



Smithsonian
National Museum of the American Indian

AMERICANS VISITOR POSTCARD STUDY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF EVALUATION FINDINGS

PRODUCED BY:
AUDIENCE FOCUS
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BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

In January 2018, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) opened the exhibition, "Americans." The exhibition, which explores Native Americans and the development of America's national consciousness through four iconic events, features a section called "Americans Explained" that invites visitors to make deeper connections between their own lives and the materials presented in the exhibition through a post-card writing activity. Within the "Americans Explained" gallery, visitors encounter text panels explaining the purpose of the exhibition, a 3-screen video with testimonials from Native and Non-Native individuals, and graphic panels with text prompts that encourage visitors to think of their own connections and share those memories, opinions, emotions, or questions on blank postcards. NMAI staff curate the postcards that are submitted, posting different visitor-generated postcards on a rotating basis within the gallery.

EVALUATION GOALS

The primary goals of this study were to:

- 1** **Uncover the main concerns, experiences, memories, and opinions expressed through the postcards that can inform future programming**
- 2** **Use the results of the study to engage cross-departmental discussions and strategic planning around ways to engage visitors in meaningful ways.**
- 3** **Create a detailed system for coding visitor postcards that NMAI can use in the future**

METHODOLOGY & SAMPLE

Within the first six months of opening the Americans exhibition, approximately 2,500 postcards were submitted. A representative sample of 1280 responses (40% of total available postcards) were analyzed as part of the study (99% confidence level +/- 2%). While not asked to provide information about race/ethnicity, 14% of visitors (n=179) self-identified as Native American.

RESULTS

During analysis, Audience Focus evaluators coded and quantified visitors' responses to the postcard activity into 5 primary categories, and 19 sub-categories. Three rounds of inter-rater reliability testing (IRR) were conducted to ensure agreement and consistency among analysts. A high level of IRR was achieved (over 85% agreement). The coding rubric was also vetted with NMAI staff and final revisions to the rubric were made based on their feedback.

CODING RUBRIC

CONNECTION

- Games, myths, sayings/rhymes, popular culture, festivals (most often learned or experienced during childhood)
- Ancestry / Identity
- Mascots
- Place & object names
- Noticing racism or stereotyping inflicted on others
- Personal experience with racism or stereotyping
- Reinforcing or referencing stereotypes

REFLECTION

- Guilt, shame, sadness, or regret over treatment of Native Americans / prior behavior
- Acknowledge prior lack of awareness
- Disputing political correctness and/or indifference towards the use of mascots and other cultural appropriation
- Pride and respect for Native Americans
- Anger, frustration, or discomfort
- Desire to learn / know more
- Happy some progress has been made

ACTION / SOCIAL JUSTICE

- Personal action
- Influencing others
- Advocating broadly

REVIEW / CRITIQUE

- Concerns with exhibition or museum approach
- Praise of exhibition or museum approach

OTHER

- Incomplete and/or do not have enough context to be coded accurately.

CONNECTION



The majority of visitors who made connections did so to popular culture, games, place names, product names, and/or sports or school mascots. Many of these connections were associated with childhood memories. Some visitors made a connection to their own identity or ancestry, while others shared stories of their personal experience with racism or stereotyping. Some said they noticed racism or stereotyping happening to others. Only a few made a connection by reinforcing stereotypes or misconceptions.

Games, myths, sayings, pop culture, festivals

27%

"There are many TV shows, and movies representing the Indian culture. When I was young, the first thought that came into my head when mentioned their culture were feathers and tribal dances."

"We lived in a Maryland suburb of D.C. and we'd walk in the woods and find arrowheads from time to time. We played cowboys and Indians and played with Indian drums."

Ancestry / Identity

19%

"I am French, German, Mexican, Filipino, and American Indian. Because I am of mixed race, I am told I am not "indian" enough. The U.S. Government has decided that I am not Indian because I don't meet the requirements of what THEY consider Indian. I am AMERICAN INDIAN."

"Cree Nation member of the community of Oye Bougouma. When I travel abroad, I always have to answer 'who are you?'"

Mascots

17%

"There is a school that has the mascot 'Indians,' yet no Natives go there."

"I went to Syracuse University where the mascot is Otto the Orange. Prior to Otto, the SU mascot was the Orange Man, in reference to the Onondaga Nation that is only several miles from campus."

Place / Product Names

15%

"I came to the United States and lived in New York when I was 12. I am now 44. The first thing I remember trying to learn was the names of places with new and exotic sounding names, like Minnewaska Lake, Fort Ticonderoga, and Poughkeepsie!"



Noticing racism, stereotyping being inflicted on others

10%

"The current president of the United States uses 'Pocahontas' as a kind of slur against a rival, which gets laughs from certain of his supporters."

"I am honored to live, love, laugh, and work in the traditional unceded territory of the Kimoks First Nations people. Appropriating Indigenous imagery for commercial usage is endemic in our North American society. If we wish to reconcile our relationship with our Indigenous brothers & sisters, we should stop using names and images without consent."

Personal experience with racism or stereotyping

6%

"Being half Cherokee, I got called all sorts of names in middle school and high school. No one ever said anything because all the teachers said: 'Suck it up. You're more white looking than most. You'll be fine'."

"1 in 3 Native American women are raped or sexually assaulted in their lifetimes. The man who assaulted me called me Pocahontas."

Reinforcing stereotypes

2%

"Indians remind me of man's lost connection with the Earth, nature and life in all its forms."

* Visitors who identified as Native American were significantly more likely to make connections with their ancestry/identity, or through personal experiences with racism or stereotyping; whereas, visitors who did not self identify as Native American were more likely to make connections to childhood games or stories, popular culture, mascots, or place/object names. Non-Natives were more likely to say they noticed racism, but did not experience it themselves.

REFLECTION

Half of visitors provided reflection on their postcards. Some described a prior lack of awareness of the complex history of Native Americans, with many saying they were not taught an accurate history in school, or grew up believing the stereotypes that were reinforced by family members and/or popular culture. Other visitors expressed anger, frustration, or discomfort over acts of racism, oppression, historical inaccuracies, and/or the failure of the U.S. government and educational institutions to tell accurate histories. Some visitors expressed feelings of pride in their Native American ancestry and/or spoke positively of Native American people.



Acknowledge lack of prior awareness

15%

"I'm British, Welsh and had very limited knowledge until I became an adult. As a child, we played cowboys and Indians at school and at parties - not knowing really why."

"I took a class on the history of Native Americans. Prior to that my only experience with Native Americans was my old school used them as a mascot. I never really gave much thought to the name. Now that I'm older, and I have studied and learned about the Native Americans, I went to my old school to change its name / mascot."

Feelings of anger, or frustration

13%

"The abuse of Indians should never be forgotten. It is our duty to share the true history of what happened to all Native Americans throughout the Americas."

"America has gone from attempting to eliminate Native culture to capitalizing off of it. HYPOCRITICAL. STOP CULTURAL APPROPRIATION!"

Pride & respect for Native Americans

10%

"I am a Seminole indian. My mother said it means I'm strong."

"I taught and lived on the Northern Cheyenne Indian reservation in Ashland, MT. Among the bluest skies, parched land, and poverty, I found beauty that will forever live in my heart. These forgotten people, land, and culture are pure beauty."

Feelings of guilt, shame, or sadness

9%

"I have cried about 5 times today and I am only halfway done with the exhibit. I am so done with America's historical embarrassment and white-washing. Stop trying to hide behind a facade."

"I am so thankful for the First Nations People. I am ashamed of the way you were treated and disrespected. May we learn from our mistakes."



Desire for deeper understanding

4%

"I like learning about Native American history and I want to learn more this year."

"Growing up in Michigan, I was surrounded by places named after Native American words. I wanted to learn about the people behind the names, but school did not teach us why places are named that way or what happened to the people living there before us."

Disputing Political Correctness

3%

"I don't believe that these images are degrading. Americans equate Native Americans with strength and integrity. Indian names are distinctive, unique, and express the heritage of locations, communities, and regions."

Pleased to see positive change

3%

"As an educator, the lack of sources from the Native perspective can be frustrating. Many textbooks use language which implies Native groups are all extinct. I am glad this is beginning to change."

*Visitors who self-identified as Native Americans were significantly more likely to reflect on the pride and respect they have for Native American people and culture and express anger, frustration, or discomfort at the treatment Native Americans have faced since the arrival of Europeans. Visitors who did not self-identify as Native American were significantly more likely to acknowledge a prior lack of awareness and express a desire to learn more. Both groups expressed equal amounts of guilt, shame, or sadness over the injustices suffered by Native American people.

REVIEW / CRITIQUE

Of the visitors who provided a review or critique of Americans, the majority complimented or praised the exhibition. These visitors provided positive feedback about the exhibition (or the Museum more broadly), saying things like “I never realized that...,” or “Everyone should see this.” Around a quarter of the visitors who reviewed the exhibition expressed concerns with the materials or messages presented within Americans and/or the Museum at large.



Praises

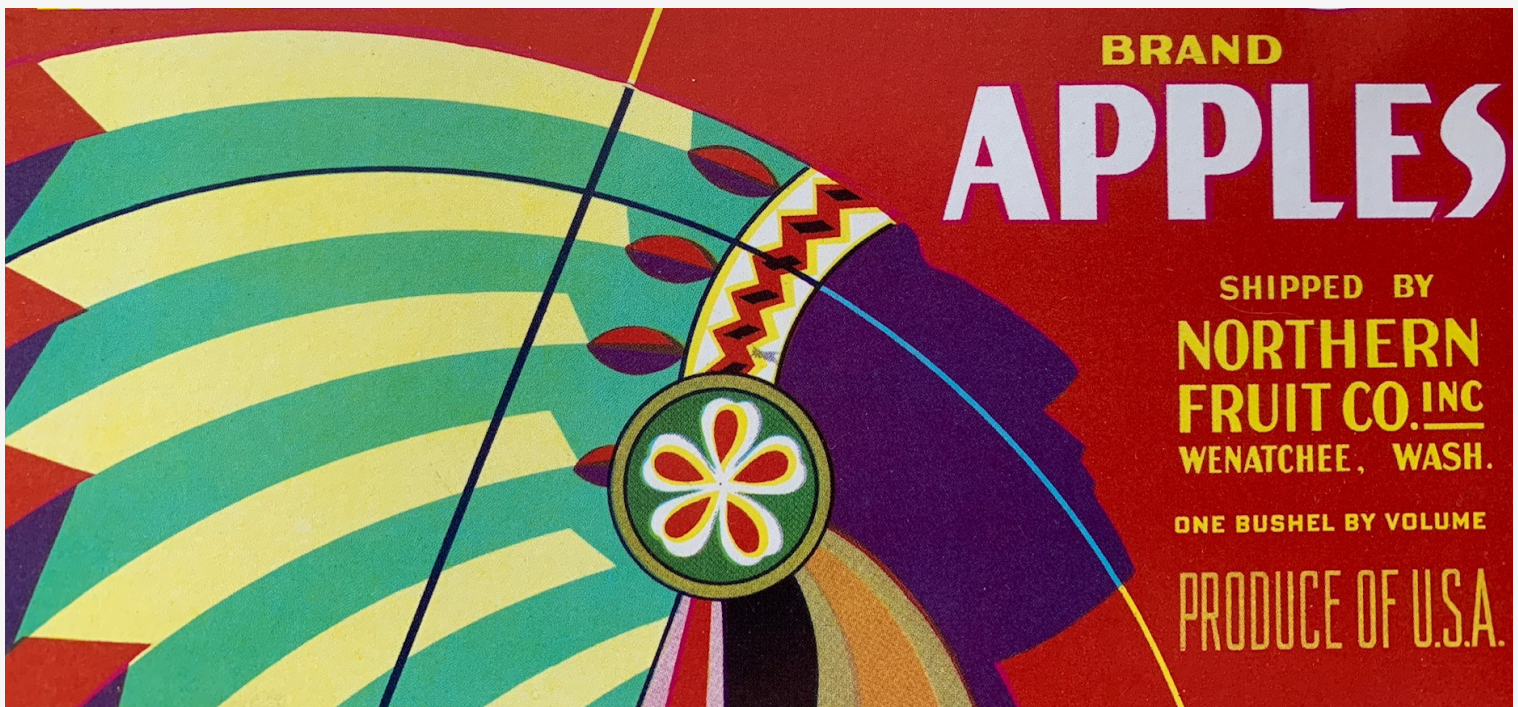
10%

"WOW! As a black girl from Arizona, this exhibit has been eye-opening. My entire life and upbringing took place with Native American architecture, art, food, and culture but no actual Indian people. Seeing this systemic erasure helps me figure out how I can lift up Native American voices and people here today."

Concerns

3%

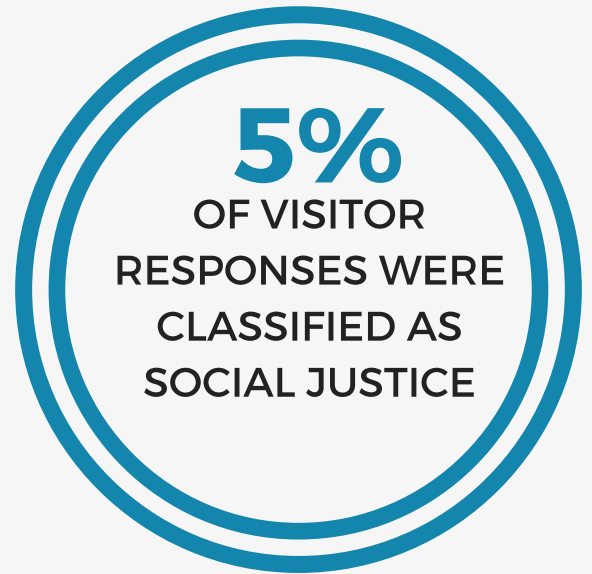
"I am Indian (as in, from India). In dialogues, conversation, I find it disrespectful and off-putting to the Indian subcontinent AND Native Americans when people say "indians" when referring to Native/Indegenous tribes. I don't think the U.S. government or this museum's curators thinks about this confusing bit of vocabulary."



*Visitors who did not self-identify as Native American were significantly more likely to praise the exhibition than were those who identified as Native American.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Only a small percentage of visitors described actions they have taken to support social justice. Of the people who took action, about half said they tried to influence others by teaching accurate histories to their children or students, or speaking out when they witnessed injustices happening. Close to another half described personal actions they have taken, like choosing not to wear Halloween costumes depicting Native Americans, supporting name changes to popular mascots, or no longer sitting "Indian style." A very small percentage of visitors described advocacy at a broader level, such as attempting to change policies.



Personal Action

"I adored Disney's Pocahontas and the Legend of the lost colony as Roanoke. When I was a child, I wanted to be a Native American when I grew up. Instead, I became an anthropologist and learned how to work with local indigenous people."

2%

"I remember as a child, I'd always make Indian noises and I never thought it was wrong. I was never taught that it was wrong... Now I know it was wrong and I plan to pass my knowledge onto my next of kin."

Influence Others

"I teach at a high school whose mascot is the 'warrior.' Our emblem is an arrow-tipped spear. As a faculty, we've been lobbying to change this for YEARS. The continuing push back from the community is disheartening."

2%

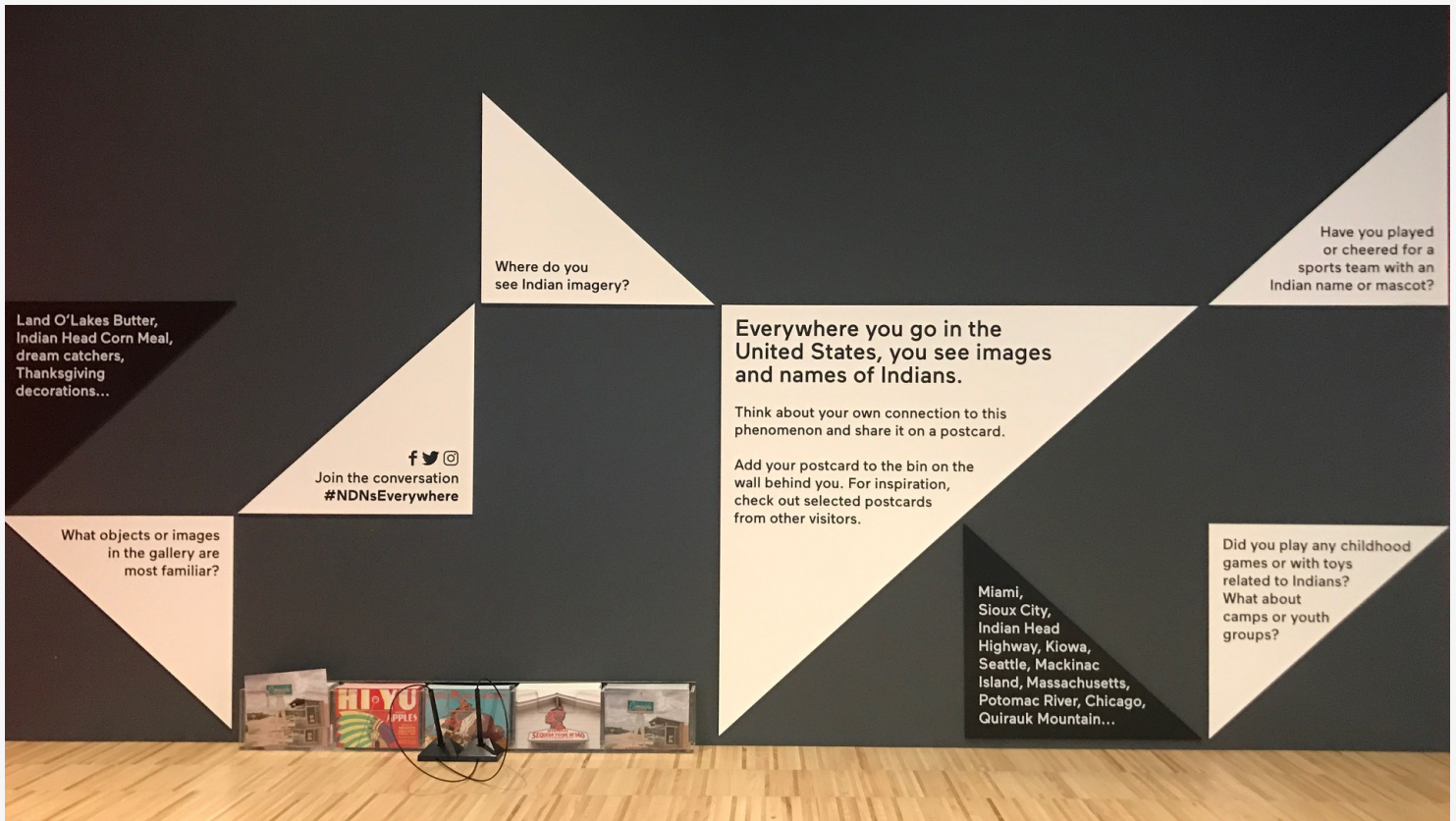
"I continue to challenge negative stereotypes of Native Americans. I believe in teaching history of our Native community is the key!"

Advocate Broadly

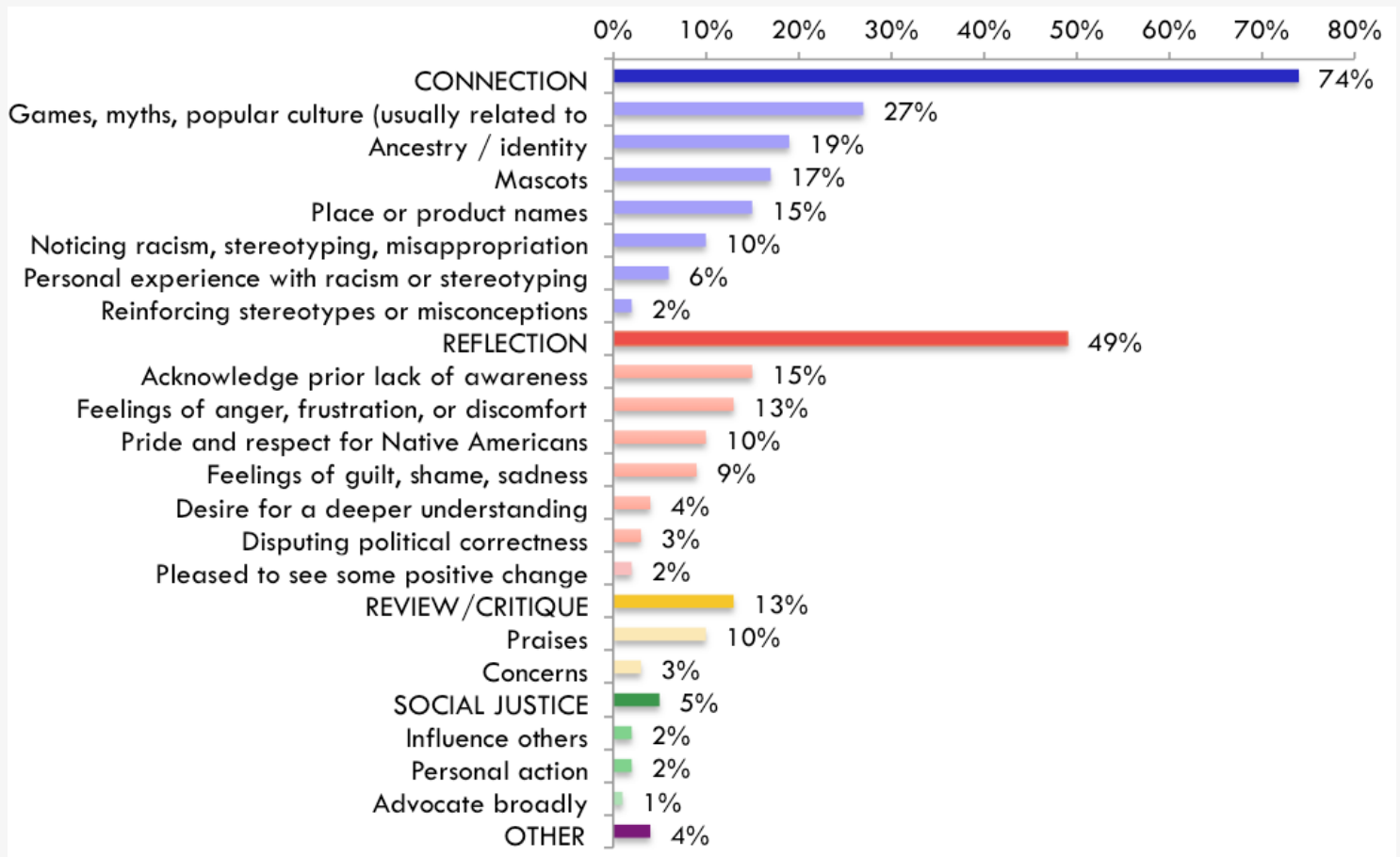
"As a Choctaw member, it is difficult to advocate for removal of Indians as mascots, logos, etc. because it has been around for a long time that many people believe it is okay or honorable. However, it creates a stereotype for Native Americans living in the world today. It holds our community back because we have to educate and continuously advocate respect for our culture for many people who do not understand what it is to be Native American and not just a descendant."

1%

*Cell counts for this category were too low to run comparative statistics between visitors who self-identified as Native American and those who did not.



The chart below shows the distribution of responses across the 5 major categories and 19 subcategories (N=1280). Percentages do not equal 100% as most visitors provided responses that fell into multiple categories.



REFLECTION

The purpose of this study was to help staff reflect on their work, better understand NMAI visitors, and to explore new pathways and themes for creating meaningful experiences for NMAI visitors in the future. We provide a few points of reflection below, and hope staff will add to these insights through continued reflection and discussions.



Stereotypes begin early in childhood

Many visitors described memories from their childhood, suggesting most stereotypes, misconceptions, and inaccurate histories are learned at an early age. Schools and camps appear to play a large role in shaping people's understanding and beliefs about Native Americans. How could NMAI work with schools to provide resources and information that will support teachers that want to see changes to the existing curriculum and narrative of Native American history and culture? Additionally, how could NMAI support parents?

People want to learn more / do more

Even though the prompt did not refer to social justice, or taking action in any way, some people shared stories of personal action or advocacy, and even more people expressed a desire to learn more. The quality of responses to the postcards suggests visitors are emotionally moved and intellectually stimulated by this exhibition and leave with a desire to do more. Could NMAI provide different suggestions for actions visitors could take after leaving the museum?

Many people have a shared empathy, consciousness

While differences emerged between visitors who self-identified as Native American and those who did not, both groups shared feelings of grief and sadness over the historic and continued mistreatment of Native American people and appear to share compassion and empathy for each other. Are there ways NMAI could create opportunities for more dialogue between Native and Non-Native visitors where they can explore shared beliefs feelings, and stories?