Donna J. Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,* Reinventing Nature as a Revolutionary Re-appropriation of Knowledge

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1. Introduction

So how do simians, cyborgs, women, and the reinvention of nature, from the similarly titled work by Donna J. Haraway, function in the conceptualization of her major argument, that "[s]cience *is* culture," but that it must be contestable and often contested, in order to leave space for political affinities that empower women and *others*?[i] The concept of reinventing nature provides the first key to interpreting this collection of essays. In much traditional, binary Western thought, nature is not invented; it exists as the essentialized, raw material of human life opposite the construction of culture.

Haraway reveals, however, that in the hands of scientists, objects from a scientifically produced category, *nature*, which includes society, can be and have been redesigned, "'*in the image of a generally acceptable ideal.*'"[ii] Introducing the possibility of nature's re-invention by socialist-feminist scientists as a response to the "acceptable ideal," therefore, becomes central to a set of powerful analyses by Haraway, which she uses to investigate the possibility of the female, or the *other*, being able to author her or its own existence. Her evaluation of the history of specific scientific experiments provides a ground for developing workable means for women's production and reproduction of their lives. By reinterpreting scientific work that stands as objective, her analysis constitutes and engenders a re-invention of the Marxist concept of re-appropriating knowledge as a revolutionary practice.[iii]

The ten chapters comprising the text are divided into three parts: *Nature as a System of Production and Reproduction*; *Contested Readings: Narrative Natures*; and *Differential Politics for Inappropriate/d Others*. Although each part pursues a particular problem related to science, to the legitimacy of constructions of narrativity, and to politics, many of the same characters: scientists, women, nature, and specific individuals appear throughout. The dual concerns of feminist mediations of scientific stories and empowerment through perspectivized scientific authorship permeate the text.

The structure of the book, by ordering the essays through lenses corresponding to the text's three parts, creates an intertextuality in which Haraway considers central questions about what could constitute a socialist-feminist science. While the order of the chapters moves from more scientifically technical essays regarding primates, through discussions of effects of language, with ever increasing momentum toward the accumulation of strategies for political empowerment, each essay supports and intensifies the nuances of the others.

2. Science of Simians as a Means to Domination

While the title's category of simians, as a group of higher primates, includes humans, the essays in Haraway's early chapters consider the motivations and methods behind scientific experimentation utilizing non-human simians by human simians. As studies of nature, *animal societies* form a basis for rationalizing and naturalizing "oppressive orders of domination in the human body politic" even as they claim to improve, or at least optimize human life.[iv] Nature, considered something that initially exists without *invention,* is taken hostage by human control through its use within human social and cultural structures like family, division of labor, and reproductive orders.

This long-standing, Western, male-propelled, view of nature as a concrete, objectively definable entity, instrumental in sustaining human culture, has influenced women's personal and

political situations significantly, according to Haraway. For example, in chapter three, "The Biological Enterprise: Sex, Mind, and Profit from Human Engineering to Sociobiology," Haraway highlights Robert Yerkes, a scientist who studied primates using comparative psychological methods for human engineering projects. Much of his work involved creating what he considered to be rational modes of social engineering. His methods, according to those in his intellectual circle, which included the Committee for Research on Problems of Sex (CRPS), was considered a liberating, rather than sexually repressive endeavor.[v]

Haraway, however, interprets Yerkes' and several other capitalist, male scientists' work as exemplars of a long-held and entrenched view of nature in the scientific community and the effects of this view. By utilizing the purportedly objective scientific enterprise to uncover the *truth* about nature, the effect is the grounding of political rights in nature, specifically, in "one's natural place determined by disinterested science."[vi] For the establishment of equality, therefore, dependence on life sciences as understood within traditional parameters, develops social constraints for women through specific applications of biological determinism, especially those dealing with divisions of labor based on traditional views that support different sexual drives based on biology.[vii]

One of Haraway's major contentions is that scientific practices considered disinterested are actually inspired by and situated in an environment that is patriarchal and capitalist and therefore, form dominating systems that maintain patriarchy by emphasizing competitive material reproduction.[viii] Because predominant theories of nature fuel cultural-political domination, Haraway's insistence on the obligation of socialist-feminists to develop their own science to inform a "new world," rather than sustaining the traditional one based on domination, appears to be a valid perspective with a possible strategic solution.[ix] If integrated into the practice of science, this approach could frame domination "as theory, not nature".[x] Furthermore, by pursuing the concept of domination as *merely* theoretical and highlighting changes that have

occurred in twentieth century life sciences, Haraway develops a question that resonates throughout the text: how can women create a socialist-feminist life science?[xi]

3. Women as Revolutionary Reconstructors

In chapters four and five, Haraway discusses the imposition of conscious and subconscious rules governing scientific stories about primate behavior. The rules were meant to maintain a level of objectivity in scientific practice, but ironically, have led to subjectively contoured public myths and understandings of science that are considered neutral. Since male scientists have produced a majority of the rules that engender situated scientific stories, which nevertheless, retain a reputation as being objective, Haraway attempts to describe and re-invent the possible roles of feminist scientific responses. Her approach is to analyze the effects of the historical contingency of perspective on scientists, as well as to consider elements of the history of scientific production.

Since the rules are implicit, they establish an unacknowledged type of *invention* of nature that denies any operative level of construction within *disinterested* scientific inquiry. Haraway creates an imaginative framework, a scholarly 'patrilineage' of primatologists that functions as a genealogy of implicit, male mediations/rules for telling scientific stories. This framework reveals the constraints surrounding female scientists and the trajectory of their scientific work, which ultimately cannot conform to the inherited parameters of storytelling.

In chapter four, "In the Beginning Was the Word: The Genesis of Biological Theory," Haraway considers possible tactics for the creation of a politically effective feminist science. First, she notes a particularly challenging tension that comes from the uncovering by feminist scientists of epistemological problems of scientific knowledge based on historically contingent values. While analyzing these problems reveals some of the biologically deterministic elements of much scientific work, it also leads to corroboration of a constructivist approach in which all

science is fabrication.[xii] Haraway insists that feminists avoid the consequence that "all scientific statements" function as historical fictions because feminists need and want to be able to "tak[e] a stand on the nature of things" in order to create a political common ground.[xiii]

4. Cyborgs: Visions of Radical Feminism

When Haraway introduces the "Cyborg Manifesto," she has already deconstructed primate scientific studies related to the *nature* of women's place; discussed the issues of historically contingent perspective in public scientific story creation; asserted the necessity of avoiding essentializing women's experience; and broached the considerations and pitfalls of conceptual reliance on the term 'gender' using theoretical—Marxist, feminist, linguistic— analyses.

The chapter, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" addresses all of the previous concerns through a more radical feminist method: Haraway's invention of an increasingly fruitful metaphor for feminist experience, the cyborg. It is the ingenuity of this new metaphor that magnetizes all of the elements in the text. Like the cyborg, Haraway advocates yielding to an un-resolvable quality within socialist-feminist science, as well as in feminist thought and experience. This un-resolvability, she argues should be utilized as a conceptual, tactical maneuver, which, due to the overlap between the essays and the ordering of the chapters, is mirrored back through the style and flavor of the manuscript as a whole.

The cyborg, imagination blended with material reality, forms a conceptualization that Haraway deems necessary for any prospect of transforming the trajectory of history to open up new feminist possibilities.[xiv] The cyborg is a postmodern, post-gender fiction that can stand-in for woman by disregarding and rewriting the repressive historical narratives that have informed feminist politics.[xv] Because the "cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled,

postmodern collective and personal self," it may remove the power of dualisms, such as nature/culture, to dominate women's role in science and politics.[xvi]

The use of the cyborg metaphor and the related development of cyborg writing by colonized and marginalized groups, engages with science and technology in order to transform structures, such as labor processes and class-hierarchies that often negatively affect women. By "seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other," cyborg writing attempts to reprogram the technologies that consider women's bodies as 'code problems'. With the aim of survival and self-identification, feminists can undermine command and control style domination through their cyborg tales.[xvii] Avoiding reference to a "founding myth of original wholeness," the cyborg is freed from dualistic approaches to science and nature that inform culture, as well as women's place within it.[xviii]

Haraway's final chapters ultimately problematize identity on two levels. The concluding chapter "boldly go[es] where no man has gone before" by discussing how the immune system, as an information technology, has become one more element influencing the modern understanding of identity through the concept of "what counts as a unit" in a world "of power-charged differences."[xix] At this point, Haraway reiterates many of the notions and incarnations of scientific constructivist and system design views of nature and of bodies, particularly those of woman, slave, and laborer that appeared in her previous essays in the text.[xx]

Most importantly, however, these final chapters flesh out viable working solutions to the problems of traditionally understood *objectivity* of scientific practice that has functioned as the basis of women's domination. Here she provides specific steps that socialist-feminist scientists can take in order to make scientific practice *truly* objective, while retaining a "critical relation to practices of domination."[xxi] Haraway asserts that "relativism and totalization both deny the stakes in location" and argues that a "split and contradictory self," like the cyborg feminist, is

better able to question perspectives and positions in order to "be accountable" in an epistemological and ethical sense.[xxii]

5. Multi-faceted Scientific Practice, Multi-faceted World

While creating a manuscript out of essays that include overlapping and repeated information is slightly jarring, the effect of the organization and content of *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, intensifies Haraway's expression and purpose in a way that parallels her overarching conceptual undertaking: to acknowledge the un-resolvability of feminist identity. Especially important are two concepts: that it is necessary to view "objects of knowledge" as actors/agents, and that using situated knowledges, both particular and embodied, avoids the denial of a type of masterful vision that supports domination through its supposed capacity for "transcendence of all limits and responsibility."[xxiii]

Like the faceted reality of a cubist painting, Haraway's cyborg feminist and assemblage of essays speak to the power of a new feminist *objectivity* in which understanding critical positioning can unlock potential political affinities without essentializing personal identity through uncontestable scientific stories about nature. Her hope is that the title's simian, cyborg, and women entities can freely reinvent themselves while developing an empowering political affinity based on a 'nature' that encompasses embodied, situated knowledges. Allowing for reinterpretations of scientific projects formerly considered objective, while at the same time, avoiding positing all scientific endeavor as a fictional construction, could provide a strong ground on which those who have had less opportunity to create their own narratives can take a stand.

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i D. J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 196, 230.

ii Ibid., 47; quoting Robert Yerkes' *Chimpanzees: A Laboratory Colony*.

iii Ibid., 45.

iv Ibid., 11, 46, 64-65.

v Ibid., 49-50.

vi Ibid., 56.

vii Ibid., 53.

viii Ibid., 68.

ix Ibid., 68.

x Ibid., 23.

xi Ibid., 45.

xii Ibid., 78.

xiii Ibid., 78-79.

xiv Ibid., 150.

xv Ibid.

xvi Ibid., 163.

xvii Ibid., 175.

xviii Ibid., 172, 175.

xix Ibid., 205, 212.

xx Ibid., 210.

xxi Ibid., 186.

xxii Ibid., 193.

xxiii Ibid., 190-91, 198.