

**(Inter)Facing the Other:
An Analysis of the Role of Cyborg Partiality in Constructing Identity**

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Humans find a strong sense of identity in their facial features. We use faces to recognize our friends or family in a crowd. As infants, people are programmed to be especially attuned to the human face (Santrock 154). In yearbooks, students are listed two ways: by their name and by their face. When photographs are taken, the focal point of the picture is not hands or shoulders or knees—it is the subject’s eyes or smiles. We use our faces to speak, to transmit our emotions, to express affection or disgust. Familiarity allows us to read people’s typical facial expressions; close friends will nearly always catch the idiosyncratic reaction in each other’s faces, even when they try to hide it. If all this were removed, wiped away, and replaced with something completely different (a hybrid face, for example), could we honestly say that in the eyes of other humans that person’s identity, the way we perceive him or her, is unchanged? Or, conversely, if our identity is not found in our physical attributes, what determines who we are?

Such are the questions raised by Donna Haraway’s essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto.” Haraway writes, “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction...By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (384). Using the image of the cyborg, Haraway proposes that, far from being individualized, identity constantly changes and depends on interactions with external elements—humans, machines, animals, technology. The irony of her argument consists in her insistence on wholeness through partiality: an identity is incomplete until it has been disassembled and reassembled through interface with something else. The juxtaposition of two depictions of cyborg identity, one from news headlines and one from literature (Mary Shelley’s classic precursor the modern cyborg, *Frankenstein*), will elucidate the role of cyborg partiality in determining our personal and collective identities.

Thirty-eight year old Isabelle Dinoire awoke from a medication-induced sleep to a horrific realization. While she slept, her nose, lips, and chin had been brutally savaged by a dog. Arguably one of the distinguishing elements of a person’s identity, her face, was stripped from her. Her subsequent disfigurement forced Dinoire to relinquish the ability to walk in public without eliciting stares or averted gazes, to eat unassisted, to articulate thoughts through speech—in short, to participate in the human community. Isabelle Dinoire’s physicians, incapable of restoring her original facial structure, offered her the first face transplant and, consequently, a chance to reconstruct an identity for herself. This reassembly involved the fusion of her face with that of a brain-dead woman who had consented to become an organ donor. Dinoire’s face is no longer wholly her own, nor is it completely the face of her donor. Rather, Dinoire now possesses a hybrid face, a fusion of the features of donor and recipient (“First Face” 1). Just as Haraway’s formula for coding the cyborg produces a “disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self,” the restoration of Dinoire’s face resulted from the interface of her identity with another (388). Each time she glimpses herself in the mirror, she will be confronted by the reflection of a different person. Thus, Dinoire’s personal, physical identity, through the mediation of technology, is also a collective identity: her physical “self” in its present state would not exist without the intervention of fellow humans and science.

Her story reminds us that the world is evolving. The dichotomies which previously governed our lives (science and nature, human and machine) are giving way to a new order. This new world—the world of the cyborg—is no longer grounded on monolithic “original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate” (Haraway 385). Haraway would suggest that not even Dinoire’s pre-transplant face possessed original unity. For Haraway, such unity or totality is a myth perpetuated in order to facilitate domination (385).¹ Completeness is a process, not an inborn state of being. If we achieve wholeness, it will grow from a progression of interdependent relationships rather than individual autonomy. Identity, then, is not found in individuality, but is forged through cyborg interface with others. Dinoire literalizes the cyborg identity, in which, argues Haraway, exists the only hope of future self-preservation. The concept of a partial face transplant, then, melds the partiality of disciplines. The cyborg in modern medicine blends the social and the scientific; they are merged in the individual as a social subject.

When viewed from the perspective of Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” a facial transplant is a contemporary revision of Mary Shelley’s classic *Frankenstein*. Haraway invokes *Frankenstein* as a narrative of Self versus Other. The elegant, civilized *Frankenstein* constructs a Creature who simultaneously represents his physical antithesis and his intellectual equal. Increasingly throughout the novel, *Frankenstein* and his Creature blur. Indeed, in popular culture, the Monster is often referred to as *Frankenstein*. Yet, despite their undeniable bond, *Frankenstein* refuses to acknowledge a connection with his creation. After experiencing disassembly (*Frankenstein* by the separation of his Self from his Creature and Dinoire by the mutilation of her face), Victor *Frankenstein* and Isabelle Dinoire are each given the opportunity to reassemble themselves by interfacing with an “Other.” *Frankenstein*’s “transplant” fails because he refuses to admit his bond with his Creature. In rejecting his creation, *Frankenstein* concurrently eradicates their ability to merge into a “fruitful coupling” and condemns them to a fate of isolated individuality (Haraway 384). However, Isabelle Dinoire’s transplant allows her to reassemble herself by embracing a partial identity.

Disassembly is only the beginning of understanding Haraway’s conception of the cyborg: “The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and *reassembled*, postmodern collective and personal self” (388, emphasis added). Reassembly grants admittance into the cyborg world through the recreation of a self that combines the private and the collective. A relevant, modern construction of identity demands the abandonment of previous notions of individualization and independence. “The relationships for forming wholes from parts...are at issue in the cyborg world” (Haraway 385). Haraway proposes a dialectic that consists of a thesis, the Self, fusing with an antithesis, the “Other.” A partial, reassembled cyborg identity resolves the tension between these opposing elements. Once disassembly has informed them of their dependency on the myth of unity, Victor *Frankenstein* and Isabelle Dinoire must choose whether or not to interface with an “Other.” Their response to this critical question determines whether they are able to resolve the dialectic, reconstruct their identity, and receive a sense of wholeness through partiality.

Though the stories of Dinoire and *Frankenstein* parallel one another through disassembly, the similarities cease with their respective acceptance or rejection of reassembly. Dinoire sought

¹ Haraway cites both Marxism and psychoanalysis as Western culture’s most powerful myths of original unity. Each of these depends upon producing differences in order to fuel the domination of women and nature. For a full discussion of the influence of original unity on domination (Haraway, 385).

to bridge the identity gap between herself and the donor of her facial tissue through the merging of their faces and, consequently, identities. Dinoire endured a dangerous surgical procedure in order to receive a new physical expression of identity. Her willingness to accept the risk was fueled by the desire to assimilate. Without a face, she was over-individuated; the fame and attention she received due to her disfigurement was overwhelming and unwelcome. However, her new identity enables Dinoire to resign her status of extreme individuality and once again blend in with the crowd. The exchange of individuation for a collective identity allows her to gain wholeness through partiality—the reassembled identity of the cyborg.

Victor Frankenstein, in contrast, declines to renounce his individuality in order to experiment with a joint identity with his creation. Though they are bound together, tension and strain characterize the relationship between Frankenstein and the Creature. Frankenstein dreams of fame and recognition. These yearnings motivate his meddling with the processes of nature, culminating in his great act of creation. His aversion to releasing his hopes for an individual identity, however, prevents any contemplation of reassembly with the Creature. Though his fusion of science and nature produces the beginnings of a cyborg dialectic, the sequence is not brought to completion.

From his first timid venture into a church cemetery to the stormy night upon which his Creation draws its first breath, Frankenstein steadily disassembles himself. Delving with alacrity into dubious research, he succeeds in revealing the secret of “bestowing animation upon lifeless matter” (Shelley 30). Ironically, as the creature’s body grows on Frankenstein’s work table, he himself diminishes: “My cheek had grown pale with study, and my person had become emaciated with confinement” (Shelley 32). Frankenstein’s wholehearted commitment to his grisly project erodes his other passions into nothingness and purges him of other desires until his entire being is focused on a single objective: bringing his work to completion. In creating a living being, Frankenstein makes an irretrievable deposit of himself into his Creature, unconsciously surrendering his individuality. Though he is loath to permit his actions to reflect the loss, his narrative following that fateful night bears witness to the fact that he is not a whole man. The void that Frankenstein carves for himself leaves him vulnerable to the connection with his creation.

With a mixture of accusation and logic, Shelley uses the voice of the Monster to highlight the bond between Frankenstein, the creator, and his Creature: “Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us...Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you” (65). Repeatedly, the language of the passage poses Frankenstein beside his monster in the familiar tableau; despite efforts to contradict it, they are two halves of the same whole. The word *dissoluble* illustrates the permanence of the connection. They will not be released by breaking ropes or untying knots. Only when the ties themselves melt away due to the acidic annihilation of one will the other be loosed.

It is doubtful whether such annihilation is even possible—these characters are so deeply intertwined that the mere existence of one bears evidence of the other. The Creature recognizes that he has a duty toward his creator just as his creator has an obligation to him. They stand in a perpetual tug-of-war, each straining and pulling in an attempt to gain the advantage. Yet the Creature willingly volunteers to abandon the struggle. He offers a chance for reassembly, in which each party can gain its prize. If Frankenstein will create a mate for his Creature, giving him another half with which the Creature can interface, he will abandon the world of men, leaving Frankenstein alone, at peace. But ultimately, Frankenstein rejects it; this bargain will not

only acknowledge but also commemorate their attachment. Despite being confronted with the truth of liberation through interface, Frankenstein prefers to cling to the illusion of his own identity as an individual. Their relationship resembles a tapestry whose face depicts beauty and skill yet possesses a tangled and chaotic snarl of threads on the reverse. In the end, the acid Frankenstein employs to dissolve these threads, obliterating his creature, instead bores a hole in his own heart.

Whereas Victor Frankenstein feared and rejected his kinship with his Creature, Dinoire embraced the potentiality of a connection between technology and humanity, entering her own version of the monstrous—a partial, cyborg identity. “A cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (Haraway 386). These *permanently partial identities* are the key to unlocking the cyborg. Partiality, or incompleteness, is not problematic, nor is it a sign of weakness. Cyborgs are woven together in a vast network of dynamic amalgamations. They should not be objects of fear, but tools which facilitate new identities through “potent fusions” and “fruitful couplings” (Haraway 385, 384).

In a cyborg world, identity constantly fluctuates. If we perceive history as moving forward toward a goal, we can interpret the choices of Victor Frankenstein and Isabelle Dinoire as milestones on a progressive timeline. In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway describes *irony* as “the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (384). With this, Haraway links into the essence of interface. Interface supersedes incompatibility; mutual exclusivity does not exist for the interfaced cyborg. The construction of contemporary identity encourages celebrating personal partiality in the midst of actively seeking the points of conflict which grow into new and exciting possibilities. Since Shelley’s initial conceptualizations of the cyborg and Haraway’s specific outlining of its criteria, humanity has been progressing toward a time of readiness when we can grasp the actualization of cyborg identity.

A society that embraces the cyborg acknowledges and accepts “Otherness.” This society sets itself in opposition to the “Other” in order to discover what such conflict will generate. Contradiction and conflict are the sites of genesis. Manmade borders recede into the soil, blurring national and global identities. Collisions between illegal immigrants and natural-born citizens become willing as they yield not jail sentences, but cultural rejuvenation. Religious wars over possession of the Holy Land cease, as the bonds between belief systems become more salient than their difference.

Taking hold of the cyborg is contingent on the ironic realization that identity is not defined by individualism, but by the impact that individuals have on one another. The myth of individuation is limiting and debilitating. Our changing world urges us, like Dinoire, to release our prideful individuality and to embrace the liberating partial identity of the cyborg.

Works Cited

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