

The Paradox of Race: Lessons from the Smithsonian

by Jeffrey Aaron Snyder – October 07, 2011

A review of the recently opened RACE exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, the most ambitious effort to educate the public about race and racism in a generation. The exhibit provides an opportunity to reflect on how academic scholarship can contribute to important public education initiatives. The author argues that race education should be organized around a central paradox: the fiction of race, the reality of racism.

Race is an illusion. Racism is real. These are two of the main lessons conveyed by *RACE*, a traveling exhibition developed by the American Anthropological Association in collaboration with the Science Museum of Minnesota. Now enjoying its Smithsonian debut, *RACE* has been seen by over 1.5 million people in some twenty museums and science centers across the country.

Overseen by a star-studded twenty-one member Advisory Board, *RACE* presents a cogent synthesis of the cutting edge scholarship about race across the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. Along with its companion website, Understandingrace.org, the *RACE* exhibition is the most significant effort to educate the general public about race and racism in a generation. It is worth examining—in some detail—not only because it encapsulates how we understand race in the twenty-first century but also because it provides a compelling model of how academic scholarship—in this case, race historiography—can inspire and inform a tangible educational program.

The first thing you notice when you walk into the *RACE* exhibit at the Museum of Natural History are the voices: “Race is the color of your skin,” says one. “Race is a combination of culture and ethnicity,” says another. “Race is the biologically determined indicator of genetic background,” says a third. What you are hearing is a recording of different individuals giving their personal opinions on what constitutes race.

These wide-ranging definitions offer a snapshot of the convoluted history of race in the United States. Since the mid-nineteenth century, race has been linked to everything from physical appearance and temperament to language and culture. A dozen different disciplines have helped to define race, including history, anthropology and biology, just to name a few.

That race is a multilayered, multidisciplinary construct is reflected in the division of the Smithsonian exhibit into three different sections. The first section examines “the science of human variation,” with an emphasis on physical anthropology and genetics; the second, informed by social, cultural and intellectual history, presents “the history of the idea of race”; and the third explores “the contemporary experience of race and racism in the United States,” drawing primarily from sociology and ethnography.

Museum visitors who watched MTV in the 1990s will surely remember the morphing faces at the end of Michael Jackson’s video for the song “Black or White.” Teja Arboleda’s *Race-Off* video installation reprises this effect in a subtler manner, with the faces of individuals from different ethno-racial groups slowly and seamlessly morphing into one another. The result is mesmerizing and underscores the difficulty of drawing hard and fast lines to distinguish among whites, blacks, Asians and other conventional racial categories.

The fluidity of race is a constant refrain of the Smithsonian exhibit and one that echoes the findings of many contemporary historians whose work focuses on race (Burkholder, 2011; Hodes, 2006; Holt, 2000; Jacobson, 1998). The mercurial nature of race is strikingly illustrated by a large photograph at the end of the exhibition. It shows present-day students wearing t-shirts that display how the Census would have counted them at different time periods. One young woman’s shirt reads as follows: *1850, Mulatto. 1970, Negro. 2000, African American.*

It is not only racial terminology that has changed over time. Which *groups* have qualified as races has changed dramatically as well. In the 1920s, Hebrews, Anglo-Saxons, Slavs and Celts were widely perceived as separate races. During World War II, however, these different racial groups disappeared into the fold of “Caucasians,” as conversations about race converged around a black-white axis.

The advent of government sponsored anti-discrimination legislation in the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to what David Hollinger (2000) has called the ethno-racial pentagon, comprised of whites, blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics and Asians. More recently there has been a great deal of discussion about the increasing number of multiracial individuals. Indeed the 2000 Census was the first to offer respondents the choice to check more than one category under “race.”

RACE features a dozen or so portraits from the HAPA Project, which depict individuals of “mixed ethnic heritage,” photographed bare from the collarbone up against a stark white background. Accompanying each portrait is a short handwritten statement. “I am 100% Black and 100% Japanese,” says one such inscription, underneath a photograph of a young man with a goatee. “I am part Chinese and part Danish,” a boy has scribbled below his portrait. “I don’t usually tell people I am Danish though, because they think I am a pastry.”

Race has now joined the ranks of grand organizing themes used to explain U.S. history, taking its place next to highly influential frameworks such as liberalism, republicanism and the frontier (Gerstle, 2001; Jacobson; Singh, 2003). “To write about race in American culture is to exclude virtually nothing,” Matthew Frye Jacobson says, summing up the consensus among his colleagues (p. 10). Rather than a surface stain upon the nation, racism is now viewed as central to our nation’s evolution and identity, shaping and describing the limits of our most cherished ideals of freedom, democracy and equality.

The conviction that race is at the heart of the American story is clearly expressed in the historical section of *RACE*. Accompanied by artifacts such as slave shackles and “Whites Only” signs from the Jim Crow era South, four richly informative timelines—“Creating Race,” “Human (Mis)measure,” “Separate and Unequal” and “Inventing Whiteness”—chart the tragic and sordid history of the U.S. race saga. Exclusion is a consistent and unavoidable theme. Slavery is followed by lynching and segregation. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is followed by the xenophobic 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act and then Japanese internment during World War II.

For those visitors who take the time to read the fine print along the timelines, they will learn that a towering edifice of “scientific” racism provided the rationale for a “natural” racial hierarchy—a hierarchy that influenced everything from our beliefs about slavery to our understanding of IQ. To explain an increase in the number of runaway slaves in the early 1850s, physician Samuel Cartwright coined the term “drapetomania,” defining it as a disease that drove slaves mad, compelling them to flee in spite of their “better” instincts. In World War I, meanwhile, intelligence tests administered to Army recruits “proved” that Eastern and Southern Europeans did not have the same mental capacity as Nordics (all whites no matter where they came from scored higher than blacks).

Starting with the publication of David Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness* in 1991, historians have discovered that it is not only people of color that have distinctive racial identities (Goldstein, 2006; Hale, 1998; McElya, 2007). White people have race too! The remarkable outpouring of whiteness literature has addressed two primary concerns—first, how and when did European immigrants (the Irish, Jews and so on) and their children become white? And second, what have been the most important cultural signifiers of whiteness, how have they changed over time and how have they operated to maintain white privilege?

RACE weaves together the immigration and cultural studies strands of whiteness scholarship. “Like other racial categories, ‘white’ was created,” we learn, “[with] boundaries [that] have been built and protected by those in power.” These boundaries were delineated by laws such as the 1790 Naturalization Act, which limited citizenship to “free white persons.” And they were fortified by popular films such as D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan as saviors of civilization and virtue.

“Admit that you have a race” is the first step in the Twelve Step Program for whites created by Damali Ayo and featured at the end of the “Inventing Whiteness” timeline. A quote from Peggy McIntosh reinforces Ayo’s larger point. “As a white person,” McIntosh says, “I realized I had been taught about racism as something that put others at a disadvantage but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.”

RACE broaches the thorny topic of “white privilege” with a series of concrete illustrations. A portrait series of all forty-four presidents provides a simple and powerful demonstration of white—not to mention male—privilege. A station called “Piles of Cash” represents the relative assets of different ethno-racial groups, with grossly unequal stacks of money underlining a striking wealth gap between whites and other groups. The typical African American family has only 10 cents of wealth for every dollar of the average white household. Accompanying this troubling fact is a detailed explanation of discriminatory practices in real estate markets, from “redlining” to inflated interest rates.

The subtitle of the *RACE* exhibit is “Are We So Different?” More fitting would have been “*RACE*: What Difference Does it Make?” The answer is a paradox and one that invites careful scrutiny and further discussion. On the one hand, race has nothing to do with our innate human potential (the exhibit painstakingly debunks any notion of race as rooted in biology). On the other, race has grave consequences, especially with respect to racial disparities in income, education, housing, health and incarceration rates. It is this paradox—this puzzling interplay of shadow and substance—that has animated recent historical scholarship about race. And it is this same paradox that should animate race education.

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