

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE RACE PROJECT

by Yolanda T. Moses and Joseph Jones



Today seems an auspicious time to forge new ways to teach about Race: what it is, and what it isn't – from a biological, cultural, archaeological and linguistic perspective. With the election of an “African-American” President in 2008, a person whose mother was an American anthropologist and whose father came from Kenya, Barack Obama appears to be forging new ways to be a bi-racial and multi-faceted American, helping many approach the issues surrounding race in new ways.

To help teachers and students begin a fruitful discussion about race, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) undertook a major initiative on race, sponsoring a large exhibition *Race: Are We So Different?* that opened at the Science Museum of Minnesota in January 2007. With generous support from the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation, this exhibition is designed to change the way teachers in middle school and high school teach about race, a subject that Americans, in general, are often reluctant to talk about. In addition, exhibition developers designed a family guide to help parents talk to their children about race: [http://www.understandingrace.org/resources/for\\_families.html](http://www.understandingrace.org/resources/for_families.html). The guide presents activities, stories, and exercises for parents and children to do together as well as offering suggestions for discussions about race.

Through the lenses of science, history, and how race is lived in “everyday life,” project developers provided a platform for discussing one of our society's most complex issues – using the disciplinary lens of anthropology.

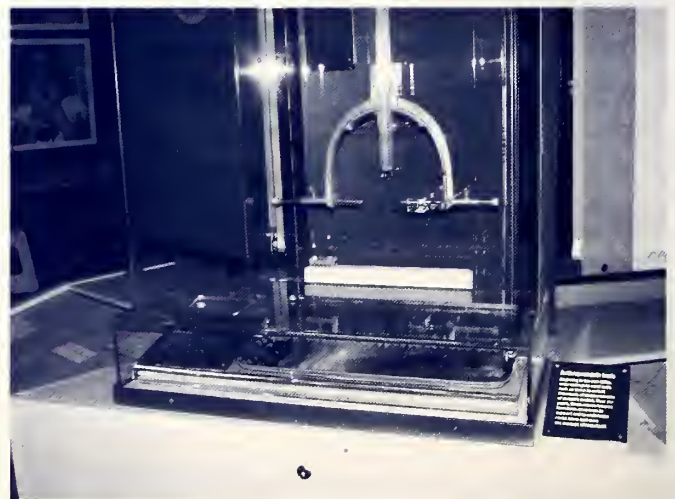
The goal of the *Race: Are We So Different?* Project was to produce a traveling exhibit, a website, and educational materials to convey a comprehensive and integrative story about race and human variation. The story, geared for middle-school students through adults, carries three overall messages:

- 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](http://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;



Piles of money show the wealth disparities that exist among those who identify as White, Asian, African American, and Hispanic/Latino. Photo: Mary Margaret Overbey.

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](mailto:yolanda.moses@ucr.edu) and to Joseph Jones at [josjones@anthro.umass.edu](mailto: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](http://aaanet.org/race) for a schedule.). If you are in the Washington, DC area, the Smithsonian has arranged many public events at



A turn of the century ceremonial vest with American flags stands in contrast to signs illustrating discrimination. The exhibit explores "white" as a racial category. Photo: Mary Margaret Overbey.

several Smithsonian museums. Visit <http://www.mnh.si.edu/race> for an events listing.

### References Cited

- Overbey, Mary Margaret. 2007. *RACE Are We So Different?* A New Public Education Program. *AnthroNotes* (Spring): 15-17.
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