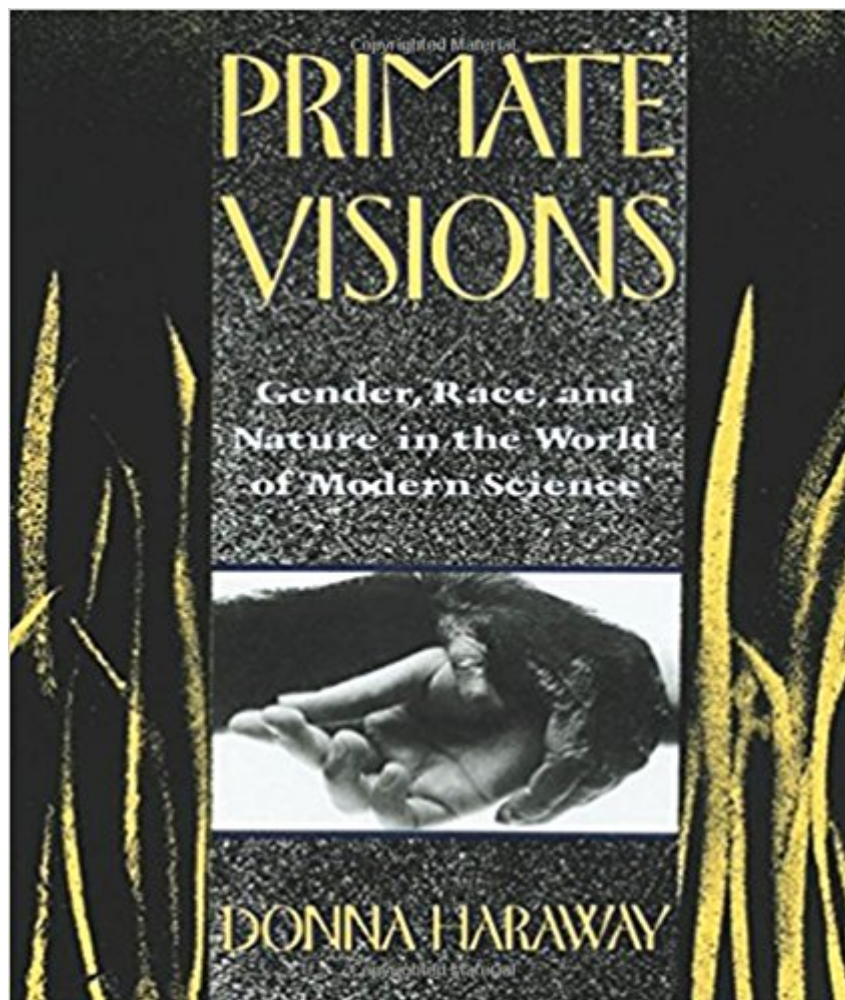




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Primate Visions: Gender, Race, And Nature In The World Of Modern Science



Synopsis

Haraway's discussions of how scientists have perceived the sexual nature of female primates opens a new chapter in feminist theory, raising unsettling questions about models of the family and of heterosexuality in primate research.

Book Information

Paperback: 496 pages

Publisher: Routledge; 1 edition (August 24, 1990)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0415902940

ISBN-13: 978-0415902946

Product Dimensions: 7 x 1.1 x 10 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #209,264 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #26 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Zoology > Primatology](#) #27 in [Books > Arts & Photography > History & Criticism > Themes > Women in Art](#) #203 in [Books > Textbooks > Science & Mathematics > Biology & Life Sciences > Zoology](#)

Customer Reviews

In this book, Haraway (biology, Univ. of California, Santa Cruz) claims there is a Western white male bias in theories of human evolution and culture and discusses the problems facing female scientists in this field. Shirley Strum, in *Almost Human: A Journey into the World of Baboons* (LJ 10/15/87), described the resistance she met when her observations of baboons undermined theories of male social dominance. Haraway probes deeper into the origins of a male bias in primatology and provides interesting sketches of this science's founding fathers and recent women scientists. However, the dense prose and polemics of this book restrict its audience to scholars equipped to debate her views. For academic libraries.- Beth Clewis, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community Coll. Lib., Richmond, Va. Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

." . . Haraway's take on the many strands of contemporary feminism is refreshingly acute. . . .

"Primate Visions is a genuine tour de force, uniquely combining intellectual history and the sociology of knowledge. It contains enough sheer insight and represents enough hard historical digging to fuel

several scholarly careers. We leave the text genuinely enlightened on the changing boundaries between nature and culture, and on our own historical trafficking in these myriad forms of otherness."-"The Nation, Nov. 1990

In "Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science", Donna Haraway examines the literature of primatology in the twentieth century. In the course of her work, she draws extensively on Bruno Latour's projected methods for studying science in action. Haraway writes "about primates because they are popular, important, marvelously varied, and controversial. And all members of the Primate Order – monkeys, apes, and people – are threatened. Late twentieth-century primatology may be seen as part of a complex survival literature in global, nuclear culture" (pg. 3). She continues, "Primates existing at the boundaries of so many hopes and interests are wonderful subjects with whom to explore the permeability of walls, the reconstitution of boundaries, the distaste for endless socially enforced dualisms" (pg. 3). Haraway draws extensively on works of fiction as she believes these help shape people's understanding of primates and, thus, themselves (pg. 3). To that end, Haraway argues, "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 dualisms, sex/gender and nature/culture] (pg. 10). One of the foundational scientists in primatology that Haraway identifies is Robert Yerkes. She argues that his "enduring contribution to science was the founding of a paradigmatic laboratory" (pg. 61). In this way, "the paradigmatic human science for Yerkes was psychobiology. Those animals most like people should be used as the most practical producers of knowledge" (pg. 62). Reflecting the Progressives' goals of social engineering, Yerkes "saw personnel research as the key discipline of the new era. Yerkes believed that industrial systems had evolved from slavery, to the wage system, to the present system based on cooperation. Only now could the value of the person be realized" (pg. 69). Haraway concludes of Yerkes' work, "Personality then tied physiology, medicine, psychology, anthropology, and sociology into the service of management. The scientific study of instinct (or drive) was like an inventory of raw material in the production of efficient, harmonious society through human engineering" (pg. 69). Summarizing the work of the late Cold

War period, Haraway writes, *“Surrogates, rehabilitants, language students, and adopted children: apes modeled a solution to a deep cultural anxiety sharpened by the real possibility in the late twentieth century of western people’s destruction of the earth”* (pg. 132). New studies during this period, such as those by Jane Goodall and the early space program tests demonstrate the dichotomy of primatology in the post-WWII era. Haraway writes, *“The naturalistic primate studies in the ethologically constructed field intersected the extraterrestrial primate studies of the space program in the electronically recorded and telemetrically implanted simians beaming information to listening scientists in the field, laboratory, and command center. In the universe of information, the antipodes of the earthly ecosystem and extraterrestrial space meet in a shared code”* (pg. 140). Discussing gender, Haraway writes, *“The story of compulsory reproductive sexuality is never far in the background in primate visions. The multiplicity of surrogates confuses the question of alliances and the nature of progeny, but not for a moment does all the boundary crossing of species barriers, machine-organism barriers, language barriers, earth-space barriers relax the injunction to be fruitful and multiply, heterosexually”* (pg. 146). Continuing her gender analysis, she writes, *“Feminists and women and men and women and feminist and not trace a fine line as scientists drawing and redrawing the objects of biological and medical knowledge marked female”* (pg. 279-280). Haraway’s contention *“is that the intersection coupled with other aspects of the decolonization of nature that have restructured the discourse of biology and anthropology, as well as other practices of international politics destabilizes the narrative fields that gave rise to both primatology and feminism, thereby generating the possibility of new stories, but also not innocent of the workings of power and desire, including new exclusions. But the intervention must work from within, constrained and enabled by the fields of power and knowledge that make discourse eminently material”* (pg. 288). Haraway concludes, *“Questions about the nature of war, technology, power, and community echo through the primate literature. Given meaning through readings of the bodies and lives of our primate kin, who were semiotically placed in allochronic time and allotropic space, reinvented origins have been figures for reinvented possible futures. Primatology is a First World survival literature in the conditions of twentieth-century global history”* (pg. 369).

Usually when I have trouble getting through a book, I place some blame on the author for poor writing. But Haraway's writing is brilliant, just so theoretically dense that if I really want to understand, it takes me an hour to read 12-15 pages. This is an incredible work of scholarship, will change the way you think about humanity's relationship with the world.

A brilliant examination of the thought underlying the understanding of primates in Western culture with a rewarding surprise on every page.

This book is so overwritten it's unreadable. I have an MFA in writing--I'm used to reading high-level texts. This is just poorly written.

Although Haraway is better known for her later *Cyborg Manifesto*, *Primate Visions* is arguably better and more insightful, and is certainly a clearer and more accessible work. *Primate Visions* takes the reader through the history of primatology, tracing the science's roots in racism, sexism, and colonialism. Haraway begins by outlining the early 20th century American museum exhibits that furthered the racist agenda of social Darwinism, and moves through descriptions of inhumane psychological research done on primates, the implications of young women recruited to do some of the first field work with apes (including Jane Goodall), and feminist sociobiological and anthropological theories. Haraway's intense prose is supplemented by provocative and heart-wrenching illustrations. All in all, a book that challenges our preconceptions of scientific research as incorruptible and free of bias.

The first paragraph of Matt Cartmill's review of Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions* book. It appeared in the *International Journal of Primatology* (Vol. 12, No. 1, 1991) This is a book that contradicts itself a hundred times; but that is not a criticism of it, because its author thinks contradictions are a sign of intellectual ferment and vitality. This is a book that systematically distorts and selects historical evidence; but that is not a criticism, because its author thinks that all interpretations are biased, and she regards it as her duty to pick and choose her facts to favor her own brand of politics. This is a book full of vaporous, French-intellectual prose that makes Teilhard de Chardin sound like Ernest Hemingway by comparison; but that is not a criticism, because the author likes that sort of prose and has taken lessons in how to write it, and she thinks that plain, homely speech is part of a conspiracy to oppress the poor. This is a book that clatters around in a dark closet of irrelevancies for 450 pages before it bumps accidentally into its index and stops; but that is not a criticism, either,

because its author finds it gratifying and refreshing to bang unrelated facts together as a rebuke to stuffy minds. This book infuriated me; but that is not a defect in it, because it is supposed to infuriate people like me, and the author would have been happier still if I had blown out an artery. In short, this book is flawless, because all its deficiencies are deliberate products of art. Given its assumptions, there is nothing here to criticize. The only course open to a reviewer who dislikes this book as much as I do is to question its author's fundamental assumptions--which are big-ticket items involving the nature and relationships of language, knowledge, and science. This review alone makes me want to read it. Must be a brilliant book to have flummoxed the reviewer so.

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