

Review Essay: RACE: Are We So Different?

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“RACE: Are We So Different?” is a traveling exhibition project of the American Anthropological Association and the Science Museum of Minnesota.

Created by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM), the exhibit “RACE: Are We So Different?” marks a significant intervention into the social and political life of a local American community on matters of race. It makes a powerful statement about the origin of race ideas, and their impact upon American society, past and present. At the same time, the exhibit asks individuals to reflect critically upon some of their most fundamental and cherished beliefs. The notice paid to race issues nationally has been sporadic at best, occurring, for example, as an after-effect of racially prejudicial remarks made by a political or media personage, vanishing almost as soon as it surfaces. The difficulty in sustaining conversations about race in the American public square is a notorious fact. Classrooms, church meetings, and family discussions (a few of the rare places in which a critical awareness is often cultivated) are *dispersed* venues. Until the race exhibit came to town (opening in St. Paul, Minnesota, in January 2007), there never was a central, public gathering place, geographically at the pivot of a metropolitan region, focused exclusively upon race and race prejudice. If an interest in race has faltered nationally, the exhibit has succeeded in attracting citizens from the hinterland of Minnesota, who rub shoulders with hip urban wayfarers, alongside vibrant flocks of middle and high school students. This pattern of interaction among visitors is likely to be repeated in each city visited by this exhibit in its five-year tour. The AAA has designed the exhibit to serve as a prototype for small-scale, local exchanges nationwide over race by creating a moment for individuals of varied backgrounds to reach out and share ideas and attitudes. In this respect, it is a model for the way in which conversations

concerning race can be engendered, conducted, and maintained.

In addition to serving as a model of and for dialogical interactions over race, the exhibit fulfills a practical educational need. To their credit, the designers have subtly woven their representations of race issues into the everyday school routines of middle and advanced high school students. We view the exhibit’s design and presentation of information as an extension of what students ordinarily encounter in their textbooks and other curricular materials. They, however, experience the finished product; the “behind the scenes” give and take of scholars, critics, and educators who made it a reality is hidden from their view. As reviewers, we feel obligated to perform a function similar to that of the educator/critic who offers the best and most honest judgment about the merits of a text, course, etc. The depth achieved by the RACE exhibit demands a critical response of comparable sophistication and expertise. We shall ask whether the exhibit satisfies the goal of the AAA Race Project, “to help individuals of all ages better understand the origins and manifestations of race and racism in everyday life by investigating race and human variation through the framework of science” (“The Story of Race” exhibit handout). We intend to comment on the choices made by the AAA and SMM on how to present a subject like race. We shall try to determine whether the present disciplinary structure of anthropology was a factor in shaping the selection of exhibit offerings, as well as interpretations of their significance for the race question. We present our observations with a view toward furthering the evolution of the RACE exhibit as it moves into a variety of venues, and in the hope that this will be the beginning and not the end of AAA-sponsored exhibits on race.

The Exhibit

“RACE: Are We So Different?” began as a project within the AAA, directed by Principal Investigator



2. Photograph by Wing Young Huie used as the introductory experience for “RACE: Are We So Different?”.

Huie, the visitor hears the voices of the bus’ diverse passengers as they try to articulate the definition of “race” in their own terms. The second introductory section is the video narrative, “‘Race is an Idea’ Theater.” From this point, the visitor can move in many directions, encountering mini-exhibits of text, video, and, in a few instances, artifacts on subjects organized into specific themes. The center of the exhibit is a ring of installations focusing on the history of the idea of race (one of the three primary themes of the exhibit), such as “Creating Race,” “Human (Mis)measure,” “The Invention of Whiteness,” and “Separate and Unequal.” The outer ring of installations is organized into subject areas such as the Census area, the Education area, the Health area, the Wealth and Housing area, and the Geography area. All but the Geography area focus on the second primary theme of the RACE exhibit, “the contemporary experience of race and racism in the United States.” This is certainly the most successful theme in the exhibit, with video segments—particularly the “Living with Race Theater” installation—attracting engrossed audiences clearly moved by the emotional power of the personal interviews. The Geography area, encompassing less than a quarter of the exhibit space, constitutes the third primary theme of the exhibit by presenting “the Science of Human Variation.” This area offers some very successful interactive

installations, including the “Non-concordance Sorting Game” and the “Who’s Talking?” game.

The so-called “Geography area” is critical to the educational goals of the RACE project, yet the Geography area suffers most from the lack of a sequentially structured curator’s narrative. As in the other areas of the exhibit, the installations do not cross-reference each other or speak to the installations in other themes. This missing connection between installations has broad implications for the success of the project’s goals, as we shall see.

Some Implications of the Historical Argument

Before entering the main exhibition space, visitors are confronted by a cacophony of voices that, in a kind of everyman speak, undertake to explain what “race” is all about. But as they enter the history exhibit, they learn that race is a systematic idea with specific properties and a complicated provenance. The setting consists of a run of video images and a narrator who asks what appears to be a simple and direct question. “What is race?” is supposed to serve as a corrective to a mishmash of half-baked and contradictory notions about the meaning and nature of the race idea. But in place of a straightforward response, perhaps a “definition”, the answer traverses the history of the race idea from the 16th century to the present. Despite the scope of the answer, some themes stand out. One is that all race ideas originated during the age of exploration. Another pinpoints their actual source: the originating race idea happened because of contact between Europeans and peoples of the New World. Strange and different, information about their customs, physical appearance, and speech, was passed on to “naturalists and scientists who classified these differences into systems that became the foundation of race as we know it today” (text of the audio from the “‘Race is an Idea’ Theater”). So much for the exhibit’s historical and conceptual “foundation” of the race idea.

It did not come to fruition, according to the exhibit, until early America became a society whose economy was founded upon the enslavement of Africans. In time, it became linked to the economics of the slave trade, but not initially: “when African laborers were forcibly brought to Virginia in 1619, status was defined by wealth and religion, not by physical characteristics such as skin color. But this

would change. Gradually, physical characteristics, primarily skin color made a difference, and land-owners began replacing European laborers with enslaved Africans who were held in permanent bondage." Before long, "a new social structure emerged based primarily on skin color, with those of English ancestry at the top and African slaves and Indians at the bottom." The invention of a color-based hierocracy fueled by the slave trade was the tipping point that enabled the race idea to effloresce. It is, in short, a product of the relation between master and slave.

We wish to comment upon several aspects of the historical argument that strike us as problematic, particularly the assumed connection between the emergence of the race idea and unfolding of a society grounded in a slave economy. To explain their connection, the historical argument emphasizes that it is sequential in nature: a coercive ideology based upon the race idea came on the scene after the slave society became entrenched and operative. The two are independently occurring phenomena, although the historical argument is clear that the latter is necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of the former. It would therefore not be surprising if the viewing public drew the conclusion that the race idea is an "effect" of the slave society. There would be a tendency to believe that the earlier occurring phenomenon was the "cause" and the latter its "effect." But, except for the claim that they are connected, there is not the slightest hint as to how in fact "cause" and "effect" are linked. No attempt is made to specify the intermediate "events" linking them, which is what we would expect in the case of a genuine causal explanation. The absence of such an explanation raises doubts about whether the historical argument is anything more than the expression of an ideological bias.

On the other hand, instead of viewing the slave society and an ideology based upon race as independent and external to one another, we believe that the exhibit could have presented them as dynamically interactive. In other words, the visitor could have been led to consider their relation to be one of mutual encompassment and co-dependence such that each has a shaping influence upon the other while being shaped. Thus, race is not an "effect," but possesses a very different significance and character. It is imbricated in the everyday lives of those regarded as inferior, in the ways they were

perceived and treated. In turn, the slaves' form of life, the physical demands placed upon them, their productivity, fertility, kin relationships, etc., weighted their market value. In this manner, the puzzle concerning the empirical connection between "cause" and "effect" is undercut.

The view that a 16th century conception is the "foundation" of the idea of race past and present is also a matter of concern. There is, as we have seen, more than one foundation: the originating idea rests upon its own economic base. But if there are two foundations, why not a third, or a fourth? A foundationalist approach, at any rate, may provide a sense of systematicity and closure, but at the expense of problems that are intractable. Here is an example of a typical objection: how does one explain the continued existence of the race idea long after the social and economic conditions that caused it to happen have vanished? To explain its remarkable longevity requires believing that the idea has an essential nature, and would therefore remain unperturbed despite shifting sands brought about by time and history. But, conceived in this way, it becomes a metaphysical abstraction rather than a subject of empirical study.

Another problem area involves the reduction of the race idea to a narrow and constricting formula that is supposed to clarify its core meaning. We agree that the master/slave relation was one of several necessary factors responsible for its appearance. But, we do not hold that the former is sufficient to explain the proliferation of different ideas of race. If, for example, we compare a 17th century taxonomist's conception of race as a technical species notion, with that of certain 20th century racists for whom it represented the "destiny" of peoples, we find two strikingly different ideas of race. Does this imply multiple foundations that correspond to distinct varieties of the idea? But in that case, the very idea of a "foundation" is subverted. Or it may be argued that a singular foundation can explain their occurrence. That, however, would be an example of essentialist fiction at its worst.

The foundationalist approach reveals a general orientation reflected in the exhibit's spatial plan and in the way it transmits information about race. A central feature of that approach is the emphasis given to a closed set of underlying features that afford a phenomenon an exclusive identity. The

master/slave relation underlies the meaning of race, but also establishes it as an independent and self-contained entity. All that we can possibly learn about race derives from the master/slave relation that constitutes its essential meaning. That there could be different versions of the idea, and the master/slave relation is one of them, will not seem credible, or at best anomalous. Race is conceived as a monothetic entity whose relationships with other phenomena cannot affect its intrinsic meaning. We do not claim that the exhibit's designers armed themselves beforehand with a ready-made epistemology of the sort just described. On the other hand, the handling of the race idea serves as an instructive metaphor that sheds light upon the detached independence conferred upon individual exhibits. If one believes that race has an exceptional meaning, it will seem judicious to attend to the American experience exclusively, while neglecting the contributions of European racists like Arthur de Gobineau, Richard Wagner, and Stewart Houston Chamberlain. Or that it is reasonable to undertake the deconstruction of the race idea—the avowed purpose of the exhibit—but, remarkably, fail to explore the relation between “race” and “racism,” and, as a consequence, fail to mention the brutality and genocidal murders they helped provoke. Unless each exhibit was considered free-standing and complete in itself, how does one account for the positioning of the deeply poignant narrative segment in which individuals recollect the difference racial attitudes made in their lives, adjacent to Franz Boas' debunking of the polygenesis myth? One can only wonder how a synoptically organized race exhibit in which individual stations achieve exclusivity through presentations of their cross-cutting connections would strike the mind and the heart.

Race and Racism

We were startled to discover the neglect of a topic that seemed to us to be what a race exhibit must be about. Although implied, racism is not mentioned in the short history of the race idea, or referred to explicitly even in demonstrations of the social consequences of race prejudice. Perhaps, this was a practical strategy to demolish the race idea, viewed as the underpinning of racism, in the belief that the latter would also fall. Perhaps the calm, meditative atmosphere instilled by the exhibit

would be disturbed by the finger pointing that often accompanies public interchanges over race. But considering what is at stake, and the horrendous consequences associated with racism, nothing short of directness and candor will do.

How we are to conceive of the relation between race and racism is in fact implied in the exhibit's account of the origin of the race idea. Initially, it grew out of efforts to distinguish between groups based upon physical appearance. In this phase, it referred primarily to differences among “natural” human kinds with no indication of what, culturally and socially, such differences represent. That came later when skin color was used to identify and subjugate the enslaved. “Natural” differences were translated into racial hierarchies that fixed the inferiority of the slaves, culturally and philosophically. Race provided the physical grounds, but conceptualization of a racial hierarchy is a matter of racism and not race. Racism is a cultural expression of fundamental social beliefs and values.

Visitors would have been better served had they been made aware that race is only half of the equation. Racism occupies the other half, and each implies the other. An exclusive emphasis upon race would lead to enumerations of physical characteristics in the absence of a framework that could organize and evaluate them. Racism performs that role, while race selects groups marked for racial defamation. The downplaying of racism may be a consequence of an incorrect understanding of the former's relation to race. It may have been assumed that race was the primary phenomenon, and racism a secondary effect occurring subsequently. But the error in this case is similar to the one made regarding the race idea and its “foundation” as cause and effect that occur independently of one another. Race and racism are not static moments on some imaginary time-scale, but expressions of a disposition to behave toward the racially conceived other, and enveloped in a relationship of reciprocal implication.

Significantly, the physical layout of the content of the exhibit makes it easier for the visitor to forget that the genocidal results of racism have been omitted from the exhibit. The only mention of what happens when a government or population adopts racial thinking, that is, genocide, occurs in “reading cards” housed within storage slots at the edge of the Housing and Wealth area, at the intersection of

“Race Road” and “Privilege Place.” The forced education of Native Americans is discussed in the history installations in the center ring of the exhibit space but the violence and decimation of populations within the United States, not to mention worldwide, is included only in these inconspicuous “reading cards.” This lack of connection between racial thinking and racial violence is all the more ominous when isolated installations can be seen to reinforce the concept the exhibit was explicitly designed to disprove. One reviewer watched an apparently innocent high school student examine the “Piles of Cash” installation in which differential wealth is illustrated by stacks of dollar bills labeled with racial statistics, with “whites” having the tallest pile of bills. This student approached the installation, asked “Where is our stack?” and then rejoiced that “We have the tallest stack of money!” This instance occurred a few feet from the “reading cards” discussing genocidal events such as the Trail of Tears, but these subjects did not have a physical exhibit, only a physically buried text.

The Science of Human Variation

The human physical evidence argues for the rejection of scientific racism. This evidence consists of modern human variability and recent history pertaining to the geographical distribution of humans; the nature of the distribution of alleles and overall genetic diversity in our species; and the physical evidence of morphological variation. This evidence demonstrates that it is impossible to recognize consistent populations, called “races,” based on the distribution of physical or behavioral traits. For different traits, one recognizes different assortments of humans.

The argument that races do not really exist—that boundaries between geographically defined groups are illusory products of historical circumstance—is made effectively enough in this exhibit. The argument that genetic variation in humans does not support, or meet the expectations of, a race-based model for our species is attempted admirably. We found that from the point of view of the already-informed and the already-convinced that the arguments were understandable, but we worry that this complex issue was too simplified to make the point clear to a visitor who does not already “know the answer.” One of us informally inter-

viewed about two dozen high school and college students who visited the exhibit, and found no evidence of this concept getting through to the students. The main exhibit on genetics and human migration, called “Geography” in the exhibit, is spectacular in appearance; it is even aesthetically pleasing as a piece of exhibitry. However, the details of the science that need to be explored to make this concept both clear and convincing are absent. This is precarious in the context of a world in which scientific racism continues to assert its presence through institutions such as the Charles Darwin Institute of Port Huron, Michigan, the Pioneer Fund of New York, J. Phillippe Rushton’s books, and the journal *Intelligence*.

We are concerned that the effect of the exhibit is to reduce visitors’ beliefs and expectations as to how much genetic variation there is between human groups. For the layperson, if there were a lot of variation between groups, it is easy to conclude that races could be real, and race could “matter.” Thus, de-emphasizing or reducing the expectation of how much variation there is between races might be a good method for disproving scientific racism. However, the layperson also lives in a world in which the public and media discourse on science presents them with a complex mix of uncontextualized information, ranging from unique genetic traits (usually diseases) of specific ethnic groups that incorrectly reify races, to the “facts” that humans and chimpanzees are 99.8 percent “the same” genetically but enormously different behaviorally. Therefore, to the exhibit viewer, a reduction of the expectation of variation to even a fraction of one percent still allows the possibility for the visitor to conceive of the behavioral diversity within humanity according to a race-based model. By focusing on the amount of variation rather than the fact that physical “racial” traits are not traits that describe races, are the product of equifinality, or simply cannot be inherited, is lost on the viewer. *Human beings could have far more genetic variation than they do today, and still not be divisible into discrete units called races.*

Most anthropologists had rejected the race concept for many decades before the most indubitable evidence—the proverbial nail in the coffin—was produced by physical anthropologists. Using the best available methods of measurement and a huge worldwide sample, W. W. Howells (1973) demon-

strated the invalidity of the race concept in skeletal materials, proving literally that race is only skin deep, if that. Subsequent work by C. Loring Brace (1969, 1982, 2005) and others has confirmed and sharpened this conclusion. Indeed, the physical evidence of human evolution over the last 100–200 thousand years tells us that (1) human variation is pruned from an ancient, more variable past; (2) human variation is not describable as subspecies (races); and (3) changes in human physical traits over time often occur along ecological lines (everybody gets shorter with the origin of agriculture, or everybody gets darker near the equator, regardless of their ancestry) and not along the lines of genetic populations. If the concept of race were tried in court, this would be the evidence that would convince any jury of its falsity.

This evidence—the physical anthropology of humans—was ignored by this exhibit, with one exception. The exhibit provides a large panel debunking the forensics concept of racial identification of bones as per television’s CSI series and numerous detective novels. This panel on forensics is excellent, in our opinion, and the point that it makes is based on the research that we mention here and feel is so important. But the link to the invalidity of the race concept is lost as the forensics panel and the human variation and genetics components were not physically near each other in the installation, and are not explicitly linked.

We feel that the genetic evidence of modern human variability was emphasized at the cost of the efficacy of the skeletal evidence for disproving the scientific validity of races. The choice to use genetics plays to popular sensibilities but focuses the limited exhibit space delegated to the “Geography” area to the amount of genetic variation rather than the absence of discrete patterning among humans. As is the case, generally, the sociological and epistemological background of anthropologists plays a role in the way the designers’ ideas came to be expressed in the exhibit. We feel that the disciplinary structure of the AAA, with its majority of socio-cultural anthropologists, could have been a factor in the de-emphasis of the physical evidence against scientific racism. This resulted in lessening the impact of the exhibit’s ability to pursue the best evidence against the latter.

Exhibit space decisions evidence this problem. For instance, the “Lived Experience of Race” theme

was treated carefully as numerous, separate installations devoted to individual aspects of the theme (as much as it is possible to separate them). In contrast, the “Science of Human Variation” theme was exhibited in installations that conflated multiple and highly complex processes that are far more unfamiliar to the average museum visitor, and therefore, arguably, worthy of more exhibition space, than the topics in the “Lived Experience” installations. Yet, the “Science of Human Variation” theme receives only one-quarter of the exhibit space. For example, the “African Origins” installation includes a map of the Old World on which colored lights representing different mitochondrial DNA lineages appear to spread from Africa into Eurasia between 200 and 10 thousand years ago. While this presentation of the current consensus on the origins of *Homo sapiens* based on modern mtDNA variability is in itself well done, the importance of the non-coding nature of this mtDNA variability is only mentioned in a small sentence in an installation over 10 feet away, allowing the uninformed visitor heading straight to the map to make the erroneous conclusion that the “African Origins” map is a visual confirmation of the genetic validity of the race concept. We can imagine the visitor faced with the “social creation” argument elsewhere in the exhibit merely citing the “African Origins” map, saying “was Europe not populated by yellow lights while East Asia was populated by mostly green lights? Does not the hard science of the genetic data trump the social construction argument?” The difficulty in exhibiting anything as complex as synchronic, modern genetic variability in the form of diachronic and geographically situated evolutionary scenarios should have been thought out to a greater degree and perhaps given more space.

Community Engagement at Museum Sites Across the Nation

Public engagement is an explicit goal of the exhibit and of the larger AAA Race Project. In addition to its very user-friendly interactive website (<http://www.understandingrace.org/>; accessed May 24, 2008), the “talking circles” within the exhibit promise very positive opportunities for community engagement. Led by exhibit docents, these talking circles occur at regular points throughout the day, so that a good number of visitors can take

part in open discussions of the issues raised by the exhibit and their own personal experiences. One of the present authors participated in several of these events and found them productive. As the talking circles are an integral part of the community focus of the exhibit, we are pleased that they will be seen in the exhibit throughout its five-year national tour.

The itinerary of the exhibit in its five year run, however, makes one wonder to what extent this engagement will have as much of a national impact as originally planned, for the tour is *not* national in any stretch of the word. Having opened in January 2007 in St. Paul, Minnesota, it moved next to Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. The next target cities include Wichita (Kansas), Jersey City (New Jersey), Hartford (Connecticut), Cleveland (Ohio), Cincinnati (Ohio), Philadelphia (Pasadena), Pittsburgh (Pasadena), St. Louis (Missouri), Washington (District of Columbia), Kalamazoo (Michigan), and Boston (Massachusetts). This is, admittedly, an oddly regional tour, with Wichita (Kansas) being the most western as well as most southern city to be visited. The itinerary of the tour, of course, could have been influenced by many exterior factors that were likely beyond the control of the AAA or the SMM. But, as we expect that the RACE exhibit to be only the first of many race-oriented exhibits sponsored and created by the AAA and others, we hope that future exhibits will travel beyond the somewhat limited distribution of the present exhibit.

Conclusion

We applaud this first step of the AAA as a tangible and meaningful foray into the public discussion of race, and we wish to emphasize that the SMM has done an outstanding job—creatively and technically—in building this exhibit. We hope, however, that our critiques can help improve such exhibits in the future. We have argued that the handling of the race idea in the introductory “Race is an Idea’ Theater” provided a simplified and misleading representation of its actual significance. We oppose the view that “race” is an idea in possession of an essential meaning. Instead, we find a broad range of meanings embedded in changing social and political circumstances. One consequence of the heavy-handed essentialist emphasis is the sequestration of exhibits whose manifold relationships with each other should have been

demonstrated. We argued that the force and plausibility of individual exhibits requires demonstrations of their faceted inter-relationships. Another consequence involved the isolated focus upon the American experience with race issues to the exclusion of other societies in which they play a decisive role in shaping social behavior. The sole emphasis upon American issues conveys the false sense that they are exceptional in nature. This had the further consequence of severing the connection between different conceptions of race in America and their European origins and affiliations. We observed that the essentialist turn of the exhibit made it unlikely that the public would have to come to terms with the existence and proliferation of American racisms. The monothetic strategy leads to the false conclusion that “one size fits all,” when, in fact, racisms vary contextually in relation to religion, politics, gender, and class. Finally, we argued that treating racism as a “silent partner” was a major drawback of the exhibit. Race and racism, we observed, are conceptually and practically entwined.

As with the historical and social side of the race issue, the Science of Human Variation objective of the RACE Exhibit was also complicated and reduced in efficacy by the lack of a predetermined pathway through the exhibit space, preventing any curatorial narrative from contextualizing the individual exhibit installations before a visitor was confronted by them. While providing freedom to the visitor's museum experience, this decision had a significant impact on the likelihood that visitors would understand the intended meaning of various pivotal scientific installations, such as the “African Origins” and “Genetic Genealogy” exhibits. We have argued that more emphasis on the inability to divide human variability into consistent assortments of humans, rather than on the amount of human variability, would have left a more incontrovertible message in the minds of visitors without prior education in the subject. The demonstration of the patterning in skeletal variability would have been more efficacious in this regard than the popular—but less straightforward—data of modern human genetic variability.

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