



Carleton Stevens Coon and The Legacies of Scientific Racism in Anthropology

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Methods

The goal of this project is to create a mini-documentary. The documentary is part of a larger project, led by Dr. Deborah Thomas, which attempts to begin to decolonize the anthropology department at the University of Pennsylvania. The focus of the documentary is trilateral: on the history of the discipline of anthropology in the United States during the latter half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th; on the role of the University of Pennsylvania in perpetuating older legacies of anthropology; and on the controversial figure employed by the University of Pennsylvania- a Dr. Carleton Coon (pictured to the bottom right).

This project was multi-tiered, and was commissioned to two undergraduate students. The steps undergone by the team were as follows:

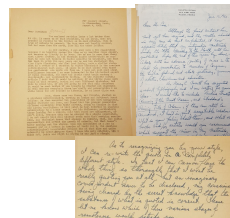
1. Attending a Summer Class
2. Conducting Archival Research
3. Conducting Interviews
4. Reviewing Data
5. Writing Storyline
6. Editing Film- Construction
7. Post-Editing Film- Details



Findings

Carleton Coon claimed throughout his life that he was merely an academic- that he was completely neutral on the political front, and that a scientist has no responsibility to confront misquotations of his or her work by external parties.

However, against his public statements, Coon privately sent support to known segregationist Carleton Putnam (who was also his cousin), in the form of scientific evidence to back Putnam's claims for the inferiority of people of African descent. To the right are excerpts of the correspondence between the two, which lasted some decades:



A History of Race Science at the University of Pennsylvania

Racial science in the 19th and 20th centuries found its core in Philadelphia. The study of bodies, particularly dead bodies, was central to the scope of research done by physical anthropologists at this time.

(Top) Samuel Morton was an anthropologist who emphasized racial typology. He amassed one of the largest collections of human skulls in the world, through various suspect sources, and identified each with a racial label. This collection is still held at the Penn Museum.

(Middle) Daniel Garrison Brinton was an anthropologist who greatly advocated for the growth of the discipline itself. Brinton was the first professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. He published many racist beliefs as science- he claimed "all races were 'not equally endowed,' which disqualified [some of] them from the atmosphere of modern enlightenment."

(Bottom) Carleton Coon was a professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania who expressed and published ideas about the biological basis of race. His main thesis throughout time was that the main races of humanity evolved separately, with people of African descent having evolved later than those of European descent.



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Acknowledgement



The University of Pennsylvania has a long history of employing racist scientists such as Carleton Coon, along with many others, therefore enabling them to publicize and popularize their theories that some groups of people are more capable of civilization- and worthy of human rights- than others. The school holds equal responsibility as the anthropologists they supported, and must acknowledge the role they have played in the establishment and perpetuation of racism as a scientific norm.

(Left) Image of the Penn Museum, contemporary. (Above) List of interviewees and images of each.

Repair

Repairing centuries of damage that was done through the employment of scientific racism in our large institutional spaces requires hard work- including recognizing the history and impacts of the anthropology department at the University of Pennsylvania, and putting time and money into repairing relationships with communities who had previously been subjugated by these institutions and their employees.

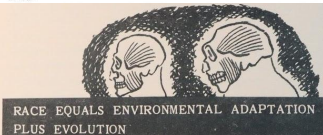
Moving Forward

In interviewing experts in the field (listed on the top right), these are some of the changes they would like to see, as we anthropologists work to acknowledge the history of our discipline:

1. Changes must be made to include a wider demographic of anthropologists
2. Race cannot be considered a biological category
3. Museums must work to complicate stories of evolution and race

THE ORIGIN OF RACES CARLETON S. COON AUTHOR OF THE STORY OF MAN

But before I could start on this documentation, I had to establish some degree of credibility for my thesis, which I state in Chapter 1. My thesis is, in essence, that at the beginning of our record, over half a million years ago, man was a single species, *Homo erectus*, perhaps already divided into five geographic races or subspecies. *Homo erectus* then evolved into *Homo sapiens* not once but five times, as each subspecies, living in its own territory, passed a critical threshold from a more brutal to a more sapient state.



(Left) Cover of Carleton Coon's controversial book, *The Origin of Races*, which was deemed an outdated account of human evolution, and further was used by noted segregationists as evidence for the inferiority of people of African descent. (Above) Excerpts of Coon's written works, as evidence of his racial typological thinking.