

Spring 2020

***May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem* by Imani Perry (review)**

Daphne Lamothe
Smith College, dlamothe@smith.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/afr_facpubs



Part of the [Africana Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lamothe, Daphne, "*May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem* by Imani Perry (review)" (2020). Africana Studies: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.
https://scholarworks.smith.edu/afr_facpubs/21

This Book Review has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu

**Imani Perry. *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem*.
Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2017. 296 pp. \$26.00.**

Reviewed by Daphne Lamothe, Smith College

In his autobiography *Along This Way* (1933), James Weldon Johnson describes “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (also known as the Black National Anthem) as one of his and his brother Rosamond’s greatest accomplishments. Inspired by the

invitation to deliver an address at a Lincoln Day celebration at the Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida in 1900, James wrote a poem that Rosamond then set to music; the idea was that it would be sung by a chorus of schoolchildren. Johnson considered the anthem evidence of the brothers' ability to create art that could move audiences spiritually and emotionally. With the song's popularity offering evidence of their talent, the duo moved from Jacksonville, Florida to New York City to try their luck. Johnson writes, "[John Rosamond's] enthusiasm roused my curiosity about this new world into which he had had a peep, and I became, as I had at time before and have many times since, keenly aware of the love of venture that runs in me, a deep, strong current" (146). The decision to leave all that was familiar in search of greater opportunity was both deeply personal and reflective of a national trend. Like other members of what would come to be known as the Great Migration from the rural South to cities in the North and Midwest, the brothers sought social advancement and personal freedom. The risk paid off. As "race men," their professional successes in the arts—and for James Weldon in literature, diplomacy, education, and social activism—embodied the aspirations and ambitions of the "New Negro" of the 1910s and '20s.

In *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem*, Imani Perry argues that this spirit infuses the lyrics of "Lift Every Voice" and accounts for its almost instantaneous popularity as it was frequently performed in African American schools, churches, and civic gatherings. Citing Johnson's autobiography, Perry asserts that "the song quickly became popular among young people in Jacksonville and spread from there" (12-13). Calling it "a lament and encomium to the story of and struggle of black people," the author offers a well-researched, thoughtful, and compelling examination of how the song has come to be so firmly woven into the fabric of African American life (7). Perry makes explicit what Johnson's autobiography implies: that the song captures the essences of black history and black consciousness. "Textually," she writes, "the song is filled with [Johnson's] political imagination. It is a march toward liberation" (19).

With elegance and lucidity, Perry chronicles the history of "Lift Every Voice" beginning with its 1900 composition for elementary school-aged children to perform at a commemoration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday. The evolving relevance of the song to Perry's extended family, rooted in Alabama and spanning several generations and multiple locations, illustrates its elasticity: "Four generations of my family, at least, have lived with this anthem. Each generation, each individual, knows this song in a distinctive manner. We discovered it in our coming of age and in the varied orbits of our lives" (xii). Perry introduces her study with a personal anecdote that culminates with the image of her elementary school-aged, suburban-raised son's leading several generations of family elders—fists raised in a black power salute—in a round of "Lift Every Voice."

By following the song's trajectory from performances at family reunions, in African American churches, social clubs, and civic organizations, where it is still sung regularly to open events and programs, as well as in Carnegie Hall and the Oval Office, Perry meditates on the myriad of forces that have allowed "blackness" to cohere across time and space. The story of "Lift Every Voice" provides a framework for her portrayal of those individuals who sang its lyrics, and the social and political contexts that drew them together. Throughout, Perry demonstrates the song's expression of the "march toward liberation" as it winds its way through eras marked by black people's struggles for social integration and political power, or by their expressions of cultural nationalism or patriotism, as well as by their participation in pan-Africanist organizations and other forms of internationalism. The book's historic scope is nearly as epic as the song itself.

Drawing from materials ranging from personal anecdotes to historical archives, Perry persuasively argues for the song's continued relevance despite the changing

circumstances of African Americans' individual and collective lives. In a well-researched study that uses a trove of materials including family letters, program notes, newspaper articles, memoirs, and interviews from which she discovers over nine thousand references to the song, she reflects on the reasons for African Americans' "collective embrace" of the song as an anthem. The book's goal is to unearth the social and cultural history from within the song's trajectory; the result is a finely wrought chronicle of African Americans' past, and a meditation on their present and future.

Perry's methods and theoretical interventions distinguish *May We Forever Stand* from other studies of "Lift Every Voice" by scholars like Shana Redmond (2013), Keith Cartwright (2013), and Timothy Askew (2010), each of whom focus variously on the song's diasporic, transnational, and national resonance. Perry's focus on the song's embodiment of black consciousness emphasizes the rituals that produce the kind of belonging necessary for racial solidarity and political organization. Intrinsic to this argument is her theorization of "black formalism," a reference not to rules of decorum or social respectability, but rather to "ritual practices, codes of conduct, dignified ways of doing and being" (7). Such rituals flourished, she argues, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when explicit forms of racialized violence and exploitation compelled African Americans to turn inward and to rely on social and civic institutions in order to set political agendas.

Perry does not neglect consideration of the ways that circumstances after the civil rights era—from social integration to rising levels of black immigration—have transformed and even diminished spaces of black formalism, even as the need for such rituals remains. "The song was not aligned with a politics, it was aligned with a people," she argues, but by the 1980s, "the sense of linked fate that was once an integral part of the singing couldn't be assumed" (210). Nonetheless, Perry argues, at the same time that the song's themes of resilience, struggle, and hope speak to the spirit of a particular moment in history, they also possess an intrinsic endurance because of their broad and continued applicability. Thus, she concludes by drawing into the discussion recent examples of state-sanctioned antiblack violence (*e.g.*, the police killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri). In doing so, she elucidates the continued need for spaces that affirm the humanity of black people: a need that "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and the black formalism with which it is entangled, fulfills. This book offers readers cogent and astute analyses of sociohistorical contexts, as well as the critical tools to understand why and how "Lift Every Voice and Sing" continues to play a role in the sonic landscape of black life, even as the boundaries and meanings of "blackness" change.
