



**African Diasporic Audience Research Project
Executive Summary**

Audience research commissioned by
the Smithsonian Institution's
National Museum of African American History and Culture

People, Places & Design Research



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Executive Summary

This audience research project was commissioned by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). "The main purpose of this audience research project is to illuminate the perceptions of diverse African diasporic audiences in order to meaningfully engage with them and offer them a fulfilling visitor experience at the Smithsonian's newest museum."¹ The research focused on African diasporic audiences in the Washington DC metropolitan area, and was designed to address three goals:²

- ▶ **define African diasporic identity**, including the existence of diasporic audiences among NMAAHC's core constituencies (internal and closely affiliated audiences);
- ▶ investigate the **perceptions and interests of African diasporic audiences** regarding NMAAHC's programming initiatives, ranging from expectations and interests about the inaugural exhibits to ideas about public program activities;
- ▶ create a **framework of visitor experience dimensions** to characterize criteria for successful Museum visits among African diasporic audiences.

The rationale for a focus on Washington DC was that there was believed to be a substantial population of African diasporic people living in the area. Also, local residents would be more likely to be aware of the Museum (vs. if they lived in some other region of the nation) and their intentions to visit would likely be more informed rather than abstract. Considering that this research was being conducted in the year before the Museum opened, these factors would help make the content of people's perceptions more detailed and realistic.³

Three phases of research used quantitative and qualitative methods to pursue the issues inherent in those three goals. The methods included online surveys of NMAAHC staff, volunteers, local members, and social media followers of NMAAHC (phase 1); a series of focus groups drawn from social media followers and local members (phase 2); and an online survey of black households unaffiliated with the Museum in the DMV⁴ area (phase 3). The research began in fall 2015 and the last data were collected in early August 2016, prior to most media coverage. Across all methods, this research included African diasporic individuals as well as African American individuals to help interpret different or similar perspectives, consisting of successful contact with 2236 individuals.

¹ Smithsonian Institution Solicitation No. F15SOL10026, Audience Research Project, March 2015

² Reference: 'Project Goals' memo of September 7, 2015, included as an Appendix.

³ Living at a great distance from the Museum would likely have introduced hypothetical circumstances such as "Well, sure, if and when I ever visit Washington D.C. I would definitely want to visit that Museum." Hypothetical behavior tends to be unreliable; the focus on local residents was expected to eliminate some of the problem of hypothetical behavior and interest.

⁴ DMV refers to the DC-Maryland-Virginia area, but does not seem to be an exact designation. The sampling area for phase 3 research on this project was guided by the sense of "day-trip" distance to DC, which was a 40 mile radius; the sampling area included Baltimore.

Highlights of the Findings

Four principal types of conclusions have been drawn from this research into African diasporic audiences:

- A. How to think about African American and diasporic identities**
- B. African diasporic identity: are we really so different?**
- C. Engaging diasporic audiences by addressing their interests and expectations**
- D. Anticipating useful dimensions of visitor experience**

These categories of conclusions are described below, and referenced to the three reports produced during the research process, where the material that led to these conclusions is expressed in greater detail.

A. How to think about African American and diasporic identities

Why this matters: The rationale for this research was to help lay the foundation for the Museum's desire to be inclusive with all people from the African diaspora. However, defining diasporic audiences presented challenges for the research, suggesting possible challenges about how the Museum and the Smithsonian define these audiences in the future.

Context:

- Beyond the broad category of 'African American' audiences, it is not easy to identify African diasporic people living in the US, in part because the US Census uses such a broad category for race: 'Black or African American.'
- One source of population statistics that is more definitive is the Pew Research Center, which produced a report in 2015⁵ focusing on black immigrants to the US based on their country of birth. Nationally, they reported that 8.7% of the overall black population were foreign-born as of 2013 data, with larger proportions evident in south Florida (34%), the New York metro area (28%), and the Washington D.C. metropolitan area (15%). However, African-diasporic populations are not only defined by being foreign-born immigrants, so these figures underestimate the population who might be considered diasporic but not necessarily African American (e.g., a person born in the US to Jamaican parents, who considers herself Jamaican, or perhaps Jamaican American). Ultimately, the more closely one examines the issue of defining 'diasporic' audiences, the more it becomes apparent that any broad external definition even though well-intentioned is only approximate. Better understanding is possible from people's own personal definitions, which is what this research did, offering an alternative to defining audiences by population statistics.

⁵ Pew Research Center: www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/09/6-key-findings-about-black-immigration (April 2015)

Findings:

1. This audience research commissioned by NMAAHC created a more detailed tool for defining the range of African diasporic identities, based on individuals' own self-reports. An expanded set of *five heritage categories* allowed people – for the first time we know of – to define themselves with multiple identities of African heritage. This is a critical aspect of diasporic identity. Respondents in this research process (e.g., social media followers, black respondents to the online DMV survey) could choose one or several of five African-descended categories:⁶
 - African American,
 - Afro-Caribbean,
 - Afro-Latino,
 - African born or descended from recent African immigrants,
 - Creole with African heritage.

Examination of these self-reported heritages yielded three broad types of black identity in the US that were used to analyze and compare people's perceptions and interests;⁷ the three types were identified as:

 - * **African American**: people who only select that category and no other;
 - * **Combination African heritage**: people who indicate that they think of themselves as African American and another African-descended category;⁸
 - * **African Diasporic**: although technically, the term 'African diasporic' includes African American people, this category was distinctive for people who check one or more African-descended categories, but not African American.
2. NMAAHC's "affiliated" constituencies – volunteers, local black members, and social media followers – are substantially African American, but there are noticeable components of broader African diasporic identities in all constituents except NMAAHC staff.⁹

⁶ Respondents could also choose non-African-descended categories per the US Census, such as White/Caucasian or American Indian, although those non-African-descended categories were not used to define the three types of diasporic identities (e.g. a person who selected Afro-Caribbean and American Indian, would be categorized as Diasporic).

⁷ Phase 1 report, May 2016, p. 4

⁸ According to NMAAHC, "African diaspora populations include, but are not limited to, African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Latin Americans, Black Canadians, the descendants of African indentured and enslaved people brought to the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America during the Atlantic slave trade, as well as later voluntary African immigrants and their descendants." Therefore, all people who originated in Africa and emigrated voluntarily or involuntarily are diasporic. However, for purposes of this research the critical issue was whether people identified themselves as African American since it's the essence of the Museum's identity. The fact that some people have multiple identities turned out to be a useful lens when compared to people who only define themselves as African American or people who do not define themselves at all as African American.

⁹ The data about heritage types from volunteers and local black members appear to be valid based on reasonable rates of responding to survey invitations; however, the data from NMAAHC staff may or may not be representative of the entire staff considering that their response to survey invitations was weaker (and yet, NMAAHC advisors on this project did not dispute that a smaller proportion of staff identify as African diasporic and not African American). Phase 1 report, May 2016, pp. 5-6.

B. African diasporic identity: are we really so different?

Why this matters: Based on the concern about being inclusive to all African heritage audiences, a key issue was whether African diasporic individuals are likely to feel included and welcomed at NMAAHC, or whether they might feel some psychological distance from the subject matter. Some lesser degree of emotional engagement could be easy to understand among people whose family history did not extend back to US slavery or to the Jim Crow segregation era. This research was charged with finding out whether African diasporic audiences identify with or feel somewhat less engaged by the African American name and spirit of the Museum, and what could help to bring them a greater sense of connection to the Museum.

Findings:

3. African diasporic audiences – people with African heritage who do not define themselves as African American but have other African-heritage identities – are strongly supportive of NMAAHC, expressing enthusiasm about its presence on the National Mall as well as enthusiasm about content themes represented by the inaugural exhibits. In fact, diasporic people are *as enthusiastic as* African Americans and ‘combination African heritage’ people about the Museum. The broad-based enthusiastic anticipation indicates that it feels like a beacon of interest, and hope for a validating experience among all people of African heritage.¹⁰
4. African Diasporic people tend to be somewhat tentative about whether they will feel engaged, have a sense of belonging, and feel acknowledged by the museum when they visit.¹¹ They are more inclined than African Americans to think that they will “feel internationally connected to the diasporic community” when visiting the Museum. And they are most likely to feel attracted to programs and events that specifically acknowledge an international and diasporic identity (e.g., Embassy-sponsored evening socials showcasing cultures from different countries in Africa or in the African diaspora).¹²
5. ‘Combination African heritage’ audiences (those who define themselves as African American and one or more other identities) tend to report their interests somewhere in between African American and African diasporic people on perceptions of content and other matters. However, the part-African-American affiliation in this ‘combination African heritage’ group aligns them more closely with African Americans on issues involving identity such as “a personal sense of belonging with the overall story” and “worried that the whole story won’t be told.”¹³

¹⁰ Phase 2 report, July 2016, pp. 2, 3, 17-18; and Phase 3 report, September 2016, pp. 6, 5.

¹¹ Phase 2 report, July 2016, pp. 2, 3, 47-49; and Phase 3 report, September 2016, pp. 6, 58.

¹² Phase 3 report, September 2016, pp. 49-51.

¹³ Phase 3 report, September 2016, pp. 6, 58.

C. Engaging diasporic audiences by addressing their interests and expectations

Why this matters: Visiting a museum is a free-choice activity; interests and expectations “drive” visitors’ experiences. A variety of facets are involved, including decisions-to-visit, making choices about what to see during a visit, as well as feelings of satisfaction from the whole of the museum experience. Therefore, examining diasporic audiences’ interests is a useful way to understand this audience in greater depth.

Findings

6. Since interest level affects people’s decisions to visit the Museum, it’s worth repeating that African diasporic audiences indicated the same high level of interest in NMAAHC compared to African American and combination African heritage respondents (~ 70% wanted to visit within the first three months of opening). African diasporic people were also enthusiastic about the Museum in general, giving the same level of rating for anticipating the experience of being ‘inspired and excited.’
7. Regarding specific content, African diasporic people indicated two top interests in inaugural exhibition topics:¹⁴
 - a) the classic history exhibit topics (slavery, segregation era) – where their interests were at virtually the same level as expressed by African Americans and combination African heritage people; and
 - b) “Cultural Expressions (language, style, foodways)” – where their interest level tended to exceed the average interest level of African Americans and combination African heritage people.

On almost all other topics, the level of interest among African diasporic people was statistically similar to the interest level among the other two audience types. However, there was one exception: diasporic people and combination African heritage people were somewhat less interested in ‘Making a Way Out of No Way’¹⁵ – possibly because this title was explained as “how African Americans acted to change and build their lives in the midst of racial oppression,” which may have resonated more with African Americans because it implies a long history of oppression and resilience. And yet this topic was still highly rated among diasporic people (4th highest out of 11 topics).

8. The expressed enthusiasm for the opening of the Museum – with African diasporic people being just as interested as African Americans in visiting early – may diminish some concerns, but there are concerns that are on the minds of the more-engaged audiences (e.g., social media followers of NMAAHC, and members). These concerns surfaced at the very beginning of the focus groups, for example, with participants’ answers to the first question on a ‘reaction sheet’ (asked before any discussion started, before any previews were shown). Their

¹⁴ Phase 3 report, September 2016, pp. 6, 35.

¹⁵ Phase 3 report, September 2016, pp. 6, 35.

concerns include acknowledgment and recognition of cultures and country origins, some skepticism about who is telling the story, and the legitimacy of their diasporic perspective of the African American narrative.¹⁶

9. African diasporic audiences indicate considerable interest in programmatic initiatives – special events, activities, workshops. And there is one outstanding indicator of their interest: if the description of the program explicitly mentions diasporic or international themes. In other words, although African diasporic audiences are likely to be just as interested as others in the inaugural exhibits, they are very likely to be engaged by programming that acknowledges African diasporic cultures. Embedded in programming ideas, phrases such as “showcasing cultures from different countries in Africa or in the African diaspora,” “the diasporic experience of recent African immigrants or about other issues important to the international African diasporic community,” and “international film festival of the African diasporic community” prompted statistically significantly higher indications of interest compared with the interest expressed by African American and ‘combination African heritage’ respondents.¹⁷

D. Anticipating useful dimensions of visitor experience

Why this matters: One the three goals for conducting this research was to “create a framework of visitor experience dimensions to characterize criteria for successful Museum visits among African diasporic audiences.” Such a framework can be used as a baseline from which to assess how visitor experience of the NMAAHC evolves over time generally, and for different subgroups, such as different categories of African-descended people, and different generational cohorts of visitors.

Context

- It was an iterative process to develop meaningful indicators of visitor experience. An initial list of terms was modified for use in focus group questionnaires, which provided a useful testing ground. Analysis and discussions ensued about which items were delivering unambiguous meanings. A proposed revision into short statements was reviewed in a workshop with NMAAHC staff, and implemented in phase 3, the public DMV-area survey.

Findings

10. The research process yielded six phrases to assess visitor experience: five are positive, one is negative, to get a broad perspective that offers people an opportunity to express their enthusiasm as well as any misgivings. The phrases are:
 - a. Inspired and excited
 - b. Feeling internationally connected with people in the African diaspora

¹⁶ Phase 2 report, July 2016, pp. 2-4, 47-49, 55-56.

¹⁷ Phase 3 report, September 2016, p. 51.

- c. A personal sense of “belonging” with the overall story
- d. An experience that will touch me emotionally
- e. A sense of the celebration of African American culture as important in US history
- f. Worried that the whole story won’t be accurately told

These statements were measured by the question “Do these phrases seem likely to describe your experience of this Museum?” The scale offered four possible answers for each phrase: no, a little, some, and a lot. Of the five positive statements, ratings of “a lot” were quite strong for three phrases (e, a, & d: averaging ~60-65%), and reasonably positive for the other two phrases (c & b: averaging ~46-50%). Since ‘b’ is the declaration about feeling connected with the African diaspora, and since it was the lowest-rated positive phrase, this suggests that the Museum has a challenge in promoting this aspect of visitors’ experience, even though the overall mantle of African American history and culture will be perceived by most visitors as the dominant theme. The one negative phrase (f: with ~15-25% average response) is not such a consensus idea, but still suggests the presence of some people’s concerns.

11. The six phrases about visitor experience have heuristic value:

- There is room both for improvement and decline in people’s affinity for these dimensions of their experience.
- Three of the phrases (e, a, d) show great consensus among all categories of black respondents. Will this level of consensus endure among visitors after the first six months or a year from opening?
- Three of the phrases (b, c, f) vary *depending on* African-heritage identity (noted earlier in finding 4). Two phrases (c and e) vary by generation (younger millennials - people age 18-26 - are significantly less likely than others to feel strongly a personal “sense of belonging” with the overall story or to experience a strong “sense of celebration of the African America culture as important in US history”). It will be interesting to monitor how these differences evolve over time.

12. Among the six dimensions of visitor experience as anticipated by local black audiences - African American, African diasporic, and combination African heritage - their highest expectation is that this Museum will demonstrate the importance of African American history and culture in U.S. history (phrase ‘e’ above). This finding anticipates an endorsement of Director Bunch’s point that African American history IS American history. It is also further evidence of the idea of a ‘beacon’ of importance that audiences are attributing to this representation of African American history and culture on the National Mall in the nation’s capital.