**Frankenstein’s Creature in the Classroom: Disrupting Disability, Race, and Medicine**

I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers—their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I 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 that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity. (114)

By the point in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* when we hear of the Creature startling at his own reflection, we already know the extent of his pain and isolation, which he has eloquently expressed to Victor. We also know of his rejection by his creator, who regards him as a “Devil” and “vile insect” (99). Nearly two centuries later, in *Waist-High in the World* (1997), Nancy Mairs described a similar scene: once, on catching a glimpse of herself in a mirror, she “squealed,” “Eek, a cripple!’” (46). Although Mairs recalls “laughing” at the time, she notes that her “humor betrayed a deeper, darker reaction” based on her acute sense, as a disabled woman, of bodily inadequacy (46). In most ways Mairs’s life could hardly be more different from the Creature’s; Mairs describes a fulfilling career and community, an intimate and mutually supportive marriage, two children, and her Catholic faith. But both moments of shock illustrate the internalization of embodied expectations—something Adam Smith suggested when he called society a mirror by which we can learn to judge ourselves—and illustrate how profoundly an awareness of non-normative embodiment can undermine our personal sense of wellbeing.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this essay, we share Martha Stoddard Holmes’s sense of “how much *Frankenstein* has to say about disability” and share her puzzlement about why “we rarely see it on those terms” (375). Stoddard Holmes incisively reads *Frankenstein* “‘with’ disability”—following several scholars who have read the Creature as a metaphor for disability, or as defined by an unnamed deformity.[[2]](#footnote-2) We wish to go further. Fuson Wang has aptly noted how “Shelley frustrates every attempt to see the creature” (4), yet when historically contextualized, the novel’s few specific and relatively stable descriptors of the Creature’s appearance begin to seem like very clear and recognizable markers of nineteenth-century disease and disability.[[3]](#footnote-3) Most notably, the Creature’s “dull yellow eye” and “yellow skin” are signals of illnesses including yellow fever (57), and the Creature’s stature, “about eight feet” (54), matches the advertised height of several famous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “giants.”

Just as *Frankenstein* engages contemporaneous scientific flashpoints such as galvanism and vitality debates,then, we view the novel as an early exploration of “disability” in its modern sense, written coincident to the consolidation of medical authority over the body and the development of normative ideals of embodiment.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Creature embodies deformity in a general sense, is “disabled” by virtue of his sociocultural and aesthetic positioning within the novel, and also gestures to specific types of embodiment that were pathologized during the Romantic era. Importantly, the novel also addresses aspects of Romantic-era discussions of race, calling attention to the ways that Western medicine and science similarly studied, classified, pathologized, and exploited disabled and non-European bodies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—a legacy that we still live with today.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Using Frankenstein’s Creature as a focal point, this essay addresses three pedagogical situations at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM), where Emily is a faculty member, and from where Ashley is a graduate with a degree in English and a minor in biological sciences. The first is a yearlong freshman-level interdisciplinary Honors College seminar (henceforth “Honors Colloquium”) that Emily taught in 2018 – 2019 and in 2019 – 2020; though themed differently, both sections of Honors Colloquium featured historically contextualized examinations of disability and race. The second is “Literature of Experimentation,” a section of the capstone to USM’s English major that Emily taught in the spring of 2018, with Ashley as a student. Both Honors Colloquium and “Literature of Experimentation” were discussion-based courses; assignments included research presentations, low-stakes writing assignments such as reading responses and journals, and a final research paper. Finally, we discuss Ashley’s 2019 Honors College thesis, which examined *Frankenstein* alongside two responses to Shelley’s novel, James Whale’s 1931 film and Victor LaValle’s *Destroyer* (2018). When possible, we integrate the voices of other of Emily’s students who have volunteered to reflect on the course material.

In what follows, we situate the Creature as the heart of a constellation of texts, historical and fictional figures, and conceptual concerns that we believe can allow students to apprehend the importance of how we react to those bodyminds we deem non-normative—the bodyminds of strangers, coworkers, classmates, and loved ones, and even our own.[[6]](#footnote-6) The courses and connections we discuss are all transhistorical but begin with, or look back to, the early nineteenth century. Implicit to this essay, then, is a claim that to understand how disability and race function today, we need to revisit the Romantic era—and Mary Shelley’s Creature provides an unusually rich locus around which we can focus classroom conversations. It is our belief that reading Mary Shelley’s Creature as disabled can allow for productive and ethically important conversations about embodiment—especially if in doing so we situate the Creature in non-literary contexts, both historical and present day. By rendering the novel’s engagements with medicine, disability, and race concrete, conversations about the Creature can promote—and in some cases disrupt, or promote through disruption—students’ and professors’ sense of wellbeing. *Frankenstein* invites us to do the uncomfortable work of questioning our beliefs about medicine and rethinking our relationships with our own bodies and the bodies that surround us. Perhaps most importantly, Shelley’s Creature can also provide an impetus to work towards actively creating more inclusive and hospitable worlds.

**I. The Creature Constructed: Romantic Medicine and Spectacular Bodies**

From the first, Emily frames *Frankenstein* as a novel that interrogates scientific perspectives on non-normative embodiment. This is why Emily always spends significant class time on the novel’s earliest description of the Creature, which appears in Letter IV as Captain Walton writes to his sister of having witnessed a “gigantic” figure from afar. For Walton, the Creature is clearly a specimen whose extraordinary body demands recording for an English audience. Walton is drawn to the Creature, calling him a “strange sight” that “suddenly attracted our attention” (23), describing how he watched the Creature until he was no longer visible, and noting that “This appearance excited our unqualified wonder” (24). Walton situates the Creature’s body on the boundary of humanity: the Creature is a “traveler” and also a “he” (24)—and later is a “man” (26)—but is also distanced from humanity, “a being which had the shape of a man” (24). Walton also discloses his interpretation of the Creature’s race: the “traveler [the Creature] seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island” (24)—tapping into scientific and cultural connections between exploration, anthropology, disability, and race theory. Here and elsewhere the novel suggests how easily discourses of race and disability slipped into one another and how in many ways these discourses were mutually constitutive. In the 1831 “Preface” and the creation scene, the Creature’s yellow tone can be read as a gesture to yellow fever, or can be read as another racial reference, possibly suggesting (especially alongside the Creature’s dark hair) what Johann Friedrich Blumenbach classified as the Mongolian race (see Anne Mellor). [[7]](#footnote-7)

Emily’s students have been struck by Walton’s enthusiasm—his awe at the Creature, but also his arctic ambition and even his brotherly “love” of Victor Frankenstein despite Victor’s singularly “wretched…condition” and the “wildness, and even madness” in his eyes (25). When contextualized alongside Romantic-era balloonists, medical experimenters like Humphry Davy, and explorers like Joseph Banks, the passionate and danger-seeking Walton—and later Victor Frankenstein—look representative of the Romantic sciences, rather than a perversion of them. Kori Miles writes that before Honors Colloquium, she had “for a long time operated under the notion that there were certain entities that you do not challenge: God, government, and medical professionals.” Critiquing Walton and Frankenstein can allow students to question this presumption, and to begin to apprehend that medicine is not, in the words of Honors Colloquium student Eden Duley, “stone-cold science preserved from the influence of human prejudice and error.” Rather, medicine is profoundly shaped by culture, is (in Duley’s words) “subject to every human flaw” of those who shape it, and is marked by frequent revisions and truths that shift over time. In both Honors Colloquium and “Literature of Experimentation,” students researched and gave short presentations on medical and scientific contexts for *Frankenstein*, from galvanism to arctic exploration to race theory. By researching and critiquing Romantic-era medicine—which developed many features of medicine we now take for granted—students can develop the critical eye that Emily hopes they will deploy in examining contemporary medicine and approaches to embodiment.

In the context of *Frankenstein* and the links between Romantic-era medicine, disability, and race, Charles Byrne and Sara Baartman can provide especially salient touchstones for students. Shelley’s novel centers the Creature’s narrative while raising questions of voice and agency. Discussing Byrne and Baartman can help us to center the experiences of the historically exploited, rather than the medical authorities whose names and innovations are still celebrated, while also grappling with the ways that their stories have been filtered and altered in entering the historical record.[[8]](#footnote-8) In many compelling ways Byrne’s and Baartman’s stories of scientific abuse echo one another. Both had their identities reduced to their ethnicity and the physical traits that made them valuable medical specimens: Byrne, “The Irish Giant,” was prized and pathologized for his height, an advertised 8’ (the same as Mary Shelley’s Creature, although Byrne was actually 7’7”); Baartman, “the Venus Hottentot,” was diagnosed with “steatopygia,” a diagnosis whose sole function was to pathologize Africans who appeared to European eyes to have unusually large buttocks.[[9]](#footnote-9) Both were displayed as spectacles in London,[[10]](#footnote-10) and both were exploited by famous men of science (John Hunter in Byrne’s case and Georges Cuvier in Baartman’s) through their dissection and the collection and display of their remains.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Knowing this history, students can readily identify shades of John Hunter and Georges Cuvier in both Walton and Victor.[[12]](#footnote-12) Discussing the stories of people like Byrne and Baartman underscores the danger latent to responses of awe and exoticization—that wonder and exploitation are in fact two sides of the same coin. Discussing historical figures also can allow students to more readily picture the Creature as a human rather than as a hybrid or otherworldly monster. This allows for fresh classroom interpretations of *Frankenstein*, especially for students who have encountered the novel—or the Creature—before. For Ashley, discussing and later researching the Creature alongside people like Charles Byrne allowed her to expunge long-held images of a monster with green skin and neck bolts, and to begin to more concretely imagine him as he is described in Shelley’s novel—as the kind of figure who, like Byrne and Baartman, was used to challenge the boundaries of humanity. There also is a reciprocal effect to such discussions: because Byrne’s and Baartman’s voices have been almost completely lost to history, in some ways it may be easier to center them as subjects alongside the Creature’s moving narrative.

Importantly, both Byrne’s and Baartman’s remains were still held in Europe at the turn of the 21st century: Baartman was repatriated to South Africa in 2002, after periodic display in Paris; until 2017, when the Hunterian Collection closed for renovations, Byrne’s skeleton was on display in London. Knowing that the issue of Baartman’s and Byrne’s bodies is contemporary allows Emily’s students to trace the influence of the Romantic era to the present. Honors Colloquium student Kelcie Bolden writes that Baartman “is an important figure because we still see her legacy in modern times,” especially in the continued sexualization and dehumanization of Black women.[[13]](#footnote-13) Considering Baartman and Byrne as contemporary issues also invites us to question our own participation in the troubling patterns of objectification that determined the lives of people like Byrne and Baartman. In her classes, Emily has found Suzan-Lori Parks’s play *Venus* (1996) useful in exploring such issues of complicity. The play writes the audience into Baartman’s exploitation in its opening “Overture,” as Venus “revolves” 270 degrees, then an additional 90, then 180 (1 – 2). From the first, we—theatre goers, but also readers—are asked to confront our own desire to stare at Venus’s extraordinary body. Likewise, through its extensive temporal interplay, *Venus* allows students to think through the relationship between past and present, and in particular the legacies of the Romantic era.[[14]](#footnote-14)

When writing her Honors College thesis, Ashley conducted research at Philadelphia’s College of Physicians. She studied records related to the anonymous 19th-century “Mütter American Giant,” who at 7’6” nearly matched the height of Charles Byrne, and visited his skeleton at the Mütter Muesum. Not only did this allow Ashley to more fully appreciate the exploitation of people who have been made into medical specimens; it also allowed her to more fully recognize her affinity with those medical professionals she increasingly had come to condemn. When she encountered the bones of the Mütter American Giant, Ashley was intending to attend medical school, and she experienced an uncomfortable self-recognition: she felt that could understand Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton—and even John Hunter—when she found herself transfixed by the towering skeleton, feeling that she couldn’t look away, wanting to know more. The presentation of the Mütter American Giant—as an unnamed specimen on display in a glass box, advertised as “the tallest skeleton on exhibit in North America”—invited objectification, and absolved Ashley of the sense of responsibility she may have felt on encountering a living man of gigantic stature. Nonetheless, in retrospect Ashley felt embarrassment at the fact that it took her so long to regard the skeleton as once having been connected to a human being. Her coursework in literary studies, Ashley believes, allowed her to finally imagine a human back into the skeleton; like other proponents of the health humanities and narrative medicine, she now wonders what would happen if all medical professionals were required to have similar training.

In Emily’s classes, conversations about the history of medicine often reached a kind of climax when students watched *Get Out*, which Jordan Peele has called “sort of … my take on *Frankenstein*.” The film’s horror hinges on medicine: the protagonist, Chris Washington, is the latest would-be victim of a transplantation surgery, “the Coagula,” that uses Black bodies as hosts for the brains and consciousness of mostly white clients. The surgery allows these patients to recapture youth and health, while relegating the host to the position of a “passenger” viewing helplessly from an inner distance in the “Sunken Place.” The surgery also allows clients to reap what they see as the benefits of blackness, including physical strength and athleticism, as well as exoticized coolness (“Black is in fashion!,” a potential buyer exclaims to Chris in the prelude to his auction). Chris is a spectacle to be admired, a Black body to be bought and sold. Like the Creature—and Sara Baartman and Charles Byrne—Chris’s humanity and subjectivity don’t matter to the medical professionals and patients who will benefit from his effective murder.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Alongside *Get Out*, Emily’s classes have discussed Henrietta Lacks, the Tuskeegee syphilis experiments, and James Marion Sims, the so called “Father of Modern Gynecology” who developed groundbreaking technologies and techniques by experimenting on unanesthetized enslaved women in Alabama.[[16]](#footnote-16) In such contexts, Dean Armitage, the father and surgeon in *Get Out*, seems less fantastical—just as historical context can render Victor Frankenstein more realistic. In their focus on the value of disabled and enslaved bodies to scientific progress, such historical figures as John Hunter and James Marion Sims, like the fictional characters of Victor Frankenstein and Dean Armitage, failed to consider human beings as more than a means to a medical end. “Literature and Experimentation” student Hiba Tahir found the class’s discussions of “Western Medicine’s exploitation of non-white bodies … incredibly unsettling.” Before discussing race, Emily’s “Literature of Experimentation” class had discussed animal experimentation, largely through *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Tahir reflects, “It was really disturbing to know that while we had struggled, through various discussions, to determine if non-human creatures deserved humanity, some people in history had denied actual humans their humanity in such outrageously cruel ways.”

Such conversations can be especially difficult—and especially important—for students majoring in the sciences or working towards careers in medicine. One such student, Sonny Miles, acknowledges that his “profession has had a controversial and perhaps cruel past.” Miles reflects that “It is important that I keep in mind just how influential my opinions will be to my future patients, and that not all individuals know to seek a second opinion.” Forensic biology major Caroline Genius writes that “When we learn that our science and medicine is built off of the horrors endured by [marginalized] people in the 18th and 19th centuries … it allows us to see how the systems we have today perpetuate the inequalities.” And yet, Genius notes, “When we can learn about the roots of this system, we can effectively work to reverse the damage done.” Brooklynn Smith, who intends to pursue an MD/PhD, writes that “Modern medicine trains people to distance themselves from their patients and to curb empathy in the name of science, but a lack of empathy and a drive for innovation is what created James Marion Sims.” Smith reflects of her future, “More than anything, I don’t want to be James Marion Sims. I don’t want to replace empathy with innovation or trade humanity for science.”

**II. The Creature Rejected: Disability and Society**

In both Honors Colloquium and “Literature of Experimentation” Emily has taught the Creature’s animation as a moment at which medicine, via Victor Frankenstein, literally constructs disability by creating the Creature’s non-normative body—but also, by virtue of Victor’s rejection of his progeny, constructs the Creature as “disabled.” As student responses make clear, however, the particular horror of Victor’s response in the animation scene is that it carries the emotional impact of a rejecting parent.[[17]](#footnote-17) The scene therefore can be said to emblematize the ways that medicine and culture collaborate in shaping responses to non-normative bodyminds. After Victor’s refusal to acknowledge his creation, the Creature’s earliest experiences continue to be of unmitigated rejection—by an old man, villagers, the Delaceys, William Frankenstein, and the companion of a drowning girl. If Walton’s initial response to the Creature tracks with contemporaneous scientific responses to non-normative humans—awe, a desire to collect—the reactions of these other characters require additional explanations.

Emily’s classes, and Ashley’s thesis, looked in part to yellow fever to help explain the horror the Creature elicits. We would not claim that Mary Shelley intended for her readers to think that the Creature was infected with yellow fever. However, jaundiced skin and eyes were an especially potent and fearful shorthand for illness and infectious disease in the 19th century: yellow fever epidemics were unpredictable and medicine had proven impotent at treating the disease or preventing its transmission. Yellow fever also triggered xenophobic fears because port cities and European travelers to tropical climates had proven susceptible to its deadly effects. The novel’s gestures to yellow fever can be seen as a factor that for 19th-century audiences may have complicated and amplified responses to the Creature’s gigantic stature and the general sense of deformity he conveys throughout the novel. To more fully account for responses to the Creature, Emily’s classes look to more general Romantic-era responses to disability. When discussing blind old DeLacey, as well as Justine’s murder trial, Emily’s classes discussed the “science” of physiognomy, and the implications of the belief that it is possible to limn a person’s talents, character, and personality by attending to their appearance. Physiognomy operates on a fantasy of making the interior visible, of finding moral significance in one’s exterior—and Victor operates according to this fantasy when he concludes that “Nothing in human shape could have destroyed” his brother William (76).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Some students suggested that the novel caused them to think about their own interpretive processes, andtheir possible complicity in adopting troubling views of those bodyminds they deem non-normative. One Honors Colloquium student, Caroline Genius, noted that “While physiognomy may not be a scientific practice today, reading Frankenstein brought my attention to how much it is still a social practice. I’ve begun noticing, too, when people judge others based on their looks or demeanor.” A second colloquium student, Eden Duley, remarked that “Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has opened an internal dialogue for me on the way I myself and the rest of the world view” ill and disabled people, “point[ing] out the human propensity to fear and despise those that look different and think differently than ourselves. In seeing the way Frankenstein’s monster is cast out…for no crime greater than an abnormal appearance, I was confronted with my own tendency to be made uncomfortable by [disability or illness].” And yet, Duley wrote, becoming “aware” of these tendencies “has given me the opportunity to address it directly and better recognize the prevalence of everyday discrimination.”

Emily’s class discussions often dwell on young William Frankenstein’s response to the Creature, which suggests how Shelley’s 19th-century readers—just like 21st-century college students—would have received contradictory messages about disability. The Creature has approached William because of his young age, assuming him “unprejudiced” because presumably he “had lived too short a time to have imbibed a horror of deformity” (142). But the Creature’s hope is misplaced, as William interprets him as a fearful “ogre” who will “eat me, and tear me to pieces” (142). This is the novel’s only reference to an ogre, the gigantic creature that populated children’s stories. As students can easily recognize, in many traditional fairy tales, bodily difference is often symbolic of evil intent. Asking students to list physically disabled villains in popular media—fairy tales, comic books, Disney movies, superhero movies, crime procedurals—can be a useful exercise. So, too, is asking them to think of villains whose bodies do not visibly reflect their evil; often these villains are explicitly diagnosed with psychiatric conditions that in reality do not correlate with violent crime.

When discussing the moment at which the Creature is shot by the companion of a girl he has just saved from drowning (141), Emily has drawn links to recent police shootings of disabled people in the United States, as well as the mechanisms by which we determine that someone is a threat. For example, in 2017, Magdiel Sanchez was shot dead in his front yard while holding a pipe—despite cries from witnesses who told cops that he was deaf and could not hear their commands. In 2016 a North Miami police officer shot Charles Kinsey, the Black occupational therapist of an autistic man named Arnaldo Rios-Soto; the police officer had misapprehended Rios-Soto’s toy truck as a weapon, although Kinsey repeatedly explained the situation to the police. The police defended the shooting by saying that the autistic Rios-Soto, not Kinsey, was the intended target. Such incidents raise difficult questions. How and why do some misapprehend disabled people, whose bodies may move differently from how they expect bodies will move, or who might communicate in ways that they don’t recognize? And how can we account for the intersections between disability and race when it comes to violent police responses to unarmed, or legally armed, citizens?

Victor LaValle’s *Destroyer* (2018), which Emily has assigned in Honors Colloquium and which Ashley discussed in her thesis,directly hinges on a police shooting. Although *Destroyer* begins in the Artic with Mary Shelley’s Creature, who has survived for two centuries, we also soon meet a second Creature-figure in the form of Akai, the reanimated son of Black experimental scientist Dr. Josephine Baker. [[19]](#footnote-19) Akai was shot by police officers after they mistook the 12-year-old boy’s little league baseball bat for a gun. *Destroyer* frames Akai’s death in the same way that more and more people have come to interpret similar events: as the product of a racism that is foundational to the history of the United States. (*Destroyer* links Dr. Baker’s loss to that of Medgar Evers’s widow, and depicts Baker in the seat of the Lincoln Memorial when she declares herself “the Destroyer” in avenging her son’s death.) Similarly, *Destroyer* problematizes past technological milestones as well as possible technological futures. We may take aspects of science and medicine for granted, but like *Frankenstein,* LaValle’s *Destroyer* invites us to cultivate skepticism.

Emily’s classes pursue what she hopes are troubling conversations about the agency of characters in, and readers of, *Frankenstein* and *Destroyer*. It is difficult to hold Shelley’s Creature solely responsible for what he does—he had no guidance or love, as students so often note—but it is also difficult to fully absolve him of responsibility, especially for the murders he commits out of revenge. From a Disability Studies standpoint, we believe it is important that the Creature is not merely a villain or a victim, two stereotypes that disabled characters often inhabit, especially in 20th- and 21st-century media. Instead, the novel may be said to offer a stringent critique of the common tendency to presume character from appearance, depicting the pain and futility with which an individual may fight against such assumptions. Because he is neither victim nor villain, we are forced to recognize the Creature’s human complexity. Something similar may be said of Dr. Josephine Baker, who assumes the mantle of “The Destroyer” and takes violent revenge after tremendous struggle and loss, and after fruitlessly contending with the systemic misogyny that led to the loss of her job and the systemic racism that led to the loss of her only child.

In the end, Emily’s students expressed deep feeling for Mary Shelley’s Creature, but also the pain of feeling for him. Honors Colloquium student Mallory Extine wrote of the Creature that she “hurt for him,” and felt distress at being privy to so much of his pain and “trauma.” Honors Colloquium student Emma Smith was most moved by the scene in which Victor tore apart the Creature’s mate: “All he craved was a community and to be loved. When Victor destroyed the mate, he destroyed the Creature’s last chance at being loved, which in turn destroyed his last chance of fulfilling the purpose that God had written on the borrowed heart inside his chest.” For Ashley, the effect of researching and writing about both *Frankenstein* and *Destroyer* in her thesis was to provoke her to confront racist and ableist assumptions she had been acculturated to make. She did not think of her own ingrained prejudices while reading Shelley’s and LaValle’s novels; rather, after reading them and reflecting on them, she began to much more readily identify, question, and address her own quick judgments and microagressions.

For other students, confronting the Creature allowed them to recognize internalized normative values that they had wielded against themselves—much like Nancy Mairs describes reeling at her own reflection, and then interpreting that impulsive response. Kori Miles wrote about how the discussions in Honors Colloquium led her to view her own bodymind differently. “At some point it really hit me,” she wrote. “I might not have all the medical verbiage to explain what's happening in my body but in a lot of ways I will always understand it better than someone standing on the outside looking in.” Reading *Frankenstein*, and discussing the history of medicine, she wrote, was part of recognizing and processing her embodied identity, and how society had shaped her sense of wellbeing. She wrote,

In my own experience I had to overcome the fear not of how my declining health was continuing to encroach upon and diminish my quality of life, but on how differently people would see me if they knew the extent of my disability. As a young woman I had to address whether or not my body’s dysfunction had at all diminished my feminine beauty. As a young black woman I had to face the fact that seeking treatment and medication was almost as if I was crossing an invisible barrier into an untapped sphere of vulnerability. I experienced none of these difficulties separately but rather they acted in conjunction with one other.

What Miles describes is, Emily hopes, is an ongoing process of seeking and questioning and scrutinizing that may allow each of us to have more agency over how we view and treat ourselves as bodyminds. Such seeking and questioning and scrutinizing also may help us to be more accountable for the ways that we interpret—and impact—the bodyminds we encounter.

**The Creature and Crip Futures**

As humanists, we are trained to consider the kinds of difficult questions that medicine necessitates, such as how we do—and could otherwise—value different kinds of bodyminds, and what constitutes a life worth living. Many of us teach our students to identify biases and critique stereotypes, and teach literature that allows our students to consider the perspectives of people who are different from them. As literary scholars, we can understand and articulate the importance of the language we use when talking or writing about certain kinds of bodily conditions. We also understand the importance of narrative and why, for example, it matters if a doctor believes their patient’s account of her own body, or what it might mean for technology to contradict a patient’s sense of his own symptoms. “Literature of Experimentation” student Zachary Wheeler suggests, “The world needs scientists and engineers in order to push humanity forward and bring to life extraordinary and impossible ideas, but we need those individuals in philosophy and the arts to inspire us to keep pushing and ethically guide how we choose to do that.” Or, as Honors Colloquium student and future medical professional Sonny Miles has commented, humanistic inquiry can be seen as part of a “a system of checks and balances” that is “necessary … in order to keep [science and medicine] functioning fairly and humanely.”

Hiba Tahir wrote that reading *Frankenstein* “forced me to contend with what it means to be human”—a line of inquiry that left her “disturbed” and “bewildered,” and that she had never before considered. Now a graduate student in creative writing, Tahir says that she was “still reeling from those questions” and that “they continue to haunt me in my poetry studies.” It is our hope that the Creature can likewise continue to haunt us, but we hope he also may guide us. Although he regarded his reflection with “terror,” the Creature requested a mate who looked like him. This request often is read as pragmatic or defeatist, but it also can be interpreted as resistant, or even as recuperative. Emily teaches it as a promise to behold disability and to not turn away. This is, of course, precisely what the Creature himself was denied by his creator, by strangers, and by a child, all of whom covered their eyes or otherwise averted their gaze; even old DeLacey, the one character who conditionally accepted the Creature, implied that were he not blind, he would “judge of [the Creature’s] countenance” (134). The Creature’s request of Victor is to enable his future with a similarly embodied companion, explicitly removed from European society in South America. In imagining this future, the Creature resists curative logic (see Alison Kafer), identifying the problem of disability as a problem with (European) society and not with his bodymind itself. We can and should regard the Creature’s story as a cautionary tale. But we may also look to the Creature as we work to imagine crip futures—the possibilities that move beyond the norms that consolidated as Mary Shelley sent her “hideous progeny” into the world.

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1. Smith suggests this generally, but as Paul Kelleher has argued, Smith’s theory of sympathy operationally and conceptually depends on the category of deformity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a short reading of the novel, Lennard J. Davis lays out a provocation, “We do not often think of the monster in Mary Shelley’s work as disabled, but what else is he?”—and goes on to read the Creature as “a disruption in the visual field” (143). Yet, as Fuson Wang has noted, “there still exists no detailed account of [the novel’s] take on disability” (3). Wang’s and Stoddard Holmes’s articles have begun to fill in this gap, as has Jared Richman’s reading of *Frankenstein* as “both a disability narrative and a passing novel” that hinges on “elocutionary mastery” (190 – 1). It is worth mentioning that foundational literary disability studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder view the novel as an example of the instrumental and exploitative use of disability as a plot device—a conclusion that scholars of Romanticism might find more difficult to reach, given the tendency to view Shelley’s Creature as complex and sympathetic, and to view the novel’s ending as unresolved. Also see Essaka Joshua on blindness in the novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wang rightly calls attention to the novel’s ambiguous characterization of the Creature’s “deformity of…aspect” (76); its “unreliable narration, contradiction, half-truths, exaggerations, and strategic prevarication” (3); and the “flagrant contradiction” in the most detailed bodily description we are given of the Creature, in the animation scene (4). Emily teaches these features of the novel as characteristic of descriptions of disability: because disability can “disorder expectations” (Garland-Thomson *Staring* 37) and trigger what Ato Quayson calls “aesthetic nervousness,” it often provokes unstable narration. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Essaka Joshua’s *Physical* *Disability in British Romantic Literature* (2020) has a chapter on *Frankenstein* in which Joshua reads the Creature in the contexts of deformity and monstrosity while arguing, as her book does as a whole, that it is anachronistic to identify “disability” in the Romantic era. (As what Joshua calls a “pre-disability” period, she claims that Romanticism requires us to use another set of terms.) By contrast, Emily views Joshua’s thorough and compelling discussion of the Creature alongside 18th- and 19th-century accounts of monstrosity and deformity as in fact evidence of the existence of an operative Romantic-era concept of “disability” as a sociocultural identity and aesthetic category—even if it wasn’t so named by 1818. In many cases (such as *Frankenstein*), literary, medical, and philosophical authors explicitly engaged, and sometimes even theorized, the social and aesthetic dimensions of non-normative embodiment—the foundation of “disability” for many contemporary Disability Studies scholars. (See Emily B. Stanback’s 2016 book *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Circle and the Aesthetics of Disability*.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In our approach to the historical intersections of race and disability, we hope to address Nirmalla Erevelles’s call for “more robust and complex analyses of race and disability” that “are necessary for us to move beyond the initial conceptual space of analogy.” A way to do this, Erevelles suggests, is by “engag[ing] the historical contexts and structural conditions within which the identity categories of race and disability intersect.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In using Margaret Price’s term “bodymind” here and elsewhere, we have in mind Sami Schalk’s note that the phrase is apt for discussions of race, in addition to disability, insofar as the “enmeshment of mind and body” can be useful in “discussing the toll racism takes on people of color” (5). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Over the course of the novel both the Creature and Victor Frankenstein speak of the Creature’s identity in ways that link him to contemporaneous discourse on race. This is a topic of discussion in Emily’s classes, although space does not permit us to discuss it in detail here. In addition to Anne Mellor, the several scholars who have read the Creature in the context of race include Allan Lloyd Smith, who explores the novel’s “thematics of race and slavery” in relation to “contemporary discourses on race, slavery, and antislavery” (209), and H. L. Malchow, who explains how characterizations of the Creature “drew upon contemporary attitudes towards non-whites”—what he calls a “hidden, or ‘coded’” dimension of the Creature’s characterization (90, 92). Just as many critics have read the Creature’s “deformity” as unclassifiable, some critics have suggested that the Creature resists racial classification. Elizabeth Bohls claims that the Creature exists “Beyond any specific category of difference or otherness – gender, race, class” and it is for this reason that he “comes to symbolise a principle of absolute outsiderhood” (168). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paul Youngquist’s *Monstrosities* is an important text in thinking through Romantic-era scientific and medical approaches to extraordinary bodies such as Baartman’s and Byrne’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hottentot was another name for a Khoikhoi; “Venus” was a reference to a body whose buttocks and genitalia were associated with sexual desire—a European desire projected onto the bodies of Baartman and other Khoikhoi women. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Baartman’s time in London coincided with Mary Shelley’s late childhood, suggesting that Baartman’s—and Byrne’s—bodies may in fact have been some of the bodies that haunt *Frankenstein*, perhaps directly informing Shelley’s sense of how society and medicine may respond to those bodyminds it deems non-normative. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Hunter undermined Byrne’s reported wish to be buried at sea, acquiring his corpse and keeping his bones. Georges Cuvier made a full body cast of Baartman’s body before dissecting her corpse and preserving her genitalia. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Paul Youngquist has called Victor Frankenstein John Hunter’s “heir,” and has said of the Creature that “This prodigious being,… this tall man, comes to avenge the bones of Charles Byrne” (55). Emily concurs, and reads the end of the novel—in particular the Creature’s agency to choose (or not) a death at sea—as a kind of answer to Byrne’s wishes. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Crais and Scully for a discussion of Baartman’s “ ghostly presence in modern Western culture” (148). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Venus* also illuminates how both medicine and broader culture dehumanize non-normative bodyminds, largely through the play’s depictions of the Cuvier-inspired character Baron Docteur (and his medical colleagues), as well as a freak show. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Lesley Thulin’s reading of *Get Out,* which is concerned withrace, disability studies, and *Frankenstein*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Historian Dierdre Cooper Owens has explained the crucial role of 19th-century medicine to slavery and has demonstrated how, in turn, slavery was foundational to the development of gynecology: “Most pioneering surgeries” in gynecology in the United States “happened during interactions between white southern doctors and their black slave patients” (4). In a similar vein, Jim Downs has argued that epidemiology developed in part because of the opportunities to study disease afforded by slave ships and plantations. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Martha Stoddard Holmes has suggested that the Creature’s awakening scene may be interpreted as “dramatiz[ing] an unsatisfactory parental response to the birth of a disabled child” (374). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Emily teaches the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* in partbecause of an added passage in which Elizabeth becomes a more direct foil to Victor: she is invested in poetry, the sublimity of nature, and “the magnificent appearance of things,” while Victor is invested in “the hidden laws of nature” (36). Elizabeth also is no longer Victor’s cousin, and her beauty is described in greater detail in 1831. The later edition therefore amplifies the novel’s engagements with issues of embodiment and aesthetics, as well as inheritance and bloodlines. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In addition to Shelley’s Creature—a truly fascinating character in *Destroyer*—as well as a (briefly) reconstituted Victor Frankenstein, the key characters in the graphic novel gesture to Shelley’s characters in complex ways. Dr. Baker is in some ways a figure of Victor Frankenstein, but also resembles the Creature in her losses and revenge. Both Akai and the Bride (formerly Pliers, Akai’s father) are figures for the Creature in the scientific, experimental, hybrid constitution of their bodies. As a figure who seeks the advancement of science at all cost, Dr. Baker’s boss embodies some of Victor’s characteristics. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)