclops. Too late she realizes her error: “Nell knew she had done the wrong thing. Dinosaur had told her to run away, and she had pestered him with questions instead” (204), but she does escape from the apartment nevertheless. The trauma of this night, which she refers to as “the screwdriver incident” stays with her for the rest of her life, just as the red room incident haunts Jane. While Jane’s escape is associated with the intervention of a dead relative, Nell’s is associated with Miranda, her future surrogate mother, who as a ractor is capable of projecting her bodily self through information, just like a ghost. Miranda is essentially powerless to intervene for Nell, being separated from her by the anonymity of the information network; her only power is to read the lines the *Primer* sets for her with varying degrees of intensity and expression. The implication is that it is her emphasis which instructs Nell when what she is reading needs to be applied in reality.

For both Jane and Nell then, some of the trauma of these pivotal incidents stems from an error in reading – Nell, rightly reading that she needs to make the ideas of the *Primer* a reality, chooses the wrong one and makes the screwdriver instead of immediately running away. Jane on the other hand, uses her reading to determine that she is being treated unjustly, and rightly reads her own family history to surmise that she would not be in this situation were her uncle still alive. But she errs by assuming that this reading will cause the material world to change – Jane does not possess

a Matter Compiler – and so she must have recourse to ghosts and madness to summon the apothecary who will effect her release.

For Laura Webster it is similarly an irruption of the technological gothic which propels her out of stasis. This is prefigured in the emblematic VCR incident of course, but I am here specifically referring to the murder of Winston Stubbs, since this is the incident which causes Laura to leave her home. Uneasy and unable to sleep, Laura has stepped out onto the balcony with her baby, when she sees a UFO: “it perched in midair in the moonlight, humming. An hourglass, cut by a shimmering disk. Laura shrieked aloud. The apparition hung there for a moment, as if defying her to believe in it” (*IN* 54). Though all too real, the military drone is described in explicitly gothic terms, and is textually not far from the light Jane sees in the red room. But what was for Jane and Nell a necessary rescue from abuse, is more of a frontal assault in *Islands in the Net* – for Laura, happiness and fulfilment (and marriage) lie before the novel’s beginning rather than after its end. For Nell and Jane, the gothic intervention is essentially a textual one, related to the mediation of their reading, while in *Islands* the intervention is decidedly material, the text focussing on the consequences of the drone’s attack for objects and bodies:

Laura lifted one hand to her cheek. Something had stung her there. Little bits of sand, she thought vaguely. Little bits of sand that had jumped from those impact holes. Those pockmarks in the wall of her house, where the bullets had passed through the old man. The holes looked dark in the moonlight. They were full of his blood. (55)

Laura’s destabilizing experience is therefore much more like Victor Frankenstein’s than like that of Nell and Jane. Jane tells us, and we hope for Nell, that home lies beyond the events of the narrative, but for Laura and Victor, once you encounter the technological gothic you can never go home again. This, of course, may be because Victor and Laura had nice homes to begin with,

whereas Nell and Jane are denied that privilege.

While the mystery of the Red Room incident is shrugged off by narrator-Jane as having natural causes that were simply misread at the time, like Laura's dismissal of her Optimal Persona, Jane has another supernatural experience which is not so easily explained. Seeking divine guidance that she would be right to reject St John Rivers' proposal, Jane hears Rochester call her name and answers him. Jane insists that her experience is the work of Nature, but attributes it also to a power of her own:

it seemed in *me* – not in the external world. I asked, was it a mere nervous impression – a delusion? I could not conceive or believe: it was more like an inspiration. The wondrous shock of feeling had come like the earthquake which shook the foundations of Paul and Silas's prison: it had opened the doors of the soul's cell, and loosed its bands – it had wakened it out of its sleep, whence it sprang trembling, listening, aghast; then vibrated thrice a cry on my startled ear, and in my quaking heart, and through my spirit; which neither feared nor shook, but exulted as if in joy over the success of one effort it had been privileged to make, independent of the cumbrous body. (359)

Jane, then is perhaps one of our first cyberpunks, or "reality pilots" as Timothy Leary etymologizes the phrase, the first to recognize that the spirit making a foray "independent of the cumbrous body" need not entail the demise of said body, that like Miranda she can send messages through the ethereal networks as well as receive them. In *Islands in the Net*, all Laura needs to accomplish the same thing and maintain her connection with David is a watchphone, but once that is taken from her, projecting her self into the Net becomes much more complicated. Unlike Jane, Laura does not admit her own narrating ability to conjure her Persona, so she requires Gresham's satellite link, but her achievement of this projection is nonetheless transcendent: "An ecstasy, pure fluid art. Possession" (357). By the end of her quest, Nell has similarly acquired the ability to communicate with Miranda and reverse the one-way nature of their relationship, an achievement which is neither

rational like Laura's, nor paranormal like Jane's, but the fantastic triumph of the collective and non-rational logic of the Drummers.

Along with the ability to communicate with her loved one, Nell has become capable of programming the Wetnet, capable of writing the story of her world. Nell's final encounter with King Coyote resolves not as the battle she had expected, but with his unconditional surrender – he hands over the keys to the kingdom the moment she recognizes that she is capable of ruling it. Similarly, Jane's subjectivity is produced out of texts, and she learns to manipulate and produce her own text as a narrator just as Nell learns to manipulate the media network as a hacker. Described from the beginning as both an “animal” (7), and a magical creature “imp,” (11), “elf” (208) etc., Jane herself is a Harawayan cyborg, part body, part text, who is subject to the rules of her textual world only as long as she fears her own narrating power to convert ideas into things and back again.

Reading Jane as a cyborg allows us to make sense of her movements within the curiously constructed realism she inhabits and makes the relationship between that realism and reality a little more comprehensible – Jane as narrator has the ability to move through time as well as space and reconstruct her story and her self as she sees fit. This is not to say that her narrated world bears no relation to a possible lived experience, but that this relation is speculative and always under scrutiny, just as it is in SF. At her darkest moment of need, Jane performs her most magical hack: she conjures Moor House. This is *Jane Eyre*'s most improbable event – stranger than her uncle's ghost, wilder than Bertha, and weirder than her telepathy – that having struck out aimlessly into the wilderness, Jane finds her family. As Levine notes: “it is, almost, an act of will which rewards her virtue” (360). Having fled from the now apparent dangers of Thornfield, Jane is deposited at Whitcross and discovers the real bodily dangers of being cut off from the Net: “Not a tie holds me

to human society at this moment” (275). Like Frankenstein’s monster wandering pathetically through the wilderness, Jane experiences the hell of exposure and “total prostration of hope” (281). While in *Islands in the Net*, the world around Laura devolves into barbarism the moment the civilizing influence of the Net is removed, Jane, Frankenstein’s monster, and Nell all experience the terrifying void of being “disconnected” (*JE* 137) as a default situation. Starving, drenched, and cold, Jane searches the horizon for a sign of hope and “a light sprang up. ‘That is an *ignis fatuus*’ was my first thought; and I expected it would soon vanish” (282) – immediately, Jane attributes another turn in her plot to the malevolent gothic. Yet this light is not here to lead her astray, “But of course it does not vanish. It is the house of a clergy-man! It is the house of cousins! It is the way to fortune and dominance over Rochester!” (Levine 360). Like the monster lurking outside the De Laceys window, Jane gazes in at the Rivers as they study, but unlike the monster she succeeds in gaining entry into their home and consequently her family.

What all of these characters ultimately seek is a place within the human/technological network of society. For Jane and Frankenstein’s monster, a place in the Net comes (or doesn’t come) through marriage; for Laura and Nell, a career of leadership. Strangely enough, although Jane’s journey takes her to unknown places and leaves her anxiously exposed to the unknown, all the other characters seem to know each other. Rochester knows about John Reed’s debauchery (190), St John Rivers has heard all about Rochester’s intended bigamy (324), and Jane’s Uncle John in Madeira is hanging out with Richard Mason (251). What for Jane is a “wide world” of “forlorn regions of dreary space” is, from the perspective of the other characters, a network of kinship, money, and rumours, so tight it seems claustrophobic. From Rochester’s perspective, Winston Stubbs is exactly right: “One world means there’s no place to hide” (*IN* 191). Try as he might to find a place where

“it is not known what a sullied name you bear, nor what a filthy burden is bound to you” (*JE* 263), Rochester’s still-living past will always haunt him. But for Jane, admission into this network means security, shelter, and most of all love: “I am resolved I will have a home and connections” (329).

From this perspective, what bars Jane from her place in the network is not, like Frankenstein’s creature, the lack of there being such a position for her, but her lack of information about her identity. Had Mrs. Reed told her about her Uncle John earlier, there would have been no need for much of Jane’s suffering at Lowood and degradation as a governess; she would have been adopted and integrated into her “proper” position in society at fifteen, and her tale would have been quite a different one, possibly involving travel to the exotic isle of Madeira. However Mrs. Reed declines to inform Jane of the existence of such an uncle, making use of her own power over the flow of information to convince Jane that though she “might have some poor, low relations called Eyre” (20), they were not interesting enough to be part of her story. Thus, like Laura, Jane moves through her world collecting and collating pieces of information, but in Jane’s case these bits of data ultimately amount to an identity, the name that Frankenstein’s monster never received. However Jane does not have access to all the pieces of the puzzle, and just as Carl Hollywood retrieves the keys from Hackworth that will enable Nell, Miranda, Carl, and Hackworth to find one another, it is St John Rivers who gathers all the pieces together for Jane. These pieces are, of course, texts: an advertisement in a newspaper seeking a missing governess, a letter from the solicitor Mr. Briggs, and a scrap of paper with the handwritten words “Jane Eyre” (324-5); combined with St John’s own oral family history, and the narration that Jane “Elliot” gave of her origins. All of these texts combine to create a Jane Eyre with the power and independence to marry/conquer Rochester, and thus it is significant that it is at this point that Jane gains the full ability to project herself into

information and communicate telepathically with her distant lover.

Becoming a cyborg may therefore enable Jane to achieve her goal of living “for and with what I love best on earth” (384), but it does not help us reconcile with the initial problem Rochester presents. That is, if he is so terrible a husband to Bertha, how can we wish him on Jane? Furthermore if we are going to accept that he is her true destined love, what should we make of the fact that he has to be maimed and “symbolically castrated” before he can be a fit husband for her? Must a monster either give up her self-making or master her master to be truly loved? I would concur with Dianne Sadoff that for Jane, in her time, the answer is probably yes, and the “novel emasculates the master-father, at its end through the careful surveillance of the governess-daughter” (528). For Jane and for Brontë, a place in the network is usually obtained by marriage, and a marriage of equal yet separate individuals “precisely suited in character” (*JE* 384) could only occur outside the structures of society, even in fiction: “perhaps because no one of her contemporaries, not even a Wollstonecraft or a Mill, could adequately describe a society so drastically altered that the matured Jane and Rochester could really live in it” (Gilbert and Gubar 369-70). However our time is not Brontë’s time, and the texts that make up our network are different from those that make Jane’s – not least because we have Jane’s text within our network. We can thus sort Jane’s text and admire what is valuable (Jane the cyborg), and jettison what is not (liberation through domination), since we now know that the if-then causality of the modern plot was an illusion, a technique for making a story more effective, we do not have to consider the one directly consequent to the other. We know we aren’t modern, and so we can trace the networks and sort out what we desire with a free conscience.

Elaine Showalter once wondered:

Can we imagine an ending to *Jane Eyre* in which Jane and Bertha leave Rochester and go off together? Obviously such a conclusion would be unthinkable. Such possibilities and such solutions are beyond the boundaries of the feminine novel. . . in feminine fiction men and women become equals by submitting to mutual limitations, not by allowing each other mutual growth. (124)

We could not in 1847, and perhaps not even in 1977, but I believe that cyberpunk imagines just such a possibility. *Islands in the Net* begins with Laura and David's idealized marriage of mutuality as though it were a sequel to *Jane Eyre*, and though the marriage breaks down in David's inability to cope with Laura's growth, Laura finds other men who consider her an equal and are willing to allow her to grow. While these men remain slightly demonic, *Islands* seems to be reaching toward the possibility of a remade heterosexuality. *The Diamond Age* may offer a kind of hope for human relationships, though it avoids cementing its characters into sexual relationships, through hybrid mutuality and technological strangeness. There is a particular profusion of lesbian imagery in Nell's story, making the end of *The Diamond Age*, with Nell leading her mouse army into a future filled with the potency of the seed, something not unlike an ending of *Jane Eyre* where Bertha and Jane ditch Rochester and go off together. But more than this, *The Diamond Age* describes a network of loving human relationships, through which Nell and her artifex creator respect and learn from each other's power and madness, and Carl and Miranda aid each other to grow through their separate but interconnected quests. If cyberpunk has succeeded in becoming a realism of the future, then just imagining that future represents a real achievement in our collective dance along the ever-turning way. Records may skip, but hip-hop has learned how to make music out of the failure of technology. Perhaps cyberpunk might achieve a similar feat for narrative, teaching us not to be afraid of the past as we learn how to make the future.

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