

Race: Are We So Different?

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A Review of the Exhibition at the Science Museum of Minnesota by Brian Horrigan

Race: Are We So Different? is a major traveling exhibition that was inaugurated at the Science Museum of Minnesota in early 2007. Since I was planning on developing an assignment in the exhibition for a college history class I was teaching, I spent a lot of time there, on many different days and at different times. My favorite moment occurred when I was alone in a quiet gallery space, in the moments before the museum officially opened for the day. Someone (or some thing) flipped a switch, and all of the media in the exhibition “turned on” at once. The effect was electrifying, so to speak, a Robert Altman

The space was not empty for long. **Race** was an enormously popular exhibition for the Science Museum—not in the category of blockbusters produced by other entities (such as its 2006 staging of one of the **Body Worlds** iterations) but a significant draw in its own right. (See accompanying report by the Science Museum’s Kirsten M. Ellenbogen on the exhibition and its audiences.)

First, however, a note on origins. Although it probably made little difference to Minnesota visitors, **Race** was not initiated by the Science Museum. Nor was it, like many traveling exhibitions, a project of a consortium of museums or science centers. Rather, it was, in the language of the exhibition’s website, “developed by the American Anthropological Association [AAA] in collaboration with the Science Museum.” The exhibition’s entry panel, declaring its thesis in boldface—“**Race** is a recent human invention”—is in fact “signed” by the AAA. The goal of the AAA was clearly to make more accessible, through the vibrant, interactive, and intensely social medium of the museum exhibition, some of the research and scholarly dialogue about the scientific bases and social construction of race in which many of its members had been engaging in recent decades. As an academic discipline, anthropology was historically the progenitor of some of the more noxious “theories”



A family group gathers around a computer interactive called “Who’s Talking?” about racial identification through voice patterns. Photo courtesy American Anthropological Association and Science Museum of Minnesota.

moment: a chorus of voices and sounds, overlapping and seeming to pick up on each other, a lively roomful of people sharing stories, a public conversation about a particularly live and urgent subject: Race.

of racial identity, and it continues to be where these issues are most fiercely argued, with other disciplines, such as history, law, ethics, and the hard sciences of biology and genetics filling out the academic spectrum and offering further

One exhibition, two museums, two cities, multiple points of view. The two reviews and one visitor study that follow provide a variety of professional and personal perspectives on **RACE: Are We So Different?** This multifaceted review is the first example of what we hope will become a regular feature of **Exhibitionist**. The Editor

weight and context. In a sense, then, *Race* is an exercise in public relations, an effort by the professional arm of an academic discipline to reach a wider public, “to foster dialogue in families and communities around the U.S. and help better relations among us all,” in the final lines of the brief entry panel.

If, at times, the academic pedigree of *Race* seems too evident—overly dense texts on some panels, a confounding computer interactive on the “dynamics of gene flow”—it is for the most part mitigated by the exhibition’s thoughtful layering



Students debate the exhibit about race and the “wealth gap”, represented by stacks of money of varying heights. Photo courtesy American Anthropological Association and Science Museum of Minnesota.

of verbal information, a vivid and engaging graphic palette (the choice and quality of images are particularly fine), and a measured sense of pacing the visitor experience. I can’t say that visitors will not feel overwhelmed—many of my students certainly were—but that’s also not necessarily a negative. It does bear repeat visitation; I know I never saw it all, and I spent more than 13 hours in it over several visits. This 5,000 square foot exhibition is frankly ambitious, packed with ideas and stories and

information. That, of course, can be said about most large exhibitions, but in this case the subject is not only vast and multivalent but it’s also difficult, challenging, controversial—and penetratingly relevant to our daily lives.

Race is organized into three major areas. The first, on the science of human variation, sets forth a series of stories and arguments based on current research in such areas as human

migration, genetic diversity, and forensic anthropology. (And, yes, *CSI* gets a mention here.) In terms of content, this area is the most complex and challenging in the exhibition. Appropriately, the section centers on a vast world map on the floor, because so much of the story here is about the world’s peoples, constantly moving and mixing. “We are all African,” declares a bold header here, which certainly gets your attention. One level down, another text explains:

“The distribution of small genetic differences in humans around the world points to a common origin.” Two more levels of texts and type follow, and adjacent are graphic sidebars and quotes. Panels like this one—and most others, for that matter, in the exhibition—are textbook-perfect examples of how to layer complex information for a wide spectrum of audiences.

The second major area is devoted to exploring the history of race as an idea and the role of



Visitors leave comments about racial and ethnic heritage at artist Kip Fulbeck’s “Hapa Project” exhibit. Photo courtesy American Anthropological Association and Science Museum of Minnesota.



An interactive invites visitors to match faces with other physical traits, such as fingerprints, height, and blood type. Photo courtesy American Anthropological Association and Science Museum of Minnesota.

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science (and pseudo-science) in that history. Here we are in the familiar realm of the classic history museum—timelines, object cases, enlarged quotes, and graphic rails. In the layout at the Science Museum, the four “history stations” were also, appropriately, corralled in the center of the gallery, creating a sheltered Resource Center, with books, videos, and a station to access the project website (www.understandingrace.org).

The final area of the exhibition ranges widely over the contemporary experience of race and racism in the United States, highlighting issues of housing and wealth (a “piles of cash” display representing the average net worth of U.S. families based on race provokes a lot of comment); health and medicine; and schools and education. There’s a compelling detour into the thorny and up-to-the-minute issue of naming sports teams after Indian tribes (“Fighting Sioux”) or derogatory epithets (“Redskins”). Finally there’s a fascinating section on the U.S. Census and its shifting racial categories, along with a computer that invites visitors to vote on how future censuses should gather racial data.

The media environment developed for *Race* is simultaneously balanced and extraordinarily rich and lively. There are more than 15 media presentations in the exhibition, but the designers

have avoided the banal and numbing array-of-monitors approach that transforms museums into flat-screen showrooms. There is seating within partly enclosed spaces for the larger-scaled media pieces—a fine introductory film, an expertly edited collection of stories called *We All Live with Race*, and—my personal favorite—a partly scripted, partly spontaneous film *Where Do You Sit in the Cafeteria?* with teenagers talking about their experiences in that most volatile forum of contemporary race politics, the inner-city American high school. Each of the history stations features a monitor with some excerpts from a 2003 documentary, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, produced by California Newsreel. And there are several lower-tech interactives, such as a microscope for examining your skin color, and a game to match faces with physical traits.

Issues of racial discrimination and identity also inform the work of many contemporary artists, and *Race* features work by several of them. There are photomurals from Minnesota photographer Wing Young Huie’s Lake Street Project, including the image used—brilliantly—as the title panel for the whole exhibition. It shows the interior of a crowded city bus, with a diverse range of faces turned to the camera, subtly reminding us of the seminal racial struggles that have historically taken place in the arena of public transportation. Nearby is *RaceOff*, a transfixing piece of video artistry by Teja Arboleda: three small monitors show faces constantly but almost imperceptibly morphing into other faces with different skin tones and features. There is also a sampling of photographs from artist Kip Fulbeck’s vast “Hapa Project” of individuals with partial Asian-Pacific Islander ancestry (“hapa,” in Hawaiian slang). The spectrum of skin tones,

facial features, and hair is astonishing, and the handwritten comments by the subjects are alternately moving and funny.

None of these art projects feels tacked on or merely decorative. Rather, they are integrated into the intellectual fabric of the exhibition, and even, in a sense, offer “comment” to adjacent scientific or historical exhibits. The “Hapa Project” pictures, for example, gain eloquence in their juxtaposition with panels on human genetic variation. At the same time, the art works tap into the deep strains of feeling that are always just below the surface of so much of the exhibition’s content. That, it seems to me, is what makes *Race* so extraordinary: for all of its erudition and careful presentation of scientific research, facts, and figures, it never loses sight of the emotional dimensions of its subject. The human story, the telling anecdotes, the “a-ha!” moments experienced by real people in real time—these are the ways the exhibition pulls you in, again and again. *Race: Are We So Different?* is booked well into 2011 at science centers, African American history museums, and natural history museums throughout the United States. In other words, it’s coming to a museum near you. It’s not to be missed.

A Review of the Exhibition Race: Are We So Different? by Ida B. Tomlin

RACE: *Are We So Different?* appeared at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American Museum (MAAH) in Detroit, Michigan from May 24 through September 4, 2007. The *Race* exhibition is a wonderful presentation that challenges visitors to think and talk about race and racism. The exhibition “brings together the everyday experience of

living with race, its history as an idea, the role of science in that history, and the findings of contemporary science that are challenging its foundations.” (AAAnet, 2007).

The 5,000 square foot exhibition features three main exhibit areas that focus on **Science, History** and personal **Experiences**. “The three sections are interwoven and tell a compelling story of science with deep and lasting social impact.” (MAAH, 2007) In the **Science** section, visitors are presented with information regarding human variation, molecular structure, genetics, skin color, health issues and a quiz to test one’s own knowledge and prejudices regarding race. In the section on **History** visitors are able to see how race and people’s views on race could have been shaped by different historically important events, especially in this country after the introduction of slavery. The **Experiences** area contains many hands-on exhibits that help visitors explore personal experiences of race in school, neighborhoods, healthcare systems, sports, and the entertainment industry. In this area, the visitor can take several quizzes and “play the game of life” by taking a sports quiz, looking at race globally, answering the question “Who am I” and exploring the standards of “beauty” imposed on today’s black girls.

The fact that the *Race* exhibition kicked off its national tour (after its debut at the Science Museum of Minnesota) at MAAH is significant. Of the thirteen museums to host the exhibition, the MAAH is the only African American Museum to do so; the other museum hosts are science, history, or natural history museums. In an article in the *Michigan Chronicle*, Juanita Moore, president and CEO of MAAH stated “This exhibit is very significant to the museum and to the community. I think that particularly

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at this point in time it is important to have conversations from different perspectives that there is no scientific basis for race. We need to understand the impact of race in this country.”(2007).

When I first saw the exhibition I was struck by the general interest of visitors. I visited the exhibition during its preview which included a reception for donors and contributors. All visitors were captivated by the information presented. Albeit a lot of reading for most museum-goers that evening, it held the attention of most of the viewers. Some visitors seemed to be a little confused as to how to progress from one exhibit to another, but by and large they seemed to find their way and to really enjoy the exhibits. Representatives of the local sponsors of the exhibition (the DaimlerChrysler Corporation Fund, the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, to name a few) were very excited about the exhibition and proud to be able to present it to the people of Detroit and the surrounding communities.

The *Race* exhibition in Detroit has served as a catalyst for conversations about race in many different forms. Throughout the summer the museum presented open forums, workshops for adults and children, and poetry readings to allow visitors, members, and others to express their opinions about the effect of the exhibition on their lives and artistic expression. Conversation Peace was presented by MAAH, the Detroit Free Press and the State of Michigan Department of Civil Rights. This series, which took place throughout the summer, provided an opportunity for participants to discuss and explore issues surrounding race. What’s the Word? Poetry Series and

Competition provided an opportunity for local and national performance poets to come together on Thursdays during the summer to explore creative thoughts on race. The museum partnered with Urban Organic, the Motown Literary Network, local and national poets and local poetry outlets. The MAAH even held Race Workshops for Children. Through art, storytelling and songs that celebrate diversity, children in grades pre-K through 4th grade could learn about how each of us is unique as well as similar.

I had the opportunity to attend one of the Community Forums on Race at the MAAH this summer. My interest was twofold: To participate in the forum and offer my perspective as an African American woman who grew up in the South during the Civil Rights era; and, to gain some additional insight into the opinions of Detroiters and others in southeastern Michigan regarding the *Race* exhibition. The Community Forum was held on August 28, 2007 and led by trained facilitators. The MAAH was asked to serve as an educational model for the exhibition tour and so was the site of one of the many community forums to be held throughout the country on the subject of race.

Participants gave an overview of their impressions of the *Race* exhibition and race in general. Some responses included the following:

- Race gives people a sense of entitlement.
- Racism is different in the United States than in most other countries. This probably stems from the unique type of slavery we experienced in this country.
- We have to look at race from a multicultural standpoint and in terms of age associations.
- There is a distinct intersection between

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race, wealth and power.

- Racism is a learned behavior.
- Group economics and politics determine the wealth of whites; “we” [blacks] practice rugged individualism.

Much of the discussion that ensued centered more on racism than just race. It was clear that the participants, who were all African American, had strong opinions about what it means to be black in America and how that affects every facet of our lives.

The facilitators also asked: What is an important message to get across? How do we feel about race or racism? Some of the participants also wanted this question answered: What outcome is expected from the exhibition producers? Basically, the facilitators indicated that what was expected is that dialogue would begin and continue on three main topics:

- 1) visitors to the exhibition would have a different way of looking at race.
- 2) visitors could begin to learn where race comes from.
- 3) visitors and others could pursue the answer to the question “Where do we go from here?”

Facilitators also asked for feedback on ways in which dialogue could be continued. One suggestion was to develop an outreach van that would take the exhibition or some of the exhibits to schools, community groups, libraries, etc. They felt this type of outreach could be a form of “mobile marketing.” In addition, the use of the exhibition website and other computer technologies could be used. It was interesting to note that feedback from participants in terms of “physical” outreach vs. technological outreach was markedly

different based on factors such as age and sociological background. Another suggestion included training and teaching mentors about the history of race and racism so that they could provide training to young people (children, students, etc.).

To wrap up the discussion on race, participants were asked to answer the question “What’s next?” after the exhibition leaves Detroit. Here are some of the suggestions:

- Develop DVD’s or audio tapes that visitors can take with them.
- Put a facilitator or two in the exhibition. It was strongly felt that this would help visitors and families to get the most out of the exhibition.
- Develop smaller exhibits that could be shown in shopping malls and convention centers.
- Create more and clearer marketing of the exhibition so that all people in southeastern Michigan, the state of Michigan and the region can participate and learn from the exhibition.

As a Science Museum professional, I was struck by the amount of scientific research featured in the *Race* exhibition. The Science section does a great job in presenting the empirical evidence for what makes human beings alike or different. It is a little ironic that the run of the traveling exhibition *Our Body: The Universe Within* at the Detroit Science Center (DSC) coincides with *Race: Are We So Different?* By the way, the DSC and the MAAH are physically located next door to one another in Detroit’s cultural district. In *Our Body: The Universe Within* “the exhibition literally, as well as figuratively, goes ‘under the skin,’ exposing the intricacy of the human body and allowing the

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general public a look at what only doctors and scientists normally are allowed to see first-hand.”(DSC, 2007) The **Our Body** exhibition shows us that we are basically all the same under the skin. In a more comprehensive way, the **Race** exhibition demonstrates that not only is there no scientific basis for race because we are all basically the same; it is mores, values, environment and culture generally which shape our views and opinions about race.

I am thankful that the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American Museum brought the **Race** exhibition to Detroit. I think it was a wonderful showcase of the scientific, historical, and sociological impact of race on all of us. Will its impact be life-changing...probably not; but, I believe the exhibition will serve to educate a few more people all over the country about what race is and isn't. This little extra knowledge can't help but make us all better human beings.

Talking about Race: Evaluation of the Talking Circle program at the Science Museum of Minnesota by Kirsten M. Ellenbogen and Murphy Pizza

The Science Museum of Minnesota's Talking Circle program was designed to allow participants to speak and listen in a safe and respectful setting. The process was developed by the Minnesota Department of Corrections and taken from Native American traditions. It has been used widely in restorative justice programs, which emphasize repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal behavior. The Talking Circle is a communication process where everyone is respected, listened to,

and can participate. Members sit in a circle, and a keeper or facilitator opens the circle, welcomes everyone, and passes a talking piece. The person who has the talking piece gets to speak, hold it in silence, or pass it on. Everyone else gets to listen. The talking piece is passed through the circle one by one, which minimizes opportunities for confrontation. SMM's Talking Circles followed a few simple principles:

1. **Focus & Orientation:** The circle discussion focused on the exhibition **Race: Are We So Different?** Participants were asked to go through the exhibition before the circle and encouraged to spend at least an hour there. Groups who did not have a full hour for exploring the exhibition were advised to split up and assign members to different exhibit components.
2. **Integration into Group Practice:** The Talking Circles were offered to groups in a private room as an opportunity to share and hear from others, build community, and talk through some sensitive topics. The circle was presented as a way of continuing the learning experience of the exhibition. Groups were encouraged to use the process in their future activities.
3. **Safe Place:** The Talking Circles were not like everyday conversation or group therapy. In conversation or therapy, some voices can dominate. In a circle, each voice is equal. Everyone listens and reflects. It is a safe place.

Program staffing drew upon an existing network of Circle Keepers in the Twin Cities, and included additional training for a total of 60 who worked on a contractual basis. The Circle Keepers had strong background

experience and training, yet in surveys, three quarters of them reflected that they had a circle at SMM that had challenged their skills as a Circle Keeper.

The Talking Circle programs generally lasted two hours (45 minutes for school groups because of school constraints). Over the course of the exhibition's run at SMM, there were about 300 Talking Circles with more than four thousand participants. A little less than a third were adult groups and 66% were student circles.

Adult circle composition was mostly colleges or educational groups, followed by government agencies, businesses and corporate groups, and a mix of private nonprofit organizations. For example, the Ramsey County Community Human Services department responded to the exhibit as a professional development opportunity for employees who work with families, children, and adults. The county joined the Great Partners program, a barter program in which agencies recruit families to acquire the GREAT TIX discount card to the museum in exchange for free museum vouchers to be used by the agency as it determines. One of the Ramsey County Supervisors explained the organizational commitment:

Our Directors bought tickets for all supervisors and managers throughout Community Human Services to attend the **Race** exhibition. We attended in groups of about 20, then held our own Talking Circle... In total, over 100 leaders attended the exhibit as part of our agency's Anti-Racism Initiative. (Ramsey County has declared itself an Anti-Racist organization.) To do this we have charted out a 25-year plan that

includes staff development and partnering with the community we serve. Besides the directors buying around 100 tickets, they also approved training and development dollars so that nearly all the 1000 people that make up community human services could attend the exhibit.

Post-program Talking Circle surveys were collected from 631 participants representing 39 different organizations (some organizations had multiple Talking Circles). Because this was a self-administered survey, some participants did not complete every question.

A review of all of the Talking Circle data quickly revealed ethnicity trends. Talking

Table 1: Self-identified Ethnicity		
Ethnicity	2006-2007 SMM Lobby Survey (n=405)	Talking Circles (n=579)
White	91%	72%
African American	2%	12%
Hispanic	2%	3%
South Asian	<1%	1%
Asian	2%	4%
Native American	1%	1%
Mixed/Other	3%	7%

Circle data were compared to an exit survey of the **Race** exhibition, as well as a lobby survey conducted in 2006-2007. The Race exhibition exit survey indicated a 20% increase in visitors identifying themselves as non-white. Talking Circle participation was even more diverse. Demographic data from Talking Circle participants were compared to visitor demographic data collected in the museum

lobby from June 2006 through January 2007 (this includes visitors who came to see the special exhibition, *Body Worlds*). Participants in the Talking Circles were significantly less likely to be White. For the Talking Circles, the difference in demographics was spread among the other ethnicities.

The survey included a variety of questions about the Talking Circle experience. Visitors were asked what was most memorable about the Talking Circle. Participants' responses were coded into themes as illustrated in the

previously had been in a situation where race was discussed openly. Participants were also asked to rate their comfort in talking about race before and after the Talking Circle. More than half rated their pre-program comfort level at a seven or higher. Despite this high, pre-existing level of comfort, everyone reported an increase in comfort level after the Talking Circle.

Participants were also asked to rate their group's comfort talking about race before and after the program. As with individual comfort, all ratings were higher after the Talking Circles.

Table 2: Memorable Program Characteristics	
Most Memorable About Talking Circles (n=518)	Percent of Participants
Listening to others	45%
Open and honest environment	13%
Discussion and sharing as a group	18%
Building relationships/Understanding others	5%
Self-reflection and awareness	4%
Sharing their own experience	3%
Thought provoking questions	3%
Other	8%
Didn't know what was most memorable	1%

table below. Almost half of the participants (45%) said that listening to others was the most memorable part of their experience. Talking Circle participants were asked to think about their previous experiences talking about race. Most participants (92%) said they

Interestingly, all participants tended to rate their group's comfort with talking about race lower than their own comfort. Participants were also asked how they thought their group would change after the Talking Circle experience. There was a significant range of

Table 3: Group Change

How the Group Will Change (n=478)	Percent of Visitors
More frequent/More open conversations	29%
Understanding others better	16%
Become closer/unified/united	15%
More accepting/ tolerant/ respectful/ comfortable with others	10%
More generally aware	6%
Won't change	5%
Awareness of/less tolerance of racism	4%
Self-reflecting/Awareness	3%
Other	9%
Don't know/not sure	13%

For More:
See The little book of circle processes: a new/old approach to peacemaking. (Pranis, K 2005). Published by *Good Books* as part of its Little books of justice and peacebuilding series.

responses, but almost a third of the participants mentioned a change of “more frequent or more open conversations.” Almost all participants said that they would recommend the Talking Circle to other people coming to see the Race exhibitions. Fully three quarters of the participants reported that they would use the Talking Circle process in the future.

Talking Circles were not limited to public programming. Staff was introduced to the format for discussion before the exhibition opened. SMM used Talking Circles as a professional development technique, offering a series of nine circles that were open to all paid and unpaid staff. More than 50 paid and unpaid staff took part in these circles. Although this does not represent a significant proportion of the museum staff, those who did take advantage of the Talking Circles spoke positively of their experience. This model of staff professional development will consequently be used in new initiatives dealing with Science and Society, led by Robert Garfinkle and Peoples and Cultures, led by Joanne Jones-Rizzi. ☀

Authors' Note: This article draws upon the expertise of the following project leaders: Joanne Jones-Rizzi, Paul Mohrbacher (who directed programming), and Alice Lynch (Talking Circle Coordinator), who was assisted by Sarah Martyn. Additional program evaluation was conducted by Barb Rose, Side by Side Associates, and the exhibition formative and summative evaluation was conducted by Randi Korn and Associates.
