Gender Representations in Orangutan Primatological Narratives: Essentialist Interpretations of Sexuality, Motherhood, and Women

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CHAPTER 3

Gender Representations in Orangutan Primatological Narratives

Essentialist Interpretations of Sexuality, Motherhood, and Women

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Primatology, the study of primates, is rooted in the disciplines of anthropology and biology, the study of humans and the study of life, respectively. Primatology’s connection to biological anthropology reflects a motivation to better understand human nature and the natural environment. Through the work of Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas, pioneers of some of the first long-term studies of the great apes, including chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans (in central Africa, Indonesia, and Malaysia), the field of primatology has created numerous popular narratives in nature programs, films, books, and environmental advocacy. Many of these narratives establish relationships between non-human and human primates in terms of behavior and biology.

This chapter explores the relationship between primatology and how meaning is created to influence our epistemologies concerning nature, gender, culture, and sexuality, drawing from Donna Haraway’s work, particularly her 1989 book, *Primate Visions*. Haraway explores how primatology constructs narratives that create fictions and facts relating to science, nature, gender, and race in problematic ways. Her work extensively analyzes the field of primatology, and this project builds on that work by critically examining narratives and metaphors related to rape, domination, motherhood, and female power.
This essay specifically focuses on the study and protection of orangutans, one of the great apes with a close genetic link to humans, through an analysis of popular press books, documentaries, and magazines, including Reflections of Eden (by Biruté Galdikas), Orangutan Odyssey (by Galdikas, Briggs, and Ammann), Orangutans: Wizards of the Forest (by Anne Russon), and several National Geographic feature stories. Using three extended examples located in these works, I argue that the rhetorical construction of orangutan copulation, orangutan motherhood, and women as primatologists imposes primatological narratives and interpretations in ways that engender and perpetuate dualisms related to nature/culture, masculinity/femininity, and heterosexuality/homosexuality. Although these narratives are problematic, using what I call ironic identification might help authors, film makers, and audiences to rethink and reframe such texts.

Orangutans: Bridging the Nature/Culture Dualism?

One of the key ideas that many ecofeminist scholars have problematized is the Western philosophical and historical conception that women are linked to the irrationality of nature, while men are connected to reason in the cultural sphere (e.g., Plumwood 1991, 1993; Roach 1991). As Val Plumwood explains, “Nature, as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilized, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness. In other words, nature includes everything that reason excludes” (1993: 19-20). The dominant reliance on scientific method and interpretation in the field of primatology plays a role in perpetuating the dualistic spheres of reason and irrationality, and of culture and nature, despite its primary goal to better understand nature and culture. According to Donna Haraway, primatologists have focused extensively on issues of reproduction and production, which offer two possible interpretations: “On the one hand, we may reinforce our vision of the natural and cultural necessity of domination; on the other, we may learn to practise our sciences so as to show more clearly the new fragmentary possibilities of producing and reproducing our lives without overwhelming reliance on the theoretical categories and concrete practices of control and enmity” (1991: 21; see also Haraway 1989).

The field of primatology attempts to challenge but ultimately reinforces these dualisms of nature/culture and masculinity/femininity through its focus on understanding both human and nonhuman worlds.

Because nonhuman primates can behave in human-like ways, human observers readily identify with orangutans, chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos, and other primes. The great apes in particular, are an attractive, charismatic species for study and environmental protection precisely because they exhibit many human characteristics, while remaining in a world separate from humans. Primatologists rely on this ambiguous characterization of orangutans to create a bridge between humans and nature, as I have argued elsewhere (Sowards 2006a). Primatologists use several rhetorical strategies to demonstrate how orangutans create a bridge between human and nonhuman worlds, including stories about orangutan and human origins, genetic connections, and psychological or intellectual connections (Sowards 2006a, 2006b). First, mythological stories about the origins of orangutans and their relationships to humans explain how orangutans became “humans of the forest” (the literal translation of “orangutan” in the Indonesian language). Humans also share 97 percent of genetic composition with orangutans, establishing a biological and undeniable close connection between humans and orangutans. Talking about orangutan intelligence is yet another way primatologists emphasize the connection between humans and orangutans, because of their higher-order thought processes, such as tool use, ability to learn and imitate, and memory skills (Sowards 2006a; Russon 2000). Anne Russon (2000), a psychologist who studies orangutans, argues that our understanding of human intelligence can be informed by studying orangutan intelligence. The study of orangutan intelligence bridges the expansive gap between humans and orangutans. However, these studies play a powerful role in anthropomorphizing orangutans. For example, humans establish what it means to be an intelligent species. The ability to learn sign language may represent human intelligence, but orangutans may have no reason to develop such a language on their own.

These identifications with orangutans (and other animals) demonstrate the power of animal narratives that provide a possible bridge between nature and culture. Haraway (2003), in The Companion Species Manifesto, observes that “through our ideologically loaded narratives of their lives, animals ‘hail’ us to account for the regimes in which they and we must live. We ‘hail’ them into our constructs of nature and culture, with major consequences of life and death, health and illness, longevity and extinction” (2003: 17). The stories that are told about nonhuman animals recall narratives of connection, similarity, and what Rose (1995) calls profound interspecies events, the kind of experience that changes who we are and how we relate to nonhuman animals. Mary Daly (1978) argues that people need to look for and learn from profound interspecies events, citing conversations with animals as sources or inspirations.
for her concept of Spinning, the move away from an androcentric world and creation of new ideas. Frans de Waal contends that anthropomorphism fosters these identifications: "anthropomorphism is not only inevitable[,] it is a powerful tool" (de Waal 2001: 40). However, de Waal (1989, 1996, 2001) makes an important distinction between animal-centric and anthropocentric identifications, that is, anthropomorphism must be employed critically to avoid the trappings of "Bambification" in which audiences simplify and reduce nonhuman animals to caricatures (de Waal 2001: 74).

While humans may find anthropomorphized orangutans endearing and consequently want to protect them and their natural habitat, they may also want to bridge the physical separation between themselves and orangutans. Instead of respecting their wildness, humans want to hold, cuddle, feed, and photograph orangutans; they want to treat orangutans as if they were human. The very human qualities of orangutans have caused them to become endangered by a rampant pet and zoo trade. Primatologists also rely heavily on a rhetoric of science to build credibility for their organizations and research programs. Harré, Brockmeier, and Muhlhäuser (1999) observe that scientific rhetoric, particularly in environmental discourse, serves to distance and objectify nature and nonhuman animals, while at the same time acts as a voice of authority that moves other narratives to the background. Much of the popular press, literature, and television documentaries contain residual traces and overtones of scientific authority and research because these materials are written and produced to present primatologists as experts on orangutans and environmental protection. Consequently, primatologists superimpose their own vocabularies onto orangutans and nature and present it as objective and final. Humans claim to speak for orangutans as they relate stories about their behaviors and lifestyles. As Richard Rorty explains, our contingent vocabularies represent our own human metaphors and perspectives:

[F]or beyond the vocabularies useful for prediction and control—the vocabulary of natural science—there are vocabularies of our moral and our political life and of the arts, of all those human activities which are... aimed at... giving us self images that are worthy of our species. Such images are not true to the nature of species or false to it, for what is really distinctive about us is that we can rise above questions of truth or falsity. We are the poetic species, the one which can change itself by changing its behavior—and especially its linguistic behavior, the words it uses. (1982: 88)

In essence, primatologist descriptions of orangutans' daily behaviors are loaded with anthropocentric vocabularies, which can have both positive outcomes, such as profound interspecies events (Rose 1993), and negative consequences, such as "Bambification" or anthropocentric anthropomorphism (de Waal 2001) that perpetuate the separation between nature and culture.

In what follows, I explore three narratives relating to orangutan copulation, motherhood, and gendered representations of female primatologists that continually reproduce the nature/culture, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual dualisms. Although Donna Haraway explores these themes in her formative and influential 1989 book *Primate Visions* and her 1991 book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, this analysis builds upon those works and offers additional insight into the problematic nature of these three narratives for several reasons. First, many of Haraway's works on simian primatology were published more than 20 years ago, warranting a contemporary examination of primatological literature in the last 20 years. *Primate Visions* provides a detailed history of how science, gender, and race are thematized in the field of primatology from the nineteenth century through the 1970s and 1980s. Examining how those themes have changed and yet remained the same into the twenty-first century represents the continuity and influence of such discourses. Second, I have focused on the most problematic and dangerous gendered themes in orangutan primatology in nature documentaries, magazines, and popular press books. I am particularly interested in how scientific narratives influence popular culture's accounts of gender, nature, science, and race in the field of primatology because such narratives construct public consciousness without critical interrogation of the implications of these stories.

Finally, Haraway's work offers extensive critique of the ideological underpinnings in primatology yet fails to offer possibilities for identification and connection. Using Richard Rorty's (1989) concept of irony, I explore how some of these narratives might be revised in ways that recognize the contingencies of language and human understandings of the world. While I believe that the following narrative examples are among the most problematic representations of nature/culture and masculine/feminine dualisms in orangutan primatology, exploring how we might revise our vocabularies moves beyond critique to find meaningful solutions, even if only partial. Lucaites and Condit argue that a rhetorical understanding of science enables audiences to examine such discourses more critically yet recognize their historical contingencies: "[A] rhetorical approach reminds us that scientific knowledge is substantive in pre-
closely the same way that social knowledge is sub[s]tantive. The specific character of that knowledge, however, depends on the characteristics of the particular scientific community under consideration. Scientific knowledge does indeed change over time, but in science these changes do not obliterate previous knowledge or understandings” (1989: 612). It is this framework that allows a critical interrogation of primatological narratives while at the same time offering possibilities for irony, revision, change, and deeper understanding of such narratives.

**Representations of Copulation:**

**Naturalizing Gendered Sexuality**

The way in which primatologists describe sexual behavior is laden with human interpretations and meanings, both positive and negative, especially in Birute Galdikas’ autobiography, in which she describes several examples of coercive copulation. Most of her examples demonstrate female orangutan displeasure with forced copulation and sexual relationships with male orangutans. For example, Galdikas describes the sexual relationship between two adult orangutans, Priscilla and Throatpouch (TP):

He moved toward Priscilla and grabbed her feet as she clung to the branches over her head with her arms. He pulled and twisted her, as though trying to break her grip, but she held on. TP was now directly below her, licking her genitalia and poking his fingers in her vagina. TP pulled and tugged her into a better position and, holding her by her feet, began to copulate again. Squirming, Priscilla tried to push him away. Several times she vocalized soft vo-vo-vo. TP withdrew and then began copulating again, Priscilla still flailing at him. (1995: 151)

In the above passage, Galdikas describes Priscilla as an unwilling participant, who tries to resist TP’s advances, and yet, is unsuccessful. Galdikas reports many sexual encounters that are similar. In another situation, she likens the sexual relationship between two other orangutans, Georgina and BWC, as date rape:

Georgina liked his attention and wanted his friendship, but did not want to copulate. BWC didn’t mind the friendship, but basically what he wanted was sex. Their last encounter resembled the stereotypical scene in which the teenager boy insists “Don’t, don’t,” while the teenager girl protests “Why not, why not?” In effect, BWC had committed date rape. (1995: 174-75)

In this example, Galdikas composes an entire dialogue between the two orangutans, anthropomorphizing them in such a way that encourages the reader to understand this sexual encounter in human terms, as date rape. Galdikas explains that orangutan “rape” is not the same as human rape because the orangutan victim does not suffer guilt and shame in the same way human victims do. Yet the way in which these passages are written invoke reader discomfort with the description of orangutan copulation or courtship as “rape” because using the word rape invokes human judgment about such behaviors. It is Galdikas’ choice of language rather than the act itself. Had she chosen to describe these encounters in different ways (or to not describe them at all), readers might react differently to stories about orangutan sex.

In another instance, Galdikas reports a story of a male orangutan (Gundul) raping a female human in her research camp. Galdikas attributes this phenomenon to the orangutan who has been kept as a pet and cannot distinguish between orangutan and human worlds:

I began to realize that Gundul did not intend to harm the cook, but had something else in mind. The cook stopped struggling. “It’s all right,” she murmured. She lay back in my arms, with Gundul on top of her. Gundul was very calm and deliberate. He raped the cook. As he moved rhythmically back and forth, his eyes rolled upward to the heavens. I was in shock. ... Gundul let the cook go, stood up, and, soundlessly, moved off the feeding platform into the trees. It was over just like that. (1995: 294)

Galdikas clearly labels this instance of cross-species forced copulation “rape” because it involves a human female. The term rape is a loaded term with so many meanings that perhaps Galdikas uses it inappropriately to describe male orangutan sexual behaviors. Interestingly, once the cook understands what the orangutan wants, she resists in her struggle against the orangutan. This passage implies that an orangutan engaging in forced copulation with a human is a much different experience than being raped by a human.

Galdikas also provides examples of female sexual desire, where in one example, the female orangutan “seduces” an older male orangutan:

Lolita’s attempts to seduce Fingers were blatant. She scrambled to him whenever he long-called. (Long calls sometimes precede copulation.) She groomed his back and arm intently with her fingers and lips; she put her arm around his neck and clung to him. She dangled suggestively in front of him, her bottom inches from his face. Once she
climbed above him, grabbed his cheekpad with her foot, and firmly pulled his face between her legs. Then, to make certain he understood, she took his hand in hers and placed it directly over her genitalia. Even then, Fingers remained unimpressed. Several hours later, however, the magnificent male finally responded. ... Fingers seemed totally consumed in the mating, thrusting like an enormous piston, machinelike in his efficiency. His eyes rolled heavenward. Lolita lay on her back, playing with a twig. Had she been human, I would have described the look on her face as one of self-congratulation. But her triumph was short-lived. The next day Fingers chose to sit and eat on a branch with the now very pregnant Cara, ignoring Lolita totally. (1995: 177)

In this instance, the sexual encounter is described as the seduction of an older male orangutan by a younger female, common in human societies. That the female orangutan’s name is Lolita further suggests the nature of this seduction.

Galdikas’ reports of forced copulation and seduction impose human language, metaphor, and perspective in ways that are problematic. In fact, these instances demonstrate the difficulty of describing orangutan behavior objectively. Rape and forced copulation are not something we can condone in human behavior, yet primatologists seem to suggest that such behaviors are natural.

Another primatologist, Dr. Herman Rijksen, describes sexual encounters between orangutans as a “beautiful love affair” (Searle 1997). He also contends that both orangutans enjoy the encounter; females sing during climax. This encompassing description of sexual relations differs substantially from Galdikas’ description in which the female might be likened to the raped virgin or the seductive whore. However, generalizing female orangutan sexual behavior as part of a beautiful love affair in comparison to Galdikas’ description is also problematic. Rijksen’s characterization of orangutan sexual behavior is that even the female orangutan enjoys the relationship. The stress on the female orangutan’s enjoyment is interesting because it implies that male mammals always enjoy sex and female mammals usually do not. Perhaps Rijksen’s argument counters Galdikas’ descriptions of orangutan rape and seduction. In either case, drawing implicit or explicit comparisons to humans is a reductionist portrayal of human sexuality.

Additionally, descriptions of orangutan sexuality also perpetuate and essentialize gender roles as well as validate heterosexual normativity. Female orangutans are either resistant to sexual intercourse and must be forced to copulate, or they seduce older male orangutans. Orangutan female roles in sexuality become the resistant virgin or the seductive whore, while male orangutans are described as controlling and even violent. “Rape,” even though used in quotation marks in Galdikas’ autobiography, becomes a natural phenomenon. All of these essentialist characterizations of gendered roles are problematic descriptions, especially when compared to human behaviors. Rose (1995) argues that discussing male dominance and rape in orangutans requires rhetorical artistry because rape and dominance are such negatively charged words. Furthermore, these accounts of orangutan copulation focus on the heterosexual activities of orangutans. Haraway, writing about Galdikas’ 1980 article in *National Geographic*, argues, “Narratives of these problems are rich sources for exploring the scientists’ preoccupation with reproductive heterosexual ‘normality’ at the dangerous edge of the garden of nature, where confusions abound” (1989: 142). In most popular culture and literature regarding orangutan sexuality, there is always an assumption of heterosexuality, in part because of narratives such as these, but also because of narratives related to motherhood. When scientists/primatologists claim these descriptions of primate behaviors as objective and real, these very same scientists claim to speak for orangutans.

**Orangutan Motherhood Narratives: Essentializing Familial Roles**

In addition to describing orangutans in terms of their sexual behavior, many primateological studies and reports about orangutans focus on female reproduction and motherhood. In particular, popular press books and documentaries focus extensively on female orangutans as mothers, in part because orangutans have a long infancy and adolescence in which they remain physically close to their mothers. Because this period can be as long as twelve years, primatologists often report and write about orangutan behaviors between mother and child. Yet, the extensive focus on orangutans as mothers reduces female orangutan behavior to acts of mothering their infants. While this is certainly a central component of female orangutans’ lives, these primateological accounts offer an overly anthropocentric interpretation of nonhuman primate behavior while projecting and insinuating the importance of such activities in the human world. For example, chapter two of *Orangutan Odyssey* (Galdikas, Briggs, and Ammann 1999), titled “The Best Mothers in the World,” implies that human women should be the “best mothers in the world,” or even perhaps that motherhood is a natural and required role for human females. Photographs and documentaries also display female orangutans and their infants frequently, constantly reminding viewers that orangu-
tans are primarily mothers. Photographs of female orangutans with their infants featured in Knott's (1998) National Geographic article demonstrate the close relationship between orangutan mother and baby, as the infant clings to the mother's hair while the female orangutan protects the baby by carrying her in front.

Although focusing on orangutan motherhood can be problematic especially when compared to human motherhood, primatologists place great value on motherhood because orangutan reproduction is necessary to replenish this endangered species. In the documentary Just Hanging On, the emphasis on the importance of female orangutan populations is explained in the following manner: "There are two ways to save these orangutans: First is female power. It's obvious to say that without female orangutans, the species is doomed. But it is the protection of the female which is key to the species' survival" (Searle 1997). Willie Smits, a conservation activist who has worked closely with orangutan reintroduction projects in various provinces in Kalimantan, Indonesia, also continues this narrative in the documentary:

The females are extremely important. When a female is killed, that territory becomes empty, and there will only be males left in that region. And it is very unlikely that a new female will come back to that territory where it has been hunted... and if you realize that, in theory, of twenty years, a mother will only raise three babies. It has to invest in them how to move around the forest, what to eat, where to eat, it must know the complete calendar and the map of the forest before it can survive. So there's seven to eight years' investment in one baby, means three: one to replace the mother, one to replace the father, and one extra just in case one gets sick and dies or falls out of the tree... (Searle 1997)

Female orangutans are rhetorically valued for their reproductive capacity to save the species. The emphasis on "female power" is really a focus on female reproduction. In drawing comparisons between the human and nonhuman worlds, reproduction and motherhood have been considered inherent values of women for centuries, perhaps since the beginning of the human species.

In addition to characterizing and depicting female orangutans in terms of motherhood, descriptions of other familial relationships also abound in primatological popular literature. Galdikas describes at great length her relationship with formerly captive orangutans (infants or adolescents who require care before returning to forest life) as one in which she assumes the role of mother, while her own husband, Rod, does not participate in this cross-species family:

The wild-born ex-captives gave me insight into the most important mammalian relationship—that between a mother and her offspring. We humans, mammals to our core, intuitively recognize the crucial nature of the mother-child bond. But in the animal kingdom as a whole, this pattern is an anomaly. For most nonmammals (and hence most living creatures), there is nothing particularly special about the mother-offspring bond after birth. Most fish, amphibian, and reptile mothers do not take care of their young at all, but rather lay eggs by the hundreds or even thousands and promptly abandon them... Only among mammals does the female, with her milk-producing glands—which give the name to the entire class of animals—have an exclusive relationship with her young, from which the father may be excluded. Biparental care, where both mother and father participate in rearing their offspring is the exception. (Even in our own order, Primates, fewer than 30 percent of species practice biparental care.) Orangutans are a clear example. In the wild, orangutan males play virtually no role in the care of their offspring. True to this primate pattern, Rod did not play a constant role in the daily care and nurturing of the orphaned orangutans. To be fair, the orangutans who have an exclusive relationship with their mother in the wild, did not invite Rod's attention. But neither did Rod make an active effort to overcome their natural jealousy. Though he often helped, he saw meeting Sugito's, Sobiaro's, and Akmad's continual demands as my business. The young ex-captives were my family, not our family. (1995: 209–10)

Galdikas suggests in this passage that motherhood, and specifically single motherhood, is a natural phenomenon found not only in orangutans, but in human families as well.

Such arguments regarding motherhood are also found in popular magazines, such as Kluger, Cray, Kher, and Steiger's (2000) article in Time magazine, "What Mother Nature Teaches Us About Motherhood." Kluger and his co-authors argue that the more we understand animal behavior, the more we come to understand human behavior, making the connection between humans and nonhumans explicit. Consequently, it seems that primatologists who study motherhood in nonhuman primates can offer insights into the nature of human motherhood. In particular, Sarah Blaffer Hardy (a primatologist from the University of California, Davis), who is cited in the Time magazine article, contends that mothers face many of the same situations across species. She also argues that women are biologically constructed to mother and reproduce. These are exactly the kinds of arguments that script roles for women because these connections essentialize and categorize gender roles for human women in reductionist ways.
Galdikas uses herself in another example of how biologically instinctive behaviors occur in both orangutans and humans, arguing that she behaves like a normal primate mother. Men, she contends, and specifically her husband, often react aggressively rather than protectively. For example, Galdikas recounts an instance when she was nearly attacked by an adult male orangutan, Throatpouch (TP):

Primates females almost invariably carry their infants on their backs when they move. For a female with an infant to fight a much larger male would mean putting that infant at risk. When a huge, angry male came at me from the treetops, I didn't think about my principles; I thought about was saving my infant. Pride and principle have their place, but care and responsibility for one's infant come first. I behaved like a normal primate mother. (Galdikas 1995: 159-60)

This passage reflects essential characteristics attributed to both men and women. Galdikas implicitly argues that aggression is a male characteristic while care and mothering are essential aspects of female behavior. Attributing such essential characteristics avoids the distinctiveness and differences among women. Furthermore, in contemporary societies, motherhood is more often a choice, rather than a biological necessity or instinct.

Motherhood is a powerful metaphor and narrative in primatological accounts. Many scholars of ecofeminism have argued that women's roles are essentialized and motherhood is romanticized by such metaphors (Biehl 1991; Bullis 1996; Carlissare 1994; Stearny 1994; Plumwood 1993; Roach 1991). This rhetoric revolving around motherhood essentializes female characteristics, as Stearny (1994) and Bullis (1996) contend. Motherhood implies a nurturing characteristic as well as women's primary role as caregiver. There is also risk in comparing orangutans to humans. Primatologists who seek to understand human behavior through orangutans risk attributing essential motherhood and nurturing characteristics to human women.

Women as Primatologists and Mothers

Not only does primatological research, as characterized in popular press accounts, essentialize and fix female sexuality, motherhood, and behavior in nonhuman and human primates, but many of these popular culture narratives also lead to similar gendered constructions of women who work in primatology. Louis Leakey, the famous anthropologist who claimed to discover Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas, argued that women are better observers because they are more patient and neutral; therefore better primatologists. While it is refreshing to see a field led by women, characterized women primatologists reinforce gender roles and dichotomies. Many of the world's leading primatologists in the study of orangutans, including Cheryl Knott, Anne Russon, Biruté Galdikas, and Sri Suci Utami are women. Other orangutan primatologists, such as Herman Rijksen, Carol von Schalk, and Gary Shapiro are men, but women are featured heavily in popular literature. Female primatologists have been featured in documentaries, books, and articles (see Downs and Walters 1999; Galdikas 1995; Galdikas, Briggs, and Ammann 1998; Knott 1998; Rose 2000; Russon 2000; Searle 1997; Siegel 1999; Spalding 1999). Galdikas was arguably the first person to study orangutans for extended periods of time, although some of her predecessors were women, such as Barbara Harrison. Because Galdikas is recognized as the pioneer of long-term studies of orangutans, she receives substantial media coverage in comparison to others.

These women in orangutan primatology are discussed for their outstanding ability to engage in high level field research in Indonesia and Malaysia. Most of this field research involves living in rural or forested areas. Galdikas established her own camp in Tjiung Puting National Park in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, while Knott relied on a previously established but rustic camp area in Gunung Palung National Park in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The way in which their living and research conditions are described inspires amazement from readers/viewers for these women's tenacity, bravery, and ability to survive with few amenities. For example, a Balikpapan Orangutan Society-USA (an environmental non-governmental organization) news update explains the rigor of field work for Anne Russon:

Now imagine Dr. Anne Russon moving through the forest tracking rehabilitant orangutans in the forest of Borneo. After hauling in a heavy pack over muddy, leech infested jungle trails, she spends the months of her summer break studying the releases [juvenile orangutans confiscated and released into forest areas]. The forest is hot, humid and exhausting, but day after day Anne takes copious notes about every move of these orangutans exploring the forest world. (Balikpapan Orangutan Society-USA 1999: 3)

Galdikas' (1995) autobiography also outlines the rigors of her 25 years in the field. When she first arrived in Borneo with her husband, they lived in a small one-room shack with two Indonesian support staff. She regularly logged 12 to 16 hours in observation and tracking orangutans.
every day. They had no running water, electricity, or proximity to health care facilities. These descriptions of the rigors of fieldwork in Indonesia suggest that these women are extraordinary, yet their male counterparts, many of whom have endured similar field conditions, do not receive the kind of media attention or awe-inspired accounts of their fieldwork. These descriptions then, distinguish female primatologists from male primatologists, even though they are often conducting the same kind of work in similarly challenging environments. In addition to documenting the rigors of female primatologists’ field work, popular literature about orangutans also documents how these women become caretakers for orphaned orangutans. Galdikas is especially famous for mothering infant orangutans who have lost their mothers. Numerous photographs and footage in documentaries and news programs show women cuddling or mothering orangutans. On occasion, men are shown holding an orangutan, such as Willie Smits and the narrator of a documentary (Kane 1995) about the orphaned and captive orangutan Didi, but most frequently, women are pictured holding and cuddling orangutans. Most of these photographs show a female primatologist or assistant holding an infant orangutan just like a human would hold a human baby. The Wanariset Center and a related project in Palangkaraya, both reintroduction centers in Indonesia, have hired female professional cuddlers to provide physical contact for the infant orangutans; their photographs are featured in brochures, websites, magazines, and documentaries. Many of these photographs are accompanied by stories that relate the bond the researcher or technican has established with the infant orangutan. For example, Rondang Siregar, a manager of the orangutan reintroduction center at the Wanariset Station recounts her relationship with Grinch:

On the first day we met, I fell in love with him. He looked so cute and funny with his big eyes as he came to me asking for cuddling. He didn’t even let me go for a while or give attention to another orangutan. He likes people a lot, and always wanted to be close to me. ... Grinch became so spoiled. Maybe he thought that I was his mother and I was wrong with giving him so much attention. ... I couldn’t leave the garage (where he stayed) before he fell asleep. He liked to put my hand under his chin and he’d cry if I left him. He’d wait for me in the morning to take his blanket out from the cage. Some of my friends reminded me not to be close and spoil him because he’d go back into the forest. I tried not to pay attention to him for a few days but he got diarrhea and then lost his appetite. I think that’s the way he protested to me. So, he became my baby again. We did lots of funny things together. ... He liked to sleep in my lap hiding his face in my armpit. (Siregar 1997: 17)

After Siregar left the project and then later returned, she wrote about meeting Grinch in the forest:

While I called his name ... he came to me and embraced me. He recognized me ... his mother... two years ago in the Ragunan Guests’ House garage. I couldn’t control my emotional feeling and I cried. We sat together for about two hours and played. [One of the technicians] took him away from me and asked me to go down to the cage. But ... Grinch cried and chased me. He embraced me again but I really had to go. ... I ran and cried. I felt so sad to leave him there. ... Then on February 13, 1997, Misri, the technician from Sungai Wain called us and asked us to take Grinch back to Wanariset. They had found Grinch laying down in his nest about 20 m from the ground. He was very sick with his eyes closed. Also it was hard for him to breathe. The veterinarian and technicians took care of him in the clinic. ... I checked with the technician every 30 minutes who stayed with him. Then, early in the morning of February 13 when I went down to the clinic, I read a note on the white board that Grinch had died at 2:45 a.m. I’m deeply sad but I realize that his pain is over. Goodbye my baby Grinch. (1997: 17)

This article reflects a deep connection between Siregar and Grinch. Because Grinch came to the rehabilitation center as an infant, Siregar became his de facto mother. They both became very attached to each other. Grinch’s death deeply affected Siregar as did Siregar’s absence affect Grinch. This story reflects a strong cross-species mother-infant bond. Relationship stories such as these are common in popular accounts of primatology and environmental organizations’ publications, and are almost always recounted by women, with few accounts related by men.

The most prominent cross-species mother-infant relationships occur between Galdikas and her orphaned orangutans. In her autobiography, she recounts story after story of how she mothered infant orangutans that came into her care. Galdikas observes:

Instinctively, as a female primate, I provided the maternal environment for the three orangutans who became members of my forest family. I didn’t kick them; I combed them. I didn’t suckle them, but I allowed them to suck my thumb and I provided them with milk. I hugged,
carried, caressed, and loved them. They became addicted to me and I to them. Their physical warmth, their soft squeals, their expressions, and their feel became part of my daily life in the forest. My life was grounded in my family. They made me laugh and they made me cry. They weren't human but they were close enough. Akmad, Sugito, and Sobiario were not like pet cats or dogs whom I had loved. In my childhood I was attached to my cats as companions. But the cats never let me forget that they were cats and members of a different species. ... I was their mother, and it didn't make much difference that I couldn't climb and swing in trees or open heavy, thick-skinned fruit with my canines. It didn't make much difference to them that I was human. It didn't make any difference to me that they were orangutans. It was enough that Akmad, Sugito, and Sobiario became my forest family, and the forests of Kalimantan, my home. (1995: 212)

Galdikas explains how these three orangutans became her children. Even when she later had her own human children, orangutans were still very much a part of her family. She also writes about how her human son Binti spent the first few years of his life with only orangutan infants as his playmates. She distinguishes how orangutans are different from other animals like cats. She cared for these orangutan infants in much the same way as she cared for her human children, attributing her nurturing ability to primate instinct.

This connection between orangutan infant and human mother demonstrates how orangutans cross nature/culture dualisms (see Sowards 2006a). Orangutans may exhibit what we define as human characteristics that lead to a stronger emotional bond between orangutans and humans, especially between female humans and infant orangutans. However, the emphasis on these relationships perpetuates the essentialization of women as mothers. Most of the female primatologists, technicians, and assistants tell stories of their connections with orangutans. They are photographed cuddling or holding infant orangutans. They cry when these infants die or become sick. Rose (1995) reports that some researchers and theorists believe that human females identify and bond more readily with orangutans than do their male counterparts, making them better researchers. The analysis of the role of female primatologists in orangutan primatological popular literature certainly supports this conclusion as female primatologists are portrayed as bonding more readily with orangutans. Although women are more frequently foregrounded in media accounts than their male counterparts, Willie Smits, a researcher involved in orangutan reintroduction projects, is shown in at least one photograph cuddling an orangutan. In fact, Smits is as nurturing as any of the women primatologists and organizational members. He shows just as much, if not more commitment to the study and protection of orangutans. Yet, women continue to be photographed, videotaped, and written about more frequently and are portrayed as mothers to orangutan infants. These acts categorize women as mothers and contribute to the essentialization of motherhood and so-called female characteristics such as nurturing tendencies and keen observation skills.

**Conclusion: Possibilities for New Narratives**

This exploration of the narratives found in primatological popular literature illustrates how gender essentialism and heterosexual normativity through rhetorical constructions of orangutan copulation and motherhood have persisted in primatological studies and narrative accounts into the twenty-first century. Examples from popular literature and documentaries about orangutans illustrate that despite thorough analyses and critiques from scholars like Donna Haraway (1989, 1991) or Jane Bennett (1992), orangutan primatologists have continued to write and tell gendered narratives. Because primatologists situate their studies, stories, and photographs in scientific discourse, their narratives create what audiences understand as objective knowledge. That is, if the study of orangutans informs us about human nature, these narratives reinforce the idea of natural and biological human instincts through language used by primatologists, such as rape, date rape, seduction, motherhood, protective nature of women, aggressive nature of men, assumptions of heterosexuality and the other examples provided in this chapter.

Richard Rorty's (1989) book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* offers a rhetorical approach that uses irony to interrogate and revise narratives or what he calls final vocabularies. That is, primatological narratives might still be used to create identifications and connections for people with the nonhuman world, bridging nature and culture, yet would still employ an uncertainty or wariness about the finality of scientific conclusions. For Rorty, an ironist is someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underline nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality.
than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old. (1989: 73)

Not only does the ironist engage in continual and critical doubts about her own way of thinking and language, but she also looks for places of similarity and difference in conversations, discourses, and narratives with others.

Rorty argues that the salience of differences and commonalities is based on contingent histories and vocabularies. Ironic identification requires the preservation of and respect for difference through a continual challenge of our vocabularies to expand our sense of self and "we-intentions" (Rorty 1989: 190, citing Sellars). Humans must also come to realize that solidarity is created rather than located; we cannot find but must build solidarity. Rorty contends that solidarity is "the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant as compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people as wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (1989: 192). Rorty's concepts of irony and solidarity relate to Frans de Waal's suggestion that we seek out these very similarities because "apes are not human caricatures but serious members of our extended family with their own resourcefulness and dignity" (2001: 33). In short, de Waal argues that we must avoid anthropodenial, or "the a priori rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals when in fact they may exist" (69).

The primatological narratives illustrated in this chapter, couched in scientific observations and method, fail to recognize the contingencies of language, as Richard Rorty suggests, with essentialist consequences. One problematic interpretation of Galdikas' copulation stories is that rape, as she describes it, is a natural and biological instinct. Although she warns against such conclusions, her description of her scientific work, her research qualifications, and language suggesting that there are many similarities between orangutans and humans mean that audiences may inevitably draw such conclusions. That is, Galdikas' stories confound and complicate human beliefs that rape is not acceptable in human societies, because there is an underlying assumption that it might be a natural instinct that can be located in orangutan populations. The problem is rooted in Galdikas' rhetorical choice of the terms 'rape' and 'date rape' to describe orangutan behavior, in language that audiences might interpret as scientific observation. Rather than recognizing her contingent vocabulary laden with human meaning, audiences may start to wonder about the natural or biological instincts related to sexual drive instead. This interpretation, as Donna Haraway suggests, is a troublesome possibility for "legitimizing beliefs in the natural necessity of aggression, competition, and hierarchy" through the "fetish of scientific objectivity" (1991: 21, 23).

Another possible consequence of such primatological discourse related to gendered constructions of family relationships is illustrated in Kluger, Cray, Kher, and Sieger's (2000) Time magazine article. If non-human primates can be successful single mothers, like orangutans, then why can't female humans also achieve such results? This is the very question that the article attempts to answer. While primatologists may not make such conclusions so directly in their scholarly publications, lay audiences and popular press writers or narrators do make such conclusions. Again, the fetishization of science perpetuates gendered and essentialized roles that have real consequences. In short, ecofeminist critiques of the nature/culture, masculinity/femininity, and heterosexual/homosexual dualisms remain important in evaluating and deconstructing narratives such as these primatological stories in order to understand how they are interpreted, used, and accepted in our societies. Interestingly, in reviewing articles, books, and other materials published in Indonesian, these narratives of orangutan copulation and motherhood are less prevalent. Perhaps these narrative accounts are written and produced specifically for Western audiences because of a long fascination with the field of primatology. Given that orangutan primatology is a field introduced and led by foreign researchers in Indonesia (e.g., Barbara Harrison, Biretna Galdikas, Herman Rijksen, Anne Russon, and Carel van Schaik), Indonesian audiences may not have the same interest in these kinds of orangutan narratives, although there is certainly interest in orangutan primatology and conservation in Indonesia.

Using ironic identification to revise these narratives might mean that anthropocentric anthropomorphism can be a powerful rhetorical tool for creating identification, but that it should be used cautiously. In the case of orangutan sex and the examples given here, an ironic examination of language might encourage authors, primatologists, and audiences to deanthropomorphize some terms that invoke connotative meanings, such as rape, date rape, seduction, and even the name of the female orangutan, Lolita (e.g., see Jeanne Altmann's efforts as discussed in Haraway 1989: 310-11). Although these narratives may serve a purpose in the author's mind, accounts of orangutan copulation do not have to be told as they were illustrated in these examples, and perhaps do not need to be told at all. Given that terms such as rape are emotionally charged,
audiences may find such stories repulsive and their reactions may have implications for conservation efforts. If the authors’ primary purpose in telling stories about orangutans is to create audience identification, their goal may be best served by avoiding these stories or choosing language more carefully since such stories do not necessarily invite positive (or ironic) identification for audiences. In fact, as I outline elsewhere, there are a number of other approaches that might be used to create positive audience identification (Sowards 2006a, 2006b). Similarly, audiences should read and watch such texts with an ironic frame, recognizing how language invites interpretation with the possibility of reinterpreting that message.

Motherhood narratives might also be ironically revised in ways that reduce gender essentialism. For instance, it might not always be useful to think of female animals (human or nonhuman) in terms of motherhood. In fact, describing orangutan behavior outside of and beyond motherhood elicits other interesting observations, such as orangutans’ social behavior, tool use, and intelligence. The very distinction we make between female and male animals means that gender essentialism is inevitable to some extent, but critically examining language choices to describe female and male animals might invite new terms and discussions. In the English language, we have specific terms for female and male animals, such as hen, rooster, cow, bull, filly, mare, ewe, bitch, doe, and stud, to name a few. In the Indonesian language, there are general terms for female animal (betina) and male animal (jantan), whereas such general terms do not exist in English. There is also a specific term for a female animal mother (induk). Other languages, such as Spanish and French, also make gendered distinctions in labeling animals, especially livestock. Many of these words evolved from the need to clarify the relationship or value of an animal. Although many of these terms are used to describe characteristics of men and women in usually distasteful ways (e.g., bitch or cow), perhaps rethinking how we use gendered terms to describe orangutans and nonhuman animals more generally is of merit, especially given how we have used these terms to describe people in derogatory manners and how that might change in other languages and cultures.

Finally, motherhood narratives are reductionist, yet common in popular culture and literature. Although primatologists discuss issues related to orangutan copulation and motherhood in scientific research literature, they generally seem to be more careful in their descriptions (see, e.g., Rose 1995: 35–37). Perhaps that same care in consideration of ironic identification could be applied in popular culture and literature as well. Haraway (1989) discusses how female primatologists were generally coded as mother (for both human and nonhuman primates) in popular press materials, such as National Geographic. Yet Shirley Strum, a primatologist who studies baboons, recounts how she was able to negotiate with the editors of National Geographic to avoid gendered images, especially related to motherhood:

I was so involved and committed to the baboons that I didn’t want that [presented first] with this dramatic woman in the wild... I wanted women to have a model of something to do that was legitimate... The majority of women who work in the field are like me. Serious about it, they may have attachments to the animals, but I felt it was unfair... not to show that this was a serious endeavor that a woman could do, and do it as science, with all the rigor. I wanted to counter the existing stereotypes because I thought here were opportunities for women that were much more satisfying than [the romantic image]. (quoted in Haraway 1989: 158–59)

Haraway also notes that “Strum recounted that the magazine ‘tried to focus on me [and] made up anecdotes about the animals. They just completely made them up’... Strum said an editor later told her she was the most difficult writer he had ever worked with” (Haraway 1989: 160).

In short, Strum fought for the images and the language that she wanted the story to convey. While her story illustrates the difficulties she had in getting the right language, text, and accompanying photos, her account also demonstrates the importance of considering language and images in popular culture and literature narratives. The importance of how we describe ourselves and others cannot be overestimated, whether in scientific discourse or popular culture narratives that are consumed by mass audiences.

In considering how primatological narratives might be revised, re-invented, retold, rewritten, and reframed, Lucaites and Condit remind us of the power of rhetoric and discourse. They contend that the rhetorical perspective enables communities where “people are concerned to ‘get things right’ [and] they act on their shared and compromised visions of the most probable course of action, based on what they believe they know, here and now” (Lucaites and Condit 1999: 610–11). It is possible to rewrite and reframe these narratives through what they call strategic liberation or “the possibility of improving life within one’s community in temporary and incomplete, but nonetheless meaningful ways. ... [Individuals and groups seek to improve their local situation without presuming that such improvements are permanent, universal, or ideal solutions to particular problems” (1999: 611). Much like Rorty’s liberal ironist, Lucaites and Condit suggest that it is possible to create
narratives that foster identification and connection but also invite critical interrogation because they are never final narratives or vocabularies. Ironic identification allows for the possibilities of rethinking all kinds of stories, but especially those that perpetuate problematic narratives rooted in the finality of scientific discourse. Opening up such narratives for re-evaluation and understanding the power of rhetoric in language choice are just some of the ways creators of texts and audiences might use ironic identification.

REFERENCES


