

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

DONNA HARAWAY ON CYBORGS, “ODDKIN” & RESISTING THE MONOCULTURE OF THE MIND

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LAURA FLANDERS: Our guest today, [Donna Haraway](#) saw our future before we did. Decades before AI and climate crises were shaping our realities, Haraway, a visionary scholar and provocative feminist philosopher and scientist was telling us something radical. Namely, that we were never separate from technology, never separate from other species, never separate from the planet itself, and that our survival depended on understanding those things. Are we self or [cyborg](#)? How do technologies shape power and resistance? How do we care for a world in tatters as ours seems so often to be? Donna Haraway helps us think about all those questions and more. But most critically, she urges us to think. Think generatively and together. She is distinguished Professor Emerita in the History of Consciousness department at the University of California Santa Cruz, and an active participant in the Science and Justice Research Center and Center for Cultural Studies there. Her 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto" and 2003 work "The Companion Species Manifesto" helped blow up lots of old patriarchal, capitalist, binary, speciesist ways of looking at the world. And she offered an expansive transdisciplinary inter-species practice instead. She is clear-eyed about the mess that we have made, but believes we do have the tools we need to face that mess without despair or denial if as she puts it, we stay with the trouble and do the work of worlding differently. What does that look like in practice? Well, more and more people today are turning to Haraway's work for a roadmap. And no wonder. It's more relevant now than ever it seems. But I suspect she will resist the whole idea of handing over a roadmap as you'll see. I'm especially honored and happy to welcome Donna Haraway to "Laura Flanders & Friends." Donna, welcome. I'm so glad to have you in this conversation.

DONNA HARAWAY: Well, thanks. It's really a pleasure to be here.

LAURA FLANDERS: Did you ever think when you were writing the "Cyborg Manifesto" in the '80s that we'd be here where we are today?

DONNA HARAWAY: Yes and no. I certainly never expected that my own work would still be read because I think I wrote it out of my own need to somehow come to terms with the situations that we were living. And we, of course, continue to live them in ever more dangerous ways. But what has both pleased me and astonished me is that the young folks, I get emails from kids in high school who said, you know, "Professor Chavez assigned us the 'Cyborg Manifesto', and I don't understand it. Would you please explain?" Things like that. I'm really astonished and also

really heartened by the fact that young folks are reading this work because it speaks to the worlds that they are trying to figure out.

LAURA FLANDERS: Am I right in thinking that you would reject the idea that you have a roadmap that you can just hand over to us?

DONNA HARAWAY: Absolutely no roadmaps. I think that the folks who are responding are responding in part to the passion and in part to the sense, well look, I like to talk about thinking as a game of string figures, as a game of cat's cradle. And at the very least, it takes two hands and it can be played with many partners. It's not something that can be played with one. It requires action and passion, passing on and taking up, dropping threads, inheriting patterns, passing on patterns. I think of it as a thinking technology. And it requires thinking with, thinking together. And inheriting a tremendous amount, but also taking the risk to try a new pattern, to invent something that may very well fall apart in your collective hands, but that the threads can be taken up and we can think again.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I have to say I fear that cat's cradle approach is not dominant in this moment of ours. To put it kindly.

DONNA HARAWAY: Certainly isn't.

LAURA FLANDERS: I wonder which of the stories that we're telling ourselves now so loudly is the one you think is most dangerous today.

DONNA HARAWAY: I think the most dangerous of the stories, which is a complex story cycle, is the story of authoritarianism and the division of the world into friend and enemy, and the production of others as killable, as those to be despised. The way authoritarianism works, taking advantage of our capacities for a kind of participatory sadism, for a kind of, of our kind of being enlisted in theaters of revenge and theaters of attack out of our own sense of lack, being enlisted in that way for authoritarian systems, really on a worldwide basis that are also simultaneously, profoundly engaged in the ongoing reinvention, in the ongoing practice of racial capitalism. That the extraction of value for some, so as to shunt it upwards to a few, that kind of authoritarianism coupled with contemporary finance capital, contemporary climate and biodiversity destruction and contemporary persecution of migrants across the world really, even while more and more migrants are being produced by the very crises caused by these systems of extraction of value.

LAURA FLANDERS: In the "Cyborg Manifesto" and also in "The Companion Species Manifesto", you urge us to understand our own selves differently. Can you elaborate on those ideas and how you think they connect to this moment?

DONNA HARAWAY: Yeah, first of all, I don't think of the self as a kind of isolated individual. We're networked materialities with deep histories. An individual is embedded deeply in worlds with other people, with other organisms, with living and non-living parts of the world. That to be a self is to come to a thicker appreciation and accountability for the way we're embedded in the world and act in the world. That's what I mean by being a proper self.

LAURA FLANDERS: And the cyborg part?

DONNA HARAWAY: Well, the cyborg part, let me tell a story, okay? My first teaching job was in Honolulu, okay? In the early 1970s, which was the era of the electronic battlefield in the Vietnam War and Robert McNamara's transformation of the Pacific, the Pacific theater into a theater of electronic war. The Vietnam War is really where that happened. And so, when I first met digital warfare and understood that as a teacher of fashion design majors and tourist industry management majors, and all sorts of majors who were not going to be scientists, that my job was to somehow develop with them what I later called situated knowledges. Understandings of the world in which we're embedded, and to which we are accountable. In system sciences and digital systems, particularly in their, in the form of war, were really prominent, but also and simultaneously, I just, I was never sympathetic toward an anti-technology point of view or a solution to the ravages of technology in the hands of the warlords, if you will. That the only possible response to all of that is some kind of quote, "return", close quote, to nature. As if there was this nature outside human activity to which we could in some barely secularized story of return to Eden, to barely secularized Christian religious notion of return. Return, you know, either return to a state of nature or being blissed out of the complexities of history in some kind of techno apocalypse. These are technologies like any other. And we need to be skillful players in these technological worlds. Look at what happens to the land when the data centers are built and the kind of energy demands. Look at the sterilization of the land. Look at the removal of life and death, of ongoingness through the building of these massive energy plants that are necessary for the running of contemporary cyborg life. But also look at Lynn Randolph's amazing painting that was done in 1989, specifically in relationship to the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. And Lynn titled this painting "Cyborg." Watch the skeletonization of her fingers on the keyboard, look at the cosmological scientific diagrams behind her, look at the spirit tiger around her shoulders, and think for just a minute of all of the ways that contemporary cyborg worlds are vital and are our responsibility. There's no story of the origin of civilization in Mesopotamia leading through the various stages of technology to Elon Musk. Rather, there's a very interesting, diverse history of humanity on this planet. There are plenty of peoples in the world who have maintained their understanding of becoming, my language, becoming with, of a kind of collaborationist humanity that is built into ways of life and into very living story practices. So, no question that [Indigenous peoples are key actors](#) in our current moment, and this is true around the world. But also, I have really high stakes in saying, "Look, even people like you and me who grew up out of these euro capitalist theories of the individual and their authoritarianism. After

all, fascism of the '30s, as well as the fascism of today are profoundly capitalist, are profoundly involved in economic systems of extraction." And as my friend Katie King always says, "There's way more going on than you thought of an interesting and positive kind and way less than there should be." So, both of us, I think could probably come up with all sorts of examples in our own lives, of communities that are vital in that matter and that are really saying no to the contemporary authoritarianism. Pretty powerfully really. Yeah.

LAURA FLANDERS: How are you seeing that in practice? And how are you practicing that kind of response... [Both] Ability.

DONNA HARAWAY: Yes. The cultivation of the capacity to respond. That we don't have a list of ethical rules. We have a capacity that needs to be enlarged, to respond, to make living and dying better.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, not a checklist of people that you can agree with and disagree with, depending on where they stand on things?

DONNA HARAWAY: That's right. Neither a checklist of people nor a checklist of principles. I think of principles as sort of useful tools, maybe a little like a computer, but not the name of the game. The name of the game is cultivating that capacity to respond vitally, to be open. So, with other colleagues I've helped organize on campus across the divisions, Stand Up, a kind of standup coalition.

REPORTER: Protestors demanding the funding for science be restored, and thousands of fired employees be reinstated.

DONNA HARAWAY: And the other thing I've been doing is organizing with the local immigrant support networks, training as a legal observer, training as a verifier, watching out for ICE and Customs and Border Patrol presence in my town, showing up at information tables at fiestas and fairs to pass out Know Your Rights cards, you know? Working with each other and with folks in town to protect immigrants as best we can.

LAURA FLANDERS: One thing I would ask you is how has your life been changed by kind of freeing yourself from being hemmed in by the binaries, perhaps you were brought up with? And how have the structures that you've dared to build made your life different and joyful?

DONNA HARAWAY: Well, the short answer is friendship. That networks of friends, past and present just make all the difference in the world. And they aren't always activist friends, though often you, we make friends in the, from the kinds of work we actually do, right? And that my stance is that showing up and engaging inevitably leads to the pleasures of knowing people you

didn't know before, of ideas you didn't know how to think before of, you know, maybe even learning how to dance a little bit, which we never knew how to do. My sense is that this is fundamentally about friendship.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, how did it work for you?

DONNA HARAWAY: My colleague Susan Harding has a son, Marco, who was adopted at a young age. He came from Guatemala. And my husband, Rusten, and I and Susan and Marco have had dinner together at least once a week for 31 years, building oddkin, building a family. So, and I know other, and I think of the folks I know in the gay, trans world are overwhelmingly the [most creative in building kin](#) of any group in society that I personally know. And so, I've been lucky to have a lot of, to have my life built in patterns of oddkin, as well as a really good bio family. I mean, my, I wouldn't trade my brother with anybody. I mean really, really good bio family.

LAURA FLANDERS: Your family includes not just humans.

DONNA HARAWAY: Absolutely. My family includes particularly dogs and hens. We have, we only have three hens right now. We have Cafe con leche, and Blackjack and Cacao. And we only have two dogs now, both former street dogs. One is called Shindychew and the other is called Oz. Both came off the street. There you go. What a good dog. What a good dog. Shindy, come here. Sit please. Good girl. Wait.

LAURA FLANDERS: We've talked about animals, about students, about learning, about thinking. There are threads to all of this and I wonder if you want to pick some of them out. Like, if there is a thread to your thinking and your, the way that you live. Do you have tips for people as they try to thread their own life in a similarly radical way?

DONNA HARAWAY: I have a word, a term which seems technical at first glance, but it isn't. Ontological choreography. Holding together the threads of ways of being in patterns that you don't, the patterns have rules, but you don't know what's going to happen in advance. The purpose of the pattern really is to open up what has not happened yet. To open up something new. And agility did that. Playing with a dog does that. You learn each other's patterns for sure, and you learn to integrate them, and there are all kinds of disciplines for that. But what it's for is opening up that kind of joy that comes from something that just wasn't there before. A kind of whoa emerges from the good run. Something that you may as well call miraculous that emerges from that dance.

LAURA FLANDERS: I think the poet and essayist June Jordan used to talk about just, it's as simple as opening a hand. Beginning. If you were to write a new manifesto or revise, revisit that manifesto of '85, what would be in it today?

DONNA HARAWAY: Well, there's no way that this "Cyborg Manifesto" today would have to deal with the Open AI world. That didn't exist then. There there would be technological developments that would have to be incorporated. And I would talk about what I think of as monocultures of the mind. The kind of flattening of thinking into that kind of instrumental thinking. Remember in the, Hannah Arendt who was writing about the Nazis and the banality of evil talked about skill and competence being turned into functional obedience. A function, you know, you're always being a functionary as opposed to a real professional. And we see the Trump administration firing real professionals and replacing them with functionaries who could achieve ends in a kind of a monoculture of the mind, a kind of flattened mode of thinking. I would definitely talk more about the different kinds of thinking. Again, using Hannah Arendt's injunction, "Think we must." And that thinking is training the mind to go visiting, to know something that is not yourself. Well, I think in monocultures of the mind, it's a bit the opposite. We're trained to repeat ourselves again and again. So, a "Cyborg Manifesto" would've to spend more time with that for sure.

LAURA FLANDERS: Take on the algorithms

DONNA HARAWAY: And then the algorithms and what we are allowed the structuring of our world through the mining of databases and the construction of algorithms that give us this world rather than the world we need. So, finding the ways to build the world we need and say no to the world that we are given so easily.

LAURA FLANDERS: The one element of now that we've perhaps under-stressed is patriarchy. And I put the, I named you as a feminist. Do you call yourself a feminist?

DONNA HARAWAY: Oh yes, absolutely. The fight against patriarchy never ends. It's like cleaning the toilet. You have to do it every couple of days. So, I think of the fight against the, against patriarchy and all that goes with it as the ordinary work that decent human beings have to do. But what really enlivens my feminism is that I simply love women. I love women and girls. I think women and girls are kind of amazing. Not counting the fascist women and girls, although part of them is probably amazing too. But no, I think that feminism is an affirmative position in the world that affirms, I don't know. All of the words are inadequate. Female is inadequate. But it's all of that and more. I think feminism is an affirmative. It's about living and dying well with each other where women and girls are acknowledged and integrated and powerful. It's that. That's my feminism.

LAURA FLANDERS:: I did think that we might not be still fighting this at this point.

DONNA HARAWAY: Wouldn't you think? No really? Wouldn't you think? We could at least have a composting toilet and throw all the patriarchs into it.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ooh, well, but you just used that word compost and we're, I have to ask you about that because we've been talking recently on this program about the mandate to be useful and productive and functional. And the critique of that that we get from the disabled world. And you've critiqued it too with this fascinating use of the word compost. So, when you say compost, what are you thinking about?

DONNA HARAWAY: Compost piles are a multi-species endeavor that turn waste into soil, that turn waste into nutrient. That take the detritus of our world and rework it, recycle it in a multi-species way to make something enriching. In this case to help my onions grow.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, maybe we could think of ourselves as species that are capable of making something of this waste that we have also created. It's a very zen, very Donna Haraway kind of idea.

DONNA HARAWAY: Yeah, and also I learned from my Buddhist friends and the do no harm, that kind of emptying out and not always being productive, but allowing yourself to be. And be open and be empty. All of that. And you know, at various times I've been called a post-modern or a post-humanist or a post-whatever, and I get grumpy and I say, "No, I'm not post-human, I'm compost." That we are all already, always, we are compost. We are a multi-species ongoing kin. We are oddkin as ourselves.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'll ask you the question that we ask all our guests before we close, and that is about the future. You've thought about storying, telling stories. I love that you use it as a verb. What's the story you think the future will tell of us now? I don't know, looking forward 25, 50, 100 years. What do you think the future will say about us?

DONNA HARAWAY: Well, I hope they're amazed at how stupid we are because they've managed to solve all these problems. But I don't, I actually am quite worried in all honesty, as I think most feeling, thinking people these days are worried. I think that biodiversity losses are permanent. There will be no going back to before. And I think that our near futures are in danger. That said I also don't spend a lot of time, I'm not very sympathetic to thinking about the future because I think our job is to make the present, which is, has deep time to it, and the present is not instantaneous, it's thick. And I think our job is to make this thick present better. And that's the best thing we can... If futures are to be more livable, the best chance is that we figure out how to make the present livable.

LAURA FLANDERS: I appreciate that. Donna Haraway, thank you so much for your work and for spending this time with us today.

DONNA HARAWAY: Well, thank you, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'll admit it. Talking with Donna Haraway made my head spin. She has a way of turning every noun into an active verb and every sentence into a paragraph. She interrupts grammar. And not just that. She interrupts the way we think and even speak. And that I realize is, of course, the point. In a period like this one where we are constantly being told that people are more individualized and lonely and cut off, she reminds us that we as humans are constantly in relationship with others in a network of relationships on this planet whether we like it or not. "Stay with the trouble," she says, "And you are part of thick time, making a story that is not over yet." Nothing about that could be finite, which is perhaps why I particularly appreciate her answer to my question about the future. "Let's focus," she says, "On the present. We're making it as we speak and think." You can find my full uncut conversation with Donna Haraway, which is absolutely worth listening to through subscribing to our free podcast or our newsletter. You can find all the information at our website. Till the next time. Stay kind, stay curious, keep thinking. Thank you, Donna. For "Laura Flanders & Friends", I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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