

CLASSICAL VERSUS BLACK MUSIC AS AN IDENTITY TROPE IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S *THE WAYS OF WHITE FOLKS*

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Abstract

The Ways of White Folks (1934) is Langston Hughes's first collection of short stories. Inspired by the reading of D. H. Lawrence's *The Lovely Lady* (1927), the fourteen stories collected in this volume offer a disillusioned portrait of that early-1900s black America torn apart by the Du Boisian double consciousness. Through sharp and direct language, these stories present poignant daily-life incidents dealing truthfully with—in Hughes's words—"some nuance of the race problem." Among the wide array of issues touched on, the dichotomy classical versus black music becomes a powerful identity trope, remarkably in "Home" and "The Blues I'm Playing", whose protagonists stand between the Western classical tradition—a marker of a presumably "higher" culture—and black vernacular music, notably blues and jazz, revealing their allegiance to "authentic" blackness. The staging of this musical double consciousness is further complicated by the contradictions of patronage and the power relations involved in the white patron-black artist relationship. The paper tackles these musical identity dilemmas by comparing the allegedly polarized dichotomy of classical vs black music of the 1930s against today's more intricate scenario.

Keywords: Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*, American studies, short fiction, black music

*And his violin for a mistress all the time [...]
Jazz at night and the classics in the morning.*

(Langston Hughes, “Home”)

Besides being one of the greatest African-American poets of the 20th century, Langston Hughes enjoyed challenging himself with different forms of literature. The publication of his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, in 1930 gave him the confidence to strengthen his interest in fiction writing. Published four years later, *The Ways of White Folks*, his first collection of short stories, functioned as an alternative means to deal with issues concerning racial discrimination in the United States, and it is paradoxical that some of the tales were written abroad (in the Soviet Union) under the influence of a British writer—D. H. Lawrence—who was an improbable model for an African-American poet like Hughes.

Alluding to titles such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and his essay “The Souls of White Folk” in *Darkwater* (1920), Hughes’s *The Ways of White Folks* touches on a wide array of issues. In particular, the dichotomy of classical versus black music becomes a powerful identity trope, remarkably in the stories “The Blues I’m Playing” and “Home”, whose protagonists stand between the Western classical tradition—a marker of a presumably “higher” culture—and black vernacular music, notably blues and jazz, revealing instead their allegiance to “authentic” blackness. Considering the events narrated in these tales and the socio-cultural scenario of that time, this essay provides some clues to investigate this seemingly polarized dichotomy.

In this respect, patronage plays a crucial role in *The Ways of White Folks*, certainly a reflection of Hughes’s relationship with his patron Charlotte Osgood Mason. Their eventual breakup happened in 1930, not long before the composition of these stories, and inevitably ended up affecting them. The rift was motivated by Hughes’s refusal to oblige Mason in her request to pursue an “exotic” African art, thus simultaneously stifling his urge for wide-ranging sources of inspiration and reinforcing the usual preconceptions regarding black people. “The Blues I’m Playing” and “Home” challenge some of these clichés by presenting remarkable black

characters. In particular, as we shall see, the dichotomy of classical versus black music is more nuanced than it would appear at face value.

1. The story of these stories

In his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1993b, pp. 33-34), Hughes mentions an epiphanic incident he experienced in high school. He was studying French literature, in particular one text by Guy de Maupassant in which snow was falling slowly, and suddenly he was able to feel the snow. Hughes then realized that it was the French author who inspired him to become a writer of fiction.

In this respect, a turning point in Hughes's literary career was his 1932 journey to the Soviet Union to participate in *Black and White*, a Russian-German joint production of a film on interracial relations in America. The unsuccessful outcome of this project pushed most of the twenty-two African Americans involved to leave the Soviet Union. Hughes decided instead to make the best of this missed opportunity, carrying on his sojourn in Moscow and later embarking on a tour to Central Asia. This period abroad was one of the most productive in his career.

After a few months travelling in Central Asia, in January 1933 Hughes returned to Moscow, where, at the suggestion of his friend Marie Seton, he started reading D. H. Lawrence's collection of short stories, *The Lovely Lady*. In his second autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes pointed out how this collection—notably the title story—was essential both for his reflections on the complexities of patronage as well as for redefining his idea of writing:

I had never read anything of Lawrence's before, and was particularly taken with the title story. [...] The possessive, terrifying elderly woman in "The Lovely Lady" seemed in many ways so much like my former Park Avenue patron [...] If D. H. Lawrence can write such psychologically powerful accounts of folks in England, that send shivers up and down my spine, maybe I could write stories like his about folks in America. (Hughes 1993a, p. 213)

Once back in the United States, in September 1933 Hughes settled in Carmel, California, where, as the guest of Noël Sullivan, a sympathetic new patron, he carried on writing short fiction, which became for him the most appropriate creative tool to deal with some of the issues he had previously scrutinized in his poems. This Californian period represented, therefore, another important turning point. Having decided to put aside poetry to focus on short fiction, Hughes became aware of the potential of this literary genre, allowing him to explore new paths and ways of expression. The racial question remained the central theme, as he reaffirmed in *I Wonder as I Wander*:

My short stories written at Carmel all dealt with some nuance of the race problem. Most of them had their roots in actual situations which I had heard about or in which I had been myself involved. But none of them were literal transcriptions of actual happenings. (Hughes 1993a, p. 281)

On the whole, the collection was well received by the critics of that time: Herschel Brickell celebrated it as including “some of the best stories that have appeared in this country in years”; Horace Gregory celebrated Hughes for his “spiritual prose style and an accurate understanding of human character”; more praises came from Vernon Loggins and Alain Locke. However, some critics complained about Hughes’s unsympathetic view of whites: Sherwood Anderson saw them as caricatures, and for Martha Gruening they were portrayed as “either sordid and cruel, or silly and sentimental.”¹

Hughes seemed to predict this sort of criticism and thus covered himself by opening the collection with an epigraph from one of the tales, “Berry”: “The ways of white folks, I mean *some* white folks” [Hughes’s emphasis]. This quotation attributes a distinct tone to the book, according to which the presented image of white people does not correspond to an essentialist vision of the whole white “race”, but only of a part of it. However, the tales included in *The Ways of White Folks* were shocking and politically involved—Rampersad (2002, p. 282) noted that initially editors did not welcome the political commitment that permeates the narration: “Why is it that authors think it is their function to lay the flesh bare and rub salt in the wound?”,

¹ See Rampersad (2002, p. 290).

an *Atlantic Monthly* editor complained. This is evidence of Hughes's "radical" turn that is typical of his 1930s output, in which the class line becomes as essential as the color line as tropes exposing discrimination across boundaries of race.²

2. The contradictions of patronage

White patronage had been a constant element in Hughes's life ever since the beginning of his literary career. Although Mrs. Mason's financial support had allowed him to engage in his literary activity without worrying too much about earning a living, her growing influence on his aesthetic choices eventually led to the breakup of their friendship, the shattering effect of which became one of the most important themes in *The Ways of White Folks*.

As mentioned above, not only did the reading of Lawrence's story "The Lovely Lady" encourage Hughes to devote himself to the writing of short fiction, but also pushed him to use the story of Mrs. Attenborough's character as a model for the creation of Dora Ellsworth, the white patron in "The Blues I'm Playing."³ Lawrence's influence on "The Blues I'm Playing" is apparent in the introductory description of the two women. Lawrence (2019, p. 634) described Pauline Attenborough as a woman "who could still sometimes be mistaken [...] for thirty. She was really a wonderfully preserved woman [...] She would be an exquisite skeleton and her skull would be an exquisite skull." Being Pauline an art collector, Lawrence's mocking emphasis on her physical features reveals her artificiality. Hughes's description of Dora Ellsworth is presented in a similar way, aiming to unveil her illusory character:

Poor dear lady, she had no children of her own. Her husband was dead. And she had no interest in life now save art, and the young people who created art. She was very rich, and it gave her pleasure to share her richness with beauty. Except that she was sometimes

² Regarding the interdependency of race and class in Hughes's works, see Armengol (2018).

³ Written soon after his return from Moscow, this story was published in May 1934 in the *Scribner Magazine* – the publication of his short stories in national magazines such as *The American Mercury* and the *Scribner Magazine* itself allowed Hughes to reach a vaster audience, including the white one.

confused as to where beauty lay [...] she once turned down a garlic-smelling soprano-singing girl who, a few years later, had all the critics in New York at her feet.⁴

In this passage, as in some others, Hughes is interested in representing Mrs. Ellsworth's shallowness: by showing the absurdity of her dismissal of a talented soprano for trivial reasons, the author aimed at ridiculing the reliability of the patron's cultural judgment.

As a matter of fact, in *The Big Sea* Hughes (1993b, p. 325) himself denounced the insistent demands made by his own patron Mrs. Mason: "She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did." Besides disagreements over issues of cultural exoticism, their rift was also motivated by domineering Mason's resistance to Hughes's increasingly politicized output, in Mason's view now lacking "negro warmth and tenderness"—Hughes's new interest in leftist politics certainly contributed to Mason's detachment from him.⁵

Their conflict also indicated the contradictions that emerged throughout the Harlem Renaissance period. As is known, along with Alain Locke's "The New Negro" (1925), Hughes's essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) was its manifesto, calling for a new self-awareness on the part of those African-American artists who were determined to set themselves free from the clutches of white paternalism to demystify the cult of the "primitive black", which was particularly in vogue during the early 1920s.

However, the image of Harlem as a lively cultural center was real for few African Americans, and a mirage for the vast majority. Hughes's later disillusionment regarding the role of art as a means to overcome the harsh reality of oppression becomes apparent in *The Big Sea* (1993b, p. 228), where he noted that most African Americans had never even heard of the Harlem Renaissance. The pursuit of poetry, art, and education on the part of what Locke defined as the "New Negro" was not enough to improve a whole community's life conditions—in this respect,

⁴ Hughes (1990, pp. 99-100). Henceforth, the page number of all quotations from *The Ways of White Folks* will be indicated in brackets.

⁵ Retman (2012, p. 593).

the Harlem Renaissance turned out to be a political failure. Indeed, Oceola Jones, the young black protagonist of “The Blues I’m Playing”, despised precisely “those cultured Negroes” who claimed that the accomplishments of black art would be sufficient to erase the color line and end violence and lynching.

The historical and cultural struggles intrinsic in the Harlem Renaissance materialize in the conflictual relationship between Mrs. Dora Ellsworth and her black protégée, pianist Oceola Jones. Predictably, the former’s financial support is accompanied by an effort to influence the latter’s aesthetic choices and even private life ever-increasingly. Following Oceola’s decision to return to Harlem and the announcement of her wedding with an African-American medical student, unsurprisingly Mrs. Ellsworth stops supporting Oceola.

Mrs. Ellsworth’s triviality pervades the whole narration and is presented by Hughes in ironical terms, notably when he focuses on her peculiar way of making up for her lack of knowledge on the life of African Americans in Harlem: “Before going to bed, Mrs. Ellsworth told her housekeeper to order a book called ‘Nigger Heaven’ [...] and also anything else [...] about Harlem” (106). Mrs. Ellsworth’s reliance on books rather than personal experience shows her inability to differentiate appearance and substance, a characteristic shared with Mrs. Attenborough, D. H. Lawrence’s “lovely lady”.

Hughes mentions *Nigger Heaven*, a novel by white writer and patron Carl Van Vechten, precisely to expose the ambiguities of white patronage. Published in 1926 at the climax of the Harlem Renaissance, it was essential reading for all those who approached Harlem’s artistic and cultural life for the first time. However, in Du Bois’s review, the reaction of the black intellectual community to Van Vechten’s novel is expressed clearly: “*Nigger Heaven* is a blow in the face. It is an affront to the hospitality of the black folk. [...] It is a caricature. It is worse than untruth because it is a mass of half-truths” (Du Bois, 1926). The satirical traits of Hughes’s aforementioned quotation and Du Bois’s negative review reveal the contradictions of patronage, a necessary evil up to a certain point, but an evil black artists sooner or later had to avoid to remain

artistically untainted. As Hughes unmistakably put it in the 1939 short poem “Poet to Patron”: “What right has anyone to say / That I / Must throw out pieces of my heart / For pay?”⁶

3. Classical versus black music

Classical versus black music may be regarded as a polarized dichotomy functioning as an identity trope reflecting the white, highbrow Anglo-European world in contrast with the presumably unsophisticated African-American culture. In different ways, the events narrated in “The Blues I’m Playing” and “Home” reveal that, on some occasions, this generalization may be truthful; however, as we shall see, it may also be deconstructed, as it is more nuanced and diversified than it seems at first glance.⁷

3.1. “The Blues I’m Playing”: reinforcing stereotypes

As we have seen, white patronage encouraged the consolidation of predictable clichés regarding black people. Hughes’s (and Hurston’s) final breakup with Mrs. Mason was an escape from their patron’s intellectual pressure reinforcing stereotypes involving primitivism, Africanism, and the like, a shallow outlook cleverly represented by Hughes in Mrs. Ellsworth’s presumption to understand all about Harlem just through the casual reading of *Nigger Heaven*.

This narrow vision is easily invalidated by an episode narrated in *The Big Sea* involving Hughes’s first visit to Africa, an incident showing his disappointment for African people’s refusal to consider him as one of them because of his relatively light skin color: “They looked at my copper-brown skin and straight black hair [...] and they said: ‘You—white man’” (Hughes 1993b, 103). Hughes was perceived as a white man because, at that time, there were not many people of mixed blood on the West African Coast—they were mainly missionaries or clerks and administrators from the West Indies applying the white man’s laws and carrying out the white man’s business: hence the Africans called them all white men.

A different scenario may be detected in “The Blues I’m Playing”. As we have seen, the story describes the controversial relationship between Mrs. Dora Ellsworth and young black pianist

⁶ Rampersad and Roessel (2015, pp. 70-71).

⁷ Regarding the idea of musical double consciousness in these stories, see Miyakawa (2005).

Oceola Jones. Contrary to the usual approach of the patrons of that time, including Mason, who encouraged the pursuit of exotic art by their black protégées, Mrs. Ellsworth claimed instead that Oceola should cultivate white classical art and financed a study period in Paris for her to focus on the work of European masters such as Beethoven and Chopin. However, Mrs. Ellsworth had to face Oceola's defiance—despite her considerable talent, she was only interested in playing blues and jazz, musical genres that instilled in her a strong cultural identity and were dismissed by Mrs. Ellsworth as “too undignified”. It was in Paris that Oceola understood the importance of her musical and cultural roots. This event prompted her decision to go back to Harlem: “I’ve been away from my own people so long [...] I want to live right in the middle of them again” (118).

Patronizing as the invitation to pursue an exotic art may be, the striving for mastery of classical music as imposed by Mrs. Ellsworth is perhaps even more condescending, as it implicitly assumes the superiority of white culture (in the case typified in the compositions by Beethoven, Chopin, etc.) over black culture, seen as folkloric and inferior. The inevitable conflict between Mrs. Ellsworth and Oceola represents the impossibility of balancing these seemingly incompatible visions and the failure of any attempt at filling the gap between blacks and whites through art. Through the character of Oceola, Hughes shows that this could be possible only if she renounced her origins and her African-American identity, transforming herself into the image that Mrs. Ellsworth had of her.

Moreover, as Armengol (2018, p. 125) noted, Hughes was interested in exposing the class biases and inequalities that characterized cross-racial interactions—hence, he depicted whiteness as a classist construction, with Mrs. Ellsworth and Oceola's different musical tastes becoming metaphors for their irresolvable racial and class backgrounds. In many ways, this rift is evidence not only of the color line, but also of the class line separating them: ultimately, in “The Blues I’m Playing”, one can identify both Hughes's growing concern in leftist politics as well as the political failure of the Harlem Renaissance's artistic program.

3.2. “Home”: a tragic *nostos*

Something different happens in the other story, “Home”. The protagonist is a young black virtuoso violinist, Roy Williams, who, quite unexpectedly, manages to tour Europe playing a classical repertoire in Berlin, Vienna, Prague, and Paris. Roy’s faltering health conditions push him to return to visit his mother in his hometown in the South (Hopkinsville, Missouri), where Miss Reese, the ageing local white music teacher, readily acknowledges his skills. In the relatively tolerant Europe, Roy had been able to walk the streets without fear, engaging in conversations with white people; in Hopkinsville, Roy finds only prejudice, racism, and hatred. Eventually, the friendship between Roy and Miss Reese tragically incurs the wrath of a vicious white mob who lynch him because he dared to talk to her in public. The final scene of the story—Roy’s body hanging from a tree “like a violin for the wind to play” (49)—graphically depicts the dreadful epilogue that was so common at that time.

Hence the irony of the title “Home”. Far from being a welcoming refuge for his final days, Hopkinsville reminded Roy of his place in American society: the first words heard when he gets off the train are hateful, racist slurs, and eventually his hometown proves to be the stage of his premature, violent death. Hughes describes this tragic *nostos* very effectively: “The eyes of the white men about the station were not kind. He heard some one mutter, ‘Nigger.’ His skin burned. For the first time in half a dozen years he felt his color. He was home” (37).

In just a few pages, “Home” features original characters like Roy and stereotypical characters like his mother, the epitome of the nurturing mammy.⁸ Roy fulfils the expectations of neither blacks nor whites: a jazz violinist versed in classical music, with “his violin for a mistress all the time” playing “[j]azz at night and the classics in the morning” (46), he is a peculiar personality for the typical expectations of that time. Thus, Roy merges the roles of classical and jazz musician, and, ominously, the latter is metaphorically associated with his bad fate: “But the glittering curtains of Roy’s jazz were lined with death” (34). Also significant are the different reactions to the white classical repertoire, respectively from an impressed Miss Reese and from

⁸ Mayberry (1995, p. 14).

her disconcerted young black students, who told their parents that a “dressed-up nigger [...] played a lot of funny pieces nobody but Miss Reese liked” (44).

In stylistic terms, in this tale Hughes intertwines form and content, with a sudden juxtaposition of the straightforwardness of the racial language and the free-flowing jazz rhythms of the church concert scene, mirroring the jazz and bebop inflections of Hughes’s poetry: “Steady, Roy! It’s hot in this crowded church, and you’re sick as hell. ... This, the dream and the dreamer, wandering in the desert from Hopkinsville to Vienna in love with a streetwalker named Music” (40-41). There is even a quasi-stream of consciousness performed by Roy as a monologue addressed to composer Johannes Brahms, in which Roy dreamt of playing his violin not for a small-town crowd of poor people, but for a large audience, only to realize that this romantic vision would never be a reality: “I had a dream, too, Mr. Brahms, a big dream that can’t come true, now. Dream of a great stage in a huge hall, like Carnegie Hall or the Salle Gaveau. And you, Mr. Brahms, singin’ out into the darkness, singin’ so strong and true that a thousand people look up at me like they do at Roland Hayes singing the Crucifixion.”⁹

Here, Hughes explicitly mentions lyric tenor and composer Roland Hayes (1887-1977), the first African American to win international fame as a concert artist—he performed with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and recorded with Columbia Records. This allows us to consider briefly the buried history of black classical music, a largely untold tale that further complicates the dichotomy of classical versus black music.

3.3. A buried history

Composers, conductors, and performers of African ancestry on both sides of the Atlantic have always made significant, if forgotten or overlooked, contributions to the classical music world since at least as early as the 18th century.¹⁰ Perhaps the first was writer, abolitionist, and composer Ignatius Sancho. Born on a slave ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean in the Middle Passage, he published four collections of compositions and even a treatise titled *A Theory of Music*. Remarkable black classical musicians were, among others, Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier

⁹ Hughes (1990, p. 40). See also Koprince (1982).

¹⁰ Shaw Roberts (2020).

de Saint-Georges, one of the first composers of African descent, known as “the black Mozart”: he wrote two symphonies, chamber music, operas, and several concertos; George Bridgetower, an English violin virtuoso of Afro-European origin, who was Beethoven’s protégée for a short while—Beethoven initially dedicated his “Kreutzer” Violin Sonata No. 9 to him, but later named it after French violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer; Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins, whose parents were enslaved, travelled throughout North America performing music by Bach and Beethoven. Besides the afore-mentioned Roland Hayes, among others we find Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, a black British composer who was challenged by Du Bois to seek inspiration in African-American roots; Florence Price, the first African-American woman to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra, in Chicago in 1933; Nathaniel Dett, a Canadian-American black composer, who used African-American folk songs and spirituals as source material for Romantic classical music; William Grant Still Jr., the author of the meaningfully titled *Afro-American Symphony* (1930); opera singer Marian Anderson, who made her debut at New York’s Metropolitan Opera in 1955 playing Ulrica in Verdi’s *A Masked Ball*; Dean Dixon, the first African American to conduct the New York Philharmonic in 1941; African-American composer and musicologist William Levi Dawson, author of the *Negro Folk Symphony* (1934); Camilla Williams, the first black soprano to make her debut in New York City Opera’s *Madam Butterfly* in 1946, and later the first African American to sing a major role with the Vienna State Opera; Hazel Scott, a Trinidadian-born jazz and classical pianist who became known for playing on two pianos simultaneously—she was also involved in civil rights and refused to take on film roles that cast her as a black stereotype. This necessarily incomplete list includes Nina Simone, perhaps the most iconic figure of both black and classical 20th-century music. Among the first to attempt to merge classical and black music, she was a pianist with an outstanding contralto voice, fusing gospel and pop with classical music. Recognized as one of America’s most influential jazz artists, Simone had a great passion for Bach and initially wanted a career as a classical pianist. She was also a great admirer of Hughes’s work, with whom she kept a lively correspondence in the 1960s.¹¹

¹¹ Other notable black personalities include the American bass baritone, actor and activist Paul Robeson; Henry Lewis, a double bass prodigy, who, in 1948, aged only 16, joined the Los Angeles Philharmonic; Robert McFerrin, the first black man to sing a leading role at the Met Opera, appearing as Amonasro in Verdi’s *Aida* in 1955; lyric soprano Leontyne Price, who made her debut at Milan’s La Scala as *Aida* in 1960; cellist Donald White, who, during a tour in Alabama in 1961, was barred from going on stage because of racism, but the orchestra declined to appear without him. See Shaw Roberts (2020), Horowitz (2019), and Jones (2020).

However, despite the significant presence of musicians of African ancestry and the importance of their contribution, classical music has always been (and still is) almost exclusively a “white” domain. The apparent reason why black classical composers were not so common in the classical music world was racial discrimination. Yet, on closer scrutiny, other important elements deserve to be mentioned to gain a better understanding of the complexities of the classical versus black music dichotomy.

3.4. A prediction come true

In a 2019 interview with Tom Huizenga, cultural historian Joseph Horowitz gives us interesting insights regarding this controversial issue. Horowitz’s premise is based upon Czech composer Antonín Dvořák’s 1893 prediction that “[t]he future of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States.”¹² Like Hughes, Dvořák was himself an outsider and had a life story involving patronage. In the early 1890s, Jeanette Thurber, a wealthy American philanthropist, hired him to lead the New York National Conservatory of Music, whose mission was to help American composers rid themselves of European influences to discover their own truly American voice.

To this purpose—Horowitz continues—Dvořák wondered about real American folk music, which was difficult to identify because of the highly composite American socio-cultural fabric. However, Dvořák was fascinated both by spirituals, minstrel songs, and what he called “Negro melodies”, as well as by American Indian music, which he studied in a summer spent in Iowa. He had heard and loved “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Go Down, Moses”, hence his will to foster an American classical music style paradoxically based upon African-American and Indian roots.

Moreover, Dvořák’s interest in these appropriated Negro melodies was equally embraced by Du Bois, who, like him, admired Richard Wagner. Du Bois followed his tradition and that of German philosophers such as Johann Gottfried Herder, whose concept of *Volksgeist*—the

¹² See Huizenga (2019) and Horowitz (2019).

spiritual life of a nation—was borrowed and adapted by Du Bois to connect folk wisdom and formal training. For Du Bois, the spirituals and sorrow songs were examples of a popular cultural musical treasure that, if developed appropriately, would produce a desired native classical musical language, and saw in the above-mentioned black composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, whom he had met at the First Pan-African Congress in London in 1900, as the right person to accomplish this task, which he partly succeeded in doing.¹³

If one considers the triumphant march of African-American music from the initial ragtime and the spirituals through blues and jazz up to contemporary mainstream hip hop, the best-selling music genre today, in some ways, Dvořák's prediction turned out to be true. In this respect, a key date was 1997, when rap label Def Jam Records released *The Rhapsody Overture: Hip Hop Meets Classic*, an album putting together rap artists and classical musicians or compositions, such as Redman rap over Debussy, Mobb Deep, and Xzibit interpreting the works of Puccini, and notably Warren G's hit "Prince Igor", the chorus of which incorporated *Polovtsian Dance* from Alexander Borodin's opera, and featured Norwegian soprano Sissel. Later notable examples are *Late Orchestration*, Kanye West's 2006 live album that saw the Chicago rapper perform alongside a 17-piece all-female string orchestra: it was a huge hit, inspiring similar operations later made by superstars such as Kendrick Lamar with the National Symphony Orchestra. As West put it in an interview: "Being able to spit true, heartfelt rap lyrics in front of an orchestra is juxtaposing what's thought to be two totally different forms of music... it shows you that it's all music. We tried to alter people's perception of the music."¹⁴

However, the situation is not as rewarding for black classical music: according to a 2016 survey (Doeser, 2016), less than 2% of musicians in American orchestras are African-American, only 4.3% of conductors are black, and most composers are white. Although there is a steady trend towards greater racial and ethnic diversity, the proportion of non-white musicians in American orchestras remains extremely low. Such modest figures call for analysis, debate, and action—there is still a long way to go to reach equal rights for ethnic minorities in the classical music

¹³ See Horowitz (2019), Appiah (2014, pp. 45-46), and Elia (2015, pp. 11-12).

¹⁴ See Proms (2019). On October 20, 2015, Kendrick Lamar and the National Symphony Orchestra delivered a one-night-only performance at The Kennedy Center in Washington DC.

world.¹⁵ For Horowitz, this ongoing situation is due to two different reasons: the first is the racial bias operated by the institutions of classical music; the second, less obvious one, concerns the aesthetics of modernism. Composers and critics such as Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland maintained that black vernacular music (and white composers inspired by it such as George Gershwin and Charles Ives) failed to display that compositional ingenuity and complexity that, in their opinion, were modernist aesthetic elements necessary to attribute worth and prestige to a classical musical composition—whether the first reason somehow affected the second is open to debate.¹⁶

Regarding the relationship between jazz and classical music, Ralph Ellison (2002: p. 260), a musician (trumpet player) himself, stressed the possibility of a fruitful mutual exchange: as a jazz lover, he studied Wagner scores and used to go to symphony concerts (“I supposed I was the only brother of color who got into these concerts in those days”) only to realize that he “valued one art form just as much as the other”. LeRoi Jones (2002: p. 230) provided us with further interesting observations from his privileged standpoint of writer, poet, and music critic: “In order for the jazz musician to utilize most expressively any formal classical techniques, it is certainly necessary that these techniques be subjected to the emotional and philosophical attitudes of Afro-American music—that these techniques be *used* not canonized” [Jones’s emphasis]. This warning is evidence of the dangers of an uncritical merging of jazz and classical music: the former should not imitate the latter in a mere musical version of the critical concept of mimicry, but it should use instead its techniques to shape the structure of a “new” jazz music inspired by the Western classical world.

4. Conclusion

Most criticism has considered Hughes’s literary production of the 1930s as a move away from black nationalism to focus instead on wider social themes such as class inequities. This view is only partially correct, as for Hughes class and race were two sides of the same coin. The overlapping of color and class lines (to which one might add the gender line) was probably

¹⁵ See Huizenga (2019) and Doeser (2016).

¹⁶ See Huizenga (2019) and Horowitz (2019). Horowitz does not believe that this view shared by Thomson and Copland was racially biased.

borrowed from Du Bois's critical contribution—Hughes's intention was precisely that of unmasking the origin of racism, meant as a classist, discriminatory, trans-racial construction generated by a particular section of white American society. This perspective allows us to read Hughes's work in a new light, notably by exploring the connections he drew between whiteness and socio-economic privilege on one side and blackness and disenfranchisement on the other.¹⁷

This race-class predicament was powerfully epitomized in the classical versus black music dichotomy. As we have seen, particularly in “The Blues I’m Playing” and “Home”, it becomes a potent identity trope—in theory, a polarized one, rather obviously indicating respectively the Western classical tradition and black vernacular music and culture, in practice more blurred than it would appear at face value for at least three different reasons.

The first one concerns the relevance of Oceola and Roy as unexpectedly remarkable black characters embodying the buried history of classical composers, performers and musicians of African ancestry. Given their technical skills and knowledge of classical music, Oceola and Roy play as fictional counterparts of the above-mentioned significant black personalities standing between the Western classical tradition and black vernacular music. The forgotten history evoked by Hughes's characters disrupts the usual commonplaces according to which black people are not meant to be part of the white classical music tradition.

Secondly, as Ralph Ellison and LeRoi Jones have suggested, there may be a fruitful dialogue between the worlds of classical and black music, a dialogue beneficial for both parties. On the black music side, it involves avoiding the pitfalls of mere imitation of white classical music, fostering instead a reinterpretation grounded upon the black cultural tradition. On the classical music side, it assumes encouraging an open-minded approach towards black music, as 20th-century white composers such as Gershwin with jazz or Ives with ragtime did. Hughes's character Roy, in particular, embodies the possibility of being comfortable with both traditions, playing jazz at night and the classics in the morning, and aiming for a creative merging of styles, in order to recreate new forms of black music inspired by the white classical tradition and vice versa.

¹⁷ See Armengol (2018, p. 117). Regarding the relationship between Du Bois and Hughes, see Elia (2020).

Thirdly, although the proportion of black musicians represented in American orchestras remains extremely low, the growing number of examples of crossover between hip hop and classical music shows not only that Dvořák's prediction somehow has come true, but also that their roles may occasionally have been reversed, with classical orchestras playing as sparring partners for hip hop superstars, who are today's repositories of economic power due to the best-selling status of their music. Juxtaposing such different kinds of music as hip hop and classical music represents an imaginative way to break new ground, moving towards different creative directions to reshape a new hybrid identity.

As we have seen, Hughes's short fiction has provided some valuable orientation in our investigation of the classical versus black music dichotomy, an identity trope that, considering today's composite socio-cultural scenario, seems to have become increasingly erratic.

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