Beyond Lift Every Voice and Sing
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According to the July 1908 *The Colored American Magazine*, Cole and Johnson’s strategy for avoiding the types of financial difficulties they encountered with *Shoo Fly Regiment* included trying to book *The Red Moon* in large houses. The team, however, faced an insurmountable obstacle. White producers and booking agents remained unwilling to book black shows into first-rate theaters. The blocking of Cole and Johnson’s *The Red Moon* from first-rate theaters contributed to the closing of the show.

*The Red Moon* met with moderate success with houses packed in cities such as Chicago and Washington, D.C. The show closed in Washington on May 14, 1910 after playing successfully there. Cole and Johnson retired temporarily from musical comedy but then, according to Bob Cole, made plans to produce a new show, *Phoebe Brown*, which would star Ada Overton Walker. The theater owners Stair and Havlin assured the team that their new show would only play in their first-class theaters around the country, but Stair and Havlin reversed themselves, and offered the team second-class theaters instead. Lester A. Walton suggested that because Stair and Havlin had begun leasing their first-class theaters for the showing of movies, the increasing popularity of the moving picture industry caused some of the problems Cole and Johnson experienced in terms of booking their new show. Because of Stair and Havlin’s reversal, Cole and Johnson canceled their plans for the new show for the fall of 1910.

J. Rosamond Johnson and Bob Cole attempted to return to vaudeville after *The Red Moon* closed, but Cole became ill and they subsequently retired from vaudeville. Cole died on August 2, 1911. After his death J.
Rosamond Johnson embarked on a solo vaudeville career in London, and James Weldon Johnson continued his work as the consul of Nicaragua and Venezuela. He eventually became the secretary of the NAACP. The death of Bob Cole marked the end of the Cole and Johnson team.6

In 1913 James Weldon Johnson hoped to continue his career as a diplomat, but the United States blocked his ambitions because of their unwillingness to send an African American man to the Azores. J. Rosamond Johnson left the United States for England in the hopes of building a career in the theater that he could not have in the United States. On May 13, 1913, James Weldon Johnson wrote a response to J. Rosamond Johnson who asked for his advice about whether he should remain in England and send for his pregnant wife Nora. Johnson’s letter offers a commentary on the United States and its relationship to African Americans. James Weldon Johnson wrote, “[f]rom my point of view, if I was going to be his daddy I’d have him born an Englishman; for there’s nothing in being an American of colored hue.”7 This comment expresses the frustrations and difficulties that African Americans encountered during the early part of the twentieth century when their hopes remained so high for the future but they were defeated by structural racism at every turn.

Several forms of black musical theater emerged after Cole and Johnson’s career came to a close in 1910. These included musical theater, which relied on minstrel forms, revues, and multiracial musicals. The book musical became a rare commodity with the appearance of these new forms of musical theater, and blacks, for the most part, lost control of black musical theater. In Black Manhattan James Weldon Johnson concluded that with the end of the Cole and Johnson musicals came a period in black theater which he called the “term of exile.” Johnson asserted that black theater faced exile from downtown New York theaters from 1910 to 1917, resulting in a thriving theater in Harlem which catered exclusively to black audiences.8 During the “term of exile” black performers found themselves free from the constraints placed upon them when playing in front of white audiences, allowing them to dismiss the minstrel forms.9 Dramatic theater companies such as The Lafayette Players and the Lincoln Players performed melodramas with Shoo Fly Regiment and The Red Moon alumni Abbie Mitchell and Inez Clough, who both appeared with The Lafayette Players. The “term of exile” ended on April 5, 1917, when the Colored Players appeared at the Garden Theater in a series of plays by white author Ridgely Torrence, which in effect marked the beginning of white control over black theatrical representations.10 A black show would not appear on Broadway for another four years, not until 1921, when black composers and writers Sissle and Blake’s Shuffle Along appeared.