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“Unknowingly Building Fences between the Two of Us”

The brochure provided to me at the entrance of the enormous Woodruff Library did little to calm my excitement as I tried not to sprint towards the curated exhibit: ‘*Prolonged Discrimination Against a Community: Building Fences Within the Community and the Cause for Mistrust and Disunity*’. Too impatient to wait for the elevator, I took the dreaded stairs and scurried to the fourth floor. After letting go of a few precious seconds of my time here to catch my breath, I entered the exhibit....

The first thing that caught my attention when I entered the exhibit was the large bold title. The wording and presentation of the title was captivating and sparked my curiosity. The curator did a good job in grabbing my attention at the very beginning of the exhibit by introducing me to a broad and thought-provoking title. Furthermore, the light grey paint on the walls, along with the polished walnut wooden floor matched very well with the modern font of the text. This added an exquisite modern touch to an exhibit that is focused very much on the past and I found this extremely appealing and was eager to progress through the exhibit and learn more.

As I entered the next room of the exhibit, I was beckoned towards the introduction of the exhibit by the presence of two large black and white pictures. It was almost as if the curator wanted me to walk this way and not in any other direction. The introduction began with a broad sentence about African American history during the 1950s and was accompanied by the two pictures mentioned above. Both pictures were from the Robert Langmuir Photograph Collection:

the first was of Martin Luther King Jr and the second was of 5 African American men and women holding strike signs outside a hospital. The second picture depicted one of the many social movements that took place during that time period. Furthermore, the use of pictures in the introduction itself was quite clever as it helped me visually place myself in that time period. I could see myself in the shoes of an African American in the 1950s and this was only possible because of the presence of visual aids to assist me in my thought process. The two pictures were followed by appropriate labels and captions, ensuring authenticity. After viewing the pictures and reading their captions, I began to try and establish a connection between the title of the exhibit and the African American history in the 1950s presented in the introduction so far. After considering all the different possible connections, I was curious to see if what I thought was close to the actual purpose of the exhibit and eagerly progressed to the next section.

In the next section of the introduction, the curator narrowed down to one aspect of the broad topic of African American history and where he made the claim that this exhibit would eventually prove and substantiate with examples. The claim was that prolonged discrimination against the African American community during the 1950s slowly divided the community into two sides with two extreme beliefs. This, I felt, was the most crucial part of the presentation as the curator had to convince his audience that such an event did take place and that this claim could be true. To accomplish this the curator first provided a small background on the writing style of famous writer and poet August Wilson with one beautiful sentence. I feel that it'll be easier for me to provide the original sentence below rather than writing it in my own words and butchering what it was trying to convey:

“August Wilson is known for his ability to put into words the ideas and experiences of everyday African Americans, who have long been caricatured, relegated to the periphery, or displaced altogether in drama created by playwrights from mainstream white society.”

After introducing August Wilson, the curator then used an interesting example from the play *Fences* written by the author. The example revolved around Troy Maxson, the primary protagonist, and his son, Cory Maxson. Troy Maxson was a single head of family who struggled to provide for his family. Even though Troy was a great baseball player, he could not progress in this career path due to the presence of racial discrimination in the field of professional sports in that era. This leads a frustrated Troy to believe that racial discrimination against the African American community was not going to stop anytime soon. His son, Cory, on the other hand firmly believed that African Americans were slowly being treated as equals by the rest of society. This slowly caused a divide in the family.

By building on the example given in *Fences*, the curator expertly develops the example of Troy and Cory Maxson to a broad theme that concerned all African Americans during that time period. At this point I realized that the exhibit deals with a much deeper theme than what I had initially thought of and this led me to appreciate the work the curator has put into this exhibit. I also felt that the curator did an excellent job in slowly building up to the theme of the exhibit by providing a historical context along with suitable examples. Often times, exhibits jump to the theme at hand without any examples and information to support the claim but Dr. Jalan convinced me, through extensive historical research, that the theme of the play was not merely just a claim.

Now that the appetizers had been served, it was time for the main course: the exhibit itself. Buzzing from the extremely well presented introduction, I almost ran to the next room to

view the exhibit itself. After what felt like an eternity but was only a few short minutes, I reached the exhibit room. The exhibit contained pictures and newspapers from various databases. On first look, there was no apparent order on which each artifact was arranged but on closer inspection I found the significance of the arrangement.

The exhibit began with a newspaper clipping from 1955, taken from the Atlanta Constitution, that talked about the abduction and murder of an African American teenager, named Emmett, at the hands of two white males. The clipping was followed by a label and a caption; the caption does a beautiful job in linking the article to the main theme of the exhibit by explaining how the majority of the white society in the 1950s racially discriminated against African Americans. In this example, the two males murdered the young boy because he allegedly wolf whistled to try and capture the attention of the wife of one of the males. After carefully examining this clipping, I became infuriated by how African Americans were treated during the 1950s. However, before I could vent out this anger, my attention moved to another newspaper clipping taken from the *New York Times* in 1954. This clipping was placed right next to the first clipping and provided the full text of the United States Supreme Court's decision to ban black segregation in public schools. This clipping was also followed by a beautiful caption that cleverly linked the artifact back to the theme of the exhibit. The caption stated how winning the battle in the Supreme Court was a major milestone for African Americans in securing equal rights. The caption also states how this milestone supported Cory Maxson's view of how African Americans were slowly being treated as equals. As I read the captions of these two articles, I calmed down and began to contemplate how, as an African American living in that era, I would be both mentally and physically affected by these events.

The next section of the exhibit had a similar approach to that of the previous one. This section contained two newspaper clippings: the first was taken from the *Daily Boston Globe* in 1955 and the second was taken from the *Los Angeles Times* in 1957. The newspaper clipping from the *Daily Boston Globe* was a follow up to the previous clipping regarding the murder of the African American teenager. However, what the curator cleverly managed to do here was provide two different aspects to the same incident. The first clipping introduced me to white males that kidnapped and allegedly murdered a small boy, thereby instilling anger and hate towards the two suspects. However, the second article provided factual information on the case itself, such as why the brothers performed such a deed in the first place and what the result of the courtroom battle was. Through both the articles, I managed to catch a glimpse into the mind of a typical white man during that time period while also taking a glimpse into society's views on African Americans during the 1950s. The second clipping, taken from the *Los Angeles Times*, was of the victory of the Milwaukee Braves over the New York Yankees in the Baseball World Series in 1957. The clipping doesn't say much other than the match statistics and player performances, but as always, there was a clever caption that clearly provided information on the significance of the victory, here the significance being that an African American baseball player Henry "Hank" Aaron led the Braves to victory with his exceptional batting skills. According to the caption, Aaron batted with a .393 during that match and hit three home runs. Now, I'm no expert at baseball statistics but three home runs? Anyone would know that hitting three home runs is an extraordinary feat. This also proved that African Americans could not only play alongside white athletes, but also be superior to them and be pioneers in the field of professional sports. At this point I was going through an emotional turmoil as I began to relate back to the

example of Troy and Cory and how the fight between them started because of the state of African Americans in professional sports.

The last two artifacts displayed in the exhibit were from the Robert Langmuir African American Photograph collection. The first is a picture of Rosa Parks with a caption beneath the image giving information on how and why she was arrested in December of 1959. The second picture is of a 105-year-old former African American slave who is registering to vote for the first time. One oddity that stood out for me was that the year this picture was taken was 1965, and this broke the general trend the exhibit was following. The general trend being that each newspaper article and image was from the 1950s. However, after reading the caption beneath the image to find out more about it I saw the irony present. Troy Maxson believed that racial discrimination against African Americans would not end in the near future. He held on to this belief until he died in 1965. The irony here is that the year Troy Maxson died was the same year this 105-year-old former slave registered to vote for the first time.

At this point of the exhibit there were many general patterns and trends I noticed after the first few artifacts in the exhibit. Firstly, each section of the exhibit contained two artifacts; secondly, all artifacts in the exhibit were arranged in chronological order and; thirdly, what I noticed was that, of the two artifacts in the section, one showed an example of racial discrimination against African Americans while the other showed an example where African Americans were treated as equals. This, along with the fact that each was arranged in chronological order, made me come to the conclusion that the exhibit aimed to show its audience that, during the mid 1950s there were instances of both events of racial discrimination against African Americans and events where African American were treated as equals. This cleverly leads back to the initial example from the play *Fences*. Quite a few African Americans slowly

started to believe that the racial discrimination against them will not stop anytime soon. This was further reinforced by the events such as the incident of Emmett and when Rosa Parks was demanded to give up her seat on the bus. However, on the other end of the spectrum, there were those who instead chose to believe that racial discrimination was slowly coming to an end and the rest of society was starting to treat African Americans as equals, thus causing the divide. This belief was reinforced by events such as the Braves winning the World Series and the Supreme Court outlawing racial segregation in schools.

By the conclusion written above I can say that I was able to clearly understand the significance behind arranging each artifact in that particular order. I felt that the curator did an extremely good job in explaining his claim and providing examples to support it. However, for those who were not able to understand the importance of the object orientation, the next section of the exhibit provided a similar description as the one I have written above. This section is also important in its own rite as it reminds its audience about how the artifacts presented in the exhibit link back to the primary theme established in the introduction and description of this exhibit. For example, I was mesmerized by each artifact and the history and significance behind that it that I had forgotten that each artifact is a part of a larger theme but this slide refreshed my mind and reminded me of the major theme.

The final part of this curated exhibit is the conclusion. The conclusion consisted of a culmination of a story that started with one simple sentence: “African American history during the late 1950s is filled with movements and struggles that were pivotal for African Americans to gain equal footing with people from other, more dominant, races” and ended with a deep understanding of the mentality of African Americans in the 1950s and how the prolonged discrimination against them affected their day to day activities. The conclusion not only very

clearly and articulately describes how the mentality of African Americans was affected by the prolonged discrimination against them, but also generalized it to all communities that face discrimination in the world today. Today, for example, Muslims are discriminated against due to the activities of the terrorist group known as ISIS. This discrimination against Muslims will sooner or later take the same path as the discrimination against African Americans during the 1950s. Ultimately, the Muslim community will end up facing prolonged discrimination and this will most likely result in the same divide that was caused in the African American community all those years ago. What the curator succeeds in doing here, and this is something I feel is very important, is link something that happened a very long time ago to the present. This exhibit and its claims and conclusion apply very well in today's world, as seen above. It is also for this reason that the curator cleverly titled his exhibit in such a way that it did not specifically talk about the African community in general, but rather, all communities. The end of the conclusion also consisted of guiding questions I could use to further research on African American history. However, in one of the questions (shown below):

*“Say, taking **two trains** and **running** ten years into the future, what could have been the state of the African American Community?”*

a few of the words were in bold. After all the effort put into making this exhibit an enormous success I knew that these words were in bold for a reason so I pulled out my phone and searched for '**Two Trains Running**' and lo and behold, it was another play written by August Wilson himself. I sat down on one of the comfy chairs I didn't notice before because I was so hooked on to the exhibit and began reading the summary of this play. In short, *Two Trains Running* talks about the state of African Americans in the late 1960s. This was a perfect place for me to start my research on African American history. I looked up from my phone and could not help but let

out a small laugh as I thought about the curator's intelligence and his ability to insert something so subtle into the exhibit.

I reached the end of the exhibit and turned around to absorb its beauty one last time before slowly walking out of the building, smiling to myself.

After spending many hours contemplating and thinking about the vast amount of information provided by Dr. Arnav Jalan's extensive research, I have come to a personal conclusion that this curated exhibit is very unique and provides a very different aspect of African American history than what is usually seen in most exhibits today. The exhibit itself used very clear font and used a decent font size so that it wasn't tough to read the information. Each newspaper clipping and picture was of high quality and was easy to distinguish. Also, the information presented in the exhibit was very cleanly spaced out and not cramped. Overall, the exhibit was extremely well presented; it did a very good job of keeping me hooked and I could not divert my attention away from the exhibit. I have previously been to historical exhibits that focus on African American history and culture but all these exhibits focused on events such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s and educated their audience on the struggle the African Americans were put through in order to gain equal rights. However, I had not come across any exhibit that explicitly described the mentality of the African Americans while they were being racially discriminated against and while they were fighting for their rights. Dr. Jalan's exhibit, at least for me, is a first that goes in depth into the mindset of the community that is being discriminated against. Further, Dr. Jalan also manages to successfully link his findings and conclusions in the exhibit to real-world problems that still exist today. Most importantly, the exhibit clearly presents a claim in the introduction and then supports the claim with text and

examples in the following slides. I felt that there was adequate information, both from the play *Fences* and from the artifacts provided, to clearly authenticate the claim set forth.