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English Narrative Essay

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Holding this morning paper from the NY Times, my slowed followed the museum group into the exhibit. My eyes scanned today's headline, "Black Lives Matter: Protesting police brutality and institutional racism." For the past few years, African Americans have been targeted by police brutality and inequality in the justice system. The media has shifted away from reporting black on black crime to attributing these horrendous events to racism. As I lifted my head from the newspaper, I read the words "The Trial of Dr. Beck: Revealing the intraracial struggles of African American Communities". It stared at me in dark black letters with a dark leathery background supporting it. My interest in this exhibit instantly peaked as I realized I had stumbled on something that had been lacking from mainstream media. The discussion of interracial discrimination and the problems African Americans face in their communities.

I quickly moved on to the introduction of the exhibit. After reading the first portion of the introduction, I understood the main artifact the author chose. "The Trial of Dr. Beck" was not an actual trial but the name of a play script. The play connected well with the topic of intraracial discrimination as the main theme of the play was about skin color and social and financial standing within the African American community. Skin color was one of the factors I did not expect to see when it came to intraracial discrimination. Next in paragraph is an introduction to the Harlem Renaissance. The name Duke Ellington stood out for me as I recognized him as one of the pioneers of Jazz music. However, Langston Hughes was not a name I have heard before. The main point of the introduction was allowing African Americans to develop their own social and artistic ideas without the shackles of western culture.

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The first part of the exhibition was titled “How Looks Defined a Person”. I noticed that the title was in past tense as this section acted as a prelude of the actual theme of the story. This portion of the exhibit gives us background information that is essential to the flow of the exhibit. The first artifact was a sketch from a scientific article in the 1899. It shows the face structure and looks of three races; The Irish Iberian, Anglo-Teutonic and Negro. The sketches showed a distinct difference between each race. The Anglo-Teutonic was drawn to have a taller and skinnier head shape with more “human like” features. The Irish and Negro sketches were more similar with smaller and rounder head shapes. My first impression of the sketch was that the Irish and Negro races resembled our previous ancestors like the Neanderthals and Apes. The Anglo-Teutonic was more closely related to sketches of humans we see in textbooks today. After reading the captions, I learned that this so called scientific fact was the catalyst of western racism against African Americans. The belief that Negroes was the inferior race based on science and research became a crutch for the development of African American individualism.

The next artifact is a photo from the book *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*. This photo is another example of how Negro's were stereotyped into being an inferior race. The photo shows two different types of African Americans. The first is the “criminal” which is depicted to have higher heads and lighter skin. While the “civil insane” African American is thought to have shorter and small heads with darker skin. I realized that the description and differences are so specific that having thinner nasal tips can separate a criminal from an insane civilian. From this artifact, the exhibit introduces the study of Eugenics. Eugenics is the belief that only humans with superior genetic traits should be allowed to breed in order to improve the human race as a whole. The movement allowed governments to dictate who has the right to bear children and to sterilize those who did not possess positive genetic traits. This

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further reinforced the inferiority of African Americans compared to European Americans. Facts like these are hardly ever talked about in discussion and main stream media. A lot of this information has been buried or forgotten.

Moving to the picture of the old west courtroom, I initially noticed that the only African American in this still image was the one on trial. The judge, the jury and most of the participants in the trial are white. This picture reminded me of scenes in the novel, "To Kill A Mocking Bird". It portrays the institutional inequality of the justice system and the racist mentality towards African Americans. This artifact showed me the results caused by the first two images. The images containing scientific proof of white superiority caused a large divide between African Americans and Whites, which lead to the inequality of power shown in the artifact of the courtroom. The second last picture of this category is a photo named "Woman with Earrings lying on cloth with hair up." At first, I did not understand the significance of this picture. It had nothing to do with play while I could not think of any connection with slavery and oppression to earrings and hair. The first aspect I noticed about this picture was that the woman looked like she was on a hospital bed with white sheets beneath and above her. Upon reading the captions, I understood the significance of hair in this exhibit. Looking back to the title of this section, "How Looks Defined a Person" I quickly realized that hair of a definitive aspect of how one looked. Through the caption I learned that curled hair was seen as part of African American culture like dreadlocks today. Straight hair on the other hand was a symbol of wealth and success as most white people had straight hair. This still image portrays the desire for African Americans to become more "white." By straightening her hair, she will be perceived by society as successful. From this example, I noticed that many in the African American communities could not accept themselves for who they are and wanted to pursue greatness even if it meant changing their

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culture and beliefs. The last artifact in this section reveals the integration of African Americans into Western Culture. The photo shows a group of African American men dress in suits and bow ties. One of the men is smoking a cigar while the others hold their top hats. This picture shows the transition of African American culture from starting as slaves to equals or almost equals in terms of social and economic standing to European Americans.

Soon, the main artifact of this exhibit was shown. “The Trial of Dr. Beck” was printed in bold, brown letters like the morning newspaper headline. Underneath was the centerpiece of the entire exhibit, the play script that was teased throughout the introduction. The script was a small and worn out black book with the golden letters “THE TRIAL OF DR. BECK” imprinted on its cover. Reading the caption for the artifact, I understood the reason that this play was the connection that tied together this exhibit. The play focused on two important conflicts in the African American community of the 1930’s, Skin Color and the Social and Economic success of African Americans. Both of these themes were introduced throughout the exhibit. Beginning with the first artifact, the author tied together skin color and how science believed it determined a person’s values. With each sequential photo, the exhibit provided instances where skin color was the deterrent factor of success. Flipping through the first pages of the book, I noticed the character page was marked with highlights and captions. I noticed that African American and White actors were separated into two groups. This was extremely odd as most plays did not discriminate between the races of actors. Further examining the actor’s list, I noticed extremely small details for casting choices. From the detail physic of each actors body to the darkness of their skin color, each physical characteristic was clearly listed and bolded. Comparing the character Beck to other African American characters, I realized a distinct difference in their skin color. Dr. Beck had olive skin, followed by the descriptions handsome and distinguished. The

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other African American character which had very black skin had negative descriptions such as short and chubby or very thin. The importance of this page was to show that even between African American communities, skin color and appearance fuelled discourse between people. However, the separation of character races symbolized the separation of African Americans from European culture.

Building upon the idea of accepting and developing one's own culture, the exhibit introduced me to one of the most important events in African American history. The words "The Harlem Renaissance" was plastered on top of two pictures and an printed out essay. The first thing I noticed was the name Duke Ellington as I recognized him as one of the pioneers of Jazz music. Examine the picture; Duke Ellington was standing in front a neon sign what said Apollo. I immediately recognized The Apollo Theater as it was the birth place of the famous Jazz singer Elle Fitzgerald. The theater was one of the centerpiece locations in the development of Jazz and Sing in the 1930's. With this background information I understood the reason this iconic location was included into the exhibit. The author wanted to show the development of African American culture starting with its music and arts. The Apollo Theater proved to not only African Americans but to the western world that African Americans have the capacity to invent and create. By developing a mainstream musical genre, the social views towards African Americans changed from being slaves and inferior to equals whose music is love by many. The second picture showed an African American man holding anstatue that resembles tribal African art. Next to this picture sat the transcript of a speech titled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." The picture portrays Langston Hughes, one of the most important poet and artist during the Harlem Renaissance. The essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" was credited to being the manifesto for the Harlem Renaissance movement. The main idea of his essay was for

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African American artist to embrace their culture and heritage. It tells young poets and musicians to create without the shackles of western views. It did not matter if white people are pleased by their advancement, people needed to express ideas that promoted their cultures. This message resonated throughout the entire exhibit as the author discussed this important value in every artifact. As the last picture of this exhibit, I thought the words Langston Hughes summarized this exhibit perfectly.

Starting with oppressions and the modeling of self-hating views by western propaganda, the exhibit introduced me to the internal struggles of the African American community. Combining the weight of oppression and western propaganda, African Americans had to work under institutional racism in order to rise to the top. Many sacrificed their own cultures and appearance by becoming more “white” in order to be successful under a false light. Moving to the main artifact, I saw the importance of Hughes Allison’s, the creator of “The Trial of Dr. Beck”, influence in African American theater. His play revealed internal struggles between African American communities and implored his audience to embrace their own culture instead of sacrificing important history to become someone else. Lastly, Duke Ellington and Langston Hughes showed me the importance of incorporating African American culture into art and culture. These two artists are living proof that African Americans as a race is equal to European Americans. With the music of Duke Ellington accompanied by the words of Langston Hughes, the author of this exhibit concluded this exhibit by showing his audience the changes the Harlem Renaissance made towards African American cultures.