Introduction

You can teach an old metaphor new tricks. In the Frankenstein story, first introduced in the novel by Mary Shelley in 1818 and made famous on film by James Whale in 1931, a monster, assembled from corpses and reanimated, rebels violently against his creator. The Frankenstein story has a long history of being used as a political metaphor, and at the start of the twenty-first century, it continues to shape political debate. Consider, for example, critiques of U.S. foreign policy in the wake of 9/11. In "We Finally Got Our Frankenstein," filmmaker Michael Moore compares Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to the Frankenstein monster: "We had a virtual love fest with this Frankenstein whom we (in part) created. And, just like the mythical Frankenstein, Saddam eventually spun out of control. He would no longer do what he was told by his master. Saddam had to be caught." Moore considers Hussein one of many monsters created by the U.S. government, including Osama bin Laden—"Our other Frankenstein"—and a roster of right-wing dictators: "We liked playing Dr. Frankenstein. We created a lot of monsters—the Shah of Iran, Somoza of Nicaragua, Pinochet of Chile—and then we expressed ignorance or shock when they ran amok and massacred people."[1]

Moore uses the Frankenstein metaphor to condemn the U.S. government for "playing Dr. Frankenstein," conducting a scientific experiment that is also a "love fest" gone wrong. Novelist Carlos Fuentes offers a similar cautionary tale but links the monster to a familial metaphor: "Saddam Hussein was Saddam Hussein because the United States gave him all possible support. The United States is extraordinarily gifted in creating monsters like Frankenstein. Then one fine day they discover that these Frankensteins are dreadful. However, for twenty years they were the spoilt children, their proteges, and the babies of the United States."[2] Journalist Maureen Dowd invokes the idea of religious overreaching when she condemns Vice President Dick Cheney "and his crazy-eyed Igors at the Pentagon [for] their hunger to remake the Middle East. It's often seen in

scary movies: you play God to create something in your own image, and the monster you make ends up coming after you." She renames the vice president "Dr. Cheneystein."[3]

Even when the metaphor is not directly named, *Frankenstein* informs contemporary critiques of U.S. foreign policy. "Blowback" is the term popularized by Chalmers Johnson to describe contemporary violence against the United States that results from its foreign policy: "The most direct and obvious form of blowback often occurs when the victims fight back after a secret American bombing, or a U.S.-sponsored campaign of state terrorism, or a CIA-engineered overthrow of a foreign political leader."[4] With its plot of boomerang violence, *Frankenstein* is the embodiment of blowback, or as another commentator summarizes the theory, "Now the monster has turned on its creator."[5] In *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004), Antonio Hardt and Michael Negri extract a different political lesson from *Frankenstein*. They open the volume, the sequel to their influential *Empire* (2000), with a discussion of the Frankenstein monster and the golem, another fictional monster who rebels against his creator. Writing "under the cloud of war . . . between September 11, 2001, and the 2003 Iraq War," Hardt and Negri suggest that both monster and golem are "whispering to us secretly under the din of our global battlefield . . . a lesson about the monstrosity of war and our possible redemption through love."[6] Later in the volume, Hardt and Negri use the Frankenstein monster as the affirmative symbol of the "multitude," their model of a global democratic proletariat. Since "Frankenstein is now a member of the family," they assert, "[t]he new world of monsters is where humanity has to grasp its future."[7] Hardt and Negri are vague on the details of this vision, but they are clearly faithful to Mary Shelley's own depiction of the monster as a sympathetic figure. The "love fest" of Moore's "We Finally Got Our Frankenstein" has become the "redemption through love" prompted by monsters.

These are disparate examples, varying in tone, sophistication, and target. My interest is in the metaphoric figure they employ as much as the political ground they occupy—or rather, in the way the figure shapes the ground. Metaphors matter to culture and thought, and these examples all suggest the continuing vitality of the Frankenstein metaphor for shaping contemporary political critique and, in particular, for voicing dissent against elites whose policies are seen as misguided in intention and disastrous in effect. Critiques of U.S. power are one inheritance of the Frankenstein story in a post-9/11 world; expressions of sympathy for the

monstrous violence that defines that world are another. What we might call the "blowback" and "sympathy" themes of the Frankenstein story extract different but complementary meanings from it, using it to criticize monster-makers and to explain monstrous violence, if not to defend monsters themselves.

Highlighting some contemporary political uses of the Frankenstein metaphor, these examples also suggest some ambiguities intrinsic to this metaphor. Moore employs "Frankenstein" to signal both monster and monster-maker, whereas in Shelley's novel "Frankenstein" refers only to the maker, who is a university student, not a doctor; Fuentes's image of Hussein as a long-time "spoilt baby" has no correspondence to the plot of the novel, in which the creature is abandoned from birth; Dowd's reference to Igor, the scientist's assistant, is to the film version of *Frankenstein*. Such changes themselves have a long history: the term "Frankenstein" migrated from creator to monster as early as the 1830s, and the assistant character was added to theatrical productions in the 1820s.[8] Combining different elements of the Frankenstein story, these writers do not so much replace older versions with newer ones as reanimate elements in place since the early nineteenth century. In these processes of recombination and reanimation, they mimic the actions of Victor Frankenstein within the story, a self-reflexivity that Mary Shelley had set in motion in her 1831 preface to the novel, in which she aligned monster and book: "I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper."[9] The piecing-together process by which "Frankenstein" becomes "Cheneystein" is part of a longer, and indeed prosperous, history in which commentators on *Frankenstein* reprise the monster-making in the novel itself.

There are, of course, many other strands of Frankenstein imagery in contemporary political culture, including references to the story in discussions of stem-cell research, cloning, cosmetic surgery, and genetically modified foods.[10] These discussions draw on the implications of the idea of "Frankenstein" as monstrous creation, an idea embodied in the neologisms drawn from the word itself. Thus, a judge ruling in a lawsuit against McDonald's Chicken McNuggets condemns this product as "a McFrankenstein creation"; opponents of a cellphone tower designed to look like a fir tree term it "Frankenpine."[11] Whereas these examples provide a verbal analogue to hybrid monsters, others also make the connection to monster-makers. For example, campaigners against "frankenfoods" attack genetically modified foods as monstrous creations, while also targeting the corporations that produce these foods, like Monsanto,

as both monster-makers and monsterlike agribusiness giants.[12] Moreover, the metaphor is used by those on the political right as well as the left. For example, Leon Kass, former chairman of President Bush's Council of Bio-ethics, has excoriated cloning for what he sees as its place on a slippery slope of social wrongs including feminism, single-parenting, gay rights, sex with animals, cannibalism, and the desecration of corpses. Counseling "the wisdom of repugnance" against cloning, Kass condemns "the Frankensteinian hubris to create human life and increasingly to control its destiny."[13]

But if the Frankenstein metaphor is so protean that it sometimes seems to defy categorization, it does have particularly significant forms. I have chosen to begin with examples from left-wing discussions of U.S. foreign policy because they highlight the vitality of the Frankenstein metaphor, in a context far removed from its specific plot of bodily animation, as a contemporary language of political dissent. This book investigates one prehistory of such political critiques, tracking the Frankenstein metaphor in U.S. literature, film, and culture of the past two centuries in relation to the interdependent themes of race and nation. These themes converge in the sustained, multivalent, and revelatory imagery of a black American Frankenstein monster.

Writing in 1860 on the eve of Civil War, Frederick Douglass declared, "Slavery is everywhere the pet monster of the American people."[14] A century later, in the midst of the second Civil War launched by the civil rights movement, comedian and activist Dick Gregory specified the legacy of that "pet monster." When he saw James Whale's *Frankenstein* as a child, Gregory remembered, he realized that "[h]ere was a monster, created by a white man, turning upon his creator. The horror movie was merely a parable of life in the ghetto. The monstrous life of the ghetto has been created by the white man. Only now in the city of chaos are we seeing the monster created by oppression turn upon its creator."[15] In the "now" of 1968, Gregory saw the African American urban uprisings of the era in terms of the monster's revenge against his creator. In the sphere of domestic U.S. race relations, as in that of U.S. foreign policy, *Frankenstein* was the story of blowback.

This study fleshes out the genealogy from Douglass to Gregory and beyond, arguing for the importance of the metaphor of the black Frankenstein monster in nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. culture. *Frankenstein* and its legacy have been the subject of substantial amounts of scholarly and popular writing, but little serious attention has been paid to the

historical specificities of its place in American culture, and virtually none to its racial resonances in the United States.[16] I take up the question of what happens to the Frankenstein story in America, defining that story in its most basic form as having three distinct elements: a monster is amalgamated from body parts; a monster is reanimated from corpses; and a monster engages in revolt against a creator.[17] Drawn from these elements, the figure of a black Frankenstein monster appears frequently throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century American culture, in fiction, essays, oratory, film, painting, and other media, and in works by both whites and African Americans. Described as yellow in the novel, painted blue in nineteenth-century stage incarnations, and tinted green in twentieth-century cinematic ones, the monster's color nonetheless signifies symbolically, on the domestic American scene, as black.

In this genealogy of black Frankenstein stories, the figure of the monster is consistently intertwined with fantasies and anxieties about masculinity, relations between men, and the male iconography of the American nation. Within this terrain of masculinity, the Frankenstein metaphor is mutable in its politics. It is sometimes invoked by political conservatives, but it has tended to serve more effectively as a radical condemnation of those in power for making monsters or as a defense of monsters themselves. In a racist culture that already considered black men monstrous and contained them within paternalist rhetoric, the Frankenstein story, with its focus on the literal making of monsters and the unmaking of fathers, provided a stylized rhetoric with which to turn an existing discourse of black monstrosity against itself. Black Frankenstein stories, I argue, effected four kinds of antiracist critique: they humanized the slave; they explained, if not justified, his violence; they condemned the slaveowner; and they exposed the instability of white power.

These arguments about black Frankenstein stories are organized chronologically in four chapters, with an emphasis on the turn of the twentieth century, when fiction by Stephen Crane and Paul Laurence Dunbar articulated the literary possibilities of the black Frankenstein monster most fully. My aim is less to offer a comprehensive historical survey than to trace a network of affiliations clustering at particular historical moments and across literary, cinematic, and other cultural forms. In chapter 1, I show that the imagery of the Frankenstein story is central to U.S. discussions of race and nation in the nineteenth century. The Frankenstein monster served as the dystopian specter of a body politic tenuously assembled from disparate parts, as well as the embodiment of racial uprising in a

nation rhetorically founded on the imagery of filial revolt. Beginning with connections forged between the Frankenstein story and accounts of the Nat Turner revolt, I argue for the importance of this story in antebellum writing by Margaret Fuller, John Van Evrie, Herman Melville, and Frederick Douglass; in literary and visual accounts of the rebellious Confederacy by Douglass, Henry Louis Stephens, and Charles Sumner; in the newly codified postwar rhetorics of miscegenation and interracial rape; and in the turn-of-the-century language of African American racial uplift.

I turn in chapters 2 and 3 to more explicitly literary representations of a black Frankenstein monster in turn-of-the-century fiction by Stephen Crane and Paul Laurence Dunbar. In chapter 2, I focus on Crane's *The Monster* (1898), arguing that this novella intertwines a thematic focus on a black monster with an aesthetic inquiry into the resemblance between monsters and metaphors. Situating *The Monster* in the context of late-nineteenth-century rhetoric about metaphor as well as monstrosity, I argue that attention to the novella's figurative surface transforms our understanding of its racial themes as well as of metaphor itself. In chapter 3, I analyze Dunbar's novel *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), which explicitly names its violent black protagonist as a Frankenstein monster, along with other works from throughout Dunbar's career. I argue that Dunbar's writing pivots on the question of parody, a form that is extensively thematized within Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as well as within the African American signifying tradition from which Dunbar drew. Dunbar and Crane, I show, self-reflexively adapt a novel in which the Frankenstein monster is already both a dead metaphor brought to life and a debased and debasing parody of an original.

Twentieth-century black Frankenstein stories, the subject of chapter 4, are dominated by the visual translation of the story into film. I begin by suggesting the aesthetic connections between film form and the Frankenstein monster in two silent films: the Edison *Frankenstein* (1910), the first film version of the novel, and D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the founding cinematic depiction of blackness as monstrous. I argue that the most famous of *Frankenstein* films, James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* and 1935 *Bride of Frankenstein*, are implicit black Frankenstein stories, which update the homoeroticism of Shelley's novel and the Edison *Frankenstein*, while rejecting the racist vocabulary of cinematic monstrosity initiated by Griffith. The film *Blackenstein* (dir. William Levey, 1973) makes explicit the racial implications of the Whale films by situating the monster within the self-parodying aesthetics of blaxploitation horror. Turning in the second

half of this chapter to works by black writers, I argue that the figure of a black Frankenstein monster indirectly structures nonfiction of the civil rights and Black Power eras by James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver and directly shapes the autobiographies, essays, and performances of Dick Gregory. Gregory brings the oppositional possibilities of a black Frankenstein monster to fruition, moving him from Europe to America via Africa and from white man's gothic specter to black man's comic satire.

In an afterword, I turn to a recent painting by Glenn Ligon, which brings together visual and verbal modes of representing the Frankenstein story in new ways. In so doing, Ligon suggests new configurations of race and sexuality in the black Frankenstein metaphor, while drawing attention to the limits of visibility, of verbalization, and of metaphor as a whole.

Apart from addressing a surprising absence in the scholarship on *Frankenstein*, this book has three major goals. First, this study uses the black Frankenstein metaphor to recast the study of race in U.S. literature and culture. Slavery and its unresolved aftermath have long been understood as a central conflict within American literature, indirectly shaping the works of such canonical white writers as Poe, Melville, Fuller, and Twain, directly organizing the works of such canonical black writers as Douglass, Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, and Morrison, and dominating the popular phenomena of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Griffith's *Birth of a Nation,* and Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind.* These dozen figures all make appearances in the following pages. *Frankenstein*, I suggest, looks like a quintessentially domestic story once it is brought into, or back into, the United States. The Frankenstein story of monstrous sons and haunted fathers throws U.S. racial formations into high relief and, in so doing, illuminates how these formations have been shaped, reinforced, and opposed in American culture.

This recasting of *Frankenstein* both confirms and complicates Toni Morrison's influential argument, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, that studying the "Africanist presence" in works by white American authors provides important insight into the construction of whiteness. Images of blackness reveal the contours of whiteness, or in Morrison's phrase, "the subject of the dream is the dreamer."[18] The Frankenstein monster appears at the start of Morrison's study, in a list of literary characters she admires: "I am in awe of the authority of Faulkner's Benjy, James's Maisie, Flaubert's Emma, Melville's Pip, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein."[19] Shelley's *Frankenstein* does not appear again in *Playing in the Dark*, which exclusively analyzes American literature, but I will draw

Shelley into the orbit of Morrison's analysis. *Frankenstein* responds to the terms of *Playing in the Dark*, while extending them to a work that is British in origin and manifestly unfocused on either blackness or whiteness. That the Frankenstein narrative is fantastic as well as foreign increases, rather than impedes, its racial significance to American culture. The English story of a monster made in a European laboratory, I argue, has as domestic a claim on American literary culture as that of the slave in his cabin.

If this study makes a case for the American dimensions of the black Frankenstein story, it also uses *Frankenstein* to situate U.S. culture in an international frame. The field of American Studies has expanded in the last generation from its initial attention to U.S. literature and culture within a domestic context to transatlantic, circumatlantic, transnational, transamerican, hemispheric, and imperialist frameworks.[20] In moving *Frankenstein* into U.S. culture, I also confirm the necessity of keeping it in a transatlantic orbit. As mobile in the early nineteenth century as now, these black Frankenstein accounts journey reciprocally between England and the United States, and among continental Europe and Africa. Such journeys inform the black Frankenstein story at every stage, starting within the novel itself. The transatlantic connection that these chapters chart is not a one-way journey in which race is "added" to *Frankenstein* as it reaches America, but rather a series of criss-crossings in which U.S. representations of the Frankenstein story make visible, and further transform, the complex representations of New World slavery already refracted in the novel.

In charting such crossings, this study contributes to the developing understanding of the orbit that Paul Gilroy has influentially formulated as the "black Atlantic," a hybrid space linking British, American, Caribbean, and African cultures, in which movement among these cultures is mobile and reciprocal.[21] The African American authors under discussion here articulate a black Atlantic sensibility in several registers: Douglass, for example, develops his monster metaphors in dialogue with British abolitionism, whereas Dunbar adapts African cultural forms in his fiction. The resonance of *Frankenstein* with these and other African American writers suggests that a novel by a white British writer has been an important stop in the circulation of the black Atlantic.

In its discussions of white authors responding to slavery, this is also a project in what we might call the "white Atlantic," which I consider less the diacritical opposite to Gilroy's term than a frame overlapping with it.

Marcus Wood has emphasized the mixture of "masochism, paranoia, self-delusion, hypocrisy, anxiety, anger, terror, guilt, horror, and envy which lie, frequently disguised, within English attempts to respond to the legacy of Atlantic slavery."[22] We might call this list a taxonomy of the "white Atlantic" in its most anxious mode, and it is an apt summary both of Victor Frankenstein's own responses to the monster he creates and of the responses to slavery of some of the white American writers under discussion here, such as Thomas Dew and Thomas Dixon. Other authors and artists, however, are not reducible to a language of white anxiety, as with Stephen Crane, and still others criticize this language, as with James Whale. Collectively, these works by whites and African Americans show the transatlantic circulation of Frankenstein imagery in Anglo-American expressions of white anxiety and in African American accounts of antiracist resistance, and also in works, across race, that reflect hybrid mixtures of anxiety and resistance. The black and white Atlantic stories generated in the wake of *Frankenstein* simultaneously suggest the novel's fit with U.S. narratives of race and nation, and the interdependence of those traditions with a broader Atlantic world.

Like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, the Frankenstein monster is an iconic figure created by a woman writer. As a study in cultural constructions of race—both nationally specific and transatlantically organized—this is, necessarily, an investigation of gender and sexuality in U.S. culture. As more than a quarter century of feminist criticism has shown, Shelley's *Frankenstein* uses its male-centered plots to explore questions about women, including female authorship, maternity, sexuality, and the very field of feminist criticism, which has heavily emphasized Shelley's novel at different stages of its own academic development.[23] *Black Frankenstein* enters this critical genealogy at the juncture of feminist criticism with studies of masculinity. The majority of the works under discussion are by men and about men, and they extend what Bette London terms *Frankenstein*'s own "insistent specularization of masculinity, its story of the male creator making a spectacle of himself."[24] As a study of the spectacle of masculinity, this book is, at times, a study of the spectacle of misogyny; for example, women are sometimes silenced, assaulted, and murdered in these texts. The majority of the works in the black Frankenstein genealogy, that is, replicate *Frankenstein*'s focus on men without actively pursuing its critique of masculinity. In so doing, some of the works in this genealogy confirm some of the sexist gender patterns in American literature first identified by feminist critics. With their plots of men who want,

like Victor Frankenstein, to "penetrate the secrets of nature," these works —like American classics looking westward to "virgin land"—focus on the lay of the land. When their creator-figures are undone, these, too, become melodramas of beset manhood.[25]

Moreover, as a study of men locked in intimate relation to each other, this project confirms and extends the sexual connotations of Shelley's *Frankenstein* on the terrain of American culture. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick first identified the organizing tableau of Shelley's *Frankenstein* as that of "two men chasing one another across a landscape. It is importantly undecidable in this tableau . . . whether the two men represent two consciousnesses or only one; and it is importantly undecidable whether their bond . . . is murderous or amorous."[26] These stories expand on the novel's interest in relationships between men, from the homoerotic to the homophobic. Panic about sexual intimacy between men conjoins, in the black Frankenstein tradition, with racist constructions of black sexuality and, later, with more affirmative accounts of gay possibility. In these dynamics between men, the black Frankenstein tradition highlights the interracial male "buddy story" so central to American culture. Some of the stories under discussion present both creator and creation as African American, but most emphasize a cross-racial contrast between white creator and black creation. In so doing, they both reveal the anxiety behind the interracial buddy plots of American culture and suggest tools for radical inversions of these plots. In the black Frankenstein tradition, white and black men together are not so much Huck and Jim as Huck and Frank, an antagonistic pairing in which the black man uses the body made by the white man as a lethal weapon against him.[27]

My first goal in *Black Frankenstein*, then, is to show how the black Frankenstein metaphor affirms, and at the same time challenges, structures of race and masculinity in U.S. culture. My second goal is to offer a study in form, for the project is as much about the making of the Frankenstein metaphor in aesthetic terms as in cultural ones. I explore the formal elements of this project of metaphor-making at several levels. At the level of genre, in tracing a genealogy of black Frankenstein stories across nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and into film, I bring together the critical frameworks surrounding different forms of the gothic. Race is now often at the center of studies of nineteenth-century gothic American literature, but the gothic in twentieth-century literature is generally routed regionally into discussions of the South, and interpretations of film horror seldom focus on race.[28] Emphasizing racial themes

throughout these different gothic media, I draw particular attention to the centrality of African American writing in and about the gothic. The "black gothic" writers whom I discuss here—Douglass, Dunbar, Baldwin, Cleaver, and Gregory—consistently use the genre to effect a resistant strategy that Teresa Goddu has called "haunting back."[29]

The gothic is not the only genre under transformation here: as the "Frankenfoods," "McFrankenstein," "Frankenpine," and "Cheneystein" examples all suggest, the Frankenstein story often moves from horror into humor. It is no accident that the genealogy of black Frankenstein stories that I trace culminates in the work of a comedian, Dick Gregory. In *Frankenstein*'s theatrical and popular history, humor has often blunted the voice of the monster, but humor has also been used to dismember the story's language of demonization and turn it back against symbolic monster-makers. In this case, comedy provides a form of leverage against racism, a way of laughing back as well as haunting back. The black Frankenstein genealogy, I suggest, forces a rethinking of "black comedy," suggesting that it is a mode as insistently connected to U.S. racial questions as the "blackness" of the gothic.

In addition to questions of genre, issues of form are intrinsic to the Frankenstein story in more structural ways as well. Allegory, for example, is one framework for the readings that follow—I read many of these Frankenstein stories as racial allegories—and allegory itself, as a rhetorical form, has some similarities to the Frankenstein monster. Allegory has often been devalued as flat, artificial, or mechanical—terms that have been applied to the monster too. In Angus Fletcher's influential characterization, allegorical characters seem to act as though possessed by "daemons" and as though they are "robots," a combination for which he explicitly names Shelley's Frankenstein monster one of several "prototypical creations."[30] Allegory has been reexamined in recent literary theory, its pejorative terms both revalued and historicized; in her study of nineteenth-century American literature, for example, Cindy Weinstein shows how descriptions of allegory as a mechanical process correspond to accounts of labor.[31] This study continues the process of reappraising allegory, by identifying a new ground—U.S. race relations—for which the Frankenstein monster's story can serve as a figure and by providing a new way of thinking about his story as, itself, a commentary on the relation between figure and ground.

A major way I consider this relation between figure and ground is through analysis of the structure of parody. Parody is often celebrated in

contemporary culture and theory, and *Frankenstein* has frequently been parodied, most famously in Mel Brooks's film *Young Frankenstein* (1974).[32] This study turns attention to the much longer history of parody as a form, analyzing nineteenth-century parodies of *Frankenstein* and the relation of parody to Shelley's novel. At the same time, I explore the role of parody in black cultural practice, particularly as late-nineteenth-century American writers engaged in it. In this project, parody is at once deeply historical and insistently literary, not so much imposed externally on an original text as given proleptic shape by the text that will be its parodic target.

The issue of form most important to this project—without which its analyses of genre, allegory, and parody could not proceed—is that of metaphor. This is a study of a literary metaphor, but one in which metaphor itself has a changing history and a dynamic form. I discuss this history most explicitly in my examination of Crane's *The Monster,* a text hyperbolically attuned to questions of figurative language; in my account of Crane, a specialized form of metaphor—the dead metaphor—has a privileged place. More generally, the making of literary metaphor suffuses the project as a whole. Shelley's Frankenstein monster, I argue, is a metaphor for metaphor itself, and the Frankenstein stories that follow often dramatize the processes whereby metaphors—like monsters—are made. That the Frankenstein stories I analyze raise highly charged racial questions suggests the high stakes involved in taking metaphor seriously as a way of making cultural meaning.

These stories also suggest the importance of taking culture seriously as a way of understanding aesthetic forms. The fields of aesthetics and cultural studies have often been seen as opposed, if not mutually exclusive, with questions of the aesthetic—associated with beauty, taste, artistry, and the figure of the aesthete—fundamentally isolated from cultural, social, and historical issues. This "isolation" of the aesthetic, Raymond Williams suggested a generation ago, "can be damaging," and recently critics have argued for repairing the damage, rethinking the ways in which aesthetic and cultural concerns, in scholarly fields as in objects under study, constitute each other.[33] Insofar as questions of metaphor, parody, and genre usually fall under the domain of aesthetics, and insofar as race and nation are usually taken to be topics grounded in the study of culture, *Black Frankenstein* advances this reparative conversation between fields. Frankenstein metaphors, as I discuss them, have emerged both through cultural frameworks and as aesthetic forms. In turn, the black Frankenstein monster

comments on both cultural and aesthetic modes of making metaphor, and on the relations between these modes.

The third goal of this project—intertwined with both cultural and aesthetic questions—is to explore metaphor's politics. As my opening examples from the aftermath of 9/11 suggest, the Frankenstein monster is often invoked in highly politicized situations. The black Frankenstein monster is a key figure in the history of monsters as politically charged forms, as well as in the history of monstrosity as a constitutive feature of the language of politics.[34] The monster overlaps with a variety of politically charged fictional figures, particularly the vampire, the other undead character who was enshrined in nineteenth-century British fiction and who continues to have a robust afterlife.[35] Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) have elicited complementary political interpretations: in an influential Marxist interpretation, for example, Franco Moretti has argued that Dracula exemplifies the bourgeois capitalist and the Frankenstein monster, the alienated proletariat.[36] *Dracula* also has important racial and ethnic connotations, which have been analyzed in connection to Stoker's own Irishness, the eastern European setting of part of the novel, its orientalist and anti-Semitic elements, and its language of blood.[37] The stories under discussion here confirm the political proximity of Frankenstein and vampire images to each other and to U.S. racial narratives. Frederick Douglass and Dick Gregory, for example, use both kinds of images, and their works suggest that the figure of the Frankenstein monster is more productive for a political account of the origins of racial rebellion, whereas that of the vampire works better to depict continuing racial enslavement.

The black Frankenstein monster also converges, at moments, with other politicized monster figures, including the many-headed hydra, the golem, King Kong, and Caliban.[38] Caliban and the Frankenstein monster have consistently been intertwined in U.S. culture, as in an 1833 review of the novel by the *New-York Mirror* that notes that the monster "created by Frankenstein, stands as much alone as Caliban, and, like that, takes a powerful hold on the imagination."[39] More generally, the monster shares with Caliban a history of reappropriation for radical political ends. Caliban has been recast, most famously, by George Lamming, Aimé Césaire, and others writing in Caribbean and Latin American contexts with explicitly anticolonial goals.[40] The political claims of Caliban do diverge from those of the Frankenstein monster, particularly in their relation to

origins: Caliban can assert to Prospero, "This island's mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me," whereas the Frankenstein monster has neither mother nor mother country.[41] But the reiterations of the monster's story under discussion here, like anticolonial versions of Caliban, similarly exploit the rich political opportunities of the remake. Indeed, since the monster is himself a remade body, his story suggests in particularly self-reflexive terms the political strength of the idea of remaking.

Yet these stories, I suggest, also reveal the political limits of strategies of reappropriation, and of the metaphors on which such strategies rely. Most obviously, the male focus of these stories limits agency for women, and does not do much to enable feminist critique. Even within their own all-male terms, these works suggest the political limits of revisions that invert existing terms rather than creating new ones. Although they undo cultural constructions of monstrous black men and good white fathers, they keep black protagonists constrained within plots that focus on their white antagonists. As racial allegories, they serve better as accounts of the origins of oppression than as outlines for a postrevolutionary future. And as allegories of American identity, these black Frankenstein stories recast, but do not discard, the defining term of nationality, revising rather than undoing the national body of the United States of America. These works remake the metaphors of *Frankenstein* in radical ways, but they also show the difficulty, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, of using the monster's tools to dismantle the monster's house.[42]

A few comments on scope are in order here. The range is wide, across periods, media, and levels of cultural value. Interpreting some canonical works, I also veer consistently toward the noncanonical; many of the works under discussion here are self-consciously lowbrow works about a low-browed monster. Yet while I have loosened boundaries of canonical value, I have tightened standards for what constitutes a usable example. This study is about what is particular to the Frankenstein monster as a metaphor, and what kinds of commentaries those distinctions enable about U.S. culture. Not every monster metaphor in U.S. culture qualifies as a Frankenstein metaphor. Rather, I look for the three elements that I defined earlier as distinctive to the Frankenstein story: amalgamation, reanimation, and revolt against a creator. Every text under discussion here contains at least one of these distinctive elements, most have two, and many have all three.

In writing about black American Frankenstein stories, I have imposed certain limits of medium and chronology to provide focus. The objects of

study here are primarily works in print and on film, a focus that leaves many media to be examined. In the genealogy of nineteenth-century American Frankenstein stories, for example, further study awaits on the rich theatrical history of *Frankenstein*. I stop in the early 1990s, leaving others to analyze new media that take the Frankenstein story in fresh directions. Such an analysis might take as foundational Shelley Jackson's hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl* (1995), which interweaves contemporary poststructuralist theory with *Frankenstein* and which imaginatively exploits the congruence between the monster's patchwork body and the disarticulated and recombined elements of hypertext form.[43] Jackson's current project, "Skin," is a short story in which thousands of participants have volunteered, through the Internet, to have a single word of the story tattooed on their bodies. This project suggests the ongoing importance of the Frankenstein story to twenty-first-century media that incorporate extreme forms of embodiment as well as the disembodiments of cyberspace.[44]

Similarly, the national framework of this study is meant to focus inquiry rather than to restrict scope. In analyzing African American themes in these works, I do not claim that racial meanings attach only to American—more specifically, U.S.—Frankensteins; nor do I mean to suggest that race is the only index of Americanization in these texts, as if, for example, the class politics so visible in the novel's British reception are not also a part of the American scene. As H. L. Malchow and Chris Baldick, among others, have shown, racial meanings attach to British versions of the Frankenstein monster, and class politics are intrinsic to American ones.[45] This study aims to complement such works, providing a productive point of departure for rethinking *Frankenstein* in an American Studies context. This context allows us to understand its racial dynamics anew as they are forged in relation to iconographies of the United States, even as these iconographies are themselves forged, in part, in transatlantic conversations.

Although I focus on a black/white axis of representation within U.S. culture, other kinds of racial and ethnic allegories about *Frankenstein* are plentiful and remain open to further study. Orientalism and antiblack racism, for example, intersect in the cultural history of the Frankenstein narrative. One such intersection appears in Ambrose Bierce's short story "Moxon's Master" (1898), a retelling of *Frankenstein* in which the monster—a fez-wearing chess-player with the torso of a gorilla—connotes the putative savagery of both black men and the feminized East.[46] Further

inquiry might examine the intersection of black Frankenstein stories with other narratives of race and ethnicity, as these narratives illuminate U.S. culture and as they organize other accounts of national, international, and transnational monstrosity.

Extending beyond works of fiction, further inquiry might also examine the role of the Frankenstein metaphor within contemporary cultural theory. I will cite just two examples. In Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985), one of the most influential works of contemporary feminist theory, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is named near the outset. More antagonist than ally, the Frankenstein monster is nonetheless a crucial interlocutor for Haraway as she defines the cyborg: "Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos."[47] Less focused on gender but equally attentive to the Frankenstein inheritance is Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2004), an analysis of contemporary multiculturalism in Britain. This work is suffused with Frankenstein references and metaphors, including its opening sentence ("Multicultural society seems to have been abandoned at birth"), its interest in the relation between the "treasure trove of Englishness" and the idea of "frankenfoods," and its analysis of British "shoe bomber" Richard Reid, "who, like Victor Frankenstein's hideous offspring, [chose] a path of destruction as his compensation for exile from kith and kin."[48] That Frankenstein metaphors have such a prominent role in these examples suggests the ongoing importance of Shelley's story as both figure and ground for contemporary theories of culture. If the works under discussion here look backward toward the relation of *Frankenstein* to the black Atlantic, then the highly visible traces of *Frankenstein* in the work of Haraway and Gilroy also suggest looking forward toward new roles for Frankenstein—as metaphor, narrative, and organizing framework—in theorizing race and gender in the future.

The biggest restriction I have imposed on this study is in its focus on male writers. Many women writers have explored the implications of *Frankenstein* for women; I have already noted the importance of Shelley Jackson's hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl*. A fuller account of recent *Frankenstein* fiction by U.S. women writers alone might highlight Katherine Dunn's novel *Geek Love* (1983), which explores the intersection of Frankensteinian monstrosity and the freak show; Rebecca Brown's short

story "Dr. Frankenstein, I Presume" (1990), which adapts the plot of the Frankenstein film to narrate the dissolution of a lesbian romance; and Achy Obejas's novel *Memory Mambo* (1996), which uses Frankenstein imagery to condemn a male character who thwarts a romance between women.[49] C. L. Moore's short story "No Woman Born" (1944), which casts a female automaton as a version of the monster, offered an early feminist critique of the novel, one that has become foundational not only to science fiction but also to feminist criticism of the Frankenstein tradition.[50] Women's revisions of *Frankenstein* are confined neither to fiction—they include poetry by Margaret Atwood, Phyllis Gotlieb, and Marge Piercy —nor to North America.[51] Scottish writer Liz Lochhead, for example, has repeatedly returned to *Frankenstein* in several genres, from a play, *Blood and Ice* (1982), which reimagines the scene of *Frankenstein*'s creation, to a long poem, "Dreaming Frankenstein" (1984), which captures the monster's ongoing presence in Lochhead's work in its opening lines: "She said she / woke up with him in / her head, in her bed."[52]

These works are related to the questions that I pursue in this project, not least because they involve a variety of issues of racial representation. For example, *Memory Mambo* is centered on a Cuban American protagonist and gives its Frankenstein imagery a Hispanic accent, literally as well as thematically; one character describes the novel's monster as "Jimmy Frankenstein (pronounced Frankhen-ess-tein, since life in Mexico produced a sudden accent in Pauli's English)."[53] Racial issues inflect works by white women that focus on white characters, as in *Geek Love*, whose freak-show setting is inseparable from histories of exoticism, ethnography, and racial display.[54] But these works do not intersect directly with the black Frankenstein genealogy as I trace it here, a genealogy centered on conflicts between and within men in the United States in the aftermath of slavery.

Nor do I focus on the wealth of works that focus explicitly on the construction of female monsters. Such stories, which can be traced back to the Pygmalion myth, are particularly prominent in films since *Bride of Frankenstein*. They range from *Frankenhooker* (dir. Frank Henenlotter, 1990), in which a boy from New Jersey reanimates his dead girlfriend from the body parts of Times Square prostitutes, to *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991), in which a male serial killer constructs a new female body from his victims—one of many transgender uses of the monster plot—and plays Victor Frankenstein to himself.[55] More generally, the idea of a "Bride of Frankenstein" remains one of the most fecund legacies

of the Frankenstein story; the phrase "bride of ——" has become its own self-contained generator of parody. In a *Far Side* cartoon by Gary Larson, for example, the Frankenstein monster is shown sitting behind the wheel of a car, handing money to a policeman; the caption reads, "The Bribe of Frankenstein."[56] That the phrase "bribe of ——" still evokes a female monster despite the absence of even the word "bride" suggests yet another of the formal connections between the body parts of a monster and the body of writing devoted to it. Even and especially in an account of monstrosity between men, the female monster is still the Frankenstein story's phantom limb.

In part because there is now such a wealth of feminist criticism in this field, and in part because I have written elsewhere on feminism and *Frankenstein*, I do not discuss female monstrosity at length until this study's final chapter, when Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* and its successors intersect directly with the black Frankenstein tradition.[57] A full account of women writers' engagement with the Frankenstein story—and of the "bride of" genealogy, with or without actual female bodies—remains this study's own phantom limb. At the same time, a woman writer remains the foundational body, anterior whole rather than auxiliary part, behind this project. Mary Shelley is foundational to the Franken-American and African American monsters who populate this book. Intersecting with a national narrative already devoted to founding fathers, her work does not so much originate as reshape that narrative. Neither secondary bride nor founding mother, she is, symbolically speaking, stepmother to the American Frankenstein lineage. As we will see, the metaphors that her story has generated—metaphors formally made, remade, and unmade in ways that her monster himself prefigures—are central to U.S. culture of the past two centuries, and they continue to blow forward as well as back.

1

United States of Frankenstein

Slavery is everywhere the pet monster of the American people.
—Frederick Douglass, "Slavery and the Irrepressible Conflict"

I.

In 1831, American newspapers were filled with the story of a "monster in iniquity," a murderer whose violent rampage constituted "a spectacle from which the mind must shrink with horror." The monster was found upon capture to be surprisingly articulate, and his story, published in a popular narrative mediated by several different voices, was considered "eloquently and classically expressed." This murderer sounds very much like the monster of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, who kills his creator's brother, bride, and best friend, and who is also a figure of surprising eloquence in the first-person story that he tells at the center of the novel's multiple layers of narration. *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818, had renewed visibility in 1831, when it was republished in Britain in a revised edition. But the "monster" reported in the news in this year was a real person, an African American slave; his crimes, assisted by a dozen others, were the murders of his master and some sixty other white people in Southampton County, Virginia; and his account was the document that came to be known as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.[1]

This parallel between Frankenstein and the most famous slave revolt in U.S. history provides an important point of origin for the cultural history of the figure of a black Frankenstein monster in American culture. To begin with, the parallel did not go unremarked at the time. The Turner revolt occasioned extensive debate over emancipation in the Virginia state legislature, and this debate, in turn, prompted proslavery apologist Thomas Dew to write a lengthy defense of slavery. Late in the essay, he quoted from a speech by George Canning, the British foreign secretary: