V1 Chapter 1 Sidebar

From the Multiregional to the Out of Africa Model of Human Evolution

When your authors were going to college and taking anthropology classes, way back in the 1980s, we learned about human evolution. More specifically, we learned about the multiregional model of human evolution. This perspective, based upon the best available evidence and tools on the subject at the time, argued that while the early stages of human evolution all took place in Africa, once *Homo erectus* appeared, the process became much more global. More specifically, it argued that once *Homo erectus* migrated out of Africa, most human evolution proceeded more or less separately among populations in Africa, Europe, and Asia (though some anthropologists and evolutionary biologists argued that another branch moved into Australia). The corollary of the multiregional model was that the modern physical differences between human populations, what we generally call "race" was the result of more than 1.5 million years of parallel, yet largely separate, evolution. One might think of this as a "deep race" model of evolution.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, a host of new evidence became available regarding human evolution. Some of this evidence was physical, such as the discovery of *Homo sapiens idaltu*, the oldest known "modern" human remains, in Ethiopia. Other evidence was material, such as the evidence from Blombos Cave in South Africa. But perhaps the most disruptive evidence was genetic. This new genetic evidence, based on our ability to map the entire human genome, pointed to a separation of human populations not over a million years ago, but perhaps only 80,000 to 100,000 years ago. As a result of this evidence, anthropologists were forced to rethink their entire model of human evolution. If all modern humans were descended

predominantly from modern humans who appeared in Africa perhaps 200,000 years ago and who did not venture out of the continent until roughly 100,000 to 80,000 years ago, then the genetic differences we call race are significantly more recent, and hence more shallow, than we once had thought.

This transformation in our understanding of human evolution is truly remarkable. In less than two decades, new evidence demanded a significant reappraisal and reconfiguration of our understanding of our own history. There was significant debate along the way, but in the end, the vast majority of scholars accepted the growing body of evidence and embraced a new "shallow race" model of modern human evolution. And what's more, the discovery of traces of Neanderthal and Denisovan DNA in many modern human populations continues to force us to adapt our models of human migration and evolution as we uncover ever more ways to understand the past. That is, after all, how science works. Similarly, even as we move ever further away from the past in terms of time, our ability to reconstruct that past improves, bringing that distant past into ever closer focus. And that is, after all, how history works.