

**The Body of The Text:  
Dispersion and Its Implication in Shelley Jackson's *Skin: A Mortal Work of Art***

Amanda J.L. Graham

*'I am old,' said the book. 'I am older,' said the body*  
-The Pillow Book<sup>i</sup>

*Some of my words sent me Christmas cards. One of my words is knitting me a scarf. I  
seem to have founded a strange sort of family.*  
-Shelley Jackson<sup>ii</sup>

On Monday September 8, 2003 at 7 PM the story began. That is, the title and first word of the story were simultaneously inscribed and published; they are respectively 'Skin' and 'If.' Tattoo artist Tabare Grazioso of Bowery Tattoo 'inked' these words in Baskerville font on the inner-wrist of author, Shelley Jackson, and the mid-back of Sarah Kamens, volunteer. 2,093 tattoos later the story will be complete. All of Jackson's words in her short story project entitled (in full) *Skin: A Mortal Work of Art* are or will be tattooed to the skin of participants who answered her call which first appeared in Issue 11 of *Cabinet Magazine*, and is presently posted on Jackson's Ineradicable Stain website.<sup>iii</sup> The site serves as a message board for the author to communicate with project participants, charts the progress of *Skin*, and acts as a forum for volunteers to commune over shared and unique experiences relative to their lives as words. According to Jackson and many of the tattooed men and women involved with/who comprise *Skin* they are not simply advertising the story, representing Jackson, or taking part in a collective art experiment. They are, and will for as long as their bodies exist, *be* words. They do not signify the word(s) tattooed on(to) their bodies; the person is word, and in turn, the word is person. Jackson's story, that she never plans to publish in any traditional (i.e. printed book) form, lives and dies along with the folks who have committed their epidermises to Jackson's cause. *Skin* is literally *a mortal work of art* as it both begins and ends with the body.

Jackson's short story does exist, but only people in the club--the words--will ever

have the opportunity to read it. The word does not receive the story until she has fulfilled her end of the agreement. After getting her tattoo she must then send a photograph of her assigned word appropriately inked on her body along with a self-portrait photograph sans tattoo. Additionally, she is required to sign and return a “12-page release absolving [Jackson] of liability and promising not to share the story with others.”<sup>iv</sup> A formal legal document may seem over the top, however if Jackson’s story is leaked by a word and thereafter published the piece of mortal literature is ever made immortal; the volunteers bodies would transform from only edition to first edition. The project as concept would be undermined. No word has spoken on the secret story so far, most likely because each has a visible investment in keeping the story invisible.<sup>v</sup> Thus, as LA Weekly reporter David L. Ulin notes, “*Skin* will, when finished, operate with the inferential power of a rumor...”<sup>vi</sup> Currently unfinished, it already has.

The participants commit themselves to a story they have not read, a fascinating act of faith in Jackson, the author --their author--who they are willing to let lead them “blind[ly]” into a story of her own making, and a project that extends beyond her control. Jackson, a “funky Californian who now resides in Brooklyn and likes to explore the ideas of Kafka, Beckett, gender politics and science fiction” has a reputation for writing that is far from ordinary or “mainstream”<sup>vii</sup>, but is--according to at least one critic--predictably not “fascist” or conservative.<sup>viii</sup> Angela Carter and Kathy Acker call her work “gutsy and original.”<sup>ix</sup> *The Village Voice* dubbed Jackson an up-and-coming “Writer on the Verge” in 2001.<sup>x</sup> She is generally framed in the popular media as a liberating tour de force, an author who constantly breaks the frame with both content and form. No doubt Jackson’s use of alternative means of publication as well as her focus on the body as unique lexicon deserves attention. However, throughout this paper, I intend to question how liberal Jackson is with her words, and in the process ask how different her work really is from more traditional writing. Does all of her literary frame-breaking redefine the relationship between the author and the words in the text? Does the re-contextualized text transform the meaning of the work itself?

With *Skin*, in particular, Jackson argues for the autonomy and independence of her words. Once tattooed, she believes, they are let loose into new scenarios that present juxtapositions and comparisons to things, people, places and other words that re-realize

their meaning(s) and generate new metaphorical potentials. The words are at play in the world, transforming with age, exposure to sun, weight gain and loss, and all other internal and external factors that negotiate the body, and in particular its surface.

While notable that the words become part of the text ignorant of the story in its totality it is important to remember that the story is not the point here (not that it's elusiveness isn't curiously attractive). The form and embedded concept interwoven through (in? on?) *Skin* is that of dispersion. The text is fragmented into its parts. Each individual word, tattooed upon the body initiates a text unto itself; the word has its own story. As Jackson explains in her interview with new media and electronic literature professor Scott Rettberg, "...my story is being rewritten, one word at a time, by my participants. As my words enter the specific contexts of their lives, they change forever."<sup>xi</sup> Frequently Jackson, in both interviews and on her website, notes that she will make every effort to attend the funerals of/for her words. In turn, she hopes her words will mourn her passing; beyond being their 'author'<sup>xii</sup> she is also their title and a fellow word.

Jackson may have founded a community of words, but after the text is realized--each individual word given life upon a human canvas--she is as (un)necessary to her participants as the next word. Or is she? Jackson positions herself as less of an author than she is an initiator and liaison; she introduces the participant to the word, and vice versa. After the word is written upon the body, claims Jackson, she is ever remembered as the matchmaker. But it is the match itself that has legs. The word embodied thereafter walks the earth in eternal encounter. How it came to be is the beginning of its story, but what it becomes--both literally (on the skin) and metaphorically (what it means for the inscribed person)--is the middle and end. Jackson and her critics convincingly argue that with *Skin* Jackson frees the word from its proverbial cage. When the word as tattoo is published on the skin of a living, breathing participant it is given wings. However, Jackson and the reporters who trumpet her cause avoid the notion that in the midst of giving words supposed new freedom, the individuals to whom the words are attached, framed by Jackson as words themselves, lose (a part of) their identities to the project.

In the pages that follow I will look at the multiplicity of frames that Jackson has broken with her story-project *Skin: A Mortal Work of Art*, and through this examination

uncover the frames that she has both worked within and created. I will argue that by breaking the frame of the text and story as narrative trope, and also freeing her words from the page, she has created new boundaries for language, among them that of the human body. I will also assert that including human participants in her experiment with text is more than a 'novel' idea. Framing human beings as words, I will demonstrate, has ramifications including--most notably--sacrificing the autonomy of the subject.

**Why is Shelley Jackson so set on parts of wholes?:  
The Fragmented Body, The Fragmented Story**

*Boundaries of texts are like boundaries of bodies, and both stand in for the confusing and invisible boundary of the self.*  
-Shelley Jackson<sup>xiii</sup>

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is as much a story about humanity as it is one about monstrosity. The monster, after all, was created by a man. When, in Shelley's book, the creature demands a female companion to assuage his loneliness, Victor Frankenstein complies at first, but shortly after becomes overwhelmed by the thought of the carnage a second monster, and offspring of the two monsters, might produce. In her article "*Flickering Connectivities in Shelley Jackson's Patchwork Girl*" N. Katherine Hayles reminds us that Frankenstein "tears the female monster"<sup>xiv</sup> into pieces when it dawns on him that her body is site of possible reproduction. The body of the female monster is so threatening that Frankenstein would rather face the murderous male creature than meet his request for a partner-likeness.

Both of the monsters--the male and the unrealized female--are assemblages, bodies composed from decaying and ruptured other (dead) bodies. Frankenstein stitches the body parts together so separate parts become whole creature. While Frankenstein gives his creature life, the hideously fragmentary nature of the monster's body forces it to live that life in seclusion. The fragmentary body is--to use Julia Kristeva's term--abject in that "it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self."<sup>xv</sup> The threat of the monsters' fragmentary body is twofold: first, it is a reminder of death as it is built of pillaged human remains and

second, it exposes the instability of the human body, held together by a thread. The ruse of wholeness is exposed with its visible stitches and disproportionate parts. Kristeva's notion speaks to the myth of separation between purity and pollution, life and death, man and monster. These things are not binaries. One exists because of and within the other. According to Kristeva we find "death infecting life" abject, but decay is a process each of us is living everyday.<sup>xvi</sup> Our parts fail. We replace them and replace them until there is little left that we might call authentically human. We are all monsters of our own making and that is scary, not because we are monsters in the sense that we are composed of fragments, but rather, because we generally insist that our bodies are the picture of unity.

In her postmodern feminist text "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," Donna Haraway explores the fragmented body and self through the metaphor of a cyborg.<sup>xvii</sup> Haraway defines cyborg as, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."<sup>xviii</sup> Hers is "an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction."<sup>xix</sup> She is asking for (or perhaps demanding?) a reconsideration of gender, race and class. Each is, according to Haraway, a malleable and constructed state, hinged on a false necessity for categories. She encourages her readers to acknowledge that the fragmented social and physical body belongs to each and all of us. Our identities and our bodies are unstable sites, constantly in flux, and inorganic. She calls unity a myth, and favors partiality. Fragmentation, for Haraway, is not abject; it is incorporated. Denying our parts is denying our whole (which is a combination of our parts). Like Haraway, Jackson calls for a *nouveau* corporality contingent on hybridity. Like Shelley, Jackson creates a monster.

*Patchwork Girl* is a hypertext novel created by Jackson and published by Eastgate Systems in 1995, eight years prior to the beginning of *Skin*. It is, loosely speaking, a reinterpretation of Shelley's *Frankenstein* starring the female monster that was never completed. While the monster that never was is, in Jackson's electronic venue, resurrected; she exists in her second incarnation as multiple subjectivities. Jackson's monster is created of disparate parts and personalities. She becomes a lesbian lover for her author, Mary Shelley, and with Shelley travels to America, goes on adventures, and disassembles and reassembles herself. Like a choose-your-own-adventure book, the

hypertext format encourages readers to explore a variety of narrative paths. Throughout the text, images, and audio the authors merge. Mary Shelley/Jackson disrupts the authorial order of things as the author's/authors' shared creation disrupts how the viewer reads the "body of text", and, alternately, the text of the body.<sup>xx</sup> *Patchwork Girl* quotes both Shelley's eighteenth century text and *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* by L. Frank Baum. By borrowing segments of these stories and incorporating them into her own, the parts of Shelley's text operate parallel to the monster's body: fragments of dead bodies--textual, in the latter case-- pieced together create the new body.

*Patchwork Girl* is testament to the fact that Jackson has long-explored notions of the fragmented body. Jackson, in both the form and content of her canonical piece of electronic literature, demonstrates that the story is most present in its fissures and how they heal. Jackson's monster proclaims, "My real skeleton is made of scars, a web that traverses me in three dimensions. What holds me together is what marks my dispersal. I am most myself in the gaps between my parts."<sup>xxi</sup> The monster is positing a glue made out of dispersion, a separateness that holds everything together. That separateness is alive and well in the land of hypertext novels, like *Patchwork Girl*, which is ultimately segments of writing paired with images linked together by the viewer/reader. It is equally pervasive in *Skin*: a project published on bodies that move around the world in greater or lesser proximity to one another, depending on the day.

### **Why is Shelley Jackson Mapping an "Imagined Community"?: The Body Moves, But the Map Doesn't**

*The map was a meeting place between the known and the unknown: only when the limits of geographical knowledge had been defined on a map could explorers set out in search of new lands, new routes and new knowledge.*

-Peter Whitfield<sup>xxii</sup>

*Striving to represent the world, we inevitably forfeit its direct presence.*

--David Abram<sup>xxiii</sup>

*Signing* lives in Flensburg, Germany "socks. in Lake Jackson, Texas. While these words do not live on the page or in the book they do have homes and houses, assigned seats, routines, beds and families. These words are comfortable (but no doubt have

occasional lower back pain or mild anxiety) in and on their own skins. Where Shelley Jackson's words reside may seem of little consequence to her project, but the location of each of the words is valuable as their proximity illustrates the dispersion of the text. It is not the words themselves, but the spaces in between each that demonstrate the disperse quality of the living narrative. As the monster in *Patchwork Girl* points out--there is value in examining the "gaps" between the parts. Gaps, for the monster, speak to the fragmentary nature of her body, but the spatial dispersion of bodies also produces gaps...some of them oceans wide.

Visitors to Jackson's website can see these gaps manifested in the symbolic geographic spaces between words on Jackson's "Skin Map." While the geographic gaps represented on Jackson's "Map" are not to scale, all maps function as symbolic systems of representation; distances between places are never to scale unless the map has a one to one correspondence with the geography, in which case the map is useless as it no longer helps the reader of the map imagine distance.

In her article "Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks" Jill Walker describes the necessary difficulty of mapping a distributed narrative, or a narrative, like *Skin*, that does not exist in one place at one time, or any time at all. She writes, "Mapping distributed narratives is not an easy task; it is hard to describe and locate things that are not *things* but connections."<sup>xxiv</sup> Later on in her paper she provocatively states, "Understanding how narratives can be split open and spread like this is important, because narratives are one of our main ways of understanding ourselves and of understanding our world. When the world changes, our ways of understanding it must change too." Therefore, while Walker acknowledges the difficulty of mapping a distributed narrative she believes these maps serve to shed light on the nature of the distribution and its permutations.

With the advent of electronic literature, beginning with hypertext fiction in the 1980s<sup>xxv</sup>, the way the world was written and read changed. Authors explored the possibilities of puncturing their text and re-framing their words so that readers might define textual outcomes and sequence itself could be dismembered. Mapping the phenomenon of seemingly boundless language--which is slowly becoming normalized--is a matter of expressing disjointedness without creating false joints. How is this possible

when inherent in the form of the map is the element of fixity? The map, that is, fixes what has been unbounded; it binds Jackson's words to the 'page' in a new--albeit geographically focused--form. The map orders Jackson's words according to their location; there is a virtual red sewing pin stuck into the map for every place a word resides. Clicking on these pins reveals the word (*if*, for example) and its location (New York, New York). The names of the participants are not included, as they are--in the context of this project--not named individuals, but singular words. There are clusters of pins in certain locations, signifying many words, and an equal number of tattooed participant bodies. Other pins are isolated. Yet, looking at the map it is evident that while these words may be geographically isolated, they are not alone. They are part of a legible and mapable community.

In her essay "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" Kristeva argues for the intertextual nature of all texts. She writes, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another."<sup>xxvi</sup> Thus, she is arguing for the fragmented text not unlike Haraway argues for the fragmented body. There is nothing solid about either, except for the appearance of unity. Whether pieces of texts are directly borrowed from other literature--as occurs in *Patchwork Girl*--or quotations are borrowed from a waitress, or a credo is borrowed from grandfather all text are influenced. They are amalgamations of experiences, perhaps subliminally constructed, but constructed nonetheless.

When these textual fragments come together in a piece of traditional, bounded, literature their stitches have been erased, and the scars from these stitches made invisible. They appear as one unified narrative, usually from one author. What Walker calls distributed narrative and what I have been calling dispersed text do not follow the laws of the book. Although Jackson's map grounds the 'words' and unifies them it does not make them look or act like a seamless story. They remain, on the map, autonomous words in disparate locales. Although the words live their lives off of the map and the map can only symbolically pin the words to particular locations, there is an effort on Jackson's part--through the creation of the map--to keep tabs on her words. Jackson requests that her words send her address changes so she might keep the map up to date, but her request is also a means of monitoring her words. Even if the embodied words

have agency over their mobility that the map cannot impede through their sheer participation in the project the words agree to be ‘mapped.’ In so doing they voluntarily sacrifice their geographic anonymity.

In *Imagined Communities* Benedict Anderson argues that the nation state, and all communities that are too large for “face-to-face contact” are creations of their citizens. Each is reinforced by communication systems that (often anonymously) link individuals (i.e. a shared televisual mediascape). Anderson writes, “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>xxvii</sup> A community does not necessitate being in the same geographic space, or even the same temporal one. People are linked through a variety of technologies including the Internet. For example, Jackson’s project-website gives her words the ability to feel like they are part of a community. The site enforces a notion that many members in a variety of imagined communities want to believe in: imagined communities are not imaginary. They are, especially in an age of globalization, the norm. Thus, the map serves as a means of connecting Jackson’s community of ‘words.’ It makes words and their locations visible to the group. It gives them a sense of where they are in the world in terms of one another.

Yet, the map is not simply a means of group identification. The map, as I mentioned earlier, bounds mobile individuals; it fixes--through both literal and metaphoric (virtual) pinning--bodies to one spot in the world. While the map is modified for address-changes it has no way of expressing traveling, homelessness and nomadic bodies. Jackson wants her words locatable, visible and knowable in their anonymity and physical absence (in her physical present). Maps are tricky, for as helpful as they are with identifying bodies, places, and things, these bodies, places, and things are more transformative than the map itself. Like bodies that move, places and things are not set in their spots in geographic space; towns, with waxing and waning populations, appear and disappear. Even maps that are regularly updated are not reflective of what is actually *there*.

Anderson discusses the meaning and function of maps, how they play a role in the imagined community, and how they are problematic mechanisms of representation--along

with the census and the museum--for they categorize without local specificity, and give power to the cartographer who is often acting out of an impulse to define certain space as opposed to other space. He writes,

Interlinked with one another, then, the census, the map and the museum illuminate the late colonial state's style of thinking about its domain. The 'warp' of this thinking was a totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state's real or contemplated control: peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth. The effect of the grid was always to be able to say of anything that it was this, not that; it belonged here, not there. It was bounded, determinate, and therefore - in principles - countable...<sup>xxviii</sup>

Even though Jackson lets her words travel freely in the world and anticipates their appearance and disappearance, she still tracks them with a map. Why? No doubt this map, like other features on her website, is a way for the words to make their imagined community more visible, less imagined. Blogs, MySpace, chat rooms, and fan sites function in a similar (but in no way parallel) way; they bring together individuals who often have a common set of interests or concerns in a virtual space so that they can share with one another, and perhaps swap e-mail addresses and eventually get to know one another, as Anderson calls it, "face to face." However, Jackson's choice of including the map on her site is curious after considering Anderson's argument. The map, according to Anderson, is "bounded, determinate [...] countable." It is de-personalizing, and hardly a tool for liberation. Is this a way for Jackson to assert her real or imagined control over her words? Is it a reflection of a monarchial impulse? Is Jackson, with her "funky Californian" aesthetic and doctrine of unboundedness more of a traditional author than she lets on?

### **Why is Shelley Jackson a Big Bad Author?: Barthes, Foucault and the Disavowal of Authorship**

*I recently took great pleasure in watching three "words" coach a fourth, nascent word through her first tattoo: "Have you eaten anything? Here, have this apple. Do you want us to hold your hand?" My presence was a comfortable irrelevancy to them at that moment.*

-Shelley Jackson<sup>xxix</sup>

When Shelley Jackson visited Stockton College on a speaking tour one of her words showed up to listen to her read *and* to meet her maker. As Rettberg remembers the encounter, the word “seemed to worship [Jackson] with an almost acolyte-like veneration.” In his interview with Jackson, Rettberg asks the author, how *Skin* has changed her relationship to her fan base who--due to the nature of her project--wear her words; does the branding of word to skin force the volunteers to “remember [Jackson] till the day they die”?<sup>xxx</sup>

Jackson’s response to Rettberg’s question does not disavow her authorial power, but does frame it as a “necessary flaw.” She states, “[*Skin*] makes me keenly aware that I am not the only, or even always the dominant voice [in the story].” She says, as I noted in the introduction to this paper, the meaning of the words she assigns for branding changes through and throughout the context of her participants lives. They own the words (in the sense that each of us owns ourselves), and give them new meaning daily. Although Jackson dictates the font and the word itself, the participant chooses how large his or her tattoo is and where on the body it is inscribed. He or she also chooses the tattoo artist, without whom, the word would remain ‘unpublished.’

In “The Death of the Author” Roland Barthes argues that the author is displaced when the text is read. The reader brings meaning to the work as the author recedes into the distance. Barthes believes that “A text’s unity” is contingent “not in its origin but in its destination.”<sup>xxxi</sup> The author is, for Barthes, an imposition on the text; the author “close[s] the writing”; he or she shuts down what might be opened up by the reader.<sup>xxxii</sup> Is this Barthesian concept what Shelley Jackson is arguing for when she insists that her words are recontextualized in the lives of their bodies? Is she asserting her own absence in the life of her language? Or is Jackson’s text as fragmented words resisting the “unity” that Barthes claims the reader provides?

Michel Foucault might say the role of the author is not quite the closed book that Barthes posits. The “author-function” that “results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author,” necessitates an investigation into how the author exists outside of the text as well as within. In his essay, “What Is an Author?” Foucault takes issue with Barthes’s author-death in favor of questioning the location of a singular author in general. How can the author die when he exists in so

many manifestations? The author and authorship is a myth for Foucault, not because the author is dead, but because he does not exist as a fixed origin. Nonetheless Foucault acknowledges “‘profundity’ or ‘creative’ power” we attribute to the maker of the text. “Nevertheless,” Foucault continues, “ these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Some of Jackson’s words “handle” the text upon their bodies by “projecting” onto Jackson. One of the sections of Jackson’s website entitled “Footnotes” is a place for Jackson’s volunteers to share their feelings, experiences, and creative reactions (poetry, quotations, articles, definitions, song lyrics...<sup>xxxiv</sup>) to living life as words. More than one of them recognizes Jackson; *in* posts: “A preposition. The opposite of out. These are just basic things that come to my mind when thinking about my word. I received my tattoo in January of 2004. I love explaining that my tattoo is a mere word in a wonderful masterpiece being mastered by a wonderful author with a great creative mind. I reside in Pennsylvania, USA, and love being part of this unique experience.” *in* is not alone in (her? his?) adoration of the author. *is* writes, “I find when people question what my “is” stands for they don't fully understand until I email them the link to Shelley's awesome website which explains the whole project (that I'm thrilled to be a part of) in depth.” While most of the words tend toward philosophizing over their word in terms of their lives and personal connections posts like those above are indicative of the awe-filled response a few participants have for their author. They attribute Jackson not only with authoring the story *Skin* but also attribute her with an indelible influence on/in their lives. She gives her “mere” words purpose, and for a few of them this is worthy of worship. She is--to a degree--their invisible creator. She may aim to give her words autonomy, power and control, however a few of them do not want it. They want an author, after all, they are words.

Prior to *Skin* Jackson owned up to authoring a number of works of electronic and non-electronic (published on paper) literature. While she often considered themes of fragmentation, and in her hypertext work allowed form to follow, Jackson did not leave

her text unsigned. She was the published author, and that was fine. Until, while working on one of her *regular* literary projects--a short story collection entitled *The Melancholy of Anatomy* (2002)-- Jackson began a story called *Skin*. The story was left unfinished as the book went into publication. However unsatisfied Jackson was by her partial story it lingered in her mind. Then, Jackson recalls,

...driving across country on my book tour in the spring of 2002, I had a seemingly unrelated idea: I would publish a story "on America." Every time I pulled off the highway, I'd scratch a word on a rock or tree trunk, leaf or fence post. I planned to take pictures of the words and post them online along with maps and elaborate driving directions, so that readers could visualize for themselves the way the words arranged themselves in space across the American landscape. An ambitious reader could follow my tracks and try to read the story that way, though I didn't anticipate anyone actually doing it—I thought just raising the possibility was interesting enough. I never did it, but the idea stuck in my mind. And I loved the idea of my words existing not in neat rows on a page but in meadows dotted with rabbit pellets, on dusty, desolate rest-stops, under buzzing fluorescent lights outside cheap motels.<sup>xxxv</sup>

The idea of an ephemeral text appealed to Jackson. Her concept of text written on the land, an unrealized precursor to *Skin*, demonstrates how important it was for Jackson to embed her words in a place that would act as an incubator for their transformation. However, like in *Skin*, Jackson turned to photography as a means of capturing her words freshly inscribed. She hoped her words would change, and ultimately disappear, but she wanted a document for the sake of permanence. Before the world takes its toll on the word, a quick snap of the shutter would produce evidence that it once existed unencumbered and perfect, if traditionally unpublished. This tension that both the story "on America" and *Skin* present is one of the ephemeral and the permanent. This tension, arguably adopted as theme, resonates throughout much (if not all) of Jackson's projects, and is especially visible in *Skin* which is both impermanently mortal and permanently tattooed. Can this tension be resolved? Even if it can, should it?

**Conclusion:**  
**Why is Shelley Jackson a "Benevolent Dictator"?**

In the end, Jackson can only control her words so much because ultimately her words are

people before they are words--people with ephemeral bodies. Bodies change, get old, and eventually die. Jackson attempts to map the ephemeral, to fix the mobile, to publish a permanent stain on the impermanent and ever-changing skin. Jackson demonstrates that ephemeral bodies are worth mapping; they are things of “consequence.”

Jackson can predict the inevitable mortality of her words, but their bodies deteriorate and fail on their own. Her authorial control does not extend to how her words live or die. Jackson is much like what Eric Raymond, in his book *The Cathedral and The Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source By An Accidental Revolutionary*, calls a “Benevolent Dictator for Life.” Raymond discusses the open source software community in which “a project has multiple co-maintainers working under a single 'benevolent dictator' who owns the project.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> The benevolent dictator oversees and maintains the community, but his power is limited. Raymond explains that the benevolent dictator “does not in fact own his entire project absolutely. Though he has the right to make binding decisions, he in effect trades away shares of the total reputation return in exchange for others’ work.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

If Jackson is like the benevolent dictator she exchanges power over her project for the daily performance of her words. By reframing the word upon the body, then, Jackson is giving over some of her authorial control to the body itself--an ephemeral thing that leaves the residue of its presence over the course of its life and into its death. Jackson’s words beget other words like, “What is that?” and “Why is it on your back?” They begin, through their performance (the wearing of the word), a discourse that includes countless words belonging to innumerable people who are not formally part of the project. They inspired the published words of reporters and critics whom I have quoted. They inspired the words on this page and those preceding it. They ignited conversations about a story most of us will never know as well as controversy over how and where words are written.

---

<sup>i</sup> *The Pillow Book*. Dir. Peter Greenaway. Perf. Vivian Wu, Yoshi Oida, Ken Ogata. 1997 (USA). DVD. Sony Pictures, 1998.

<sup>ii</sup> Rosita Nunes, "Written On (and Under) the Skin: An interview with Shelley Jackson." <http://www.tattoohighway.org/8>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://ineradicablestain.com/>

<sup>iv</sup> Daniel Pink, "THE 4TH ANNUAL: YEAR IN IDEAS; Skin Literature." *The New York Times Magazine*. 12 Dec. 2004.

<sup>v</sup> I have not read any articles that conjecture about why the 'words' have stayed silent. However, I have a few theories including: guilt and worry over betrayal of both group and author, investment in Jackson's vision, and maintaining power and control over knowledge. Every secret club and society develops an in-club/out of the club structure that reifies belonging and individual import.

<sup>vi</sup> David L. Ulin, WORDSTER "Wearing Shelley Jackson's "Skin"" *LA Weekly* Published on June 30, 2005.

<sup>vii</sup> Frank Franklin II, "A story told in tattoos" 5/17/2004 *USA Today.com*.

<sup>viii</sup> Joanna Walters, "Why this new brand of fiction is a life sentence" by *The Observer* Sunday 16 November 2003.

<sup>ix</sup> Nunes, *Ibid*.

<sup>x</sup> Lenora Todaro, "Writers on the verge: Shelley Jackson" *The Village Voice* May 15, 2001.

<sup>xi</sup> Scott Rettberg, "Written on the Body: An Interview with Shelley Jackson."

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/mainpages/new/july06/jackson.html>

<sup>xii</sup> This is a contentious title that I will return to later in this paper.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Stitch Bitch: The Patchwork Girl," MIT Communications Forum, November 4, 1997.

<http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers.html>

<sup>xiv</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects in Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 147.

<sup>xv</sup> B. Creed, *Horror And The Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection* (London: Routledge, 1993), 65.

<sup>xvi</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

<sup>xvii</sup> Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid*, 149

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid*, 150

<sup>xx</sup> Hayles, 149.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>xxii</sup> Peter Whitfield, *New Found Lands: Maps in the History of Exploration* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 2.

<sup>xxiii</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 41.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Jill Walker, "distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks" Presented at AoIR 5.0, Brighton, September 21, 2004,

[jill.walker@uib.no](mailto:jill.walker@uib.no) – <http://huminf.uib.no/jil>

<sup>xxv</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, "Electronic Literature: What is it?" v1.0 January 2, 2007

<http://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html>

<sup>xxvi</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Anderson, 6.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

<sup>xxix</sup> Rettberg, <http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/mainpages/new/july06/jackson.html>

<sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid*

- 
- <sup>xxx</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 148.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Ibid, 147
- <sup>xxx</sup> Michel Foucault, What Is An Author? in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124-127.
- <sup>xxx</sup> it, for example, includes all of the lyrics from Lennon/McCartney's *Let It Be*.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Rettberg, <http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/mainpages/new/july06/jackson.html>
- <sup>xxx</sup> Eric Raymond, *The Cathedral and The Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source By An Accidental Revolutionary*, (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2001), 101.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Ibid.

## References

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage, 1997.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill & Wang: 1977.
- Connor, Steven. *The Book of Skin*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Creed, B. *Horror And The Monstrous Feminine : An Imaginary Abjection*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Foucault, Michel. "What Is An Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Franklin, Frank. "A story told in tattoos." USA Today.com. 17 May 2004. [http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2004-05-17-tattoo-story\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2004-05-17-tattoo-story_x.htm)
- Grosz, Elizabeth. "Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations and the Corporeal." *Feminine/Masculine and Representation*. Eds. Terry Threadgold and Anne Cranny-Francis. Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, 2002.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

---

Hayles, N. Katherine. *My Mother was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Hayles, N. Katherine. The Electronic Literature Organization. "Electronic Literature: What is it?" v1.0. 2 Jan. 2007. <http://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html>

Jackson, Shelley. *Patchwork Girl*. Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 1995.

Jackson, Shelley. "Stitch Bitch: The Patchwork Girl." MIT Communications Forum. 4 Nov. 1997. <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers.html>

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. "Word, Dialogue, Novel." New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

Kuwahara, Makiko. *Tattoo: An Anthropology*. London: Berg Publishers, 2005.

Nunes, Rosita. "Written On (and Under) the Skin: An interview with Shelley Jackson." *Tattoo Highway*. <http://www.tattoohighway.org/8>

Paterson, David. *Sun Turned to Darkness: Memory and Recovery in the Holocaust Memoir*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1999.

Pink, Daniel. "THE 4TH ANNUAL: YEAR IN IDEAS; Skin Literature." *The New York Times Magazine*. 12 Dec. 2004.

Raymond, Eric. *The Cathedral and The Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source By An Accidental Revolutionary*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2001.

Rettberg, Scott. "Written on the Body: An Interview with Shelley Jackson." <http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/mainpages/new/july06/jackson.html>

Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1971.

---

Todaro, Lenora. "Writers on the verge: Shelley Jackson." *The Village Voice*. 15 May 2001.

Ulin, David. "WORDSTER: Wearing Shelley Jackson's "Skin"" *LA Weekly*. 30 June 2005.

Walker, Jill. "Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks." Presented at AoIR 5.0, Brighton, 21 Sept. 2004. jill.walker@uib.no – <http://huminf.uib.no/jil>

Walters, Joanne. "Why this new brand of fiction is a life sentence." *The Observer*. 16 November 2003.

Waxman, Zoë. *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Whitfield, Peter. *New Found Lands: Maps in the History of Exploration*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Lacan: The Silent Partners*. London: Verso, 2006.

*Shelley Jackson's Ineradicable Stain*. <http://ineradicablestain.com/>

*New Zealand In History*. "The Māori." <http://history-nz.org/maori3.html>

*Robert Walker's Gang's or Us*. "Tattoos." <http://www.gangsorus.com/tattoos.html>

*The Pillow Book*. Dir. Peter Greenaway. Perf. Vivian Wu, Yoshi Oida, Ken Ogata. 1997 (USA). DVD. Sony Pictures, 1998.