

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Re-conceptualizing the "Politics of Recognition"

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Abstract

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Patchen Markell offers a critique of the political pursuit of recognition in *Bound by Recognition*. In this thesis, I respond directly to Markell's central argument in order to rethink, rather than abandon, the political pursuit of recognition through a textual interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. I read *Frankenstein* as an exemplary tale of the struggle for identity recognition, wherein Victor Frankenstein's Creature—his famous "Monster"—attempts to "un-monster" himself by demanding that others recognize his positively affirmed self-identity as a "kind and feeling friend." Ultimately, the tragedy of *Frankenstein* is that the Creature cannot see himself as anything other than a monster—he is never afforded the recognition he desperately desires. Contra Markell, I argue that the Creature's pursuit of recognition fails because he cannot single-handedly overcome the asymmetrical power relations that underlie the social construction of identity, and that are reinforced through the construction of his identity as monster.

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Introduction

This paper is a study of contemporary debates about the “politics of recognition.”

Building off of mainstream views of distributive justice that primarily concern themselves with the fair distribution of goods— money, power, and opportunity— proponents of recognition such as Charles Taylor have suggested that due recognition of a group or individual’s self-identity is a basic human need (Taylor 1997, 104). However, this renewed interest in recognition has come under increasing scrutiny within the last few years, and several critics persuasively argue that the political pursuit of recognition should be abandoned. Recently, Patchen Markell offered an elaborate critique of the pursuit of recognition in the influential book, *Bound by Recognition*. Drawing from Arendt, Markell argues that the pursuit of recognition is doomed to fail since identity construction is an ongoing and unpredictable enterprise, achieved intersubjectively in an often incoherent world of meaning (Markell 2003, 154). Although I engage with several authors concerned with the concept of recognition in this thesis, I respond directly to Markell’s central argument in an effort to re-think and re-orient, rather than abandon, the political pursuit of recognition.

In my analysis of contemporary debates about recognition, I offer a textual interpretation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. At first glance, I realize that *Frankenstein* may appear to be an unlikely source. However, I read *Frankenstein* as an exemplary tale of the struggle for identity recognition. Over the course of the novel, the reader is invited to explore the ways in which Victor Frankenstein’s Creature, his famous “Monster,” attempts to “un-monster” himself by

demanding that the other characters in the novel recognize his self-identity as a “kind and feeling friend” (F, 95). Ultimately, the tragedy of *Frankenstein* is that the Creature cannot see himself as anything other than a monster—he is never afforded the identity recognition he so desperately desires. Contra Markell, however, I argue that the Creature’s failure to resist the externally imposed identity of monster is not primarily a result of the human condition of finitude, although I agree that identities are constructed intersubjectively and that identities are unfixed, multiple, and subject to change. Instead, I argue that the Creature fails to achieve a more human identity because he cannot single-handedly overcome the asymmetrical power relations that underlie the social construction of identity, and that are reinforced through the construction of his identity as monster. In order to demonstrate how processes of social construction constitute the Creature as monster, I adopt Nancy Hirschmann’s “three level” framework of social construction as outlined in *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* as the organizational format of my textual analysis (Hirschmann 2003).

Ultimately, my reading of *Frankenstein* suggests that the normative goals of political pursuits of recognition are worth pursuing, even though Charles Taylor’s conception of recognition is misguided in fundamental ways. As evidenced by the miserable fate of the Creature—he suffers from psycho-emotional distress, social exclusion, and economic poverty—members of oppressed groups unjustly suffer from real and damaging effects of identity-based subordination. Keeping the detrimental effects of the social construction of demeaning identities at the forefront of my analysis, I argue that political theorists concerned with social justice should learn from the tragedy of *Frankenstein*: we must recognize and acknowledge that we participate unevenly in processes of social construction in order to better understand how oppressive groups often have the power to define the oppressed (Hirschmann 2003, 101).

Because identities are socially constructed, recognition should not be conceived as a “good” within a distributive paradigm of justice; this approach invokes the concept of a fixed, authentic identity. Instead, recognition should be understood as a matter of procedural justice, wherein justice requires social arrangements that permit all members of society to not only interact face-to-face with one another as peers in processes of social construction but also challenge discursive power structures through deconstruction and the resignification of social meaning (Fraser 2001, 29).

Contemporary Debates about Recognition

Within the last few decades, the discipline of political theory has witnessed a renewed interest in the role of recognition in political life. In the canon of political thought, the idea of recognition was originally derived from Hegel’s philosophical formulations about the “struggle for recognition” and the “dialectic of master and slave” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Although several prominent theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century—George Herbert Mead, Karl Marx, and Charles H. Cooley, to name just a few— developed important analyses of recognition and its relationship to political and social life, the catalyst for the resurgent interest came with prominent philosopher Charles Taylor in the publication of his highly influential 1997 essay “The Politics of Recognition.” In this essay, Taylor argues that dominant cultures must recognize the worth of various minority cultures in a dialogical process of mutual recognition.¹ Taylor’s conviction is based on the assumption that misrecognition

¹ Although I do not elaborate on this point, it is important to note that Taylor discusses two types of recognition demands: the “politics of universalism” asks us to recognize the universal dignity of all citizens, while the “politics of difference” demands that we recognize the distinct, particular identities of individuals and groups. According to Taylor, some versions of the politics of equal respect can be inhospitable to the politics of difference because the commitment to equal respect, he argues, is limited in liberal thought to the equal *potential* inherent in all human

(which often involves projecting an inferior or demeaning identity onto a minority group) is an act of oppression. To the extent that misrecognition saddles its victims with crippling self-hatred and low self-esteem, Taylor argues that “misrecognition has now graduated to the rank of a harm” (Taylor 1997, 121). In light of the damage wrought by misrecognition, therefore, Taylor insists that “due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a basic human need” (1997, 99).

Taylor’s essay provoked an engaged and spirited debate within the field of political theory. Consequently, a cluster of loosely related formulations of the idea of recognition emerged to reinforce its centrality to much contemporary theorizing. Despite the important differences among disparate authors, Nancy Fraser concisely identifies the problem that many political theorists have attempted to solve through recognition:

They contend that to belong to a group that is devalued by the dominant culture is to be misrecognized, to suffer a distortion of one’s realization to oneself... In this perspective, the politics of recognition aims to repair the internal self-dislocation by contesting the dominant culture’s demeaning picture of the group. It proposes that members of misrecognized groups reject such images in favour of new self-representations of their own making, jettisoning internalized, negative identities and joining collectively to produce a self-affirming culture of their own... (Fraser 2000, 110).

Thus, she argues that whereas mainstream views of distributive justice have typically concerned themselves exclusively with the fair distribution goods—money, power, and opportunity— the renewed concern for recognition suggests that all people should be afforded the recognition of positively self-affirmed identities.

Recently, several critics have argued that the pursuit for recognition should be abandoned as a political practice. Among them, Patchen Markell offers the most elaborate critique of

beings, but does not necessitate equal recognition of the accomplishments of human beings, as individuals or as groups (1997, 118-119).

recognition in the book *Bound by Recognition*. Drawing primarily from the democratic theories of Hannah Arendt and Ernesto Laclau, Markell argues that political pursuits for recognition are fundamentally misguided for several important reasons. First, Markell argues that the pursuit of recognition overlooks the reality that identity construction is an ongoing and unpredictable enterprise, achieved intersubjectively in an often incoherent world of meaning (Markell 2003, 154). Appropriating Arendt's formulations of plurality and action, Markell argues that the process disregards an important element of the human condition—finitude. Because our public identities are constituted in a context of plurality and indeterminacy, he argues, we cannot control how our identities will be perceived by others. In addition, Markell disagrees with Taylor's assumption that action is dependent upon identity. Whereas Taylor maintains that we can only act once we know what is important to us, Markell argues that we cannot (and should not attempt to) achieve a coherent conception of a “doer” behind a “deed.” In sum, Markell argues that the political pursuit of recognition denies the open-ended and contingent nature of human interaction and mistakenly binds identity to action. If a radical “identity crisis” is politically paralyzing (as Taylor seems to suggest), Markell argues that an excessively firm grip on identity is paralyzing too.

In place of a politics of recognition, Markell advocates a “politics of acknowledgement.”

He succinctly outlines his creative project as follows:

Acknowledgement is in the first instance self- rather than other- related; its object is not one's own identity but one's own basic or ontological condition or circumstances, particularly one's own finitude; this finitude is to be understood as a matter of one's own practical limits in the face of an unpredictable and contingent future, not as a matter of the impossibility or injustice of knowing others; and finally, acknowledgement involves coming to terms with, rather than vainly attempting to overcome, the risk, hostility, misunderstanding, opacity, and alienation that characterizes life among others (2003, 38).

In an effort to champion the politics of acknowledgment over the politics of recognition, Markell creatively offers a textual interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. According to Markell, Sophocles' *Antigone* stages a paradigmatic struggle for recognition. In his interpretation, he argues that the characters of Antigone and Creon attempt to achieve sovereign agency by acting on their understandings of who they are, and by demanding that others respect them on the basis of their self-declared "true identities" (2003, 69). Ultimately, Markell argues that Antigone's act of disobedience (through the burial of her brother in spite of Creon's edict to let Polyneices' body lay unburied in disgrace) is an attempt to achieve the recognition of her identity as "sister" and "woman" (2003, 80). At the same time, Creon primarily self-identifies as a citizen and ruler, despite the fact he is also Polyneices' uncle. He values the well-being of the *polis* over his duties towards family, for he treats Polyneices as *ekthros* (enemy) after the war. Furthermore, because Creon's exclusively civic conception of *philia* is rigidly masculine, Antigone's disobedience simultaneously misrecognizes his civic authority and threatens his masculinity (2003, 81).

The main point that Markell wants to drive home through this interpretation is that Antigone and Creon's actions (actions derived from identities) ironically undermine their commitments to the very self-identities that they hold dear. Although Antigone is willing to suffer death out of loyalty to a blood relative, she undermines her identification with her familial gender role by severing ties with Ismene and inappropriately appearing in civic spaces (2003, 81). Likewise, Creon's acts also undermine his own self-identifications. His pursuit of civic order turns him into a tyrant, and the death of his son Haemon forces him to effeminately mourn over his dead child (2003, 82). With respect to the central message of the tragedy, Markell writes,

Part of the aim of (the) tragedy is to provoke in us an acknowledgment of action's unpredictability and consequently also of the ineliminable possibility of suffering.

More deeply still, it teaches us that the attempt to become master of our own deeds and identity is not only doomed to fail, but risks intensifying that suffering unnecessarily, even demanding that we give our lives for what will turn out to be our illusion of control (2003, 65).

According to Markell's interpretation, Sophocles' *Antigone* is a cautionary tale about the dangers of pursuing identity recognition in a context of plurality and indeterminacy.

Overall, I agree with Markell's assertion that Taylor's pursuit of recognition is misguided. Although Taylor explicitly states that recognition occurs through a dialogical process of mutual recognition, I agree that by using recognition claims to demand that people recognize us for who we *really are*, he simultaneously invokes a conception of identity as a static, predetermined, and authentic.² That said, I am equally dissatisfied with the politics of acknowledgement. Namely, I argue that Markell lacks an adequate analysis of power relations with respect to theories of identity construction. Because he does not pay attention to systematic patterns of "who gets paid attention to, what gets heard, and how" within a context of plurality (Bickford 1995, 318), his analysis does not fully consider the underlying power dynamics between subjects.

In addition, by primarily focusing on the face-to-face dynamics of identity construction, Markell importantly overlooks the structural dynamics of power that often systematically impose ascriptive identities on embodied subjects through processes of cultural inscription. In the book *Against Recognition*, Louis McNay argues against what she calls the "fetishized indeterminacy" of Markell's politics of acknowledgment (McNay 2008, 69). As McNay eloquently states, "...the assertion of a foundational indeterminacy does not go very far in unpacking the determinate

² Markell convincingly argues that Taylor simultaneously espouses two conflicting conceptions of identity through his formulations of recognition. On the one hand, Taylor equates recognition with "construction," explicitly stating that identities are achieved in a dialogical process of mutual recognition. On the other hand, Markell rightly notes that Taylor also implicitly endorses a conception of recognition as "cognition," which invokes identity as a predetermined "fact" awaiting our acknowledgement (2003, 58-59).

nature of many dimensions of social existence which pertain, in part, to the insidious operations of power on embodied subjects” (2008, 68).

McNay’s persuasive critique of Markell’s politics of acknowledgement is largely indebted to the writings and appropriations of Michel Foucault. Rather than locating power completely within the individual acting subject, McNay adopts a social constructivist conception of power similar to the one articulated in the *History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*. According to Foucault,

Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization: as the *process* which, through ceaseless struggle and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or even reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or *institutional crystallization* is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various *social hegemonies* (Foucault 1990, 92).

Under this definition, power is best understood as a relation. Foucault’s understanding of power is intimately connected with his conception of discourse. Drawing from several of Foucault’s most prominent works, feminist theorist Joan Scott offers a useful summary of a Foucauldian understanding of discourse. According to Scott’s reading of Foucault, a discourse is not a language or a text but a “historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs.” Discourse is thus “contained or expressed in organizations and institutions as well as in words” (Scott 1990, 136).

For example, Foucault understands “the gaze” to be a form of disciplinary power that is exercised within hegemonic discursive power structures. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes Bentham’s infamous panopticon as an architectural structure that allows prison guards to maintain constant visual control of prisoners. Designed using the principles of an optical system of control and domination, the panopticon allows the gaze to serve as a technology of

power in the production of docile bodies by allowing the prison guards to see while remaining unseen in return. Foucault's analysis highlights the asymmetrical power relation between the "seer" (the subject) and the "seen" (the object). According to Foucault, the gaze is never simply a neutral act of vision—it is a sociocultural power regime taking place within discursive power structures. Furthermore, Foucault contends that the major achievement of the panopticon is "...to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1995, 201). Thus, the internalization of the gaze is the ultimate exercise of power.

If we contrast McNay's and Foucault's understanding of discourse to that of Taylor and Markell, we find that "discourse" is understood in profoundly different ways. Although Taylor and Markell do not explicitly define their use of the term "discourse," I take them to mean it primarily as dialogue, conversation, and/or deliberation.³ At its most basic definition, discourse thus involves reasoning with others through language. In *Against Recognition*, McNay importantly critiques this understanding of discourse. Looking specifically at Taylor's writings, she states that his theory of linguistic mediation invokes a "purified model of language where power relations are seen as extrinsic or secondary forms of distortion of the primal dyad of recognition" (2008, 62). She continues to critique this oversimplified understanding of discourse by arguing that "the setting up of language as prior to, rather than coeval with, power undermines (Taylor's) claims to develop normative proposals that proceed from a sociological sensitivity to the situated and embodied nature of self" (2008, 62).

Overall, I agree with McNay's critique. Language is not secondary or "outside" of power—language is power. By highlighting these two different conceptions of discourse, I hope

³ Although Taylor doesn't define "discourse," he states that language "is not just in the words we speak, but in other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the 'languages' of art, of gesture, of love, and the like" (1997, 102).

to show that resistance to the social construction of demeaning identities cannot *only* be located in an individual's right to participate in deliberation and discourse between subjects (using Taylor and Markell's understanding of the term). Rather, resistance must also involve the resignification of meaning and the displacement of hegemonic meanings within discursive power structures through practices of deconstruction.

To be clear, my adoption of a Foucaultian conception of power and discourse *does not* mean that I disregard the reality that identity construction also involves some degree of negotiation and conflict between subjects (see also McNay 2008, 169; Bickford 1996, 119). As I have already stated, I agree that identities are constructed intersubjectively in a context of plurality. However, language is not secondary to power—language *is* power. Thus, our identities are also to some degree constituted by our positioning and situatedness within language and discursive structures.

As for Markell's politics of acknowledgment, I also argue that he does not adequately focus on the fact that people often suffer psycho-emotional, social, and economic disadvantages under the imposition of demeaning identities. His inattention to the effects of an internalized, depreciated identity subsequently results in an unsatisfactory theory of agency and resistance. For instance, in his re-reading of Hegel's account of the master-slave relation, Markell offers some limited insights about resistance:

On Hegel's account, identity-based social subordination is *not* fundamentally rooted in the failure of the powerful to notice some fact about the worth or value of the subordinated... Instead, these practices are rooted in the failure of the powerful to acknowledge something about *themselves*—specifically, in their failure to acknowledge, to bear the weight of, the fundamental human condition of finitude (2003, 112).

As if the solution to the problem is simply to wait for privileged groups to acknowledge their vulnerability! Ultimately, waiting for oppressors to understand their vulnerability in the face of

human finitude may not appeal to individuals currently navigating the damaging, all-too-real effects of identity-based subordination.

To sum up, I agree with Markell's assertion that the social construction of identities is a continuous and indefinite enterprise, and that participating in processes of social construction does not mean that you always get what you want. However, I disagree with Markell's tacit assumption that power is simply located within individuals and that language is secondary to power. This assumption results in an incomplete portrait of the social construction of identities. Likewise, Markell does not take seriously the psycho-emotional, social, and economic disadvantages wrought by the social construction of demeaning identities. The politics of acknowledgment subsequently fails to offer an adequate theory of resistance.

At the end of this thesis, I will champion an alternative version of the politics of recognition that can adequately account for my aforementioned critiques that is largely inspired by the work of Nancy Fraser. Before I endorse an alternative, however, I want to offer a textual analysis of another tragedy in order to better understand what is at stake in political struggles for recognition. Whereas Markell provided a textual interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone* to discredit political the pursuit of recognition, I turn to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in order to re-conceptualize recognition and propose an alternative framework to both Taylor's politics of recognition and Markell's politics of acknowledgment.

At first glance, *Frankenstein* may appear to be an unlikely source. However, I read *Frankenstein* as an exemplary tale of the struggle for recognition. Over the course of the novel, the reader is invited to explore the ways Victor Frankenstein's Creature, his famous "Monster," attempts to "un-monster" himself by demanding that the other characters in the novel recognize his self-identity as a "kind and feeling friend" (F 1994, 95). Ultimately, the tragedy of

Frankenstein is that the not-so-monstrous Creature cannot see himself as anything other than a monster—he is never afforded the recognition he so desperately desires. In contrast to Markell, however, I argue that the Creature’s failure to resist the identity of “monster” is not primarily a result of the human condition of finitude. Rather, I argue that the Creature cannot single-handedly overcome the asymmetrical power relations that both underlie the social construction of his identity as monster and are reinforced through his imposed location within hegemonic discourses of corporeal normality.

The tragedy of *Frankenstein* may be more relevant to contemporary debates about recognition than Sophocles’ *Antigone* because it was written during an historical epoch when our contemporary understanding of recognition was being developed. According to Taylor, the new ideal of an “authentic identity” (an identity demanding recognition) was one outcome of the decline of hierarchal societies during the eighteenth century. Taylor maintains that in earlier societies, what we would now call identity was largely fixed by one’s social position. In contrast to conceptions of identity in pre-modernity, the advent of democratic societies and the increasing time-space compression of the modern era created a social context ripe for new forms of identity construction (1997, 104). Given the historical specificity of the concept of recognition, it is important to briefly situate *Frankenstein* in biographical and historical context.

Mary Shelley and the World She Inhabited: A Brief Biographical and Historical Background

When nineteen-year-old Mary Shelley wrote a story to “curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart” in the summer of 1816, she could never have foreseen the lasting impression *Frankenstein* would leave on the modern social imaginary (*F*, vii). One need only flip on the television in October to confirm its power over the modern mind. Numerous academic

disciplines— literature, history, sociology, critical race studies, and political theory, among others— have yielded diverse interpretations of *Frankenstein*. Moreover, within these disciplines, many scholars have studied the rich themes embedded in the text: the dangers of overreaching and pursuing knowledge at all costs (O'Rourke 1989); the use and value of language (Bugg 2006); the importance of family and parenthood (Carlson 2007); the trope of physical difference (Davis 1995; Malchow 1993; Gigante 2000; Mossman 2007), and others.

Several scholars have focused particular attention on Shelley herself, the self-proclaimed “daughter of two persons of literary celebrity” (*F*, v). These writers argue that it is difficult to thoroughly understand the larger implications of Shelley's novel unless we put it on conversation with Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin's lives and publications. For instance, U.C. Knoepfelmacher persuasively argues that *Frankenstein* is an expression of Shelley's adolescent anger over her parentage, especially over her irresponsible father who often neglected his children in order to pursue professional and political ambitions (Knoepfelmacher 1979, 39). Similarly, Ellen Moers argues that *Frankenstein* evolved out of Shelley's own tragic experience as an unwed mother of a baby who only survived a few weeks. According to Moers' interpretation, *Frankenstein* both discloses Shelley's personal anxieties about childbirth and motherhood and also reveals Shelley's guilt for having caused her own mother's death (Moers 1979, 77). In the end, Moers suggests that the novel should be read as a “horror story of maternity” (1979, 95). Finally, in *England's First Family of Writers*, Julie Carlson also argues that life and literature were inseparable in the daily lives of Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Shelley. One of the central claims of Carlson's book is that not only are their writings and lives inextricably intertwined, but that their professional and personal goals included “blurring the

boundaries between person and text, private and public, living and writing, works of literature and works of mourning” (2007, 3).

As Godwin and Wollstonecraft’s daughter and renowned poet Percy Shelley’s wife, Mary Shelley undoubtedly confronted several challenges to self-definition. The “infamy” of her family legacy, resulting from Wollstonecraft and Godwin’s unorthodox personal lives and radical philosophies, not only cast a wide shadow for Mary in radical intellectual circles but also exposed her to the hardships of endless gossip and public scrutiny from conservative enclaves. Thus, Shelley undoubtedly faced difficulties carving out an intellectual voice in the face of her radical intellectual inheritance (Carlson 2007, 247).

Shelley also lived outside the conventional expectations of white, middle-class womanhood in early nineteenth century England. In 1814, when Mary was just sixteen years old, she fell in love with Percy Shelley, who was a married man at the time. That summer, Mary and her step-sister Claire Clairmont fled to France with Percy. On their return to England, Mary was pregnant with Shelley’s first child, who would later die prematurely. Percy and Mary married in 1816 after Percy’s wife Harriet committed suicide. In addition to the scandal surrounding Shelley’s personal life, she also faced obstacles to autonomous authorship simply by virtue of her gender identity. In *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, literary scholar Mary Poovey argues that in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century European society female authorship jeopardized modesty and transgressed gender boundaries by calling attention to “...the woman as subject, as initiator of direct action, as a person deserving of notice for her own sake” (Poovey 1984, 36). If Poovey is right, social constructions of femininity in early nineteenth century Britain may explain why *Frankenstein* was originally published anonymously in 1818. Building

off of Poovey's analysis, Shelley's *Frankenstein* can be read as Shelley's "monstrous" desire for autonomous authorship in the face of dominant gender norms of female propriety (1984, 46).

Moving beyond Shelley's personal "identity crisis," we see that the historical epoch in which Shelley was born was generally characterized by rapid change, expanding understandings of the world under colonialism, and challenges to tradition and hierarchical power structures. However, the dissolution of feudalism, the Enlightenment project of human perfectability and universality, and the ideological pluralism of the epoch all provoked a political and ideological backlash towards the end of the eighteenth century, especially after the unfavorable outcome of the French Revolution. Placing *Frankenstein* in its social and historical context, historian H.L. Malchow importantly notes that Mary Shelley grew to maturity in a highly charged political and intellectual atmosphere, during a time when revolutionary radicalism was under attack by an increasingly vocal conservative polemic (1993, 94).

The conservative political era Shelley inhabited as a young writer witnessed the emergence of a dominant discourse in which the body surfaced as a site of social, political, and moral identity. As literary scholar Lennard Davis argues, it was during this era that the body came to be viewed as the external manifestation of an internal "self." To prove his point, Davis examines the advent of statistics, claiming that statistical analyses were a manifestation of modernity's new need to regulate bodies and attach normative judgments to particular physical attributes. According to Davis, French statistician Adolphe Quetlet (1796- 1847) developed the concept of *l'homme moyen*—"the average man." Quetlet's *l'homme moyen* was a combination of *l'homme moyen physique* and *l'homme moyen morale*, meaning that the average man was both a physical and moral construct. In turn, physical attributes such as weight, height, and skin complexion were ascribed with moral, social, and political worth. Ultimately, Davis's point is

that in formulating the idea of *l'homme moyen*, the physical became tied to a more fully articulated conception of the internal self. Davis's historical analysis not only accounts for the reason why scientific arguments about "nature" increasingly informed social theory during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but also shows how the physical and the moral became intimately intertwined (Davis 1997, 26-30).

Although contemporary revisionist histories explain how the external body increasingly operated as a marker of identity in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe⁴, one need go no further than the writings of many political thinkers of the time to ascertain the ways in which physical characteristics functioned as markers of internal moral worth. For instance, philosopher David Hume celebrates the inborn superiority of the white race in his essay, "Of National Characters" (1742):

I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men (there are four or five different kinds), to be naturally inferior to the whites. There was never a civilized nation of any other complexion than white... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men (Quoted from Bugg 2006, 662).

In this passage, Hume's defense of the superiority (coded as civilization) of the European man is founded upon the distinction of physical attributes between human beings, which he assumes are markers of "naturally" inferior characteristics. As we know from the larger body of his writings, Hume used this differentiation to advocate the expansion of colonialism. In fact, this emerging discourse about the relationship between the body and identity was often used to justify and perpetuate practices of social and political inequality: if one assumes that the external body is a physical marker of an internal identity, it is convenient to devalue particular bodily attributes (the

⁴ H.L. Malchow and Anne Fausto-Sterling's revisionist histories confirm that eighteenth century Europe witnessed the construction of moral, social, and political identities based on physical attributes (see Malchow 1993, 96; Fausto-Sterling 1995, 40).

assumed markers of an internal moral inferiority) in order to preserve and perpetuate relations to dominance/submission.

This emerging discourse about identity not only existed when *Frankenstein* was published, but it was also commonly used to justify and perpetuate practices of inequality. I am not suggesting that Shelley necessarily read Hume's work; no causal relationship is implied. However, I do suggest that Shelley's insights about identity and physical difference reflect and react to the discussions of identity taking place at the time. As I mentioned earlier, several scholars interpret the Creature as a signifier of corporeal difference (Davis 1995; Malchow 1993; Gigante 2000; Mossman 2007). Whereas Lennard Davis and Mark Mossman convincingly interpret the Creature as a signifier of physical disability, H.L. Malchow draws comparisons between Shelley's *Frankenstein* and contemporary writings and images of race and slavery in early nineteenth century England. While I find their arguments persuasive, I resist claiming that the Creature is specifically racialized or disabled, per se; I am satisfied with the basic assertion that the Creature is an aberrant signifier of corporeal difference. Keeping this in mind, the ensuing textual analysis of the social construction of the Creature's identity as monster attempts to highlight how discursive power structures of corporeal normality often systematically impose ascriptive identities on embodied subjects through processes of cultural inscription.

Shelley's *Frankenstein*: The Social Construction of Identity

In this the direct moral of the book consists; and it is perhaps the most important, and of the most universal application of any moral that can be enforced by example. Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Requite affection with scorn;—let one being be selected, for whatever cause, as the refuse of his kind—divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations—malevolence and selfishness. It is thus that, too often in society, those who are best qualified to be its benefactors and its ornaments, are branded...with scorn, and changed by neglect and solitude of heart, into a scourge and a curse.

-Percy Shelley, 1818, Review of *Frankenstein*

This passage is an explicit statement of what both Percy and Mary Shelley regarded as one of the central intended messages of the book. Assuming that individuals are products of their social environments, Percy Shelley claims that if you “treat a person ill...he will become wicked” (Quoted in St. Clair 2000, 40-41). Much like Taylor and Markell, Mary Shelley denies ontological individualism, or the notion that selves can achieve identity outside the social domain. However, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* also reveals the ways in which processes of cultural inscription— particularly the operation of the gaze— constitute the character of the Creature as “monster,” “fiend,” “daemon,” and “devil.” In other words, Shelley demonstrates that even though identities are socially constructed in a context of plurality, ascriptive identities are often produced at one remove from direct dialogue through discursive technologies of power. As a result, Shelley’s insights about the social construction of identity not only challenged the emerging discourses of the body and identity in eighteenth and early nineteenth century England; they also inform contemporary debates about the politics of recognition.

When referring to social construction, I adopt Nancy Hirschmann’s “three level” conception as outlined in the book *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom*. According to Hirschmann, level one of social construction is the “ideological misrepresentation of reality” (Hirschmann 2003, 77). At this level, social construction is taken to mean something artificially and purposively constructed in a way that obfuscates “true” reality. Applying the first level of social construction directly to *Frankenstein*, Shelley reveals how the assumption that the external body is a manifestation of an internal self is a misrepresentation of reality. Over the course of the novel, Shelley deconstructs the supposedly natural relationship between corporeality and identity by highlighting the divide between the Creature’s internal values and sense-of-self and the externally imposed identity of monster. Our ability to analyze

how the Creature's internal self does not match his identity as monster is made possible by the unique narrative format of the text, which is divided among three narrators: Captain Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature. Through the Creature's narrative, the reader is able to move beyond the Creature's monstrous hideousness (as described by the Walton and Frankenstein) to see how he considers himself as a being who exudes an innate goodness, a desire to learn, and an inherent sociability. Similarly, the reader is also able to discover the divide between Victor Frankenstein's external appearance as normative—an educated, middle-class, male European—and his internal struggles with inner daemons.

Hirschmann labels the second level of social construction materialization, wherein the misrepresentation of reality produces material effects (2003, 79). At this level, social construction moves from the misrepresentation of reality to the material creation of the social phenomena it describes. As it applies to *Frankenstein*, Shelley effectively illustrates how the misrepresentation of reality materializes into a social hierarchy predicated upon corporeal difference by detailing the Creature's miserable fate of psycho-emotional distress, social exclusion, and economic poverty. Scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson labels this hierarchy the "politics of appearance"⁵, whereby the body serves as "the coordinates of a taxonomical system that distributes status, privilege, and material goods to a hierarchy anchored by visible human physical variation" (Garland-Thomson 1997, 135). The second level of social construction is particularly salient because it reminds us that the normative goals of Taylor's politics of recognition are worth pursuing. Although the demeaning identity of monster is socially

⁵ In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie-Garland Thomson analyzes cultural representations of disability in nineteenth century American literature, and she claims that by focusing on cultural representations of disability she discovers a *politics of appearance* in which some physical "...traits, configurations, and functions become the stigmata of a vividly embodied inferiority or difference, while others fade into a neutral, disembodied, universalized norm" (135). While I do not claim that the Creature is disabled, per se, Garland-Thomson's methodology undoubtedly influenced my textual analysis of *Frankenstein*.

constructed, Shelley reminds her readers that social construction materializes into real and occasionally detrimental consequences that require political intervention.

Lastly, Hirschmann calls the third level of social construction “the discursive construction of social meaning” (2003, 81). Appropriating Foucault’s conception of discourse, this third level demonstrates how discursive structures actually constitute subjectivities. Because nobody is “outside” of language, an analysis of the discursive construction of social meaning also reveals how “excluded others” participate to varying degrees in social construction. Turning to the character development of the Creature, Shelley reveals how the Creature’s identity is constituted through his positioning within language, and she highlights how discourses of corporeal normality are reinforced through the operation of the gaze. Also, the direct exchanges between the Creature and Victor show how the dialogical construction of identity is played out in a context of inequality. An analysis of the third level of social construction reinforces my central critique of Taylor and Markell. Although I agree that identities are partially produced intersubjectively, I also argue that attention to the structural dynamics of power underlying processes of social construction will reveal a loose pattern to social construction and lay bare the often “determinate nature of many dimensions of social existence which pertain...to the insidious operations of power upon embodied subjects” (McNay 2008, 68). The following sections elaborate on the three levels of social construction as they relate to the character development of the Creature as monster. From this interpretation, I hope to show that we cannot judge the relative merit of particular conceptions of recognition without first understanding how oppressive groups have the power to define the oppressed.⁶

⁶ The following summary provides a useful overview of how Hirschmann understands the “three levels” of social construction: “Level three reveals the depth of social construction, that it is not simply a superficial socialization process but takes place in our very language, epistemology and ways of understanding our identity. But levels one and two link discursive understandings to the physical, visceral reality of oppression. One should imagine ‘levels’ in

The Misrepresentation of Reality

Frankenstein is composed of a series of letters that recount Captain Robert Walton's journey for the North Pole to his sister, Mrs. Saville. While the first three letters detail the success of Walton's mission at sea, the fourth letter describes how the mission is soon interrupted by "vast and irregular plains of ice" (*F*, 8). Trapped in the frozen water, Walton encounters Victor Frankenstein as he travels across the ice on a dog-drawn sledge in pursuit of the Creature. In this opening scene, Walton first describes the physical attributes of the Victor and the Creature by juxtaposing "European" and "savage" physical attributes. When describing Victor, he writes, "He (Victor Frankenstein) was not as the other traveler seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but a European" (*F*, 8-9). From the outset, the reader is invited to understand the "savage" as distinct from the person who looks like a "European" (*F*, 8).

Next, Captain Walton takes the nearly-frozen and emaciated Victor aboard his ship and nurses him back to health. After Victor recovers, he discloses the tale of his life to Walton, who records Victor's story in a manuscript addressed to Mrs. Saville. This manuscript allows the reader to hear Victor's first-person narrative (*F*, 14). At the beginning of his tale, Victor describes his blissful childhood in Geneva and romanticizes his relationships with his family and friends, most notably his adopted sister Elizabeth Lavenza and his best friend Henry Clerval. Later, Victor confesses that after he moved away from home to attend the University of Ingolstadt in order to study natural philosophy and chemistry, his insatiable curiosity and ambition feverishly drove him to attempt to "bestow animation upon lifeless matter" by

quotation marks, however, because **the three are not distinct processes, one leading to the next in linear fashion. Rather the three dimensions are intricately interdependent**" (2003, 89 emphasis added).

fashioning a creature out of dead body parts (*F*, 32). As his creation comes to life, he describes its appearance as follows:

His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of his muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness, but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost the same colour of the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveling complexion and straight back lips (*F*, 35).

Upon seeing his creation, Victor declares that “breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (*F*, 35). Furthermore, he quickly attaches normative adjectives to the Creature’s character, using terms such as “miserable” and “wretched” to describe his creation well before he has stirred. Thus, the Creature’s unusual physical attributes are immediately coded with value judgments—judgments that precede the Creature’s use of language or behavior towards others. In this way, the Creature is assumed to be monstrous because of the way he looks— not as a result of his actions.

Thus far, the novel is aligned with the assumption that the external body was a physical manifestation of an internal “self.” However, the first-person narrative of the Creature challenges this view by revealing the divide between the Creature’s own sense of self and the externally imposed identity of “monster.” The Creature’s first-person narrative is introduced in the novel after Victor has already relayed the following sequence of events to Walton: after the Creature escapes from Victor’s apartment, Victor receives a letter from his father informing him that his youngest brother, William, has been murdered (*F*, 46-47). When Victor rushes home to console his family after the murder, he catches sight of the Creature in the woods and rightfully suspects the Creature to be the murderer (*F*, 50). Meanwhile, a family friend named Justine Moritz is wrongfully accused, convicted, and executed for the murder of William (*F*, 54-57). Throughout this sequence of events, Victor feels immensely remorseful that his creation has killed two loved

ones. He journeys on horseback to the mountains in order to escape his grief and guilt only to be approached by the Creature, who is desperate to present his side of the story. At this point, the narrative format of the novel is complete: the Creature speaks through Victor's narrative to Walton, and Walton ultimately serves as the scribe of *Frankenstein*.

The Creature's narrative begins with his flight from Victor's apartment into the wilderness. He takes refuge in a hovel constructed of wood in an area near some cottagers, who come to be known as the De Lacey family. As we are exposed to the Creature's inner thoughts and feelings, we come to realize that he is not so monstrous after all. For example, after he reads a copy of Plutarch's *Lives* that he found on the ground outside of the De Lacey home, he describes his reaction to the novel, stating that "I read of men concerned in public affairs... I felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice" (*F*, 92). Furthermore, he explicitly declares his admiration of peace (*F*, 92), gushes over the values family and community (*F*, 86), and laments the injustice of poverty (*F*, 85). Likewise, he exhibits admirable moral sentiments, such as sympathy (*F*, 91), love and reverence (*F*, 86), and curiosity and intelligence (*F*, 85).

In a similar way, Shelley complicates the identity of Victor Frankenstein. Although the reader is initially invited to identify with the man who appears to be an educated, middle-class, European, we come to see that a monster lives within Victor. After the death of William and the conviction of Justine, Victor states:

I wandered like an evil spirit, for I had committed deeds of mischief beyond description horrible...I was seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures... (*F*, 61).

Thus, the man who appears normal on the outside actually experiences inner demons. This point is further articulated in his confession that "I...was the true murderer" (*F*, 63). Hence,

Frankenstein's self-identity as an atrocious murderer also complicates the connection between his exterior body and his internal identity, further exposing the "misrepresentation of reality."

The Materialization of a Misrepresented Reality

Shelley's formulation quickly moves beyond an analysis of the misrepresentation of reality. Over the course of the novel, every character suffers the negative consequences of the social construction of the identity of monster. Most notably, the Creature endures psycho-emotional distress, exclusion from social life and equal participation in the arrangement of human affairs, and economic poverty. Several passages capture the Creature's feelings of self-hatred and misery: "I abhorred myself; (*F*, 164); "I am miserable" (*F*, 104); "Everywhere I see bliss, from which alone I am irrevocably excluded" (*F*, 69). In these passages and others like them, we confront the psycho-emotional damage wrought through the internalization of a demeaning identity. Several proponents of recognition, including James Tully, have focused on the psycho-emotional effects of such misrecognition. These scholars claim that devalued identities undermine an individual's self-respect and self-esteem, which enable the individual to develop the autonomy necessary to participate equally in public and private life (Tully 2000, 470; see also Honneth 1995). Shelley supports this formulation. The Creature repeatedly discusses his desire to participate in social life, but his fears of being misrecognized in the public sphere prevent him from doing so: "I longed to join them (people)," confesses the Creature, "but I dared not" (*F*, 77).

After the Creature becomes aware of his corporeal difference, he states that "I did not know yet the fatal effects of this miserable deformity" (*F*, 80). In this passage, the Creature expresses foresight into his unjust fate of exclusion, isolation, and poverty that results from his position at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In a moment of self-pity, he implicitly reveals his

understanding of the politics of appearance when he states, “I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome...” (*F*, 85). In this way, the Creature recognizes that his body traps him in a snare of abnormality that impedes his acceptance into society.

In the face of these material effects, the Creature toothlessly grapples with the consequences of the misrepresentation of reality by attempting to “pass,” which involves adopting the characteristics of the oppressor in order to cope with a stigmatized identity (see Goffman 1963, 73-77). The theme of “passing” is fully developed through the Creature’s acquisition of language:

I easily perceived that, although I eagerly longed to discover myself to the cottagers, I ought not to make the attempt until I had first become master of their language; which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure (*F*, 80).

Shelley also touches on passing when she refers to Aesop’s fable of the ass and the lap-dog. According to the fable, a donkey foolishly attempts to adopt the mannerisms of the beloved lap-dog in order to win the affection of their master. The moral of the story is that unworthy people should not try to usurp the position of their superiors. However, the Creature challenges this fable when he states that “It was as the ass and the lap-dog; yet surely the gentle ass whose intentions were affectionate, although his manners were rude, deserved better treatment than blows and excursions” (*F*, 81). From this, we can infer that the Creature hoped to be rewarded for his conformity and be allowed to pass as human if he adopts all of the characteristics of human beings.

However, the Creature does not suffer the negative consequences of misrepresented reality alone. After repeatedly enduring the hardships of the identity monster, the Creature gives up on passing. Eventually, the Creature is constituted as monster and begins to commit

monstrous acts. We see this change in the Creature's character after he has been rejected from the De Lacey family: "I, like the arch-fiend, bore a hell within me; and, finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin" (*F*, 97). In the timeline of the novel, the Creature's consciousness of his position as the bottom of the social hierarchy and his experiences of exclusion and poverty precede all of his monstrous acts. The Creature kills his first victim, William, only after his refuge in the woods and his full realization of his own rejection. In turn, William's murder incites the murder of Justine, who was falsely accused of killing William. Later, the Creature vengefully kills Frankenstein's beloved friend Henry Clerval, followed his bride Elizabeth on their bridal bed. In response to these monstrous acts, the Creature insists, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend" (*F*, 69). In a similar passage, he claims that "My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor" (*F*, 106).

In effect, the social construction of the identity of monster comes full circle. The Creature's corporeal attributes are coded with negative value judgments, and his hideous external attributes are assumed to reflect his internal monstrous self. Over the course of the novel, we see that the discourse about the relationship between the body and identity becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Discursive Construction of Identity

Thus far we have seen how the first two levels of social construction operate in the text: the Creature's body is assumed to reflect his internal monstrous self, and this false representation actually constitutes the Creature as monster. Furthermore, the materialization of the Creature's identity as monster results in the Creature's sad fate of isolation, poverty, and psycho-emotional

distress, and all of the other characters in the novel must deal with the effects of his monstrous actions after he has been constituted as such. In this section, I pay close attention to the ways that discourse constitutes the Creature as monster. What I find to be particularly interesting about Shelley's insights into discursive identity production is her strategic use of the words "normal" and "deformity." If we pay close attention to the way she describes judgments about normality and deformity, we see that she implies that our judgments about this distinction are learned and socially contingent. For example, before the Creature kills William, the following thought passes through his mind:

An idea seized me that this little creature (William) was unprejudiced, and had lived too short a time to have *imbibed a horror of deformity*. If therefore, I could seize him and educate him as my companion friend, I should not be so desolate on this peopled earth (*F*, 102, emphasis added).

This passage supposes that children learn to demarcate normality from deformity within discursive structures of corporeal normality.

In addition, Shelley details the role that vision—the gaze—plays in social construction. At the beginning of his narrative, the Creature describes his experience with a group of villagers in the wilderness as he attempts to enter their garden. In this account, he states that, "I had hardly placed my foot within the door before the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted" (*F*, 74). The Creature wrongly assumed that the villagers reacted adversely because of his actions, and he ponders what he did wrong. He racks his brain to "endeavor the motives that influenced their (the villagers') response" (*F*, 77). Little did he know, the mere sight of his body provoked the adverse reaction. This initial experience with human beings is followed by a more telling encounter with the father of the De Lacey family, who is blind. One day the Creature finds the courage to approach Mr. De Lacey in an attempt to befriend him once the rest of the family has left the home. His interaction with the old blind man is positive until the rest of the De Lacey

family returns to discover them, striking out at the Creature in fear and horror before he can explain his intentions.

The point that Shelley stresses is that the gaze occludes dialogue. Going back to the villagers' reaction to his appearance, the Creature says that "some fled, some attacked me, until grievously bruised by stones and other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped" (*F*, 74). Likewise, when the other members of the De Lacey family—Felix, Safie, and Agatha—came home and saw the Creature conversing with their blind father, the Creature states that "Agatha fainted; and Safie, unable to attend to her friend, rushed out of the cottage. Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from their father, to whose knees I clung" (*F*, 97). Thus, the Creature is not only constituted as monster because everyone who sees him points a finger and dialogically declares "you are a monster." Rather, the Creature is situated within a discursive field of corporeal normality, in which the gaze strips him of his capacity to engage with others in a process of mutual recognition.

In fact, the only opportunity the Creature has for self-definition is during his brief conversation with Mr. De Lacey, since De Lacey's blindness creates a window for the Creature to express himself free from the "tyranny of vision":

I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless and in some degree beneficial; but *a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes*, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster (*F*, 95, emphasis added).

The fact that the Creature's only positive interaction with a human being is with a blind man suggests that the Creature may have had a better chance to achieve a more human identity had he lived in a world where vision did not regulate and discipline bodies to conform to hegemonic discourses of corporeal normality.

Not only does the gaze occlude dialog, as Shelley skillfully demonstrates, but it also reinforces the asymmetrical power relations between the subjects of the gaze (the “seers,” i.e. the villagers and the De Lacey family) and the object of the gaze (the “seen,” i.e. the Creature). These asymmetrical power relations are further entrenched after the Creature internalizes his identity as “monster.” As the Creature looks into the pool of water, he states,

How I was terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification (*F*, 80).

Hence, it is clear that Shelley understood how the dominant discourse of corporeal normality hampered the Creature’s ability to fully participate in processes of mutual recognition.

That said, Shelley still acknowledges that the Creature (as “excluded other”) participates in the social construction of his identity to some degree. In Hirschmann’s understanding of social construction, she maintains that “we are all constituted and constituting, simultaneously at once” (2003, 83). The dialogical exchanges between the Creature and Victor imply that Shelley would agree. Yet Shelley repeatedly draws our attention to the unequal power relations between the actors. Looking at the first conversation between Victor and the Creature, Victor yells, “Begone! I will not hear you. There can be no community between you and me.” The Creature directly replies with the following plea:

Let your passion be moved, and do not disdain me. *Listen to my tale*: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge that I deserve. But hear me...*I ask you not to spare me: listen to me*; and then, if you can, and if you will, destroy the work of your hands (*F*, 69, emphases added).

This plea strikes me in two ways. First, the Creature is more concerned with the process of judgment more than the outcome. He is desperate to be an equal participant in the intersubjective construction of his identity. Second, he knows that his ability to sculpt his identity

is tied to Victor's receptivity, since Victor is not disadvantaged by his externally imposed identity, having been granted his status as human. The Creature highlights the unequal power relations between subjects when he concedes to Victor: "*On you it rests*, whether I quit forever the neighborhood of man and lead a harmless life..." (*F*, 70, emphasis added).

Ultimately, Victor does not affirm the Creature's recognition claims. Subsequently the ultimate tragedy of *Frankenstein* is that the Creature is never able to see himself as anything other than a monster. One could easily attribute the tragedy of *Frankenstein* to Markell's conclusion that we cannot and should not attempt to control the reactions and perceptions of other individuals in a context of plurality, for any attempt "to become master of our... identity is not only doomed to fail, but risks intensifying the suffering unnecessarily" (Markell 2003, 65). However, Markell's appropriation of Arendt overlooks patterns of "who gets paid attention to, what gets heard, and how" within a context of plurality (Bickford 1995, 318). In contrast, Susan Bickford's analysis of the relationship between plurality and identity makes an important distinction "between being stereotyped or being otherwise not-heard (a kind of tension that is antipolitical) and being heard differently than we want to be" (Bickford 1995, 328). This distinction between being stereotyped and being heard differently than one wants to be draws our attention to the ways in which positively self-affirmed identities can be thwarted by dominant discourses and stereotypes.

According to my reading, the Creature's demand for recognition does not fail because he is heard differently than he wants to be, as Markell might suggest. In fact, Victor admits that "I was moved... I felt there was some justice in his (the Creature's) argument. His tale, and the feelings he now expressed, proved him to be a creature of fine sensations" (*F*, 105). Instead, Victor cannot bring himself to admit what was otherwise obvious. In his own words:

I compassionated him (the Creature)...but when I looked upon him, when I saw this filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred (*F*, 106).

Thus I argue that the Creature's appeals do not work because Victor is unable to think outside of the constructs of hegemonic discourses of corporeal normality. In short, Victor cannot move beyond his preconceived stereotypes of what a monster is.

For his part, the Creature cannot participate on equal footing in dialogue as a result of the material inequalities wrought by his identity as "monster." Not only does Victor not actively listen to the Creature, but the Creature is all-too-aware that he is dependent upon Victor. For example, in his pleas for companionship the Creature cries, "You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. *This you alone can do*" (*F*, 104, emphasis added). The Creature knows that he lacks the social capital, education, and economic security to achieve this goal by himself.

Lessons from the Tragedy of *Frankenstein*: Re-conceptualizing the Politics of Recognition

If the tragedy of *Frankenstein* is that the Creature cannot see himself as anything other than a monster, what are we supposed to learn from the tale? How, exactly, does *Frankenstein* inform contemporary debates about the role of recognition in political life? First, the miserable fate of the Creature reminds political theorists who are dedicated to social justice that we cannot overlook the fact that the social construction of demeaning identities unjustly forces members of devalued groups to navigate psycho-emotional, social, and economic hardships. Whereas Markell suggests that we should simply abandon pursuits of recognition and accept "the ineliminable possibility of suffering" (2003, 65), the tragedy of *Frankenstein* alerts us to the fact that we have a democratic responsibility to address the systemic social inequalities that impede

members of devalued groups from achieving participatory equality in public life. Although I cannot fully explore this point here, I find it remarkable that Shelley's *Frankenstein* focuses on the informal impediments to participation, given that the novel was written in an era when the majority of women, people of color, and propertyless workers faced a variety of formal barriers to participation, including the denial of basic right to vote.

Furthermore, the tragedy reminds us that even though the social construction of demeaning identities is detrimental to members of devalued groups, members of devalued groups cannot simply demand that other people recognize their self-affirmed identities, since we cannot control other people's reactions to our actions and speech. After all, because social construction requires some perpetual conflict and negotiation on the part of actors, participation does not necessarily mean that you get what you want. Therefore any viable alternative to Taylor's politics of recognition should abandon the pursuit of recognition within the framework of distributive justice and embrace an understanding rooted in the paradigm of procedural justice. Accordingly, recognition is not a good that we owe people, since the concept of a good implies fixity. Rather, recognition involves acknowledging the fact that we participate unevenly in processes of social construction. In the words of Nancy Hirschmann,

Acknowledging the disparities in powers of production and creation *within* the processes of social construction allows us to identify, locate, and name the ways in which oppressive groups have the power to define the oppressed... While recognizing that we all participate in social construction, identifying disparities in this process yields a further recognition that we participate unevenly, that such disparities are systematic, and that there is a loose pattern to how social construction takes place (2003, 101).

Ultimately, recognition is not about unconditionally recognizing the self-identifications of devalued groups. Rather, recognition entails addressing the unequal status of the participants of

social construction so that negotiations and conflicts over the social meaning of identities can occur on a level playing field.

Several political theorists have already made the move towards a more procedural understanding of recognition (see Tully 2000). Most notably, Nancy Fraser's theory of participatory parity is primarily concerned with the effects of misrecognition on democratic participation. According to Fraser, to be misrecognized is not simply to be thought ill of or devalued by others. Rather, it is "to be denied the status as a full partner of social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life... as a consequence of institutionalized patterns interpretation and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem" (Fraser 1998, 141). Hence Fraser argues that justice requires social arrangements that permit all members of society to interact with one another as peers (Fraser 2001, 29). What is important about Fraser's conception of recognition is that it redirects our focus to a new object. Instead of recognizing identity, we recognize the unequal status of the participants of identity construction.

In Fraser's deontological formulation, she identifies two preconditions for participatory parity. The first is what she calls the "objective condition" to participatory parity, which demands that the just distribution of material resources ensures all individuals the ability to participate in social life and interact with others as peers. Second, she argues that participatory parity requires particular "intersubjective conditions". That is, it requires that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants, thereby precluding institutionalized norms that systematically depreciate some groups of people (2001, 29).

The problem I identify with Fraser's participatory parity framework is that Fraser's preconditions are the very goals that the process of pursuing recognition attempts to solve. In this

way, the framework is tautological. As I understand Fraser, the first precondition mitigates the material effects of the social construction of demeaning identities through mechanisms of material redistribution. Although debates about material distribution are far from settled—what types of resources, how much, to whom— it is fairly safe to assume that most people recognize that institutionalized deprivation and exploitation impede participatory parity by denying some people the means and opportunities to interact with others as peers. If we recall the Creature’s statement that “I possessed no money, no friends, no kinds of property” (*F*, 85), we see that material redistribution would successfully mitigate the effects wrought by the materialization of devalued identities.

However, Fraser does not explain how we should achieve the intersubjective conditions necessary to preclude institutionalized value patterns that systematically depreciate some categories of people and ultimately deter them from achieving participatory parity in the process of social construction. Isn’t this is the very problem that the pursuit of recognition attempts to solve? Ultimately, I think that a return to a Foucaultian understanding of discourse offers some insights here. Foucault’s insistence on the plurality of discourse and language, and the impossibility of fixing meaning once and for all, implies that social meanings are temporary, contextual, and open to challenge. Therefore, I argue that resistance also involves the resignification of social meaning by displacing hegemonic meanings through practices of deconstruction and re-creation.

Some contemporary feminist accounts of deconstruction elaborate on the role of deconstruction as political practice. In *Gender Trouble*, for example, Judith Butler locates the political “in the very signifying practices that establish, regulate, and deregulate identity” (Butler 2006, 201). In Butler’s words,

Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible...The critical task [for feminism] is... to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity, and therefore present the immanent possibility of contesting them (2006, 201).

In this way, the deconstruction of identity establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated: for Butler, revealing the fictive and “unnatural” character of sex through deconstruction is a political act (2006, 203). In her discussions of political subversion and agency within the heterosexual matrix, drag successfully parodies and mocks gender identities by revealing the performativity of gender. Thus, the revelation—the unmasking of “foundationalist fictions”—allows for the resignification of meaning. Deconstruction is political practice.

Likewise, Patricia Hill Collins also explores political resistance through the resignification of social meaning in *Black Feminist Thought*. According to Collins, “the authority to define societal value is a major instrument of power” (Collins 2000, 69), so a central component of resistance thus involves resignification. Historically, discursive power structures have portrayed black women as stereotypical “mammies,” matriarchs, welfare recipients, and “hot mammas.” These degrading images are largely constructed by institutions external to African-American communities, such as schools, the news media, and government agencies. Yet Collins also suggests that these images are also perpetuated within the black community itself, in the family, church, historically black colleges, and other Black civic organizations, since nobody is “outside” of discourse (2000, 86).

In an attempt to understand how black women can construct independent self-definitions within a context where black womanhood remains routinely derogated within discursive

structures of power, Collins argues that resistance requires a two step process. First, black women must deconstruct and unpack hegemonic ideologies by “coming to recognize that one need not believe everything one is told and taught” (2000, 286). Yet, Collins argues that because deconstruction is simply reactive, successful resistance also requires constructing counter-hegemonic knowledge that empowers and values African-American women. Because black women have responded to their treatment in a variety of ways, their self-affirmed identities have taken a variety of forms within a range of public and private spaces. For instance, writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have both captured the struggles of forming positive self-definitions in their writings and creatively declared their own visions of what black womanhood means to them (2000, 93). The Blues tradition and other African-American forms of music have provided another location where women have come to challenge the externally defined controlling images used to justify black women’s subordination (2000, 105-106).

As Butler and Collins remind us, deconstruction is political practice. While Mary Shelley’s contributions to political thought have often been overlooked and undervalued, my reading of *Frankenstein* suggests that Shelley strategically used the novel format to debunk one of the dominant misrepresentations of her contemporary reality and condemn the exclusionary social and political practices of her time through literary deconstruction.⁷ Several of the themes within *Frankenstein* were undeniably influenced by Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Godwin’s *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, and Percy Shelley’s Romantic poetry. Yet, Mary Shelley is more than one of England’s most notable literary heiresses. She is a

⁷ Other authors have already argued that Shelley is an early deconstructivist. In “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, Gayatri Spivak reads *Frankenstein* as a text that contests the very notion of a unified subjectivity and, hence, the underpinnings of imperialist ideology. While I note Shelley reveals the “foundationalist fiction” of the assumption that the body is an external marker of an internal “self,” Spivak offers a deconstructivist perspective of the novel as a text of “nascent feminism” where the binary opposition of male/female are undone in Victor Frankenstein’s womb-laboratory (1985, 243-261).

political theorist in her own right. As I have tried to show, the tragedy of *Frankenstein* behooves contemporary theorists concerned with the political pursuit of recognition to fully consider the rich social and political insights underlying Shelley's novel.

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