

## HNRS 110 EXHIBIT ANALYSIS

### *Communities in a Changing Nation: The Promise of 19th-Century America*

#### **Objective**

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The purpose of this assignment is to develop your ability to think critically about the role of “official stories” in the presentation of evidence. This examination will prepare you for the research you will undertake this semester. The basis of the assignment—the source of the “official story” under question—is a visit to the *Communities in a Changing Nation* exhibit at the National Museum of American History.

#### **Context of this exhibit**

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There is likely no public space in the United States more dedicated to the expression of “official stories” than the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The monuments and museums along the Mall offer carefully crafted narratives about American history and identity, about science and nature, and about art, language, and culture all over the world. As with any story, each of these narratives has been shaped by the personal choices made by the scholars, philanthropists, politicians, and artists who created them. In some cases, the narrative supported by these choices is clear. The Lincoln Memorial, for instance, emphasizes President Lincoln’s role in the Civil War and through the speeches etched in its walls confirms one of the most familiar and powerful stories about the United States—that it is a nation committed to liberty and equality. The narrative logic organizing some other sites on the National Mall, however, is not so clear. One such instance appears in the National Museum of American History in an exhibit called *Communities in a Changing Nation: The Promise of 19th-Century America*.

#### **Process**

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In the first part of this assignment, you will engage in a critical examination of the logic the museum curators used to construct this exhibit. In the second part, you will use evidence from the exhibit to construct an alternative narrative. In the third part, you will reflect on the relationship of Fredrick Douglass experience with the Promise of America.

#### **Assignment**

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Read carefully through each part of the assignment before you begin your visit to the National Museum of American History.

##### *Part I: Official Stories*

Go to the *Communities in a Changing Nation: The Promise of 19th-Century America* exhibit on the 2nd floor of the National Museum of American History. Spend at least 45 minutes looking through the exhibit from beginning to end. Focus on the way the artifacts and explanations that make up the exhibit express and support a narrative about “America’s promise” and issues affecting the fulfillment of that promise.

- Based on your response to the exhibit as a whole, on what is most memorable and strikes you most powerfully, and on how positive or negative you feel when you come to the end complete the following sentence:

The exhibit *Communities in a Changing Nation: The Promise of 19th-Century America* suggests that the promise of America is that all Americans should be able to \_\_\_\_\_ and it suggests that this promise mostly has/has not been fulfilled [choose “has” or “has not”].

- Then, go back and find the three artifacts and/or explanations that provide the best evidence to support your claim. These may be audio or video recordings, plaques, descriptions, explanations on walls, mannequins, or other material artifacts. I encourage you to use a camera, but you should also take enough notes so that you are able to describe each in detail, including where each is in the exhibit and what comes before and after it.

### *Part II: Counter Stories*

Reinvestigate one part of the exhibit with the intention of finding evidence that challenges or complicates your sense of the overall narrative.

- Focus on just one of the three represented communities (the industrial workers and managers in Bridgeport, Connecticut, the Jewish immigrants in Cincinnati, Ohio, or the slaves and free blacks in the low country of South Carolina).
- Explore how the particular experiences of this group might challenge the narrative about America’s promise as you have described and documented it in your answer to Part I.
- Find the three artifacts and/or explanations that best substantiate this alternative narrative. Document each as fully as possible.

### *Part III: Talking Back to Official Stories through Frederick Douglass*

Using *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as the source for your evidence, write a 250-word conclusion to your analysis of the official and counter-stories present in the *Communities in a Changing Nation* exhibit. How does Douglass’s experience complicate either the official or alternative story you discovered in the exhibit? Use 2-3 specific examples from Douglass’s autobiography to support your argument.

Think of Part III as a conclusion that, as in the example given on pages 63-64 of *The Craft of Research*, challenges or suggests a new approach to the ideas explored in Parts I and II—new problems to be solved or a different way of addressing the question(s).

## **Requirements**

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- Part I and II: When you are home from the exhibit, use your notes to write a 750-word essay that accounts for your observations in response to Part I & II. You may structure

the essay any way you like so long as you substantiate your claims with at least four specific and well-contextualized pieces of evidence from the exhibit. Feel free to incorporate photographs that you took during your visit (though be aware that photographs do not speak for themselves; you must contextualize them and explain their relevance).

- Part III: Write a 250-word essay incorporating *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in your essay.
- Be sure your final version is double spaced, printed with a standard 12-point font, with 1" margins, and stapled (without any cover or folders).
- At the risk of irrational anger on my part, be sure you edit and proofread your work.

Remember that the Exhibit Analysis is worth 10 percent of your final grade and is due Thursday, September 30.