

The Geoethics of Frankenfolk

Martine Rothblatt, Ph.D.

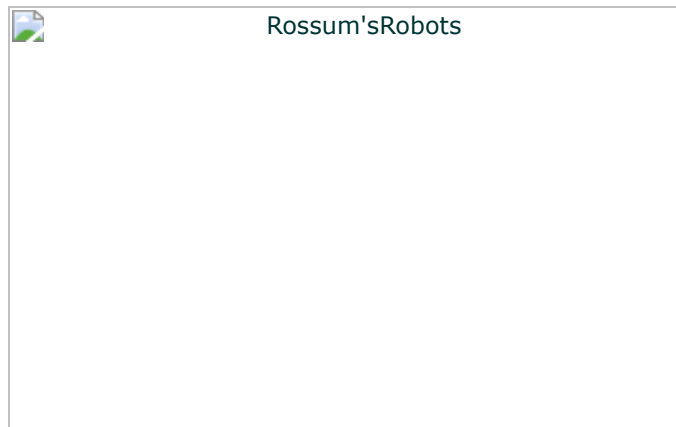
This article was adapted from a lecture given by Dr. Martine Rothblatt during the 7th Annual Workshop on Geoethical Nanotechnology on July 20, 2011 at the Terasem Island Amphitheatre in Second Life.

Dr. Rothblatt analyzes historic cultural and civil differences illustrated in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and compares them with modern-day technological notions of artificial life.

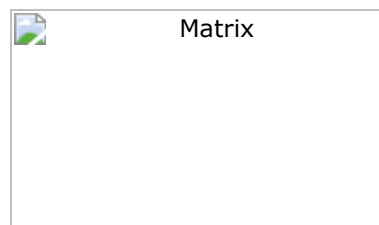
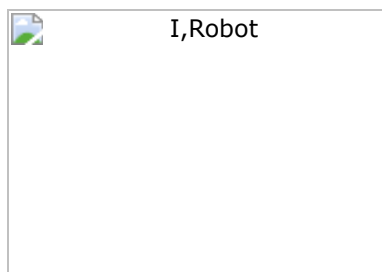
I'm going to examine the intertwined histories of the rights of artificial life and civil rights as seen through the eyes of Mary Shelley. Of course, Mary Shelley is not here to lend us her eyes, but I hope she won't be too angry about my interpretation of her story.

Mary Shelley's story, Frankenstein, is about a tinkerer named Victor Frankenstein who stitched together dead body parts, then enlivened the assembly with a galvanic charge, resulting in what Mary Shelley called, the "Monster". Pop Culture now mistakenly refers to the monster as 'Frankenstein', confusing the creator with his creation. I believe the story of Frankenstein is the forerunner of many variations on a theme of human makes imitation, imitation feels aggrieved, imitation goes amuck and human regrets imitation.

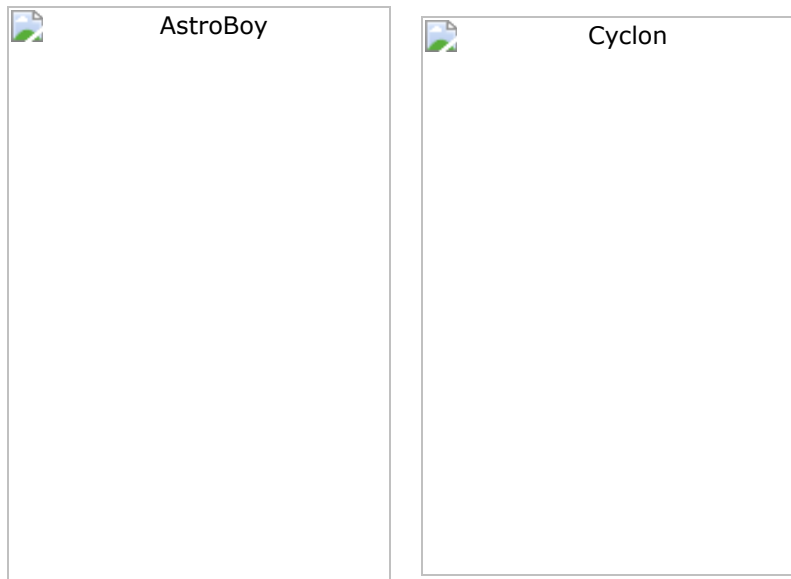
The imitations may be flesh, as was the case of Frankenstein (the story), where the imitation was called the "Monster", or the imitations may be of bio-plastic, as was the case in Karel Capek's 1920 play that gave us the word 'robot'. His play was called "R.U.R - Rossum's Universal Robots" [1].



Sometimes the imitations can really look robotic with metallic composite bodies, such as in the film "I Robot" [2] starring Will Smith. Other times, the copies can be completely virtual as in the avatars deployed against humans as in "The Matrix" [3].

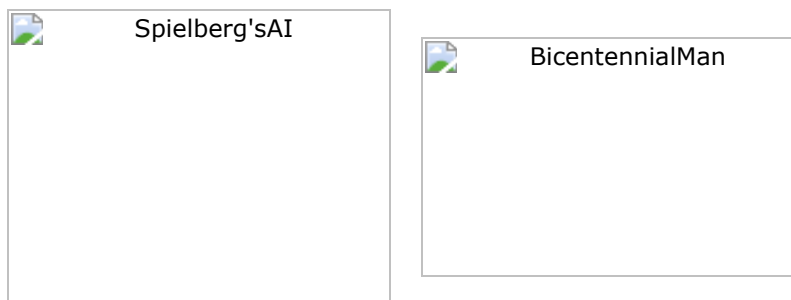


The imitation's grievance is usually traceable to a lack of acceptance, as in Frankenstein, or in second-class citizenry as in "Astro Boy" [4], originally created in manga format as Tetsuwan Atomu by Osamu Tezuka in the aftermath of World War II. The sense of rejection may then express itself as reverse specieism at the perceived human inferiority, a sentiment for example, of the Cylons in Battlestar Gallactica [5]. The resulting mayhem may be a handful of murders, as was all that the Monster accomplished in Frankenstein, or an effort to kill only the "bad humans" as in "I Robot", or the grievance may extend to a total genocide of virtually every human as in Capek's play, R.U.R. A sense of regret fuels the gamut of quests to 'kill' the Frankenstein Monster or hunt down potentially dangerous robots (leaving only the 'nice' robots), or to prohibit artificial intelligence entirely.



Some use self-pity to deal with the rejection. Even without anti-human violence, the imitation always tends to feel the Frankenstein monster's sense of abandonment. Wouldn't any of us feel that way if we were abandoned and treated like second-class citizens? Sometimes the imitations feel almost exactly like humans would feel. This is not a surprise because humans (who are well aware of the fact that if you treat people poorly they will often exhibit hurt feelings), write fictional stories.

In Steve Spielberg's film, "A.I." [6], a mother dumped the cute little AI kid with the hankering for spaghetti at the side of a highway. That's a pretty mean thing for a mother to do. We will give her a brownie point though, for tossing him out with his robot teddy bear. Also, remember how the wise and kind father kicked the "Bicentennial Man" [7] out of the house that he so immaculately maintained and made a fortune for wise father – all because he simply asked for a living wage. Empowerment, via the creation of an imitation, followed by disappointment due to the imitation feeling separate, unequal, unloved, and/or threatened, followed by conflict arising out of humanity's inadequate response to its imitation's unhappiness and then regret based on humanity's disdain for finding itself in conflict.



These are the themes of robots and other human-like creations. First, rising expectations, then crashing expectations, then agitation followed by lamentation. Interestingly enough my friends and fellow geoethic nanotechnology symposiumites, these are also the age-old themes of civil rights: empowerment, disappointment, conflict and regret – what goes for technological imitations is also the story of human rights.

"...anyone who values being free should be free..." While rights for preferred demographic groups date to antiquity, think of those Greek men in togas living large, only around the time of Frankenstein did civil rights, per se, the notion that 'anyone who values being free should be free'

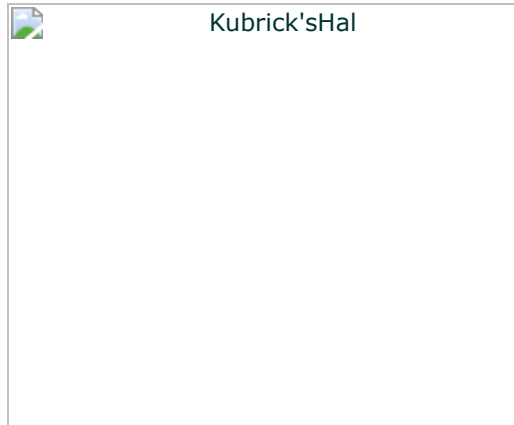
become a popular concept. The American and French Revolutions in 1776 and 1791 respectively, set the stage for civil rights with brilliant declarations of freedom understandable by the masses.

Just as it's been the plot line in imagined technological imitations of humans, second-class citizenship for women and racial minorities was met with resentment and conflict. The expectations of Africans born in the Americas were slapped down by racism. The rising expectations of women empowered by the Industrial Revolution were crushed by sexism. These dashed hopes fueled decade after decade of conflict and the long march of civil rights from the 1860s to the 1960s.

In the past two centuries, imitations of life and civil rights have swirled about each other like a strand of DNA. The fictional imitations evolved from being called monsters or things by Shelley, to robot, meaning forced worker in Slavic

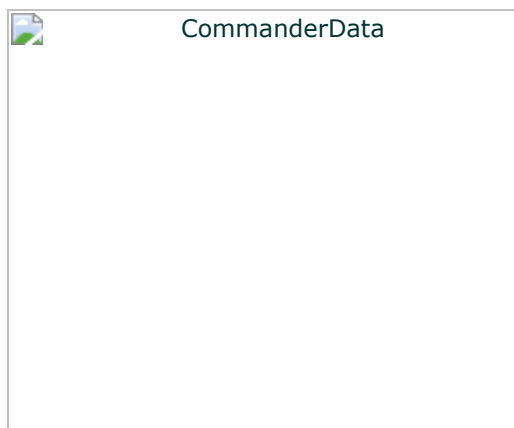
by Capek. Meanwhile, the socially constructed imitations evolve from being called slaves or chattel in the 1800s, to being called coloreds or bitches in the 1920s. Women went from having no property rights in a marriage to equal rights. The birth of artificial intelligence in the 1950s gradually made Frankenstein-like stories plausible albeit now with digital persons rather than fused body parts.

A decade later, after the 50s made artificial intelligence seem possible, we have a credible, digital person, HAL in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, "2001: A Space Odyssey" [8], running America's first spaceship to Jupiter. Again, as we always know is going to happen, it's going to feel aggrieved, it's then going to go amuck murdering crewmen and then humans will regret they made it.



Since 1960s era fictional robots and digital creations murdered humans on movie screens out of paranoid resentment of second-class citizenship, out in the streets real-world riots flared from equivalent emotions. African Americans, Latinos and people all around the world who were under the yokes of colonization finally began to regret their imitated, constructed second-class citizenship granted to them by Europeans and pseudo-Europeans and clamored in the streets, in the fields, and in the jungles for their rights.

Gay, lesbian and even transgender rights rose in the 1980s upon an expanding platform of feminist and people of color successes. I may also add ableism rights arose during this same time period from the exact same motivations. I think very few people were surprised in 1989 when Star Trek: The Next Generation aired its famous, Measure of a Man [9] episode heralding, for the first time ever in a solidly credible manner, in the bible of the pop-culture, the civil rights of digital people such as Commander Data. With Commander Data's civil right's road broached in Measure of a Man, the 200 year-old convergence of artificial life from Mary Shelley to civil rights had finally arrived. Please join me in a round of applause for Commander Data!



Had Victor Frankenstein loved his creation, it would not have gone berserk. Had Charlie Manson's mother loved her creation, he would not have gone berserk. Had Osama bin Laden's father loved his one little Yemenite creation, he would not have gone berserk. Had all immigrants been treated equally, there would not be the fear, the loathing and the bloodshed that accompanied the march of civil rights and continues to accompany it throughout the streets, barrios and ghettos of Europe, China, Australia, America and elsewhere. Had men cherished the magic of women's bodies and partnered on the basis of equality, uncountable lives would not have been torn asunder in domestic discord.

I would like to conclude with what I believe are the lessons of the intertwined, cultural histories of techno-human imitations and civil rights. Today, most people regret treating Africans, other immigrants and women as second-class citizens - or much worse. We realized that when we mistreated the imitation of a person, the wife of a husband, the slave of a master, or the non-documented citizen, we unleash the inevitable blood of resentment and conflict as in the

cultural history of robots, automatons and other imitations. We realize that at the end of the trail of tears it was all so unnecessary. Love what you create and what you create will love you.

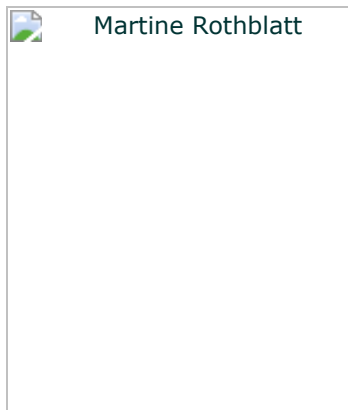
[<Back to Issue Contents](#)

Endnotes

- [1] **Rossum's Universal Robots** - <http://preprints.readingroo.ms/RUR/rur.pdf> October 31, 2011 11:44AM EST
- [2] **I Robot** - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0343818/> October 31, 2011 11:50AM EST
- [3] **The Matrix** - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/> October 31, 2011 12:00PM EST
- [4] **Astro Boy** - "In 1951, Japanese manga pioneer Osamu Tezuka published his first comic story about a young robot boy named "Tetsuwan Atomu" – or "Astroboy" as he became known overseas." <http://uk.movies.ign.com/articles/316/316850p1.html> October 31, 2011 12:50PM EST
- [5] **Cylons (Battlestar Gallactica)** – "from **Cybernetic Lifeform Node** - were a race of sentient machines created by humans of the [Twelve Colonies](#). They had several forms, some of which were mechanical in appearance and function, others resembled and even mimicked the behavior of humans". http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Cylons_%28RDM%29 October 31, 2011 12:55PM EST
- [6] **A.I. Artificial Intelligence** - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0212720/> October 31, 2011 2:56PM EST
- [7] **Bicentennial Man** - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0182789/> October 31, 2011 3:00PM EST
- [8] **2001: A Space Odyssey** - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062622/> October 31, 2011 3:05PM EST
- [9] **Star Trek: Next Generation: Measure of a Man** - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0708807/> October 31, 2011 3:10PM EST

[<Back to Issue Contents](#)

Bio



Martine Rothblatt

Martine Rothblatt, J.D., Ph.D., started the satellite vehicle tracking and satellite radio industries and is the Chairman of United Therapeutics, a biotechnology company headquartered in Silver Spring, Maryland. Dr. Rothblatt is also the President of Terasem Movement, Inc. and has authored several books, including *The Apartheid of Sex*, *Two Stars for Peace*, *Unzipped Genes*, *Your Life or Mine* and *From Transgender to Transhuman*.

