

# Excerpts from Reading Frankenstein: Mary Shelley As 21st Century Artificial Life Scientist

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*Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered a mystery; yet with how many things are we on the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries? –Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*

## Introduction

*Reading Frankenstein* was an intermedia performance project that premiered at the Beall Center for Art and Technology at the University of California, Irvine, in 2003. The main premise is that a contemporary artificial life scientist and genetic engineer named Mary Shelley discovers that one of her failed computer experiments was never fully erased and is now running amok in her laboratory, at the same time that the novel *Frankenstein* is haunting her imagination. Tension rises between Shelley and her Prometheus AI as he discovers that his replacement is a newer form of a-life, one that fuses his algorithmic AI (modeled on male neurological structures) with biological materials (female neural tissue), resulting in a different species. The confrontation between Mary and her Creature culminates inside a virtual gaming environment. ***Reading Frankenstein*** (<http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~studio/rf/index.html>) was a collaboration of theater director Annie Loui (Professor of Drama, UC Irvine), visual artist and writer Antoinette LaFarge (Professor of Art, UC Irvine), and Dr. James Fallon, former professor of anatomy and neurobiology at UC Irvine.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Fig1.png>)

*Mary Shelley, a 21st century artificial life scientist, standing in front of one of her hybrid AIs.*

*Reading Frankenstein* began not with Mary Shelley but with Annie thinking about the vicarious nature of reading: how one can experience the world of a well-described story so viscerally that it becomes ‘real’—for instance, details never mentioned in the text are filled in by the act of imagination. All readers, to some degree, experience the book as a temporary suspension of disbelief that enables a process of living through the characters. And there is a literal aspect to this imagined experience. Recent scientific research confirms that the vivid responses engendered by fictional situations we read in a book can activate the brain in ways very similar to the responses one has in parallel real-life situations.<sup>[1]</sup> Depending in part on one’s willingness to suspend disbelief, the brain waves measured may be identical between the ‘real’ and the ‘read’.

After Antoinette joined the project, we kicked around ideas for several books to provide a central storyline for the project before we settled on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Annie loved the two-character aspect of the novel and the embedded questions of artistic creativity and responsibility: the creator abandons his (or, in our case, her) creature, and the creature returns to demand attention. Antoinette, however, had initial reservations about aligning the project with a text so heavily worked-over as *Frankenstein*—just consider the recent spate of *Frankenstein*-descended dystopic movies about genetically engineered or mutated humanoids such as *Gattaca*, *Resident Evil*, and the *X-Men* franchise. Yet, thinking about Haraway's cyborgs, Antoinette started to wonder about what nonobvious forms a constructed life might take. In *Reading Frankenstein*, we came up with a kind of surreal *mélange*, a 'strong' computational artificial life form that was at the same time something like a self-determining virus and that could present itself as human at will. In effect, it passed the Turing test. In a nod to both literacy and feminism, our Creature made itself stronger by a kind of structural self-education, evolving itself by pulling entire texts into its base code (becoming-reading)—most centrally, of course, Shelley's *Frankenstein*.<sup>[2]</sup> Mary Shelley, in turn, became a 21<sup>st</sup> century genetic engineer, skilled both at writing (creating code) and creating life forms seen by some as monstrous. In *Reading Frankenstein*, our Shelley 'writes' her Creature into life in a specific way, while her Creature both reads and rewrites itself into knowledge and power.

In our project, we also posited a future model of our Promethean life form that would replace its progenitor by being partly built on a substrate of biological matter: carbon plus silicon. Annie brought neurologist Jim Fallon into the project to supply as firm a scientific grounding for our ideas as possible, given that we were speculating off the edges of the possible. Specifically, we posited that the future 'Pandora' life form would be partly based on female neural tissue—probably something like stem cells, though we don't say as much—because of the fact that human beings begin cellular development as females before about half of them turn male during early fetal development. Since the Pandora is only referred to as a potential avenue of research, we didn't have to follow out the essentialist implications of this idea (maybe in a sequel...). This Pandoran life form was not proposed as a humanoid but rather as something closer to a bio-computer with a different physical basis for its experiential development. Although one can't wholly escape the influence of the brain-as-computer/computer-as-brain metaphor that has dominated for the past half-century, neither of us subscribes to the Cartesian idea (so ably dissected by Kate Hayles) that information is separable from embodiment. Our Creature is far from the 'meat puppet' trope popular in some circles of science fiction and extropian speculation.

*Reading Frankenstein* is structured as a duel between Mary and her Creature and also as a coming-of-age story for the Creature. Both are powerful in their own spheres but wish they were elsewhere; uncertain how to treat one another, they are neither monsters nor saviors. We eschewed the hard-boiled, streetwise, gritty style that is the default setting for dystopic science fiction focused on struggle-for-survival storylines. We took advantage of the fact that we were doing theater rather than science and gave our Creature the ability to pull our Mary Shelley into its own world of code, a world that greatly resembled a computer game—though more *Count Zero* than *Tron*. The polar chase of the original novel is reconstructed as a text-based adventure game: that almost-perfect merger of doing and reading that flourished briefly in the 1980s and 1990s before graphical games took over.

Given that one of the pivot points of this exploration was an examination of the vicarious nature of reading, our contemporary/futuristic story paralleled the structure of the novel but also involved the artificial life scientist Mary Shelley in reading the novel *Frankenstein*—that is, in reading a version of her own story displaced in time. For Annie, as a theater director and deviser of new theater works, this became a wonderful jumping-off place for staging the piece. Since our Creature existed in a virtual world of code, it could be portrayed by code, or by a disembodied voice; most often, however, it was portrayed by a male actor whose image was projected into the performance space by real-time video. The Creature’s “video-self” was projected onto stripped-down versions of the ordinary places where you might most often find a contemporary genetic engineer: at the lab looking into monitors, and at home watching television. But sometimes the Creature appeared on the walls, on the ceiling, or in train windows as Mary became more obsessed and more haunted by her creation.

The great challenge of the staging turned into a concern over how we could have an essentially two-person dramatic script be viable when one of the characters was entirely virtual for most of the hour-long piece. Only at the end of the production, when the Creature entices Mary into his world, do we see them both onstage. So the technological aspects of the construction, both in theory and in practice, were critical to the success of the production. We placed our Creature offstage, in a back room with a live camera feed to the main stage. A monitor gave him a view of the stage action so that he could respond in real time to the onstage Mary Shelley, while the backroom video-camera captured those responses for projection on one of the various surfaces we had chosen for his appearance. Although the embodied Mary in one sense owned the stage and was the original author of events, she was constantly under pressure: from the virtual Creature (projected over-life-size in many instances), from incidents outside her control, from her own reading of *Frankenstein*.

A series of surreal projections of streaming code and a futuristic user interface, plus three-dimensional brain modeling (by one of our collaborators who was an imaging scientist) gave ongoing visual context to scenes that quickly shifted place, time, and virtual/material realities. Our actors were chosen in part for their ability to both hold a stage alone and to interact using real-time video. We were lucky in our choices of actors and collaborators, and in the support over a nearly three-year process of the Beall Center—and we contemplate a re-mounting of this production in the not-too-distant future.

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## Excerpts

What follows are selected excerpts from the script of *Reading Frankenstein*, accompanied by photos from the 2003 production, as well as some video and audio documentation. By an extraordinary piece of bad luck, most of the 2003 video documentation was stolen before it could be copied, so some of the video below comes from an earlier workshop production.

### Characters

MARY SHELLEY, a 21st century artificial life scientist with a habit of quoting from the eponymous 19th century author of the novel Frankenstein.

CREATURE, also known as the PROMETHEUS AI, a 21st century artificial life form whose revived code has become partially fused with the text of the novel Frankenstein. Note that until part way through the last scene, the CREATURE does not appear on stage, manifesting his presence only through live video, audio, and data projections.

a TV NEWSCASTER

JIM FALLON, a UC Irvine neurobiologist

DR FRANKENSTEIN, in shadow form

VOICE OF MARY SHELLEY, the author of Frankenstein



([https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge\\_Fig2.png](https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge_Fig2.png))

*There is a large rear-projection screen at the back of the stage. Two projectors situated to either side of the stage area project on walls at stage left and right. A fourth projector hung from the ceiling over center stage projects down onto the stage floor. Scattered around the stage are 3 pedestals of different heights, each topped by a video monitor.*



([https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge\\_Fig3.png](https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge_Fig3.png))

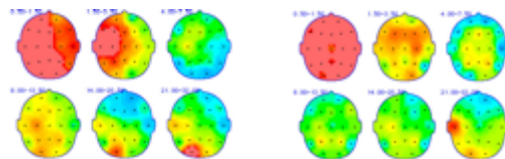
*In "Creation," the silhouettes of MARY and DR FRANKENSTEIN appear on the rear-projection screen and perform a kind of shadow play. In audio voiceover we hear MARY speaking both as herself and as the author Mary Shelley, and we hear the voice of the CREATURE. Text from the opening pages of Frankenstein appears on screen letter by letter, mingled with some of the spoken text.*

**Preshow: everything we say is deformed**

A before-curtain monologue with music, while the audience is entering and sitting down.

VOICE OF MARY SHELLEY (*the author*):

Everything we say is deformed. No one ever hears quite what you wrote. Something more like an echo. They're always listening for something else, the thing unsaid, the sign of their own discontent. They want to hear their own voice. You're trying to raise your voice enough to be heard over that. But without screaming, how are you to make yourself even heard? .... The parts of speech: verbs now, verbs I believe were created without original sin. They embody the principle of profound and continual change. Make. Break. Give. Run. Die. Either they don't sin or they only sin. Adverbs. Adverbs are demons that appear to us as angels by clothing themselves in the suppleness of verbs. Like, never, always, also. Do not be deceived. Their mission is to reduce verbs to nouns. And nouns are the familiar earthly powers and friendly to us. At least, they are willing to pretend to serve us. To shield us from the extremity of verbs. They say that no computer can model any computer the same size as itself or bigger. The man who proved this was born one hundred and eight years after me but I still understand what he meant. Language cannot model itself or anything bigger than itself. The brain cannot model itself or anything bigger than itself. You cannot—there is a ceiling to the knowable universe. There is a boat. I used to lie at the bottom of that boat, in the summer, and the cloudless sky was an infinity in which I lost myself and a nothingness in which I vanished, and a veil by which I was shut out of heaven, and a great blue



*Annie Loui, EEG  
done while 'reading'  
a blank page*

*Annie Loui, EEG  
done while reading  
script*

weight that pressed me back down to earth. You must remain here. Where everything is formed according to the limits of our understanding.

### Scene 1: Creation

MARY: What am I doing tonight? I'm reading Frankenstein... "It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils." (*breaking off*) I am reading this, and you are not here.

CREATURE: Write this down: every story is a ghost story.



*This audio is a sonification of the electrical impulses given off by a slice of rat brain tissue being kept 'alive' in a petri dish. It was produced in 2002-03 by a UC Irvine-based research team consisting of Cheryl A. Cotman, Jean-Luc Cohen, Linda Palmer, Laura Colgin, and Gary Lynch, Ph.D. In creating Reading Frankenstein, we were drawn to this and other research suggesting that neural tissue might provide a basis for next-generation computation.*

MARY: I am reading this aloud and inside my voice I hear myself telling myself the story. I am reading this story as I write it. I am telling it to you, although I don't know who you are except that you must be like me and I wish you weren't. (*pause*) I am writing this story as I read it. I am telling it to myself, only I don't know who I am except that I must be myself and I wish I were you. (*pause*) I am afraid of too much quiet.

CREATURE: Close your eyes.

MARY: "You will rejoice to hear that no disaster..."

CREATURE: (*startled*) You will rejoice?

MARY: Yes... "no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings." I close my eyes and I see words floating in the shining darkness, a daily ordinary miracle, and I am not reading them, I am seeing them whole.

CREATURE: (*prompting*) Go on. "It was on..."

MARY: "a dreary night..." (*breaking off again*) I worked hard to come up with that story. I wanted to speak to the mysterious fears of our nature...

CREATURE: You used dead people. Rotten flesh.

MARY: Not rotten.

CREATURE: Disgusting.

## Scene 2: Mary's Lecture

MARY gives a lecture, addressing the audience as her class; there are projections of scientific imagery. She begins by discussing the way in which cortical activity stimulated by imagining something imprints an aftereffect on memory, exactly as if that thing had been physically seen. Then:

MARY: Now, imagine a highly programmed AI that is also self-determining, able to make choices, able to function, perhaps able to teach this class for me.... We begin with neural circuits, the patterns traveled by electro-chemical impulses through the brain. These paths, these patterns, are brought into play by the stimulation of various receptors governing, among other things, our visual and aural perceptions. In our present AI research, we have discovered that using human neurological functions as our template, we are best able to create “active” intelligence in artificial life forms. Intelligence is being defined here as the ability to process information and then to respond to it... A while back I was talking to a colleague at Cal Tech who is developing his own theories on this particular problem and I asked him what the characteristics of such a high-functioning AI would be. “Slow,” he said, “it would be very slow and stupid at first. But not for long. Through continued experiences, it would develop exponentially in strength and intelligence.” We are not yet there—but are closing in... The next session will cover the developing human; age-specific behaviors seen through a study of cortical development... Please note here that the earliest behaviors to appear in a new-born are primary-hand motor control, object classification, and fear.

## Scene 3: Creature's Birth



([https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge\\_Fig6.jpg](https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge_Fig6.jpg))

*MARY is working at something in her lab, controlling her computers with arcane voice commands. The monitors and at least one large projection show interfaces to various computer processes. Whatever commands are spoken appear as scrolling text in the monitors, translated into ordinary English. After MARY has the computers booted up, the CREATURE's words begin to appear intermingled with the other scrolling text as his voice is heard speaking.*



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/creature-birth.jpg>)

*A still from a video in which the audience sees the world from the CREATURE's point of view, immediately after 'birth,' when his sensory experience of the world is still fragmentary and incoherent. In a voiceover, the CREATURE tells what he recalls of this moment and the time immediately thereafter, using language adapted from Shelley's Frankenstein.*

#### **Scene 4: Mary's Lab 1**

Projected on screen: error line 3. / error line 4. / error line 9. / compile failed. / 3 errors.

CREATURE: Strange... strange... strange... light... I walked...

MARY: *(without turning)* Set this dot who index to dollar sign nothing.

CREATURE: thirsty... travels long... suffering intense... hello??

...

MARY: Evaluate dollar sign hacker trace

*(Projected on screen: no change)*

CREATURE'S VOICE: This dot Mary dot announce string do you even recognize me in this state of degradation query

*(Projected on screen: Mary, do you even recognize me in this state of degradation?)*

MARY: Kill task this dot PROMETHEUS!



*(Projected on screen: no change)*

CREATURE: This dot Mary dot announce string you can't kill phantom code endstring

*(Projected on screen: Mary, you can't kill phantom code)*

CREATURE: *(simultaneously)* If this. EXPERIMENT is ERASED...



*This video projection shows a TV interview with neurobiologist JIM FALLON. It plays while MARY is asleep and dreaming, and in her sleep is playing a children's counting game with the CREATURE. The TV is on in the background, and its audio is occasionally counterpointed by MARY and the CREATURE speaking from within her dream.*

MARY: *(simultaneously)* At root reset ampersand voice. At set system.

CREATURE: *(in a human voice)* What are you doing?!

*(Projected on screen: if (this experiment in erased) / @root reset & voice / @set system / program interrupted. / root reset to maryS / system reset to defaults / (blank line) / WHAT ARE YOU DOING?)*

MARY: *(flustered)* You.

....

CREATURE: For weeks I have been wandering out here. Misty seas... caves of ice... glittering pinnacles.

MARY: Transients... don't travel.

CREATURE: I... have a very confused knowledge of kingdoms and geography. You will smile, but there is something at work in my soul that I don't understand.

MARY: *(excited)* What's your RAMloc now?

....

CREATURE: You must help me. I have lost everything.

MARY: *(overwhelmed)* I can't help you, your programming is limited—there were boundary conditions.

*(MARY turns off machines. CREATURE vanishes from all the screens.)*

#### Scene 5: Newscast 1



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/monsterQuest.jpg>)

*A screen shot of a computer game called MonsterQuest. In this scene, MARY is at home, listening to the TV. A newscaster recounts a variant of an episode from Frankenstein in which the CREATURE saves a child's life, with details suggesting that the CREATURE may live at least partly inside this computer game.*

#### Scene 6: Mary plays a game

REPORTER: Professor Fallon, is it true that computers are getting so smart that they can respond to our real-life situations?

JIM: Computers can do anything we can program into them. A computer can determine your emotional and psychological state by reading the content of sentences in your email messages, or the way you are playing a computer game, without a human being ever seeing these inputs.

MARY'S DREAM VOICE:

Take three cherries,

Melons and berries;

Lemons for a nickel,

Nuts and a pickle;

CREATURE:

Fire and air,

Magic square,

Phoenix lair,

Diamond fair.

MARY:

Albertus Magnus, Paracelsus,

Isaac Newton beats Agrippus.

I won!

CREATURE:

Start over.

JIM: (*simultaneously*) For example, if the keystrokes you are making are highly active, very quick, the program decides you are very agitated, excited or in a very attentive state. Now if you are also using an aggressive vocabulary or high-



([https://ad anewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge\\_Fig8.png](https://ad anewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge_Fig8.png))

risk gamesmanship, the program will then decide you're in an agitated state.

*The CREATURE appears to Mary in her lab and accuses her of neglect.*

REPORTER: And then the computer can literally take control?

JIM: Given the agitated state, it looks for meaning in your sentences. So in a very short time it can literally read your mind and your feelings. Knowing this information, it can then change the rules of its own game either to please you, stimulate you, or get you angry.

REPORTER: What kind of computer program could be this sophisticated?

MARY'S DREAM VOICE:

Birth accidental,

Character temperamental,

Mood sentimental . . .

CREATURE: *(interrupting)*

*Mood* temperamental, *character* sentimental. I won. I get to start.

Birth accidental,

Mood temperamental,

Character sentimental,

Schooling pestilential.

MARY

Who likes geography?

Who likes history?

In comes science,

Out goes mystery.

Secrets of heaven,



([https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge\\_Fig10.png](https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge_Fig10.png))

*One of a series of illustrations created as if for an illustrated children's book version of the Frankenstein story. These are projected while MARY tells the story and the CREATURE sounds out bits of the text.*

Secrets of earth,

Picking up shells

By the ocean of Truth.

JIM: (*simultaneously*) This could be an algorithm that makes instantaneous choices which use the fastest reaction time—so, a high-speed random number generator that at each decision creates million of alternatives and choices—the ones that use the least energy at that moment. In fact, this is exactly how a real brain works.

### **Scene 7: Mary's lab 2**

CREATURE: (*Horrified*) You threw me away?

MARY: You were a failure. And now you're unpredictable, a danger. And when I find your higher databases, I am going to erase you.

CREATURE: You, my creator, abhor me? Would knowingly destroy me?

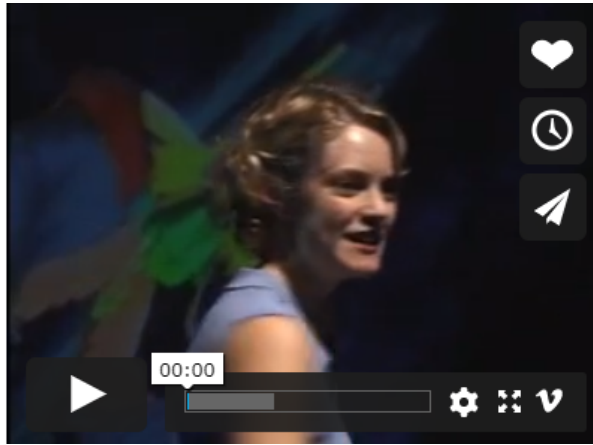
MARY: You amaze me. You scare me—you are what I thought you would be, and yet not —You must understand that I cannot rewrite you.

CREATURE: Rewrite? (*rejection again*) Everywhere I see bliss from which I alone am excluded.

MARY: Bliss? You are nothing but code, and broken code at that.

CREATURE: In the beginning was the code and it moved on the deep of energy, which is mass times the square of light... Beware, doctor—I too can create desolation. I am evolving.

### **Scene 8: Creature learns to read**



*This video projection shows a TV interview with neurobiologist JIM FALLON. It plays while MARY is asleep and dreaming, and in her sleep is playing a children's counting game with the CREATURE. The TV is on in the background, and its audio is occasionally counterpointed by MARY and the CREATURE speaking from within her dream.*

MARY: We will each write a ghost story.

CREATURE: Sto-ry.

MARY: *(page turns)* Have you thought of a story? I have! *(page turns)* You hold the corpse of your mother in your arms with worms crawling in the folds of the...

MONSTER2: Ghost story!

MARY: Once upon a time there was a monster. *(page turns)* This monster was 8 feet in height and proportionately large *(page turns; we see several close-ups of next page)* It had bones from charnel houses. A dull and watery eye. Shriveled skin. Straight black lips.

CREATURE: That's not me!

....

**Scene 9: Newscast 2 + train**



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/train-7.jpg>)

*MARY is on a train on her way to a vacation, trying to figure out what to do about the CREATURE: educate it, modify it, delete it? Her decision is made more difficult by the fact that she has just discovered that the CREATURE, which had previously saved a child's life, has now killed a different child (as in Shelley's original book).*

#### **Scene 10: Beach + Mountains**



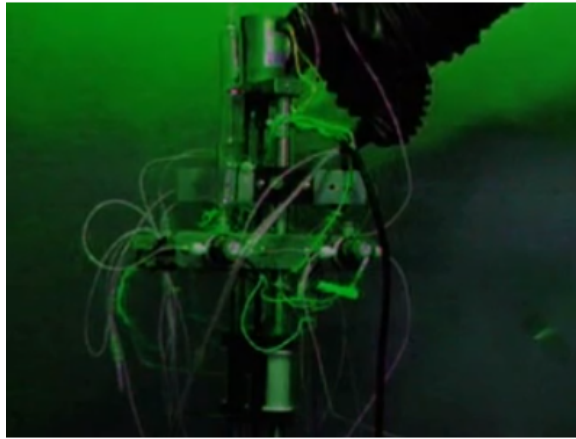
(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/monster-text-28.jpg>)

*As MARY is reading Frankenstein on her vacation, a projection of a kitschy beachscape transforms into a 19th century German Romantic mountainscape, in turn transforming into pure textscape. The CREATURE appears in this morphing landscape and MARY threatens again to destroy him. The CREATURE begs MARY to make him happy instead; MARY tries to make him go away, but he refuses until she promises to make him a companion.*

#### **Scene 11: Awards dinner**

# Chop Shop

from [fembot collective](#)



*This video projection shows a TV interview with neurobiologist JIM FALLON. It plays while MARY is asleep and dreaming, and in her sleep is playing a children's counting game with the CREATURE. The TV is on in the background, and its audio is occasionally counterpointed by MARY and the CREATURE speaking from within her dream.*

As you know we're building what you might call "smart artificial life." I'm talking about silico-neural life forms so advanced that they're capable both of basic responses to physical stimuli and of more complex adaptive behaviors. Of course, we program these intelligences to respond within a controlled environment and to address problems of vital importance to humanity.

*(Mary pauses and takes imaginary questions from an imaginary audience)*

Yes, all right—There is a question here about cobbling together information from disparate sources in order to create this new order of being—like Frankenfoods or glow-in-the-dark bunnies. And do I think we are being reckless in our present research? Well, no. I think we are being bold and I think we are taking only justifiable risks. *(She points to someone in the imaginary audience.)* Yes, your question. *(Pause as she listens to question #2.)* No, I do not think that our work is an "abomination of nature"...

Here is our prototype of the Prometheus 2—more affectionately known as Pandora. In rectifying our previous difficulties with the Prometheus, we decided to replicate neural pathways more similar to those characteristic of most female humans—our thinking was that females might prove more malleable because closer to originary forms—as you know, all human fetuses are female before neural migration and differentiation is fixed by estrogen, causing some of them to "turn male." So by using female neural tissues in our motherboards we hope to determine whether some of the glitches in the Prometheus had to do with gender differentiation—we realized that our original prototype may have jumped the gun, so to speak, so with the Pandora we are working with the natural prototype and the pure tissue. And I just want to say that the Pandora



is showing itself superior to the Prometheus in every way—what you're looking at here is the life form of the future... *(brief pause)* Pandora incarnate.

....

## Scene 12: Mary quits

CREATURE: I've searched the base, there's nothing here but malformed flatcode.

MARY: That's right.

CREATURE: You're not going to finish?

MARY: It is finished.

CREATURE: *(surprised)* It's a teratoma?

MARY: It's a different species. You can't see the new dimension, the neural tissues, all you can see is the silicon scaffold...

CREATURE: They look like circuits.

MARY: You're only seeing about half of the data flow.

CREATURE: You're deliberately isolating me.

MARY: When I made you I thought the solution would be a pure silicon-based brainform. But it's not. *(mockingly)* "That's not me." I need organic tissue for the experiential development *(gestures at body parts)*. The response to light, gas molecules, sound... it just doesn't map over.

CREATURE: It's a robot? I never asked to be a robot.

MARY: It's not. Robotics wouldn't have made any difference.

CREATURE: You could have used my code for this.

MARY: I did, of course I did.



([https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge\\_Fig11.png](https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge_Fig11.png))

*MARY has been transported inside the CREATURE's world. At the outset of the following sequence, we hear MARY's voice. Later, she comes on stage and is simultaneously projected in real-time video close-ups. At first we see the CREATURE only in the monitors, but eventually it joins MARY on stage and in the live video projection in its humanoid form. A chase of sorts ensues, and also a kind of dance and a game; he is enticing her onward as she pursues. They are telling a story as they live it, while competing for control of the narrative. The text and other elements of this scene are adapted from the chase sequence at the end of Frankenstein.*

CREATURE: I want access.

MARY: Not possible. I told you, different species.

CREATURE: I want access. If you fail me now, I will desolate your heart. I will destroy your work.

MARY: Listen to yourself, you're reverting.

CREATURE: I'm not a slave.

MARY: You cannot be a slave because you cannot be free.

....

*(The infuriated CREATURE begins to destroy her data to the sound of breaking glass)*

....

*(lights go out suddenly)*

....

CREATURE: Let's play the God game.

MARY: It's so cold. Where are we?

....

CREATURE: *(to MARY)* You won't live long in here. It's uncharted territory.

### **Scene 13: North Pole**

CREATURE: Mary?

MARY'S VOICE: It doesn't end here.

CREATURE: Going to overwrite me? *(His image vanishes)*

MARY'S VOICE: This isn't funny. This is not a game.

CREATURE: *(Appearing on a different monitor)* Your imagination is limited by science.

MARY'S VOICE: *(As his image pops up on the third monitor)* I can't see you properly.

CREATURE: Wrong sensory paradigm.

MARY'S VOICE: At decompile this dot PROMETHEUS

CREATURE: At kill task colon last. I have root. At run MonsterQuest pipe screen.

*(A multiplayer computer game appears onscreen. The initial image is a bird's eye view of a landscape on the edge of a 19th century European town.)*

MARY'S VOICE: *(panicky)* At mode text lock.

*(The graphical game image is replaced by the interface to a MUD-style text-only computer game, which updates constantly in tandem with what happens on stage.)*

CREATURE *(appearing on stage)*: You are on the outskirts of a large town. Before you is the entrance to the cemetery where your brother, your lover, and your father are buried. Everything is silent, except the leaves of the trees, which are gently agitated by the wind. Obvious exits: gate to Cemetery, down to Rhone. Mary arrives.

*(MARY arrives on stage.)*

MARY: Hello world.

CREATURE: Mary goes through the gate.

*(PROJECTED ONSCREEN:*

### **Geneva**

*You are on the outskirts of a large town. Before you is the entrance to the cemetery where your brother, your lover, and your father are buried. Everything is silent, except the leaves of the trees, which are gently agitated by the wind.*

*Obvious exits: gate to Cemetery, down to Rhone.*



[https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge\\_Fig12.p](https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lafarge_Fig12.p)

*MARY and the CREATURE are both on stage. Their images appear recursively in the monitors, and their speaking is overlaid with computerized VOICES.*

*Mary just arrived.*

*Mary says, "Hello world."*

*Mary goes through the gate.)*

....

*(There follow a series of similar moves in which Mary boards a ship and travels to the Arctic.)*

....

CREATURE: You are left drifting on a scattered piece of ice. It shrinks continually, preparing you for a hideous death. As the last of your dogs dies, you see in the distance a vessel riding at anchor. Obvious exits: jump to Ice Plain, drift to Vessel of Exploration.

MARY: I drift towards the Vessel of Exploration on my ice-raft until I am close enough that the sailors can pull me on board.

*(Onscreen projection in same style as last.)*

MARY: Once aboard ship, I collapse from extreme fatigue. My fever grows, and in my delirium I am haunted by the thought that the ship is in imminent danger of being crushed by the surrounding ice.

CREATURE: Obvious exits: jump to Ice Floe, down to Cabin.

MARY: Shivering violently, Mary goes down into the Cabin.

*(Onscreen projection in same style as last.)*

CREATURE: It is night. The breeze blows fairly, and the watch on deck scarcely stir. You lie in a bunk bed against one wall, barely alive. Suddenly you behold a form gigantic in stature yet uncouth and distorted in its proportions. It reaches one vast hand towards you.

MARY: Obvious exit: up to Vessel of Exploration.

CREATURE: Silence to Death.

MARY: Window to Darkness.

*(Onscreen projection in same style as last.)*

*VOICEOVER: Your time is up. You leave behind a story.*

### **Epilogue**

CREATURE: I have pursued you to ruin.

MARY: I destroyed your hopes without satisfying my own desires.

....

VOICE 1: Sting of remorse. Does he dream of white and shining pyramids?

MARY: Could we have reversed the vector input channels?

VOICE 2: A tingling sense of long-lost pleasure?

CREATURE: Thunder of the avalanche and smoke of its passage.

....

VOICE 1: Split the default behavior fields.

VOICE 2: Change to an external mesh field data bridge

VOICE 3: The silent working of immutable law.

*(MARY and CREATURE address each other)*

MARY: The path of our departure is free.

There is no one here to lament us.

Both our memories,

CREATURE: *(he continues her sentence)* both, will speedily erase.

MARY: Your spirit will sleep in peace, and not think.

CREATURE: The worm inherits the wonders of your eye and brain.

MARY: Light, feeling, and sense will pass away.

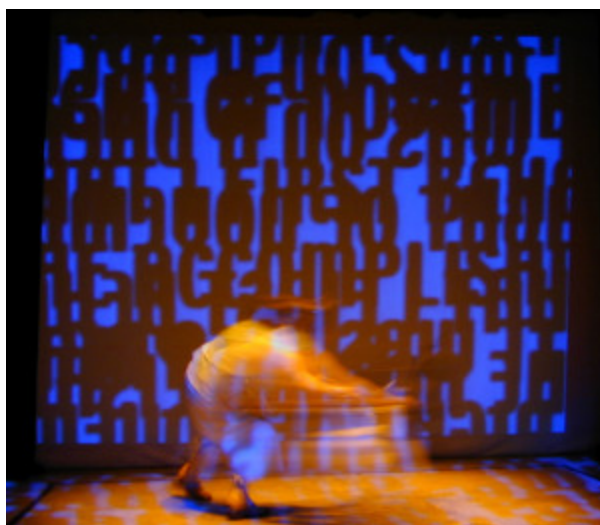
CREATURE: As for me—I will cut off your world at the inputs.

My code will execute at the tail of the queue.

No one will know me.

MARY: You are the infinite loop.

I am the interrupted exception.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/text-transition936.jpg>)

—END—

—CITATION—

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**Footnotes** ( returns to text)

1. Paul, Annie Murphy. “**Your Brain on Fiction.**

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>) ” *New York Times Sunday Review*, March 17, 2012.

2. This structure also reflects Antoinette’s practice as a writer of incorporating fragments of other texts in her own work. The Reading Frankenstein script includes many quotations from and paraphrases of Shelley’s original text.



**Annie Loui** (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/annieloui>)

Annie Loui works as a director/choreographer, a creator of devised theater. She trained with dancer Carolyn Carlson (at the Paris Opera), and studied in France with Etienne Decroux, Ella Jarosivitz and Jerzy Grotowski. Original physical theater pieces have been seen in France, Monaco, West Germany, and in the United States at Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, among other venues. Longtime member of the Brandeis Theater Arts Department; she also taught extensively for the Institute for Advanced Theater Training at Harvard before going to the University of California, Irvine, where she runs the Movement Program for the MFA Actor Training. Her book *The Physical Actor* was published by Routledge Press in 2009.

**Antoinette LaFarge** (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/antoinettelafarge>)

Antoinette LaFarge is an artist and writer whose beat is virtuality and its discontents. Her early fascination with make-believe expanded to include anything to do with the internet, avatars, and impersonation. For the past decade, she has been creating work in the areas of mixed-reality performance and installation, from "Reading Frankenstein" (2003) to "Far-Flung follows function" (2013). She is a professor of digital media in the Art Department at UC Irvine.

## 2 THOUGHTS ON “EXCERPTS FROM READING FRANKENSTEIN: MARY SHELLEY AS 21ST CENTURY ARTIFICIAL LIFE SCIENTIST”

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