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A Walk Through My Exhibit

The world today is facing issues regarding race and class that mimic the struggles of the Civil Rights era of the 50's and 60's. I've had an interest in this situation for some time. For this reason, my friends suggested that I go visit the new exhibit. It is an exhibit about Lorraine Hansberry and her novel *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play that I've heard of but never knew much about. I bought a ticket for the exhibit and headed over full of curiosity. I got to the building that housed the exhibit. There rested a sign on the top of the building with the name of the exhibit: *The Two Sides of 'There Goes the Neighborhood'*. Looking at the name, it's kind of funny but I feel that it invokes a sense of discomfort. There was a time when people would say, 'there goes the neighborhood,' and actually meant it. Now, this exhibit is using that name to almost literally imply that the neighborhood is leaving through the act of gentrification. That's eerie but unfortunately quite prevalent today.

I walked under the sign and into the building where I submitted my ticket and entered the doors to the exhibit. I entered a square room with a door on the other side and a book in the middle. The walls were an egg white. That book is of course the main inspiration for the entire exhibit: an original copy of *A Raisin in the Sun*. The cover was quite radiant. It was a bright red with little on it but the name of the play. The cover was clearly aged, but it was obvious that it was kept in good condition. Holding the play was a wooden stand with a silver plaque on it. The plaque gave information on the play like who wrote it and when it was first performed. Below that information was a small summary of the play as well as why it is important to society. The summary mentioned how Hansberry put much of herself in *A Raisin in the Sun*, such as her opinions on race, gender, and sexuality. It also talks about how this play gives insight into things called 'racial restrictive covenants' which Hansberry went through personally as a child. The characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* go through the same problem as Hansberry. After I finished reading the

plaque, I looked up to see a banner above the door with the full name of the exhibit on it. It said "*The Two Sides of 'There Goes the Neighborhood': Examining Housing Restrictions Using Lorraine Hansberry's Views on Class and Race*". I walked through the door to the next section of the exhibit.

In this new room, there was a TV in the middle of the room with the rest of the exhibit behind it such that you must walk around to continue. The TV displayed a picture of Lorraine Hansberry in front a typewriter looking very classy. In the background, there is audio from an interview with Hansberry. In the interview, she talks about the struggles that she faced in Chicago during her youth. While listening to her interview, I read the plaque underneath the TV that explained the interview and gave a little context to the situation. It was helpful because I wasn't aware of Hansberry's past or her connection to the characters in the play. I thought it was fascinating how she had a piece of herself or a loved one in her characters. I listened to her views on acclimation and thought about that idea for a second. I thought about how, in the time, acclimation seemed necessary to thrive. To be anything but white was dangerous so to advance in life one must develop a 'white' lifestyle. I think this interview was very helpful in giving an understanding of Hansberry's life while writing the play and where she gained inspiration for the characters and plot. I walked behind the TV towards the rest of the exhibit.

Behind the TV was a sign that specified the section of the exhibit: *The Examination of Racial Restrictive Covenants*. The font appeared to pop off the sign. There was an introduction on the wall that gave a little background on the idea of racial restrictive covenants. The basic idea is that neighborhoods or other various housing options could restrict residents to a specific race. It's hard to believe something like housing could be so oppressive. It was legal to refuse someone something so fundamental: the right to property. The introduction mentioned other problems that arise from housing restrictions and more broadly refusal of such fundamental things. The main problem mentioned is a type of systemic problem facing minorities which will be discussed inside the exhibit.

Moving past the introduction I could see an old page from what looked to be a rule book of some kind. It was clearly old and worn, covered in stains from the passage of time. The page said "RACIAL

RESTRICTIONS” right in the middle followed by the specifics of this rule. It basically says that no other person but ‘White or Caucasian race’ people could move in to the neighborhood. This shocked me at first because although I knew it was a thing, I never expected it to be so blatant. The plaque underneath the paper talked about the issue mentioned in the introduction for the section: systemic issues. Systemic issues are ones that have become engrained in a system such that they become difficult to remove. The plaque talked about how it was difficult for minorities and underprivileged people to get out the hard environments because they simply weren’t allowed to move anywhere else. The lack of mobility causes those minority, often deteriorated neighborhoods to stay that way. Because they never change, the neighborhoods are underfunded and therefore difficult to leave because nobody can make enough to get out. This is what the exhibit describes as a systemic issue.

The next artifact was a picture on the other side of the room that focused on Lorraine Hansberry and another guy with an audio clip playing in the background. Per the caption, this is Mike Wallace from *60 Minutes*. The interview was apparently an unaired portion of Hansberry’s interview with *60 Minutes*. Mike Wallace mentions that some people think Hansberry won her awards and earned her praise because she was black. This thought shocked me because of the time in which this interview took place. How could people say that her race was the reason she was being praised and then immediately turn around and oppress her for the color of her skin? Soon after Hansberry says what I was thinking: it would be the first time in US history where being black was an advantage. The exhibit talked about how this was a way for white people to undermine the accomplishments of people of color. I looked at the picture again and tried to imagine what that could mean and how that happens. A sign says I will learn more about this in the next section. I continued through a wooden archway to the next room.

In the next room was a sign that said the name of this section: ‘Raisin in the Revitalized Neighborhood: A Discussion on Gentrification’. I thought the name was funny. Revitalized neighborhoods are another name for gentrified neighborhoods. Using the name of the main artifact and combining it with the topic of the exhibit is clever. The first artifact I see is a playbill from a show called ‘Clybourne Park’ by Bruce Norris. The picture on the front is a sign post that has two signs saying the

same word: Clybourne Park. The signs are black and white which I assume symbolizes the main theme of the play: the crossroads between the black and white members of some society. Apparently, this is a play that uses the same characters from *A Raisin in the Sun* to talk about modern day housing restrictions. The first act covers the events before the climax of the original play. Karl Lindner is about to tell the Youngers that they shouldn't move in. The second act is set in the modern day and takes place in the same house the Youngers moved to almost 60 years earlier. The neighborhood has become predominately black. A white family has decided to buy the house and tear it down to build a nicer house. The descendants of the Youngers think of this as a form of gentrification and decide to stop it. The justification the descendant makes is that the house has more value than its price. The house symbolizes a triumph in the black community. The play covers the topics of acclimation and extermination of black culture through the 'revitalization' of deteriorated neighborhoods. I now get the point earlier in the exhibit when it was mentioned how white people can undermine certain cultures by essentially not allowing them to thrive. As in Clybourne Park, the white family is quite literally destroying a symbol of progress and replacing it with their own, 'better' version of the house.

I made my way to the opposite side of the room to see an intriguing picture. The picture is a black and white photo from 1969 that focuses on a large sign placed on the side of a building. The sign talks about the attempts by the city of Boston to remove the residents of a low-income neighborhood for gentrification to take place. The plaque underneath explains the process by which gentrification typically happens. The first step is to remove the residents of the area. Many loopholes have been discovered that allow for the forced eviction of residents such as the tenant retiring or the building being sold. I can't imagine what I would do if I were forced to be evicted from my home with no plan as to where to go. This occurrence, though, is far more common than I thought and I now understand the affect it has on the residents. The picture portrays a community that fought back against the attempts by the higher-class to gentrify their neighborhood with success. This shows that the people of these neighborhoods are equal and deserve to be treated with the same respect as others regardless of wealth and race. I turned away to see the next part of the exhibit.

I walked over to a TV showing a video of a young man. The man's name is Kai, a resident of the Mission District in San Francisco. Kai is walking around his old neighborhood showing the parts that have changed. He shows the new luxury additions that replaced some of the old buildings that he used to visit, like restaurants and clothing stores. Just like the buildings he visited, Kai's home was replaced forcing him to leave. Kai shows the buildings he was forcefully evicted from. This was an emotional moment because the eviction caused him to be homeless as a young child. One of the main portions of the video is when Kai visits a park where he used to play soccer. A video of Kai talking to some young tech workers about the usage of the soccer field went viral. Kai was arguing with the tech workers about the usage of the field. The workers booked the field, something the 'locals' didn't do because the purpose, to the locals, of the field was to be public at all times. The video shows the beginning of gentrification. Wealthy people move into the neighborhood and begin to make the cost of living there higher by restricting access or demanding more expensive housing. The video stood out because it put a face to the issue. Kai is a real person that is undergoing the struggles brought on by gentrification and forced eviction. I never imagined those struggles, but seeing those struggles gave me perspective on the situation.

This exhibit was insightful regarding the issues that faced people of color and lower income families with respect to housing restrictions. As I walked through it, I learned about a lot of issues and how Lorraine Hansberry's work was directly influenced by those issues. The portion on restrictive covenants taught me not only about the problems that minorities faced trying to find a place to live, but the other effects that those restrictions had. Those other affects were the constant undermining of minority accomplishments and significance. The other portion of the exhibit taught me about the modern aspect of housing restrictions, for instance gentrification. I learned a lot about gentrification and the many effects that it had on the culture of people of color. The process 'revitalizing' a neighborhood is also the process of eliminating culture. As someone who hasn't faced that issue in person, this is the best way for me to learn and then try to help.