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Narrative Essay

“You cannot give up on the American dream. We cannot allow our fears and our disappointments to lead us into silence and into inaction.” This famous quote about the American Dream by Marco Rubio had always been my motto after I had visited the exhibit “Different Perspectives of the American Dream and How Characters in ‘A Raisin in the Sun’ Acted According to Their Dreams”. This exhibit was a collection of artifacts about the pursuit of the American Dream by African Americans in the mid-20th century. The exhibition also related the topic to the famous Broadway play “A Raisin in the Sun” as well as its author, Lorraine Hansberry. From viewing this exhibit, not only did I realize how difficult it has been for African Americans to pursue their American dreams during the mid- 20th century, but it also motivated me to pursue my American dream as well.

The first thing I saw as I arrived at the exhibit was the title of the exhibition and its description as well as introduction. The title, centered and in bold, was in a larger and more artistic font than that of the rest of the exhibition. The background of the exhibition showed a wooden floor with a white wall in front of the viewer. This made me feel as if I was inside a real gallery looking at the exhibit artifacts on the walls. As I examined the title, I knew that the exhibition is going to be about how different people percept their American Dreams differently. This topic could relate to “A Raisin in the Sun”, as one important theme of this famous play is

the American Dream of the Younger family. The titles on the top of the pages used a different font than the actual exhibit text, which provided a refreshing view for the viewers. The description and introduction of the exhibition first defined the American Dream, and then gave me an overview of the main theme as well as the contents of the whole exhibition. By reading the introduction, I knew that evidences that African Americans in the 20th century worked hard to try to reach their American Dreams would be present in this exhibition. Besides the pursuit of the American Dream by the general African American population, I also expected to see connections to “A Raisin in the Sun” somewhere in this exhibition.

As I moved on to the main body of the exhibition after reading the description and introductions, an image of the play “A Raisin in the Sun” attracted my attentions. The image was a photo of an original publication of the script of the play. The book had a red leather cover, with two silver pins on the left hand side that kept the papers together. In the middle of the cover of the book, the small silver words “A Raisin in the Sun” was printed capitalized. Beside the image was an ID label of the artifact, consisting of the name of the play, the name of the author, the first publication of the play and the location where the script was kept. By reading the caption following the ID label, I had obtained a brief summary of the play and an analysis of some of the main characters of the play based on the “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs”. I felt that it was fair for the curator to include the hierarchy of needs in his exhibition, because it is a well-known concept for the general public, and including the hierarchy in the exhibit could both provide further analysis of the artifact as well as guide the visitor through the play.

Beside the image of the play were a pair of headphones. This device drew my attention as I was curious about what I would hear through them. As I put on the headphones, I read the ID label of this artifact, and found out that I was about to hear an unpublished interview of the author of “A Raisin in the Sun”, Lorraine Hansberry. The ID label included a hyperlink on which I could click to access the interview on its original website. The interview was recorded in the same year as “A Raisin in the Sun” was first published. This made me more interested in listening to the recording, because what Lorraine Hansberry thought and said just after first publishing her play was a valuable piece of information for me in analyzing the play. This interview was short, and was only about a minute long, but the conversation between the journalist Mike Wallace and Lorraine Hansberry was straightforward and concise. Beside the ID label, I saw a transcript of part of the interview I just listened to. As I read the captions on the next slide, I figured that the curator of this exhibit included this interview in his exhibit because this interview provided insight into Lorraine Hansberry’s American Dream and her connections with the characters in her play.

Next to this artifact, a painting of a black girl walking with four guards around her caught my eyes. This was the only colored image in the exhibition despite the photo of “A Raisin in the Sun”. The painting seemed somewhat contradictory to me, because it made me wonder, why would a cute and harmless little girl need four guards walking beside her to protect her? Furthermore, why are there racist slurs written on the wall beside her? Thus, my curiosity urged me to read the ID label of this artifact as well as the caption of it. From reading, I learned that the girl in the painting is a six-year-old black girl named Ruby Bridges, and this painting was significant because this is the first time that a black child is going to an all-white grade school in

the American South. This picture made me feel quite angry, as the contrast between the innocent young girl and the horrible word written on the wall beside her is too large for anyone to accept. Now, I had found out the connection of this artifact to the main theme of the exhibition and I understood why the curator chose to include this particular painting in his exhibition.

I moved on to the next artifact, which was a black and white picture of a line of African Americans standing in front of a sign that reads “there’s no way like the American way”. This image seemed contradictory to me as well. Although the words “world’s highest standard of living” was written on the sign behind the line of people, the African Americans standing in the line did not seem to be happy at all. I asked myself, why did the curator include such a strange photo in this exhibition? The ID label of this artifact showed that the photographer, date and title of this photo were all unknown, but there was a hyperlink through which I could find the original website of the photo. After reading the captions, I found out that the curator had chosen this particular image because it showed the poor standards of living of African Americans in the 20th century compared to that of the white population. From this image, it was evident that although African Americans may have had the same American Dreams as other people, it was significantly harder for them to actually reach the goals because their lack of education, opportunity and jobs.

The artifact next to this one was also in black and white. The fact that these photos are all in black and white was also an evidence that these photos are taken in the mid-20th century, thus reflecting the theme of the exhibition. This image attracted me because on the photo, three African Americans were standing beside a stairwell with the large word “COLORED” on it.

My first instinct was that the word “colored” correlated with the African American population. However, a question rose inside me, what was the point of printing the word on the stairwell? As I continued to read the ID label of this artifact beside the photo and the captions of it on the next slide, I figured that I was wrong from the start. This photo was taken outside of a movie theater showing the newest Tarzan movie. Although people did tend to associate the word “colored” with African Americans, the word “colored” in this case meant no other than the fact that the film itself is in color. This clarification made me smile, and I felt guilty for directly relating the word to a race. Nevertheless, this contradictory image was another evidence of the fact that African Americans were distant from the white population in the society.

As I moved on to the last artifact of the exhibit, I noticed that this black and white photo is different from the previous two photos in that this one did not have a hyperlink besides it. This photo was originated from the Robert Langmuir African American Photographs of the Rose Library at Emory University. The main character of this photo was also different from those of the last two photos because the African American in this picture seemed to be in a higher social class than the African Americans in the previous images. I wondered, what is the man in the picture doing, and why is he so focused on it? From reading the ID labels, I learned that he was working diligently on a poster for the brand Formula X. This artifact contributed to the theme of the whole exhibit by making it evident that, despite the huge obstacles African Americans faced in the pursuit of their American Dreams, they still struggled towards their goals and hoped they can make a change in their lives someday.

After I had finished going over the whole exhibition, I had come to the conclusion part of the exhibition. This conclusion seemed interesting to me because it not only summarized the

contents of the exhibition, but it also brought up a social issue in our society today, and connected the theme of the exhibition to the problems our current world. The issue that the curator brought up is that racial issues is still a major problem in the society today. This made me think of the various events relating to racial issues happening around me right now, including the Black Lives Matter movement and the stereotypes of African Americans. Although racial issues had been alleviated significantly in the past decades, it would take much more time for it to completely disappear from our society.