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### The Echoing Voices of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston

To the curators and owners,

It is the duty of a museum to remember as well as to educate. The National Museum of African American History and Culture has the weighty responsibility of fulfilling these obligations for a race of people who have suffered for hundreds of years under systemic oppression and violent suppression by a country which first brought them here to be sold as property, but who have since won their freedom and flourished in that country which is now equally their home. As difficult as it may seem to encapsulate the spectrum of suffering and jubilation that defines the African American experience, leaning on the words of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston would give the museum an incalculable advantage. The museum should place quotes by these authors outside of the main entrance in order to captivate visitors with the uplifting and tenacious spirit of African American culture and to aid them in reflecting on how the history presented by the museum can shed light on issues facing America today.

Langston Hughes's body of work offers a brutally honest view into the lives of African Americans during a period of unprecedented creativity and carries timeless advice for navigating the continued racial strife gripping this country. Hughes closes his 1926 essay "The Negro Artist

and the Racial Mountain” by describing how the art he and his contemporaries were creating was a unique expression of African American identity with no pretense or desire to capitulate to white critics:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (Hughes 1324)

Using this quote to greet visitors to the museum will help them understand why African American art and culture is something of which to be proud. Hughes himself was an author who fearlessly celebrated African American identity. Poet Kalamu Salaam describes Hughes as “our Poet Supreme,” a poet whose resounding contribution to humanity was his analysis of “the mutuality of the human condition, [that] we come to our understanding of ourselves via understanding and being understood by others,” (226-227). Following in Hughes’s path of mutual understanding, what the visitors to the museum will benefit most from by seeing Hughes’s passage is how his words enable us to let go of prejudices, and to accept the beauty, the ugly, and the radical honesty of African American art for what it is, not for what it ‘should’ be. This mutual understanding will create space to move forward as a culture in an effort to heal the centuries of racial violence this country has undergone. The quote stands on its own as a testament to Hughes’s “uncanny ability to speak directly, pointedly, to the changing circumstances in which we find ourselves, both as individuals and as a society,” (Campbell 130).

Greeting visitors with Hughes's words will help open their eyes to the temples he and his contemporaries built, temples which those visitors may enter every day without even realizing it.

The unabashed self-love Zora Neale Hurston expressed through her writing gives insight into the unique struggles experienced by African American women and establishes her as a paragon of courage her readers can cling to in times of adversity. Her essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" is a love song to herself, devoid of vanity but dripping with confidence. When it comes to the problem of race, she tells us:

Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely  
Astonishes me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond  
me. (Hurston 1042).

This quote would present to the visitors of the museum a defiant proclamation of self-love in the face of discrimination. As someone who was admonished by her peers equally as often as by her critics, Hurston existed in a world which tried to quell her sense of self-worth (Gates & Smith 1029-1031). This kind of social and interpersonal oppression is something which African American women often face, as they find themselves at the violent confluence of racism and sexism (Hiest 38-39). Hurston's extollation of her own beauty and intelligence in the face of oppression shows the resiliency she embodied and the boundless love she contained. By displaying this passage, the museum would be acknowledging the unique kind of discrimination that has impacted African American women in this country, while celebrating the heroism Hurston showed by continuing to love herself despite what anyone else might think. The visitors of the museum will be inspired by the courage Hurston exudes and come to understand that the African American experience is not defined by external judgement.

The museum and all of its guests will benefit greatly from exposure to Hughes and Hurston's fearless and inspiring words. The goal of displaying these quotes is not to paint the entire picture of who these authors were or what world they lived in. Rather, the goal is to serve the museum's mission statement by showing its visitors the spirit of resiliency and optimism exemplified by these writers, as well as to pique those visitors' interests in who these "new Negro artists" were and why this unequivocal celebration of African American people and culture was such a defining moment in American history. The visitors are, after all, going on a trip to a museum. If all goes well, they will be enlightened to these facts during their visit and emerge with a newfound appreciation for the quotes, their context, and moreover what choices they themselves can make to help transform our country into a more equitable and harmonious home for all Americans.

## Works Cited

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