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Katharina Schramm

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Race and science in contemporary South Africa

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**Department of SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY**  
Institut für KULTUR- UND SOZIALANTHROPOLOGIE

**Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Vienna**  
Fakultät für Sozialwissenschaften, Universität Wien

[ksa.univie.ac.at/vwpe03](http://ksa.univie.ac.at/vwpe03)

## CLAIMS OF DESCENT RACE AND SCIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA

Katharina Schramm (*Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg*)

### Abstract

This paper is concerned with the question of how to ethnographically account for race as a complex knowledge formation and political reality. I focus on South Africa which occupies a special place in global scientific debates on race and human origins – historically as well as presently. From the early twentieth century onwards, paleoanthropology, physical anthropology and genetics were preoccupied with the study of indigenous populations in order to draw general conclusions on human evolution and biological differences (and hierarchies) between groups. These genealogies of knowledge resonate in various ways in contemporary research. At the same time, the bureaucratic and ‘culturally’ defined race classification of apartheid heavily relied on common-sense notions of race and this has contributed to their ongoing persistence. While not fully congruent with each other, these ‘cultural’ and ‘biological’ classification practices are nevertheless closely intertwined. In the post-apartheid society it is therefore not enough to say that race is socially constructed or a mere biological fiction in order to subvert its ongoing political and epistemological power. I argue that we need to rather problematize race itself as a polyvalent phenomenon. In order to do so, I discuss the relationship between epistemic objects (human remains, casts and DNA), classificatory violence and the politics of memory by which different actors perform race, while articulating their claims of descent and political subjectivities in contemporary South Africa.

### Introduction: the many lives of ‘race’

In recent years there has been a growing debate on the apparent re-emergence of race in scientific discourse and practice. Even if contemporary race is a phenomenon that is not necessarily named (as in crude typological jargon), it nevertheless maintains an uneasy presence that cannot be solely delegated to the realm of the ‘social’ vis-à-vis the ‘biological’. This poses a number of theoretical and methodological challenges to social scientists – summarised in the question of how to account for the slippery character of race that escapes easy definition? How to analyse the coproduction of race as an epistemic object in science

and politics? Much of the recent literature on this topic has taken medical research or laboratory genetics as its starting point for the discussion of racial or racialised knowledge production (e.g. Fullwiley 2011; M'charek 2005; Montoya 2011; TallBear 2013b). In line with recent scholarship in Science and Technology Studies on epistemic cultures (cf. Jasanoff 2004; Knorr-Cetina 1999) these important studies have helped us to understand the multiple ways in which scientific knowledge about race and human biological diversity is always also 'cultured knowledge'. Differences are not simply 'out there' in nature, but they are granted significance in complex biosocial configurations.

However, through this specific focus on laboratory and medical practice, race has largely remained a matter of biology (or biologisation) and less attention has been paid to its other lives, i.e. in terms of memories of oppression and struggles for political recognition. In my paper, I therefore suggest an ethnographic approach which takes these dimensions into account – thereby not taking the meaning of race for granted, but problematising it at the core. Through the notion of 'troubles of descent'<sup>1</sup> I aim to show how race is performed and brought into being as a relational object (M'charek/Schramm/Skinner 2014; Schramm in press/b). This implies that race cannot be pinpointed as 'residing' in a body, DNA-marker, group classification, scientific measurement or a practice of self-identification. Rather, it constitutes a polyvalent phenomenon that is assembled from various such elements which in their combination may situationally produce racial effects (cf. M'charek 2013) that resonate with the problematic and oppressive history of the concept.

The empirical base for this project comes from ten months of continuous fieldwork in South Africa, where I first started working in 2010. My main interest is in the many overlaps and historical dis/continuities between scientific and public debates on race and human origins in a post-apartheid setting.<sup>2</sup> I focus on South Africa as a special 'site of cognition' (Anderson 2012; Santos, Lindee, and de Souza 2014) for two reasons. First, and in line with Anderson's and Santos, Lindee and de Souza's use of this term, Southern Africa was, and continues to be, a highly significant site for the study of the history of humanity as a whole through physical anthropology and human genetics of indigenous populations who were

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1 I borrow the notion of trouble from Donna Haraway's (2010) catchy phrase 'staying with the trouble'. It helps me to address and take seriously the multidimensionality and complexity of race and descent.

2 I approached this complex subject through different scales (Fortun 2009) and sites. My main research took place in Cape Town, where I worked with heritage authorities, physical anthropologists, museum professionals, geneticists and members of so-called descendant communities. I also undertook a number of field trips to Johannesburg, the South African hub of population genomics, where I had the chance to get many insights into concrete laboratory practices and sampling strategies.

classified as ‘Other’.<sup>3</sup> This importance can be traced back to the early days of race science, where human remains of so-called ‘Bushmen’ and ‘Hottentots’<sup>4</sup> were circulated through a global trading network that connected European and colonial scientific institutions, including the emerging South African ones. In the prevailing evolutionist logic, living and dead ‘Bushmen/Hottentots’, defined through an arbitrary mix of life-style and physical appearance, represented the earliest (read ‘least developed’) stages of humankind. After the Second World War, the race-paradigm in physical anthropology with its specific associations of hierarchical difference and morphological fixity began to give way to an interest in population diversity, adaptation and ecology in the new physical anthropology (cf. Haraway 1988) – and hunter-gatherer groups like the San played a major role in this shifting interest (cf. Lee 1979). Eminent South African scientists such as Philip Tobias, thrice nominated for the Nobel Prize, and Trefor Jenkins, an early pioneer of population genetics, also continued to advocate and conduct research in the Kalahari, mainly in Botswana and what was then South West Africa, today’s Namibia (cf. Tobias 1975; Jenkins et al. 1971). Under the chairmanship of the Kalahari Research Committee, 21 interdisciplinary expeditions were mounted to study Bushmen/San populations under the broad labels of human variability and genetic affinities within and between groups. And today, once again, genomic research that takes an interest in human origins and migration history focuses largely on Khoisan groups and their descendants whose mitochondrial and Y-chromosomal haplogroups appear to be closest to the root, the common ancestor of humankind (cf. Tishkoff et al. 2009, Schuster et al. 2010, Schlebusch et al. 2012). This interest is so profound that one geneticist told me ironically “there must be a shop in Smitsdrift where you can buy genetic samples!” (interview 30.05.2014).

Yet there is also a second reason why South Africa can be considered as a special site of cognition for the discussion of race and the troubles of descent. This has to do with the history of South African apartheid and the ways in which it has shaped people’s common

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3 Of course, South Africa is also the site of major hominid finds in paleoanthropology (‘Taung Child’; ‘Mrs Ples’; ‘Littlefoot’ and most recently ‘Australopithecus Sediba’). Racial anthropology and the early paleoanthropology were closely related (cf. Dubow 1995). Today the disciplines of biological anthropology, paleoanthropology and molecular genetics converge in the sciences of human origins. For reasons of limited space, I mostly leave out the discussion about the ‘Cradle of Humankind’ here, even though it forms an important part of claims of descent in twenty-first century South Africa (see Bystrom 2009).

4 Nomenclature is complicated and problematic. The derogatory colonial terminology for indigenous inhabitants of the land was ‘Bushmen’ (for various groups of hunter-gatherers) and ‘Hottentots’ (for Khoekhoe pastoralists). Due to their closely entangled histories, languages etc. the joint identity label today is KhoeSan or Khoisan. San is the most common (self-)ascription for hunter-gatherer groups in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana and their descendants. However, the term ‘Bushman’ is also still widespread, especially in the discourse of so-called Khoisan revivalism. In contrast, ‘Hottentot’ or the Afrikaans equivalent ‘Hotnot’ has clearly remained an insult.

understandings of race, their claims of descent and their relationship to past and present scientific practices. Many authors (e.g. Breckenridge in press; Morris 2012; Posel 2001) have argued that the racial classification of apartheid was based on a bureaucratic and cultural model and therefore disconnected from the scientific debates on race as a biological fact or fiction. While I agree to their call for historical specificity and differentiation, I argue that in order to understand the ongoing trouble with race it is important to bring these dimensions together. I will do so by looking at the difficult relationship between human remains, DNA and the contemporary self-identifications of so-called descendant communities through the lens of what I call classificatory violence. I am interested in the ways in which descent is performed differently in relation to the materiality of casts, bones and DNA and how disciplinary and political histories translate into one another.

### **Contested representations of the ‘indigenous’ in South African collections: life-casts and human remains**

In August 2013, after almost 20 years of debate, the South African Museum (Iziko) in Cape Town decided to remove all of its so-called ‘Bushmen life-casts’ from its ethnographic showroom and put them in storage. The casts had been on display for almost 100 years.<sup>5</sup> Together with ancient Karoo dinosaur fossils and a spectacular whale gallery they belonged to the museum’s main attractions from its inception. In a book from 1961 with the astonishing title “Bushman, Whale and Dinosaur”, the activities of James Drury, chief taxidermist at the museum and modeller of the casts, are described as follows:

“Drury travelled widely to secure from living subjects the moulds for his Bushmen groups and to study the habits of these primitive people. He skinned the elephants shot by Major Pretorius and the lions and hippopotami shot by the Duke of Westminster in Rhodesia, ‘filleted’ odoriferous whales on our coasts, excavated the cave dwellings of extinct Cape Bushmen and engaged in other multifarious activities to collect specimens for the Museum” (Rose 1961: cover blurb).

The author Walter Rose represents Drury as the white hero-collector who ventured far beyond the comfort zone of ordinary museum visitors so that they could eventually marvel at the wonders of the collection. Post-1994, this very agglomeration of colonial practices of hunting, collection and display came under serious criticism and the casts in particular became the

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5 The majority of casts were made between 1907 and 1937.

object of a heated controversy that involved various publics. As a result, the centre-piece of the display, the 'Bushman diorama' which showed a group of semi-naked hunter-gatherers in a nineteenth century-style camp, was closed to public view in 2001 (Davison 2001; on the history of the casts see Davison 1993). This decision was made on the grounds that the diorama symbolised the representational and genocidal violence against the indigenous people of the Cape Colony.<sup>6</sup> Many liberal critics saw the diorama as a derogatory display of San people as a primitive Other belonging to the realm of nature and frozen in time.<sup>7</sup> This effect, of course, was enhanced through the very form of the diorama (Haraway 1989) and its placement in a museum of natural history.

However, the remaining casts, which gave an extremely lively impression as they showed people in various activities and positions (dancing, playing music, beading etc.), have recently been removed on different grounds: they are now considered as "unethically acquired...human remains" (panel description of the remodelled ethnographic display). This new categorisation of the casts has at least two components: First of all, historically, casts, photographs, voice recordings, life-measurements and the procurement and study of human remains all together formed part and parcel of racial anthropology – and so-called 'Bushmen' (living and dead) were favoured objects of study in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were considered to be a dying-out race, one of the 'most primitive' people on the hierarchical scale of human evolution. In the reasoning for removing them from public display, the casts, through their very materiality, act as intimate embodiments of the practices of scientific racism and the violence associated with them.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, museum officials have argued that through the very act of casting, traces of bodily material (hair, cells, DNA) have

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6 For some of the historical background see Adhikari (2010) and Penn (2005). It should be noted that many groups fought each other in the frontier situation, which included conflicts between hunter-gatherers and pastoralists as well as migrants from the Eastern and Northern interiors. The emphasis in the museum and in public discourse focuses on colonial forms of warfare, conquest and oppression, as analysed, for example, by Penn (1996). However, whereas Nigel Penn insists on the differentiation between Khoekhoe and San encounters with the colonial trekboer settlers in different historical periods and circumstances, these distinctions are often collapsed in contemporary non-academic debates. Likewise, the participation of Khoekhoe and other non-European troupers in the later eighteenth century commando-operations that were designed to break San resistance (Penn 1996: 86) is not prominently discussed.

7 However, there were also representatives of Khoisan groups who objected to the closure of the diorama, arguing that it served as a reminder of an ancient way of life and an ancestral connection. The whole debate about the fate of the diorama was sparked by the Miscast-exhibition, where artist-curator Pippa Skotnes had problematised the violent treatment of 'Bushmen' bodies in colonial hunting expeditions and scientific research (Skotnes 1996). The exhibition project caused a massive debate which focused on the problematic objectification perpetuated in the Miscast-display itself (cf. Douglas/Law 1997; Fauvelle 1999).

8 On the coercive conditions under which life-casts were often made, cf. Hoffmann (2009) and Rassool/Hayes (2002).

literally melted into the casts which therefore need to be considered as actual parts of a dead person and not mere representations.

The casts are not the only objects of contention at the South African Museum – as reclassified ‘human remains’ they have joined the collection of indigenous skeletal material that became a haunting issue for the museum from the 1990s onwards. A number of South African institutions, including the University of Cape Town and the South African Museum, still hold large collections of indigenous human remains. Many of these are of archaeological origin, including a considerable number of Khoisan remains.<sup>9</sup> These collections were started in the early twentieth century under the premise of race typology, and early procurement in particular took place in highly problematic circumstances (Legassick/Rassool 2000; Morris 1996).<sup>10</sup> Collecting and research continued under changing conditions and with new research questions until the present (see Morris 1992). Before the end of apartheid, no provisions existed for so-called descendant communities to have a say in the future of any uncovered human remains (including graveyards). This changed with the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 (Section 36), which explicitly states that proactive consultations should be sought with “communities and individuals who by tradition have an interest in [a] grave or burial ground”.<sup>11</sup>

But how are ‘communities’, ‘tradition’ and ‘interest’ defined here? And which time-frame is concerned? In line with a growing international debate about the treatment and possible restitution of indigenous human remains from colonial collections worldwide (Fforde 2004; Turnbull/Pickering 2010), South African activists have increasingly put forth demands for the repatriation and reburial of such remains. In its Human Remains Policy,<sup>12</sup> the South African Museum reacted by calling upon “descendant communities, scientific communities and other concerned groups who have an interest in human remains in Iziko collections” to join forces in seeking a dialogue over the fate of the collection and to repatriate ‘unethically collected’ human remains. The book “Skeletons in the Cupboard” by Martin Legassick and Ciraj Rassool (2000) serves as an important reference point here. Through meticulous

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9 See Department of Arts and Culture, Review of Heritage Legislation. Final Report 2007, p. 38.

10 The organising principles of these collections differ considerably. On the institutional development and internal differentiation of physical anthropology and comparative anatomy in South Africa see Morris (2012).

11 As stated in the National Heritage Resources Act, commissioned by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) in 1999, p. 62.

12 Policy on the management of human remains in Iziko Collections; approved by Iziko Council, 29 September 2005; unpublished document.

historical research they have documented and problematised the unscrupulous methods that were underlying the trade in human remains at the South African Museum between 1907 and 1917 – including the grave-robbing of recently deceased individuals. In its restitution policy and community outreach, the museum largely focuses on concrete cases of ‘unethically acquired’ remains identified in this and other research projects. In 2004, the Museum commissioned consultations about the restitution of such ‘unethically required’ human remains with descendant communities, mainly in the Northern part of the country. This initially concerned 15 cases, but was soon expanded to include 115 cases<sup>13</sup> – a clear indication of the difficulty to identify ‘clean’ and unproblematic specimen in the historical collections.<sup>14</sup> However, as I will show below, the demand for repatriation often goes beyond this narrow time span.

In the above mentioned policy document descendant communities are defined as “communities that have established or recognized lines of descent” – just like the National Heritage Resources Act would have it. But this is not a clear-cut genealogy at all – especially when it concerns the notion of ‘Khoisan remains’. Even at the time when Drury made his life-casts, many people (some of whose remains are found in collections today) had died in prisons, had been shot by farmers and hunters or had been forced to give up their lifestyle and language to become indentured labourers on white farms. Indigenous status was not recognised; by the 1920s, the South African Union, and later the apartheid-administration, considered the South African Khoekhoe and San to be on the edge of extinction. With the apartheid installation of the Population Registration Act in 1950, the ‘coloured’ category became the racial label that encompassed everyone who was not classified as ‘native’, i.e. black or white. In the post-apartheid period, however, there has been a large revival of Khoisan identities among people who had previously been classified as ‘coloured’.<sup>15</sup> This revival is mainly concerned with the revitalisation of forms of political organisation associated with a Khoekhoe past, including the institution of chieftaincy and a hierarchical distribution of power. Nevertheless, San (as hunter-gatherers) remain an important point of

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13 See Final Summary Report, Iziko Museums Consultation Process, 30 November 2004.

14 At the time of my research in 2012, none of these remains had been repatriated and I am not aware of any case of repatriation from the South African Museum collection itself. However, in 2012, Austria repatriated the human remains of Trooi and Klaas Pienaar from the collection of Rudolph Pöch in Vienna. Their case had been documented extensively by Legassick and Rassool (2000: 22-3). They received a state-burial in South Africa.

15 See Besten (2009). A number of Master-theses by South African students at various universities have also dealt with this subject, e.g. de Wet (2006) and Gabie (2014).

reference in this revivalist movement, because they represent an original and spiritual relationship to the land.

It is frequently representatives of such Khoisan groups who have vehemently criticised the scientific objectification of human remains in archaeology and physical anthropology, arguing for unconditional repatriation of *all* human remains from international and local collections. At the same time, population genomics and genetic ancestry testing in particular are discursively embraced as a means of *proving* those very claims of descent, indigeneity and belonging. To understand this selective approach to disciplinary histories, scientific practices and the materiality of samples as well as the complex ways in which race is brought to the fore in these conversations, I will, in the remainder of this article, pay attention to what I call classificatory violence and its impact on the interpretation of descent and community. I will then move on to examine how the notion of descent is evoked in different ways to connect the living and the dead.

### **Classificatory violence**

In my use of the notion of classificatory violence I slightly depart from Bowker and Star's (2000) famous case-study on the meaning of racial re/classification during apartheid. In their piece, they point out the often disturbing and disastrous effects of group classifications (such as the racial regime of apartheid) on individual lives. Through the concept of "torque" they engage the process of mutual bending and twisting of biography and the process of classification itself (2000: 27). They demonstrate that the messiness of social life can hardly be tamed by a strict and exclusionary classificatory model.

By speaking of classificatory violence here, I will pay less attention to the impact of classification on individual biographies but rather to the formation of collective identifications that serve as a significant reference point in contemporary debates. There are two levels which are relevant for my discussion. The first concerns the composition and historical role of the collections of human remains themselves. Classificatory violence here refers to the creation of scientific specimen from indigenous human remains in the aftermath of colonial conquest. Salvage anthropology and imperialist nostalgia worked together to create a typological archive that in today's political debates serves to exemplify the actual violence of colonial extermination. The second level of classificatory violence is related to further processes of disjuncture and identification that are associated with apartheid classification and

the fixation of racial categories according to a hierarchical bureaucratic ordering. The political contestations around the troubles of descent in contemporary South Africa conjoin these two dimensions of memory and political subjectivity.

### **Classificatory violence and the collections of human remains**

The first trajectory of classificatory violence can be said to have started with the display (alive and dead) of Sara Baartman who performed as the so-called ‘Hottentot Venus’ in London and Paris where she died in 1814. Her body was scientifically examined and dissected by George Cuvier, one of the founders of modern anatomy, for whom she represented a unique racial type as ‘Boschismanne Hottentot’, sharply distinguished from other human races and closest to apes (cf. Abrahams 1997, 1998). Skeleton, body cast, and conserved brain and genitals were stored and partly exhibited at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until they were eventually repatriated to South Africa in an elaborate state ritual in 2002 (Krüger 2010). On her return, the remains were first kept at the South African Museum before being reburied in the small town of Hankey in the Eastern Cape, supposedly near her place of birth. When I visited the South African Museum in 2011, the box in which the cast had been flown in was still there. It leaned against a wall inside the storeroom where human remains were kept, obstructing easy passage. The person who led me through the storeroom indicated that nobody had dared to remove it; it sat there as an uneasy reminder of the highly political significance of the issue of human remains.

The iconic case of Sara Baartman is but one out of thousands of indigenous bodies whose remains are still stored in collections worldwide. Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, a vast trade in human remains fed European and colonial scientific institutions with comparative samples of skulls, skeletons and soft tissue, mainly of indigenous people who were classified as primitive and/or different. Comparative anatomy and physical anthropology focused on the identification of pure racial types in the search for comparative samples; racial anthropologists measured skull-shape and brain-size, and identified unique features (such as the so-called ‘Bushman canine’ which is still referred to in contemporary forensic and archaeological practice; interview N.D., 24.11.2011). In South Africa, a colonial society with a distinctive scientific landscape that centred on human origins research (cf. Dubow 1995), indigenous human remains were collected with equal fervour, far into the twentieth century.

In the early days, many skeletons were bestowed to the collections as donations by farmers – and while some were accidental finds, others were literally robbed from their graves. For example, several skeletons were presented to the anatomy department at the newly established University of Cape Town<sup>16</sup> by a C.G. Coetzee in the 1920s. The catalogue entry for specimen UCT 43 reads as follows:

UCT 43 Cape Inland. Known in life as Bushman. (*The latter added later in pencil; copied from original entry, K.S.*)  
Kruis River Farm, Sutherland.

Skeleton of an old Bushwoman (Saartje) who had been a member of the wild Bushmen and had been caught by Mr. Coetzee's great-grandfather. She died about 1880 and was reputed to have been 60 or 70 years old at death. She had been buried in a niche in one side of the grave at a depth of 4' with big stones in front of her. Presented by C.G. Coetzee, 1927. Reputed to be wife of UCT 50 and mother of UCT 51. Also see UCT 52 + UCT 54.

In addition, the index card informs that the skeleton, cranium and mandible are complete. It also notes that the remains have been studied as part of a PhD thesis on Holocene human evolution and “the biocultural development of the Khoisan” (Hausman 1980).

A whole family joined on the shelves of an anatomy department. The narrative that the remains and the index cards tell is firstly one of objectification in life and death (cf. Roque 2011). Caught as a ‘wild bushman’, the woman was renamed “Saartje” and most likely worked for Coetzee's great-grandfather and was later buried on the farm. As the owner of the land, Coetzee could dig up the remains (even those he had ‘buried himself’, referring to UCT 29) and present them to a scientific institution where they served as ‘type specimen’ of the ‘Bushman race’. Matthew Drennan, who started the skeletal collection at UCT, where he served as Professor of Anatomy from 1919 until 1956, extensively studied such remains, asserting that “the majority of the physical characters of the Bushman tend to lie towards the simian end of the human scale” and concluding that “the Bushman is undoubtedly a member of one of the lowest of the human races” (quot. in Dubow 1995: 47).

However, this is not the only dimension here; the index card conjoins several temporalities. When the remains were accessioned, they went into the “List of Bushmen Skulls in the Department of Anatomy”. In line with the prerogatives of racial anthropology,

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16 Thanks to the support of Prof. Alan Morris I had full access to the catalogues and archival material at the UCT Anatomy Department. My access to the South African Museum was much more limited – at the time of my stay, all collections were closed to external researchers. In the case of human remains, this included the registers and catalogue entries.

the emphasis here was on the ‘Bushmen racial type’ and it was the skull that formed the basis for racial comparison. In the 1980s, a new Catalogue of Human Skeletal Remains/Anthropology was put together by biological anthropologist Alan Morris, who rearranged the cards according to the specific geographic regions where the skeletons were found – if any such information was available (see Morris 1992). Thus, the new index card for UCT 43 prioritised the geographic origin of the remains. It also contained information about the completeness of the skeleton and the presence or absence of post-cranial remains. This new ordering of the catalogue was inspired by new interests and priorities in biological anthropology. Changing research questions that included human-environment interactions demanded detailed information about the landscape in which a skeleton was found; for osteopathological studies or those focusing on occupational stress, for example, the skull was far less significant than other parts of the skeleton.

Clearly, this reorganisation of the collection is an indication of a paradigm shift in the discipline of biological anthropology away from racial typology, towards ‘population diversity’, ‘adaptation’, ‘ecology’ and ‘development’. This shift is largely associated with the announcement of a New Physical Anthropology in the 1950s (Washburn 1951) and concurring developments in human population genetics. Over time it definitely affected the practices of South African scientists and people working with the South African collections, if only to varying degrees. As Morris states as late as 1992 in his published “Catalogue of Holocene Remains”:<sup>17</sup>

“For too long there has been a tendency to force racial conclusions from the data either by means of typology or through the oversimplification of the biological picture into Khoisan and Negro categories only. The direction we should be taking is one that emphasizes the process of change and the dynamic nature of South African history and prehistory. For this, the data themselves must dictate the questions we can ask” (Morris 1992: 16).

But, as the layered information on the index card for UCT 43 and the history of the collections suggests, this data or the meaning of the human remains does not simply reside in the skeletal material alone. Nor does the rejection of the previous ‘tendency to force racial

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17 This catalogue encompasses all South African collections and presents the remains according to the geographical location (biome) in which they were found. This taxonomy does not necessarily match the organising principles of the institutional collections, some of which still follow a racial/ethnic taxonomy, as demonstrated in the Raymond Dart collection at the University of the Witwatersrand (see Dayal et al. 2009). Morris explicitly states that he excluded such remains that were solely collected for the purposes of race science or that have no additional information available. However, the catalogue includes many skeletons that were procured by scientists with a typological inclination, such as by Robert Broom or Raymond Dart.

conclusions' eliminate race itself, if we consider race and race trouble through the lens of classificatory violence and its multidimensional reverberations.

Morris and his colleagues seek to generate a new understanding of human biology, prehistory and human relatedness through the study of indigenous human remains. The shared standpoint is that it is important to study the remains – if only to give 'back' their histories. However, as I will show below, this reasoning is not always shared by the spokespeople of political groups who claim indigenous remains (regardless of their specific way into the collections) as their ancestors. Unburied human remains have become symbolic embodiments of racial violence that is not restricted to the distant realm of scientific racism but rather connected to the more recent apartheid past and the inequalities it produced in death *and* life. Through the association with indigenous human remains people may articulate a new sense of indigeneity<sup>18</sup> in the present – they *become* descendant communities.

### **Apartheid categories and the rejection of the label 'coloured' after 1994**

Therefore, the second level on which I would like to briefly discuss classificatory violence goes deeper into the historical period of apartheid where race classification and segregation were at the heart of the regime of governance. Established racial typologies persisted and were turned into administrative categories. However, in contrast to the classificatory endeavours of race science, which had largely focused on the naked body (literally naked to the bones), the apartheid classification was highly conscious of the arbitrariness of categories and brought in culture and lifestyle as explicit criteria to determine race. Thus the Population Registration Act No. 29 of 1950 states the following:

“‘Coloured person’ means a person who is not a white person or a native; ... ‘native’ means a person who in fact is or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa; ... ‘white person’ means a person who in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person.”

‘General acceptance’ and ‘way of life’ were equally important to ‘appearance’ – with the result of a highly flexible and thereby extremely effective system of racial classification put in place (Posel 2001).

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18 For the notion of the ‘articulation of indigeneity’ in connection with genomic research, cf. Tallbear (2013a).

The Act makes no mention of ‘Bushmen’, ‘Hottentots’ or ‘Khoisan’ for that matter – these labels were erased from the political sphere. In the logic of apartheid, the indigenous groups which they represented were no more recognisable and had basically died out. As living people, they had no political legitimacy. However, their dead physical remains as well as their ancient rock art continued to account for their presence in an imaginary precolonial landscape. Black people, according to this reasoning, had migrated to South Africa just like whites and therefore could not claim any land outside the *Bantustans* assigned to them. The original inhabitants of the land were no more – therefore, it could rightfully be claimed by white farmers. Meanwhile, the descendants of Khoekhoe and San had melted into the ‘coloured’ category, which brought together European, Khoisan and slave ancestries of various origins. In contrast to ‘natives’ who were placed at the bottom of the racial ladder, the intermediary category of ‘coloureds’ granted certain privileges (in terms of education, job opportunities and the like). With whiteness as the standard for social mobility, most people rejected any association with ‘Bushmen’ or ‘Hottentots’ and the racial stereotypes as ‘primitive Other’ that accompanied these notions.<sup>19</sup>

With the winds of change and shifting power relations towards the end of apartheid and much more pronounced after the elections of 1994, a fairly large group of people who had been classified as ‘coloured’ refused to be counted in that category and some began a revivalist cultural movement. As a manifestation of this new identification, the first “Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference” (Bank 1998) took place in 1997, followed in 2001 by the “National Khoisan Consultative Conference”. While the former meeting was a largely academic event, the latter brought together numerous groups and political organisations with the aim to consolidate a common Khoisan-ness as an alternative to the apartheid categorisation (as ‘coloured’) and perceived loss of identity.<sup>20</sup> In one of the contributions (“Die Khoisan se identiteit”/“The identity of the Khoisan”), Chief Basil Matthys Coetzee states: “The term ‘Coloured’ was in fact never accepted as a proud identity, as no cultural heritage was linked to this newly created identity” (National Khoisan Consultative Conference 2001: 25). Heritage, in this understanding, had to be linked to deep time, it had to connect its heirs to a precolonial indigenous past. Legitimate descendants of Khoekhoe and

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19 On the complex and exceptional case of Griqua identification, pre- and post-apartheid, cf. Waldman (2006) and the bibliographical overview by Louw (2010).

20 This, of course, is a situationally specific and ideologically motivated understanding of cultural identity and heritage. For a more diversified picture of ‘coloured identities’ see Erasmus (2001) and Adhikari (2009).

San who had originally occupied the country could today voice their demands for land and full political recognition in the language of rights.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the unifying attempt of the Khoisan Conferences, there are still numerous splinter groups with a range of ideas about political affiliation as well as the question of what constitutes indigeneity and how far it should be prioritised over a sense of mixture or more inclusive notions of blackness, for that matter. Consequently, it is also debated who can claim descendant status and who not, how descendant communities should be defined and on which basis claims of belonging are to be built. Human remains and DNA play a significant role in these debates.

### **Contested bones and the claims of descendant communities**

With the “Miscast” exhibition of 1996 (Skotnes 1996), the publication of Martin Legassick and Ciraj Rassool’s (2000) book “Skeletons in the Cupboard” and the eventual repatriation of Sara Baartman’s remains in 2001, the subject of human remains in South African and international collections became part of the public consciousness. In 2003, the issue exploded in a massive conflict over the treatment of a large colonial burial site (Prestwich Street) that was uncovered during reconstruction works in the city centre of Cape Town. During the heated debate about the destiny of the remains, archaeologists and biological anthropologists insisted that their work could meaningfully contribute to the process of commemoration for the people who had been buried there (paupers, slaves, sailors – most of them belonging to the non-white underclass of the city). As scientists, they could provide valuable information about the concrete circumstances of life and death – on labours performed, food eaten or deprived of and diseases caught. These claims to scientific fact-finding (and the connected right to study and ‘know’ these remains) were vehemently objected by activists and historians who regarded themselves as spokespeople of the descendants of these remains – representing the coloured communities who had been forcibly removed from the city centre during apartheid (see Schramm in press/a).

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21 This movement partly needs to be understood in the light of current political leadership and policies of black economic empowerment (BEE) in South Africa, from which many colored people feel excluded (see Adhikari 2005). Many of the historical references are to Khoekhoe identities (which are more immediately linked to the bounds of the South African nation-state and the Cape Province in particular). San (or ‘Bushmen’) connections (reaching out to Namibia and partly Botswana) feature as a kind of legitimizing joker in terms of persistent survival against all odds in the way of the ancestors - through retained language, hunter-gatherer skills etc. Ironically, there are also problematic parallels to apartheid logics of cultural segregation and autochthony, which were pinpointed by Zoe Wicomb (1998) early on.

In the debates around the treatment of the Prestwich Street dead, opponents of the anatomical and archaeological investigations rejected the study of human remains and the associated disciplinary knowledge on the grounds that it was a remnant of colonial race science (through the collections of human remains), and also of apartheid racism (through the involvement of white scholars from a historically white, even though liberal, academic institution – UCT) (cf. Rassool 2011; Shepherd 2007; for a good summary of these positions cf. Hall 2009). The very study of the human remains of people who never gave their consent while still alive appeared to be analogous to a colonial politics of knowledge; people protested against the objectification of non-white bodies under a seemingly neutral scientific gaze. Speaking as descendants on behalf of the dead, the protesters regarded themselves as legitimate spokespeople for the dead, claiming a strong emotional bond and intimate connection.

Clearly, the involved scientists did not share the idea that their disciplines would perpetuate scientific racism in the present and protested vehemently against what they regarded as a misrepresentation of their science. They argued that through their contemporary analytical practices, such as isotope analysis, radiocarbon-dating, but also general morphological description and ascription of population affinity they could not only give voice to the dead, but also scientifically determine descent in terms of an established biological or cultural connection that went along the notion of ‘population’.<sup>22</sup> For example, specific dental modifications could indicate slave descent through cultural affinity to groups who are known to have practiced specific styles. In contrast, the community representatives presented their claims of descent in much less concrete (though not less binding) terms through notions of solidarity and a shared experience of suffering that spanned the past three hundred years. This conflict remained unresolved – until today, the bones are stuck in limbo. They were neither reburied nor studied, but now rest in an ossuary in the city centre that is more renowned for its adjacent coffee-shop than as a memorial space.

The debacle of Prestwich Place led to irreconcilable positions. Involved scientists insisted that the decision to leave the remains unstudied was wrong and based on a lack of understanding about the practices of contemporary science and the knowledge opportunities

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22 A prominent example of this stance was the presentation by PhD-student Jacqui Friedling “Yes, Dead Men Do Tell Tales!”, which was delivered at the David and Elaine Potter seminar, University of Cape Town, on 19 February 2005 (unpublished manuscript). See also Judy Sealy’s contribution “What scientists learn from studying human remains” at the first public meeting on Prestwich Place held at St. Stephen’s Church, Riebeeck Square, Cape Town on 29 July 2003 (SAHRA files 9/2/918/206, Vol. 1-2).

that could arise from it. Race or race science, so they argued, played no role in their practice. Here, race referred largely to a typological and hierarchical taxonomic principle that was long overcome in the discipline. Opponents, however, based their criticisms on a much more general claim to epistemological authority and political self-determination as descendant communities. Exemplary for this fundamental critique are the following remarks by Zenzile Khoisan, journalist, anti-apartheid activist and currently spokesperson for the Khoe and Boesman National Assembly,<sup>23</sup> who argued for the complete restitution and reburial of *all* human remains still held in South African institutions, no matter what their origin. If this does not happen, he assured me in our interview, young activists “are going to just start bombing museums and then scientists have to come to terms with the shit that they’ve been catching on. So we have to draw the line ... You’ve had enough time to do your research, find other mechanisms of doing your research, leave our ancestors alone; let them rest!” (interview, 19.01.2012).

Here, the human remains are defined as “ancestors, not specimens” (Turnbull 1997) and a clear relationship is established between them and ‘us’, i.e. present day community activists. But how are these ancestral connections defined? In relation to the field of ‘science’ that is the focus of Khoisan’s critique, this process is twofold – referring to the living as well as the dead.

Let me continue with the dead for a moment. In a conversation that I had with Chiefs Josephs and Jooste, both of whom are associates of the above mentioned Khoe and Boesman National Assembly, they told me of a request of the Bredarsdorp Shipwreck Museum to help in the reburial of a skeleton, ‘a bag of bones’ that had been in the museum’s possession for quite some time. They refused the request – first, because they would not have been in control of the burial, but secondly, because the museum council did not know anything about the provenience of these remains: “that’s old tannies who sit there, they didn’t know anything about history, so it can be a bag of bones from Kwazulu Natal or of an old dog” (interview 06.01.2012). This remark was clarified a few minutes later as follows: “You can’t take a skull and say it looks Khoe, you see? It’s human, you can say it’s human, it’s no animal, but you can’t say that is Khoe or this is San”. Here, they clearly rejected any form of typology (be it related to race or population) as a basis for the identification of human remains. The racial labels that accompanied skulls and other remains when they were put on display in local

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23 Khoisan changed his name in 1988. He was also actively involved in the controversy over the Prestwich Street remains.

museums were not considered as significant or legitimate information. However, in their insistence on historical contextualisation, the chiefs also introduced geographical location and explicitly the age of the bones. They argued that before 1652, that is, before the arrival of Jan van Riebeck and his crew on the Cape, “the proof will be there it is Khoe”. In historical perspective, then, Khoekhoe in their narrative constituted a population category that joined biological and cultural parameters; a simple reality with rather clear-cut boundaries that ought to be revived as a point of reference for present political subjectivities.

Zenzile Khoisan, too, emphasised the significance of time in determining ancestral connections. Familiar with the international indigenous movement and the important role of ‘repatriables’, i.e. human remains, as “material evidence to...destruction, dispossession, and scientific objectification” (Kakaliouras 2012: 216) of indigenous groups, he saw repatriation and reburial as symbolic means of reclaiming a new and powerful Khoisan identity. For example, he and other people told me that a recently discovered skeleton in the seaside resort of Hermanus was claimed by the local ‘Khoe and Boesman’ community as one of their own. This time, the town museum and the Khoisan activists apparently worked together – the remains were being held in the museum vicinities until the details of the reburial could be arranged.<sup>24</sup> The activists wanted to make sure, however, that this was truly a ‘Khoisan’ ancestor. How was this to be done? Not by physical examination of the skull and skeleton that were simply ‘human’ (see above), but through determination of its age. For that purpose, they sent part of the bone material to a private lab in Pretoria to be radiocarbon-dated, thereby embracing the same invasive technologies that Zenzile Khoisan had so vehemently criticised before. So while these methods and the knowledge they produced (concerning the geographical location as well as the time frame of the Holocene, which began about 10.000 years ago) were the same as in the more detached scientific projects that Alan Morris was referring to above, the purposes differed – reburial and ultimately political legitimisation were the guiding principles. Thus, human remains in this peculiar setting are never fully ‘either (specimens)/or (ancestors)’, nor do they simply speak for themselves. They are at the same time a scientific and ancestral archive. Moreover, classificatory ambivalence can occur among scientists as well as community representatives, whose positions may overlap or be contested. The troubled meaning of race thus only comes to the fore in specific constellations, it is not given per se.

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24 At the moment of writing this paper, I am not aware that any reburial has taken place so far.

### **Making living descendants: DNA**

Which brings me to the living, and to the question how ancestry and descent are actually claimed and constructed. Most of the people I spoke with who associated themselves with the Khoisan revivalist movement highlighted political instead of biological affiliations in their definitions of belonging. Clearly aware of the genealogical network that interlinked the various racial categories of apartheid bureaucracy, especially, but not exclusively in the Cape Province, they recognised biological affinities with other groups, as they did the many instances of racial ‘passing’ that had occurred during apartheid. However, they prioritised cultural and political practices as well as historical associations over such genealogical lines. As another associate of the Khoe and Boesman National Assembly stated:

“You don’t get a pure Afrikaner, you don’t get a pure Khoe, but then, the people who before 1994 were recognized or spoken to as coloured, that is the people who are the indigenous. As black people were recognized as Xhosa, Zulu and white people as Afrikaner, they did not want to be coloured, so why will they come now? ... Where did that blood lie? It was there all the time, but they [did not] want to be part of [the] coloured community before 1994!” (interview, 06.01.2012).

And still, despite this political and historical awareness, reference was constantly made to biology and genetic embodiment to determine what indigeneity means at the core – i.e. the basis on which one’s belonging could be asserted. Current findings in population genomics that ascribe the oldest mitochondrial (L0d and L0k-variations) as well as Y-chromosomal (A and B-variations) lines to what is commonly referred to as the ‘Khoisan population’ served as convenient reference points to substantiate autochthony claims. The authors of these recent studies have often translated their scientific findings into a more popular language of “the oldest known lineage of modern humans“ (Schuster et al. 2010: 943), arguing, for example, that “modern human migration originated in southern Africa (...) the current homeland of click-speaking San populations” (Tishkoff et al. 2009: 2) or, a bit more cautiously, that “within Africa, click-speaking southern African San and Khoe populations (...) harbor the deepest mitochondrial DNA lineages, have great genomic diversity, and probably represent the deepest historical population divergences among extant human populations” (Schlebusch 2012: 473). It was this type of information, and not so much the disciplinary history of population genetics or the specifics of sampling decisions, that was brought into play by the activists I engaged with:

“What ...we do know from the genetic studies ...is that the oldest foundational genetic block that has been studied comes out of this group the Khoisan and that is a basic accepted fact, that’s all I really need to know, the rest of it *I leave for those people who want to fiddle and faff around in their labs.* (...) for the purpose of what I’m busy with, which is a social and cultural identity reconstruction process, I just have to establish that we are descendants from the first people” (Khoisan, interview, 19.01.2012, my emphasis).

Here, as in many other genetic ancestry projects, (genomic) science is appealed to as a legitimising factor to substantiate one’s historical narrative and to explore the potentiality of one’s political subjectivity in the future (cf. Nelson 2008; Schramm 2011). This emphasis on indigenous self-identification does not so much follow out of a preoccupation with purity but rather a historical choice which connects political and biological notions of belonging: “for a long time, our original route has been demonised but we are an odd mixture of a whole range of genetic mixtures and we come from a foundational block that has been so long denied that now we are returning to that which was rejected“ (Khoisan, interview, 19.01.2012). Similarly to the carefully chosen embrace of dating techniques in order to corroborate the claim to certain human remains as potential ancestors, many people I spoke to thus employed the findings of population genomics selectively to justify a status as ‘descendant community’ on biological and statistical grounds. And yet there was a striking dissimilarity in the positioning towards the disciplines – whereas population genomics (mainly encountered through media reports and personal involvement in genetic ancestry testing) was largely evaluated positively, physical anthropology and archaeology were often portrayed as tainted, even perverted, disciplines.<sup>25</sup> In public debates and private conversations, non-scientists portrayed research with human remains, no matter its concrete goals, as unethical whereas they did not problematise population genomics in similar ways, but rather saw it as empowering. One could argue, of course, that this was related to the disciplinary past in race typology, but population genetics, too, shares in some of these genealogies.<sup>26</sup> I would therefore argue that it was not so much the practice of racial and/or population classification as such that accounted

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25 This is just a broad trend from my empirical findings in a very specific research setting, it should not be generalised. Critical issues about population genomics largely refer to questions of informed consent, genetic sovereignty and benefit sharing. For an academic critique that explicitly takes up the question of (racial) classification in genomic research cf. Erasmus (2013).

26 Due to a lack of space I cannot elaborate on this point here, but population genetics in Southern Africa was from the beginning closely interlinked with physical anthropology. Post-World War II, typological notions persisted in both fields, at least until the 1970s. This, by the way, was not only the case in South Africa, but can be traced as a global phenomenon during the Cold War; cf. Lipphardt (forthcoming) and Santos/Lindee/de Souza (2014).

for this difference in perception, but rather the distinct understandings of ancestry – and consequently of descent – that were promoted or allowed by these disciplines. In conclusion, I explore this connection through the troubles of descent.

### **Conclusion: the troubles of descent, or connecting the living and the dead**

Contemporary physical anthropology and archaeology establish ancestry through the dead. Linkages to the living in form of population affinities are not prioritised, and, given the burden of the typological heritage, I would even say they are even discouraged. The physical anthropologists I spoke with and other scientific practitioners who were working with and on human remains clearly stated that race (which they understood as an outdated tool to describe human variation) was not an issue for them: “I don’t do race” or “Race is not a meaningful category for our work” were often repeated and, I would emphasise, genuine statements. And yet, this clearly gestured distance from the practices and ideological direction of the race science of old did not dissolve the intricacies of race that they encountered in reaction to their work. This, I would argue, was *not* simply due to a profound misunderstanding between physical anthropologists and their critics over the presence vs. absence of race in their scientific practice. Rather, the race trouble was connected to the complexity of classificatory violence that interlinked the materiality of indigenous human remains in scientific collections, the memory of colonial genocidal violence, the disturbing consequences of the apartheid regime for group identification and individual lives and the new challenges of post-apartheid legislation. As I have shown, the active claim to the dead (i.e. human remains) as ancestors helps to constitute descendant communities in the present.

Similarly, the selective embrace of population genomics also needs to be understood in relation to classificatory violence. As a discipline, population genomics is part and parcel of the same constellation that I describe as race trouble above.<sup>27</sup> However, the fact that genetic ancestry testing in particular infers relatedness – and therefore also descent – through the living makes a qualitative difference with regard to its interpretation in the contested terrain of belonging. As one of my interlocutors commented on the L0d result of his own maternal genetic ancestry testing:

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27 In my larger book project I pay more attention to the sampling strategies and conceptual genealogies in population genomics and to the many ways in which race is performed in those practices.

“You know, we have experienced slavery, forced removals, killings, murder, so there is a memory of pain that is vast. And this is a sign of survival, so it links up with identity very strongly. (...) Having grown up saying that you don't have a culture of your own [is a bad thing]. But everyone has forefathers! And depriving people from that is another form of genocide, it's a cultural genocide. So having that biological connection also emphasises a relatedness” (interview, 16.11.2011).

This embodied and symbolic sense of survival is very much in support of current demands for political recognition because it promises direct connectivity to an ancestral past, which is otherwise commemorated through the dead and their remains. As I have shown, however, this relationship is by no means straightforward, but takes many twists and turns. Descendent communities, for that matter, are not pre-given entities, but rather brought about as relational articulations of biological, material-symbolic and political elements. In a similar way, we cannot refer to race as something that we already know in advance, or as corresponding in a one-to-one fashion to a certain scientific practice (of classifying populations or measuring bones, for example). In order to understand its persistence, we need to expand our view beyond the lab and take the troubles of descent and belonging into account.

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### **Zusammenfassung**

In diesem Aufsatz geht es um die Frage, wie sich Rasse als komplexe Wissensformation und politische Realität ethnographisch beschreiben lässt. Dabei fokussiere ich auf Südafrika, das historisch wie gegenwärtig eine besondere Position in globalen wissenschaftlichen Debatten um Rasse und den menschlichen Ursprung einnimmt. Paläoanthropologie, physische Anthropologie und Genetik widmeten sich schon im frühen 20. Jahrhundert der Untersuchung indigener Bevölkerungsgruppen, um damit allgemeine Aussagen zur Menschheitsevolution und zur biologischen Differenzierung (und Hierarchisierung) zwischen verschiedenen Gruppen treffen zu können. Diese Wissensgenealogien wirken in gegenwärtigen Forschungen in vielfältiger Weise nach. Zugleich ist Südafrika geprägt von der bürokratischen und „kulturell“ definierten Rasseklassifikation der Apartheid, die auf Commonsense-Kategorien von Rasse basierte und diese nachhaltig zementierte. Diese „kulturellen“ und „biologischen“ Klassifikationspraktiken sind nicht deckungsgleich, aber eng miteinander verflochten. In der Postapartheid-Gesellschaft reicht der Verweis auf die soziale Konstruktion von Rasse als biologische Fiktion demnach nicht aus, um ihre anhaltende politische und epistemologische Wirkmächtigkeit zu unterwandern. Vielmehr gilt es, Rasse als vielschichtiges Phänomen im Kern zu problematisieren. Dabei betrachte ich das Verhältnis von Wissensobjekten (menschliche Überreste, Abformungen und DNA), klassifikatorischer Gewalt und Erinnerungspolitik, durch das verschiedene AkteurInnen Herkunftsansprüche und politische Zugehörigkeit im gegenwärtigen Südafrika artikulieren.

### **Biographical Note**

Dr. Katharina Schramm is Senior Lecturer for Social Anthropology at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. She has published widely on race and identity politics. Currently, she is working on a manuscript “Race/Trouble: Classificatory Violence, Genealogies of Knowledge and the Sciences of Human Origins in Post-Apartheid South Africa”.

### **Biographische Notiz**

Dr. Katharina Schramm ist Ethnologin und wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am Seminar für Ethnologie der MLU Halle-Wittenberg. Sie hat zahlreiche Veröffentlichungen über Rasse und Identitätspolitik vorgelegt. Gegenwärtig arbeitet sie an einem Manuskript “Race/Trouble: Classificatory Violence, Genealogies of Knowledge and the Sciences of Human Origins in Post-Apartheid South Africa”.

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Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology  
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Vienna  
Rathausstraße 19/9, 1010 - Vienna, Austria  
Tel: +43-1-4277-49565

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[tatjana.thelen@univie.ac.at](mailto:tatjana.thelen@univie.ac.at) [evangelos.karagiannis@univie.ac.at](mailto:evangelos.karagiannis@univie.ac.at)

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