

Written statement of Naomi André. HR 301 House Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties. Hearing on the history and continuing social and cultural relevance of “Lift Every Voice and Sing”.

February 4, 2022

Thank you Chairman Cohen, Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Johnson, Ranking Member Jordan, and Members of the subcommittee. I am happy and very honored to have my voice included in this hearing supporting “Lift Every Voice and Sing” to become a national hymn. My entrance in this discussion gets at the core issue I want to emphasize: the sense of Belonging. While Belonging might be a birthright of citizenship, it is not always experienced in the happenings of daily life. Belonging is not proven by statistics or enforced through surveys and in person—or online—workshops. Belonging should not be an aspiration; instead it is a feeling. We have that feeling when we are seen as being fully human.

As a musicologist I want to spend a moment unpacking the musical term: Hymn. Going back to the ancient Greeks, with discussions by Pindar, Bacchylides and in Homeric poems, the *Grove Music Dictionary* (this is the gold standard for scholarly music reference) describes the hymn and its ability “‘to weave’ or ‘to combine words’ artfully.”¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces its history from Latin, Greek, and Hebrew words with a hymn being “a metrical composition adapted to be sung in a religious service; sometimes distinguished from *psalm* or *anthem*, as not being part of the text of the Bible.” In the second listing from the *OED*, there is a broadening away from the religious connotations with the hymn being “an ode or song of praise in honour of a deity, a country, etc.”²

I like this term “hymn” because it has a long-continued history up through the present. In addition to the Jewish, Greek, and Roman uses, there are also medieval Christian and Byzantine versions of the hymn as a poetic object.³ The hymn was a genre that was later adapted by Protestant faiths to support congregational singing and worship. This is important for the unity it can create for belonging in a community. In the mid-twentieth century, hymns had a special use in the civil rights movement and linked the themes of devotion, praise, liberty, and protest all together. Hence, since

Many thanks to my colleagues Professor Anne Stone (City University of New York) and Professor Scott Ellsworth (University of Michigan) for their helpful suggestions. All text and context is my own.

¹ Anderson, Warren, Thomas J. Mathiesen, Susan Boynton, Tom R. Ward, John Caldwell, Nicholas Temperley, and Harry Eskew. "Hymn." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 30 Jan. 2022. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000013648>. [from first paragraph “Nature of the hymn”]

² *Oxford English Dictionary: The definitive record of the English language*, “Hymn” <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/view/Entry/90208?rsk=FDSKtW&result=1&print> [from Anne Stone, medievalist, CUNY]

³ For Jewish hymns see Ruth Ellis Messenger “Old Testament Hymns,” on https://biblehub.com/library/messenger/christian_hymns_of_the_first_three_centuries/ii_old_testament_hymns.htm

antiquity and up to the present, as a genre the hymn has spiritual, religious, political, and social capacities that center it in articulations of culture and community.

There is a terrific story behind this song “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” that I will relate in words told by James Weldon Johnson (related in 1935).

A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln’s birthday in 1900. My brother, J. [John] Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercises. I wrote the words and he wrote the music. Our New York publisher, Edward B. Marks, made mimeographed copies for us, and the song was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred colored school children.⁴

Shortly afterwards my brother and I moved away from Jacksonville to New York, and the song passed out of our minds. But the school children of Jacksonville kept singing it; they went off to other schools and sang it; they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country. Today the song, popularly known as the Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used.

The lines of this song repay me in an elation, almost of exquisite anguish, whenever I hear them sung by Negro children.⁵

At this time (in 1899-1900 when the song was written) James Weldon Johnson was the school principal at the Edwin M. Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida (the same school he and his brother, John Rosamond Johnson, had attended). This was an all-Black school (due to the segregation of the time) and in 1900 they were celebrating a visit to the school by Booker T. Washington and honoring the 91st anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s birth (1809-1865). There are different versions of this history that have the students reciting the text (by James Weldon Johnson)

⁴ Colored and Negro (a word mentioned in the next lines of this quotation) were polite terms used for African Americans in 1935.

⁵ <https://www.jamesweldonjohnson.org/lift-every-voice-and-sing>. The Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46549/lift-every-voice-and-sing> These comments by James Weldon Johnson are reprinted on many websites. One website says that these words were “among the pages of a 1935 collection of his poems” (<https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/09/us/lift-every-voice-and-sing-trnd/>), which might be *Saint Peter Relates an Incident: Selected Poems* (a collection from 1935 mentioned on Wikipedia).

in 1900 and then the melody by John Rosamond Johnson added in 1905. Most versions say that there were 500 children who sang this song in 1900.

There is a version of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” that was recorded (via zoom) by PS 316, Elijah Stroud Elementary School on June 15, 2020. This recording was made right around Juneteenth, one year before Juneteenth became a federal national holiday. PS 316, Elijah Stroud Elementary School is in Crown Heights, Brooklyn in NYC. The notes about this recording say “Our students virtually and collectively singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing” the Black national anthem. They did so every morning at school even before the pandemic.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-wrj97dVVg> and on their homepage website:

<https://www.ps316brooklyn.org/music>

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” has been sung and recorded by many populations, a testament to those who already feel that this “hymn” holds a special place in the American imagination. One of my favorite videos is from the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service recorded by Petty Officer 1st Class Jesse Carmona and the Navy Band Southeast.⁶ In this 2.12 minute video we see The Navy Band Southeast of Jacksonville, Florida (the place where this hymn was first performed by James Weldon Johnson’s school children in 1900) The first stanza of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” is performed by the service men and women representing multiple races and ethnicities (it looks like there are white, Black, and Latina/Latino [Latine/Latinx] performing as singers and on musical instruments). It is a moving and beautiful performance that visually and sonically demonstrates how this song is already serving the function of a national hymn.

<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/785335/lift-every-voice-and-sing>

During the Civil Rights era, especially in the 1950s-1960s, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was sung along with “We Shall Overcome” and “This Little Light of Mine” as community building emblems of faith, solidarity, and resistance. This past fall (of 2021) the National Football League decided to start week 1 of the season with “Lift Every Voice and Sing”—a gesture that has been both celebrated as well as criticized as a weak mollifying gesture after the treatment of Colin Kaepernick the former quarterback who took a knee to protest the police brutality of African Americans during the national anthem in the 2016 season (and he has not played in the NFL since).

⁶ This video recording was arranged by Chief Musician Jesse Carmona and Musician Second Class Benjamin DeAngelis. It was made on 2/16/2021 and posted a month later (3/8/2021) with a video id: 785335, VIRIN: 210216-N-HR578-875 with a PIN:123456.

In 1919 the NAACP called this song the “Negro National Anthem” and since then it has been frequently referred to that way. However, a statement Faith Karimi and AJ Willingham (2 CNN reporters) wrote in September 2020 about this work captures the fault lines between hymn and anthem well. Referring to this song they state “The hymn is known as the Black National Anthem, but it’s more than that. It’s a history lesson, a rallying cry, a pledge of unity, and as people gather to fight for equality and justice, it is an ever-present refrain.”⁷ This brings us back to the power of this work as a hymn and the collective sense of belonging that, as in the past, it continues to create.

I have set up the hymn as a separate genre of praise that is adjacent to, but not replacing our national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Dr. Mark Clague has a book coming out about the history and complications around our national anthem—including the references to slavery in the third verse (not usually sung) and the problematic history of Francis Scott Key and slavery.⁸ I assert that there is room for both a national anthem—“The Star-Spangled Banner”—that we all know and have associated with patriotic occasions and, a national hymn, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”

To have the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing” be formally recognized as a national hymn would elevate its importance and aid to recognize the artistry of writer James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) and the composer John Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954); two Black brothers from the first generation when all Black people were born free in an America that newly saw them as full citizens legally entitled to a sense of belonging. As a national hymn “Lift Every Voice and Sing” can sit side by side the official “Star-Spangled Banner” national anthem and send a new message to African Americans who have felt a special affinity to this song for over 100 years.

Though “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written by a Black compositional team, there is nothing in the three stanzas of the text that exclusively refers to African Americans. The Black experience is embodied while also referencing the triumphs, struggles, and strength that all humans encounter. The text refers to hard work, aspiration, motivation, and moving towards victory. In the first verse we have “every voice” called up on to rejoice and “face the rising sun of our new day begun.” In the second verse, there is a very important recognition of difficulties, tears, and “days

⁷ Faith Karimi and AJ Willingham, CNN “What Makes ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’ so Iconic” (September 10, 2020). <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/09/us/lift-every-voice-and-sing-trnd/> NAACP page, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing#:~:text=Often%20referred%20to%20as%20%22The,the%20music%20for%20the%20lyrics.NFL:https://operations.nfl.com/inside-football-ops/diversity-inclusion/the-nfl-and-hbcus/lift-every-voice-and-sing/>

⁸ Mark Clague, *O Say Can You Hear? A Cultural Biography of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”* Forthcoming 2022 from W.W. Norton. Dr. Clague is a Professor in Musicology at the University of Michigan.

when hope unborn had died.” The “weary years” and “silent tears” are brought into the third—final—verse. The concluding lines “True to our God, True to our native land” combine praise and national pride; sentiments that perfectly encapsulate the mission of a “national hymn.”

National songs that have connections to a country’s heterogenous populations present the opportunity to elevate voices from its larger community. When South Africa dismantled apartheid and created a new national anthem, the committee was chaired by its most prominent Black South African composer, Mzilikazi Khumalo. *The National Anthem of South Africa* (1997) brings together the five most widely spoken of South Africa’s eleven official languages: isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho, Afrikaans, and English. Sections of the anthem contain previous national anthems from South Africa’s white and Black populations.⁹ The intended result was for the national music—their national anthem—to voice the sound (language and music) of the diverse communities.

A nation has the potential to create its own sonic landscape. Such power comes from the connectedness its people feel; how are their experiences embraced in emblems of national representation? Sound can generate belonging. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” engages familiar audiences while welcoming new communities.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on this important topic. I will be happy to answer any questions at the appropriate time.

⁹ Ludumo Magangane. *The National Anthem of South Africa*. South Africa: Partridge Publishing, 2016.