

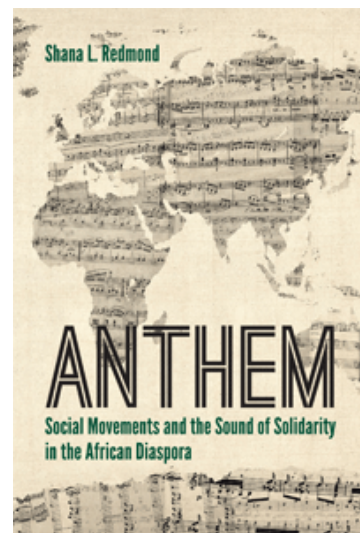
Anthem: Social Movements and the Sounds of Solidarity in the African Diaspora

Shana L. Redmond

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What if you had a nation but not a country? This is what many people of African descent felt in their day-to-day lives in the Americas and in colonial Africa. Their nationality was defined by the colour of their skin. They were Blacks, Negros, les noirs or los morenos. The book “Anthem: Social Movements and the Sounds of Solidarity in the African Diaspora” explores how this nationality without a nation found a voice through social movements and their “national” anthems. Shana L. Redmond, a former musician and labour organizer currently teaching at the University of California Los Angeles, chooses to explore six songs and their associated social movements.



The book proceeds chronologically, beginning with the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) founded in Jamaica by Marcus Garvey and Amy Ashwood. Set up to protect Africans around the world, the UNIA used all the trappings of a nation. It had a constitution, a social order, politics, uniforms and an anthem. An issue regarding the UNIA’s international status the author highlights is that “[t]he collective questioned for example, if meetings were to culminate in rousing renditions of the national anthem, should it be ‘God Save the King’ or ‘The Star Spangled Banner?’” (pg 24). The organization chose the song “Ethiopia” written in 1918 by Benjamin E. Burrell and Arnold J. Forde as its anthem. The lyrics “Ethiopia, land of our fathers” and “[o]f the red, the black and the green” pays homage to ideals of the UNIA to eradicate Western colonialism from Africa. The demise of the UNIA occurred after the deportation of Marcus Garvey from the United States in 1927.

The book then examines the ascendancy and role of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured Peoples (NAACP) — an organization that traces its roots to the Niagara Movement of 1905. The author notes that W.E.B. Du Bois was likely the most important figure in the history of the NAACP. Redmond explores the role of the organization in African American society. She writes that “[i]n spite of its contradictions, the NAACP developed a culture early on in its history that made it a force to be reckoned with, artistically, socially, and politically.” Around 1920 the song “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” was chosen as the organization’s anthem. Former U.S. Senator Ed Brookes recounted his experience with the inspirational song:

When I finished high school and moved on to Howard University, I continued to sing and hear ‘Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing’ at small and large gatherings on and off campus. The stirring words of James Weldon Johnson and the soul-gripping music of his brother J. Rosamond Johnson stayed with me when I served with the brave men and officers of the Negro 366th Infantry Combat Regiment in Italy fighting in World War II in a segregated U.S. Army to preserve world freedom and liberty. When the morale of our troops was low, as it often was, we sang our Negro National Anthem. It sustained us and helped us to carry on (pg. 97).

The third chapter deals not with an organization, but with a man — the singer and actor Paul Robeson. The song investigated is “Ol’ Man River” from the 1927 Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein musical, “Show Boat.” “Show Boat” was based on the popular novel of the same name and told the story of life on the Mississippi River around the turn of the twentieth century. Robeson first performed the song when he was cast as Joe in the play. He wrote to a friend saying “I sing only one song — ‘O’l Man River,’ but it runs through the show and I get three spots for it. I’ll get a lot of publicity, and it might make London concerts easy” (pg. 101). However, Redmond notes that the “relationship with the musical that made him a star was a tortured one” (pg. 100). The original novel was written by a northerner with the portrayal of Blacks based on the derogatory stereotypes of the time. The song also included these stereotypical views and over the years Robeson revised the lyrics to better reflect African American realities. The following lyric provides an example with the original stating “Git a little drunk An’ you land in jail,” whereas Robeson revised it to “Show a little grit. And you land in jail” (pg. 119).

Robeson had enough experience to know that just showing “grit” was enough to get a Black person into trouble in America.

The author goes on to the 1945-1946 tobacco strike in Charleston, South Carolina. Black women were central to the strike and it is through them that “We Shall Overcome” evolved into a political anthem. Redmond writes:

The historico-musical lineage of ‘We Shall Overcome’ travels a long, and at times obscure, passage from its roots in Negro spirituals to its usage as a labor ballad. While the sacred and secular are often in conflict, the mid-twentieth-century use of an antebellum religious song fits squarely within the larger canon of Black protest music (pg. 143).

The power of music was demonstrated in Charleston when the police outlawed the singing of union songs just three months into the strike.

Chapter 5 highlights the power of an African American in the person of Nina Simone. Long involved with Black activism, Simone became a symbol of pride and rebellion in the turbulent 1960s. Her songs included “Mississippi Goddam” written in response to the murder of Medger Evers and the bombing deaths of four girls at a Birmingham church. She wrote the song in an hour and recalled that it “was my first civil rights song, and it erupted out of me quicker than I could write it down. I knew then that I would dedicate myself to the struggle of Black justice, freedom and equality under the law... .” However, it was her song “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” that became the anthem of the Black Power movement. The Black Nationalist Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) adopted the song as the Black National Anthem at its 1971 convention. Nina Simone’s influence was not limited to the United States, but was felt around the world — especially in Africa.

The final anthem comes from South Africa. It is “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika,” a Xhosa hymn, adopted as an anthem by the African National Congress (ANC). Early in its development, the ANC espoused itself as a pan-African organization requesting the government replace the word “native” with “African.” Through the actions of South African exiles and other diaspora, “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” became the anthem of other African nations as well. Its English translation begins, “Lord, bless Africa – May her horn rise high up; Hear Thou our prayers – And bless us” (pg. 225).

Redmond goes into great detail about the social and political issues surrounding each of the songs and the movements for which they became anthems. She concludes her book with the wish that “[t]he project and practice of Black anthems represented here will, with any luck, mobilize another cohort with talents to remake the world” (pg. 288).

South African singer and activist Miriam Makeba succinctly put it, “[w]ho can keep us down as long as we have our music?” (pg. 221).



Peter Meyler