

⋮ Exhibit Review

RACE: Are We So Different?

A Conversation

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In January 2007 *RACE: Are We So Different?* made its world premiere at the Science Museum of Minnesota. This major exhibition, which will tour the country during the next 5-7 years, was created by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in collaboration with the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM).

To discuss the creation of the exhibit, *Museums & Social Issues* brought together Alan Goodman, current president of AAA, a member of the *RACE* project advisory group, and a professor of biological anthropology at Hampshire College with Robert Garfinkle, the exhibit project leader for the *RACE* exhibit at the Science Museum of Minnesota. The conversation is moderated by Juliet Burba, an exhibit developer at the Science Museum of Minnesota.

Juliet: Alan, could you please talk about the initiation of this project?

Alan: The idea was to develop a public education project about the intersections of race, racism, and human biological and genetic variation. We wanted to change the public debates, to get them beyond the simple dichotomy that race is either real or not real—to consider in a more serious fashion the varieties of ways in which race sometimes is real and sometimes isn't.

Collaboration among a diverse group of anthropologists started a decade ago when Yolanda Moses, the head of the AAA project advisory group, was the president of the AAA. Yolanda recognized that anthropologists had lost their public voice around issues of race and racism and she pushed us to try and recapture it. Along with some of the other eventual advisors to the project, including Michael Blakey, Faye Harrison, Robert Hahn and Carol Mukhopadhyay, Yolanda realized that we had achieved a new anthropological synthesis on race. In a phrase, it is that race is no longer a valid scientific way to describe human genetic variation, but race is an idea, a very powerful idea, and one with enduring consequences in, for examples, wealth and health.

So we began looking around for ways to start a public education program. (This, incidentally, is not something that academic associations



Alan Goodman and Robert Garfinkle

typically do! If they do it at all, it is to publicize and educate publics about what their field is all about.) We were encouraged by the Ford Foundation to think about a museum exhibit, and they provided our first major funding.

Juliet: Robert, could you talk about the partnership of the Science Museum with the AAA?

Robert: I believe AAA held a series of exploratory meetings with a number of people in the museum community. One of those meetings included my colleagues Paul Martin and Don Pohlman, and they came back very interested in having the SMM involved. AAA ultimately selected SMM to be the exhibit partner and together we secured funding from the National Science Foundation.

One thing we talked about early on with AAA was that the staff doing the work would be mostly white. SMM is changing but it's still a predominantly white organization, and has been historically. So all of what we've done, and how we've approached this, has been with an awareness that our vision was limited by our whiteness. Of course we're always limited, no matter what topic we're doing, but in this one it was really important to challenge that. We made a commitment to expose these ideas to diverse groups, to seek lots of feedback.



A display illustrating wealth disparities between ethnoracial groups is a popular discussion piece. *Photo courtesy of Science Museum of Minnesota and Terry Gydesen*

I think we did a pretty good job of that, but still, down in the trenches of doing the work day-to-day, there was this obvious challenge that our staff was primarily white.

About six months after we started on the project Joanne Jones-Rizzi joined the team. Joanne is an African-American woman who spent 20-plus years at the Boston Children's Museum developing exhibits, including projects with race or racial themes. So Joanne's involvement was critical and incredibly valuable. It was also tricky, figuring out how to put this all together. Joanne and I talked about this a lot. She didn't want speak for all blacks, or all people of color, and yet she felt she did in some way have to take that position. I listened closely to Joanne because she had a perspective as a black woman we needed to hear, and I had to trust my thinking, too, when it was different from Joanne's.

I think this was my biggest challenge and the most rewarding part of the experience for me. I had to trust my judgments and instincts; at the same time, every decision, I had to say, "Are you reading this right?"

How is your white privilege or experience blinding you?" We talked about it many, many times. This is all tricky territory, which is really the point—we're doing this exhibit, because race is so tricky and confusing and complex, especially for whites. Of course I made mistakes and my racism and ignorance showed plenty of times; that's part of the learning process of undoing racism. But being aware of race and racism, talking about it, I think that's the only way to make it work.

Juliet: Alan, what's it like for you to do this project as a white male?

Alan: I'd been taught in graduate school that race was a scientifically bankrupt concept. After graduate school, I was mostly working with ancient bones and reconstructing the health of long-dead individuals and groups. At a conference in 1992, I got hit over the head with the observation that race not only never died in my field of biological anthropology, but with the advent of genomics, it was a good bet that race was about to become "re-biologized". *The Bell Curve* was published two years later, claiming that racial differences in intelligence were inherent and reaching the second spot on the *New York Times* list of bestselling nonfiction. But what concerned me even more than the clear and obvious scientific racism, was the subtle everyday scientific misuses of race: how race-as-genetics had gone underground and was now creeping back in.



Photo courtesy of Science Museum of Minnesota and Terry Gydesen

Finally, I came to realize that as a “white-ified” individual, I had a role to play. Most of my colleagues that were speaking out against race in biological anthropology, including Michael Blakey and Fatimah Linda Collier Jackson and Janis Hutchinson, another core advisor, were my few African-American colleagues. Following in the footsteps of George Armelagos, my graduate advisor, I was in a privileged position of being able to speak out. It is strange to be “the expert” when I do not know a grain of what my colleagues know. But as a white-ified male, I may be able to reach a predominantly white audience in ways that they can not.

Fortunately, the AAA, although not a diverse organization, was able to put together a group of advisors that are diverse in race, ethnicity and expertise. I have had the great privilege to hear and learn from those who have lived with race in ways I can only imagine.

Juliet: What messages do you think are important to convey?

Alan: First, as a biological anthropologist and scientist, I wanted to get across the message that the idea of race is a ghastly poor fit with the reality of human genetic variation. The second message that I am invested in goes beyond the science and shows how race and racism are real. What is really interesting to me is the juxtaposition of these two messages: the first that race is a poor fit to human genetic variation and the second that the lived realities of race and the consequences of institutional racism are very real.

The exhibit includes a display on accumulated wealth and one, about forty feet away, on the structure of genetic variation. In this “science” display, one sees that race poorly maps onto genetics. But, then you can go over to the “lived experience” display on race and wealth disparities and see that race is very real in terms of accumulated wealth, between Latino, black and white families. I am delighted that these are so close to each other.

Robert: Alan, why did AAA want to do an exhibit? Why the medium of an exhibit?

Alan: Speaking frankly, an exhibit was not the first place that I had thought to go. I have had a fantastic experience working with eighth grade students and their teachers. In general, these students have responded quickly and clearly to the core ideas of the AAA project. Other members of the project advisory group including Carol Mukhopadhyay and Yolanda Moses had similar experiences and interests

in working with K-12 teachers and students. I, therefore, thought that junior high schools might be one of the best places to intervene in understanding what race is and what race isn't.

However, I now think the Ford Foundation officers were absolutely correct to push us in this direction— to start with a museum exhibit and a website, and from the exhibit and website, begin to develop teacher training guides. We may eventually move toward working more with K-12 teachers and even with medical school curriculums. The point is that the exhibit gave us an opportunity to think outside of our undergraduate classrooms.

Robert: So was your intended audience always young people?

Alan: I think that young people are the core audience. Individuals who are in high school and junior high school right now are developing a much more sophisticated, nuanced understanding of race, identities and differences. At the same time, their ideas and worldviews are not as solidified about what race is and isn't. So we're looking to individuals whose ideas and worldviews are still flexible.

So, Robert, I'm going to ask you that question: as a museum developer, someone who has dealt with a wider variety of audiences (not just 18 to 21 year olds, like I have), who do you think the exhibit is for?

Robert: Now, having gone through the process, I think that the people who need this information the most are adults. People like myself, people who grew up in the shadow of the Civil Rights Movement, whose ideas of race are more simple-minded, and more seeped in the Jim Crow legacy of superiority and inferiority—I think we are more confused than younger people. Young adults are often more accepting and matter-of-fact about race; they are also often naïve about race. I'm sure this information will be useful to them, but the conversation in this country about race needs to change more with the generation of forty, fifty and sixty-year-olds more than with twenty-year-olds. And while good information is useful, it's still not as important as being open-minded.

Alan: Do you think that this exhibit will change how forty, fifty, and sixty-year-olds view race?

Robert: I think it can. I think it has that potential. We always had in mind that the endpoint wasn't the visitor's experience *with the exhibit*, but



Students consider how the U.S. Census has counted them and their ancestors. *Photo courtesy of Science Museum of Minnesota and Terry Gydesen*

visitors' experience *with each other*. That's true in all museum exhibits, I think, but we really put an emphasis on conversation in this exhibition, looking for opportunities to foster it. We have a number of feedback stations where you can read visitors' comments, we ask questions, we have lots of seating of different kinds, places for younger kids to hang out while their parents and older siblings visit the exhibit—all of these are meant to encourage conversation as a major motif in the exhibit.

There are a lot of “talking heads” in the exhibition, on video. The pleasant surprise to me so far is that all these “talking heads” are sort of having a conversation with each other. When visitors walk into this space, there's already a conversation going on. It seems to give people license to talk, too, so the conversation level is higher than I thought we'd see. I'd like to say that's how we planned it, but the effect of those videos is mostly a happy accident. It's very rich, the interactions we're seeing in the exhibit so far.

Alan: I sense that there is a contradiction in that the forty, fifty, and sixty-year olds are the generation that has power and makes policy, and it would be very useful to influence how they think about race. This is the generation of individuals that are not just writing our Supreme Court decisions, but are working for the Food and Drug Administration, who are making policies regarding race and medicine, who are putting together census categories, and things of that sort. But I am concerned about their flexibility. They are “invested” in a particular worldview. Can they come to see race differently?

Robert: This probably reflects a difference between a subject-matter expert like you, and an exhibit developer like me. While I think there are gaps in knowledge, I think there are usually bigger gaps in motivation, in attitude. I suspect that in general young people are more motivated, more comfortable talking about race in general, and older people aren't. And if we can change the willingness to talk, that's what the power of exhibits is all about.

And we better involve the older generation, because as you point out, us older folks will still be around running things, making policies and voting for a good long while. So we all need to figure this out together.

Juliet: Robert, what do you imagine the message will be? And what did you initially imagine for the visitor experience?

Robert: I'm thinking back to writing the grant proposal. I remember you [Juliet], Don [Pohlman] and I locking ourselves in that room, after having talked and talked about it with AAA for six months, and still not sure what the exhibit experience was going to be. We had to ask ourselves, “What kind of experiences are people actually going to have in this that aren't just reading copy? What kind of experiences will be engaging and emotionally moving?” For example, interactive experiences turned out to be quite hard to come by, because many that come to mind are essentially interactions that re-create or reify race; categorizing experiences or things like that. Then there were another set of ideas that were experiential in that you try to experience what it's like to be in the other person's shoes, or to test your level of prejudice or ignorance. But in the end, we dropped those too, because we didn't want to put people into the role of being the oppressor or the oppressed. This has been by far the hardest exhibit I've ever developed.

Alan: The tensions I had from the very beginning involve those that one



RACE appeals to young children as well as teenagers and adults. *Photo courtesy of Science Museum of Minnesota and Terry Gydesen.*

always bumps up against in going from academics to more public spheres. I'm used to looking for large causal patterns. As an academic, someone who theorizes for a living, I like figuring out how ideologies about genetic differences have consequences for daily life . . . in the dentist's office, the doctor's office, the pharmacy, in finding and identifying victims of crime. But I'm not so sure that those who do not do this sort of thing all the time can so readily connect the dots.

If you're going to write a popular story about the salience of race, the typical advice is to start with a personal story to hook in the audience. Good advice, right? One of the remarkably surprising things about the exhibit is how much people are sitting down and listening to the videos and personal stories. These pieces are compelling. But what was really difficult was how one looks at these personal stories of race, which are full of idiosyncrasies and fluidities. They are, perhaps, more gut than brain. The academic in me still fears getting lost in the details of the personal and not seeing the overarching patterns.

One of the complexities of race is that it is ingrained, historical,

and cultural, it's broad – people talk about it as a *worldview and a social contract*. But then it's profoundly *personal and fluid*. And so, how do you capture that in an exhibit?

Robert: I think I underestimated how social race is. One of the advisors said in a meeting that Americans have no framework for thinking about things sociologically—we're so committed to rugged individualism that we hardly have a language for social actions. That really resonated with me, because it is hard to write and think and talk about race because it is so socially constructed.

Alan: Robert, you came into a group of anthropologists who were “experts” on race. I'm very impressed with how well you and the exhibit staff came to understand the complexities of race, and those theoretical messages, and your ability to translate without watering down, turning our ideas into something people would want to know about.

Are there key moments when you came to realize something about yourself that might be similar to someone visiting the exhibit?

Robert: I see the development of an exhibit as a translation process from expert to novice. To that end, not having particular expertise in a topic is a good thing, because I want to align myself more closely with visitors than with experts. Exhibit developers tend to be good at translating and at synthesizing ideas.

Through this process I felt, especially early on, that the anthropologists would overestimate what we could do and how much information we could convey. Not just in quantity, but also in depth. We tried to convey to AAA that exhibits are more effective at influencing attitudes than conveying structured information. I think of this exhibit, at its best, as a provocation. You need information to provoke people, but it can't come too fast or thick that people walk away. I suspect that was probably a hard thing for you to hear, and I think it was met at times with the sense that we were being simplistic or aiming too low. But I think what we were looking for were big ideas and memorable points that people could attach to, could grasp enough to then wrestle with. We need to trust visitors and we trust them to synthesize different ideas through the process of experience.

Alan: Working with the AAA must have been difficult. While we had a solid general sense of what we wanted to accomplish, we often disagreed on specifics and how to accomplish what we wanted to. We all see race and racism from our specific locations. For examples,

some individuals wanted a more comparative and global perspective on racial systems. Others wanted more of an introduction to contemporary genomics, and many others to present the materials in different ways. The project was one huge negotiation among experts within the AAA and museum staff, as well as between these two groups.

I'll give one example about the importance of biological determinism, the idea that one's place in society is determined not by institutions but by nature, usually now meaning genetic nature. The ideology of race co-developed and is profoundly intertwined with the more general ideology that the human differences we see, in wealth for example, are determined by one's nature, one's genetics. Some of the core advisors strongly felt that the concept of biological determinism had to be central to the exhibit. If the audience did not get that idea, they could not as fully understand the roots of the ideology of race.

However, the museum developers asked, "Is that the key message?" And when push came to shove biological determinism ended up with a less prominent role in the exhibit. I think it is there and some individuals will make the connections between biological determinism and the ideology of race. Others will not see it. Is that a loss? Yes. Was it a necessary compromise? Probably.

Juliet: Do you think that this exhibit is doing something that academic articles can't do?

Alan: Absolutely! First, as an interactive space, the museum forum differs from anything written, or even a video, that has a script attached to it with a beginning, middle and end. The museum provides a space where you can wander around and make connections in unexpected ways.

Second, there's also a visual experience that you can not get in an article, although perhaps on a video. In the exhibit you can see your own skin color next to other individuals' skin colors. You can take your own blood pressure while you talk about racial discrimination and its effect on heart disease and blood pressure. So, in that way, there are a lot of educational advantages that the museum can bring to the public. It was a lot of fun thinking and working in this new medium.

Robert: I think this linearity that you pointed out is important. Academics and subject matter experts are usually doing lectures and classes and lining up arguments, and making sure what goes first and what

comes after what. We had many discussions where the AAA advisor would say, "Well, this idea, this story should come first in the exhibit." or, "Visitors must see this before they see that." And I'd have to say, "Well, you know, you really can't control people's movements in a traveling exhibit." You can influence people's choices, of course, with good design cues and such, but it's nothing like the linearity of a classroom lecture or a book. Visitors come to exhibits and they vote with their feet, and they'll stay if it's engaging. So that provides a different opportunity than a college or classroom setting.

Juliet: Could you say more about the process of turning theories into museum experiences and how that process works in practice for you? Did this exhibit perhaps provide a stepping stone between academic theorizing and public use and practice?

Alan: While academic anthropologists are educators, we tend to educate a very select audience: fellow academics that by and large share our worldview and base of knowledge and the students that select our classes. There is a lot of self-selection, so our audiences are far from typical. For example, I often talk in class about the critical difference between the idea of race and human genetic variation. And students frequently tell me that this distinction has profoundly influenced their views on race, and I get the sense that they "got it."

They'll approach race and they'll understand the dynamics of race in a much more sophisticated way, and I have a good sense that they'll be real allies and start pushing a new understanding of race that will be good for this country. I think the design team of the museum brought a lot more expertise and a broader perspective on how individuals learn and what people can learn from an exhibit. In collaborating with Robert and other museum professionals, we took a huge leap of faith.

Robert: I think that the collaboration issues and, in fact, the content issues, and the perspective of visitors, in many ways come down to control. Academics are more used to controlling delivery and hopefully outcomes with their audience; as museum developers, we're more comfortable with letting go of that and making the museum visitor a partner in what they discover. But that was very tough on this exhibit. Because a key part of the historical story of race has been about confusion, about misinformation, and with such terrible consequences. So your instinct is to describe things carefully, so there's

no room for misunderstanding by people. But we have to trust people to bring themselves and their prior knowledge into this, even if that prior knowledge is flawed. We tried to balance these two approaches in the exhibit. It was a very delicate line for us all to walk.

Alan: I agree that control of the message was extremely tricky, and for me, it still is. First, as an anthropologist, one knows that experiences of racializing and racism are fluid and specific. Those experiences differ by place and time and are experienced differently depending on a myriad of factors. We want to validate individuals' highly personal, lived experiences: They are real, ethnographically, and for them. Moreover, for learning to take place, they *have* to be taken into account.

But this fluidity of experience then bumps up against the broad sociological sweep and the histories and sciences of race. It is an example of the *emic* and *etic* distinctions, or how to make sense of the world internally and "on the ground" (*emic*), and how one makes sense of the world "scientifically" and theoretically (*etic*). Race is such a great example of that because everybody experiences it; in a sense, everybody is an expert about race, and then here we are, the scientists coming in and saying, "Ah-ha, we have the 'Truth' about what race is and what race isn't."

In the exhibit, we are in some sense still in a tension between whether this is an exhibit about our truth about race versus how much of this is an exhibit in which we air it out, and let individuals talk about race, and have their own personal experiences. How much do we give up control? As an academic, giving up control is a tough lesson. I think I get it enough that you can't control everything. But at the same time, the scientist and the anthropologist in me wants to teach what I've learned. I want to be at the front of the classroom.

Robert: I don't pretend that I don't want to control things, either; I just have different levers. We want to guide people in subtle ways, to follow their instincts. If they are going to ask about sickle cell disease, or ask about forensics, then we better do a component about that. And if they need to hear individuals' stories to think about this, then let's do that. I think we have to both lead and follow visitors.

Alan: The title of the exhibit is the first place where you have to have some faith that simply focusing an exhibit on race will at least be getting individuals talking, and challenging their beliefs. We had intense discussions about whether or not *race* should even be in the title of the

exhibit. Some people might think that RACE—in bold, capital letters and a large font—reifies race, and make race more real in individuals' minds (after all there is an exhibit on race in a science museum) and they will not get the subtleties of how race is both real and *not* real.

Juliet: How might the experience of working on this exhibit inform both of your respective future endeavors?

Robert: This has been an incredible learning experience for me. I had the chance to confront, daily, my own understandings about race, my own racism, to challenge my own lack of awareness about my white privilege. I welcome wrestling with this day-to-day and I'd like to continue that in some fashion. I don't know how that plays out but I would like to involve myself with projects that continue the work around race and anti-racism efforts.

Having done a project with this kind of social significance, that's what I want to keep doing. I think that science museums have, in a way, been discounted by the public, as institutions that are about fun—fun and education—and that's of course great. I love science museums, but I'm proud of what we do as a field, but I do think we can do more. I would like to see the general community look to science museums for work of social significance the way that they look to cultural museums or art museums that do things that are important in some big way.

One thing I'd like to see is that the press begins to cover the work science museums and science centers do with the same critical eye and language that they turn toward other exhibitions on the arts and humanities, because that would improve our practice and the discourse we have with the public.

Alan: I've heard many complaints from students about “multicultural burnout” or “diversity burnout,” stemming from having attended one too many cultural sensitivity session or diversity programs. Well, I also had a small case of what I might call “race burnout.” The point is that it is a privilege in some sense to have burnout. Individuals who have darker skin than I, confront race and racism every moment of every day. In comparison, I've had a very short and circumscribed career.

The exhibit has re-energized me to continue the struggle. We talked about this exhibit being a toehold, to get a little more traction in this debate. The museum exhibit, and especially the responses to it, has given me more optimism. I realize that my strengths still are

as a generalist and theoretician. But I'm more profoundly self-aware about how individuals approach my "expert" knowledge, and I hope I can give individual views more legitimacy as they approach and interact with my "expert knowledge".

Juliet: Do you want to talk about what you hope the exhibit will accomplish?

Alan: I hope the exhibit gets as much public discussion as possible. I hope students come, and I hope they bring their parents who are policy makers, educators, doctors and lawyers. I hope individuals visit multiple times, and they bring their family and their friends, and get a conversation going.

Robert: As I said before, I think of exhibits, at their best, as provocations. I hope that *RACE* provokes all kinds of conversations and that we can go from conversation to action of some kind, something that can create change in the world. Here in Minnesota we've developed programs to go along with the exhibition, one of which is the opportunity for groups to meet together after seeing the exhibit and reflect and debrief on their experience. I hope this can deepen and broaden peoples' experiences of the exhibition. These group conversations were inspired by the Levine Museum of the New South's "Courage Conversations." We're doing a particular form of conversation, called "Talking Circles." These are a key piece for me as to what the exhibit can accomplish. We can host those conversations, and we can be enriched by the exhibition and the chance to reflect on it directly afterward. Those conversations can be held in peoples' homes, but I hope it isn't just a family event. I hope that there is just as much conversation in community settings of different kinds, in faith communities, and community organizations, and corporations.

I think that kind of momentum could make a big difference, and I hope it does.

About the Authors

Alan H. Goodman, Ph.D. is President of the American Anthropological Association and Professor of Biological Anthropology at Hampshire College. Robert Garfinkle is the Director of Special Exhibit Projects at the Science Museum of Minnesota and was the project leader on *RACE Are We So Different?*, a traveling exhibit that opened in January 2007.