

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Testimony for the Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties
re: Hearing on H.R. 301—"LEVAS" the official national hymn of the United States

February 4, 2022

It is not an exaggeration to say that the influence and impact of "Life Ev'ry Voice and Sing" (LEVAS) is immeasurable. My comments today will only scratch the surface of its importance but will, I hope, nonetheless assist in deliberations. Written in 1899 by the brothers James Weldon Johnson (lyrics) and J. Rosamond Johnson (music), LEVAS was carried by its original Jacksonville community out into the rest of the segregated U.S. South via Black schoolteachers, faith workers, and families for decades before it was adopted as the hymn of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1921. It was and remains a standard performance within that organization, one that comes with its own official and unofficial rules, including standing during its performance. The song served as an introduction to the NAACP for many who knew the song but had little or no knowledge of the organization in the 1920s and 30s when it began major organizing campaigns in the South. The song was a greeting, a familiar piece of southern Black history, and a welcome into the future of that interracial organization.

The Johnsons received requests to reprint and perform LEVAS from all over the country and the world in the early decades of the twentieth century. Religious organizations and camps, hymnal projects, missions in Africa, intercultural propaganda in Japan: people wanted that song. They cared so much for it that they wrote to its authors to inquire about how exactly it should be sung—Crescendo here? Diminuendo there?—in order to honor all that it signaled. LEVAS called to historical and present experiences of racism and other forms of dispossession while also highlighting the greatest principles of democratic possibility, which the elder Johnson believed in wholeheartedly. As a party of Lincoln Republican and appointed consul abroad, James Weldon understood that the Black experience of violence in the U.S. was vile but not insurmountable; distinct but unexceptional globally. His investment in the promises of democracy meant that LEVAS was not an end but a beginning—an opening into the community from which our best futures are made.

When people gather to sing, things begin to change—from the pressure in the air to the ways in which people live. As I wrote in my first book, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*, "music is a method...[that] allows us to do and imagine things that may otherwise be unimaginable or seem impossible" (1). LEVAS is a perfect example of this. It is a song with vision that was readily accessible to and adopted by a wide variety of communities. Unlike the "Star Spangled Banner," LEVAS is not coerced—it was and is *chosen* for performance by people invested in and inspired by its message. Although institutionalized by the NAACP, the song retained its value to people beyond the organization who took it up in protest and in praise then as well as now. Historically Black Colleges and Universities, jazz musicians in protest against police violence in New York City (2020), a joint recital in 2021 by gospel choirs at [Arizona State University and York University](#) (Ontario, Canada), as well as the song's appearance on stages for the National Football League (2020) and popular music festival Coachella (2019) document that the song is not a relic but a resource that is tapped regularly because it means something—something that is reinvented with every performance.

LEVAS is significant not because of its exceptional author or even its dynamic history with the NAACP but because it is useful to people. Regularly adapted for the concert stage as well as enactments of dissent, it is an actively sought after song with recognizable ambitions and consequences. The investment in the song is so high, that while Johnson consistently described the song as a “hymn,” it has been known for generations as the “Black National Anthem.” This designation is a testament to its power and vision and a strong suggestion that its time of usefulness is far from over.



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Attachments:

- Truth in Testimony Form
- Testimony
- Table of Contents, Chapter 2, and end notes from *Anthem*
- CV