

reality. The stark binarism of this phase of van Wyk Louw's poetry may not be quite what the new South Africa is looking for, but readers of English will be grateful to Kannemeyer for opening up Afrikaans literature in this way.

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***Alan G. Morris, The Skeletons of Contact, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1992***

The only useful thing to have emerged from that loathsome disease of intellectual life known as postmodernism - this bug has many guises but can usually be diagnosed by the indiscriminate use of the prefix 'post', as in poststructuralist, postmarxist, postfeminist, and so on - is the notion that writing embraces more than just the graphic representation of the spoken word. In anthropology, where the effects of the 'post' contagion have been particularly nasty, this one redeeming feature of a renewed attention to writing in its many aspects seems to have survived the ravages of the disease. Theory in social anthropology has become dominated by writing about writing, and where this is not self-indulgent it has led to some interesting and fruitful research.

In physical anthropology things are a little different. On the one hand it has been less prone to infection by the postmodern malaise but on the other hand its practitioners seem not to have woken to the possibilities of rethinking their subject in the metaphors of writing. After all, is not physical anthropology the study of that most essential form of writing, namely the inscriptions that time has made on our very flesh and bones? There is however a curious lack of sophistication in the theorising of physical anthropology, and this is made all the more evident by huge and rapid advances in empirical findings and methodology.

Physical anthropology has to be one of the most exciting sciences of our time. Drawing on the technical advances of genetics, archaeology and statistics, it has developed powerful tools to detect and explain patterns of change in the physical characteristics of human populations. We can for instance soon expect to know with a high degree of accuracy exactly when and

where spoken language emerged, and the indications are that the previous chronologies of the origin of language vastly overestimated the length of time that humans have been speaking to each other.

Yet despite these astounding advances there remains a sort of theoretical naïveté in much of the work of physical anthropologists that manifests itself in slightly unhinged speculation. This is probably a consequence of the parasitic relationship of physical anthropology to other sciences and the attempts of theory to keep up with the extraordinary empirical advances in the field. A case in point is the quaint tale of the 'African Eve'. There is evidence that all the mitochondrial DNA in human populations (which is inherited only by women) can be traced back to one African woman who lived less than half a million years ago. The idea was therefore put forward that we are all descended from this one woman - hence the 'African Eve'. However, subsequent statistical analysis indicates that things are a lot more complicated than the geneticists thought and although 'Eve' might have been African, from a statistical point of view she might just as well have been located elsewhere in the world. The African Eve was the product of over ambitious speculation combined with an inadequate understanding of the complexities of statistical analysis and population genetics.

*The Skeletons of Contact* is an altogether more modest attempt to use skeletal remains found at four sites along the Orange River to reconstruct a profile of the various populations and their interactions in the period just prior to colonisation, when this region constituted the so-called 'Northern Frontier'. This is a timely and important study, published at a moment when the history of South Africa needs to be rethought in a way that is free from the political constraints - of the left as well as the right - that have hampered a really critical reconstruction of our past. It begins to unravel the complex relationships of the different groups in competition for land, resources and power on the margins of European conquest in Southern Africa. These issues have been so densely clouded by propaganda and the various 'histories' of the descendants of these populations, going to the heart as they do of claims to the land, that it will take many more studies of this sort to clear away the fog.

There are however some problems with this study that are symptomatic of the more general ones in physical anthropology that I alluded to above. The main one is the lack of any attempt to critically confront the archaic and often misleading terminology that has become conventional in physical anthropology in Southern Africa. Thus, while the author admits to the inadequacy of terms like Negro, Khoikhoi, San and Caucasoid to describe biological

populations and the further confusion of Bushman, Hottentot and Bantu to designate linguistic groups (with yet more fuzziness when it comes to terms for social groups) he makes no effort to rethink these categories. It is my belief that one way of putting physical anthropology onto a more rigorous and critical theoretical footing would be to conceptualise its task as a sort of grammarology: to interpret the residues of the experiments that time has made upon our bodies.

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