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Narrative Essay: An In-Depth Look at Black Identity

This exhibit is a refreshing departure from the hate and chaos that has begun to seize our society. Comprised of only six pieces, this exhibit tackles one of the nation's most pressing dilemmas: identity. Aside from the central focus of the exhibition, the title itself is especially eye catching. It is the first thing viewers see upon entering the exhibit. The large, bold and bright typography of the exhibition title denotes heightened purpose. Before reading the introduction and examining the artifacts, the intentions of the exhibit are already well defined. From the title, I gathered that the exhibit was an examination of black identity. The conspicuousness of the opening sequence commands my attention and the intentionally broad phrasing peaks my curiosity. I am compelled to delve into the exhibit.

Not surprisingly, the exhibit becomes more focused and I now have a framework for what I am about to see and witness. Here I am given a time period, and a listing of the types of artifacts I will soon see. Once more, the stance the exhibit takes on identity and its correlation to Civil Rights and *A Raisin in the Sun* only heighten my intrigue. Having been provided context and essential topics to consider, I am eager to explore the exhibit. I fervently await the first artifact.

The exhibition is arranged in the shape of a circle, where viewers are directed in a counter clockwise direction. The first artifact I approach, a poem by Langston Hughes, serves as an introduction for the rest of the exhibit. The simple, type writer font of the text against the white background is very striking. The look of the poem appeals to the retro theme and time period of this portion of the exhibition. By the end of the exhibit it quickly becomes evident to me that this starting poem is an outlier of sorts among the exhibit. But I think the curator's decision to open with this artifact was very strategic because it provides context. It eases viewers into the exhibit before getting into the most crucial points on identity. Viewers do not have to have read *A Raisin in the Sun* to know its importance to the exhibit. By reading

the words of Langston Hughes, exhibitors know the major connections between the central artifact, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the theme of the exhibit.

After viewing the large image of *Harlem*, I proceed to the next artifact; the strategically placed walls and organization of the pieces aid in directing me from artifact to artifact. To the left of the poem is an original manuscript of Lorraine Hansberry's, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Surrounding the manuscript is a series of photos from the first few opening pages of the book. Upon first viewing the original copy of the play, my immediate reaction is awe. I am excited to see an actual, authentic manuscript. I take note of the official look of the manuscript. It is not just a rough draft; the neat type and red leather bound cover indicated that this is a completed work. I also see that there are article clippings and reviews of the play attached to the first few pages of the book. I know that the artifact was at a stage well past rough and final drafts; the play was already open to the public at the time this copy was made, and not surprisingly, the play was very well received. I found the article clippings to be quite fascinating because not only do they highlight the extent of the play's popularity, but they also add a very human and emotional quality to the artifact. I imagine Hansberry attached the articles to her play because she was very proud of its success. The caption of the artifact provides viewers with a very thorough summary of the play. Detailed knowledge of the play is not necessary, the caption, manuscript, and additional images of the script are impactful enough. The artifact's clear connection to identity resonates with me even as I walk towards the next artifact.

As I continue on the circular layout of the exhibit I approach a large black and white photo. The stained, faded boarder and retro appliances in the background and forefront of the picture indicate its age. The woman in the photo is shown in her kitchen cooking a meal. Her face is obscured because her head is bent at an angle that allows her to cook. Although her face is not clearly shown, it is evident that the woman is happy and smiling. Clothed in an apron and surrounded by food and cooking appliances, the woman appears to be at ease working in the kitchen. She expresses great enjoyment in cooking. As written in the caption, other than the date and photographer, the context of the image is unknown. I cannot place whether this picture was a candid photo or staged in some way. There is an odd sense of artificial

happiness in this photo. The woman appears to be almost *too* happy to be doing menial kitchen tasks. Of course the woman may truly enjoy cooking, and there is nothing wrong with that if she does, but, I cannot deny the striking stereotypical undertones of this image. Nearly everything about the photograph highlights the stereotypes of 1950s housewives and African American housekeepers. The figure's clothing, facial expression, actions, and setting highlight the misogyny against black women of that era. Once more, the quotes adjacent to the image reinforce this idea. I really appreciate the selection of quotes. Both speak of identity but from different perspectives.

As I finish reading the caption on the black and white image and finish my contemplation of the artifact, a screen catches my eye. I see a set of computers all with the same slideshow of images playing on the monitor. I walk towards the sleek computers because they are the next stop in the circular arrangement of the exhibit. As I get closer, I notice that a set of bulky black headphones are connected to each computer and I understand that what I will be seeing next is not a slideshow but an interview of some sort. Upon fitting on the large headphones, I am surprised to hear Hansberry's voice; I am struck by the sound of it. Hansberry is being interviewed by a man named Mike Wallace but for some time I cannot even concentrate on the questions. It is so fascinating to connect a literal voice to all of Hansberry's work and influence. She sounds exactly how I would expect her to sound; intellectual, confident and wise. There is also something about her voice that is otherworldly, she does not sound like someone from this time period. Her retro tone befits the 60's era. I see that this artifact is a continuation of the previous artifact because it directly tackles labels. When I direct my attention to the interview, I understand that it is meant to illustrate the prevalence of labels. Mike Wallace hints that Hansberry's success is most likely due to the fact that she is African American. In that one line, Hansberry was profiled and stereotyped because of her race; her talent was undermined. The quote from the interview, which is displayed on the wall beside the computers, is unassuming and impactful at the same time. The small sentence but piercing quote adds emotion to an already poignant artifact.

For the remainder of the exhibit I notice a very clear departure from the previous artifacts. There is an abundance of color and an undeniable expression of modernity in the style and set up of the coming

artifacts. As I near the end of the circle, I see a striking six-piece color image of an African American man in a series of different looks and outfit styles. I cannot detect a specific pattern; each of the six images appear to be scattered in no particular order. The first image my gaze falls on is a man dressed in a crisp, clean suit. Interestingly, beside and below the suited image of the man are images that tell very different stories. To the right of the image of the man wearing a suit, is the same man wearing an undershirt, a short sleeved flannel, and a sideways cap. Directly below the suited image, is an outfit reminiscent of the 90s rapper, Tupac: the man wears only an undershirt and a black bandanna around his head. In the remaining photos, the model wears a collared, stark white button up shirt with a tipped fedora, and a black windbreaker. In one panel he wears the windbreaker with his hood down and in the other he wears his hood low over his head, creating a dark shadow that frames his face. It is amazing and frustrating how the change of a person's garments can have such an effect on their outward identity. The man makes the same facial expressions in each image and is even photographed under the same lighting but many different stereotypes can be attributed to each look he is photographed in. The glaring juxtaposition between the model in a suit and in an under shirt and bandanna is striking. And the solemn truth that a black male can be *threatening* just by covering his head with a hood is disheartening. To society, an African American male in a suit is far less threatening than an African American male with a hood pulled far over his head. Far too often, people jump to conclusions based on factors like race, gender, class, clothing, etc., rather than factors that actually matter like talent and personality. The caption tells me that the article highlights a rising social media movement where people of color publicize their distinct achievements and identifiers to break down identity restraints. In this climate of discourse and the great divide within the nation due to the recent election, this article is especially eye-opening. Together, the image and the article force viewers to acknowledge the stereotypes that run this country. Within the six images, centuries, stereotypes are exposed so that they can be addressed and overcome.

The final component of the exhibition, a spoken word video, is the perfect conclusion to the display. I heard the murmuring from the video throughout the entire exhibit so I am buzzing with anticipation for what I am about to see. I take a seat in a dark closed off viewing area right when the video

ends so the screen is stalled in a suspenseful black state. The surrounding sitting area is also dimly lit, the atmosphere combined with the black screen adds gravity and a sense of importance to the video; it has not even started yet. When the screen finally comes to life, the very first thing I see is a man who slowly raises his head towards the camera. He then confidently says, "I am not black", I am mesmerized by his poem from the very start. From the first words the speaker utters, to the end where every person comes together and joins hands, I gazed at the screen in rapt attention. Every word the poet says connects so seamlessly to the meaning of the exhibit. As Prince Ea continues to speak, he is replaced by people of all different ages and races. The people change but Prince Ea's words and strong voice remains constant. He speaks through different lenses but the overarching message, which is a protest against labels, can be applied to anyone. In the last seconds of the video, Prince Ea is surrounded by a diverse group of people, and the focal point of the frame is his shirt, which reads, "I Am Not a Label". When the video cuts off, and the screen goes black again, I am speechless because his words were so truthful. I love how the video adds an element to the overall exhibit that effortlessly ties everything together. The video expands on the present issues of identity but also delivers a message to the audience. Together, Prince Ea and the other subjects of the video build on the theme of identity and even push the boundaries of the topic beyond just black identity. Here, anyone watching can relate. This piece in the exhibit adds even more meaning to the elements presented thus far, and expands the scope of the exhibit to a broader audience. Watching the frame change from person to person, all the while listening to Prince Ea speak, made for a very moving work of art. So much emotion is presented in this style of spoken word. I found that the rhythm of the poem was just as powerful; some lines are spat out quickly, while others come out slowly and are left hanging in the air. What I admired the most about the video was the diversity. I saw children, infants, the elderly, families, people in religious and cultural garbs and so much more. This combined with the words and all of the artifacts I've seen so far make the exhibit very moving. The poem helps viewers reach a great realization: that there is nothing more essential than identity. While the message was grave, I left the exhibit inspired, optimistic about the future, and ready to take action. With each artifact I observed, I was filled with more and more hope that we as a nation, have the power to change this growing social justice

issue. I greatly appreciate the curator's ability to commemorate writers like Lorraine Hansberry and Langston Hughes by highlighting identity struggles from the past and then connecting those same ideas to the present. At this time especially, people must be reminded that identity and outward appearance are separate and that inner identity is far more important.