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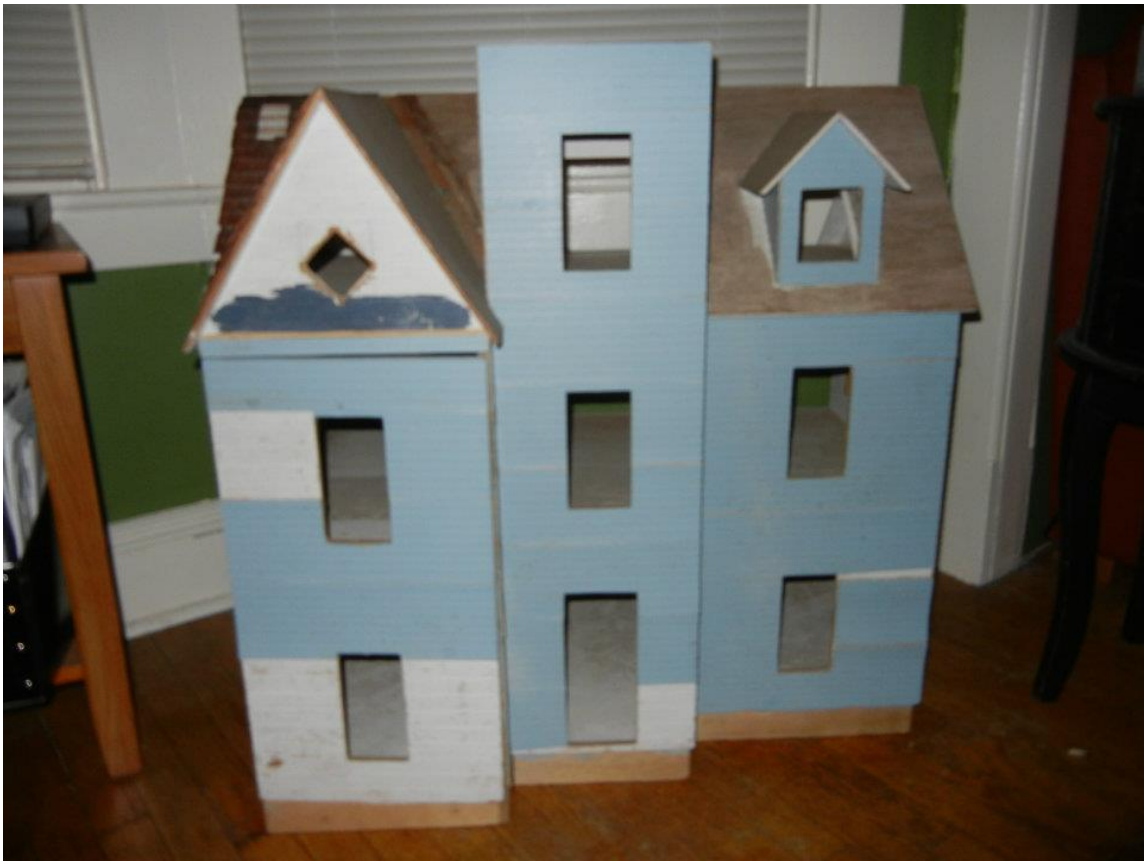
The Cyborg in the Basement Manifesto, or, A Frankenstein of One's Own: How I Stopped Hunting for Cyborgs and Created the Slightly Irregular Definition of Cyborgean Forms of Storytelling

Jilly Dreadful

> *One need not be a chamber to be haunted,*
> *One need not be a house;*
> *The brain has corridors surpassing*
> *Material place.*
>
> *–Emily Dickinson*



(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Dreadful-original-dollhouse.jpg)

The dollhouse when I first purchased it.

There was a hand-scrawled sign that read "sold" on the dollhouse at the thrift store. Under a decade layer of attic dust, the shell of a dollhouse had been built, but nothing had been installed (no walls, windows, stairs, or electrical) and the outside siding was damaged. Four different shades of blue were paint tested on one of the sides. It broke my heart that someone had beaten me to the dollhouse because it was the perfect

Victorian architecture I had wanted to use for my new media project, *The Spectral Dollhouse*. As a literary and new media artist, my work often revolves around forms of monstrosity and female childhood, so I wanted to employ these concepts as a means to chart the interdisciplinary terra incognita between critical and creative writing inside an animated space.

I am somewhat of a compulsive rule-follower, so I almost didn't ask about the dollhouse because it was clearly marked "sold." The manager, Craig, later told me that he had never sold his own items in the thrift store before because all proceeds from The Treasure Chest benefit the Albany Damien Center which helps people living with HIV/AIDS. But this was a special case. He had received a few inquiries about it, but everyone tried to lowball him and he was tired of fielding offers he wasn't going to entertain (hence the sign that said "sold"). I bought it for his full asking price of $200, a bargain if there ever was one, and it came with all the electrical, wallpaper, flooring, siding, windows, shutters, gingerbread trim, shingles, staircases, doors, and some windows—everything was jumbled together inside two cardboard boxes, the kind office workers use when they get have to clear their desk after being fired.

As he helped me load the bones of the dollhouse into my car, he told me he had originally planned to build the dollhouse for his mother, but then he said it had been stored in his attic for the last 10 years.

I made what N. Katherine Hayles might call a "hypertextual connection" in the beautiful and tragic absence of what Craig chose not to say: that his mother had died before he could finish the dollhouse, which was why it was in its current state of disrepair.

Looking back now, I see the fearful symmetry in how I acquired the dollhouse: not only did I literally find the physical answer to my project in a place called "The Treasure Chest," but the strategic lapses of language that Craig used, and the way I pieced the bits together to see his story as a whole; this first encounter would come to embody what my project was really about: narrative transmography.

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Before I can properly explain what narrative transmography is, outlining what *The Spectral Dollhouse* project is about, and the process of developing it, will work as a foundation for understanding how narrative transmography functions as a cyborgean

form of storytelling—and how narrative transmography has been functioning in narratives as far back as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (and even farther back than that).

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Dreadful-dollhouse-inside.jpg)

This is the cross-section of the dollhouse

The Spectral Dollhouse is a new media literary project that I initially animated with Adobe Flash Professional 5.5, but am currently revising and reprogramming with the Unity 3D game engine for publication with Eastgate Systems.[1] I refurbished and designed a physical dollhouse, and staged death scenes of real and fictional women inside each room—the way I photographed each space is meant to challenge the image as a representation of reality, as well as symbolize literary oppression that women face in regards to the procreation of their stories and bodies. My original vision included readers looking at a normal dollhouse photo on their screen, but once a card was shown to the computer's webcam, the Augmented Reality (AR) interaction would reveal the concealed narrative and the virtually hidden death scene.

While I could get the AR code to work based on the examples I found on an Adobe Evangelist site, my programming knowledge is minimal, so when I tried to merge it with my dollhouse code, I couldn't get the AR to work. I revised the original vision of the narrative structure to match more closely to what I could accomplish with my beginner programming skill set. In order to retain the driving force of the hidden story narrative design, I kept each photograph an explorable image and made a Ouija Board planchette in Photoshop as a mouse pointer, and the space is animated by the reader conjuring my writing as apparitions. [2]

My intention was that the combination of creative and critical writing featured together in the space—one haunting the other—would symbolize the ways in which stories animate our humanity, and that, for many readers, the loss of linear storytelling is the true horror.[3] I believe making connections is an act of creativity, so the order is less important than the hypertextual connections one makes on their own as they explore each room, especially as the ideas between rooms cross-pollinate. For the time being, you can access ***The Spectral Dollhouse*** **for free in its current Flash incarnation** (http://transmography.net/) on my website.

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This seam symbol— : | : —appears often in this essay and will be the symbol of animation around which the augmented reality will revolve in the future incarnation of this project. It is symbolic of the narrative seams writers use to sew a story together, as well as the animating force readers use when they connect the patchwork of fragments together to create the narrative as a whole.

The specific fashioning of this symbol is based upon the caesarean scars my grandmother has on her abdomen from when she gave birth to my mother and her siblings.

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It's important that we can see the narrative seams in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. After all, Frankenstein's Monster is one of the first and longest lasting metaphors of the posthuman: he is a man-made fabrication, created from makeshift body parts beyond the parameters of the biological, maternal body. Mirroring the monster's body, the narrative is also pieced together, thrice-fold removed from the reader, sewn together through the perspectives of Victor Frankenstein, his creation, and Captain Robert Walton. Furthermore, the fact that women are largely absent from the narrative drive [4] underlying the story is a conspicuous form of invisibility that can be read as a feminist call to action. (I imagine Mary Shelley tweeting, "Frankenstein: it's what happens when women don't participate in culture or meaning-making. #literarycaesura #thisiswhatafeministlookslike.") In this way, the character of Frankenstein's Monster and the narrative drive share a familial bond in the art of seaming: out of the pieces, readers construct the whole in a process called "cognitive closure" (McCloud 63).

Scott McCloud details this process of "cognitive closure" in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art,* a book-length non-fiction work about comics written in the comics form [5]:

> *This phenomenon of* observing the parts *but* perceiving the whole *has a* name*. It's called* closure. *In our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is* incomplete *based on* past experience*. Some forms of closure are* deliberate inventions *of* storytellers *to produce* suspense *or to* challenge audiences. *Others happen* automatically *without much* effort*…part of* business as usual*. In* recognizing *and* relating *to* other people*, we* all *depend* heavily *on our learned ability of closure. In an* incomplete world*, we must* depend *on closure for our very* survival*. (McCloud 63; emphasis his)*

By utilizing that space between the panels, called "the gutter," McCloud explains that creators and readers work together to perform "magic" there (68). He draws upon an example of a raised axe in one panel and a cityscape shot with a scream that rises above the buildings in the next panel, separated by a traditional gutter:

> *Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is* aided *and* abetted *by a* silent accomplice*. An* equal partner in crime *known as* the reader*. I may have drawn an* axe *being* raised *in this example, but I'm not the one who let it* drop *or decided how* hard *the blow, or* who *screamed, or* why*.* That*, dear reader, was* your special crime*, each of you committing it in your own* style*. All of you* participated *in the murder. All of you* held the axe *and* chose your spot*. (McCloud 68; emphasis his)*

Similar to the way in which the narrative structure andnarrative drive of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* symbolically represent and reinforce each other, so, too, does the structural medium of McCloud's treatise on comics, written in the sequential art form, reinforce the narrative drive of *Understanding Comics*. With some exceptions, print literature is typically regarded as not having a "body," only a "speaking mind." N. Katherine Hayles, a literary theorist who specializes in the posthuman and new media, explains the importance of a text's "body" by arguing that "the physical form of a literary artifact always affects what the words (and other semiotic components) mean" (25). When the narrative structure symbolically reinforces narrative drive through forms of cognitive closure, I refer to this process as "narrative transmography." Narrative transmography functions similarly to narrative drive, except for two distinct differences:

> *1) The structure or medium through which a story is told is inextricable from the narrative itself: one reinforces, or haunts, the other.*

> *2) A shift in perception on behalf of the reader, instead of the protagonist, is necessary, usually in some form of cognitive closure. The beauty of new media art forms is that closure can come in a variety of different styles: from the way a reader animates an eye blink across two panels in a comic book to realizing later that he should have not have climbed down that ladder in the video game* Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem.[6] *Narrative transmography is the animation of the structural engine that drives the story in not only new media works of art, but across artistic narrative texts of all kinds.*

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(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Dreadful-parlor.jpg)

Jane Austen and the Zombie Apocalypse Parlor

On the outside (as well as the splash page readers first encounter), the dollhouse looks unassuming—well, that's not entirely true. The exterior of the dollhouse plays upon the specific presumption that the inside will be immaculate in miniature. However, once you look inside, the violence that ravages the interior is literally splattered across each room.

My childhood was a secretly violent one, and there came a point that I wished my teachers would ask me how I got the bruises on my face. When I told my mother this

desire, she told me that my younger brothers and I would be taken away. I said good. I said at least it'd get us away from our father.

When I was nine years old, my mother said the words that haunt me still: if I told my teacher what was happening, my brothers and I wouldn't be kept together. She said we'd be split up.

I am five years older than one brother, and seven years older than the other. The only person at school who ever asked about my bruises was Mr. Franks, my sixth grade teacher. He knew my smile was fake, but Mr. Franks couldn't get me to change my story about little brothers, cheekbones, and unfortunately placed doorknobs. When my mom warned me that if anyone found out about the abuse, not only would we be taken away, but that we'd be split up, I decided it was better to endure the violence I knew than to go into an unknown situation. At least I understood the rules of my father's horror.

There is a specific tension I want to "play" with by utilizing a dollhouse to display my writing in this way, and the tension exists between work, play, and violence.

Dollhouses can be the expensive end-product of an adult-oriented hobby—building them takes a tremendous amount of *work*: consuming time, skill, and money to stage them "properly." [7] Furthermore, dollhouses bring out the urge "to collect" in many enthusiasts—furnishing each room is an opportunity for curation; plus, dollhouse hobbyists often have a collection of them.

Dollhouses are also, symbolically, relics of childhood—although it is a time of innocence, childhood constitutes our first encounters with what William Blake would call "experience," priming us for the way the world works when we are adults via exposure to varying degrees of "horror." [8]

In his essay, "The Uncanny," Freud examines the aesthetics of terror and anxiety, and argues that terror can be found not only in the Strange, but in the Familiar as well. The uncanny acts as the slash between the culturally defined binary between strange/familiar. As a scholar with my particular history, it probably isn't a surprise that I have been preoccupied with decoding forms of monstrosity as metaphors for cultural anxieties; particularly metaphors around monstrous bodies that exist in a state of "polymorphous perversity" which is defined as the constant shifting of borders, continual transformation, and accumulation of powers and body-parts (Allison 9-16). In these ways, a dollhouse is the symbolic convergence of innocence/horror.

It was my intention to make my dollhouse into the embodiment of that slash. Because in my experience, playing was hardly ever playful; it was a series of calculated, escalating risks.

There's a dollhouse in my soul, and I'm inviting you to look inside.

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The Spectral Dollhouse started as a very different project. I had envisioned it to be a traditional book project—with quires and a spine and binding—that did a feminist analysis of cultural representations of cyborgs. I had noticed a similarity among the texts I had chosen to work with. Even though the epistolary gothic works (*Frankenstein, Dracula*) were vastly different from the manual/guidebook style of Max Brooks' *The Zombie Survival Guide,* which, in turn, was wildly different from the comic books I wanted to include (David Mack's *Kabuki*, CLAMP's *Chobits*), the narrative structure of each text is essential to the narrative drive of their stories, and each text required a different form of cognitive closure as well. In order to contextualize these disparate works of fiction within the framework of "A Cyborg Manifesto," I focused on applying two of Haraway's more abstract definitions of the cyborg as starting points: the cyborg as a creature of social reality and as a creature of fiction. In doing this, I found the genealogical strand that bound these texts together:

> *A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed "women's experience", as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. (Haraway 149)*

When Haraway dismantles the notion of social reality as a "world-changing fiction," and reminds readers that "women's experience … is a fiction and a fact of the most crucial, political kind," she is calling to attention that there is no real distinction between "lived social reality" and "fiction" because one is constantly defining, or haunting, the other. Haraway's use of the word "fiction" is simultaneously troubling

and empowering. It's troubling because acknowledging that social reality is a lie is a tremendously scary proposition. We find ourselves as Neo in our own version of *The Matrix.* However, understanding the fact that social reality is a fiction means we can now write our stories. [9]

Since I'm a storyteller and new media artist, I'm most interested in what the myth and metaphor of the cyborg can do for the possibilities of storytelling. I interpret Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" as a call to action: to be a storyteller and take control of my own narrative. Haraway says that the figure of the cyborg will "change what counts as experience," especially for women. Changing what counts as experience takes a certain amount of intellectual freedom. But what does intellectual freedom look like? In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argued that identity is a form of storytelling, and that the act of coming to the awareness that oppression exists means that storytelling can be used to create revolution. He reminded us that sharing a story can be empowering and that one can use storytelling as a framework to move beyond oppression. He called for cognitive development to go beyond simply the "I" in order to have a wider awareness of one's subject position as part of a greater whole. In order to understand the balance of power between colonizers and the colonized, Freire throws the illusion of choice into sharp relief. Freire writes,

> *Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion (47).*

Framing notions like freedom and the illusion of choice through a posthuman lens, the notion of "awareness" filters through as the true anxiety of our current, post-industrial era, for it is awareness that awakens the ghost in the machine. [10]

The fact is: the ghost in the machine woke up long ago, beckoning not a technological singularity wherein computer or machines become sentient, but beckoning a sociological singularity where humans become more than cogs in a cultural machine: they become aware that oppression exists and try to do something about it.

Although people have long revolted against forms of subjugation, feminism has given us an intellectual toolkit to not only recognize oppression along gender lines, but to correct the cycle of oppression through education. And education, like history, is often at the mercy of those who do the shaping (or retelling) of it.

The unique power of feminism is that it teaches us how to recognize conspicuous absence or silence as a call to action. For example, it requires a form of cognitive closure for scholars to see a lack of women writers or black writers or queer writers as part of a standardized literary canon and then to do something about it.

Feminism is the original form of narrative transmography.

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"One of the most pervasive themes in the fiction and theory of cyberculture of the past few decades has been that the human body is vanishing, irrelevant or, interfaced with the machine, an empty shell robbed of what is variously called spirit, consciousness or identity," says Allison Muri in her essay, "Of Shit and Soul: Tropes of Cybernetic Disembodiment in Contemporary Culture" (73). She goes on to note that: "There is, apparently, neither birth nor decay in this marriage of calculation and angelic spirit: no offspring, no ageing bodies, no organs or secretions" (75). Muri's observation resonated with me and added to questions I was formulating about cyborg bodies—why are cyborgs sexed and gendered in a majority of contemporary media? And with those representations, where were the complications of a being a combination of biomatter and cybernetics? How did "pleasurebots" clean up after a client in *Tokyo Rose* or *Blade Runner*? Or how does a T-100 keep the thin layer of organic flesh alive around the mechanical skeleton in *Terminator*? What does a cyborg eat? What does a cyborg do with its waste byproducts?

The de-emphasis of the human body in cybercultural representations (in both fictional and scholarly texts) struck me as parallel to the de-emphasis of women and people of color that continually plays itself out in our current cultural theater. Take, for example, Disney's upcoming animated feature, *Frozen.* In a blog post titled, "Disney diminishes a heroine in 4 easy steps," Margot Magowan of reelgirl.com details the ways in which the film, originally titled *The Snow Queen,* based on the fairytale of the same name where a sister rescues her brother from a powerful female villain, has systematically stripped or masked the female agency of the original narrative:

> *(1)Change the title. Once called* The Snow Queen*, the movie is now called* Frozen. ***Using the same tactic as when Disney switched the title of*** Rapunzel ***to*** Tangled ***to hide the female star*** *(http://reelgirl.com/2010/11/disney-male-execs-stop-movies-starring-girls/) , it's become extremely rare for a female to be referenced in the title of an animated movie for children.*

> *(2)Change the story. In the original story, the girl rescues her brother. Now, she rescues her sister, keeping the trope of a damsel in distress and preventing a girl from saving a boy.*
>
> *(3) Create a male co-star. Just as* ***Flynn Ryder's role was expanded to equal Rapunzel's in*** Tangled *(http://reelgirl.com/2010/11/disney-male-execs-stop-movies-starring-girls/) , Disney invented Kristoff, a mountain man, to share the screen with the heroine.*
>
> *(4) Don't let females dominate posters or previews The first look trailer for* Frozen *has no Snow Queen and no females at all. It's a funny bit between two male characters.*

In addition to reminding readers that representations of women in children's media is rare, Magowan adds this observation:

> *Thousands of years ago, conquering armies smashed the idols of their victims and stole their stories, an extremely effective tactic to destroy a community and steal its power. Christians did this to pagans, but of course, this act is all over history. Just like the goddess morphed into the Virgin, girls are going missing under the guise of celebration. Right now, in 2013, Disney is stealing and sanitizing stories. It's an annihilation. How long before we all forget the original story? Will our children ever hear it?*

If Magowan's observations seem hyperbolic, days earlier Lino DiSalvo, the head of animation of *Frozen,* said this in an interview regarding the difficulty of animating female characters:

> *Historically speaking, animating female characters are really, really difficult, 'cause they have to go through these range of emotions, but they're very, very — you have to keep them pretty and they're very sensitive to — you can get them off a model very quickly. So, having a film with two hero female characters was really tough, and having them both in the scene and look very different if they're echoing the same expression; that Elsa looking angry looks different from Anna being angry. (Lee)*

Shortly after the interview with DiSalvo was published, Amid Amidi of cartoonbrew.com posted an animated gif of the two lead female characters over the face of Rapunzel demonstrating that they are all rendered with the same exact character model (so each of the faces of the three characters are shaped exactly the same, they're just "skinned" differently with different eye colors, freckles, and hair styles). "In the realm of knowledge, the result of sexual objectification is illusion and

abstraction. [A] woman is not simply alienated from her product, but in a deep sense does not exist as a subject, or even potential subject, since she owes her existence as a woman to sexual appropriation" (Haraway 159). When Donna Haraway asserts that, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess," she is resisting the dualistic nature of the essentialisms and naturalisms that "informatics of domination" use to codify and reduce women into objects that can be exchanged in closed patriarchal circuits (Plant).

> *From the perspective of cyborgs, freed of the need to ground politics in 'our' privileged position of the oppression that incorporates all other dominations, the innocence of the merely violated, the ground of those closer to nature, we can see powerful possibilities. …With no available original dream of a common language or original symbiosis promising protection from hostile 'masculine' separation, but written into the play of a text that has no finally privileged reading or salvation history, to recognize 'oneself' as fully implicated in the world, frees us of the need to root politics in identification, vanguard parties, purity, and mothering. Stripped of identity, the bastard race teaches about the power of the margins and the importance of a mother like Malinche. Women of colour have transformed her from the evil mother of masculinist fear into the originally literate mother who teaches survival (Haraway 176-7).*

While Haraway's cyborg is empowered by life on the margins, unattached to an origin point rooted in oppression, it is free to redefine language and dreams that are unencumbered by the history of oppression from which Western feminists inherently operate. The cyborg is a powerful symbol for the way feminism has the ability to unite other bodies that exist on the margins in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and class. But the metaphor of the cyborg is limiting in precisely the area Haraway argues is the cyborg's unique superpower: no origin point.

Feminists' power should not be located in our ability to be origin-less so that we're not genealogically tied to a tradition of oppression—this is inherently why it pisses me off when people say, "I'm not a feminist, but I believe in equality," or, "We should find a new word for feminism. Like equalism." Eliminating the etymological origin point of feminism in exchange for a new word unencumbered by the messy, wet history of feminism is a sterilizing of feminist history. To use Magowan's wording: it would be an annihilation of the history of women and the oppression that women have overcome, and the oppression feminists continue to call attention to. It should not be feminists' responsibility to make people feel comfortable that the word is rooted with "fem," but it is our responsibility to ensure that people understand that the definition of feminism does not mean privileging one sex, gender, race, or class, above another. The beauty of

Haraway's cyborg metaphor is that her cyborg deals in guerilla warfare: empowering those living on the margins with analytical weaponry.

Human embodiment is a wet process: each of us is a skinbag of ligaments and secretions. Discarding the shit and saliva, or sanitizing it, is no better than what Disney has done to *Frozen.*

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Dreadful-kitchenWEB.jpg)

Donna Haraway and the Kitchen

It is for these reasons that Donna Haraway's metaphorical death scene tableau is staged in the kitchen of *The Spectral Dollhouse*. The kitchen is not only a place of biological essentialisms, but a complicated space of privilege (the invisible labor of women), and also of sustenance (in both a traditional cooking sense, but also in the traditions that families pass on to each other)

I imagined that Donna Haraway rejected traditional sustenance and drank a teacup of oil.

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The promise of feminism is that, at its best, it helps illustrate the ways different theories interlock. Feminism paved the way for re-framing narratives, re-fashioning the body, re-visioning the self and re-inventing the script. Current and emergent new media technologies are changing "what counts as experience" as it democratizes knowledge, through processes like "sharing": from blogging recaps of favorite television shows that deconstruct casual racism and misogyny to universities' hosting course materials for free public dissemination to being able to quickly repost to articles to social media to share with friends or readers.[11] Nearly 30 years after the first BBS boards, we're only just now starting to harness the possibilities of the internet to empower people not only to access knowledge, but to participate in its cultural production.

I found that question, "What does intellectual freedom look like?" haunting.

I decided that intellectual freedom looks like a motherfucking dollhouse.

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There's a trope called, "Women in Refrigerators," (WiR) which was made famous when Gail Simone called attention to *Green Lantern* #54, when the hero comes home to find his murdered girlfriend stuffed into the refrigerator. The WiR Syndrome employs the death (or injury) of a female comic book character as a plot device, usually in male driven titles. The trope has been used to highlight the elimination (or incapacitation) of women in comic books and other media.

By co-opting the WiR trope of sensationalized female character deaths inside *The Spectral Dollhouse*, the project (re)appropriates the gaze in order to challenge the lines between gender, materiality, and violence in a new media format. I purposely staged the scenes so that there are no bodies of women, only the eerie aftermath of violence that has been left in the wake of their passing. I then photographed the rooms in such a way that readers hopefully "forget" that they're looking at a simple dollhouse.

The basement is the only room that features a body. Under the stairs in the entryway is a secret door to the basement. If you venture down below, you will encounter a cyborg being assembled in a secret laboratory. I thought it only fitting to have the foundation "house" the symbol that started it all.

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It's a common occurrence for writers to think of their texts as offspring—in this way, writing has been a (pro)creative act dominated by male writers for centuries. In their book*, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose that the pen is a metaphorical penis, and in print, ink is inscribed upon the "pure space of the 'virgin page'" in a process that mimics cultural misogyny (3-4). In her book, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England,* Sharon Marcus comments that, "Literary critics have noted the relatively paucity of autobiographies by women that fulfill aesthetic criteria of a coherent, self-conscious narrative focused on a strictly demarcated individual self" (34). This relative paucity of female writers is not limited solely to autobiography, but to the formulation of the Western literary canon.[12] Women's lifewriting during the Victorian era, however, Marcus clarifies, is:

> *[D]efined as any text that narrates or documents a subject's life. The autobiographical requirement of a unified individual life story was irrelevant for Victorian lifewriting, a hybrid genre that freely combined multiple narrators and sources, and incorporated long extracts from a subject's diaries, correspondence, and private papers, alongside testimonials from friends and family members. … The authors… often did not name themselves directly. Instead they subsumed their identities into those of their subjects. (Marcus 34)*

These Victorian female authors often wrote specifically for others with the intention of distributing the diary or work in small social circles. From the "capaciousness" of the genre, to the subsumed anonymity, Victorian lifewriting can be seen as the precursor to the likes of blogs and Twitter today. Perhaps due to the ephemeral quality of the medium (diaries and ink) that contributed to authorial impermanence (the journals weren't published in the traditional sense) lifewriting and new media texts share a monstrous, and feminized, lineage. Instead of contributing to the author's immortality via publication, the (female) writers of these texts were (and are) content with allowing them to "die."

In Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*—a hypertext story published in 1995—the form (the body) is the text and the text is the body. The reader becomes the psychic medium channeling the nonhierarchical branching mechanism that drives the story. I taught a class at Hobart and William Smith Colleges called Animating the Cyborg: Monstrous Forms & Digital Storytelling. I had my students "read" *Patchwork Girl*. For many, the method used for reading the story, the software program *StorySpace*, wouldn't install (I did my version of chest compressions on the .exe file and managed to bring it back to life). When the story was finally functional, my students were angry. They craved

linearity as though they craved air. They wanted to make sure they "read" the whole story. They didn't want to miss a piece.

But that's the point of *Patchwork Girl*. Making connections is creativity. There are stitches holding her parts together. And those stitches are aging. Archaic. Ancient, by now in the way technology evolves. So pieces are bound to drop off. Go missing. Hearts stop beating.

Shelley Jackson says she's okay with the death of a text. In fact, she's so okay with it that she's in the process of turning people into living, breathing words in *Skin*. This story is being exclusively published in tattoos; one tattoo per human participant. She says words have bodies, so it makes sense that she transmogrifies people into words. The only time the story will be read will be once every word is inked into skin, and then the words will gather and read the story. Both software and genetic code decay, so death is an inevitable function of the creative process. Shelley Jackson's words will inevitably die, and a clause of the contract each "word" signs to be part of the project is that Jackson will endeavor to attend each word's funeral. [13]

The Spectral Dollhouse is a monstrous entry in the world of literature in the tradition of both the haunted spaces of the gothic novel landscape, as well as the haunted spaces of new media projects that have preceded it. We have been familiar with the science fiction story of inanimate objects taking over humanity. The metaphor of objects gaining sentience and having demands (or words having lives), and possibly destroying the world in the process, can be seen from the Seneca Falls Convention to the writings of Karl Marx to the Civil Rights movement: it's the cultural fear that the oppressed will become the oppressors. My work highlights how technology has usurped the supernatural to become the emergent arena in which our cultural fears and fantasies play themselves out. Utilizing the technique that McCloud employed in *Understanding Comics*, with keen attention to Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," *The Spectral Dollhouse* is the embodiment of narrative transmography in practice: the dollhouse is a form of cyborgean storytelling, and, as such, highlights the ways virtual spaces and appropriations of gender combine to generate monstrous forms of embodiment. As literature and new media have become progressively porous and demand constant cultural and cognitive closure, this participatory reading process has the ability to generate intellectual freedom—establishing the social singularity brought about by technology and feminism as a feedback mechanism. In order to interrogate the ways in which cultural anxieties are inscribed upon the feminine, the concepts that I focus on

inside the dollhouse primarily revolve around the apprehension of maternity and authorial impermanence, the emergence of science and technology, desire.

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(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Dreadful-entry.jpg) Shelley Jackson "haunts" the entryway. This room was uncomfortable to stage for me because she is a personal hero of mine. I have admired Shelley Jackson's work for almost half of my life, and I met her in 2009 when she was a guest speaker for the Gender and Animation Speaker Series for The Fisher Center at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Placing her in the entryway, which is a marginalized, liminal space—the way that major pieces of her work, such as *Skin*, are marginalized and liminal—made symbolic sense. In a kind of *Showgirls* or *All About Eve* moment, my desire, to simultaneously admire her and to supplant her, has caused me to push her down the stairs. It's a monstrous impulse harnessed in a marginalized space, and it is only by exploring the room in its entirety that the secret door to the basement is revealed—because Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* was my entry point to new media, as well as my point of departure.

The cross-section of the dollhouse looks like patchwork on purpose.

: | :

Stories are programming.

Stories are coding.

I love the ambiguity of those phrases. They each could mean that stories are either in the process of programming or coding, or that the stories are the physical embodiment of each. Stories can also be the viruses that spread across a population. They are all of these at once.

The process of narrative transmography is not linear, but a meandering, and, at times, an abject method, in which the steps of the cycle often become blurred and reordered. I combine seemingly disparate parts into my very own creation in order to examine the intersection of gender, technology, monstrosity and narrative construction. I employ the metaphor of the cyborg in the form of a virtual dollhouse to highlight notions of materiality, visibility and impermanence, in an effort to prove that cyborgean forms of storytelling are able to break free of the dualities that once doomed the writing to vanish in the ether. Instead, these concepts now inhabit a polymorphous perverse space: the area of the grey: a convergence of the dualities that at one time were the foundations of the cyborg's original programming—boundaries and binaries that the cyborg now transgresses and blurs.

Shelley Jackson has said that writers are Frankensteins. She was highlighting that storytelling is about piecing together seemingly disparate parts in a Frankenstein process of one's own. In this way, she said, readers are Frankensteins as well because readers galvanize the story to life with the act of reading. And so I write and read. I tell stories and pass them on. I code meaning, and in the process I revive the space of the cyborg

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the members of the Fembot Collective, and especially Alexis Lothian, for their input on this essay. Their feedback helped shape and expand my thinking on these subjects.

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This article has been openly peer reviewed at **Ada Review** (http://adareview.fembotcollective.org) .

Footnotes (returns to text)

1. Eastgate Systems publishes foundational literary texts that utilize new media technology, like Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*.
2. Unity 3D seems to have the ability to incorporate AR in the way I originally wanted to implement it into the narrative design of my text, which is why I am switching software platforms. Although I am looking for a collaborator on this project (a programmer), as of this writing I do not currently have a collaborator.
3. I have taught *Patchwork Girl* in my course "Animating the Cyborg" to a surprising amount of resistance from my students, which I will explain later in this essay.
4. Einstein said, "You can't solve a problem at the same level of consciousness that created the problem" (qtd. in Watt 16). For the purposes of narrative transmography, I am using Alan Watt's definition

of "narrative drive" as, "The meaning [the protagonist] makes out of his *apparent* problem is the engine that drives the story" (17, emphasis his). Watt explains that at "The heart of every story is a dilemma. If we're not sure what our story is about, let's consider this for a moment: Problems are solved while dilemmas are resolved through a shift in perception" (16). Narrative transmography only works when there is a shift in perception on behalf of the reader.

5. Comics are also known as "sequential art."
6. Drawing upon the example of the Nintendo game *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2003), Chris Kohler explains:

> *"[O]ne of the first things you do is play as the character who soon becomes the main antagonist, and there's a ladder in front of him that will lead him down into the tomb where the main events of the game — horrors that will span millennia — are kicked into motion. And when you look at the ladder, you see this:*
>
> *" 'Should Pious climb down the ladder? Yes: A; No: B'*
>
> *"This seemingly innocuous dialog box is actually a brilliant little trick. There's no gameplay reason why anyone would need to press "B" at this moment; there's nothing else in the room and nothing else to do but climb down the ladder. A more recent videogame would simply have a screen overlay that reads "A: Climb Ladder." But here* Eternal Darkness *uses a gameplay mechanic to make a point: Pious, you realize a little later,* should not *climb down the ladder, should not set these events into motion. Written somewhat like a text adventure, the game is actually breaking the fourth wall to address you the player directly and asking your opinion: Should he do this? Is this a good idea? And by assenting, you're implicated in everything that follows."*

7. I use the word properly only to indicate proper in regard to the hobbyist's individual vision for the space, which ranges from traditional to non-traditional staging (Halloween themed dollhouses have a large internet presence).
8. I use "horror" in quotation marks because I wish to remind readers that, like most concepts, horror is culturally and individually defined.
9. There is a peer review process here at *Ada*, which enables members of the Fembot Collective to read and respond to each other's work. Nalo Hopkinson had this to say after reading the paragraph I just footnoted, which was so well-worded, that I am including her direct quote here: "[T]he following notion just came to me: a cyborg is an artificial (i.e

> human-made), reasoning pilot (kybernete) of an artificial body/ship. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* seems to say that just because the cyborg's body and its ability to reason are artificial doesn't mean that its experiences and reactions are false. There may be something there about humans lacking faith in our ability to be truly creative. … [The fear then is:] The monster that you made turns on you because you are a poor craftsman."

This concept is crucial for this essay as a whole, especially in regard to storytelling (or story sharing) having the ability to incite revolution (and, especially, when storytelling does *not* have that ability): "Just because the cyborg's body and its ability to reason are artificial doesn't mean that its experiences and reactions are false." For example, I usually refrain from writing, or speaking, about my childhood because, when I do, it tends to intimidate people—which is never my intention and happens so frequently that I am embarrassed that my stories have this effect. One of my best friends, Hannah Smith, has said (I'm paraphrasing) that her experience is not even a fraction of the trauma of what I have gone through, so how can she possibly feel bad about what she has gone through? She assures me that it is not my delivery that makes her feel this way (sometimes people "compete" for who has suffered more, and that is one competition I assure you that I do not want to win).

So why does my story make her feel, well, like a cyborg? (She isn't "human," therefore: she's not allowed to have an opinion.) I don't have an answer, but I have experienced this dynamic myself. For years, I didn't think I was abused because my father insisted that I didn't know what abuse was—when he was a child, both of his parents had gone to prison, so he went to live with his grandparents. One night, his grandmother made macaroni and cheese. My father hated cheese, and couldn't stomach to eat it. When my father vomited up his dinner, his grandfather smacked him in the face and told him to eat it anyway. And they both sat there until my father's bowl was clean, vomit and all.

Solving the problem of what counts as "authentic" or "valid" or "human" experience is at the core of Donna Haraway's argument: that everyone's story is valid.

10. The technological singularity is generally understood to be the development of sentient artificial intelligence in computers, and the common trope is that this superintelligence supplants humans in an

apocalyptic fashion. Skynet in the *Terminator* series is a prime example of this.

11. A couple examples of higher education institutions attempting to democratize knowledge include, but are not limited to: MIT Open Courseware, http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm – University of Oxford podcast lectures, http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/ – these are my personal favorites.
12. The paucity of women writers is a topic that has gathered momentum of late, due in part to **VIDA's The Count** (http://www.vidaweb.org/the-count) , which counts the rate of publication between male and female writers in the most respected literary outlets.
13. Shelley Jackson gave a lecture entitled, "Words and Other Bodies in Motion," at Hobart and William Smith Colleges as part of the Fisher Center Speaker Series on February 19, 2009. You can listen to it **here** (http://www.hws.edu/news/podcasts/fisher_center/jackson.mp3) .

PEER REVIEWED

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Jilly Dreadful is the librettist of the chamber opera, Light & Power: A Tesla/Edison Story, composed by Isaac Schankler. She received her Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California and is currently an adjunct faculty teaching literature and creative writing classes at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. You can play with more of her work at: transmography.net.

3 THOUGHTS ON "THE CYBORG IN THE BASEMENT MANIFESTO, OR, A FRANKENSTEIN OF ONE'S OWN: HOW I STOPPED HUNTING FOR CYBORGS AND CREATED THE SLIGHTLY IRREGULAR DEFINITION OF CYBORGEAN FORMS OF STORYTELLING"

Jilly Dreadful

NOVEMBER 11, 2013 AT 10:27 PM

A few days ago, one of my heroes, Joss Whedon, said words that make my heart hurt. And, in a strange way, he and Donna Haraway might want the same thing: a new origin story unencumbered by oppression.

The cyborg in Haraway's story would originate from a source that is not founded on oppression. The cyborg in Whedon's would originate in a society that is so post-sexism that the hipsters of the future would make sexist jokes ironically. But the common vision they share is "uncoupling" from the past. But I maintain that eliminating the etymological origin point of feminism in exchange for a new word unencumbered by the messy, wet history of feminism is a sterilizing of feminist history.

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I made this comment on io9.com where one of my favorite writers, Charlie Jane Anders, linked to our issue of Ada. I always wanted to make the site! Hooray for all the writers who contributed to our feminist science fiction issue!

http://io9.com/feminist-cyborgs-unite-the-feminist-science-fiction-1462561548

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Pingback: **Information Culture: Looking Back | Anastasia Salter**

Jonne Atman

AUGUST 23, 2015 AT 4:16 AM

Thank you for sharing some of your ideas. As a dollhouse collector I discovered your house while viewing images on Google. I had never thought to write about the scenes or people I display.
Yet the character sketch is assembling itself as I layer the items inside each space with detailed precision. Creating diverse and distinct separations between each vinyette. Now I want to extend my stories further thanks to you. It also gives a further purpose and opportunity for creativity to this collection. So thank you for helping me expand my path of creativity to include this new thought provoking encounter. I have created a small village of glass cabinets as condos and hotels, two landscaped residential mansions, a circus complete with antique animal marionettes to play with, vintage car display garage and a 9 floor North Pole apartment house for Santa and the elves. As you can see I am well on my way.
Thanks again.

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