

Jeffrey P. Moran. *American Genesis: The Evolution Controversies from Scopes to Creation Science*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 196pp.

Shaun F. Richards*

The College of William and Mary

In 2005 *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* aired a weeklong special report entitled “Evolution Schmevolution” that featured clips of various conservative-minded pundits opposed to teaching evolution in public schools. Following the de-contextualized excerpts, the eponymous host lampooned the talking heads for their primitive intellectualism and religious obscurantism, insinuating that proven scientific facts like evolution ought to be part of any curriculum. *Pace* Jon Stewart, the debate is nothing new. Jeffrey Moran’s *American Genesis* offers a more rigorous and thoroughgoing history of the “antievolution impulse” in America (x). Moran begins with the courtroom—or rather courtyard—debate between William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow during the Scopes Trial of 1925, an event that polarized the nation along spiritual, intellectual, and political lines.

American Genesis argues that the reception of and resistance to evolution in America mirrors its ideals and values (24). Moran takes an exceptionalist approach based on the contradiction that America “has the most advanced scientific infrastructure as well as the highest rate of church adherence” and also three determining factors contributing to its antievolutionism—Protestantism, democracy, and cultural diversity (x, 17). Following a recent

* Shaun F. Richards is a PhD candidate in American Studies and adjunct professor of English at The College of William and Mary. His dissertation examines the appropriation and representation of evolutionary and social scientific theories of deviance in American literary naturalism and modernism. He can be reached at sfrichards@email.wm.edu.

trend in cultural histories of evolution, he further problematizes the story by adding new foes to the “warfare model” of science and religion,¹ and though he starts with a consideration of the eternal conflict between men of science and men of the cloth, it romanticizes neither. Instead, Moran extends the creationist-Darwinist opposition to include analytic concepts such as regionalism, education level, race, and gender that, we learn, are necessarily entailed in the debate. The latter two categories, perhaps the study’s most important contributions, offer an interesting and underexplored conjunction in the scholarship. This reviewer, however, regrets the lack of discussion regarding the role of political ideologies and the media in the debate.

Chapter one contends that antievolution sentiment resulted from the feminization of American culture—particularly religion.² Antievolution rhetoric allowed for the re-masculinization of Christianity, whereby Christ was recast as ideal modern man and Protestantism as a rational, almost scientific type of (manly) pursuit. The strategic confluence of reason and faith is a tactic repeatedly employed from theological modernists then to scientific creationists now, as both first and new wave militant fundamentalists draw upon a long-held worldview that privileges professionalized male reason. Chapter two outlines the two sides of the debate along a North-South axis, highlighting regional differences of Southern communal religiousness and Northern secular individualism. Chapter three details the different racial positions on the controversy as evidenced by the Scopes Trial, in which the issue was not teaching evolution in black schools. On one side was a small cadre of black intellectuals that latched onto a modernist ideal of progress—both biosocial and scientific—as a means for racial uplift; on the other was a powerful spiritual community rooted in traditional Christian values. Figures like W.E.B. Du Bois popularized evolutionary science and its more jarringly progressive theories (i.e. miscegenation and eugenics) through race presses in order to destabilize social

hierarchies based on scientific racism, an ideology that long predates Darwinism in the United States. Black elites led a two-pronged attack against not only the same old bigotry of the New South, but also the prevalence of African American religiosity, which still viewed clergymen as masculine leaders. The final two chapters chart the continuities and flexibilities from turn-of-the-century positivism and Darwinism to seemingly similar positions in the contemporary culture wars, focusing on activists, educators, and scientists—evangelical and secular—and their strategies for civic engagement, culminating in the intelligent design movement.

Evolution continues to be a lightning-rod issue because of its ability to forge identities across many different levels aside from religious affiliation. Much more can be said on the intersections of race, gender, modernity, and evolution: questions about what roles African American women played in the controversies surrounding evolution, or what the debates would have looked like had African American clergymen lost their authoritative positions remain to be addressed. By calling attention to the various factors that led to the uniquely American public interest in evolution, however, Moran ultimately hints at a fundamental anti-intellectualism running throughout American history. Yet one need not be familiar with *The Daily Show*'s satirical routine to know that the debate remains as divisive as ever, even if the venue itself has evolved.

¹ Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (Harvard University Press: 1998): 22.

² Ann Douglass, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).