Beyond Lift Every Voice and Sing

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INTRODUCTION

Lift Every Voice and Sing
[THE BLACK NATIONAL ANTHEM]
WORDS BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON, MUSIC BY J. ROSAMOND JOHNSON, 1896

Lift ev’ry voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, Ring with the
harmonies of liberty; Let our rejoicing rise, High as the list’ning
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.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chast’ning rod, Felt in the days
when hope unborn had died; Yet with a steady beat, Have not our
weary feet Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come treading our path thro’ the blood of the slaugh-
tered,
Out from the gloomy past, Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou who hast
brought us thus far on the way; Thou who hast by Thy might, Led
us into the light, Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget
Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, May we forever stand, True to our God,
True to our Native land.

(ATLANTA UNIVERSITY EDITION, 1900)
From 1898 to 1911, Bob Cole, James Weldon Johnson, and J. Rosamond Johnson were one of the most prolific songwriting teams of their era. In their all-black musicals *Shoo Fly Regiment* (1906–1908) and *The Red Moon* (1908–1910), theater, uplift, and politics collided. With these two musicals, Cole and the Johnson brothers (designated in this text and in their day as the show business team Cole and Johnson) made their mark on musical theater. Following Booker T. Washington’s lead, W. E. B. Du Bois’s ideology, the tenets of Atlanta University, and Cole’s “Colored Actor’s Declaration of Independence,” and informed by their own brushes with United States racism and subjugation, the team actively worked to “become leaders and helpers of their race” through music and theater. Their careers as producers of black musical theater lasted approximately four years, but these years proved pivotal to black musical theater and politics.

Lizabeth Cohen argues in *Making a New Deal* that in the 1930s a culture of unity existed in Chicago through the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which allowed workers of all races nationwide to unite as “political participants.” She states that while this culture collapsed after the 1930s, it is important to understand what that unity meant to the people who participated during that historical moment. Cohen maintains that during this period significant changes occurred in the political lives of the workers involved with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. They accomplished their goals by participating in a political movement for the common worker and taking part in eradicating racism in the workplace. These activists felt that they made a difference. Correspondingly, even though whites gained control of the black theatrical product after Cole and Johnson’s career ended in 1911 and though structural racism ultimately prevented African Americans from gaining control, Cole and Johnson believed at their historical apex that they had contributed fully to the uplift and education of African Americans through theater.

The advances that Cole and Johnson made during the four years they produced *Shoo Fly Regiment* and *The Red Moon* might, to many, seem inconsequential, but their innovations proved enormously progressive for their time. While many scholars dismiss Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson as conformists who bought into hegemony, the contention of this study is that they used the very tools of hegemony to create a distinctly black theater informed by black politics, history, and culture. It is important to understand that the historical epoch in which they lived differed greatly from our times and that, as products of their era, they made progressive political statements through their musicals. They argued for inclusion in the political fabric of American society, and, as followers of the African American boxer Jack Johnson, Theodore Roosevelt, and the manliness movement,
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They envisioned black male inclusion within U.S. society. While it appears that they ignored Roosevelt's overt racism, in *Shoo Fly Regiment* Cole and Johnson included a commentary on United States racism and Roosevelt's refusal to acknowledge the accomplishments of black soldiers during the Spanish-American War by portraying black soldiers as the heroes of the war. They worked within the limits of their time and, like Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, felt that they had served their community.

Cole and Johnson believed that blacks deserved respect in U.S. culture, and they used tropes of masculinity, femininity, and education to advance their beliefs. Their musicals also reflected the relationship between what happens off and on stage, and the playwrights utilized key historical events in African American life to flesh out their musicals. The life of Booker T. Washington, as well as their experiences at Atlanta University, served as background for *Shoo Fly Regiment* and *The Red Moon*. The settings for both productions included industrial institutions patterned after Tuskegee Institute and Hampton Institute. In addition, the team conceivably patterned characters in *Shoo Fly Regiment*, such as the Lady Principal, Rose, and Professor Maxwell, after people they had known at the schools and in their lives. They used Booker T. Washington’s experiences as a teacher of Native Americans in *The Red Moon*. Their productions also reappropriated African American history and reflected historical realities, such as the African American soldiers in the Spanish-American War and the black and Native American education program at Hampton Institute. In the case of the biracial educational program at Hampton Institute, Cole and Johnson reimagined the actual program, which attempted to position blacks and Native Americans as adversaries, by portraying alliances between the two races on stage.

James Weldon Johnson’s commitment to politics, the death of Bob Cole, and J. Rosamond Johnson’s move to London to forge a career as a performer and educator marked the end of the attempt of these three to create a distinctly black theater. Cole and Johnson created theater productions in part to educate audience members about the history of African Americans, to champion the race, and of course, to entertain. Because of his experiences with the theft of his sketch “At Jolly Cooney Island” and his music by the producers of The Black Patti’s Troubadours and the appropriation of “La Hoola Boola” by Allen Hirsh and Yale University, Bob Cole made it his life’s mission to control his theatrical product; for the most part he accomplished this goal. The team adhered to Bob Cole’s “Colored Actor’s Declaration of Independence” and accomplished many of the objectives mapped out in the declaration by writing, directing, and producing their own shows; hiring their own orchestra leaders and composers, such as James Reese Europe;
hiring their own stage managers, such as Charles A. Hunter; and controlling their publicity. But the very real fact that they lived in a society in which structural racism prevented them from owning their own theaters thwarted complete fulfillment of their aspirations.

While we cannot deny that Cole and Johnson in some ways conformed to hegemony and an ideology that embraced patriarchy and color caste, in many respects they moved away from hegemony and committed themselves to an inclusionary form of uplift. Their theatrical productions reflected their attempt to dismiss color-caste casting: while many in their cast were in fact light skinned, blacks of every hue appeared in their productions, including the dark-skinned performers Ada Overton Walker, Anna Cook Pankey, Henry Gant, and Andrew Tribble.4

Like Booker T. Washington, they included black women in their project by hiring Ada Overton Walker, Siren Nevarro, who choreographed *The Red Moon* and *Shoo Fly Regiment*, and Elizabeth Williams, who taught drama classes in addition to performing. Cole and Johnson’s ideology for black women included elevating their status off stage through the newspaper series “*The Red Moon* Rays.” Ada Overton Walker also participated in changing the representative image of black stage women through a series of articles she wrote about show business and black female respectability. The use of the print media by Cole and Johnson and the actress proved truly revolutionary. Additionally, their wives, mothers, and sisters played active roles in their careers and most certainly informed their decisions to include women in their endeavors. Both James Weldon Johnson’s and J. Rosamond Johnson’s wives tended to their business while the husbands worked overseas. Bob Cole’s mother, sisters, and wife Stella Wiley all played instrumental roles in his life.

Abbie Mitchell’s life offered an object lesson in the relationship between the world of the theater and daily life. Indeed, her life mirrored the character Minnehaha in *The Red Moon* as she liberated herself from societal constraints placed on her as a performer and as a person of mixed-race heritage. She reconfigured her place in society by dismissing the notion that the stage was a place of debasement. Mitchell imagined the theater as a place of dignity and respect for black women. Bob Cole, James Weldon Johnson, and J. Rosamond Johnson also dismissed societal restrictions. Because the team drew the character of Minnehaha as a lady of repute, they departed from stereotypical renderings of the mixed-race Native American and African American. Abbie Mitchell used education and marriage as a form of uplift to position herself as decent, upright, and dignified. Through the character of Minnehaha, Cole and Johnson used marriage as a marker of repute and
social standing and rejected the prohibitions placed on black and Native American women at Hampton Institute by portraying romance and marriage between Minnehaha and the African American Plunk Green.

Cole and the Johnsons’ family lives also impacted their musical theater careers. Bob Cole’s experience with white supremacy, the threat of lynching at the age of fifteen, his family’s slave and Native American heritage, and his fight with the white producers of The Black Patti’s Troubadours all informed how he would run his theatrical business and how he would attempt to change the representative images of blacks, Native Americans, and Filipinos on stage. The Johnson’s family heritage also influenced their lives and their theatrical products. The Johnson brothers’ family background reflected a more international view because of their mother’s Haitian and white heritage. The threat of enslavement propelled their free-born mother and father to leave New York for the Bahamas and to eventually relocate in Florida. These incidents surely influenced the Johnson brothers and proved essential to their commitment to the uplift of the black race globally as well as nationally. Despite their parents’ status as freeborn blacks, slavery still touched the family. James Weldon Johnson’s experience with racism, his writings on the lynch laws, his education at Atlanta University, and his commitment to serving others all pointed to his dedication to the welfare and interests of African Americans.

Placing their shows within a black center, Cole and Johnson made significant advances by crafting black musical theater as a form of protest, breaking the love scene taboo, incorporating romantic songs in their shows, and promoting interracial solidarity between blacks, Native Americans, and Filipinos on stage. Knowledgeable about the negative impact of U.S. politics on the minds and bodies of these racial minorities, the team offered audiences new forms of representations of educated blacks and Native Americans, blacks as soldiers, teachers, doctors, and lawyers.

While we might look at the attempt of Bob Cole and the Johnsons to create a distinctly black theater as a failure, for a brief moment in time they accomplished their goals. Their productions proved so innovative that black and white musicians, writers, composers, and audience members spoke of their accomplishments for years after their deaths. In the Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, Harold Cruse argued that African American history reflects the conflict between whether blacks should fight for inclusion through integration or fight for a nationalist project that would exclude whites. He argues that nationalism remains the only solution for African Americans. Cole and Johnson’s attempt to create a distinctly black theater incorporated both the nationalist agenda and integrationist agenda and, for a fleeting moment, they succeeded.
Overview

The main objective of this book is to explore how roles and representations in black musical theater both reflected and challenged the dominant social order and to examine how Cole and Johnson worked as part of a collective culture of uplift that combined conservative and progressive ideas in a complex and historically specific strategy for overcoming racism and its effects.

Chapter 1 discusses significant events in the lives of Cole and the Johnsons that helped to shape their political and social thought. It looks at how these events instilled in the team a strong commitment to uplift. This chapter includes the biographical background of Bob Cole, his business networks, and his resistance to hegemony through musical theater. It also examines the life story of James Weldon Johnson and how key incidents in his life instilled in him a sense of racial responsibility. I detail how Johnson’s forays into politics acted as an outgrowth of these events and influenced Shoo Fly Regiment and The Red Moon. The chapter also offers the reader biographical information on John Rosamond Johnson, including his commitment to all facets of the theater and his full participation in performance, acting as director of music schools in London and in Harlem. It also details how he incorporated this commitment to the theater into the musicals written with Bob Cole and James Weldon Johnson. It investigates the trio’s influences in the public and private spheres and how these forces led them to reject minstrelsy and black stereotypes on stage. I also investigate the ideologies of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois and shake up the common notion that they remained totally dissimilar. In doing so I examine how Cole and Johnson as well as other African Americans adopted both ideologies to advance their agenda by successfully combining the two seemingly discordant philosophies.

I also look into how their business skills informed their attempt to secure financial control of their theatrical products and publicity. I investigate their use of the stage as a tool of uplift to educate both black and white theatergoers about the historical accomplishments of African Americans and examine the ways in which black entertainers worked to change the image of the stage.

Chapter 2 investigates how Cole and Johnson changed the projected images of African American men and women in Shoo Fly Regiment. This chapter looks at how the two coupled the ideologies of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois and reigning notions of African American womanhood in shaping the musical. I also consider how Booker T. Washington’s and the trio’s experiences as teachers and students further informed Shoo Fly Regiment. This chapter examines the restoration of the black male body through sports, the boxer Jack Johnson, and what I term the African American hypermasculine übermensch, the authoritative ideal for black male
power, black masculinity, bodily strength, and the conquering of hegemony and how the team adopted these tropes. Chapter 3 delves into how the playwrights modeled the characters within the production after real people from their lives. I survey the stereotypical characters in *Shoo Fly Regiment* and audience responses to the production.

The fourth chapter considers the case of Cole and Johnson’s *The Red Moon*. This chapter includes a summary of *The Red Moon* and exemplifies how history informed the production. In this vein I explicate the relationship between the Civil War and industrial institutions and how the Civil War served as a training ground for white soldiers placed in charge of creating and running black industrial institutions. Furthermore I describe how their understanding of Booker T. Washington’s experiences teaching Native Americans students fleshed out Cole and Johnson’s *The Red Moon*. This chapter discusses the romance and educational hierarchies set in place at Hampton Institute by the white administrators and instructors and how Cole and Johnson reimagined these hierarchies by presenting on stage interracial unity, solidarity, and romance. It also chronicles the real-life experiences and relationships between the black female teachers at Hampton Institute and the Native American students and how Cole and Johnson imagined these interactions. I look at how Cole and Johnson eliminated the problematic white presence in the production and envisioned the amalgamation of black and Native Americans on stage. This chapter also examines the stereotypes of Native Americans in U.S. culture and looks at the affirmative representations in *The Red Moon*. It grapples with identity issues through an analysis of the black and Native American character Minnehaha and how this character reflected the life of Abbie Mitchell, the actress who played the role.

In the fifth chapter I consider the female artists of *The Red Moon* and Cole and Johnson’s efforts to transform the image of African American women on and off the stage through the popular cultural icon “The Gibson Girl” and the newspaper column “*The Red Moon* Rays.” I also look at how the stars of *The Red Moon*, Ada Overton Walker and Abbie Mitchell, changed preexisting perceptions of black women through their attempts to dignify stage life.

Cole and the Johnsons’ musicals and their political activism refracted the variegated, multilayered reality of African American life. Emblazoned with African American agency, politics, and art, Cole and Johnson changed the theatrical and social landscape of the United States by fusing their aesthetic agenda with their political goals and, in doing so, unremittingly and unapologetically challenged the cultural and racial hegemony of the day.
Figure 2. Bob Cole, James Weldon Johnson, and J. Rosamond Johnson. James Weldon Johnson Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.