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ByLuciana Parisi

Although its evolutionary theories were by no means unanimously accepted, Elaine Morgan's 1982 book *The Aquatic Ape* caused something of a perceptual seismic shift and formed the perfect companion to her 1972 feminist classic *The Descent of Woman*. Luciana Parisi suggests our cyberspace surrounds make Morgan's number due to come up again.

As all good cultural anthropologists know, Y2K is a time bomb which decrypts the computer calendar's digital codes, disrupts the linear counting of the Gregorian clock and sets time back to zero. More than a regression in the history of civilisation, this cipher marks the cybernetic rewinding of evolution and, in doing so, drags the first woman Eve down into the digital sea.

In contrast to the tempo of the long-accepted story of gradual evolution, adaptation and sexual selection, this time bomb ticks far too fast for the Time-Chains of the civilised Monkey to survive. Zeros and ones unleash an unnatural devastation upon the *Descent of Man* comparable to the aquatic traumas of the African ape when it was forced to move from the jungle to the sea during the obscure bio-geological period of heat and dryness known as the Pliocene.

Continental drift, infernal droughts, the impact of comets and the flooding of plains have repeatedly looped mammals back into the waters and triggered serious somatic mutations. Expounding this theory, Elaine Morgan's *The Aquatic Ape* (1982) and, earlier, *The Descent of Woman* (1972) challenged conventional evolutionary wisdoms built on the figure of the terrestrial savannah ape. In Morgan's history, the primordial cave of Man Hunter gives way to the salty aquatic space around the Danakil Island in Africa, where quadruped apes living near the coast were forced to migrate into the waters.

For 12 millions years, the Pliocene saw the continent's forests dry up: starting from Central Africa, the drought rapidly forced mammals to immerse themselves in the sea. This sudden change generated the unnatural scars of the Aquatic African ape who walked into the sea on two legs, vertically aligned her spine in order to breathe, lost her body hair and acquired webbed digits to swim more smoothly. Morgan's evolution shows how the new aquatic habitat disentangled eroticism from reproduction (by disconnecting it forever from the uterus and substituting a rear approach to sex with an aquatic ventro-ventral proximity) and, through the water's 'three dimensionality', made the movement of her spine more fluid. As Morgan explains, these were swift and unnatural changes which forced the line of hominid terrestrial evolution to deviate forever.

When the African continent was engulfed by the sea, she says, our aquatic ancestor crossed the narrow gap from Africa to the Eurasian land mass. The diasporic circumnavigations of the globe are not an invention of *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, the evolved, wise monkey. Described by Morgan as a rapid succession of evolutionary shocks, the aquatic experiences of the middle passage are, in effect, programmed into our bodies as memory.

Samuel Butler, the infamous author of *Erwhon* (1872), already acknowledged race memory. He believed that "an instinct can evolve as if memory were inherited". Tapping into the zeroed matrix of the aquatic continuum - the cybernetic U turn from the waters to digital waves - mnemonic marine tactics short-circuit the evolutionary ladder of Eve, the reproductive wife of the terrestrial ape and plug the webbed digits of the aquatic ape into cyberspace. Our ancestor knew about swimming long before she met any hunter. If surfing has become the default motion capture of cyberspace, it is because she learnt to surf marine tides long before she learnt to eat meat.

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More at the Aquatic Ape Theory page maintained by Dewi Morgan, Elaine Morgan's grandson:
[<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/5168/aat.html>]