

**Written Statement of Dr. Dwandalyn R Reece, Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs,
Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African American History and Culture
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, Civil Liberties
House Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
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Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Jordan, Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson and Members of the Committee, I want to thank you today for giving me the opportunity to testify on HR 301.

My name is Dwandalyn R. Reece and I have the pleasure of serving as the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture’s Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs. Prior to assuming this position, I served as the Museum’s Curator of Music and Performing Arts for twelve years.

In 1900, James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) a lawyer, and principal of a segregated school in Jacksonville, Florida was asked to provide remarks for an event to be held in honor of Lincoln’s birthday. Johnson, initially planned to write a poem about Lincoln, however, as he started to write, he found his ideas raking him into another direction. After consulting with his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954), a classically trained musician, Johnson decided to write a song instead. The result of their collaboration was the hymn, “Lift Every Voice and Sing”

*Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea*

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won*

A chorus of 500 children introduced the song at the public celebration, and it quickly began to make its way through communities in the north and south. It received a public endorsement by Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee University and by 1919, had been designated as the official song of the NAACP. By the 1920s you could find copies of the song inserted or pasted into the hymnals of black churches across the country. Both of the Johnson brothers had moved to New York by this time to pursue their careers. J. Rosamond continued to work in music as a musical theater composer, singer and actor, while James Weldon served as a diplomat under President Theodore Roosevelt’s administration, published numerous books and Anthologies, and served as executive secretary of the NAACP from 1930-1940.

The song is a masterpiece of lyrics put to music. The lyrics trace the experience of black people through slavery and freedom through visual metaphors that capture the emotion and significance of each line. The shift from major to minor key in each verse mirrors the highs and lows of that experience that are embodied merely through the act of singing. And the plodding speech-like setting of the first three words of each refrain, “Sing a song . . .” have a tone and rhythm that emphasizes the importance of its message.

Johnson was steadfast in classifying “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as a hymn. The evocative imagery in the three stanzas of praise, lament and prayer are reminiscent of the congregational songs used in church. Hymns are written to elicit a communal response to the music and text and are used in a variety of religious traditions as a way to bring people together. While the hymn could be easily found in the hymnals of black denominations, it wasn’t until the 1980s that “Lift Every Voice and Sing” started to appear in the hymnals of large mainline denominations. Black Lutheran and Episcopalian musicians had advocated for its inclusion in their denominational hymnals and their efforts were rewarded when “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was included in the Episcopal Church’s standard 1982 hymnal. Today, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” appears in forty-four hymnals and is sung in churches of all denominations.

During his lifetime, Johnson expressed great pride in how this hymn served the black community, but also in the way it spoke to the experiences of people across the world. The hymn has been used in contexts outside the church including community-based and public events, meetings, conferences, official gatherings, and other ceremonial occasions. “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” has served this nation much in the way another hymn, “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” did when it was embraced by Americans over a century ago.

In abandoning his original idea to write a poem about Abraham Lincoln, James Weldon Johnson took the opportunity to write something that served a larger purpose. His poem was a reflection on the symbolic meaning of Lincoln’s presidency, from leading the country through a civil war to signing the document that abolished slavery in the United States, held for African Americans and the nation overall. “Lift Every Voice and Sing’s” legacy rests in the pride and inspiration that it brings to African Americans but also as a meditation on the transformative power that a collective sense of aspiration, perseverance, and hope have in the face of struggle and overcoming adversity.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today about the historical importance of “Lift Every Voice and Sing”. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.