



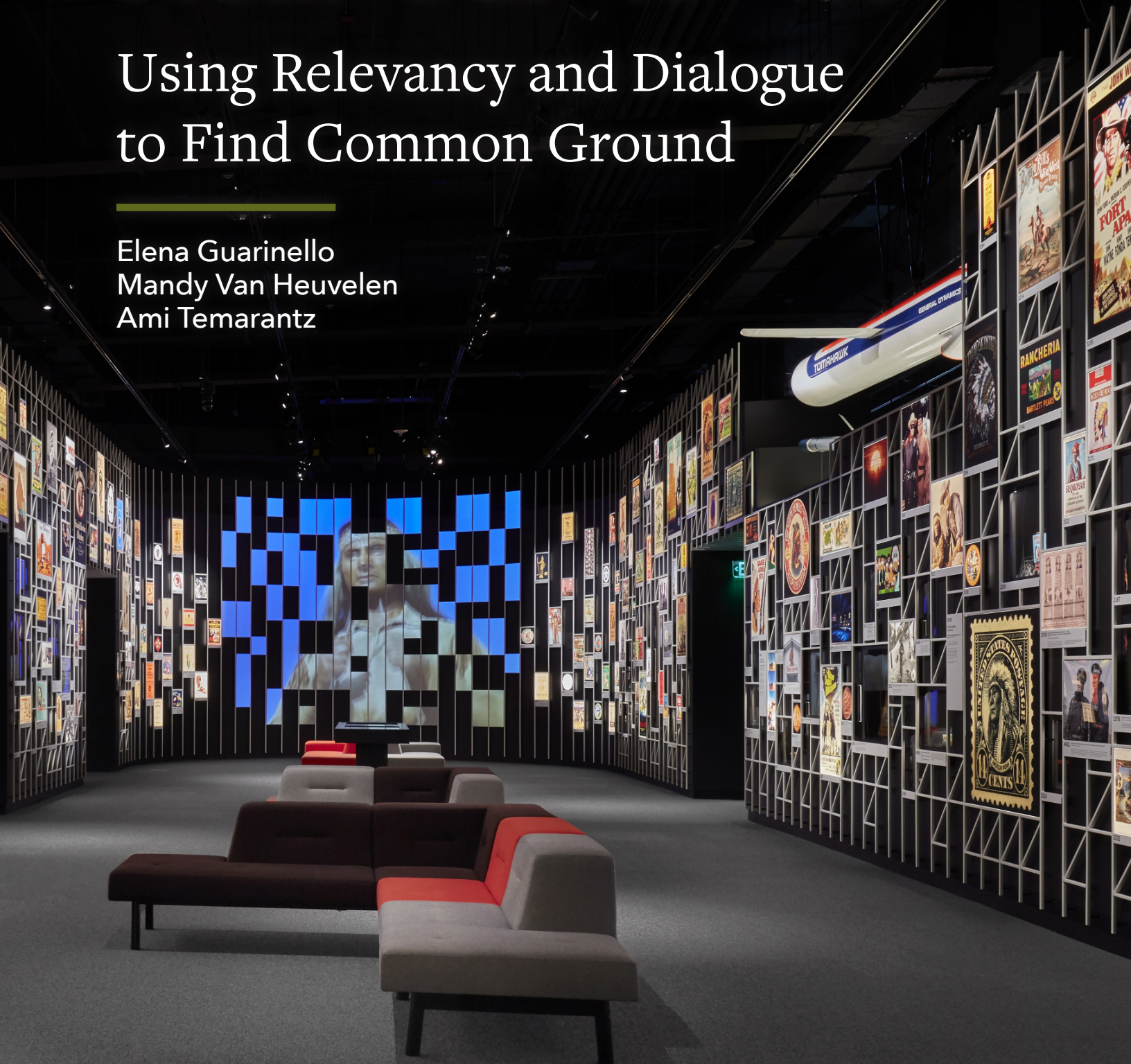
Fourteen-foot high walls filled with images and objects line the central gallery of Americans.

# From “Our” to “We”

Using Relevancy and Dialogue  
to Find Common Ground

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When *Americans*,<sup>1</sup> the newest semi-permanent exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, was in its earliest planning stages, President Barack Obama was in his first term and the Dakota Access Pipeline was not yet in the news.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition opened one year into the presidency of Donald Trump and three months after a signpost made by pipeline protestors was added to the museum's collection and put on public display.<sup>3</sup>

Though these changes certainly had an impact on our work, in truth the divisions in American life that the museum seeks to bridge are far more long-standing than today's political climate. Pop-culture stereotypes and school curricula filled with incomplete and inaccurate versions of history inform and dominate 21st-century public perceptions of Native Americans. A recent national study designed to understand this dominant narrative about Native peoples in the United States found 62 percent of respondents didn't know a single Native person.<sup>4</sup> More startling, this research also found that a significant portion of the American population believes that Native Americans no longer exist.<sup>5</sup> In short, most

1 *Americans* opened in January 2018 and will close in 2028. See "Exhibitions in Washington, DC," *National Museum of the American Indian*, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://americanindian.si.edu/americans/>.

2 The controversy around the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) brought national and international attention to treaty rights. The museum offers an online educational resource for more information about DAPL. See "Standing Rock Sioux and Dakota Access Pipeline: Teacher Resource," *National Museum of the American Indian*, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-treaties/dapl>.

3 See Dennis W. Zotigh, "Mile-marker from the Dakota Access Pipeline protests makes the point that U.S. treaty history is still being written," October 24, 2017, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://blog.nmai.si.edu/main/2017/10/dapl-mile-marker.html>.

4 First Nations Development Institute, *Reclaiming Native Truth Research Findings: Compilation of All Research*, (2018): 53, [www.firstnations.org/publications/compilation-of-all-research-from-the-reclaiming-native-truth-project](http://www.firstnations.org/publications/compilation-of-all-research-from-the-reclaiming-native-truth-project).

5 *Ibid.*, 34.

Americans believe they have nothing to do with Native Americans.<sup>6</sup>

This is a long-standing challenge for the National Museum of the American Indian. The Indians that most of our non-Native visitors know best are not living, breathing fully human individuals capable of the entire spectrum of human behavior, good and bad. Rather they are imaginary Indians, the stuff of myth and stereotype.

Though it is a big lift for a single institution to chip away at generations of misunderstandings, since its founding in 1989 the National Museum of the American Indian has worked to make Native peoples, their role in history, and their lived experiences visible and meaningful.

### "Our" Story

The National Museum of the American Indian was built upon the inclusion of perspectives of Native leaders, activists, culture bearers, teachers, artists, and more who advocated for the creation of the museum as a place to tell the story of American Indian contributions to the world and to speak authentically about Native cultures and histories. The opening of the museum in Washington, DC in September 2004 provided an important opportunity for Native community members to tell their deeply held understandings of their own histories and cultures.

The inaugural exhibitions were co-curated with 24 tribal communities. They shared

6 Throughout this article, we use the terms American Indian and Native American. Both are acceptable terms used to reference Native peoples. Many prefer *Indian*, *Native*, *Indigenous*, or, better yet, the name of their specific nation. The question of which term to use is a frequent question from visitors to NMAI. In its central gallery, *Americans* includes a brief panel with similar text to what you see here in this footnote.

**Fig. 1.** The Wixarika section of *Our Peoples*. Each of the three inaugural exhibitions featured eight community-curated sections designed to bring Native perspectives to the forefront.



SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN, 2010

While Native visitors appreciated the effort the museum made to engage with Native communities and to privilege their voice, many critiqued the overall lack of a more telling national narrative that expanded upon the flawed and unjust history of federal policy toward American Indians.

their distinct narratives and points of view in three exhibitions: *Our Peoples; Our Lives; and Our Universes* (fig. 1). Members of these communities worked closely with the museum's exhibition teams to guide the development of their section and, throughout this process, tribal members played key roles in final decisions and outcomes. While some local and regional museums were employing this type of collaboration prior to our opening, this approach was foundational to the museum's debut on the National Mall because it put Native voice and perspective at the center of a national museum in the United States for the first time. The practice of including Native perspectives and consulting with Native communities has since become more common in the museum field.<sup>7</sup>

However, as a colleague says in reference to the critical reviews received upon opening, "if we were a Broadway show, we would have closed the next day."<sup>8</sup> The existence and architecture of the museum impressed, but the exhibitions confused and confounded both critics and visitors. Over the years, through visitor studies and day-to-day interactions, staff came to better understand this disconnect. Absent was a way for visitors, the vast majority of whom are not Native, to connect to these specific Native narratives.<sup>9</sup> Our visitors were largely unfamiliar with the traditions and stories of these cultures and a frame of reference to make connections or build empathy was missing.

7 See Amy Lonetree, "Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI," *American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 3/4 (2006).

8 For example, see Edward Rothstein, "A Museum with an American Indian Voice," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2004, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/21/arts/design/museum-with-an-american-indian-voice.html>.

9 The Smithsonian Institution conducted a four-season visitor experience survey in 2015–2016, a component of which tracked and recorded visitor demographics specific to the NMAI.

As our current director Kevin Gover (Pawnee) notes, “The initial point was to celebrate the ongoing existence of these Native peoples. We took it to an extreme, and the narrative got lost.”<sup>10</sup>

While the use of the word “Our” in the exhibition titles was intentionally inclusive of Native voice, these exhibitions failed to build a bridge for visitors, Native and non-Native alike. In her review of the museum’s inaugural exhibitions, Native author and Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of California, Amy Lonetree (Ho-Chunk) wrote, “A notable absence for me, however, is a failure to discuss the colonization process in a clear and coherent manner.”<sup>11</sup> While Native visitors appreciated the effort the museum made to engage with Native communities and to privilege their voice, many critiqued the overall lack of a more telling national narrative that expanded upon the flawed and unjust history of federal policy toward American Indians. To advance the museum’s goal of changing U.S. society’s dominant narrative about American Indians, we needed to build bridges for all of the museum’s visitors to empathize with Native perspectives so they feel that the American Indian story is their story, too.

### The Shift to “We”

To build inclusion, impact, and understanding, in 2011 the museum began to change its interpretive approach. Exhibitions and programs started to provide clear historical narratives while also making space

10 Peggy McGlone, “National Museum of the American Indian uses a new exhibit to spread its message,” *The Washington Post*, October 3, 2014, accessed July 25, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/national-museum-of-the-american-indian-uses-a-new-exhibit-to-spread-its-message/2014/10/01/18f0090e-44f1-11e4-9a15-137aa0153527\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.bdc7df8f5348](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/national-museum-of-the-american-indian-uses-a-new-exhibit-to-spread-its-message/2014/10/01/18f0090e-44f1-11e4-9a15-137aa0153527_story.html?utm_term=.bdc7df8f5348).

11 Amy Lonetree, “Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI,” *American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 3/4 (2006): 636.

for candid and inclusive dialogues. This shift was not only informed by seven years of interactions with visitors on the National Mall, but also feedback from tribal leaders and other stakeholders. Kevin Gover, who began his tenure as director in 2007, heard from Native constituencies that as a place that reaches large numbers of non-Native people, the museum had an obligation to correct false narratives.

Based on these factors and much internal review, senior staff set a new course. This led to both the initiation of an ambitious educational initiative, Native Knowledge 360°, and an exhibition master plan for a set of long-term shows, including the initial ideas for what would become *Americans*.<sup>12</sup>

*Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations* (opened 2014) was the first exhibition conceived under this new vision. It clearly examines historical events and articulates their contemporary consequences as a way of finding common ground with visitors and showing that Native American history and American history are indivisible. *Americans*, which began its earliest exhibition development phases in 2013, tacked toward popular culture as a way to connect with visitors. We wanted to use those familiar imaginary Indians of myth and stereotype as a way to open up a conversation about the complicated relationship between Americans and American Indians.

Instead of using “our” to refer to the perspectives of Native peoples, *Americans* would purposefully use “we” to mean “we, Americans.” We would stand side-by-side with visitors, Native and non-Native alike, working together to ponder, debate, and

12 See “Native Knowledge 360°,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360>.



puzzle out the complexities of American Indians in American life.

The central concept of the exhibition is “Indians everywhere.” The idea is to utilize both familiar and unfamiliar Indian images, objects, and stories (Pocahontas, Trail of Tears, Battle of Little Bighorn) to make two central arguments: 1) Americans, including American Indians, are still trying to come to terms with the inescapable contradiction that the United States was built on nations already here and at great cost to Native peoples, and 2) The American Indian images and names that surround us in our everyday lives shape how our society views Native

people. As articulated in a portion of the intro panel:

These images are worth a closer look. What if they are not trivial? What if they are symbols of great power? What if the stories they tell reveal a buried history – and a country forever fascinated, conflicted, and shaped by its relationship with American Indians?

The exhibition is organized to help visitors access memories they may have about these Indian images, be they, for example, food products, toys, or movies – and avoid contemporary culture wars that might

Fig. 3. Hi Yu Apples crate label, 1940s.

make some feel guilty or defensive. Unless visitors felt they were part of this story, they would never engage with the museum's larger message: that Indians are central to contemporary American life, history, and national identity (fig. 2, intro image).

### Developing and Designing for "We"

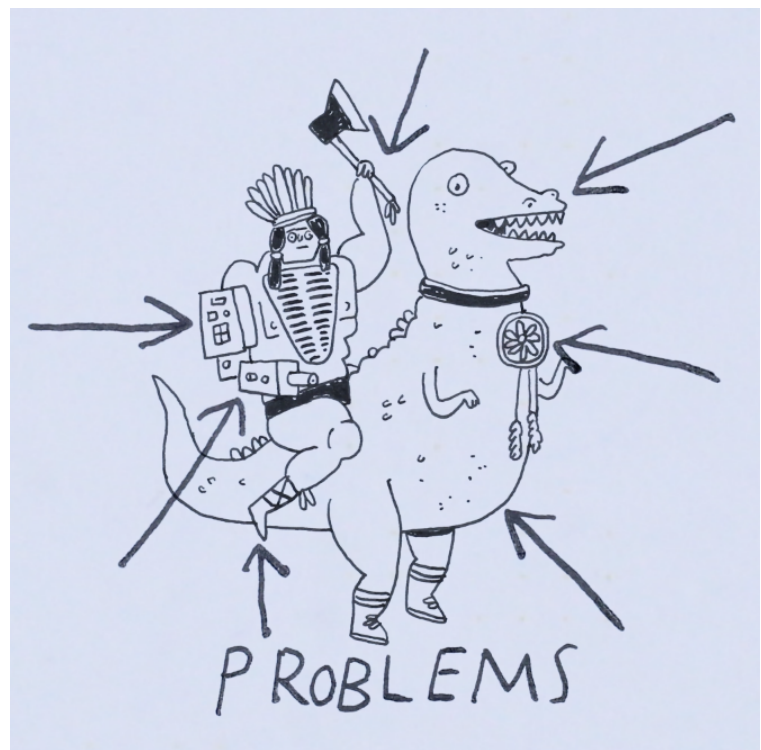
The exhibition team was intent on creating an exhibition that functioned as a public square of sorts – a safe, comfortable space where visitors with disparate backgrounds and opinions could air their memories and opinions and seek common ground. This meant that, alongside typical discussions about what content to include, also dominating our conversations was how to create an authentic, welcoming place that would not alienate or preach.

We relied on formative evaluation to help fine-tune our approach and see how receptive visitors would be to an exhibition that displayed representations of Indians and said, "relax, we're not here to guilt-trip you." We knew that some people would hope for a playbook of sorts, for example, sports mascots = bad and state seals = okay. But there is nothing straightforward or easy about the Indian imagery out there. After all, it runs the gamut from racist to beautiful to downright bizarre (fig. 3). We didn't want to let our visitors off the hook that easily; we wanted them to engage with the material, think for themselves, and come to their own conclusions. However, formative evaluation of early drafts of the introductory text demonstrated that visitors felt unmoored by an approach that was too open-ended. They wanted to know where the museum stood.

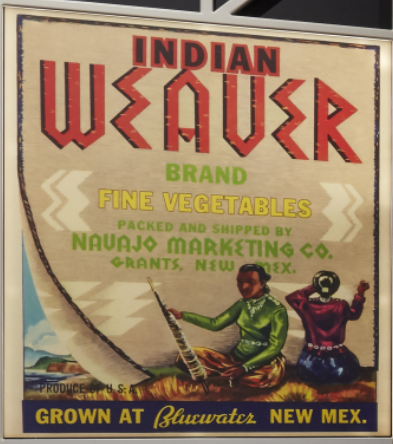
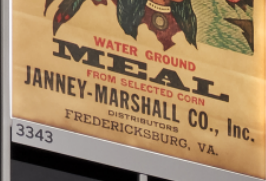
The result is text that poses questions but is clear about our take. The language is direct and disarming, with elements of whimsy,

surprise, and humor. It expresses difficult truths about the country without distancing. For example, in the orientation film, *The Invention of Thanksgiving*, the narrator says, "Thanksgiving says, however imperfectly we remember Indians, we're remembering Indians, and with all the problems with it, it's still a powerful idea and it's still powerful to not Photoshop Indians out of the national narrative" (fig. 4).

Fig. 4. A still from the orientation film, *The Invention of Thanksgiving*, narrated by curator Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche).







3058 Indian Weaver Vegetables crate label, 1940s



2194 Calumet Baking Powder can, ca. 1945



3527 Calumet Baking Powder logo, 2001

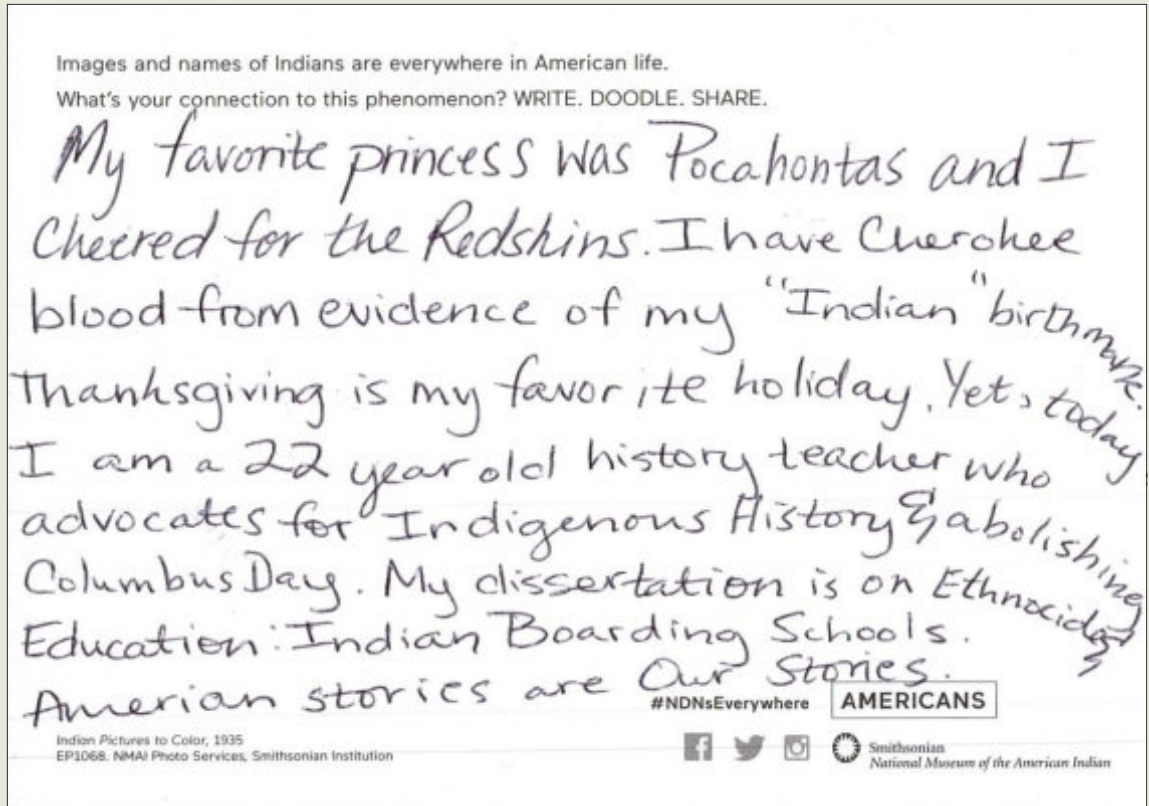
Pocahontas didn't save John Smith. She saved America.



Fig. 5. The “billboard” graphic at the entrance to the exhibition’s “Pocahontas” section.



Fig. 6. A visitor postcard.



# To be truly successful, we needed to go beyond providing a canvas for conversation.

Equally important to words and tone was creating a space of beauty and comfort. The central gallery of the 9,200-square foot exhibition displays hundreds of objects and images dating from the colonial era to the present in a sleek floor-to-ceiling display. The design elevates the items held within its framework, calling attention to the proliferation of this imagery and the extent to which it has influenced the country's culture.

A common complaint from the 2004 inaugural galleries was a feeling of getting lost within the rather circuitous gallery layouts. This was top of mind as we designed *Americans*. Feeling lost should have no place in the welcoming space we hoped to create. Studio Joseph, the show's exhibition design firm, established clear wayfinding with a legible, grid-like floor plan. Five side galleries with "billboard" graphics radiate off of the central "Indians Everywhere" gallery (fig. 5, pp. 28–29).<sup>13</sup>

An equally important element was plenty of comfortable, inviting furniture. Three large clusters of modern couches span the center of the nearly 30-foot-wide "Indians Everywhere" space. We regularly see visitors lounging as they chat with one another, continue to browse the expansive display walls, or simply wait for other members of their group.

13 Where "Indians Everywhere" demonstrates the ubiquity of Indian imagery as an output of this strange national obsession, three of the side galleries give foundational reasons behind it. In the "Pocahontas," "Trail of Tears," and "The Battle of Little Bighorn" sections we reframe the event to show how it changed the United States and why it is still in our heads today. The other two side galleries, "The Invention of Thanksgiving" and "Americans Explained" are referenced here. For more on the event galleries, see: Paul Chaat Smith, "Hiding In Plain Sight: An exhibition showcasing America's obsession with Native American iconography aims to start a new conversation," *Museum Magazine* 98, no. 4 (July/August 2019): 30–35.

Whereas the items in the "Indians Everywhere" gallery were curated to trigger personal connections, one of the side galleries, "Americans Explained," encourages reflection and explicitly invites visitors to share their personal experiences. A three-screen video installation shows Native and non-Native people talking about their connection to "Indians Everywhere," expressing nostalgia, recognition, painful memories, and/or ambivalence. A rotating selection of more than 50 visitor-generated postcards are available for browsing and there are blank cards for writing.

We hoped this room would convey the museum's genuine interest in visitors' perspectives and experiences. We honestly weren't sure whether it would work at all. As it turns out, we collect about 450 of these postcards each month. While many list familiar place names, school teams, or products, many others are filled with detailed memories, questions, strong emotions, and commentary.

A study of the first six months of postcards shows that 74 percent of respondents make a personal connection to the material, and 49 percent provided reflection on their postcards. Some described a prior lack of awareness of the complex history of Native Americans, with many saying they were taught an inaccurate history in school or grew up believing stereotypes. Other visitors expressed anger, frustration, or discomfort over acts of racism, oppression, and/or the failure of the U.S. government and educational institutions to tell accurate histories (fig. 6).



**Fig. 7.** Cultural Interpreter Michaela Pavlat (Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians) leads a dialogue activity with students in *Americans*.

While it is encouraging that visitors connect to what they see through self-guided visits, during the planning process museum staff knew there was only so much a static exhibition could do to carry on a genuine conversation. To be truly successful, we needed to go beyond providing a canvas for conversation. The museum needed to extend the interpretative approach of inclusiveness and “we” to our educator-led programs as well.

### Inclusive Dialogue

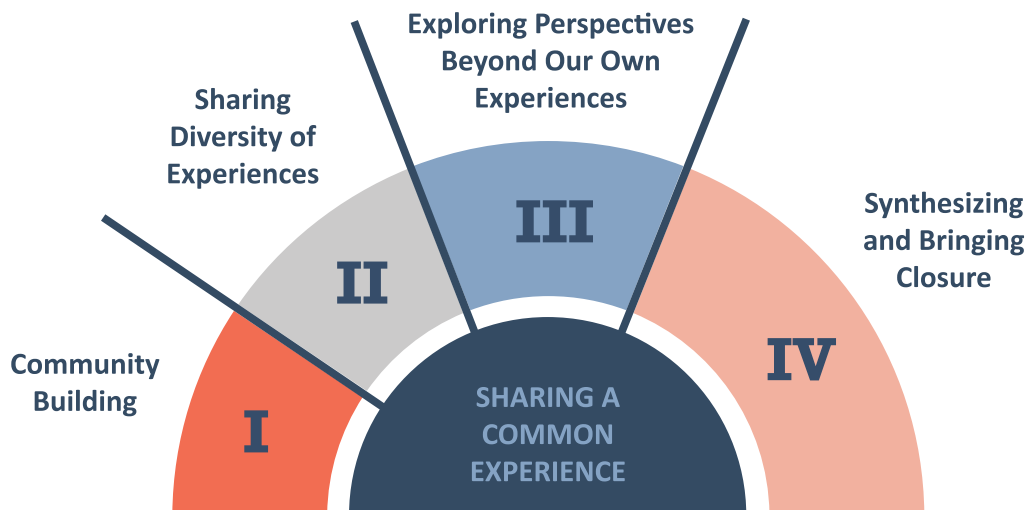
To create opportunities for building personal connections to the messages within *Americans*, museum educators adopted an interpretive approach rooted in a facilitated dialogue methodology for student programs (fig. 7). Dialogue allows participants to share personal experiences, assumptions, and opinions, in addition to receiving ideas and information, for the purpose of both personal and collective learning. These programs employ a tool called “the arc of dialogue,”

which pairs an experience shared by all participants with a sequence of questions designed to build trust and communication (fig. 8).<sup>14</sup>

In dialogue, participants don’t need to have any prior knowledge of the subject matter because an experience that all participants share during the program becomes the grounds for the dialogue. In one of the *Americans* student programs, museum educators employ a facilitation tool called “Visual Thinking Strategies” to help students look more closely at a painting of Pocahontas and decipher the story it tells.<sup>15</sup> The educator then guides students through content that

<sup>14</sup> The arc of dialogue was developed by Tammy Bormann and David Camp. Arcs are structured around four phases: community building, sharing personal experience, exploring beyond personal experience, and synthesizing/bringing closure.

<sup>15</sup> Visual Thinking Strategies uses art to teach visual literacy and communication skills and does not try to provide any more information than what the viewer observes. See Philip Yenawine, *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013).



**Fig. 8.** Facilitated dialogue programs conducted in *Americans* are based on an arc of dialogue. The questions within each phase of the arc are designed to build trust and communication.

# Dialogue offers an opportunity to not only engage visitors with the exhibition and with each other, but it also fosters empathy by allowing visitors to feel like they're a part of the story.

reveals the painting's hidden story and the fact that many stories that Americans tell about American Indians are often false or incomplete. The educator also incorporates questions from the arc of dialogue to help students consider their own connections to these stories.

We worked with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, leaders in dialogue methodology, to create a dialogue arc for these programs.<sup>16</sup> The arc of dialogue is best seen as the guiding framework that aids the educator in creating meaningful conversations. Educators also need to craft shared experiences, supplemental questions, and necessary content to inform the dialogue.

<sup>16</sup> The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience is a worldwide network of places dedicated to remembering past struggles for justice and addressing their contemporary legacies. The coalition was founded on the idea that, as trusted educational and community spaces containing human connections to the past, museums and historical sites are ideal venues for fostering dialogue and civic engagement. The toolkit Sites of Conscience created for Americans provides basic grounding in the practice of dialogue and includes three 60-minute program models that educators can use in the exhibition to facilitate dialogue with students. See *Americans: A Dialogue Toolkit for Educators*, National Museum of the American Indian, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/NMAI-Americans-dialogue-toolkit.pdf>.

Student responses to the questions illustrate the success of this model in creating inclusion and connection. For example, a Phase III question provokes students to dig deeper into their assumptions and to probe the underlying social conditions that inform the diverse perspectives of the group. Examples of Phase III questions include, “What do we gain by telling stories that are false or incomplete? What do we lose?” Student responses have included, “We lose facts. We lose history”; “We lose the trust of others”; “We can gain other opinions”; “We gain stories that make us look good.” These answers show a clear connection between the students’ experiences and the exhibition’s messages.

This interpretive approach offers insights into the power and potential of dialogue within exhibition planning and design. Dialogue offers an opportunity to not only engage visitors with the exhibition and with each other, but it also fosters empathy by allowing visitors to feel like they're a part of the story. Dialogic questions have no right or wrong answer – they ask for visitors’ opinions, beliefs, and knowledge based only on their own experiences. They are rooted in the present and often touch on universal concepts and values. Exhibitions can use these types of questions to create an empathetic bridge between their content and visitors.

## What's next?

In shifting our interpretive approach, the National Museum of the American Indian has found a way for visitors who may think they have nothing to do with Native Americans to find a connection and to empathize. The shift from “our” to “we” has been transformative as we shape and position other projects. For example, educators have created a dialogue-

based program for another exhibition, and exhibition planners have rethought the organizational structure of upcoming exhibitions to more closely align with visitor understandings and expectations.

However, the real challenge is still ahead. We cannot be satisfied with just building bridges that help people see themselves in our content. We must find ways to harness that connection, plumb its depths, use it to demonstrate our shared history, and convert it to equity and social justice for Native peoples.

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