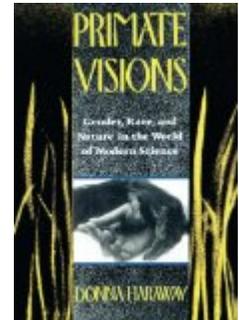


**Donna J. Haraway.** *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science.* London and New York: Routledge, 1989. ix + 431 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-90294-6.



**Reviewed by** M. Lynn Byrd

**Published on** H-Ideas (May, 2001)

## Visions and Revisions

[Note: This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.]

*Primate Visions* is an ambitious and important work. At this millennial review point, the book is a decade old and still influential, helping to lay the foundation for feminist and multicultural critiques both of popular science--a discourse long immune to this type of inquiry and possibly still a stronghold against it--and of the imbrication of science, capitalism, and imperialism.

In Haraway's words:

The argument of this book is that primatology is about an Order, a taxonomic and therefore political order that works by the negotiation of boundaries achieved through ordering differences ... The two major axes structuring the potent scientific stories of primatology that are elaborated in these practices are defined by the interacting dualism, sex/gender and nature/culture.

Sex and the west are axiomatic in biology and anthropology. Under the guiding logic of these complex dualisms, western primatology is simian orientalism (p. 10).

The work has three major objectives. It offers a narrative history of the field of primatology from the early part of the twentieth century through the early 1980s. It argues for the social construction of scientific knowledge, exposing subjective and personal agendas underlying so-called objective work and also subjects the natural sciences "to criticism on the level of values, not just facts" (p. 13). The book also insistently introduces race and gender issues into those very narratives, not only by interrogating the field itself in terms of its gendered and western-oriented discourse, but also by examining the role (participation) of women and minorities in it.

The argumentative scope of the book is supported by its length and amplified by its intended audiences. The almost five hundred page book (hard cover) is divided into three sections by chronological time period and by theme. Haraway herself suggests that this "large book may be read

from start to finish as a chronological and thematic survey of twentieth-century primatology," but she notes that each chapter can also stand alone as an essay (p. 14).

Haraway identifies some of her multiple audiences and suggests possible starting points for each of them; she closes her introduction with the claim: "each chapter is simultaneously history of science, cultural studies, feminist exploration, and engaged intervention into the constitutions of love and knowledge in the disciplined crafting of the Primate Order" (p. 14) and with a call to consciousness:

My placing this account of primatology within SF--the narratives of speculative fiction and scientific fact--is an invitation for the readers of *Primate Visions*--historians, culture critics, feminists, anthropologists, biologists, anti-racists, and nature lovers--to remap the borderlands between nature and culture (p. 15).

Haraway wants to reorder the world.

This may be, as several critics have pointed out, too much for one work, even given the ten years of research undertaken to produce the book (noted on the jacket) and even given the author's impressive credentials, a Ph.D. from Yale in Biology, a solid list of publications in her field, and a professorship at the University of California, Santa Cruz on the History of Consciousness Board.

While most of the chapters are able to stand alone as previously published articles, the continuity of the book does at times seem lacking. Also the quality of the chapters and sections themselves is uneven. Haraway's tour of primatology takes the reader through museums, space and other research labs, African field work, and even into film and other art forms. Her research journalism and narrative are superior! In these tasks, Haraway shines. Part I, "Monkey's and Monopoly Capitalism: Primatology before World War II" is the strongest section. The studies include Carl Akeley's taxidermy and the dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History; Robert Yerkes'

primate lab for human engineering; and the field research of C. R. Capreuter and S. A. Altman on the Caribbean island of Cayo Santiago.

Standout chapters in Part II, "Decolonization and Multinational Primatology," include "Apes in Eden, Apes in Space," which traces post-war primate labs conducting both space and language research, and "Metaphors into Hardware," which explores Harry Harlow's career in comparative psychology that turned monkeys and apes into symbols both of human evolutionary adaptation and of static and "natural" human difference in terms of race, class, and gender.

Part III, "The Politics of Being Female: Primatology is a Genre of Feminist Theory," is perhaps the most nebulous section. It argues for an alliance between feminism and primatology because both historically have been discourses about "managed bodies" (p. 289). Although the section claims to examine the give and take of the two fields, with feminism offering primatology a way to restructure its stories, and primatology offering feminism a greater range of definition (p. 287), it actually reads like the earlier case studies. Haraway does not privilege work just because it is labelled feminist.

Some of the strongest and most repeated criticisms of the work involve its language. It may be unfortunate that a book attempting to undo the masculine and Western hold on scientific investigation is written, at times almost impenetrably, in the current abstract and abstruse Western theoretical tradition. The small criticisms over content and style notwithstanding, the book stands as a seminal piece. It remains timely. One of the primatologists that Haraway comes close to critiquing, sociobiologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, just published *Mother Nature: A History Of Mothers, Infants And Natural Selection* this past October, while the July/August 2000 issue of *Psychology Today* contains an article "My Best Friend is a Chimp" by Roger Fouts, psychology professor and co-director of the Chimpanzee and Human Com-

munication Institute, that could have as easily been included as part of Haraway's critique.

In fact, primatology itself remains an interesting study, an open field. One of the words Haraway uses repeatedly in her descriptions of science, primatology in particular, and of her own work is "contested." That word choice is significant because the book does become a sort of contest. Haraway's attempt to unite fact and value in a scientific discussion as well as her desire to bring together diverse and disparate audiences from academic professionals in both the humanities and the sciences to amateurs who love nature just about guarantees a lot of friction. It is also an important start.

However, in this "contesting" book, there is no winner. Haraway fails to offer anything other than criticism. She does not fall into the trap of some environmentalist who replace scientific discourse with a simplistic organic holism. In fact, she is careful to note that feminist, ecofeminist, and non-dualist anthropological approaches do not offer a "unity innocent of power and domination" (pp. 256-57), but she still leaves the readers in a field of postmodern language play. Haraway even refuses to accept the ultimate relativist position, "Nor does my argument claim there is no world for which people struggle to give an account, no referent in the system of signs and productions of meanings, no progress in building better accounts within traditions of practice" (p. 12).

However, Haraway offers no other paradigm for bettering the world other than bettering the accounts. Thus, the book points out just how little distance we've actually covered, not in terms of science or technology, but in terms of talking about, or representing, our advances. Re-ordering does not always equal changing.

*Primate Visions* reveals that P.M. (Postmodernism) is, in fact, just the afternoon of modernism. The title of this review, "Visions and Revisions," recalls the modernist character Prufrock, who sees the dissolution of his society, but cannot

see to fix it. Similarly, Haraway's own words "Substitutes do not destabilize, they replicate" (p. 310) come back to haunt her. We are still looking for the language to discuss our paradigm shift, and we may need to look beyond language to action. While it focuses on the borderlands between human and ape and between nature and culture, *Primate Visions* flounders in the in-between of reason and faith; and Haraway, whom Micaela Di Leonardo describes affectionately as "the pissed-off radical accountant," remains an earnest professor, but a hollow prophet.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas>

**Citation:** M. Lynn Byrd. Review of Haraway, Donna J. *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. May, 2001.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5154>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.