ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE RACE PROJECT

by Yolanda T. Mores and Joseph Jones

● Race is a recent human invention;
● Race is about culture, not biology;
● Race and Racism are embedded in our institutions and everyday life.

The exhibit and its website explore three themes:

- The history of the idea of race;
- The science of human variation;
- The experience of living with race and racism.

As described in an earlier AnthroNotes article (Spring 2007) by Margaret Overbey, the website, www.understandingrace.org, includes a virtual tour of the RACE exhibit, videos, historical timelines, activities, and quizzes, as well as scholarly papers. Teachers and families can access further education materials in the website’s resources section. Two teacher’s guides – for middle school

Calipers and hair samples are among the tools scientists used to measure human differences from early to mid-1900s. The calipers belonged to William Montague Cobb, the first African American physical anthropologist. Photo: Mary Margaret Overbey.
and high school teachers – present race and human variation through the integrated lenses of biology, culture, and history. The guides meet national and select state standards for science, biology, social studies, and social science and provide more than 10 lesson plans that address biological and cultural variation, and the experience of living with race and racism. The teacher’s guides include some of the background material and lesson plans published in a related resource for teachers, How Real is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology by Carol Mukhopadhyay, Rosemary Henze, and Yolanda Moses (2007).

Today, the main exhibition continues its national tour to more than twelve cities across the country, including Washington, D.C., where it will open at the National Museum of Natural History on June 18, 2011. Visit http://www.mnh.si.edu/exhibit/race for events at the Natural History Museum. The exhibition closes December 31, 2011 and then continues its national tour through 2014. In addition to the main exhibition, there is a second 5,000 sq. ft. version of the exhibit and a third 1500 sq. ft. version of the exhibit designed so that smaller exhibit spaces around the nation can take advantage of this tremendous resource.

Currently, we are in the process of learning from teachers who have used the project materials whether or not these materials met their expectations, and whether they have changed the way they approach the subject of race in teaching the social sciences, the biological sciences, as well as archaeology. We are seeking additional funding from NSF for this new project.

What has really surprised us in the years since the RACE exhibit began with its award-winning website is the realization that there is such a strong need and desire for a conversation about race in America – well beyond teachers and students. Anthropological materials from the RACE project have, indeed, stirred conversations in museums and in both 9-12 and university and college classrooms. But such discussions have also been generated in rural, suburban, and urban communities; in civil society and social justice groups and organizations; in corporate boardrooms; in arts organizations; in state agencies (for example, the child protection agency of Texas); and in government circles, including local, state and federal governmental organizations and agencies.

Looking Ahead

As the U.S. public confronts the notion that race and racism are more complex, nuanced, and prevalent than many believe, now is the time to ask collectively— as anthropologists and as educators— what are the next steps for a public anthropology of race project? Consider the following:

- Does the integration of concepts such as “global vision” and “social and emotional literacy” into educational standards and frameworks provide an opportunity to promote RACE and anthropology more systematically in schools?
- Since any long-term public education program about RACE must involve a K-12 educational component, how can the AAA partner with K-12 teachers toward this end?
The Race project’s key messages were developed several years ago for a broad public. How can we combine additional ethnographic and other forms of anthropological knowledge to elaborate upon these messages and produce new programming illuminating the dynamics of race and racism? What new research topics and findings should inform this process? How can we best deal with genetics and race?

What greater role can anthropology departments play in developing and implementing RACE programming especially given that the smaller version of the exhibit will likely be seen in university and college venues? Is there a special role for graduate students who comprise the next generation of anthropologists and often assume important teaching responsibilities in introductory-level undergraduate courses?

How can the RACE project be used in efforts to develop, maintain, and perhaps repair relationships between universities and their surrounding communities including local schools?

Among anthropologists, what are the prospects for, and impediments to, the types of intra- and interdisciplinary commitments necessary for addressing today’s and tomorrow’s social problems? For example, is there a broad social justice vision of human difference that can guide RACE and position it as a platform for future public engagement projects?

There are many other important questions and issues to consider, and we must all work together to continue this work. Please send your comments and suggestions to Yolanda Moses at yolanda.moses@ucr.edu and to Joseph Jones at josjones@anthro.umass.edu.

We hope that educators reading this article will look for the exhibit when it comes to their area. (See aaanet.org/race for a schedule.) If you are in the Washington, DC area, the Smithsonian has arranged many public events at several Smithsonian museums. Visit http://www.mnh.si.edu/race for an events listing.

References Cited


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