

Koritha Mitchell  
mitchell.717@osu.edu

When Music Fails as a Universal Language: The Human Violin  
in Langston Hughes's "Home"

There is no question that Langston Hughes loved music. Much of his work enacts a passionate belief in music's capacity to bring people together. Of course, Hughes is mostly aligned with the blues and jazz. In fact, his famous short story "The Blues I'm Playing" in *The Ways of White Folk* (1934) suggests that he believed that only soulful music could be liberating. Yet, what he accomplishes in "Home," a short story from the same collection, represents more of a biting satire of the modern American assumption that music is a universal language.

In "The Blues I'm Playing," Hughes uses the tension between Osceola and her patron Mrs. Ellsworth to show that the simple love of music is insufficient for building a bridge of human understanding. In "Home," Hughes similarly uses Roy to expose the folly of accepting the idea that music can bridge racial divides. However, the critique intensifies as the text labels it deadly folly to believe that music can bring freedom. (Even as Hughes features a character that has traveled abroad, freedom of movement is shown to be quite elusive.) Because he intermittently entertains the belief that music can give him access to various arenas, Roy becomes a human violin. By story's end, he is lynched, his body hanging "like a violin for the wind to play."

In the body of the paper, I will flesh out the narrator's critical distance from Roy, which allows Hughes to hold up for ridicule Roy's mentality regarding his cosmopolitanism versus his hometown's provinciality. However, I will also account for the passage in which the narrator presents the concert audience through Roy's eyes. In these moments, Roy is given the power to gaze critically, rather than simply serve as an object of criticism. Hughes therefore insists upon satirizing in a couple different directions. His doing so ultimately proves to be a commentary on the very real possibilities of music but also on the extent to which those possibilities can seduce us into folly. And for African Americans in a racist society, folly can too quickly become deadly.

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Koritha Mitchell earned her PhD from the University of Maryland-College Park and she is currently assistant professor of English at The Ohio State University. Her primary interests are African American literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, racial violence throughout American literature and culture, and black drama and performance. She is completing a book project that analyzes black-authored lynching plays, titled *Living with Lynching: African American Drama, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930*. A brief selection of this research appears as "(Anti) Lynching Plays: Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and the Evolution of African American Drama" in the edited volume *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919* (New York UP, 2006). Mitchell is equally interested in examining the impact that racial violence has had on artists who work in forms other than drama. For example, see her article "Mamie Bradley's Unbearable Burden: Sexual and Aesthetic Politics in Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*" in *Callaloo* 31.4 (December 2008). While examining a novel prompted by Emmett Till's murder, this essay builds on traditions of black feminist criticism to begin explicating what Mitchell calls "homebuilding anxiety," a concept that will animate some of her future work.