

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: COLOSSUS OF RUTGERS: THE VISUAL
AND PRINT MEDIA LEGACY OF PAUL
LEROY ROBESON

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One of the most celebrated African American figures known worldwide, Paul Leroy Robeson was primarily erased from history books for almost a decade after he began speaking out about injustices stemming from the second Red Scare. Fewer still know of his formative years and early influences. This erasure can only be counteracted with targeted scholarship. As a project of reclamation, this American Studies dissertation joins scholarship in other fields that aim to restore Paul Robeson to his proper place in history with the hope of prompting a new wave of research on

the subject. The youth and early career of Robeson is the targeted era (before his matriculation at the University of London in 1934) of this work.

The central question around which this dissertation is organized is this: Through a close examination of the role that the skin and masculinity of Paul Robeson played in his early life and career, how can we come to understand the ways that the resulting gaze was imposed on his body, and how did Robeson himself cultivate the gaze of his own public image and cultural representation as a performance icon and “race man,” launching him on his way to becoming an advocate for rights of black people worldwide?

To engage this research question, the methodologies of textual critical discourse analysis, Mora Beauchamp- Byrd's exhibition categorization and methodology, and Frederick Douglass's lectures on visual theories are utilized. All of these have directly assisted in the interpolation of the printed and photographic legacy of Robeson. Given the early career focus of this dissertation, archival materials from the following institutions provided the primary sources for this work: the Rutgers University libraries Special Collection and Archives, Temple University's Charles L. Blockson Afro-American collection, and the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York. With Robeson as an example of a multi-talented black cultural icon, textual discourse analysis demonstrates how to construct specific views of the social world that Paul Robeson inhabited in the early phase of his public life and how his career developments were portrayed in both the Black American and majority print media outlets of the era.

COLOSSUS OF RUTGERS: THE VISUAL AND PRINT MEDIA LEGACY OF
PAUL LEROY ROBESON

by

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There is one man who had an outsized impact on my life in a variety of ways. Dr. George Bolles, my maternal grandfather and first holder of a doctorate in my family, paved the way for me to be where I am now. From the coal mines of West Virginia, to the battlefields of North Africa in WWII, to obtaining his own Ph.D. from the University of Paris, this man set an example to all others. He provided financial support for both undergraduate and graduate studies for his nine younger brothers and sisters. His example also includes his daughter whose pursuit of her own PhD led her

to New Brunswick, NJ and Rutgers University. As the third in my family to earn my way to this academic level, it is important to recognize that the strength, commitment, and brilliance of Black America is represented on a micro level with my family's history. Now, I can include myself in that category. This is not to self-aggrandize, but to acknowledge that there is a responsibility to impart this knowledge to young people, as they are the future of this country and the African American community.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: The Evolution of a Black Icon

Of interest to scholars from many disciplines, including labor history, political science, cultural studies, and anthropology, much of the academic work on Paul Robeson has focused on the outcome of the federal government's seizure of his passport in 1955 during the Red Scare, and the impact that action had on his life and career. Once one of the most celebrated African American figures, known around the world, Robeson was largely erased from history books after he began speaking out about injustices at home and abroad. Historian Joseph Dorinson has called him, "the greatest legend nobody knows."¹

Prized for his physical presence, on the athletic field, stage, and screen, Paul Robeson came to be attacked as "ungrateful"—and worse—once he became an outspoken social critic and activist. As a result, few Americans today know of Robeson, much less his many contributions and achievements. Fewer still know the story of his formative years and early influences. Works by Paul Robeson, Jr., and historian and biographer Martin Duberman are rare comprehensive portraits covering those chapters of his life.

This dissertation, then, is one of reclamation. It seeks to recover and investigate the fascinating history of Paul Robeson's multifaceted early life and career. It asks what propelled this man of humble origins who was the son of a minister who escaped slavery while in his teens. A related aim of this dissertation is to reframe Paul Robeson for a wider audience, and to introduce the renowned activist,

¹ Joseph Dorinson, "Introduction," in *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy*, ed. Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2004), 7.

singer, actor, and athlete to future scholars, and others who may not be aware of his profound historical and cultural significance. Lastly, this study explores how Paul Robeson became an international, anti-colonial icon, as well as a living manifestation of the creativity of the Harlem Renaissance and American Modernist movements.

There is a personal aspect to this project. I have felt a lifelong connection to Paul Leroy Robeson, and view this study through multiple lenses: first as a lifelong student of his influence, second as an academic, and third as an educator. My parents met in the 1970s, while attending graduate school at Rutgers New Brunswick, the university where Robeson received his undergraduate degree. My younger brother is named after Robeson. As the child of parents with PhDs, my home was filled with books of all kinds. Growing up, some of my earliest memories were of looking at the pictorial biography of this very large, powerful looking man. When I advanced to reading at a higher level, other books about Robeson in my parents' collection became accessible to me, and I learned even more about him. Now, as my academic career has progressed, my interest in Robeson's fame and influence, along with his virtual disappearance from the historical record, has intrigued me.

This dissertation, then, is the culmination of my own intellectual journey, including my interest in unrecognized or politically ostracized black leaders. This is a journey that began while working on my master's degree at Morgan State University. As my teaching career has progressed, I have taught hundreds of students at the University of Maryland, College Park. When I ask my classes if they know of Paul Robeson, fewer than a handful of students indicate they have heard of him. Part of my mission, then, is to educate students and other readers about the vital role this multi-

talented man played in so many areas of life, including professional realms, that younger generations enjoy and perhaps areas in which they seek careers.

The central question around which this dissertation is organized is this:

Through a close examination of the role that Paul Robeson's race and masculinity played in his early life and career, how can we come to understand the ways that the public gaze was imposed on his body? How did Robeson himself cultivate his own public image and cultural representation as a performance icon and "race man"? And how did these representations influence how he was received as an advocate for the rights of black people worldwide?

Through the focus on Robeson's early life and career, this study also reveals the value of examining how worldviews of influential leaders are shaped by early life and educational experiences. An overview of Robeson's life preceding his years as a University of London student demonstrates what this dynamic figure had to overcome, and how that process unfolded during a critical chapter of American history. To comprehend what Robeson and his family experienced, and how those experiences shaped Robeson's worldview, one must step back and gain some understanding of the period's discourses, as well as the political and social systems, which I will discuss in the following pages.

Literature Review

This dissertation is in conversation with the substantial body of scholarship on Robeson, emanating from a variety of fields. These disciplines offer significant theoretical and methodological approaches through which to study Paul Robeson. While the review of existing scholarship that follows is not exhaustive, it does help

situate my work, pointing to, among other things, ideas and findings that have influenced how I think about my topic.

The narrative of Paul Robeson's life is pivotal in this research project. Any discussion of his ability to transcend prevailing stereotypes of black men requires identifying and accessing credible primary and secondary sources to establish what was transpiring during his career at each turn, but particularly within the timeframe (1898-1934) that is the focus of this project. In addition, it is necessary to understand the inspirational forces that helped Robeson grow and develop into the person he would become.

There are several critical secondary biographical texts that this dissertation draws from. The first and most well-known is Martin Duberman's *Paul Robeson*.² As the first, and most importantly, comprehensive biography of Robeson's life and career, this volume breaks down his life into distinct phases, from his childhood to his undergraduate career, to his role as a fledgling actor during the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. Duberman's use of manuscript archives as well as oral history interviews with family and friends provides a highly detailed resource for this project. As Duberman recounts in *The Rest of It: Hustlers, Cocaine, Depression, and Then Some (1976-1988)*, although he was hand-selected by Paul Robeson, Jr., to be his father's official biographer, the relationship was a contentious one.³

The second biographical text critical to this project is *The Young Paul Robeson: On My Journey Now*, written by Robeson's good friend and collaborator

² Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988).

³ Martin Duberman, *Cocaine, Depression, and Then Some, 1976-1988* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

Lloyd Brown.⁴ This book focuses on Robeson's younger years, discussing at length Robeson's journey, growing and developing into the transformative "New Negro" figure he was. Brown uses extensive oral history interviews from a variety of Robeson's family members and close friends, along with primary source research, to provide a well-rounded and extensive study of Robeson's early life.

The third important historical text employed is *Here I Stand*, Robeson's autobiography, which was first published in 1958; the last year of his banishment from international travel.⁵ Robeson's right to travel was restored in 1958 when the United States Supreme Court's ruling *Kent V. Dulles* found that the Secretary of State did not have the legal authority to ban individuals from international travel.⁶ This autobiography was written when Robeson was middle-aged, yet he always began with stories of childhood and collegiate experiences that provided a foundation for his personal and public quest to transcend his race and excel in chosen career pursuits. The 1988 reissue of the book, the edition I find most useful, features an extensive introduction by Sterling Stuckey, a distinguished scholar of slavery and African American intellectual and cultural history. Robeson's autobiography is essential to this project, given that it was the sole book he authored about his life and career.

Edited into a single volume by Philip Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks*, first published in 1978, is a collection of speeches, writings, interviews, and newspaper

⁴ Lloyd L. Brown, *The Young Paul Robeson: On My Journey* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1997).

⁵ Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

⁶ *Kent v. Dulles*, Cornell University Law School Legal Information Institute, accessed September 14, 2014, www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/357/116

articles.⁷ Foner assembled this collection of primary sources to provide a well-rounded perspective on Robeson that encompasses all phases of his career and life. This volume also establishes the range of media with which Robeson engaged.

Of equal importance to Robeson's biographical information is background about his complex yet loving relationship with his wife, Eslanda Goode Robeson. This is explored in Barbara Ransby's *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson*.⁸ This work describes the inner dynamics of the Robeson marriage, and offers insights into the construction of Paul Robeson's unique form of black American cultural representation by showing how Eslanda and Paul worked together to shape his professional profile and career through her management of his career and business arrangements.⁹

Despite these autobiographies and background information, in the main, literature on Robeson's early life tends to be scarce. A notable exception is *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen*, a collection of essays edited by Jeffrey C. Stewart, and produced in conjunction with the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at Rutgers University, which is especially illuminating in terms of drawing connections between Robeson's

⁷ Philip S. Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974* (New York: Citadel Press, 2002).

⁸ Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

⁹ Other influential biographical works include *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement*. Co-authored by Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, this book, which took Boyle and Bunie twenty years to research and write, rivals Duberman's earlier volume in scope. Also contributing to knowledge of Robeson's life and career are: *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy*, co-edited by Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak; Gerald Horne's *Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary*; granddaughter Susan Robeson's pictorial biography, *The Whole World in His Hands: A Pictorial Biography of Paul Robeson*; and a work by Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, which focuses on his father's early life from 1898 to 1939. *Undiscovered Paul Robeson* focuses on his father's early life from 1898 to 1939. Most significantly, the volume provides insight into the dynamics of Paul, Jr.'s parents' relationship that only a family member is able to provide.

early and later years.¹⁰ One of the arguments made by Stewart as well as contributors Deborah Willis and Julianne Malveaux is that as long as audiences remained focused on Robeson's physicality, and as long as he remained determined to play by the rules, work within the system, fit in, and not rock the boat, he was mostly deemed non-threatening by white Americans. His public image would shift dramatically when he assumed an activist stance, however.

My formal training leads me to make linkages between and among disciplines, texts, and genres. Given this, I bring perspectives from material and visual culture to this discussion. W. J. T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* traces the levels of significance of visual images and the shaping forces they exert in American culture, and introduces a methodological concept, "applied iconology."¹¹ Described as a way to investigate interactions of visual and verbal representation in a variety of media, this methodology is useful when applied to visual representations of Robeson's multifaceted career as an athlete, orator, and star of stage and film. Mitchell's approach helps us to understand how, across visual platforms, Robeson's career can be linked to issues of power, value, and human interest. It can also help reveal how Robeson forced many in the United States to reframe their understanding of black male capability and influence.

Robeson's dramatic oeuvre is equally critical to any conversation of study.

Othello was one of the most important dramatic roles Robeson would play, and John

¹⁰ Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed., *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998). Parallels can be drawn between the career of Muhammad Ali, and in the age of the 45th presidential administration, could be updated to include Colin Kaepernick and others.

¹¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4-5.

Proctor's dissertation, *Othello: Representation, Race and Robeson*, offers an insightful analysis not only of Robeson's portrayal, but the wider historiography of the play itself and the socio-historical implications of all-white portrayals of Othello. Those portrayals, Proctor asserts, had inscribed race into the minds of theater patrons. Also illuminating is Proctor's exploration of principal elements of black masculinity and how black identity has influenced the ways audience members construct meaning or read the spectacle text of *Othello*.¹² Robeson's portrayal of Othello was multifaceted, and forced new understanding of black masculinity, capability, and identity. Proctor argues it was also an act of political activism.¹³

Primary sources provide unique insights into the ways people live their lives, but most importantly, how the people under study affected and influenced those around them throughout their personal and professional lives. The primary texts this study turns to are critical, but are not the only historical texts used, because understanding how Robeson transcended prevailing stereotypes of black men and their masculinity during Reconstruction, the Progressive Era, and Gilded Age requires understanding those stereotypes within context, as reflected in the eras preceding the initial years of Robeson's life. Furthermore, notions of white masculinity are just as important to understand, because stereotypes of black masculinity are drawn from comparisons to white masculinity. Perceptions of difference nearly always hinge on

¹² John Ray Proctor, "Othello: Representation, Race and Robeson" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2011), 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

ethnic differences coupled with social and economic inequality found across the United States.

Several scholars emphasize that Robeson's political beliefs, and the vast amounts of attention given to them during the Red Scare of the 1950s, drowned out the incredible gifts he possessed and all that he contributed to black and white communities alike, nationally and worldwide. On this topic, Maurice O. Wallace's *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995*, has been highly influential in the development of my ideas. In seeking to "negotiate the frequently discordant relationship between blackness and maleness in the cultural logic of American identity," Wallace points to a dearth of scholarship on black masculinity, especially when compared to the number of studies done on the formation and establishment of white masculinity.¹⁴ In an effort to help fill that gap, the author attempts to map the discrete metaphysics by which black masculine identity has sought its own ideological equilibrium of race and masculine subject-hood.¹⁵ As Wallace shows, postmodern black masculine identity tends to assert itself in performativity, and so this study is critical to a wide-ranging understanding of how black masculinity has been manifested in performance and specifically as part of Robeson's legacy.

The mere presence of a black man in the vicinity of white company has historically elicited immediate suspicion and fears. Marlon B. Ross's *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* explores this topic by centralizing

¹⁴ Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture 1775-1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

both the body and Jim Crow. Ross reads the Jim Crow system as one of racial suppression, but also as a system of sexual classification. His interdisciplinary study investigates the racial and sexual logic operating in rival modes of gendered interaction between whites and blacks.¹⁶ As an early twentieth century performance artist, Robeson had to carry himself in a non-threatening manner through a variety of highly racialized arenas, including professional circles, collegiate sports, and vocal and stage performances. Ross's work helps conceptualize how Robeson's deft maneuvering and management of his personality, at a time when the black male body itself was visibly stamped with Jim Crow exclusion, allowed Robeson to break down barriers in his chosen ventures.¹⁷ The construction of both Robeson's identity as a Black person and a man in general is a dialectical process.¹⁸ Robeson, given his high level of visibility and the extent to which the public followed his pursuits, played a significant role in crafting that person.

Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, when joined with other books in this literature review, provides substantial context for the era in which Robeson lived, offering insight into the idealization of white masculinity, directly linking it to citizenship in the United States. It frames both black and white masculinity at the turn of the century, and identifies national leadership figures that helped shape it, albeit not always in a positive manner for black communities across America. Bederman points out that although masculinity in America is historical, ideological processes

¹⁶ Marlon B. Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 2-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

produce a set of truths about who an individual is.¹⁹ Most importantly, Bederman traces how Americans at the turn of the century were obsessed with the connection between manhood and racial dominance.²⁰ White masculinity had been idealized from the colonial era throughout the antebellum periods, in both the North and South. The end of the Civil War led to a substantial level of self-reflection and caused whites to reformulate how their race would continue to justify their status as the apex or dominant social group in America. With that as its focus, Bederman's work examines how racial dominance of white males was cast in terms of race, class, and civilization discourse, i.e., what groups in the United States were deemed “civilized” during the Progressive Era and Gilded Age. In doing so, it captures the complexity of the process whereby white men would define themselves in opposition to black men, regardless of their educational attainment.²¹

Methodologies

This study has an interest in exploring the role that descriptions of Paul Robeson’s physical stature played in his early career. Specifically, I am concerned with how the public cast a particular gaze on his body, including the role that Robeson himself played in that image. To get at this, I employ an open coding technique while reading a host of textual and visual sources. In short, the open coding is a means of reading and re-reading various primary sources to note the recurrence of similar themes. Once a theme emerged more than three times, it became important to

¹⁹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1996).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

note. This method, combined with that employed by Mora Beauchamp-Byrd in her exhibition *Body and Soul: Paul Robeson, Race and Representation*, where she systematically catalogs “Paul Robeson’s physical images throughout his lengthy career as a pioneering social activist, scholar, athlete, renowned baritone, and actor on stage and in film,” will also be critical.²² These methodological approaches help organize the materials examined, before incorporating their overall themes into a discussion of the range of discourses and media themes that surrounded Robeson and his career, across the early twentieth century color line. Given that Robeson was actively transcending societal and cultural myths about black intellectual and physical ability, the meanings of these themes and the ways that these issues surrounded his artistry and were framed in the media are vital to presenting a clear portrayal of Paul Robeson’s life and career.

For the photographic legacy of Robeson’s early career, Frederick Douglass's lectures on visual theories are utilized to directly assist in the interpolation of the printed and photographic legacy of Robeson. The images of him that were reproduced in newspapers and magazines, along with those printed in the handbills and programs of his performances, had the potential to reframe black masculinity and the coded ideological negativity surrounding representations of black men in a non-servile capacity. This coded negativity was deeply inscribed into white supremacist ideology, where male dominance in society was constructed through racial dominance. Paul Robeson’s artistry actively and directly counteracted this mythology. The images

²² Mora Beauchamp-Byrd, *Body and Soul: Paul Robeson, Race and Representation*, Exhibition at The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Chapel Hill, NC: October 9, 2007 – January 25, 2008) <<http://stonecenter.unc.edu/files/2016/08/ROBESONbook.pdf>>.

found throughout this dissertation are analyzed to provide a deeper understanding of the role of visual culture and print media representations of Robeson during his earliest phase of his public career and notoriety.

Finally, *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, edited by Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, is a collection illustrating how objects created by humans are developed with a particular goal or relevance in mind. It highlights objects as cultural creations, demonstrating that their structures invoke multiple metaphors that serve to materialize beliefs and establish and maintain cultural truths.²³ With this dissertation's focus on Robeson's career, particularly his embodiment of the "New Negro," aspects of his performances in athletics and on stage provide insight into how his career influenced American society.

This dissertation aims to develop a "thick" description of Robeson's influences on black masculinity in the Progressive Era. As defined by cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, "thick description" as a methodology examines not only behavior, but the reasoning behind and purposes for that behavior.²⁴ This element and what and how it signifies masculinity in the United States during the historical period covered is a substantial component of this study.

A note should be made here on terms. In chapters four and five, I use the term physical spectacularization. This means, essentially, there is an overemphasis on the physical body. I will also illustrate Robeson's (sometimes unwilling) participation in

²³ Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institute, 1993), xiii.

²⁴ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 12.

the politics of black respectability. Black respectability politics refers to attempts from within the Black community to monitor and control the behaviors so as to insist they are compatible with the values of mainstream society. Black intellectualism is also employed to reflect patterns of black thought primarily through the analysis of the society and culture mores of the time. And lastly, we cannot overlook that role of class consciousness played in Robeson's life. Robeson grew to be a figure almost larger than life. His theatrical and vocal performances were judged in both the Black and white media. But, they were judged on many merits including race, class, subject matter, and talent. Social class becomes infused in this conversation because of the various roles that Robeson undertook. Some performances, the engagement with Negro spirituals, for example, were considered an affront to Black society, even while simultaneously praised.

In the chapters that follow, the passion I have for Robeson's life and legacy unfolds beginning with a look at his early life to my own interpretations of Robeson's performances. Chapter two, "Family Origins and Early Education, Keys to a Life," traces Robeson's early life through his senior year of high school. It focuses on his family's history, including his father's escape from slavery, the growth of the Robeson family, and eventual birth of Paul, the youngest of five children. This chapter first explores some of the ways that Robeson's family, coming out of slavery and forging a new life at the dawn of the twentieth century, played a critical role in his socialization as a black man. Hardships faced by the Robesons during these years were mirrored by challenges Paul confronted later in life. I then consider the father/son relationship, focusing on specific relationships and experiences with

members of the extended family that father and son shared. These experiences contributed to shaping Robeson into the man he would become. Finally, this origins story examines the development of a tone and demeanor that helped Robeson confront and navigate a society that viewed black people in low regard, of lesser intelligence, to be kept at the lowest position of the social hierarchy. In the words of W.E.B. DuBois, Robeson developed a double consciousness, a reality black Americans share, “of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”²⁵ Robeson, in a variety of professional and private situations, throughout his childhood and into college, experienced the feeling of “two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”²⁶ These early experiences laid the foundation of Robeson’s identity as an international icon fighting for freedom and justice.

Chapter three, “Paul Robeson of Rutgers: Transcending Societal Racialization,” engages the reader in a complex history of Robeson’s time on Rutgers University’s New Brunswick campus. During this period, his athletic ability was matched only by his exceptional performance in the classroom and other sites of intellectual deliberation and cultural exchange. It was during his college years that Robeson also experienced the deep reach of de facto Jim Crow practices, which systematically impacted the lived experience of New Jersey’s citizens. The Great

²⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 1903, accessed December 4, 2017, <<http://www.bartelby.com/114/1.html>>.

²⁶ Ibid.

Migration had led to population shifts in urban areas, bringing whites and blacks into closer proximity in Northern cities and towns, including Princeton and New Brunswick. However, ideas about race and masculinity, manifest in a variety of institutions, beliefs, and practices, limited how black Americans were perceived, and in turn what they were deemed capable of doing, based solely on what society inscribed on their bodies. If Robeson, by that point, was arguably the most visible young black person in the state, his racial difference along with his physicality had great bearing on his collegiate life.

Chapter four, “Physical Spectacularization: Print Media Coverage of Robeson 1916-1927” focuses on Robeson’s collegiate athletic career at Rutgers, and his early vocal and theatrical performances during his time in law school, first at New York University’s School of Law and then at Columbia. Unique creations by Robeson and his accompanist, Lawrence Brown, pioneered a concert performance style that was so unorthodox that black and majority white media outlets had to devise a new language for describing it. This era was the genesis for his career and there is specific focus on the contrasts between his depictions in Black print media to that of white print media of the era. An open coding technique is utilized in both chapter four and five. I applied this to a close reading of a very large volume of print media articles focused on Robeson. Robeson’s physicality during these performances on the athletic field, and then later, theatre stage was commonly referred to, and it was his physicality that caught the attention of a prominent New York patron of Negro arts. This phase of Robeson’s career was fostered by his relationship with Carl Van Vechten, an important Modernist figure, who like other Modernists, was fascinated by the

essential “primitivism” of blackness, said to be the essence of modern art. A deep desire to turn from the traditions of white Western culture and instead look to the supposedly more primitive traditions of non-white culture is a consistent current in the Modernist movement of the 1920s.²⁷ Modernist representations of Robeson in art are examined at some length in chapter six.

Chapter five, “Man of the Race: Print Media Coverage of Paul Robeson 1927-1934,” continues the open coding technique as a methodology for examining how Robeson was discussed, described, and covered by newspapers across the country as his careers unfolded, as set out in the previous chapter. How newspapers framed issues of their era offers insight into Robeson’s cultural representation from 1927 to 1934, the years that are the focus of this chapter. A complicated period, America during this time was in the depths of Jim Crow, while also experiencing an unprecedented explosion of black creativity in Harlem and other urban centers. I contrast white and Black newspaper content from that era as a way of gleaning how Robeson and his career activities were framed by white and black writers, and for white and black audiences.

The sixth chapter, “Visual Representation: The Power of Photography,” explores cultural constructions of masculinity and the impact and significance of select Robeson images uncovered through archival research. Visual culture as a research approach provides a crucial way of interrogating images of Robeson during the early phase of his career because it prompts us to think about the visual in terms

²⁷ Edward White, *The Tastemaker: Carl Van Vechten and the Birth of Modern America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 107.

of cultural significance, social practices, and power relations embedded in images. The methodological approach in this chapter combines the photographic categorization and exhibition methodology of Mora Beauchamp-Byrd's Robeson with Frederick Douglass's nineteenth century lectures on visual theory. Dr. Beauchamp-Byrd's exhibition is Titled *Body and Soul: Paul Robeson, Race and Representation*. It was on display at the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill's Sonja Hynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History from October 9, 2007 to January 25, 2008. The analysis of Mr. Douglass's lectures on photographs is from Dr. Ginger Hill's chapter on him from the book *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*. Because Robeson was one of the most widely photographed black icons of the early twentieth century, it is crucial to consider ideologies surrounding masculinity and citizenship and the ways in which images of Robeson challenged normative masculinity and power relations during the Harlem Renaissance, particularly in terms of describing images of him and exploring how readings and interpretations of those images differed in black and white society. It also helps us see how imagery was used to push back against normative ideas of masculinity and racial ability during that period. With Robeson as an example of a black cultural icon with an unprecedented range of talents, the images selected for analysis present a range of depictions of Robeson's multifaceted early career. These span Robeson's undergraduate years, athletic career, and early career as a performance artist.

The seventh and concluding chapter "Reclaiming Robeson," ends this dissertation by presenting the ways in which Paul Robeson has been recognized and

celebrated through commemorative Black history month stamps, as well as his infusion onto the physical landscape on college campuses, and his hometown in New Jersey. This work has a dual purpose, to present and analyze the legacy of Robeson in black and white print media and photography, but it also is a project of reclamation. Here, I am situating myself in relation to Robeson. Moreover, with less than a handful of exceptions, my undergraduate students are completely unaware of this man, regardless of the fact they he was breaking boundaries and changing how people thought of Black Americans in an unprecedented way in the early twentieth century. Most of my students are exposed to his existence for the first time in my introduction to African American studies courses I teach at the University of Maryland, College Park. This dissertation aims to both provide an interpolation of Paul Robeson in a unique way, but also to reclaim him and to present him for the post millennial generation with my undergraduate students in mind.

Chapter 2: Family Origins and Education, Keys to a Life

No one was more influential in molding Paul Robeson's early life than his father, William Drew Robeson. A former slave, William's early years were spent in Robersonville, North Carolina, a town named after the family who owned the plantation where he was enslaved. William would escape via the Underground Railroad in 1860, at the age of fifteen.²⁸

Since access to literacy and formal education were deemed illegal by the North Carolina General Assembly's adoption of Southern slave codes in 1831, William was not formally educated until his escape.²⁹ It is unknown precisely when William arrived in the North, but the earliest record is his registration for a yearlong pre-college course at Pennsylvania's Lincoln University in 1867. He would formally enroll as a student there the following year.³⁰

When presented with the opportunity, William embraced a deep love of learning. His deep appreciation of classical languages was fully evident when, as a graduation speaker at his 1873 commencement exercises, he delivered his speech in Latin.³¹ That his son, Paul, would become fluent in fifteen languages may be directly connected to his father's interests.

It took William ten years but he would eventually obtain both a bachelor's and master's degree in sacred theology from Lincoln University.³² An achievement in itself, this level of academic accomplishment was extremely rare for the time, and

²⁸ Brown, 10.

²⁹ North Carolina Slaves and Free Persons of Color, "An Act Concerning Slaves and Free Persons of Color. North Carolina General Assembly 1831," <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/slavesfree/slavesfree.html> accessed 10 June 2017.

³⁰ Brown, 15.

³¹ Ibid., 16.

³² Ibid., 17.

even more so for a black man.³³ Under Jim Crow, black Americans had difficulty accessing even the most rudimentary levels of education. As a result, William's first three years at Lincoln were devoted to a preparatory program, instructing him in the basics, and resulting in the equivalent of a high school diploma or G.E.D. certificate today.³⁴

The elder Robeson's study of language would bring him to church leadership when he became minister of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1881.³⁵ Ministry in Princeton had its challenges, and racial attitudes toward black Americans, both in the town and at the university, proved highly antagonistic. Son Paul described the environment as a caste system, where Negroes were restricted to menial jobs at low pay. They lacked any semblance of political rights or bargaining power and could hope not for justice but only charity.³⁶

Not law, but tradition, made Princeton a Jim Crow town and the university a Jim Crow campus.³⁷ This legacy was so deep and pervasive that even if a brave black American were to challenge the color line in court, de facto segregation was deemed outside the reach of the judiciary. This was because courts viewed Jim Crow as resulting from private actions and government actions that were prima facie ("on its face" or "at first look") not discriminatory.³⁸ As a result, the university could and would remain steadfast in its adherence to the traditional color line in America,

³³ Boyle and Bunie, 9.

³⁴ Ibid., 5.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Robeson, 10.

³⁷ Brown, 22.

³⁸ Donato and Hanson, 203.

refusing to admit black students until World War II.³⁹ Paul Robeson would characterize Princeton as being spiritually located in Dixie and featuring the rigid social and economic patterns of white supremacy. This was clearly on display when William attempted to lobby Woodrow Wilson, Princeton University's president—and future president of the United States—to allow his older son, Bill, to enroll there. At the time, Paul was only two years of age. The senior Robeson refused to accept Wilson's repeated and forceful attempts to avoid a direct response to his request, compelling Wilson to angrily declare that Princeton did not accept 'colored' students.⁴⁰

Wilson, who had graduated from Princeton in 1879, reflected the racialized culture of the university during that era. He was known to refer to black Americans as "darkies" in both public and private forums, and drew crude sketches of black men as monkeys.⁴¹ Robeson, in his 1958 biography, recalled that upon hearing the news that Wilson had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, described him as, "the apostle of the New Liberalism, advocate of democracy for the world, and Jim Crow for America!"⁴² Despite this environment, shaped as it was by a Southern social structure, the town of Princeton had a sizable black population (fifteen to twenty percent) that was also cohesive.⁴³

³⁹ Duberman, 19.

⁴⁰ Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898- 1939* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2005).

⁴¹ John Milton Cooper, Jr., ed., *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson: Progressivism, Internationalism, War, and Peace* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 104.

⁴² Robeson, 11.

⁴³ Duberman, 6.

Coming of Age in New Jersey, 1898-1915

The youngest in his family, Paul Leroy Robeson was born April 9, 1898, in Princeton, New Jersey. Robeson's mother, Maria Louisa Bustill, forty-five years old at the time, had already given birth to seven children, five of whom had survived infancy. Unlike Robeson's father, Maria came from a well-respected and influential Northern black family. Maria's great-grandfather, Cyrus Bustill, had been trained as a baker in the mid-1700s and served in the Revolutionary War, baking foodstuffs for the Continental Army. After the war, he established a baking business in Philadelphia, and was well respected there.⁴⁴

The Bustill family built a legacy around providing the city's growing black community with sound leadership buttressed by economic substance through the continued growth and expansion of the family's bakery business.⁴⁵ Maria's great-grandfather would go on to convert his family to the Quaker religion and establish the Free African Society, one of the earliest black self-help organizations in the country.⁴⁶ His family also became active participants in the abolitionist and Underground Railroad communities of the city.⁴⁷ Maria would receive her education at the Quaker Institute of Colored Youth, one of the most elite schools for black Americans in Philadelphia.⁴⁸

With their business and social influence cemented in Philadelphia, the Bustills of Maria Louisa's generation felt keenly the pressure to protect their status and hard-

⁴⁴ Boyle and Bunie, 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶ Duberman, 5.

⁴⁷ Boyle and Bunie, 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 12.

won economic gains in the face of streams of newly emancipated blacks who were fleeing to the North.⁴⁹ In this way, her family was emblematic of the color division that was ever-present within the black community, a division that can be traced to the Antebellum era when lighter skinned African Americans worked in higher socioeconomic divisions than those with darker skin.⁵⁰

When William married Maria, the family did not approve. In fact, the light skinned Bustills distanced themselves from dark skinned and impoverished William, a reflection both of the color line and William's former slave status.⁵¹ His diploma from Lincoln University could not erase his dark coloring, lack of "background" and lineage, and history as a slave.⁵²

Regardless of her family's disapproval, marriage to William provided Maria something that material gains could not, a means of recapturing her agency. Working as a team, Maria assisted William with parish duties and writing sermons, and William provided Maria the opportunity to live out her own ideals and recapture the pioneering Bustill spirit.⁵³

As William Robeson's career in church ministry advanced, he became reverend of the largest of three black churches in Princeton at the turn of the century.⁵⁴ His voice was a critical asset that propelled his success. The powerful

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Stephanie Irby Coard, Alfee M. Breland, and Patricia Raskin, "Perceptions and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31, no. 11 (November 2001): 2256-2274.

⁵¹ Robeson, Jr., 8.

⁵² Boyle and Bunie, 13.

⁵³ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁴ Duberman, 6.

sermons he delivered, and his practice of singing along during services, left a deep imprint on Princeton's black community, as well as his children. Because Paul's career capitalized on his vocal talents, it was only natural that memories of his father's voice were central. Paul described his father as having the greatest speaking voice he had ever heard, a deep sonorous basso, richly melodic and refined. As a reflection of this, Paul Robeson's autobiography begins with this declaration:

The glory of my boyhood years was my father. I loved him like no other in the entire world. His people (church congregants) loved him too and the white folks—even the lordliest of aristocratic Princeton—had to respect him.⁵⁵

This respect on the part of whites had its limits, however. Foreshadowing, Paul's turbulent late career experiences, his father was a victim of early twentieth century racism.⁵⁶ On November 28, 1898, an all-white Presbyterian governing body removed him from his church ministry after twenty years of service. This was in retaliation for holding a community meeting to discuss lynchings that had occurred in the Carolinas where William's siblings still resided.⁵⁷ This abrupt and unexpected firing was tragic for William Robeson's congregation, the black community of Princeton, and the Robeson family. It was rumored that William Robeson's unsuccessful attempts to lobby President Wilson on behalf of son Bill years earlier had played a role, that those efforts may have cost him his pastorate.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), 6.

⁵⁶ Paul Robeson's right to travel internationally was removed by the State Department when his passport renewal was denied in 1950. The government stated that Robeson's travel and advocacy was "contrary to the best interests of the United States," Duberman, 389. He appealed the decision and ultimately lost his appeal on August 16, 1955.

⁵⁷ Brown, 21.

⁵⁸ Robeson, Jr., 5.

Early twentieth century civilization and citizenship discourses, perpetrated by racist institutions and internal conflicts within black society, clearly had an impact on the Robeson family. Interactions with Wilson exemplify how these discourses were implemented, promoting the false notion that black men were incapable of the diligence required for high achievement, regardless of their grades in school. After being denied admission to Princeton solely on the basis of this racist ideology, Paul's brother Bill went on to graduate cum laude from Lincoln University in 1902.⁵⁹ Later, he was accepted and obtained a medical degree from Howard University College of Medicine in Washington D.C., allowing him to practice medicine as his career.⁶⁰ Clearly Wilson was wrong about Bill Robeson's abilities, and wrong about black intellectual ability in general. He was a product of his time and of a culture that reflected a racialized masculinity ideology.

Like his father and brother before him, Paul, the youngest Robeson, would confront and fight these social and at times physical forces his entire life and professional career.

The forces of internal racism and classism were felt even within the extended family, something made crystal clear in the midst of the gravest of tragedies, the death of Paul's mother, Maria, when Robeson was five. It was January 19, 1904, when Maria, who had suffered from asthma and was nearly blind from cataracts—needing her children to assist her with mobility around the home—experienced a fatal injury. She was in the kitchen adjusting the wood stove when the stove door

⁵⁹ Brown, 44.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 45.

accidentally opened, and her dress ignited in flames, ultimately taking her life.⁶¹ Paul, her “little guide and inseparable from her,” was deeply affected.⁶² In the opening of

Here I Stand, he writes:

I remember her lying in the coffin, and the funeral, and the relatives who came, but it must be that the pain and shock of her death blotted out all other personal recollections. Others have told me of her remarkable intellect, her strength of character and spirit which contributed so much to my father’s development and work.⁶³

Now a widower, William sought assistance from his in-laws, asking them to take in the youngest of the children, but the Bustills refused. Even though they had the means to do so, this philanthropic and civic-minded family did nothing to help their son-in-law through this tragic period, something that was later corroborated in the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s 1942 report on Robeson and his extended family.⁶⁴

Understanding the impact this series of events had on the family dynamic between the Robesons and the Bustills is crucial for understanding Paul’s life. It rivaled the impact that William’s removal from the Witherspoon Presbyterian pastorate had on him, in terms of how it affected his worldview, and how he would live his life. The Bustill family’s abandonment of children at a time of their greatest need revealed to Paul the extent to which colorism and classism existed within the black community. Even within the Bustill family’s long history of important work within the Black community in Philadelphia, their sense of Black racial identity was

⁶¹ Ibid., 28-9.

⁶² Boyle and Bunie, 23.

⁶³ Robeson, 7.

⁶⁴ Boyle and Bunie, 23.

deeply influenced by their own sense of superiority. To clarify, Black racial identity is an emotional or affective attachment to the concept of being black and to other people who share the same label or self-definition.⁶⁵ Even within family groups colorism can prevail as an outgrowth of people attributing higher status and granting more power and wealth to people of one complexion, typically light skin, within the group designated as non-white.⁶⁶ The Bustills not only disapproved of William's marriage to their daughter, but their sense of superiority was rooted in their financial power and business ownership, connected to their family history. They took pride in the fact that unlike most other African Americans, the Bustills had been free for generations.⁶⁷ There was zero regard for William's level of education in the Bustill metric of respectability, wealth, and light skin privilege. The Bustill family only reached out to Paul in 1918 (inviting him to the annual Bustill Family Association meetings)⁶⁸ once he became a notable scholar athlete at Rutgers, which is discussed in chapter three.

William found himself forced to do whatever he could to make ends meet, including buying a horse and wagon to start an ash removal business, discarding the ashes in his own backyard.⁶⁹ As he struggled to hold his family together financially, William was also experiencing character assassination among members of the larger Princeton community. In a reflection of Jim Crow ideology, "smart" Negroes in

⁶⁵ Jennifer L. Hochschild, Vesla Weaver, "The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order," *Social Forces* 86, No. 2 (December 2007), 655.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 646

⁶⁷ Brown, 89.

⁶⁸ Brown, 89.

⁶⁹ Duberman, 9.

Princeton, such as William, were to be kept in their place.⁷⁰ Rumors about William being sexually involved with female church members, started by a visiting Princeton divinity school student, who wanted the Witherspoon Presbyterian pastorate position for himself, were later proved untrue.⁷¹ Other false rumors about William being an alcoholic circulated.⁷² What *was* true was that the Robeson family became financially destitute after Marie's death and William's job loss. This led to the humiliating revelation, published in the *Princeton Press*, that William had fallen behind on his taxes.⁷³

Hard Life: Breaking New Ground and Learning Life Lessons in Westfield

William needed to provide a sense of stability for Paul, so in 1907 he relocated the family to Westfield, New Jersey, where he assumed leadership of a new church, the Downer Saint Luke A.M.E. Zion Church, with a largely Southern migrant congregation.⁷⁴ Although he had a new church, life was difficult in Westfield. William made ends meet by working in a grocery store owned by a congregant, and the family slept in the attic of the business and cooked and washed in a lean-to attached to the back of the building.⁷⁵

While life was hard in Westfield, Paul experienced a sense of stability and attended school in a mixed-race environment in a town with a smaller black population (450 out of a population of 6,500) than Princeton.⁷⁶ Although it was only

⁷⁰ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 38.

⁷¹ Boyle and Bunie, 20.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *Princeton Press* Jan. – Feb. 1903, cited in Boyle and Bunie.

⁷⁴ Duberman, 9.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Boyle and Bunie, 28.

thirty miles north of that college town, Westfield was decidedly more Northern in racial attitudes.⁷⁷ In school and in town, Paul had his earliest taste of moving through a predominately white environment, creating the foundations for many of his future life experiences. Life in Westfield helped stem some of the racial animosity he felt toward whites, as he acted with the respectful politeness and courtesy his father had taught him.⁷⁸ Later in life, Robeson would describe this previously unknown mobility, which had him crossing normal racial social boundaries through school friendships:

In these towns I came to know more white people, I frequently visited the homes of my schoolmates (though they never visited his own) and always received a friendly welcome. I wasn't conscious of it at the time, but I now realize that my easy moving between the two racial communities was rather exceptional.⁷⁹

This ease of movement across racial and class divides in his childhood set Paul Robeson apart from others of the town's black residents, who only entered white homes as servants.⁸⁰ By contrast, he exhibited social ease, and was popular in school due to his athletic ability, which in turn helped him escape some of the grief he had over his mother's death.⁸¹ When Paul was in seventh grade, he was recruited by the high school to play shortstop, an early example of his prowess in sports. However, his devotion to sports was never at the cost of his academic performance, something

⁷⁷ Brown, 35.

⁷⁸ Boyle and Bunie, 29.

⁷⁹ Robeson, 17.

⁸⁰ Boyle and Bunie, 30.

⁸¹ Robeson, Jr., 12.

which was vital to his father, who placed a premium on personal integrity and reaching one's potential.⁸² It appears that Paul truly took this to heart.

Even though there were initial hardships, the decision to move the family to Westfield proved fruitful. Paul would attend fifth, sixth, and seventh grade in an integrated school environment, while playing sports at a higher level.⁸³ His athletic talent would, in turn, open many doors. In fact, his talent was such that New Jersey football officials eventually changed the rules at the state level in an attempt to neutralize his dominance.⁸⁴ This dominance came as the game itself was evolving from its roots in England. Yale University's Walter Camp, known as the "father of football" after a collegiate career as a player, became a driving force behind rules changes which would impact Robeson, the athlete.⁸⁵ One central rule, developed in October 1882, came to define the game.⁸⁶ The "downs rule" proposed by Camp brought about the marking of the field into five-yard segments with white lines to assist referees in determining whether a first down was made or not, birthing the gridiron.⁸⁷ Robeson, playing high school football several short years later, was the product of these rules and one of its early stars.

Alongside the continual guidance and attention Paul received from his father, it was during this period that his older siblings began to play a more profound role in

⁸² Robeson, 18.

⁸³ Robeson, Jr., 12.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁵ James E. Herget, *American Football: How the Game Evolved* (Kerrville, TX: CreateSpace, 2013), 36.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 46-7.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 47. Establishing turnover of ball possession on the fourth down if a team had not advanced five yards in three downs.

his life. Several crucial life skills cultivated between 1908 and 1910 can be attributed to his family. Most important among these were the skill to learn from life experiences, especially in the form of critical thinking, and the honing of his vocal skills for musical performance. Older brother Bill, described by Paul as the smartest member of the family, took charge of cultivating his younger brother's lively mind during visits home.⁸⁸ Together they would hone what have come to be referred to as "critical thinking skills," the process of conceptualizing and analyzing information as a guide for belief or action.

Robeson described the process:

Though his gift for theory and analysis had such little practical effect on his own life, for me Bill was the principal source of learning how to study. During my high school years in Somerville, Bill was often at home, between colleges and railroad runs, and he spent much time directing my studies. He was never satisfied when I came up with a correct answer. 'Yes, but why?' he would insist sharply. What was the relation of one fact to another? What was the system, the framework of a given study?⁸⁹

Critical thinking skills taught by Bill were supplemented by lessons from their father, providing Paul a vital survival strategy that he would deploy throughout his life. While his father taught Paul to judge whites individually, he also drilled into him that he must always remember his obligations to the black community, both to protect and stay alive.⁹⁰ Staying alive meant that black Americans had to tread lightly in racially mixed social, school, and employment settings. At the same time, blacks

⁸⁸ Robeson, Jr., 15.

⁸⁹ Robeson, 22.

⁹⁰ Duberman, 18.

could not be servile or obedient. This was the lesson Paul Robeson took from his father, as summarized in *Here I Stand*:

Even while demonstrating that he is really an equal (and, strangely, the proof must be *superior* performance!) the Negro must never appear to be challenging white superiority. Climb up if you can—but don't act 'uppity.' Always show that you are *grateful*. (Even if what you have gained has been wrested from unwilling powers, be sure to be grateful, lest 'they' take it all away.) Above all, *do nothing to give them cause to fear you*, for then the oppressing hand, which might at times ease up a little, will surely become a fist to knock you down again!⁹¹

The elder Robeson's strong opinions about black ability and achievement and how to navigate the system were evident in his reaction to core beliefs espoused by Booker T. Washington in his "Atlanta Compromise speech." According to Paul, his father "flatly rejected Washington's concept that Negro education be limited essentially to manual training," instead believing that "the heights of knowledge must be scaled by the freedom seeker."⁹² Striving to scale the heights of knowledge throughout his school years was something Paul would do, as he constantly challenged himself academically.

Somerville: Early Lessons of Jim Crow

The move to Westfield proved advantageous for both father and son. William regained his reputation for sound church leadership and greatly expanded the size of his congregation. This success would lead to the Robeson family's third and final move, when, in 1911, William took a position with the St. Thomas AME Zion church in Somerville. There, Paul would attend high school, and Somerville would remain home to him throughout his college years. As one of only a dozen black students in

⁹¹ Robeson, 20.

⁹² Booker T. Washington, Atlanta Compromise speech, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/>

town, he would continue to display athletic and scholastic excellence.⁹³ At the same time, his exposure to diverse groups of white allies helped shape his ever-expanding concept of American society and the potential for individuals to cross racialized boundaries.

A relationship with a neighbor had a profound impact in this regard.

Throughout Paul's childhood, his father grew vegetable gardens to supplement the family's diet, whenever they had a home. Unfortunately, the soil on their Somerville lot was unsuitable for a garden, leading their friend and neighbor, Samuel Wodin, to invite William to plant a vegetable garden on his property. Both men had experienced extreme oppression. Wodin was a Russian Jew who had escaped Czarist persecution and William had escaped American chattel slavery. This shared experience was the basis of their friendship, and Wodin's offer became one of the first acts of personal kindness Paul had witnessed a white person bestow upon his father.⁹⁴

Other positive interactions with whites in Somerville came at school, where multiple white teachers helped Paul foster his talents. In *Here I Stand*, he fondly recalls those who treated him fairly and in a friendly manner. His Latin teacher, who "seemed to have no taint of racial prejudice," would help instill in Paul his lifelong passion for language studies.⁹⁵ A science teacher encouraged him in the classroom and social realm, one of her side duties. Although Paul occasionally attended events,

⁹³ Lindsey R. Swindall, *Paul Robeson: A Life of Activism and Art* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 16.

⁹⁴ Boyle and Bunie, 31.

⁹⁵ Robeson, 19.

he shied away from most, out of fear that something might happen. The two worlds of white and Negro were nowhere more separate than in social life.⁹⁶

The teachers and administrators who had the most impact on Robeson represented the extreme racial polarization of the early twentieth century. Elizabeth Vosseller, who taught music, was one of two highly influential high school teachers. It was Vosseller who convinced Paul to join the glee club and insisted he take his talent for singing seriously, the first encouragement he had received outside his immediate family. Meanwhile, an English teacher, Anna Miller, coached Paul in acting and debating, helping him hone skills he had learned from his brother Bill and father.⁹⁷ Miller suggested to Paul that he consider becoming a professional actor one day. Robeson wrote that she, "paid close attention to my development as a speaker and debater."⁹⁸ Significantly, she was the first person to suggest he play Othello. She also encouraged Paul and fellow students to organize a showcase production, with students performing readings from various Shakespeare plays. It was Miller's faith in Paul's ability and capacity for theatrical expression that made such a distinct and lasting impression on Paul, who recounted that he had his doubts:

The idea (to play Othello) seemed eminently right to Miss Miller and she coached me in the part. Nervous and scared, I struggled through the lines on that solemn occasion (mindful of my father's ear for perfect diction and my teacher's patient direction) and no one in the

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Brown, 48-9.

⁹⁸ Robeson, 19.

world could have convinced me then that I should ever try acting again.⁹⁹

Because proceeds from the show were going toward their senior class trip to Washington D.C., Miller was initially hesitant to ask Paul to play the role. In the end, he was not able to go on the trip because Jim Crow in the nation's capital barred hotels from taking black guests.¹⁰⁰ While Paul attended integrated schools and had white friends, being prohibited from taking part in the trip was one of the times he could not be shielded from the racialized realities of Jim Crow America.

Yet another would come closer to home in the form of interactions with one particular adult, his high school's administrator, Dr. Evans "Baldy" Ackerman. Ackerman offered young Paul Robeson a window into the systemic racism and racial segregation that pervaded American society as a normative reality. It was he who demonstrated a fundamental tenet of Jim Crow, that any white person was superior to every black person, and conversely, that any black person was inferior to every white person. If this system were to retain its operating logic, there could be no exceptions.¹⁰¹

During his senior year, Paul's classmates convinced him to perform a solo during a student led production. This production was a minstrel show in which white classmates performed in blackface.¹⁰² It is unknown how he truly felt about this performance other than speculation by secondary source authors. Contrary to the fair

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Duberman, 13.

¹⁰¹ Jerold M. Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 2002), 87.

¹⁰² Boyle and Bunie, 38.

and warm treatment by some teachers, Dr. Ackerman demonstrated open resentment and hostility toward the exceptional young black student. Furthermore, according to Robeson, Ackerman made “no effort to hide his bitter feelings, the better I did the worse his scorn.” Ackerman would go out of his way to belittle young Paul whenever possible.¹⁰³ What made matters more confusing to Paul was that Ackerman’s treatment of him was at odds with what he had been taught by his father, to judge whites on an individual basis and not as a whole. This open hostility and racial animus on the part of his principal would foreshadow future experiences as Robeson’s professional stature grew.

While Robeson was upset by these encounters, confounded as to why his efforts to be a ‘credit to his race’ would arouse the racial animus of the white man in charge, he tried to take it all in stride and view it as a learning experience.¹⁰⁴ This did not stop him from becoming angry when he was sent home from school by Dr. Ackerman as punishment for a perceived infraction. When he arrived home during the day his father immediately asked him why he had been sent home, and Paul responded: “I’m bigger now. I don’t care what you do to me, but if that hateful old principal ever lays a hand on me, I swear I’ll try my best to break his neck!” His father seemed to understand and let it go at that.¹⁰⁵

This anecdote of a justifiably angry young man can be interpreted as a vocalization of Paul Robeson’s emotional state at that moment. However, his response to the bullying incident also captures the lifelong physical restraint he learned to

¹⁰³ Robeson, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Brown, 51.

¹⁰⁵ Robeson, 21.

practice. On one such occasion he was at a pool hall with some friends when an older black boy picked on him, hitting him with a pool cue. In retaliation, Paul picked up a pool ball, stemmed back and shot it at his assailant's head with all his might. He missed his target, but the force smashed a hole in the wall.¹⁰⁶ It was in recognizing that his physical size and athletic ability equipped him to smash a hole in a wall with relative ease, that Robeson decided he would have to keep his physical power in check for the rest of his life. His son, Paul Robeson, Jr., described this as a pivotal moment, his father realizing he could never let his anger spin out of control because he could kill someone if he did.¹⁰⁷

The Path to College

Paul Robeson is an example of a highly talented individual who, propelled by the attention and guidance of others, his father and brother in particular, was able to exceed expectations of a society steeped in racial hegemony. It was instilled in him that college would set him on a career path. Paul's father and older brothers had all attended Lincoln University and initially that was the direction William was pushing his youngest son to pursue. However, the economic realities of college tuition and other expenses proved difficult. Then, an opportunity presented itself. During Paul's senior year, he won a scholarship to Rutgers through a competitive examination contest, again exceeding societal expectations.

The Robesons learned of this competition very late in the process. Faced with an examination covering his entire four high school years, Paul had his work cut out

¹⁰⁶ Robeson, Jr., 15.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 16.

for him. During the exact same three-hour period that he would be tested on material from all four years, other students would be tested only on their senior year's work.¹⁰⁸ This was because Paul had been unaware of a preliminary test he could have taken the previous year.¹⁰⁹ Whether or not withholding this information was intentional on the part of his teachers is unclear. Paul Robeson, Jr. has speculated that Dr. Ackerman had deliberately failed to notify Paul, Sr.¹¹⁰ Yet, others have surmised there was a less nefarious reason. Somerville's faculty was aware that Paul's father, brothers, and sister had attended black colleges, and may have assumed Paul would do the same.¹¹¹ Whether notification about the test was intentionally withheld or not, he won the competition, assuaging his fear of financial strain on his father's modest income.¹¹² After William's experiences with Woodrow Wilson at Princeton, the elder Robeson felt strongly that at least one son should have the experience that had not been available to him.¹¹³ Of his children, it was only Paul who was equipped to navigate a minefield of potential racial humiliations.¹¹⁴

The final public challenge Paul Robeson faced during his pre-college years was an oration competition held at Rutgers. Encouraged by his father and brother Bill, who had selected a speech for him to give, this competition was a team effort of the Robeson men. Paul recited a speech written by the white abolitionist Wendell Phillips, in celebration of the black liberation of the Haitian people led by Toussaint

¹⁰⁸ Robeson, 25.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹¹⁰ Robeson, Jr., 18.

¹¹¹ Boyle and Bunie, 42.

¹¹² Robeson, 24.

¹¹³ Robeson, Jr., 17.

¹¹⁴ Boyle and Bunie, 38.

L'Ouverture. From the audience, William Robeson broke out in emotional bursts of expression several times. This was noteworthy because it was so uncharacteristic of the normally dignified and restrained gentleman.¹¹⁵ Paul went on to win third place behind a young white woman and the winner, a young black man from Asbury Park, New Jersey.¹¹⁶

Understanding Self and Society

Robeson's persona was cultivated by his father's experiences of enslavement, his educational attainment, and a growing understanding of the obstacles in place under Jim Crow. The elder Robeson's knowledge of the system was the basis of a bond forged between father and son that was critical to Paul's development as a black man living in a world that did not value his intellect, abilities, and values. Over time, Paul would come to recognize that his family's social mobility was hampered by factors of colorism stemming from his father's status as a former slave and his dark skin tone. With this knowledge he would eventually forge an understanding of how to maneuver and negotiate a complicated and unjust society. His understanding of how to do this was shaped by his experience as the youngest member of his family, the difficult circumstances surrounding his mother's untimely death, his father's uneven employment, as well as some of the positive cross-racial relations he had experienced.

As one who possessed the set of life skills required of black men and women to successfully navigate a segregated society, Robeson also brought to his endeavors an individual drive that guided him through elementary and high school. Despite

¹¹⁵ Duberman, 17.

¹¹⁶ Robeson, 25.

racial obstacles, teachers recognized his music and theatrical talents, and Paul sought to reclaim the right of self-determination and agency that had been stripped from black Americans by de facto Jim Crow. None of which is to diminish the obstacles he confronted at every turn, those having to do with race and skin tone, and those involving his gender and physique. From the earliest stages of his development, Paul Robeson's public life was a by-product of a level of visibility he was unable to ignore.

By the time Robeson arrived on the overwhelmingly white Rutgers campus in 1915, he was a physically large, deep-voiced black American male, at a time when the number of black Americans in college was extremely low. Dr. W.E.B. Dubois, editor of *The Crisis*, reported just fifteen years before Paul Robeson entered college, that only 2,600 black students had graduated from post-secondary institutions.¹¹⁷ A mere 390 had graduated from schools with majority white enrollments.¹¹⁸ Gifted, athletic, and highly intelligent, Robeson would go forward, showcasing his abilities as a black man at a highly visible majority white school in New Jersey.

The next chapter focuses on the Rutgers years, a period in which Robeson continued his development as a person, gifted athlete, and outstanding scholar. At Rutgers, he excelled at a majority white institution. He did this by physically enduring abuse and transcending racial boundaries through his talents as a performer.

¹¹⁷ PBS American Experience, "America 1900: African American Higher Education," accessed November 12, 2015, <www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/1900/peopleevents/pandeAMEX40.html >

¹¹⁸ "Journal of Blacks in Higher Education Chronology of Major Landmarks in the Progress of African Americans in Higher Education," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education: Key Events in Black Higher Education*, accessed November 12, 2015, <https://www.jbhe.com/chronology/>

In all of this, Robeson was a real-life affirmation of new realities in the twentieth century for black male achievement and possibility for the black community.

Chapter 3: Paul Robeson Of Rutgers, Transcending Racialization

Entering Rutgers University as a freshman, fall semester of 1915, Paul Robeson would go on to make his mark on the New Brunswick, New Jersey campus. He succeeded in all endeavors, both on the sports field and in the classroom. Most noted for his prowess with football, he also played basketball and baseball and was on the track and field team. At the very time he was impressing people with his athletic ability, Robeson was also sharpening several life skills he had learned early in life. All eyes were focused upon him due to his physicality as a dark-skinned black man, his ability to deal with abject racism, his adept intellectual capability, and his aptitude to work with others across the racial divide.

It is vital to provide readers with a concise history of Robeson's undergraduate career to provide context for subsequent chapters that examine years when his name recognition and notoriety for multiple talents reached unprecedented heights. To illustrate how Robeson's visibility, representation, gaze, and development of personal control is framed by the gridiron and his Rutgers years, this discussion begins with a brief history of college football. It then recounts the Rutgers football team of that era, when racism and physical abuse abounded.

Early Collegiate Football

Football in the United States evolved from an intramural prep school game with origins in "public" schools in England that functioned as preparatory institutions for Oxford and Cambridge. It was introduced at the college level in 1846 as an intramural sport and in 1863 a body of rules was decided upon. That was also the year

the London Football Association was formed.¹¹⁹ The game would be brought to the United States and Princeton would publish its game rules in 1871. Yale and Harvard followed in 1872.¹²⁰ The game would continue to evolve throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and would have died out if not for the adoption of certain rules and interventions of specific coaches and players. Paul Robeson benefited from the new rules as well as relationships he formed with coaches.

According to the history of U.S. collegiate sports, college level athletics were intrinsically linked to the British sporting legacy as well as the roots of higher education in America, with different schools engaging one another in athletic competition. The first intercollegiate athletic competition, a rowing race, was held in 1852 between Harvard and Yale.¹²¹ Regardless of the type of sport being played, Britain's greatest impact on American sport was philosophical in nature.¹²² This created an element of divergence between college athletes from different socioeconomic backgrounds and life experiences. In a British context, this divergence was class based, while in the United States it was racial, meaning that a black American player had to be very good, much better than average to even make the team.¹²³ The one element that fuses these multiple public images was Robeson's physicality, which was an ever-present element of media coverage about him,

¹¹⁹ Herget, 2-4.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹²¹ Robert E. Wells, *Sport and the Talented Tenth: African American Athletes in the Colleges and Universities of the Northeast, 1879-1920* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, Inc, 2010), xix-xx.

¹²² Ibid., xix.

¹²³ Ibid., xxii.

whether it be for athletics, or at a later point in reviews of his vocal and theatrical performances.

When Robeson entered Rutgers in the fall of 1915, he was not the first black student in the history of the school, but rather the third since the school was founded in 1766.¹²⁴ James Dickinson Carr, the first black student, attended from 1888 to 1892. While an undergraduate, Carr participated in leisure athletics, but was not on any official varsity team, due to an accident he suffered early in life that deprived him of sight in one eye. He is also said to have had a somewhat frail physique.¹²⁵ Carr and Robeson were among a small number of black American men in higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both were high achievers, inducted as members of Phi Beta Kappa. The central difference was that Robeson lived his life at Rutgers under constant scrutiny given his athletic achievements profile and physical size. Robeson represented many things to many people, and devoted tremendous energy into living up to his own and others' expectations. Also, there was the white world of Rutgers to conquer. He felt challenged to prove himself and his race competent and capable.¹²⁶

Athletically talented his entire life, Robeson had never needed to prove his ability to others. This was the case while playing catcher on his high school baseball team, and as guard in basketball.¹²⁷ There is a difference between the need to prove one's ability to perform on the field or court, and the racialized reality of the society

¹²⁴ Stewart, ed., 37.

¹²⁵ *Rutgers Alumni Quarterly* (October 1920): 57.

¹²⁶ Bunie and Boyle, 45.

¹²⁷ Robeson, Jr., 16.

in which he lived. This would be put in stark relief for Robeson and his father, when William attended a football game during Paul's senior year of high school in 1914. Paul scored three touchdowns in a 24 to 18 loss to Phillipsburg, New Jersey's high school. The loss was not the issue, as this is part of playing sports. The issue was that Paul was sidelined during the game due to a broken nose and collarbone. These injuries occurred in a game where no penalties, or even game stoppage were called against the opposing team's players who had broken Robeson's bones and facial cartilage. This incident became linked in his mind with mob violence against blacks.¹²⁸ Being physically brutalized with no recourse from officials or coaches exemplified the obstacles Robeson would confront on the much more visible intercollegiate field.

Arriving at Rutgers in September 1915, Robeson must have been filled with hope and lofty expectations. These were dashed once the dean of students told him he would not be allowed to live on campus, because there were no other black students for him to room with. He would find refuge off campus with the Cummings family who took him into their home.¹²⁹ Paul was eventually allowed to move into Winants Hall, a dormitory centrally located on campus, but would have the entire building to

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 20.

himself as no white students could cohabitate with him, even if they wanted to.¹³⁰ De facto segregation was clearly the norm for New Jersey, both on and off campus.

Excited about the athletic opportunities presented, Robeson was called into a meeting with Foster Sanford, coach of the Rutgers team.¹³¹ Sanford had seen Robeson play for Somerville and had been preparing for his arrival. The meeting did not go as Paul likely expected. Sanford's preparations had involved convincing white players who had learned about Robeson's impending arrival not to strike. An unfortunate byproduct of this effort was that he was not invited to any of the pre-season practice sessions.¹³² This put the freshman at a disadvantage, but he still attended team tryouts. Here Paul was subjected to the silent treatment by other players who clearly objected to his presence. This situation would only seal his resolve to forge onward. There were obvious differences besides skin color, as five team members were five-foot-nine or shorter. With Paul being six-foot-two and one-hundred-ninety pounds, he stood some three or four inches taller and weighed twenty pounds more than other men on the field.¹³³

This physical difference did not stop the other players from teaming up against him to brutalize him. Veterans of the team had rebelled against even the idea of a black player trying out for "their" team.¹³⁴ Even with the relatively sparse number of black Americans in higher education in white majority schools on the East

¹³⁰ Brown, 64.

¹³¹ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 34.

¹³² Robeson, Jr., 21.

¹³³ Duberman, 20.

¹³⁴ Robeson, Jr., 21.

Coast at that time, only fourteen played on white college teams.¹³⁵ Robeson described the locker room talk that preceded the first day of tryouts for the 1915-1916 season. “There’s a big darky on the field,” Sanford announced to the squad. “If you want him okay, if not okay.”¹³⁶

Accounts of the first practice session with Robeson on the field have been the subject of controversy. His recounting of injuries he sustained (a broken nose, a sprained right shoulder and assorted cuts and bruises) is a potent view into the possible physical outcomes for black athletes in collegiate sports in the early twentieth century.¹³⁷ Interviewed for Martin Duberman’s 1988 book *Paul Robeson*, several white players recounted vociferously pushing back against the mistreatment and abuse Paul suffered, saying they held no racial animosity. These comments likely stem from fear that this would be their only mention in the historical record, although some of these players had gone on to develop friendships with Robeson following the first practice session.

Over time, Robeson’s own perceptions of the motivation behind his teammates’ mistreatment of him varied. At one point he expressed feelings that white teammates didn’t want a “Negro” on the team. At another he suggested they may have been concerned with protecting their starting roles.¹³⁸ Regardless of the rationale, real or perceived, it took Paul ten days to recover from the injuries inflicted by his teammates. Once again, his family helped him through a challenging time. Bill

¹³⁵ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 35.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Duberman, 20.

¹³⁸ Wells, 348.

came to visit his bandaged and beaten brother and said, “Kid, if you want to quit school go ahead, but I wouldn’t like to think that our family had a quitter in it.”¹³⁹

This was all it took to keep Paul’s “head in the game,” leading to a second pivotal early Rutgers football experience, one about which there appears to be no dispute.

Here is how he remembered it:

I made a tackle and was on the ground, my right-hand palm down on the ground. A boy came over and stepped, hard, on my hand.... The bones held but his cleats took every single one of my fingernails off my right hand. That’s when I knew rage! The next play came around my end, the whole first-string backfield came at me. I swept out my arms...and the three running interference went down. The ball carrier was a first class (senior year) halfback named Kelly. I wanted to kill him, and I meant to kill him.... I got him up over my head.... I was going to smash him so hard on the ground that I’d break him right in two...but just then the coach (Sanford) yelled...’Robey, you’re on the varsity!’ That brought me around. We laughed about it often later. They all got to be my friends.¹⁴⁰

This event symbolized Robeson’s transition from outsider to insider in Rutgers athletics. It would not end or mitigate complex racial interactions on and off campus but would cement Robeson as a fixture of the Rutgers football program from 1915 to 1919. For Robeson himself, this experience was liberating. It was as if he had used the energy of his rage to convince a group of hostile white men that he might kill at least one of them in self-defense if they attacked him.¹⁴¹

Robeson’s acceptance from the team led to his “Robey” nickname and protected him from attempted fouls by opponents who were hostile to the first black player they had ever faced.¹⁴² On any team, camaraderie is a must if success is the

¹³⁹ Brown, 61.

¹⁴⁰ Foner, 201. Excerpt from an address given in New York City, June 19, 1949.

¹⁴¹ Robeson, Jr., 23.

¹⁴² Ibid., 24.

desired outcome. As Rutgers players came to know and trust one another, they came to each other's aid. During a practice, James Burke, who played end, was chasing a pass and accidentally fell fifty feet over an embankment into the Raritan Canal. Robeson, still wearing all his football pads, raced into the water to haul him out.¹⁴³ Luckily for Robeson, the water was not deeper than his height, since, like many black Americans, he had never learned to swim.

During his freshman year, Robeson played four games out during an eight-game season. For the first two, he rode the bench. After being substituted into a game and recovering a fumble in October, he was no longer riding the bench.¹⁴⁴ From that point on, he was starting in games, as his talent and comparatively large physical size gave his team a distinct advantage. He would go on to start at the right guard position in a 39-3 victory over Stevens Tech. He then started at the left tackle position in a game that found his team shutting out New York University, 70-0. The Rutgers football squad finished the season with seven wins and one loss, to Princeton.¹⁴⁵ Given his family's history with Princeton, specifically the conflict between his father and Woodrow Wilson, this was painful.¹⁴⁶ The rationale for Robeson riding bench in this game was not his race, but that coach Sanford did not want to play an inexperienced freshman in such a crucial game.¹⁴⁷ Much to Robeson's chagrin, no other match was played against Princeton during his tenure at Rutgers. He was never

¹⁴³ Duberman, 21.

¹⁴⁴ Wells, 348.

¹⁴⁵ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 34. The loss to Princeton is of particular interest because the very first intercollegiate football game in the United States pitted Rutgers against Princeton in 1869.

¹⁴⁶ Woodrow Wilson, accessed July 18, 2017, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/presidents/woodrowwilson>>.

¹⁴⁷ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 39.

able to achieve his dream of helping to inflict a crushing defeat on the Princeton Tigers, something he sought because the school's leadership was largely responsible for the destruction of his father's pastorate, and because there were strong feelings in the region's black communities that Princeton was rabidly anti-black.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, its teams were said to use brutal methods against black players on opposing teams.¹⁴⁹ Although deprived of that opportunity, his efforts were rewarded with the first of many Rutgers varsity letters.¹⁵⁰

In the Classroom and Life

Off the football field his freshman year, Robeson strove to live up to the opportunity afforded him to attend college during a period when racial discrimination across all facets of life was the norm, whether North or South. Also, he had to live up to the expectations of his father and siblings. His favorite subject freshman year was mathematics, a clear foreshadowing of his intensive study of languages later in his life, as there are similarities in the educational processes between the two. During his freshman year, he earned an A in algebra and public speaking, a B in English literature, Greek, and Latin, and a C in English composition.¹⁵¹ His father was not pleased with the C, which led to him forbidding Paul to try out for the basketball team. This motivated him to buckle down spring semester and achieve stellar grades. William then allowed Paul to play varsity baseball.¹⁵² From today's perspective, this

¹⁴⁸ Brown, 63.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 63-4.

¹⁵⁰ Wells, 349.

¹⁵¹ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 32.

¹⁵² Robeson, Jr., 25.

could be perceived as “helicopter parenting.”¹⁵³ However, in those days Paul was in a precarious and sensitive position. Not only was he the first black American ever to play for the school that created intercollegiate football, he was also impossible to miss on campus.¹⁵⁴ Robeson was representing not only himself, but the whole black community.

Outside of his immediate family, Robeson was beginning to build friendships and forge alliances with blacks and whites alike, something that was fundamental to his sociocultural development as an international anti-colonial icon. For Robeson, football was key, as it was his prowess on the gridiron for which he would be first recognized, and, in many cases, be most remembered by sports infatuated America. It was football, after all, which would introduce Robeson to the white world.¹⁵⁵ While the social and relational dynamic with his teammates was vital, it was his relationship with varsity coaches that was essential to his success. With football being his first and central sport—he would go on to join the basketball, baseball, and track and field teams as well—his relationship with Coach Sanford was indispensable. Despite the lukewarm reception he initially received, the close personal relationship and mutual respect that developed would last not only during Robeson’s time at Rutgers, but for the remainder of Sanford’s life.¹⁵⁶

It is possible that Sanford initially kept his distance from Robeson because he was unsure if he would work out on the team, but over time his apprehension

¹⁵³ “Bizarre and Unusual: Readers respond to Helicopter Parenting,” accessed July 18, 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/business/lavar-lonzo-ball-helicopter-parenting.html>>.

¹⁵⁴ Swindall, 21.

¹⁵⁵ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 33.

¹⁵⁶ Duberman, 21.

diminished, and their friendship grew. Beyond white teachers who helped Robeson in Somerville, the coach was arguably his greatest white ally during his undergraduate years. Paul Robeson, Jr., framed this connection glowingly, “Coach Sanford taught Paul how to make the most of his phenomenal emotional discipline, and helped him concentrate, calculate his moves, and respond with explosive action.”¹⁵⁷

Sanford had been recruited to coach Rutgers’ football team by Leonor F. Loree, the industrialist who sought to raise the university’s athletic profile. This, in turn, required infrastructure, large projects like facilities and bleachers for spectators. Loree, class of 1877, not only facilitated the growth of the school and its sports profile but sought to recruit the best coaching talent available. Sanford was a well-known entity in the football world at that time, having coached successful teams at Columbia, West Point, and Yale.¹⁵⁸ The owner of a very successful insurance business, his love of the game was not monetarily linked, at least not directly during his ten years as Rutgers’ football coach (1913-1923). As a result, Loree convinced Sanford to coach without direct payment. Sanford’s business provided Loree’s railroad with insurance and that served as payment for his work indirectly.¹⁵⁹

Crossing Divides

Understanding the nature of the coach-player relationship is critical for understanding the key role cross-cultural relationships would play in the development of Robeson’s persona and his professional career. Sanford took coaching his first black player very seriously. Robeson’s talent and physical size were obvious. After

¹⁵⁷ Robeson, Jr., 24-5.

¹⁵⁸ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 34.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

the brutal “welcome” Robeson received in his first tryout, he was taken aside for individualized one-on-one coaching. Not necessarily to hone his playing ability, but for something far more important, the protection of his life and physical well-being.

Sanford was acutely aware of how “Robey” would be received by other teams, coaches, referees, and sports fans. In their one-on-one sessions, the coach would line up empty wooden fruit crates on each side of Robeson, and then, from a three-point stance, have him vault upward on signal, smashing the crates. Sanford taught his player how to use his forearms and elbows as protective weapons, so that in a game situation, he would flatten his rivals before the opponents or officials knew what was happening.¹⁶⁰ This type of practice, which supplemented regular team practice sessions, would aid Robeson in some of the more trying sports environments he experienced following his freshman season.

By the close of Robeson’s successful freshman year, he had learned many skills and successfully won over both his teammates and coach. Yet, he continued to confront racism. At the end of each season, the city of New Brunswick held an annual banquet for the team. Robeson attended the one his freshman year, but it was the only one he was ever allowed to attend, because the invitation was an accident. His presence violated de facto segregation in New Brunswick.¹⁶¹ The menu was something Robeson would save as a souvenir. Even later, when Robeson was widely

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 37.

¹⁶¹ Brown, 64.

recognized and celebrated as the school's most talented athlete, no invitation would come his way.¹⁶²

On a social level, Robeson's experience at the banquet was nothing out of the ordinary. His father had made him acutely aware of the level of racialization, discrimination, and hyper-segregation that existed. For Robeson, the sole black student at Rutgers, there was no choice but to "act right." If he acted "wrong" he would be gone.¹⁶³ The rarity of the opportunity he had been afforded was something about which he was keenly aware. In 1915 fewer than fifty blacks nationwide attended primarily white colleges.¹⁶⁴ The ease at which he maneuvered through, over, and around various social and racial tripwires was a skill honed during his primary and high school days. He immediately became one of the most visible due to his sports profile.

Robeson's navigation of Jim Crow was all-encompassing, impacting nearly every interaction he had with white students, staff, and faculty at Rutgers. When traveling with his team, it was clear he would not be able to eat with teammates in restaurants. He was forced to eat in the kitchen. A teammate described Robeson's use of humor to disarm the tension, kidding others after leaving restaurants, saying, "I feel sorry for you guys. You got such little helpings out there in the restaurant. In the kitchen, they fed me like royalty!"¹⁶⁵ This was intended to mitigate any awkward feelings and to spare his teammates from embarrassment over the obvious inequality

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁶⁴ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 32.

¹⁶⁵ Boyle and Bunie, 54.

in treatment. His responses were mostly for show, but for Robeson they acted as a type of armor, shielding him from the blatant racialization in otherwise commonplace interactions.

Humor was a means for preserving his sense of self-worth. Experiences of Jim Crow were so emotionally damaging that Robeson would do almost anything to avoid being reminded of the extent to which he remained at the mercy of that social code.¹⁶⁶ Dealing with this treatment himself, he regularly witnessed the mistreatment of others on campus. Jewish college students across the nation faced blatant ethnic biases, social ostracization and worse. At Rutgers, the children of recently immigrated Eastern European Jews experienced substantial anti-Semitism that was tolerated in its most blatant forms.¹⁶⁷ Thinking back to the first act of interracial kindness he had ever witnessed, when his father's friend and neighbor Samuel Wodin helped the Robesons for no other reason than to be a good man and neighbor, Robeson felt a deep connection with Jewish students. Recognizing that their oppression at Rutgers mirrored that of the black community in many ways, he would later recall having experienced, "a mystical feeling, an almost unexplainable rapport with Jews."¹⁶⁸

During his senior year, Paul's roommate was a young Jewish man named Herbert Miskend.¹⁶⁹ Robeson described feeling a deep sense of affinity with the hardships of the Jewish people in the United States. This affinity would be dramatically enhanced years later as he witnessed the horrors of World War II and the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 56.

widespread popularization of his rendition of “Zog Nit Kaynmal,” song of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.¹⁷⁰ In 1943, his very public stance against anti-Semitism led the FBI to officially open an investigative file on Robeson.¹⁷¹ Jewish Americans were the first non-black population that Robeson witnessed experiencing discrimination on par with black Americans.

By the end of his freshman year, eighteen-year-old Robeson had completed a crash course in the racial and social realities of higher education and intercollegiate sport competition. During that time, he had managed to stay mostly focused and grounded, spending most Sundays in Somerville, singing and reading the gospel at the various churches where his father preached. During the summer he taught Sunday school.¹⁷² These commitments outside the Rutgers campus proved a crucial outlet for him, removing him from the hyper-segregated world of Rutgers and college sports and providing an environment where he could relax. Life in the world of Jim Crow, especially when you were one of the only black faces present, required a level of hyper vigilance that is difficult to comprehend. During his college years Robeson lived two rich but distinct lives, one in the white world and the other in the black community.¹⁷³

Perhaps most importantly, the time Robeson spent helping his father with services at AME Zion allowed him to hone his skills in a musical genre he went on to

¹⁷⁰ “Centennial of Birth Marked Here, Paul Robeson: Forgotten Hero of Jews, African Americans,” *Jewish News of Northern California*, <www.jweekly.com/1998/06/19/centennial-of-birth-marked-here-paul-robesson-forgotten-hero-of-jews-african/>; accessed 21 July 2017.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Boyle and Bunie, 56.

¹⁷³ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 41.

break boundaries in. Bringing black spiritual music to mass, non-black national and international audiences became one of his hallmark achievements. Although Robeson described himself as not being particularly religious, the emotional power of singing spirituals evoked in him something akin to a religious experience.¹⁷⁴ Spending time in his father's church and at home in Somerville proved to be a grounding experience, reminding Robeson where he came from and what opportunities his father's work had provided.

Upon completing his first year in college, finding employment was Robeson's next challenge. After his high school freshman year, Paul had accompanied his older brother Ben to Narragansett Pier on the Rhode Island coast to work at a resort. His job, as a fourteen-year-old, was to scrub pots and pans used for cooking for guests.¹⁷⁵ Returning after his first year at Rutgers, Paul worked as a waiter alongside Ben. In his leisure time he played baseball, representing the hotel against teams comprised of workers from other area hotels.¹⁷⁶ This summer work provided Paul with needed social and leisure time, and a break from racialized conflict. It was during this period that he gained a highly significant friend, Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard. Playing for Brown University, Pollard was the only other black college football player on the East Coast at that time. He was also college football's first black all-American.¹⁷⁷ Working together as waiters that summer, Pollard and Robeson became friends, despite a significant age difference. Most significantly, Pollard would coach his

¹⁷⁴ Boyle and Bunie, 57.

¹⁷⁵ Brown, 53.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁷⁷ Robeson, Jr., 26

young friend on the fine points of playing the end position and catching passes. A decent piano player, Pollard accompanied Robeson when he sang at social gatherings in Rhode Island.¹⁷⁸

Spending summer out of state, away from the oppressive social environment of New Brunswick, was both a welcome respite and a time to spend in a majority black and Native American environment. The small informal concert recitals where Robeson performed allowed him to continue to develop as a singer in a semi-casual setting. He and his friends would invite staff from the hotel, and members of the baseball teams they played against, to these performances. Some of the white help attended and then went back, telling their employers about Robeson's voice. Some of the employers attended the next performance. These casual summer concerts, where he sang both popular songs and spirituals, were forerunners to his notoriety as a vocal and theatrical performer.¹⁷⁹ Drawing multi-racial audiences, they proved that talent could transcend race. Robeson would observe that the experience showed him that he did not always have to work as if he were the sole representative of the black community, thus relieving him of pressure he often felt at Rutgers to "act right." Relationships between people of different backgrounds were less fraught with tension in the Rhode Island resort town.

Robeson entered his sophomore year much better prepared than he had as a freshman, a good thing since it proved to be one of his most challenging years at Rutgers. Over the summer he had had the opportunity to relax and cultivate his talents

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Boyle and Bunie, 58.

in a low-pressure environment. Coaching by Pollard had helped him develop his football skills, while intra-hotel baseball games allowed him to spend time behind home plate as a catcher, and his recitals contributed to his growth as a singer. He had also gained muscle mass and size. When his measurements were taken in preparation for football season, Robeson stood six-and-one-half feet tall and weighed 210 pounds.¹⁸⁰ This extra size would benefit the team in their overwhelming 33-0 victory against Villanova, the first game of the season, with Robeson as a starter. He went on to be in the opening lineup either at left or right tackle the entire season.¹⁸¹ Coach Sanford, ever mindful of the advantage he had in Robeson's size and playing ability built his line around Robeson's ability to play several different positions, tackle, guard, and end.¹⁸² He even designed a special running play called "tackle-back" for him to run the ball down field and barrel through his opponents along with the offense.¹⁸³

Unfortunately, the second game of the 1916 season would not include this play and was one of Robeson's most traumatic athletic experiences, one that would impact the rest of his life. As an East Coast team, Rutgers played colleges all across the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, but also Southern teams. These Southern schools brought with them legally enforced or de jure Jim Crow segregation ideology and policies, regardless of whether or not the game was being played at home below the Mason-Dixon Line. This particular game was a matchup against Washington and

¹⁸⁰ Wells, 349.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Robeson, Jr., 26.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Lee, a Virginia college with deep roots in the Antebellum South, and an ironic Latin motto that translated to, “not unmindful of the future.”¹⁸⁴ Very mindful of the present, the Scarlet Scourge, as they were known, demanded Robeson not play against them on his home field in New Jersey. The school’s administration came under immediate pressure from alumni groups, and possibly Leonor F. Loree himself, to acquiesce to the Southerners’ demands. In 1916 the school was celebrating its 150th anniversary and was hoping for an outpouring of alumni gifts.¹⁸⁵ As a result, Sanford was forced to not play Robeson. The resulting 13-13 tie game was the cruelest hurt Robeson suffered at Rutgers and was central to the ambivalence he felt about the university for the remainder of his life. He considered this an act of betrayal by his teammates, and most significantly by the coach whom he idolized.¹⁸⁶

This event was likely the worst encounter with the sociopolitical realities of Jim Crow Robeson had experienced up to this point in his life, and many in the black community were incensed. Rutgers’ first black graduate, James Dickinson Carr, wrote a passionate letter to William H.S. Demarest, the school’s president, in protest of Robeson’s exclusion from the game:

I am deeply moved by the injustice done to a student of Rutgers, in good and regular standing, of good moral character and splendid mental equipment, one of the best athletes ever developed at Rutgers, who, because guilty of a skin color not colored as their own, was excluded from the honorable field of athletic encounter, as one inferior, and from those lists in which so many competitors for glory were engaged, in which he had formerly been, and into which, with a humiliating tardiness, he was afterward admitted. He was robbed of the honor and glory of contending in an athletic contest for his college

¹⁸⁴ Not Unmindful of the Future,” <<https://www.wlu.edu/about-wandl/non-incautus-futuri>>; accessed 25 July 2017.

¹⁸⁵ Duberman, 22.

¹⁸⁶ Brown, 68-9.

before an assembled multitude composed of representative men and women, of various avocations, from all corners of the earth.¹⁸⁷

Robeson was not further disenfranchised that season. Paul Robeson, Jr., described his father's reaction. "Paul was angry, but he held his peace and kept his silence; he knew All-American status would almost surely be his, the next year, so it didn't make sense to challenge his coach and benefactor over this one game."¹⁸⁸ This did not mean that other teams did not display hostility, but things would not escalate to that level again. The following game, against Brown University's team on their home turf in Providence, Rhode Island, saw Robeson squaring off against his friend Fritz Pollard. Brown handily won the game 21-3, and few if any recognized the historical significance of the game; that it was not strictly about Brown vs. Rutgers.¹⁸⁹

In the following game Robeson scored his first-ever collegiate touchdown, in a 14-6 victory against Holy Cross, recovering a fumble and returning the ball fifteen yards to the end zone.¹⁹⁰ In the next contest, the realities of the South came once again. Aware of the Washington and Lee game, coach Alfred Earle "Greasy" Neale and the administration of West Virginia University, appealed to Rutgers to bar Robeson from playing. Unlike with Washington and Lee, Coach Sanford refused, likely embarrassed by his previous capitulation.¹⁹¹ In this game Robeson played and in turn faced a brutal response to his presence. The tenacity of both teams led to a scoreless game. In the aftermath, instead of anger, there was respect toward Robeson,

¹⁸⁷ Peter Mazzei, "James Dickinson Carr: First Black Graduate of Rutgers College," *The Journal of Rutgers Library* 47 (1985): 98.

¹⁸⁸ Robeson, Jr., 27.

¹⁸⁹ Wells, 350

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

earned by the skills he displayed on the field. Robeson's hand was shaken by all players and coaches of the opposing team.¹⁹² Even "Greasy" Neale was complimentary to Robeson, albeit in a manner steeped in racism. "Anyone who could tolerate such rough treatment and not complain about it, wasn't a black man, but a white man."¹⁹³

During Robeson's years at Rutgers, there were only two games played against Southern teams. Although on the schedule for the 1916 season, William and Mary and Georgia Tech both elected to cancel rather than play against Rutgers with their very large, very skilled black player.¹⁹⁴ In the last two games that season, Rutgers defeated Dickinson College 34-0 and lost their last game of the season 12-9 to Washington and Jefferson. In these final games Robeson was doing the best he could in the most turbulent season of his career. He caught two passes in each of the final two games and had an interception in the Dickinson game.¹⁹⁵

At times during his sophomore year, Robeson struggled with the strains of being pulled in so many different directions, including sports, singing performances, and course work. He did well in language study in Latin and Greek, but his English

¹⁹² Duberman, 23.

¹⁹³ "When Paul Robeson Starred Afield," *Westfield (NJ) Leader*, 18 November 1943.

¹⁹⁴ Duberman, 22.

¹⁹⁵ Wells, 351.

composition grade was still a C. Overall, in his first two years, he managed to maintain a B average.¹⁹⁶

Crossing Class Lines

With a rise in profile and notoriety, Robeson was slated to receive invitations to events where he would mingle with New York's and New Jersey's black elite. One such event put him in proximity with his defender, Rutgers' first black graduate, James Carr. In his sophomore year, a banquet was held for the assistant district attorney for Manhattan, F.Q Morton, and Robeson was invited. Dr. W.E.B. Dubois, the venerable civil rights champion and scholar, who would later emerge as another important ally of Robeson's, was in attendance. In Robeson's memoirs, he describes the event as a night of "fine speeches, and a real insight into the political life of New York City."¹⁹⁷ This black-tie affair was his first foray into the lifestyle he would become immersed in during law school and his early professional career. From the perspective of a nineteen-year-old, it was an eye-opening experience.

The summer before his junior year, Robeson returned to Rhode Island to work, a respite from his fast-paced, sports star lifestyle. The next school year proved to be his most memorable, one in which he would reach the pinnacle of his career as an athlete and a scholar and suffer his most grievous loss.¹⁹⁸ He was now six-foot-three-inches tall and weighed 220 pounds, having lost none of his speed and agility.¹⁹⁹ With the basic structure of the game set by World War I, Robeson

¹⁹⁶ Robeson, Jr., 27-8.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Brown, 71.

¹⁹⁹ Robeson, Jr., 28.

spearheaded a new chapter in Rutgers football, enhancing his own notoriety and career.²⁰⁰ Upon seeing Robeson when he returned, Coach Sanford realized he had perhaps one of the greatest players of all time and set out to build the entire team around him.²⁰¹ This accolade would be realized at the end of 1917 by the “father of football,” Walter Camp, who judged Robeson to be the all-time best player at the left-end position.²⁰²



Fig. 1, Rutgers University yearbook 1918 (Rutgers University Library, Special Collection)

By his junior year, Robeson’s size would provide a potent force to the rest of his team. On Rutgers’ 1917 team, there were only four other six-foot-tall players on a team of eighteen, and their average weight was 171 pounds.²⁰³ With a promising lineup and strategy developed around his size and playing ability, world events intervened in the 1917 college football season. The First World War had been ongoing in Western Europe since June 28, 1914, with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.²⁰⁴ However, the United States would not enter the conflict until

²⁰⁰ Herget, 115.

²⁰¹ Robeson, Jr., 28.

²⁰² Brown, 74.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁰⁴ Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 53.

April 6, 1917, with President Woodrow Wilson stating that “the world must be made safe for democracy.”²⁰⁵ This was in the midst of spring semester of Robeson’s junior year.²⁰⁶ Many college sports teams were depleted of their older athletes, who had enlisted in the service. While some schools simply canceled their football seasons, Rutgers stayed the course and played theirs.²⁰⁷

The season opened with a 25-0 victory over Ursinus College and an overwhelming victory against the Fort Washington Service Team 90-0. Their first loss of the season was to Syracuse University 0-14.²⁰⁸ Robeson led his team to victory in the next four games, defeating Lafayette 33-6, Fordham 28-0, Springfield college 61-0, and Philadelphia’s United States Marine team 27-0.²⁰⁹ These wins were significant for the Rutgers community and for Paul himself, because with each game his playing skills were both tested and refined. However, it was the game played against the Newport, Rhode Island Naval Reserve team on November 24, 1917, that would help cement Robeson’s legacy in football history.

The opposing team featured eighteen All-American players from various schools across the country, who had joined the Navy and then were recruited to play for their military service team. Such teams were a product of Woodrow Wilson’s administration’s fears of scandalous behavior by the millions of young men who had been recruited and drafted into the military at the onset of American’s involvement in

²⁰⁵ “Making the World ‘Safe for Democracy’: Woodrow Wilson Asks for War,” <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4943/>; accessed 3 August 2017.

²⁰⁶ Many Black Americans found Wilson’s words in his declaration of war to be hypocritical, given Wilson’s enthusiastic screening of the Klan film, D.W. Griffith’s *A Birth of a Nation* at the White House and his intransigent opposition to federal legislation that would abolish lynching.

²⁰⁷ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 47.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 48.

World War I. The Bible verse “idle hands are the devil’s workshop” applied to the formations of service teams.²¹⁰ The Wilson Administration’s concerns over vice near military installations led to the creation of a commission to supervise leisure time activities. That commission appointed Walter Camp to be the Navy’s athletic director.²¹¹

The Naval Reserve team was formidable, and undefeated at that point in their season.²¹² Most significantly, Walter Camp, who attended this game as a part of his new duties, witnessed one of the most spectacular displays of playing ability and physical tenacity of any player, white or black in the history of the game, one which is still cited nearly one hundred years later. On defense, Robeson completely shut the Navy team down. They only had two first downs the whole game.²¹³ On offense, Robeson caught a pass on the five-yard line and muscled across the goal line with three Navy Reserve players trying to bring him down.²¹⁴ Rutgers would win this game 14-0, the capstone of a season that saw the Scarlet Scourge winning seven of nine games and 295 total points.²¹⁵ Although Robeson’s offense and touchdowns won

²¹⁰ Proverbs 16:27, <<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+16%3A27-29&version=TLB>>; accessed 5 September 2017.

²¹¹ James Mennell, “The Service Football Program of WWI: It’s on the Popularity of the Game,” *Journal of Sports History* 16, no. 3 (Winter 1989): 251-2.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Robeson Jr, 30.

²¹⁴ Duberman, 24.

²¹⁵ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 49.

accolades in the press, it was his defensive play that caught the attention of coaches and writers.

Robeson was extremely busy throughout his college years, traveling home to Somerville every Sunday to help his father, keeping up with his course load, playing on various sports teams, and singing and reciting at social events. In addition to playing for Rutgers, he played on a non-college basketball team in Harlem. The St. Christopher's Club team played on Sundays, holidays, and between semesters during school breaks.²¹⁶ He also played basketball for Rutgers, usually as a center or guard, winning five games and losing three his junior year.²¹⁷ There is evidence that

²¹⁶ Brown, 70.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 83.

Robeson thrived amidst all of this activity, as his persona and warmth were noticed by all whom he encountered.



Fig. 2, Rutgers basketball team, 1917(Rutgers University Library Special Collection)

During this same period, Robeson came to be recognized for other talents, but with severe restrictions due to his race. Although never officially a member of the glee club, he occasionally sang with the group during home performances.²¹⁸ The stipulation was that he never participate in social events following performances where white women would be in attendance, this to prevent interracial socialization. Members of Philoclean, the campus literary society, allowed Robeson to participate while openly stating that he never attend any social gatherings.²¹⁹ He had an ulterior motive for participating in events where his presence was barely tolerated. He used them to advertise private concerts he would give to augment his scholarship.

²¹⁸ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 39.

²¹⁹ Duberman, 24.

I used to hustle around, fix up a concert, and bill myself as the star attraction. It is probable that I attracted my audience in the first place partly by the fact that my name was already fairly known as a Rugger man (Rutgers sports and academic star). I would go on the stage, sing a group of songs, orate and flourish for 20 minutes, and then sing again. These early ventures were practically the whole of my stage training.²²⁰

Giving credence to his oratorical skills, Paul was a member of the varsity debate team as well, and won the class oratorical prize four years in succession.²²¹ Throughout all of this maneuvering and negotiating New Jersey's de facto Jim Crow, he managed in the latter half of his college career to maintain such a high grade point

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

average that he was one of only four undergraduates from a class of eighty admitted to Phi Beta Kappa his junior year.

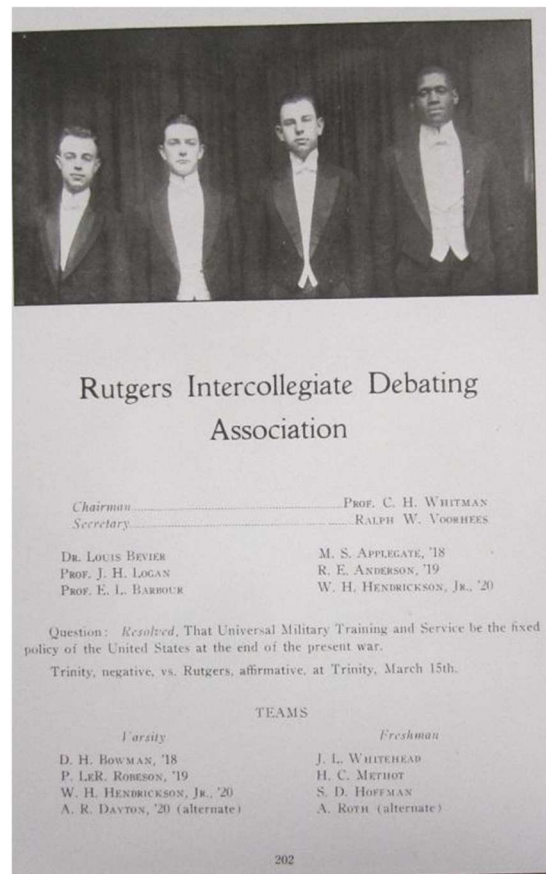


Fig. 3, Rutgers Yearbook, 1918 (Rutgers University Library Special Collection)

None of his multifaceted skills or complex array of interests and strengths prepared Robeson for his life's greatest loss. On May 17, 1918, at the end of his junior year, William Robeson, then seventy-three years old, took his last breath and quietly passed away.²²² The impending funeral, which brought his brothers and sister together for the last time, was held nine days after William died, as this was the earliest they all could return to Somerville. Paul was devastated by his father's death and nearly inconsolable. On Sunday, May 26, 1918, he and his siblings traveled to

²²² Swindall, 23.

Princeton to inter their father next to their mother, Maria, who had died fourteen years earlier.²²³ This would set a somber tone for the summer, one that would be beset with a deeper bitterness when Paul was invited to the annual Bustill summer picnic in Philadelphia.

After having cut off all contact with William in the wake of Maria's death, the Bustills invited only one Robeson family member, Paul, to their gathering, this due to his increasing notoriety and standing, both within the black community and beyond, and belying the family's irrational concern with his dark skin color. The Bustills had apparently decided to bestow upon Paul the legitimacy they had denied his father, although they slighted him when they printed his name in the day's activity program as "Roberson," the spelling of the slave holding family that owned William until his escape from Robersonville, North Carolina, a year before the outbreak of the Civil War.²²⁴ Paul was asked to give a speech entitled "Loyalty and Convictions" at the event. In it, he declared that his life's successes were not due to his mother's elite progenitors, but rather the ambition which led him to strive for excellence, something he had learned from his father.²²⁵

Upon returning to Rutgers fall semester of his senior year, Robeson was fully aware of the shifts in a nation then at war. To avoid being drafted, he joined 450 young male students belonging to the Rutgers Student Army Training Corps (SATC), this on a campus that, to all appearances, had been transformed into a military camp.

²²³ Brown, 86-7.

²²⁴ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 52.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Possibly owing to his fame, he would train alongside white classmates.²²⁶ By contrast, his brother Ben, an Army chaplain, was serving in a segregated unit in Kentucky.²²⁷ With the SATC having an intrusive presence on campus, many student activities were canceled, but not football which campus administrators viewed as vital.

At the outset of Robeson's senior year, there were lofty expectations for him personally as a player, and the entire team. Sanford viewed a successful season as the team's contribution to the war effort, the coach believing that players would demonstrate the same courage on the battlefield they exhibited on the gridiron.²²⁸ For the first half of the season the Scarlet Scourge was living up to those expectations, defeating more military teams. They defeated Pelham Bay's Naval Reserve Team 7-0, then largely through the efforts of Robeson shut out Lehigh University in a 30-0 game, going on to overcome another Navy team, this one from the transportation unit, 40-0. By midseason, not one of Rutgers' opponents had succeeded in gaining a first down.²²⁹ This winning streak would not last, however. In the final two games of the season, Rutgers would lose to the Great Lakes Naval Station team 54-14 and then to Syracuse University 21-0.²³⁰

All-American and New Directions

The real highlight from this final season was the official announcement made by Walter Camp that Paul Robeson had been named to the All-American first team by

²²⁶ Ibid., 54.

²²⁷ Brown, 86.

²²⁸ Dorinson, ed., Boyle and Bunie, 54.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

Camp himself. The rationale was that, “there never was a more serviceable end, both in attack and defense, than Robeson.”²³¹ This was not only expected, but warranted, given Robeson’s immense talent, size, and speed on the field. This may also have lessened the sting from the beginning of the 1918 season when the elections for team captain took place, and Robeson’s name was never even mentioned. He expressed neither surprise nor anger; by now he knew this was the way the white world operated.²³² Even if he was by far the most skilled player on the team, he was still a black man in a white world steeped in de facto Jim Crow.

On a personal level and owing to the death of his father and having no family members close by to lean on, Robeson became closer with Coach Sanford. It is highly likely that Sanford had an influence on his entry into law school that next year. Another important influence was James Carr, who had gone on to become a New York City lawyer.²³³ A significant indicator of Robeson’s interest in law was his senior thesis, an important piece of work, especially given that his senior year was his academically weakest. He earned two As, four Bs, one C, and a D in economics, which he dropped after one semester.²³⁴

His thesis, “The Fourteenth Amendment: The Sleeping Giant of the Constitution,” was the capstone of his undergraduate career. In it, he interpreted the

²³¹ Brown, 92.

²³² Robeson, Jr., 30.

²³³ Brown, 91.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

Fourteenth Amendment in a way that prefigured its eventual use as a civil rights weapon. He succinctly pointed out that:

This amendment is a vital part of American Constitutional Law and we hardly know its sphere, but its provisions must be duly observed and conscientiously interpreted so that through it ‘the Sleeping Giant of our Constitution’ the American people shall develop a higher sense of constitutional morality.’²³⁵

He recognized that citizenship in the United States during this era remained intrinsically linked with white masculinity, something that will be extrapolated in chapter four’s discussion of black masculinity. Robeson, by this time, had represented his school in a wide array of sports, activities, and leisure activities, whenever it was possible for him to do so given the social realities and expectations of social distancing via de facto Jim Crow across New Jersey at that time. In his senior year,

²³⁵ Foner, ed., 62.

Robeson was inducted into the Cap and Skull Honor Society as one of four men who best represented Rutgers' ideals.



Fig. 4, Rutgers 1919 Cap and Skull inductees
(Rutgers University Library Special Collection)

Soon after—and reflecting the complicated nature of his time at Rutgers and relationship with the school's administration—a momentous request was made of him. With only six days' notice, Robeson was asked to be his class valedictorian, after the originally selected student became ill. This was a rare and perhaps unprecedented tribute, not just in the state, but likely the entire region. The school's board of trustees, faculty, and many distinguished guests and recipients of honorary degrees stood for Robeson as he made his way to the graduation speaker's stand.²³⁶ This was a simple act, but one that spoke volumes.

Also momentous was that Robeson was granted permission by the university's president to write a speech that “would touch upon the racial question, to show the

²³⁶ Duberman, 26.

dawn of a renaissance for the Negro.”²³⁷ Entitled “The New Idealism,” the speech touched upon the sacrifices of Americans in Western Europe in World War I, comparing them to the sacrifices made to preserve the Union during the Civil War. Most importantly, he addressed racial dynamics of American society at that time, and the need for black Americans to show their potential through their actions. He noted that nothing but self-imposed limitations “can prevent a man from sustaining an honorable character. We know that neither institution nor friends can make a race stand unless it has the strength of its own foundation; that races like individuals must stand or fall on their own merit.”²³⁸ The strength of the foundation is a reference to the black Americans’ past and the perseverance of men like William Robeson who literally stole themselves from their owners.

Robeson pointed out that former slaves taught themselves not only how to read, but how to think critically. Critical thinking ability would lead to “unparalleled opportunity for reconstructing our entire national life and molding it in accordance with the purpose and ideals of a new age.”²³⁹ This opportunity and foundation was what young black people in America at that time had to build upon. They could not rest or slow the demands for black constitutional rights because this was—and remains—an ongoing struggle for equality, freedom, and justice. He added that “unity is impossible without freedom, and freedom presupposes a reverence for the

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Foner, ed., 64.

²³⁹ Ibid.

individual and a recognition of the claims of human personality to full development.”²⁴⁰

Robeson then connected the plight and diligence of black Americans—whose efforts were a constant uphill struggle. “And we are struggling in attempting to show that knowledge can be obtained under difficulties; that poverty may give place to affluence; that obscurity is not an absolute bar to distinction.”²⁴¹ Then, possibly making a reference to the struggles of his father, but also the discrimination he, as well as black Americans more broadly faced, said, “that neither the old time slavery, nor continued prejudice need extinguish self-respect, crush manly ambitions or paralyze effort; that no power outside of himself can prevent a man from sustaining an honorable character and a useful relation to his day and generation.”²⁴² He observed that it was the duty of the white community to allow this growth without hindering it, saying: “It is necessary that you of the favored race catch a new vision and exemplify in your actions this new American spirit.” That spirit which prompts you to compassion, a motive instinctive but cultivated and intensified by Christianity, embodying the desire to relieve the manifest distress of your fellows.”²⁴³

Here, Robeson is compelling his fellow graduates, who were overwhelmingly white, to appeal to their sense of religion and show compassion for those who are not white and had far less social and economic capital due to systemic inequities. In New Jersey, this was the de facto Jim Crow that permeated the state. Elsewhere, it was the

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

legally sanctioned de jure Jim Crow that imposed draconian limitations on black ability to thrive, work, and think freely.

The audience received Robeson's speech with enthusiasm, as did the Rutgers university newspaper. The *Targum* forecast his future, predicting his election as New Jersey governor. "He has "dimmed the fame of Booker T. Washington," and is a "leader of the colored race in America."²⁴⁴ Staff writers hoped that Robeson would set an example for other black Americans, stating, "In you other members of your race may well find a noble example, and this leadership is your new duty."²⁴⁵ Warranted, given his contributions to the Rutgers community, this glowing tribute would foreshadow the brilliance Robeson displayed in the next chapter of his academic and professional career when he moved to New York City.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Brown, 96.

Chapter 4: “Physical Spectacularization: Print Media Coverage of Robeson 1916-1927”

Due in large part to the media attention he received, Paul Robeson can perhaps be considered the first internationally acclaimed Black icon. He had a multifaceted career and the media coverage of him was vast. Robeson's emergence as a race man roughly began in 1934 and was deeply entrenched in the racial realities and time in which he lived. This is most evident in the constant flow of observations and commentary about him, which strongly fell along racial lines. For the white press, focus on Robeson was largely on his physical size and on the impactful role he had on the various sports in which he participated. Post college, there was a perceived scandalous nature to some of some of his stage roles because they involved him with white women and/or other issues that spoke to American's racial anxiety. In the Black print media, a very different type of conversation was occurring. Black journalists covering Paul Robeson and his career focused on his academic achievements amid his rise to prominence. After his time at Rutgers, as Robeson began his performance career, Black media discussions on him focused not only on his intellectual capacity, but also his adherence to Black respectability politics and, thus, often reflected a strong class consciousness.

The primary sources chosen for the next two chapters heavily reflect how Robeson's early career unfolded in the public eye, from the perspective of both Black and white American media. This data reveals how Robeson was one of the most highly visible Black college students in the country, at the time. Information can also be gleaned from the media sources to learn of his performances on the stage, both as a theatre actor and as a vocal performance artist. Given that this is an extensive body of

information, my analysis of the newspaper coverage of Robeson in his early career is expounded upon in two chapters. By considering together Black and white media coverage of Robeson from 1916 to 1927, I argue for the ways in which the white media tended to overemphasize Robeson's physicality while Black media honed in on his intellect, activism, and other pursuits. The latter set of readings often leaned toward a communication of black respectability and middle/upper-class social values. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to identify and discuss newspaper coverage of Paul Robeson. Using an open coding technique and applying it to a close reading of the voluminous body of newspaper articles from both Black and white outlets, I searched for resonate themes. What emerges is the way in which the articles tended to speak to Black intellectualism and respectability, often along class and racial lines. In all, it illustrates Robeson's influence but also how he was made into a vexed being. I close the chapter with a focus on how Robeson intervened in his own representations making him even more complex but also iconic.

This and the following chapter are organized under an umbrella term that I call "physical" spectacularization." Spectacularization used here is a play on Mora Beauchamp-Byrd's "specularization" (discussed more in chapter 6), which she uses to discuss and illustrate how Robeson's physical appearance was at play in his life. But, I also make use of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). For Debord, the spectacle is directly tied to the market economy and how we receive information, and especially advertisements, and celebrities. The media is an important instrument of conveyance; it does a certain kind of work and thus serves as a tool or portal. Debord writes, "And by this they mean to describe a mere

instrument, a kind of public service” for society. Spectacle focuses our attention on a set of experiences and people and can be used to distract and/or create a representation. He writes further, “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation.”²⁴⁶ Writing on Debord, John Harris, columnist for *The Guardian*, further breaks down spectacle this way, “The spectacle is much more than something at which we passively gaze, and it increasingly defines our perception of life itself, and the way we relate to others. As [*Society of the Spectacle*] puts it: ‘The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.’” To this end, for me, physical spectacularization is the lens I use to read and analyze the writings about Robeson. It is a way of interpreting the texts through how Robeson’s physical presence is remarked upon. Through his physical body white audiences related to him. Black audiences, alternatively, did not disregard the physical, but augmented and filled out their characterizations with a focus on Robeson’s intellect, activism, and comportment. In other words, they read him as having “complex personhood.”²⁴⁷ For both sets of audiences loving or hating, understanding and misunderstanding Robeson and his performances were mediated

²⁴⁶ See Byrd, “*Body and Soul*”; Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>>. Accessed March 30, 2012. Others have used the term spectacularization to discuss celebrities. See, for example, Ming Lim & Mona Moufahim, “The spectacularization of suffering: an analysis of the use of celebrities in ‘Comic Relief’ UK’s Charity Fundraising Campaigns,” *Journal of Marketing Management* 31:5-6, 525-545.

²⁴⁷ See the “Introduction: Her Shape and His Hand,” to Avery Gordon’s, *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). In it she explains, Complex personhood “means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (4).

by their image of him—real and imagined—especially his physical being. This was all negotiated through the lenses of race, class, and respectability.

So, physical presence is always mentioned with regard to Robeson, but perhaps not in the way I am pursuing—a comparison on how his spectacularization reveals more about the actor, singer, orator, and activist. I see three ways in which this plays out in this study. First, even throughout the earliest phase of his public career, Robeson's physicality far exceeded that of the average American, regardless of ethnic origins, leading to an oft-exaggerated focus on his body size. Second, this focus on his body (depending upon the particular news outlet and even the racial background of the press reporter) frequently led to a divergence in how media stories framed Robeson. The white press focused on his body by using metaphors from and references to Greek and Roman mythology and even the *Bible*. But, even then, there often were vast differences in how the U.S. outlets differed from the British press in discussing Robeson's performances.

Third, the Black American press did mention Robeson's physicality, albeit to a limited extent. Black media seemed to be far more focused on his intellectual and academic achievements, as well as his social, political and activist communications and career. This seems fitting given that the ability to read and write always has been vital to Black Americans, both in terms of challenging white supremacy and for personal empowerment and enlightenment. Acutely aware that literacy was the key to his future, obtaining literacy was one of the first things Paul Robeson's father, William, sought to do after fleeing slavery. The ability (and opportunity) to recognize an individual number or letter and realize that the symbol meant something served as

an intellectual spark, not just for him, but for many Black Americans—then and now. Whether slave or not, and regardless of region, all Black Americans during this time period were impacted by chattel slavery, de jure Jim Crow, or de facto Jim Crow in some form or another. And a primary component of the system of racialized control was the intentional legal ban on Black literacy and later a segregated educational system. So, while the white press focused on his body and physical endeavors (on the football field and on the performance stage), the Black press focused on the multi-faceted nature of his career. And, while when he was still in college, they focused on his academic accolades. Robeson's body thus primarily served as a lens of through which black male physical bodies were read, while the Black press often centered Robeson's intellect as a Black American and as a man.

In order to efficiently analyze the primary source newspapers selected for this work, I first categorized them across the various phases of Paul Robeson's career, starting with sports coverage while he was at Rutgers and through his later adult life, including coverage during his law school years, his stint as a professional football player, his early theatrical and singing performance career, and his theatrical work during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. I then used an open coding method, whereby I looked for a consistent set of themes to emerge over time across more than three publications. Using a constant comparative method, I tallied a running compilation of the themes.

The newspapers and articles for this chapter were selected for several reasons. The first is availability to me. Robeson's materials are widespread and a great deal of what is available focuses on his later career—particularly his work from the 1940-50s

and beyond. I searched extensively to learn about what collections included his youth career as this dissertation is primarily focused on those early career activities. The earliest materials are primarily held at two important library collections and in one museum collection. First, there is Rutgers University Special Collection and Archives, at the institution where Robeson undertook his undergraduate studies. Unsurprisingly, it is one of the preeminent locations for primary sources on Robeson's early career and their comprehensive and detailed collections includes newspapers from both sides of the color line.

Second, there is Temple University's Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection that possesses unique Robeson materials. By this I mean extant ephemera from his earliest professional performances including programs announcements. Third, there is the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, which has one-of-a-kind original photographs of Robeson taken both during the timeframe of this dissertation and beyond. These images can be found in both chapters four and five, but also in the sixth chapter that focuses specifically on the visual legacy of Robeson. Lastly, there are some articles from the Library of Congress, which also owns a large set of historical newspapers. At each of these repositories, I examined every article in their holdings for the early period of Robeson's career being studied here. Even though it was a targeted and comprehensive search, it was not all inclusive as there are Robeson collections elsewhere. For example, the New York Public Library

possesses a sizable Robeson collection, but their newspaper collection begins in 1942, which is beyond the time frame for this dissertation.²⁴⁸

The Roots of Paul Robeson's Physical Spectacularization: White Media References

Print media coverage was the tool to convey the focus on and fascination with Robeson's large physical size and powerful playing ability. It is the vehicle by which he became codified in American culture. Robeson's largeness was always referred to in articles written about him for white publications. The perceived abnormality of his physical body as well as his playing style reflected massive strength and as such he became the figure of competition needed for Rutgers sports. White print media seized upon him and represented him as such. This characterization was given him while he was yet an undergraduate and before he had even fully grown or matured as an athlete. One of the earliest mentions of his physicality is found in the *New York Times* at the beginning of his sophomore year. In recounting the team's 33-0 victory over Villanova, Robeson was described as "a tower of strength on the Scarlet defense. [Towering] above every man on the field, and when he stretched his arms up in the air, he pulled down passes that an ordinary player would have to use a step ladder to reach."²⁴⁹ This would continue over the years as Robeson grew two inches in height and gained thirty pounds of muscle, adding to the notoriety his size afforded him.

While the *Times* article pointed directly at his height, other metaphors used to describe Robeson's influence on the football field included the notion that he had the

²⁴⁸ The New York Public Library: Archives and Manuscripts. Paul Robeson collection, printed matter. <http://archives.nypl.org/scm/20649#detailed> (Accessed 1/10/18.)

²⁴⁹ *New York Times*, 14 October 1916.

effect of being “a Dark Cloud” on an opposing team’s chances to win.²⁵⁰ An article in *Association Men of YMCA* addressed not only his physicality, but also his intelligence and character, albeit in a racialized manner. Reflecting the biased perspectives of the era in which he wrote, reporter Lawrence Perry referred to Robeson as a “Herculean Negro possessing immense strength.”²⁵¹ However, he did not stop there. He also cited Robeson's "self-control and his gentlemanly instincts and his ability as an athlete (which) made those who had been baiting him seem like pygmies by comparison."²⁵²

Robeson's football skills were extremely useful in playing both offense and defense. Discussing the famous Rutgers vs. Naval Reserve game, perhaps the most excellent game of his football career wherein these skills were on full display, the *New York Sunday Tribune* referred to Robeson as “a veritable Othello of battle,” foreshadowing a future stage role of Robeson’s.²⁵³ The *New York Times* reported that Charles Brickley, captain of the military team, was the only player the entire game to gain any yards against Robeson, clearly demonstrating what it was like to play against a man of his size and ability. The article notes, “Brickley once made five yards through the line, but he was so badly shaken up when big Robeson stopped the play that Charley tarried in the background after that.”²⁵⁴ The writer implies that one tackle

²⁵⁰ Charles A. Taylor, “Maroon Grid Warriors Smothered by Rutgers,” *New York Tribune*, 28 October 1917.

²⁵¹ Lawrence Perry, “Why Does a Winner Win?,” *Association Men of Y.M.C.A.* XLV, No. 6, (February 1924): 248.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Louis Lee Arms, *New York Sunday Tribune*, 29 November 1917.

²⁵⁴ “Naval Team Fails to Check Rutgers,” *New York Times*, 6 November 1918.

from Robeson was enough to deter this player from advancing during the rest of the game, further reinforcing Robeson's physical power on the field.

Frederick G. Lieb, another white sports writer, also provided coverage of Robeson's offensive play. Citing Robeson's power, he called attention to the humorous manner in which not even the joint effort of several opposing players could stop Robeson. Writing about Rutgers' 28-0 victory against Fordham, Lieb notes that the "real Rutgers hero was the Negro end, Robeson."²⁵⁵ He proceeds to describe how "four Maroon tacklers [Fordham players on defense] were hanging on Robeson's knees as he reached into the air and drew in the football, but showing little annoyance, he carried the ball for some fourteen additional yards before he was brought down. The play was worth a good laugh in addition to being mighty fine football."²⁵⁶ While these accolades helped cement Robeson's football legacy, the capstone was the praise he received from Walter ("Father of Football") Camp in an article that appeared in *Collier's Weekly*.²⁵⁷

Many early publications erroneously stated that Robeson was officially named an "All-American" player for two consecutive years, 1917 and 1918. Factually, this is not the case. At an annual conference to select the college football player of the year, "It was decided to omit the usual All-American selections for 1917 because of wartime conditions."²⁵⁸ Even if there were no official All-American selections that year, many sources note that Robeson was rated as such, "because he was the

²⁵⁵ Frederick G. Lieb "Rutgers Football Legions Overthrow Fordham Team," *New York Sun*, 28 October 1917.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Walter Camp, "War and Football," *Collier's Weekly*, (15 January 1918): 32. The Paul Robeson Collection at Rutgers University Library retains a primary source copy.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

consensus choice of virtually all of the other experts for that honor.”²⁵⁹ The image below is a photo of the 1918 All-American teams lists with Robeson prominently featured at the top. That same year, Camp declared Robeson, "the greatest defensive end ever to trod the gridiron."²⁶⁰

Throughout the sports articles on Paul Robeson referenced above, we can see specific decisions and references were made by the authors to focus on the “power” and “strength” of the young, heavily muscled (almost unusually so?) Negro American football player. The characterization begs a bit more unpacking, especially the language. The references to his physical body as big, dark, towering, and possessing immense strength were probably not too surprising given that most African American men at that time were seen as powerful bucks, capable mainly of reproducing offspring and working like horses, yet possessing little intellect or smarts. From this subset of description references we can see a specific portrayal of Robeson emerging. He was a player who was unstoppable (or difficult to stop). And using language that was recognizable to the reading public, he was compared to Hercules and other figures from Greek, and later Roman, mythology. There were many linguistic ways that Robeson's ability could have been characterized in the print media, but the authors' perspectives and backgrounds led them to draw upon mythical references. As Hercules was one of the most referenced classical mythology figures of the entire 20th century, he would be instantly recognizable to a readership that would be

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 35.

²⁶⁰ Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, “Paul Robeson, Rutgers Phenomenon, 1915-1919,” in *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy*, eds. Joseph Dorinson, et al. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2002), 49.

familiar with such images. These kinds of references, which exemplify the physical spectacularization of Robeson, would continue throughout his career.

It is, however, most thought-provoking that he was also described as a “veritable Othello of battle.”²⁶¹ This turnabout suggests that for some white media personnel, Robeson was more than a physical being, but also a thinking one. Othello was the Black/African character from the Shakespearian play of the same name. In the play, the character is a general in the Venetian army. The promotion to the position of general indicates a high level of skill, power, and ability. Othello was also not the villain of the play but was a causality in the play’s overall tragedy.²⁶² This background information on the Othello character is important for what it suggests about why the reference was made to Robeson. The specificity of the reference suggests the author of the article, Louis Lee Arms, knew its meanings and most likely expected his readers did, too. So, readers would pick up on the association of Robeson to a battle-hardened individual like Othello, who was a force to be reckoned with. The intended white news audience also might have known that this play was Shakespeare’s chief exploration into the notion of racial difference.²⁶³ Even if they did not, Arms most likely did and thus considered Robeson’s ability to be so accomplished in a majority white environment unusual enough so as to warrant

²⁶¹ Louis Lee Arms, *New York Sunday Tribune*, 29 November 1917.

²⁶² Swindall, *The Politics of Robeson’s Othello*, 7.

²⁶³ Swindall, 11.

making a link between his playing ability and the fictional character's military leadership.

Through this initial section, we can see how the physical spectacularization theme is on display in the articles from the white media. The practice of using these theatrical and mythology references is significant. By choosing to connect Robeson with well-known characters, it creates a relationship between them in the minds of the readers of the articles. This reference practice suggests the kinds of information possessed by the readership at the time in which the newspaper articles were written. They were most likely learned and, thus, these multilayered mentions of Robeson were perhaps designed to subtly suggest his intelligence without offending the whites, many of whom thought (even if they didn't say it) that African Americans were inferior. So when different reporters wrote their articles on Robeson and his achievements on the field while linking him to notable mythological characters they, deliberately or inadvertently, enshrined him. The readership subsequently built their perception of Robeson through the article's language and cultural references.

Numerous additional articles describe not just Robeson's ability, but also his sports intelligence. One such article from the *Daily Home News* refers to him as a "colored wonder," who "possessed extraordinary ability in solving plays, and this fact coupled with his great strength and ability to think quickly has placed him on the backfield on offense."²⁶⁴ Rutgers' student paper, *The Targum*, similarly refers to Robeson. In a review of the 1917-1918 football season, a reporter describes him as a

²⁶⁴ Harold E. O'Neill, "Sporting Topics," *Daily Home News*, 18 December 1917.

"colossus of Rhodes."²⁶⁵ This comparison to the one-hundred-eight-foot tall ancient Greek statue guarding the entrance to the Greek city of Rhodes is highly complimentary.

The Roots of Paul Robeson's Physical Spectacularization: Black Media References

Somewhat similarly but also in stark contrast were the profiles of Robeson in the Black press, which was undergoing a period of exponential growth during this period. With the help of the Black media, Robeson would be catapulted to great notoriety. For example, in March 1918, *The Crisis*, the publishing arm of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the most widely read Black magazine at the time, named Robeson one of its "Men of the Month."²⁶⁶ While it was the first mention of Robeson in this particular publication, it, too, would begin with an emphasis on physical spectacularization by highlighting his age and physicality, stating, "This athlete is only nineteen years old, but he is six feet two inches high and weighs 210 pounds."²⁶⁷ This made Robeson above average in height and weight for all ethnic groups in the United States at that time. The article also provides a brief family background, pointing out that his father was a minister in Somerville and that Paul was a graduate of the high school there as well as detailing Robeson's academic successes at Rutgers. Both of these are equally important mentions.

That same year, Robeson's name also begins appearing in another one of the most prolific and widely read Black newspapers of the era, Robert Abbott's *Chicago*

²⁶⁵ Sidney S. Margolius, "Robeson All-American End 1917-1918 Series," *The Targum*, 29 October 1932, p. 4.

²⁶⁶ "Men of the Month," *The Crisis Magazine* 15, No.5: 229.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

Defender. The earliest mention of him, in the November 30, 1918 issue, is a review of Rutgers' loss to the Great Lakes Naval team. The article emphasizes the athlete's physical size when the author writes "Robeson is always a tower of strength to his team even in defeat."²⁶⁸ Another article from the *Defender* the next year follows a baseball game against New York University and the headline reads: "Timely Wallop by Robeson Wins the Game." It goes on to describe how Robeson hit a three-base hit in the fourth inning, providing momentum for his team in their win against NYU.²⁶⁹ This article is somewhat unusual, as Robeson's strength in baseball was generally behind home plate playing catcher. Noting his assist and base hit suggests, again, he was more than a one-dimensional athlete of any sport.

While these first couple of news stories illuminate a focus on Robeson as an athlete, athletics, while popular, were not held with the same degree of reverence that they are today. And although the majority of the Black press coverage of Robeson came after his graduation from Rutgers, his earliest media mentions devoted far more space to his impressive academic resume, often emphasizing Robeson's "firsts." This included his competing for and winning a four-year scholarship "in which he made the highest average in the state."²⁷⁰ The article closes by emphasizing Robeson's unique place in Black society, noting that, "Mr. Robeson has maintained a high scholastic record. He won the class oratorical prize for two years, a feat never before accomplished in the school."²⁷¹ The June 1918 issue of *The Crisis* shared that

²⁶⁸ "Robeson Stars, Although Rutgers is Defeated" *The Chicago Defender*, 30 November 1918, p. 5.

²⁶⁹ "Timely Wallop by Robeson Wins Game," *The Chicago Defender*, 19 April 1919, p. 11.

²⁷⁰ *The Crisis Magazine*, "Men of the Month" 15-No.5: 230.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

Robeson was “elected a member of the senior secret society, ‘Cap and Skulls,’”²⁷² while the August issue announced “Paul Robeson, the athlete, gained first prize in the Junior oratorical contest at Rutgers and has won his ‘letter’ in four branches of athletics.”²⁷³

This kind of attention would be the bedrock upon which Robeson would go on to become considered a major community icon and a transformative Black intellectual figure. Moreover, these kinds of accomplishments enabled W.E.B. DuBois, the editor, to emphasize Robeson's academic prowess and to show the publication's Black (and white) readership how a young Black male student was achieving things in college that no student, of any race, had done before. This is important to note, given that Robeson was one of the most high-profile young Black men in the country at the time. He was attending the university when Black college enrollment was infinitesimal, with only a handful of African Americans enrolled in predominantly white colleges and universities.²⁷⁴ Even though Robeson's athletic achievements were a part of the prominent narrative of the *Crisis* showing Black Americans breaking barriers in the white world, from an organizational standpoint, the NAACP was hyper-focused on the normalization of Black success in academic, legal, business, and political realms. Also, being from a relatively middle-class background—his father was a minister—and having completed not only high school

²⁷² “The Horizon,” *The Crisis Magazine* 16, No.2 (June 1918): 87.

²⁷³ “The Horizon,” *The Crisis Magazine* 16, No.4 (August 1918): 191.

²⁷⁴ Francis C. Harris, “Paul Robeson: An Athlete's Legacy,” in *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 35.

but also college socially and culturally placed Robeson well above many African Americans of the time and placed him squarely among the intellectual elite.

When references were made to Robeson's physical stature, it was done so without the social language of the gallant heroism of European mythology or European theatrical character descriptions. Rather, it was stated matter-of-factly. The description of him being a "tower of strength"²⁷⁵ was not just a statement but mirrored or was extracted from the white press's coverage of Rutgers team's loss to the Naval Reserve. The press coverage by the Black media was complimentary to his abilities even in the face of defeat, reflecting that for the Black press, Robeson was always to be celebrated, even when his team lost. The attention to Robeson's physical measurements was to emphasize in dramatic fashion how Robeson, strong, tall, and smart, outsized (and outsmarted) not just the average man in white America, but also his Black American contemporaries.

This kind of press coverage, with its overt emphasis on Black intellectualism, makes clear that Black journalists wanted to impress upon their readership that a young Black man in the northeast was singlehandedly breaking through the barriers of Jim Crow. They cultivated a persona of Robeson that illustrates he was exceptional amongst the high achieving Black students at a predominately white institution of higher education during that time. This intention reflects the reality that for the Black readership outlets like *The Crisis*, and *The Chicago Defender* focused on a greater range of news--that was the order of the day. The fact that they were able to help build the budding career of Paul Robeson by including not just what he was able to do

²⁷⁵ "Robeson Stars, Although Rutgers is Defeated" *The Chicago Defender*, 30 November 1918, p. 5.

with his body, but also what he was capable of doing with his mind, was key to helping to build up the entire race. Additionally, one can see the solidarity expressed by the authors writing for Black print media and Robeson. They are the link between Robeson and the rest of the Black community. To this end, it was fitting that they celebrated him across his achievements, on the field of play, in the classroom, and other locations of his career, like his vocal performances with the Rutgers Glee club.

Newspaper Coverage of Robeson's Early Stage Career

At the very beginning of the Harlem Renaissance Robeson moved to New York City for law school and in 1920 he joined the cast of an amateur play production titled, *Simon, the Cyrenian*, performed at Harlem's YWCA. Robeson is said to have enjoyed performing in the play.²⁷⁶ Yet, he treated it as a lark, a prank never meant to be taken seriously.²⁷⁷ But he met with great success from Black newspaper coverage and his reputation started expanding, including to newspapers outside the East Coast. An article in the March 20, 1920 edition of a Texas based Black newspaper, *The Dallas Express*, for example, reported on Robeson's attending a Columbia school banquet for the senior undergraduate class. In 1920 this was unusual enough to warrant media coverage as far away as Texas, where de jure Jim Crow was the law of the land. The attention paid to a social gathering on the opposite side of the country reflects how the Black community clamored for media attention that highlighted

²⁷⁶ Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 35.

²⁷⁷ Duberman, 43.

achievements of the race. Moreover, such news did the important work of reinforcing the arguments that Black Americans were capable and competent Americans.

The article noted that Robeson "occupied a seat of honor at the speaker's table at the Columbia University annual senior class dinner. As an undergraduate, Robeson had often skipped such events. In this case, however, he was one of the speakers. As far as can be ascertained, the presence of Robeson at the speaker's table set a precedent for Columbia senior class events."²⁷⁸ Hence, the reporter's focus in this article was on the unprecedented nature of a Black star's attendance at a university social event. But, at the same time, the reporter also normalized Robeson's presence writing, "The presence of Robeson passed without comment from the 125 members of the senior class at the dinner. Following the speeches by the president of the class and others, Robeson sang three solos and remained until the party dispersed."²⁷⁹

The Dallas Express was one of the largest Black newspapers in Texas at that time, and a Black icon attending a white function because of his exceptional achievements is an example of the types of media coverage the Black community found interesting. This coverage reflects another instance of Robeson's ability to operate in mixed-race social environments, and at the same time how he functioned under the spotlight as the sole Black American attending an event where he is not a part of the banquet hall's waitstaff. The article closes with a quote from Columbia's white senior class president L.R. Condon: "Robeson had been invited because he was one of Columbia's most brilliant men, as well as being a widely known singer and

²⁷⁸ "Football Star is Honor Guest at Banquet," *The Dallas Express*, 12 March 1920, p. 1.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

famous football player.”²⁸⁰ For some, this quote validates Robeson’s right to attend the event. Furthermore, as an instance of the color line being upended, it became a newsworthy event.

Another example of Robeson’s participation in respectability occurred in 1921, the year after he married Eslanda Cardozo Goode. Another Black newspaper reported on a social event given in honor of Paul Robeson where this time he was accompanied by his bride. The article, published in *The Broad Ax*²⁸¹, emphasized the glamorous nature of the affair. Headlined “Mr. and Mrs. Cary B. Lewis Gave a Delightful Reception and Dance in Honor of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Robeson of New York City,” it describes the evening as “one of the most brilliant social affairs of the season.”²⁸² The reporter focuses on background information about the Robesons and offers detailed descriptions of the glamorous dresses worn by the women in attendance. This is a "soft news" article, or an example of the type of story written about a cultural figure in a celebratory tone. It is also an example of how Black sourced media was diversifying in the early twentieth century.

This diversification would extend to include Robeson’s early stage career. In the spring of 1922, Paul Robeson was still in law school, although his heart was not entirely in it. Unbeknownst to him, his performance in *Simon, the Cyrenian* had impressed several influential whites, and that March he found himself recruited for a

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹This newspaper is noteworthy for its aggressive tone and stance on racial segregation. Originally based in Salt Lake City, it was forced to relocate to Chicago in 1899 after tensions arose between the *Broad Ax* and leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See, “About the Broad Ax (Salt Lake City, Utah) 1895-19??,” <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024055/>>; accessed 9 September 2017.

²⁸² “Mr. and Mrs. Cary B. Lewis Gave a Delightful Reception and Dance in Honor of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Robeson of New York City,” *The Broad Ax*, 2 December 1922.

new play, *Taboo*. *Taboo* received unenthusiastic reviews, with *Life* magazine calling it “diffuse,” and its plot “obscure.”²⁸³ Another review, this one written by Alexander Woollcott of *The New York Times*, was a mixture of compliment and criticism, characterizing Robeson’s performance and voice as “dominating the play,” and describing his voice as “rich and mellow”²⁸⁴ Even so, Woollcott said that “Robeson belonged almost anywhere but in the theater.”²⁸⁵ Mixed reviews did not stop the play from being brought to the United Kingdom in the summer of 1922 for a somewhat unsuccessful run.²⁸⁶ The year 1924 saw Robeson’s place in American theatre thoroughly cemented. That was when he was cast in a play by the venerable playwright Eugene O’Neill, leading to roles in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *The Emperor Jones*. He would also star in the comedy-drama, *Roseanne*.²⁸⁷

These performances helped Robeson improve his craft, following the mixed reception of *Taboo*, leading to a dramatic increase in the amount of Black and white press media attention given to him in 1924 and 1925. While his acting ability was improving with every production, it was his remarkable and unmistakable speaking and singing voice that drew crowds. Marcus Boulware, the author of *The Oratory of Negro Leaders*, describes Robeson as, “probably the only Negro orator who combined singing, acting and speaking.”²⁸⁸ Lindsey Swindall, in *The Politics of*

²⁸³ Robert Benchley, *Life Magazine* (20 April 1922).

²⁸⁴ Alexander Woollcott, *The New York Times*, 20 April 1922.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Duberman, 47.

²⁸⁷ Boyle and Bunie, 126.

²⁸⁸ Marcus H. Boulware, *The Oratory of Negro Leaders, 1900-1968* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 69.

Robeson's Othello, says of Robeson's talents: "One can conceive of Robeson first as an orator who subsequently sang and performed in dramas."²⁸⁹

Also drawing the attention of the press were controversies surrounding the interracial dynamics of the actors and actresses selected for these productions, and plot elements of these plays. White media, including the *Boston Post*, *Daily Home News*, *New York Herald*, *New York Times*, *Sunday Times*, and *New York Herald Tribune*, published a barrage of articles on Robeson in O'Neill's productions. Rutgers University's *Targum* printed articles on the controversial nature of these plays, too. In sum, they reflected cultural anxieties surrounding a Black actor playing the intimate partner of a white woman on stage.

Upon the opening of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, Black publications, including *The Chicago Defender* and *Baltimore Afro-American* reported on discriminatory attitudes toward Robeson. The Black press pointed out how reactions to the play reflected racial dynamics in Jim Crow America, even if the play would never be performed in the South. In an article in the April 26, 1924 issue of *The Defender*, the reporter made a comparison between the hostile reaction to the play and its actors, and the ways Americans had reacted to Ira Aldridge's portrayal of Othello in nineteenth-century London; this, even though the play was never produced with Aldridge starring in it in the United States.²⁹⁰ Hailing from New York City, Aldridge, the first Black actor to play many of William Shakespeare's leading roles, recognized he had little chance of pursuing his acting career in the United States, so he had

²⁸⁹ Lindsey R. Swindall, *The Politics of Robeson's Othello* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 25.

²⁹⁰ Henry F. Downing, "Protest Over O'Neil's Play Recalls Days of Ira Aldridge," *The Chicago Defender*, 20 April 1922.

relocated to England in 1824. There, he would excel in theatre, performing over forty roles, most notably, Othello. What made Aldridge so remarkable was that he successfully portrayed Shakespearian characters that were not explicitly written as Black roles.²⁹¹

In casting the role of Ella, the white female romantic partner in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, with Robeson in the lead, controversy ensued. Helen Mackellar, the original actress cast to play Robeson's wife, reportedly dropped out of the production, "when she learned that during the play she had to kiss the hand of her Negro husband."²⁹² This led to her replacement, Mary Blair, who declared in a 1924 *Boston Post* article that, "I deem it an honor to take the part of Ella. There is nothing in the part that should give offence to any woman desiring to portray life and portray it decently."²⁹³ Blair was boldly taking a stand against the racial, social boundaries of American society. Tony Langston, writing for *The Chicago Defender*, described her motivations and what her unwavering participation in the play represented: "Despite the unfavorable comments of the press and the tremendous outside influence of different sorts which have been brought to bear, she is steadfast in her determination not to allow racial prejudice to prevail over her art and in this she is receiving

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² "Girl Who Refused to Play Opposite Robeson and the Girl Who Accepted," *The Sunday Times*, New Brunswick, NJ, 24 February 1924.

²⁹³ "Mary Blair is to Play Part: Actress Proud to Be Colored Actor's Leading Lady—Colored People Resent Plot of Play," *Boston Post*, 23 February 1924.

encouragement from many who can see no harm in her decision and who look upon a friendly intermingling of the races in theatricals as a step in advance.”²⁹⁴

Opposition to the play went to the highest levels of city government, the *Daily Home News* reporting that: “The only significant objection came from Mayor (John) Hylan. At a late hour yesterday, the Chief Magistrate revoked the Gerry Society’s permission for children to appear in the performance. The initial scene (featuring child actors) therefore was banished.”²⁹⁵ Other New York political figures were equally distressed. The District Attorney for New York County, Joab H. Banton, stated that “the statutes limit his office to the prosecution of producers of obscene and indecent plays,” and that, “he could not act until after the first production of such plays.”²⁹⁶ William McAdoo, the chief magistrate of New York, told *The New York World* that, “a play in which affection is shown between a negro man and a white woman will result in dangerous racial disorder.”²⁹⁷ Robeson reportedly told the National Urban League’s *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, that, “O’Neill was liberal in matters of race and that the play mocked race prejudice of any kind.”²⁹⁸ When asked about Robeson’s performance in *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, O’Neill told the *St. Louis Missouri Star* that, “He (Robeson) can portray the character better

²⁹⁴ Tony Langston, “White Actress to Star with Paul Robeson In Eugene O’Neil Drama,” *Chicago Defender*, 1 March 1924, p.1.

²⁹⁵ “O’Neill’s Play Starring Robeson Has Packed House,” *Daily Home News*, 16 May 1924.

²⁹⁶ “Public Protests Ignored; O’Neill Play to be Seen,” *New York World*, 3 March 1924.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* (December 1924):368.

than any other actor can. That's all there is to it. The question of race prejudice cannot enter here."²⁹⁹

All God's Chillun Got Wings would elicit extreme reactions from critics working for the white press. For example, a critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* characterized the play as, "a sincere exposition of a marriage between a stupid negro and a stupid white woman. If it is possible for you to get an emotion out of that situation, here is your opportunity."³⁰⁰ Other white reviewers had more positive reactions. Alexander Woollcott, for example, saw in the performance, "a noble figure who was superbly embodied and fully comprehended by Paul Robeson."³⁰¹

Reaction to *All God's Chillun Got Wings* in the Black press was mixed, as exemplified by Theophilus Lewis's review published in Asa Philip Randolph's *The Messenger*. "Paul Robeson," Lewis proclaimed, "gave an exhibition of sound acting which for a few minutes in the second scene of the second act became brilliant."³⁰² Lewis was known for his criticism of the all-Black acting company the Lafayette Players, and this review's tone indicates a lukewarm reaction toward the play, while at the same time pointing out Robeson's potential.

Recognizing the controversy of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, Black media outlets like the *Baltimore Afro American* came down on both sides of the racial divide. One reporter stated, "critics on both sides of the color line are divided."

²⁹⁹ "O'Neill Defends Newest Play as 'Private Affair,'" *St. Louis Missouri Star*, 19 March 1924.

³⁰⁰ Percy Hammond, "The Mayor Interferes a Little Bit with 'All God's Chillun Got Wings,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 May 1924.

³⁰¹ Alexander Woollcott, "O'Neill's Play Tranquilly Produced in MacDougal Street" *The Sun*, 15 May 1924.

³⁰² Theophilus Lewis, "At the Provincetown Theatre 'All God's Chillun Got Wings,'" *The Messenger: World's Greatest Negro Monthly* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 223.

She/he further points out “Lester Walton of *The World*, declares the part of the heroine should be given to some colored actress. Other critics declare that 'art knows no color line,' and that judgment as to the propriety of mixing the races on the stage should be withheld until the show stages its premiere.”³⁰³ Even in the midst of the controversy surrounding his being cast in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, Robeson was able to garner additional acting experience, this time in another Lafayette Players production, *Roseanne*, which played first in Harlem, and then at the Dunbar Theatre in Philadelphia. A critic for the *Philadelphia Record*, a white media source, opined that “the players seem a good deal more interesting than the play itself. Paul Robeson is a strapping man with a voice that rolls out of him like a vibrant tide.”³⁰⁴

In contrast to *All God's Chillun Got Wings's* mixed reception, the 1924 production of *Emperor Jones*, with Robeson cast as Brutus Jones, was well received. Alexander Woollcott praises Robeson, explicitly citing that his physicality added to his stage presence. He also cited his vocal talents: “Robeson adds to his extraordinary physique a shrewd, rich understanding of the role and a voice that is unmatched in the American theatre. This dusky giant unleashed in a great play the kind of evening in the theater that you remember all your life.”³⁰⁵ A review by an unnamed critic for the *New York Evening Post* was even more complimentary:

Mr. Robeson brings great native gifts to the part, including a splendid physical presence and a voice the likes of which I have rarely heard. He is a true son of Stentor; one felt that if he turned loose his full vocal powers, the walls of the tiny Provincetown (theater) would fairly bulge. It is not merely a large and powerful voice, however, but one

³⁰³ “Theatrical Storm Centers ‘Round Them,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 14 Mar 1924, p.1.

³⁰⁴ *Philadelphia Record*, 1 April 1924.

³⁰⁵ Alexander Woollcott, “The Emperor Jones Revived: Paul Robeson Capital in Eugene O’Neill’s Masterpiece,” *The Sun*, 8 May 1924.

rich in shadings and emotion, an organ that should play an important part in whatever success comes to the young negro actor."³⁰⁶

The use of the phrase “son of Stentor” has a specific history.³⁰⁷ In Greek mythology, Stentor was a herald for the Grecian forces in Homer’s *Iliad*. In that epic poem, Stentor possessed “a voice as powerful as fifty voices of other men. Stentor used that voice to call his fellow Greeks to battle against Troy.”³⁰⁸ A general understanding of Greek mythology must have been the order of the day because of the many journalistic references. And, again, these comparisons were intended to convey a deep sense of the power of both Robeson’s voice and body and physical power.

But not all reviews were complimentary. Another assessment reflects racist characterizations of Black Americans by comparing an earlier production starring Charles Gilpin with the one featuring Paul Robeson as the lead. Published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, it stated “physically this full-blooded negro (Robeson) fit the role better than (Charles) Gilpin. He sounded the bottom rock depths of terror. He brings a full measure of understanding to the childlike volatility of his race.”³⁰⁹

When *Emperor Jones* was brought to London in the fall of 1925, Rutgers University’s *Targum* reported that “London has gone wild over Paul Robeson.”³¹⁰ The article cited two separate British reviews. While praising Robeson’s physical attributes and vocal capacity, the white reviewers did have some criticisms of the play itself. A *London Herald* review pointed out that, “One does not come away (from *The*

³⁰⁶ “The Emperor Jones Reappears at the Provincetown With a New Emperor,” *New York Evening Post*, 7 May 1924.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Homer, *Iliad*, 5: 785-6.

³⁰⁹ *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 May 1924.

³¹⁰ “Robeson Praised for London Work,” *The Targum*, 30 September 1925.

Emperor Jones) as from a tragedy of Shakespeare's, feeling that grandeur in man's struggle with fate, with pride in the endurance of the human soul," but noted that, "Paul Robeson is an exceptionally powerful actor, of that there is not the slightest doubt. His performance was tremendous."³¹¹ A second review, in *The London Daily Graphic*, stated that "the play reads better than it acts," before praising Robeson's exceptional singing ability. "No praise could be too high for the performance of Paul Robeson, whose physique is as magnificent as his acting, but we were moved more by the natural dignity of his personality and the magnetic charm of his extraordinary musical voice than we were by the story."³¹²

Upon the premiere of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, the play received intense criticism from some significant Black press outlets. A review in *the Baltimore Afro-American* called it, "a hard play to sit through."³¹³ A review in *the Chicago Defender* described the play as, "the genius productions of subtleness of the most insidious and damaging kind."³¹⁴ The intense responses from Black theater critics illustrates how Black class consciousness and respectability rose to the fore. In this case, media criticisms suggest that Robeson was not working toward the best interest of the Negro community. These harsh reviews prompted Robeson to respond in several interviews. In one, published in the National Urban League's magazine *Opportunity*, Robeson chided critics and stood up for Eugene O'Neill. Robeson opines, "We are too self-conscious, too afraid of showing all phases of our life. The great mass of our group discourages any member who has the courage to fight these petty prejudices.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ A. B. Budd, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 May 1924.

³¹⁴ Will A. Madden, *The Chicago Defender*, 24 May 1924.

Those who object most strenuously know mostly nothing of the play and in any event, know little of the theatre."³¹⁵ Of O'Neill, he said, "he is a broad, liberal-minded man who has negro friends and appreciates them for their true worth. He would be the last to cast any slur on the colored people."³¹⁶ In a subsequent interview, given in direct response to criticism he was receiving from the most activist elements of the Black community, Robeson said, "If I do become a first-rate actor, it will do more toward giving people a slant on the so-called Negro problem than any amount of propaganda and argument."³¹⁷

In response to some in the Black community, Robeson began seeking to define himself as both a race man and actor. Respectability and social class consciousness had enough of an impact on Robeson that he started to make a concerted effort to define himself and his place amongst Black American creative figures of his time. One early example of this was a piece he published in the January 1925 issue of *The Messenger*. In it, Robeson discusses his early stage career and the processes and experiences that had brought him to this point in his career. He expresses a desire for his artistry to be given a chance by those who may have previously been critical. His faith in himself and his ability is also apparent: "I honestly feel that my future depends mostly on myself. My courage in fighting over the rough places that are bound to come—my eagerness to work and learn—my

³¹⁵ *Opportunity Magazine* (December 1924): 368-70.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ "Propaganda and Argument," *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 July 1924.

constant realization that I always have a few steps more to go—perhaps never realizing the desired perfection—but plugging away.”³¹⁸

He proceeds to talk about Black artistry, citing Roland Hayes as one example of a cultural asset, something he too was striving to be. Robeson says,

One of the greatest measures of a people is its culture, its artistic stature. Above all things, we boast the only true artistic contributions of America are Negro in origin. We boast of the culture of ancient Africa. Surely in any discussion of art and culture, music, the drama, and its interpretation it must be included. So today Roland Hayes is infinitely more of a racial asset than many who ‘talk’ at great length.”³¹⁹

This is a subtle yet strong response to the advocacy crowd who were critical of him, and it might be argued, provided little to the community or entertainment realm, aside from their negativity toward Robeson’s work.

Robeson early stage career, white performance critiques:

The first and highest-profile play in which Paul Robeson starred was Eugene O’Neil’s *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*. The earlier section discussed that even before the play opened to the public, New York City’s Mayor, Chief Magistrate, and District Attorney were incensed over the implied miscegenation of the play (only Robeson’s hand was to be kissed in the play by his white female costar) and were trying to use their power as elected officials to disrupt the play. A large body of newspaper coverage, both white and Black, was dedicated to reporting on this controversy. The comments of the New York City Chief Magistrate describing the play having the potential to bring “dangerous racial disorder”³²⁰ is reflective that even in a state that

³¹⁸ Paul Robeson, “An Actor’s Wanderings and Hopes,” *The Messenger: World’s Greatest Negro Monthly* VII, No.1, (January 1925).

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ “Public Protests Ignored; O’Neill Play to be Seen,” *New York World*, 3 March 1924.

never had anti-miscegenation laws on the books, there still was race prejudice and anxieties over the proximity of Black men to white women, even if in this context it was solely in the professional realm. The "dangerous disorder" language provided white readers with a statement that may have reinforced their existing prejudices. Additionally, this statement also reinforces the racialized worldview that prejudiced people possessed. Even with this opposition from white elected officials, the play was still released. White reaction to *All God's Chillun Got Wings* seemingly broke upon the lines of personal race prejudice or not. The extremely hostile reaction from *The New York Herald* stating that the play was "a sincere exposition of a marriage between a stupid negro and a stupid white woman"³²¹ was nakedly both racist and misogynistic in its tone. This further shows there was a readership for prejudiced viewpoints in white newspapers in that era. The more measured response by Alexander Woollcott referring to Robeson's performance as "noble"³²² shows that even in the culture of the era there were white critics who wanted to review Robeson's performance work on the theatre stage fairly.

When the 1924 production of *The Emperor Jones* was released, there was a much more widely celebratory response amongst white theatre critics. These reviews of *The Emperor Jones* referenced the "Dusky Giant" possessing an "extraordinary physique,"³²³ showing that once again the central print media themes on Robeson revolved around the physical spectacularization of his performances during his early

³²¹ Percy Hammond, "The Mayor Interferes a Little Bit with 'All God's Chillun Got Wings,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 May 1924.

³²² Alexander Woollcott, "O'Neill's Play Tranquilly Produced in MacDougal Street" *The Sun*, 15 May 1924.

³²³ Alexander Woollcott, "The Emperor Jones Revived: Paul Robeson Capital in Eugene O'Neill's Masterpiece," *The Sun*, 8 May 1924.

career. This was almost always a relevant part of the context surrounding discussions of Paul Robeson in the print media of the era.

Robeson's early stage career, Black performance critiques:

Amongst the Black print media of the era, there were similar attempts to describe the controversial reactions of New York City's white elected officials, but also professionally review the play as well. The articles discussed in this section show that the reception to *All God's Chillun Got Wings* were mixed. One of the examples published in *The Messenger* describes Robeson's work as being "an exhibition of sound acting."³²⁴ Others were extremely critical of his work, mainly reviews in both the *Baltimore Afro American* and *Chicago Defender*. In these, we can see how some in the Black theatre community were more focused on criticizing Eugene O'Neill for the way that he wrote Black characters. These negative Black responses were some of the earliest adverse reactions by Black audiences of Robeson. In referencing the play as being the "most insidious and damaging kind"³²⁵ in the *Defender*, we can see the demands for the infusion of civil rights into creative pursuits by those who were the most forceful advocates for those issues of the era being waged even back in the 1920s. For some in the Black community, Robeson was not forceful enough.

Although Paul Robeson was widely known as an international anti-colonial icon later

³²⁴ Theophilus Lewis, "At the Provincetown Theatre 'All God's Chillun Got Wings'," *The Messenger: World's Greatest Negro Monthly* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969): 223.

³²⁵ Will A. Madden, *The Chicago Defender*, 24 May 1924.

in his career, at this stage some of the most active voices in the Black print media wanted him to become more forceful in his public commentary on racial issues.

Singing the Songs of My People: Spirituals and Concert Performance

During this same period, Robeson was making strides developing his singing career and once again displays of class consciousness and Black respectability reveal themselves in early Black print media coverage on Robeson. Launching his career as a vocalist was a natural progression from his concerts at Rutgers, the glee club performances where his presence was barely tolerated. Now, audiences came to performances to hear him sing. Using his earlier successes as a springboard, his career path seemed wide open. Some began speculating about his potential in the political arena, even while interviewing him about his budding acting and singing career.

Interviewed for the July 1924 issue of *The Daily Home News* Robeson was asked directly whether he might enter politics. He answered succinctly, "No, I never will, there are limitations for a Negro in politics, and I don't propose spending my lifetime trying to break down precedent. I will be satisfied to do things for my people in the ordinary course of daily life."³²⁶ In the same interview, Robeson was asked about how *The Emperor Jones* influenced his singing, to which he responded: "Following the success of that play, I have filled several engagements at impromptu concerts, singing old southern songs and negro hymnals. My voice is nothing to brag about, but those songs were as natural to me as the 'River Shannon' is to the son of

³²⁶ *The Daily Home News*, 8 July 1924.

the Emerald Isle.”³²⁷ This interview was conducted at a time when impromptu concerts he was holding across the country were beginning to have an impact.

Throughout the fall of 1924, Robeson was extremely busy fitting his many appearances into his schedule. In between his acting roles, he spent part of October assisting his friend and mentor, coach Sanford, back in New Brunswick, New Jersey. *The Targum* enthusiastically reported on one of the school's most prominent stars returning to campus, noting that, "for the last couple of weeks Robeson has been coaching the ends and tackles of the Scarlet football squad."³²⁸ While at Rutgers he also gave a short concert in the school's chapel, and was quoted as saying, "When I'm on the stage in New York, and a Rutgers man comes backstage, it makes me feel good to have him say, 'that's fine work Robey,' and shake my hand."³²⁹ At this particular performance, he sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Go Down Moses" with "Professor McKinney playing the piano accompaniment for these two Negro spirituals."³³⁰

Paul Robeson's first formal professional concert was held in Boston at the Copley Plaza Hotel in November 1924. The program for this concert is an essential example of the material culture legacy of Robeson's early performance era. It includes a short biography of the budding young performer and describes his successful tenure at Rutgers up to his performances in Eugene O'Neill's plays. Included in the

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ "Robeson Sings in Chapel," *The Targum*, 21 October 1924.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

biographical section is a quote of Robeson's that reflects his mindset on his cultural representation:

I shall stick to the stage if I have the opportunity to do so. On the stage, think of the millions of people that I might reach, and especially with a play of this type (referring to *The Emperor Jones*). Think how powerful an influence that would be. People need to be shown that the negro is worthy of respect. They need to be shown that he can do things. If I can be the right sort of man and the right sort of actor, think of the number of people that will say, 'look at Robeson; now he's a Negro, and a Rutgers college graduate, look what a fine man he is.' And with that recommendation, the Negro race will rise in the estimation of mankind.³³¹

This concert was well received by white critics. *The Boston Evening Transcript* described it as "old negro folk songs and spirituals and some works by young composers of his race," noting that, "Mr. Robeson set before an audience always frankly pleased, and on occasion, enthusiastic." Robeson's singing voice was praised. "A lovely natural voice, never forced nor harsh, colored the simple folk pieces with gentle expressiveness and emotional depth. Sincerity and unaffectedness lent a charm which sophistication can only imitate."³³²

The Rutgers concert left many wanting more, and another performance was scheduled for December 1924. There were multiple articles in both *The Daily Home News* and *The Targum* on this much more significant event, which benefited interscholastic debating at high schools across the state.³³³ It is noteworthy that the concert was given "under the auspices of the Philoclean Literary Society," a campus organization that when Robeson was a student on campus only allowed his partial

³³¹ *Paul Robeson Copley Plaza concert program* (Temple University, Charles Blockson Special Collection)

³³² *The Boston Evening Transcript*, 3 November 1924.

³³³ "Paul Robeson Gives Concert Tonight at Ballantine Gym," *The Daily Home News*, 17 December 1924.

participation.³³⁴ However, the beneficiaries of the concert's proceeds were likely of greater importance to Robeson. *The Targum* celebrated the alumnus's appearance: "In recognition of his efforts we can do nothing better than to give him a full house, to do our best in a small way to express the appreciation that we feel for his constant support of Rutgers."³³⁵ *The Targum* also pointed out that Robeson's performance in Boston "caused much favorable criticism in the leading Boston papers."³³⁶ Meanwhile, *The Daily Home News* cited his debut professional concert in Boston that past November which had, "won high praise from the critics."³³⁷

A sign of his growing recognition as a singer, Robeson performed on New York radio station WGBS the very next day. An article in *The New York American* said the planned performance would, "broadcast one of the scenes from (*The Emperor Jones*)."³³⁸ It also noted that Robeson would sing a number of old negro spirituals, adding: "He is a singer of ability and training besides being an actor, and has given a number of successful recitals. He has an excellent broadcasting voice."³³⁸

Paul Robeson's expansion into formal performance concerts was an essential step in his personal and professional evolution. Even without out the aid of his longstanding performance co-star Lawrence Brown, Robeson managed to have a substantial impact through his work. White newspaper reporters were highly complimentary of his solo performance work. In *The Boston Evening Transcript*

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ "A Loyal Alumnus," *The Targum*, 9 December 1924.

³³⁶ "Robeson to Sing in Gym on December 17: Will Be Accompanied by Mrs. Murray and Mr. Hooper. Boston Press Lauds Recent Recital," *The Targum*, 9 December 1924.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ "Robeson on air with scene from *The Emperor Jones*: Radio premier for U.S. Author," *New York American*, 18 December 1924.

review the description of his vocal performance was said to have the effect of "gentle expressiveness and emotional depth," but also Robeson possessing great "sophistication"³³⁹ in his artistry. A similar style of social language about Robeson can be found in *The New York American* article, which described Robeson as "a singer of ability and training."³⁴⁰ What makes these examples of the newspaper conversations surrounding this era of Robeson's early career is the complimentary portrayal of his work when compared to the more mixed white review of his early work in the theater. The style of musical performance, as well as the genre of music that he was performing was very uncommon in the era, particularly in the Northeastern region of the U.S.

Robeson's singing ability and concerts would be elevated to new heights when he reconnected with his friend Lawrence Brown, who would serve as accompanying vocalist and piano player. Although they had briefly met in 1922, a chance encounter in New York in 1925 put them solidly on a path together, a performance pairing and friendship that would last thirty-eight years.³⁴¹ Their first concert as an act was April 19, 1925, at the Greenwich Village Theatre.

Writing for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, reporter J. D. Carr described the upcoming concert as being held "under the auspices of a Princeton faculty group, Paul Robeson will appear in concert December 16, in the university auditorium."³⁴²

³³⁹ *The Boston Evening Transcript*, 3 November 1924.

³⁴⁰ "Robeson on air with scene from *The Emperor Jones*: Radio premier for U.S. Author," *New York American*, 18 December 1924.

³⁴¹ Boyle and Bunie, 140.

³⁴² J.D. Carr, "Robeson to Sing for Jim Crow Princeton," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 14 December 1929, p. A1.

Another piece, this one in the New Brunswick *Sunday Times*, glowingly reviewed the performance, without the casual racism of the era. Using lyrics from “Joshua Fit de battle of Jericho,” with its hero “tumbling down” walls, the reviewer wrote of the “walls of misunderstanding and antagonism that had fenced in these two young negroes (Robeson and Brown) and the inarticulate millions of their race whose music they were singing.”³⁴³ Later in the piece, the writer stated, “Paul Robeson's own Battle of Jericho, following the long, hard effort of a preceding generation of negro artists has progressed with astonishing rapidity. He and his young contemporaries are finding less and less hopeless the task of ‘tumblin down’ the barriers in the road to achievement.”³⁴⁴

Carl Van Vechten, Robeson’s benefactor and family friend, wrote in *Theater Magazine* of Robeson’s and Brown’s potency as a musical act. Van Vechten was taken by Robeson’s and Brown’s use of African American vernacular English, observing: “They likewise indulged in the characteristic vocal peculiarities of negro inflection. The negro spirituals were and still are under primitive conditions, sung in harmony by a chorus, one voice leading with a verse to which the chorus responds.”³⁴⁵ Van Vechten described how Robeson’s acting ability complemented his singing, “His (Robeson’s) postures and gestures and the volume of his voice are under such complete control and such studied discipline that he always suggests the possession of a great reserve force.”³⁴⁶ Moreover, the author was duly impressed with

³⁴³ “Paul Robeson’s Singing Has Helped to Lower Walls that have Fenced in His Race,” *The Sunday Times*, New Brunswick, NJ, 10 May 1925.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Carl Van Vechten, “All God’s Chillun Got Songs,” *Theater Magazine* (August 1925).

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

Robeson's ability to articulate. “His enunciation is impeccable—one never misses a word—and his interpretation is always clearly thought out and lucidly expressed.”³⁴⁷

Paul Robeson and Lawrence Brown were an excellent performance pairing on both a professional and personal level. Their music was highly sought out across the country. This level of visibility and the accolades, however, did not shield the duo from racial realities. This was starkly made evident in April 1925 when they were invited to perform at the Dutch Treat Club, an all-white New York City “social lunch club,” that described itself as, “a New York City club for creative people.”³⁴⁸ Before their performance, Brown and Robeson were made to wait in the hallway until the pre-performance meal was finished. They were not invited to dine with members. Following their performance for the 130 club members, they were not offered the customary honorary club membership.³⁴⁹ The Black press and many Black New York City residents were incensed. The NAACP, then led by James Weldon Johnson, was quoted in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, saying that, “a wave of moral indignation swept the city.”³⁵⁰ The *New York Age*'s Lucien White went further, contending that the leader of the Dutch Treat Club, George Mallon, was, “a spineless creature lacking moral courage,” for allowing Robeson and Brown, “to be made the subjects of an insulting slight.”³⁵¹

For their part, Robeson and Brown kept their feelings on the matter mainly to themselves. Given that they sought an interracial audience, this was not a battle they

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ “History,” The Dutch Treat Club, <<https://www.dutchtreatny.org/history>>; accessed 21 September 2017.

³⁴⁹ Boyle and Bunie, 150.

³⁵⁰ *Pittsburgh Courier*, 10 May 1925.

³⁵¹ “In the Realm of Music,” Lucien White, *New York Age*, 9 May 1925.

wanted to fight. In Robeson's muted reaction to this incident, we see once more the influence of William Robeson, who had urged his son to avoid racial controversy if at all possible. The open discrimination Robeson and Brown faced at the Dutch Treat Club was not worth the effort to combat, especially at a time when de facto Jim Crow was how society functioned, even in New York City.

International Performance, Racial Realities and a Domestic Tour with Brown

Realizing the potency of their musical partnership, Robeson and Brown began touring the United States upon Robeson's return from his travels throughout the UK and France when *The Emperor Jones* completed its British run in October 1925.³⁵² Throughout that run, Robeson would receive "a prolonged personal ovation."³⁵³ *The Chicago Defender* reported that Robeson's "appearance in London was a positive personal triumph."³⁵⁴ During his time overseas, Robeson gave several interviews to British newspapers. In one with *Reynold's News*, reprinted in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, a Black newspaper, Robeson articulated how he viewed his stage and vocal performances. Significantly, the interviewer saw Robeson touching on a "theme very near to the heart of this man whose ambition it is to interpret his race to the white world."³⁵⁵ Robeson described how he viewed and interpreted the state of Black America at that time, as well as his place in it:

"Well, I am the son of an emancipated slave, and the stories of my old father are vivid on the tablets of my memory. The American Negro is just coming into his own. He is emerging from centuries of oppression

³⁵² Duberman, 91.

³⁵³ Alan Bott, *The Sphere: An Illustrated Newspaper for the Home*, 19 Sept 1925.

³⁵⁴ "Robeson on Tour," *The Chicago Defender*, 2 Jan 1926, p. 7.

³⁵⁵ "Paul Robeson, "Son of Slave Parents, Reaches Pinnacle," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 November 1925.

and prejudice. Modern education has given him his chance. It gave me my chance, and I took it.³⁵⁶

Robeson's time in England performing *The Emperor Jones* helped him understand how little some in England understood of the Black American experience. "People tell me that I have made the Negro tragedy live for them," he said.³⁵⁷ At the same time, the article based on the interview included references to Robeson's physicality, adding to the ongoing "physical spectacularization" of him. "'Naturally I am an athlete,' said Mr. Robeson, flexing his gigantic arms and displaying the rippling muscles of his magnificent shoulders."³⁵⁸ His physicality was an intrinsic element of what we now call his "brand," although this might also have been the behavior of a relatively young man showing off for the interviewer. The interview ended with Robeson further extrapolating how he viewed America's interpretation of him as a young Black male performer:

Sometimes people express surprise that a negro should be an intellectual... The Negro as an artist surprises them even more. This is because there remains much of the old false ideas of the Negro's limitations. That will pass as time goes on and education leavens the races. If I have done something toward interpreting the Negro to the white races, then I have fulfilled my purpose, and am well content.³⁵⁹

That a Black newspaper reprinted this interview, reflects an urgency among those working in Black American media to find performers and leaders such as Robeson who were able to articulate their perspectives on the problematic racial circumstances of the community. Here we also see the themes of Black respectability and class consciousness are present in the urgent desire of Black journalists to

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

identify community members who portray Black Americans in the educated, elevated ways that they so desperately needed to convey to American society.

Throughout early 1926, Robeson's and Brown's concert tour took them across the United States. *The Chicago Defender* reported that Robeson, "tells the story of the old slave days," and that the performer's "rendering of their true songs is indeed spiritual."³⁶⁰ Throughout the tour, media outlets featured concert reviews and announcements of upcoming performances. The *Chicago Defender* published a review of a concert held at New York City's City Hall, from a Black American's perspective. It was extremely enthusiastic, noting that, "thunderous applause forced the singer (Robeson) to give encore after encore. Even after the curtains were drawn, the majority of Mr. Robeson's admirers refused to budge."³⁶¹ The unnamed African American reviewer keenly observed that the "town hall was packed to capacity, but there were only a few members of the race."³⁶² Given that this performance was at City Hall, it seems likely that low attendance by Black Americans may have been due to the price of tickets, though unfortunately that information is not included in the article. The article also illustrates how Black media contributed to the physical spectacularization of Robeson, the reviewer observing, "his singing coupled with a stage personality that bears the stamp of excellence, completely captivated the audience."³⁶³

Three days later, *The New York Amsterdam News* published a review of a Robeson performance at the Selwyn Theater in Chicago. As in New York, it was

³⁶⁰ "Robeson on Tour," *The Chicago Defender*, 2 January 1926, p. 7.

³⁶¹ "Paul Robeson Recital Pleases Large Throngs," *The Chicago Defender*, 16 January 1926.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

reported that multiple encores were “pleadingly requested by admirers of the singer.” The writer also pointed out that it was “now the usual thing for Paul Robeson and Lawrence Brown to have capacity houses for their programs of negro music.”³⁶⁴ The praise for Robeson's and Brown's performances was cross-cultural as they were pioneering a whole new way to perform concerts. Cultural exchange and exposure of Black American musical traditions to white audiences was a principal aim. This is also clear in a January 31, 1926 announcement of an upcoming performance on behalf of the Lions Club in Springfield, Massachusetts, published in *The Springfield Union*. “Negro spirituals have always had a deep appeal. Their melodies, their rhythms, their profound emotions have never failed to move audiences. They are primitive, they are fundamental. They find a response in the heart of everyone. Only possible in the tragic folk music of Russia is such a profoundly simple note found.”³⁶⁵ This piece closes with a peculiar word choice, “There is no one whom it will not arouse and satisfy in a strange, subconscious way.”³⁶⁶

Here, “strange” implies that it is somehow not normal for music originating with Black slaves to evoke an emotional response from listeners. This observation reflects a profound lack of experience with the musical traditions of people of African descent. Moreover, it serves as an example of advertising utilizing the “exotic” nature of a musical source to attract concertgoers. The “subconscious” way that this type of spiritual music is capable of evoking an emotional response from white concertgoers is deemed a potential positive. Music has always had the ability to reach people in

³⁶⁴ “Robeson-Brown Have Splendid Audience,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 20 January 1926, p. 9.

³⁶⁵ “Lions Club to Bring Robeson, Negro Baritone,” *Springfield Union*, 31 January 1926.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

ways that words and speeches alone may not. The team of Robeson and Brown were forging a new path, demonstrating the potential for Black American musical expression to reach wide audiences, not seen since Fisk University's Jubilee Singers during the 1870s.³⁶⁷ Coded lyrics, which gave voice to the experience of the oppressed while simultaneously condemning their oppressors, were a source of the power and impact of early twentieth-century spirituals, frequently lost on Northern white audiences.³⁶⁸

A line in another article about the 1926 concert tour, also published in a mainstream newspaper, the *Providence Journal*, captures a “progressive” white political perspective on Black performers: “Against the great handicap of the color line, the Negro is striving to better himself in life.” The writer observes, “What the Negro’s ultimate place in American life will be is a problem which no amount of inquiry has been able to solve.”³⁶⁹ Continuing in this vein, the reporter says, “It is evident that much of the bewilderment which must have oppressed the minds of the colored people here in the past is reflected in the spirituals and folk songs which Mr. Robeson sings so well and many of which have been so deftly arranged by Mr. Brown.”³⁷⁰

In the midst of the 1926 concert season, *The Sunday Times* of New Brunswick published a long, detailed article on Robeson's life and career. It remains one of the most extended newspaper articles found in the Rutgers University Paul Robeson

³⁶⁷ Fisk Jubilee Singers, “Our History” <<http://fiskjubileesingers.org/about-the-singers/our-history/>>: (accessed 15 April 2018.)

³⁶⁸ Carby, 94.

³⁶⁹ “Robeson Thrills Strand Audience: Colored Singer Presents Program of Negro Spirituals and Folk Songs,” *Providence Journal*, 1 March 1926.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Special Collection. This article details Robeson's high school and undergraduate years, and time spent in Somerville and New Brunswick. Additionally, it provides extensive details on his cross-racial appeal and some of the personal friendships he cultivated in New Jersey. Ms. Vosseller, Robeson's music teacher at Somerville High School, is credited for her support of his singing talent and for encouraging him to develop it further. It then details his theatrical and vocal performances up to that point.³⁷¹

International Performance, Racial Realities and a Domestic Tour with Brown: Black media Responses

The year 1926 saw a dramatic increase in the rate of print media on Paul Robeson in both the Black and white press. American Black newspapers were able to increase their rate of articles on Robeson by reprinting articles from British press outlets. The increase in media exposure had an impressive impact. It showed domestic Black audiences how little people in England understood African American experiences. In many ways, Paul Robeson was the vehicle for their education. This was even more so for his articulations of the style of Black masculinity that he portrayed in his work. The cultural representation that Robeson was seeking to instill in British audiences was acutely reflected in his comments on how "If I have done something toward interpreting the Negro to the white races, then I have fulfilled my purpose, and am well content."³⁷² As this interview was a reprint from the British

³⁷¹ Mina V. Higgins, "Somerville's Paul Robeson, A Man: Another Impression of Rutgers Graduate, Singer, and Actor, After He 'Came Back Home,' and Was Acclaimed by Friends and Judges," *The Sunday Times of New Brunswick*, 11 April 1926.

³⁷² "Paul Robeson, 'Son of Slave Parents, Reaches Pinnacle,'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 November 1925.

newspaper *Reynold's News*, it shows that Robeson was hoping to influence British discourse on Black American masculinity and performative ability. It also had the impact on potentially shifting the "do more" narrative in the Black press after *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, where he was strongly criticized in Black newspapers. Paul Robeson seeking to have great control over the conversations about him in both the Black and white media, and his performances both as a vocalist and as a theater star were the primary vehicles for this at this stage in his professional career. Complimentary Black media responses would continue throughout 1926 with Black media reactions of Robeson noting the "rendering of their true songs is indeed spiritual."³⁷³

The context of this article is that the professional pairing of Robeson with Lawrence Brown accompanying him was a sight to see for Black and white audiences alike. These media themes created for the readership depicted a sense that Black expressive culture, in this case, the musical performance, was being normalized for a higher number of Americans whose minds could be opened through that form of expression. What were "typical" expressions of Blackness were not the same for those in the majority in the year 1926, and Robeson's music was a driving force behind this evolution in what was considered a "typical" or normal style of music and culture.

Black Boy

In 1926, Robeson agreed to take the lead in *Black Boy*, a play loosely based on the career of Negro boxer Jack Johnson. The role was overtly discriminatory, and

³⁷³ "Robeson on Tour," *The Chicago Defender*, 2 January 1926, p. 7.

quickly the most degrading role played by Robeson during this era. The script consistently used the word "nigger," and its audiences were overwhelmingly white, leading one to wonder if Robeson read the script carefully, or even at all before accepting the role.³⁷⁴ This places Black media themes such as class consciousness and respectability into stark relief as Robeson was savaged by Black journalists for his work on this play.

What made this play even more problematic was how Robeson's "physical spectacularization" was weaponized. His international profile as an anti-colonial advocate for freedom and justice was not yet developed, so white audiences and white media reaction to Robeson during this era was largely metaphoric. In *Black Boy*, his body came to signify the gargantuan threat of the Black body to civilization.³⁷⁵ This is evident in a photograph of Robeson leaning over Fredi Washington, who played his romantic interest, menacingly. His hand reaches toward her as if he is about to strangle her. Because Robeson possessed a large body wrapped in jet-Black skin, his presence in plays like *Black Boy* epitomized popular white images of the Black male as utterly "other," distinctly different from that of white men. Such images had their origins in slavery and continued to shape white reactions to Black male bodies, including in Northern settings.³⁷⁶

As Robeson grew older and developed a greater sense of his masculinity and a heightened awareness of his cultural representation, this is the type of role Robeson would be forcefully opposed to taking. Reaction from the Black press also compelled

³⁷⁴ Ransby, 175.

³⁷⁵ Stewart, 140.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

him to regain control of his agency so as not to reinforce false images of the aggressive Black male that whites perpetuated at every turn. The control and careful cultivation of his public image would become a cornerstone of Robeson's growth, both as a creative personality and social icon for Black America.

Concert Marketing and Benefit Concerts

During their 1926-1927 concert tour, Robeson and Brown crisscrossed the United States, engaging and captivating audiences with Black American musical expression. Concert programs from this tour displays ways in which these performances were also utilized to promote recorded versions of Robeson's and Brown's music that was available for purchase. In the concert program below, the text is laid out so that concert attendees could easily see which songs were available for purchase on recordings. Those that had been recorded were highlighted with an asterisk. On the back of the program is an advertisement for "The New Orthophonic Victrola." This slick product placement showcases the modern technology of having a record player in one's home that "demonstrates the fidelity with which Mr. Robeson's voice is recorded on." According to the advertisement, earlier versions of record players did not possess the speaker technology to reproduce "rich, sonorous lower tones"; "for the first time in the history of music, full justice is done the bass voice by a reproducing instrument."³⁷⁷

Throughout this tour, Robeson and Brown were becoming more visible in the United States cross-culturally; this is due in large part to their unique concert style,

³⁷⁷ Evanston, Illinois concert program, Temple University, Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection.

but also the fact that they were both highly educated. This, in turn, led to greater attention in the Black press and an even greater number of articles portraying the class consciousness, respectability, and Black intellectualism media themes. As a reflection of this, the *Pittsburgh Courier* presented a unique view of Robeson's professional mindset. The reporter, Floyd J. Calvin, was star struck. At the same time, his commentary demonstrates the extent to which reporting on Robeson in 1927 played up elements of physical spectacularization. Calvin writes,

To sit near Paul and watch his face as he talks, to hear his heavy voice roll evenly and see the fire of determination in his eyes, to see his giant frame shift from this position to that with only the slightest effort, to see his various and varied expressions, now boyish and smiling, now determined and piercing, now attentive and contemplative, to sit near Paul Robeson and watch him talk is quite an experience.³⁷⁸

In this interview, Robeson was keen on presenting why he thought actors should seek out the highest level of education possible and used his own experiences to frame how education had opened doors that may not have been available if his critical thinking skills were not as developed. "Many of my closest friends thought I had wasted my time when I took a college course, then a law degree, only to enter the theater. However, the truth is, that has been the primary reason for my achieving a fair degree of success in a comparatively short time."³⁷⁹ Critical thinking extended to his vocal performance. He said this of wealthy patrons who attended his performances: "Again, in nearly every case where I go out to sing for private affairs of the richest and most highly cultured white people, after my performance, I am invariably invited to meet the guest socially. This is because they know me to be a

³⁷⁸ Floyd J. Calvin, "Robeson Recommends University Training for Actors: Says Present Day Stage Celebrities Lacking in Original Imagination," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 8 January 1927, p. A2.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

university man, and they know I have background. That is most unusual for a singer."³⁸⁰

From Robeson's perspective, his intelligence was a cornerstone of his performativity and this indicates the actor held a deep concern for Black intellectualism. He goes on to say, "All of my work was judged by intelligent people with my scholastic training in mind. So that a university man really has a better chance to make the grade, even in other fields besides acting."³⁸¹ In closing, the reporter asked Robeson, "How does it feel to be the race's biggest actor?" To which Robeson responded with typical eloquence:

I am naturally glad if people think well of me, but I set my own standards for myself and I haven't nearly reached what I want to reach. I always find flaws in my work. For instance, all the critics say my voice is great, but I know two years more of experience will make my voice much better. It will have more shade and color. I need more dramatic experience. I need to learn to handle my body better, my hands, etc. I know I have lots more to learn.³⁸²

Robeson then linked his stage and vocal performance ability. "The voice means three-fourths of the battle. The singing voice helps the speaking voice."³⁸³ Robeson, at this point in his career, was working on two different crafts with overlapping elements. Seeing connections between the two helped him simultaneously improve his ability in both.

One of the unique and significant themes in the print media coverage of Paul Robeson in his first tour with Lawrence Brown in the US is the personal commentary of Robeson himself and his desire to put forth a respectable, Black intellectual

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid.

portrayal of his artistry. Thus, previous articles display an early attempt by him to secure control over the cultural representation while also normalizing Black higher educational attainment. He would no longer allow journalists to editorialize on his career actions without input from him directly if he could help it.

Later in the tour, an article in the *Baltimore Sun* announced that Robeson would be coming to the city to perform songs and read excerpts from plays he had starred in, such as *The Emperor Jones*, on radio station WIP. Robeson was in high demand, in part as the *Sun* reported, because he was “considered one of the best interpreters of Negro spirituals on the concert platform today.”³⁸⁴

Paul Robeson’s Midwestern Concert Tour

From 1926-27 Robeson and Brown left the east coast to tour the midwest. Here, Robeson would encounter unfortunate but not unusual criticisms of Black expressive culture. The Black media coverage from this leg of the tour contains some of the most intense portrayals of the media themes of class consciousness and respectability experienced throughout Robeson’s early career. That this criticism was classist is evident in a remark made by one critic that Southern Black music performance would lead to the Black community being “confused as clowns.”³⁸⁵ L. J. Bacote, who wrote those words in a review for the *Kansas City Call*, was a Black music teacher in Kansas City. In her hostile critique, she stated that Robeson had "stage timidity" and lacked "musical education."³⁸⁶ This viewpoint, that the Black

³⁸⁴ “Paul Robeson, Bass, to Sing from WIP: Spirituals and Excerpts from Roles Will Be Given,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 30 January 1927, p. R14.

³⁸⁵ L.J. Bacote, “Paul Robeson Not an Artist, and Recital of Negro Songs Here was ‘Humiliating’ Says Mrs. Bacote,” *Kansas City Call*, 27 February 1927.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

race “had no culture of its own and would improve its status only after educating itself and acquiring white culture,” was shared by some others of the Black middle and upper classes.³⁸⁷ Some were embarrassed by raw, unadulterated Black expressive culture, such as the performances of spirituals by Robeson and Brown, the first to present this genre of music to cross-cultural audiences across the United States and later in other parts of the world.

After the mixed reaction to the Kansas City, Missouri concert, the performers traveled to Wichita, Kansas, for a January 24, 1927 concert. Reporter Velma Day, writing for the Black Wichita *Negro Star*, referred to Robeson as, “one of the best artists the Negro race has and who has charmed the world with his genuine power to render the Negro spirituals with a cry from the depth of his soul that will touch the souls of any human.”³⁸⁸ She made a note of the relative remoteness of Wichita, saying, “It is almost a miracle when a city is able to get an engagement like this.”³⁸⁹ Robeson was seeking to reach the broadest range of listeners possible and this concert in remote Kansas reflected a willingness to travel long distances to make an impact. Continuing the midwestern leg of the tour, Robeson would also perform at an American Legion post in Columbus, Ohio. The caption beneath Robeson’s photo on the inside of the concert program reads:

Robeson is an artist of the purely unaffected type, and kind; for he merely sings. This artist sings with ease and grace; with a beautiful resonance that names no reflector with ability to momentarily grasp the pitch only to release it for another, finally attaining the true and

³⁸⁷ Boyle and Bunie, 183.

³⁸⁸ Velma Day, “A Singer with Genuine Power,” *Negro Star*, 7 January 1927, p. 1.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

beautiful tone and quality with such deftness that he alone knows whether it is effectually or helplessly done.³⁹⁰

The stark contrast in the conversations between Robeson's Kansas City performance, with that of Wichita, KS, and Columbus, OH, reflects a schism in the Black community regarding progress. Black press coverage of Robeson during this time reifies the existing themes. In many ways, the music performance by Robeson and Lawrence Brown was an unashamed expression of southern Black musical culture. Many of the songs were holdovers from the 19th century and connected Black Americans to the era of chattel slavery. Spirituals are an intrinsic element of the Black American experience, and Robeson's performances of them were celebrations of Blackness and nothing to be ashamed of. This is where the conflict of class, and educational level comes in. The review in *the Kansas City Call* states that "Black Americans "have no culture of their own."³⁹¹ This is not only wildly untrue but a reflection of a worldview that combines educational level (the reviewer was a middle-class music teacher) with the erasure of authentic Black Southern culture. This perspective, reflected in the shared language of the hostile review in *the Kansas City Call*, reveals some Blacks believed that only by embracing white culture and music could Black Americans progress into the modern era. This Eurocentric perspective did not exist in a vacuum, but it reflects how Robeson was unique in the sense that his career attainments after his undergraduate experience brought him closer to

³⁹⁰ Paul Robeson concert program, Charles Block Post No. 157 American Legion of Ohio, 12 March 1927, Temple University Charles L. Blockson Special Collection.

³⁹¹ L.J Bacote, "Paul Robeson Not an Artist, and Recital of Negro Songs Here was 'Humiliating' Says Mrs. Bacote," *Kansas City Call*, 27 February 1927.

traditional southern Black reality and culture when the opposite was true for some in the African American population.

This belief was a departure from that possessed by his maternal family the Bustills, whose freedom above the Mason Dixon line led them to hold a biased perspective against darker-skinned Blacks. When contrasted to the review from Wichita, KS and their *Negro Star* paper review, this dichotomy could not be more apparent. The topical discussions on "authentic Blackness" added up to a conversation in part being driven by Paul Robeson's artistry and how the musical performance of spirituals in a concert setting brought back deeply held public and private memory on the slave experience. This was the case for older audience members, and that of their children in this era, often only one generation from being held in chattel. The experience of bondage endured by William Robeson who stole himself from his owners in North Carolina is a perfect example of how the discussions of Black culture were driven not by history in a book but by tangible lived experience. This is beautifully expressed by the *Negro Star* article portraying Robeson's voice reflecting "genuine power to render the Negro spirituals with a cry from the depth of his soul that will touch the souls of any human."³⁹²

Returning to His Root: Paul Robeson Returns to Princeton

In April 1927, after the midwestern leg was finished, the performers returned to the East Coast to perform at two locations of great importance to Robeson, albeit for distinctly different reasons. On May 31 they performed at Princeton University's Alexander Hall. This was the same school to which Woodrow Wilson had denied

³⁹² Velma Day, "A Singer with Genuine Power," *Negro Star*, 7 January 1927, p. 1.

entrance to Robeson's brother Bill. And it contributed to destroying his father's pastorate at Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church. A review in the *Daily Princetonian* noted that this performance took place at the church but neglected to mention that it was the very church from which William Robeson had been removed, resulting in the Robeson family's financial destitution for several years. Whether that omission was intentional is unclear. The review does indicate that Robeson was well received: "[Robeson] selected an entire program of Negro spirituals and folk songs. In an audience consisting of approximately 1200 people, representing both the white and Black races, he found such spontaneous unanimous favor that he was called back for eight encores."³⁹³ The writer adds that "Robeson has been especially praised for his interpretation of the songs of his people, and his work last night was superb."³⁹⁴

Several days later, an article in New Brunswick's *Daily Home News* announced that Robeson and Brown were to perform at Rutgers' Kirkpatrick Chapel. It reported that the audience at Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church had been, "wildly enthusiastic over the remarkable singing of the giant negro singer."³⁹⁵ The article then provided a brief account of Robeson's undergraduate life and athletic career at Rutgers, as well as his growing celebrity status. Accordingly, "Paul Robeson has been for some years a prominent figure in American life. Whatever he has done has been of public interest."³⁹⁶ As the Rutgers concert approached, *The Daily Home News* published two additional articles. They offered additional context, including

³⁹³ "Princeton Hears Pleasing Recital by Paul Robeson," *The Daily Princetonian*, 1 April 1927.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁵ "Paul Robeson and Co-Artist Will Appear Here April 27th," *The Daily Home News*, 13 April 1927.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

about the community the Robeson family was forced to leave after the 1900 decision by an all-white governing body for local Presbyterian churches.³⁹⁷

One critic, using the pseudonym “Roundabout,” wrote that Robeson sang his musical selections at Princeton, “in deep mellow tones which only the most talented of natives can produce. If Roundabout was ever thrilled with music, he was that night.” Most intriguing was the writer’s description of what he observed backstage, after the concert. He recounted witnessing a group of

about forty colored man and women clustered around him (Robeson). Some were grey haired women. Their faces showing the marks of age. They had known Paul during his early childhood days in Princeton, had rocked him to sleep. Some of them clung to his hands, so threw their arms around his neck, others kept their distance and admired him with eyes filled with tears.³⁹⁸

This is a fascinating insight into the legacies of Robeson and his father. These elderly concertgoers were likely former congregants of William's, and friends of Robeson's late mother and father. Also interesting is how "Roundabout" describes Robeson's demeanor and character. He told readers that his enthusiastic account of the concert was, “not to be a discourse on the merits of Paul’s voice. Rather, it is a tribute to his unspoiled, democratic personality. Popularity and fame have not gone to his head.”³⁹⁹

A second article in *The Daily Home News*, this one published the day before the concert, included an account by Glenn D. Gunn of the *Chicago Herald Examiner*, of a performance in that city. Gunn’s piece is an interesting illustration of the white majority’s reaction to Robeson’s and Brown’s program selection of spirituals and Black folk music: “[Robeson’s] program is limited to the music of his race. Such a

³⁹⁷ Brown, 26.

³⁹⁸ “Paul Robeson, Hero, Coming Back ‘Home,’” *The Daily Home News*, 25 April 1927.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

program might easily become monotonous, but this singer practices a simplicity, a sincerity, and an unconscious dignity of style that immediately wins the respectful attention of his listeners.”⁴⁰⁰

A post-concert review by Lorena Cole for *The Daily Home News* was also celebratory, opening with the laudatory statement, “Paul Robeson stands foremost among the negro singers of the world and those who heard him last night at Kirkpatrick Chapel understood why he is so ranked.”⁴⁰¹ Throughout this piece, media themes reflect a popular white perspective on Black performative characteristics. This is especially evident in the description of Robeson's singing voice as, “primitive, fundamental, throbbing, with the very soul of the negro. Other times it was rollicking, almost barbaric in its chanting rhythm.”⁴⁰² This highly racialized description was followed by other articles characterizing Robeson’s voice as, “solemn, awesome and gigantic; but never harsh or forced. Always it was intelligently restrained, interpreted with gentle understanding and exquisite appeal.”⁴⁰³

New York World columnist Heywood Broun was among the reporters who covered the performance. Speaking with Lorena Cole after the concert, Broun said of Robeson’s and Brown’s performance, “it seems that Robeson does better with negro songs than anyone I know. Into his voice there comes every atom of the passionate feeling which inspired the unknown composers of these melodies.”⁴⁰⁴ Here, Broun was referencing the antebellum progenitors of the Black spirituals and folk songs

⁴⁰⁰ “Robeson, Here Tomorrow, Has Won Praise of Critics,” *The Daily Home News*, 26 April 1927.

⁴⁰¹ Lorena Cole, “Robeson Thrills Hearers at Brilliant Song Recital Here,” *The Daily Home News*, 28 April 1927.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

which Lawrence Brown had gathered and developed into a unique format in his musical partnership with Robeson.

The Targum also covered the event, observing that, “The widely famed negro gave the audience his interpretations of the songs of his people. In the first group, Robeson sang four negro spirituals, compositions arranged from the unwritten airs of the bygone slaves, expressing their intense religious feeling. The second group on the program consisted of folk and dialect songs.”⁴⁰⁵

The irony of imparting a widely celebrated musical performance by both print media journalists and the local population in the same church that his father had been appallingly forced out of, should not be missed. One could not hope for a more triumphant return to the community and place of worship in which Paul Robeson had not only spent the earliest years of his life but where he had, in many ways, first been exposed to the African American musical tradition upon which he built his musical career. The return to Princeton must have been a triumphant moment, but one that was likely bittersweet to him. The gathering of the older Black attendees that had known him and his family before they were unceremoniously deposed was a balm, as was the nearly universally positive reaction from print media journalists in attendance. The intimate post-concert meeting of the Black Princetonian concert attendees is an illuminating element of the conversation posted in this article. Given that a white newspaper relayed this account, the language was notable, particularly the description of Robeson's performance of “deep mellow tones.”⁴⁰⁶ In a similar vein

⁴⁰⁵ “Robeson Gives Concert Before Large Audience,” *The Targum*, 30 April 1927.

⁴⁰⁶ “Paul Robeson, Hero, Coming Back ‘Home,’” *The Daily Home News*, 25 April 1927.

was the interview of the concert attendee in *the Daily Home News* depiction of Robeson's voice at the concert exhibiting "every atom of the passionate feeling."⁴⁰⁷ The articles on Robeson as a vocal performance artist are an interesting departure from the physical spectacularization descriptors and review of his theatrical work. In his work as a vocalist, the spectacularization shifts from his body to his powerful ability to enunciate and to reach notes in a modulated deep baritone that was unmistakable, even when compared to other singers whose speaking and singing voices similarly would be classified.

As they continued their tour, Robeson and Brown performed a benefit concert to fundraise for a vocational school in Sierra Leone. This illustrates Robeson's developing understanding of the linked struggles of people of African descent across the world, and a growing awareness of the African continent before his enrollment at the University of London. The reverse side of the concert program featured two newspaper reviews of previous concerts — the first, written by A. J. Warner of the *Rochester Times-Union* said that Robeson's "unerring intelligence and his command of the art of vocalization is secure. It was as if a whole people spoke through the medium of one man."⁴⁰⁸ The second offered accolades to Brown's arrangements, for providing the "racial spirit and particular beauty that Mr. Robeson demonstrates."⁴⁰⁹

In July 1927, the official magazine of the YMCA published an extensive interview with Robeson. During the interview, conducted by Frank B. Lenz, Robeson

⁴⁰⁷ Lorena Cole, "Robeson Thrills Hearers at Brilliant Song Recital Here," *The Daily Home News*, 28 April 1927.

⁴⁰⁸ Robeson Sierra Leone Benefit concert program, Temple University, Charles L. Blockson Special Collection.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

revealed his feelings about performing Negro spiritual and folk music, this to a publication mainly targeted at white Americans, and in a way that had yet to be captured by the white press. The reporter interviewed Robeson in his Harlem apartment, and later the same evening attended a concert given by Robeson and Brown. When Lenz asked Robeson, "Why have you centered your attention on the folk songs and spirituals of the colored folk?" Robeson responded:

The music of my race is the happiest medium of expression for what dramatic and vocal skill I possess. In the first place, Negro music is more and more taking its place with the music of the world. It has its own distinctive message and philosophy. Many critics say it is the only folk music of America. Negro music is not gloomy as so many have believed. It was born under unparalleled conditions. Its story is full of hope, faith, courage, and exultation. It portrays the hopes of our people who faced the hardships of slavery. They suffered. They fled to God through their songs. They sang to forget their chains and misery. Even in darkness, they looked to their songs to work out their destiny and carve their way to the promised land. Singing their songs, the negroes make known their sorrows, their patience and their vision of the freedom to come. There is no expression of hate or revenge in their music. That a race which has suffered and toiled as the Negro had did not express bitterness but that they did express love is strong evidence of the influence of Christianity.⁴¹⁰

Within this article, there is a specific focus on the vital role of Robeson's voice, whether performing speaking parts or solo concert performance pieces. This became commonplace in early media coverage of Robeson's theatrical work, regardless of how well audiences received a play. Lenz wrote: "In all the dramatic criticisms Paul received, great stress was put upon his remarkable speaking and singing voice."⁴¹¹ This illustrates that by this time in his career Robeson's voice as well as his body was spectacularized. Robeson was the first Negro baritone singer in

⁴¹⁰ Frank B. Lenz, "When Robeson Sings," *Associated Men YMCA Magazine* (July 1927): 495.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

the US, but he represented a performance artist whose talent transcended a single category. Therefore, such a wide array of responses to his work, by both white and Black journalists alike, should not be surprising. His talents transcended standard categorizations of performance artists. What makes this observation significant is the level of interest in different elements of Robeson's abilities. Many in the white press were flummoxed that a Black American vocalist could provide audiences with programs full of Black music harkening back to the chattel slavery era but do it with class and excellence.

Shortly after the YMCA magazine interview, Robeson gave another, this time for a Jewish publication, perhaps a reflection of the prominence of Jews in Robeson's early inter-ethnic friendships, including with his neighbors the Wodins in Westfield, and the comradery and friendships he developed at Rutgers, including with his senior year roommate. The interview with Sulamith Ish-Kishor highlights the many similarities in Hebrew and African American history and music. Robeson observes,

“It’s a curious thing that the *Bible* (Old Testament and the Torah) has been the sole law for two contrasting races, its originators, men of fiery action and inspired thought, and the enslaved negroes. They were just the opposite of the ancient Hebrew; the Hebrews were so warlike, resentful of domination. The captive Negroes of America took that race as their model, in a way, at least, by having such a complete and absorbing interest in their history.”⁴¹²

Ish-Kishor responds, “but after all, the Jews all throughout the Egyptian captivity had their memories of former glory and freedom to inspire them with the hope of future freedom. It is much easier to pick oneself up from a fall, than to get up

⁴¹² Sulamith Ish-Kishor, “The Sources of Negro Spirituals,” in *Paul Robeson Speaks*, ed. Philip S. Foner. (New York: Citadel Press Books, 1978), 73-4.

when one has always lain supine.” To which Robeson replies, “the *Bible* was the only form of literature that the captive negroes could get at, even those who knew how to read. It was natural for their quick imaginations to find a pathetic similarity between their condition and that of the enslaved Hebrew. I believe that’s why the *Bible* made such a tremendous appeal to the negroes, they saw their own history reflected in it.” Robeson continues to make an Old Testament and Torah link. “They (enslaved Black Americans) felt their own freedom would depend on some miracle happening, so they had to have intense faith in what they read, or heard, of the Old Testament. You will notice by the way that comparatively few of the negro spirituals are based on the New Testament.”⁴¹³ Robeson’s emphasis on links between Black Americans and Jews reflects the extreme importance of ally-ship and cultural influence amongst populations that had experienced overwhelming oppression in both the ancient and more recent past. The similarities in hardship faced by both of these communities, coupled with Robeson’s personal experiences with Jews in his community and collegiate experiences, led to long-lasting friendships. This would become a vital aspect of the friendship he developed with Russian Jews later in his career when Robeson would travel to and perform in the Soviet Union. It was Russian director Sergei Eisenstein who convinced Robeson to travel to the Soviet Union for the first time in 1934.⁴¹⁴ Although the events of that trip fall outside of the timeframe for this dissertation, it is important enough to mention, given that this article in many ways

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Swindall, 70.

foreshadows this sense of kinship that Robeson felt towards his Jewish brothers and sisters.

Throughout the various articles in this chapter, one can see that Robeson had a major hand in shaping all aspects of his career, first in college sports, then in the theater, and as a vocal performance artist. Additionally, we see how media coverage of him differed in the Black and white print media of the era, specifically, in the types of language used to describe his work and his impact on American culture. The same can be said for the kinds of worldviews and languages imparted upon the reading audiences of newspapers. The situated meanings in the context of each newspaper article in this chapter diverge largely upon racial and community lines. In the reporting and coverage of Robeson in the white press, there is a consistent physical spectacularization of his body from the time of his sports career as an undergraduate athlete, to his early career on the theater stage. This accompanied him into his work as a vocalist, but here we see an expansion on the “spectacularization” of Robeson that goes beyond his body to include his very deep and powerful speaking and singing voice.

In the African American press, we can see some similarities, but also some stark differences in the ways in which Robeson was discussed. Much more emphasis was placed on respectability, intellectualism, and class consciousness in the articles written in Black media outlets. For example, *The Pittsburg Courier* interview with Robeson conducted by Floyd J. Calvin describes his relaxed body language during the interview while at the same time touching upon both his physical and vocal strengths. Calvin focuses on how his “heavy voice roll[s] evenly” and “his giant

frame shift[s] position to that with only the slightest effort.”⁴¹⁵ Importantly, beyond these descriptors, their conversation shifts to the development of Robeson's critical thinking skills and how his formal education directly aided in their development, displaying an emphasis on Black intellectualism. The African American community was interested in a greater range of issues on Robeson, and this can be seen in some of the earliest Black media coverage of him in this chapter, particularly in *The Crisis* and *The Chicago Defender*, where his scholastic achievements received more elaboration than his college athletic career.

The themes elicited from the open coding technique employed throughout this chapter have helped to provide greater insight into the impact of the media glare on a young sports star and, later, a multifaceted performance artist. Through the implementation of the media themes shown in the close reading of the articles identified here, readers can delve into the subtext, the cultural references, and other aspects of the print media legacy themes depicting Paul Robeson. Across the spectrum of early media coverage on Robeson, there is a keen focus on the then culturally impactful young man who had a great deal more to give to both the US and later the world. This conversation will extend into the following chapter where I discuss the rest of the articles from 1927 until the early 1930s.

⁴¹⁵ Floyd J. Calvin, "Robeson Recommends University Training for Actors: Says Present Day Stage Celebrities Lacking in Original Imagination," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 8 January 1927, p. A2.

Chapter 5: Physical Spectacularization: Print Media Coverage of Robeson 1927-1933

This chapter is a continuation of the newspaper examination in the previous chapter. Throughout this chapter, I employ the same open coding technique to close reading of the print media archives of Robeson to examine further how his career trajectory was handled differently by white and African American media. In addition to continuing to analyze the vocal, theater and movie performances stateside, I also consider how he was written about internationally in the UK and western Europe. Lastly, I consider tabloid coverage. In many Black press outlets, especially, celebrity gossip comprised a sizable percentage of the print media on Robeson. With this type of coverage, we can see one of the earliest Black celebrities becoming a favorite subject of “soft” news coverage, which is typically more sensational, more personality-driven, less time-bound, and more incident-based than other news.⁴¹⁶

Paul Robeson Junior’s Birth: Short Career Hiatus

During that fall season, Robeson and Brown traveled to France for the first of its kind American Negro spiritual concert tour.⁴¹⁷ While they were overseas, Eslanda gave birth to their son Paul Robeson, Jr. Given Robeson’s celebrity status, the birth of his son was a newsworthy event in the Black press. A frontpage article in *the Baltimore Afro-American* reported: “Paul Robeson’s concert debut in Paris last week

⁴¹⁶ Thomas E. Patterson, *Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy-and What News Outlets Can Do About It* (Cambridge, MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2000), 5.

⁴¹⁷ Robeson, Jr., 143.

and the debut of his young son and the first child born to the singer's wife Mrs. Eslanda Good Robeson in a private hospital here, were almost simultaneous."⁴¹⁸

The birth of his son would lead to a slowdown in Robeson's performances for six months.⁴¹⁹ During this interim period, Robeson's career and cultural notoriety were cited in an article written by the executive secretary of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson. Published in the widely read *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist" was a discussion of how the Negro community at that time was actively transcending societal expectations and sociohistorical prejudices levied against it through cultural expression. At the time it was "a new thought that the Negro has helped to shape and mold and make America."⁴²⁰ To make his case, Johnson used Black spirituals and folk music as examples of uniquely American cultural expression, stating that, "in countless and diverse situations song and dance have been both a sword and a shield for the Negro."⁴²¹ From Johnson's perspective, spirituals inspired "admiration for the creative genius of the race."⁴²² He cited "Paul Robeson, that most versatile of men, who has made a national reputation as athlete, singer, and actor," as a manifestation of the Negro creative spirit that was elevating the national creative discourse.⁴²³ Moreover, he pointed out that Robeson's acting had "put to the test an ancient taboo; he played the principal role opposite a white

⁴¹⁸ "Robeson Makes Paris Debut; Heir Arrives," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 12 November 1927, p. 1.

⁴¹⁹ Robeson, Jr., 188.

⁴²⁰ James Weldon Johnson, "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (1 June 1928): 769.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 770.

⁴²² *Ibid.*

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 773.

woman.”⁴²⁴ Here, Johnson was alluding to Robeson’s acting in *All God’s Chillun* in 1924 and its brave violation of de facto Jim Crow in New York City.

Showboat & Legal Trouble

Robeson would join the cast of *Porgy & Bess* in January 1928, needing the income for his family. After playing the role only a short time, his momentum returned. After he was cast in *Showboat*, two articles in *The Baltimore Afro-American* touched upon Robeson’s performance. One, written by Bill Gibbons, poses the question, “Does the college athletic star retain his luster after graduation?”⁴²⁵ Robeson stood out in the piece as one of the few former athletes who had remained highly visible. Gibbons writes, “Robeson, you know, who was a four-letter man at Rutgers in addition to making Phi Beta Kappa, is an attorney, but his love for the stage has kept him before the footlight’s glare, he being at present in the London cast of ‘Show Boat,’ at Drury Lane.”⁴²⁶ Another, this one with Burton Beach’s byline, said of Robeson’s performance:

Went to a Drury Lane matinee to hear Robeson deliver his ‘spirituals’; went in a materialistic mood prepared to scoff but remained to weep and left to pray. The big house was jammed. Caruso or Chaplin never could have drawn such a crowd. Robeson held everybody spellbound. Tell me, can a white man find and intone the secret of the ‘spiritual?’ Nothing we have had from the States this year has snared us so effectually as this singing Blackmoor.

Beach added that the success of *Showboat* “furnished proofs more convincing of the growth of negro vogue in England’s entertainment projects.”⁴²⁷ The words used to

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Bill Gibbons, “What Becomes of Star Athletes After College Graduation,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 8 September 1928.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Burton Beach, “Biggest 1929 Shows Plan to Feature Race Actors,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 28 July 1928, p. 8.

describe a Black man that closed the article is noteworthy because "Blackmoor" is a derogatory term used to refer to a Black person.⁴²⁸ Its use to close a piece that was wholly enthusiastic about the play reflects the degree of racism during that era both in the United Kingdom and the United States. Even more surprising is that this language appeared in an article published in a Black newspaper.

Reflecting upon the positive reaction to his performance in *Showboat*, as well as the accompanying fame of the song "Old Man River," Robeson became widely sought out by the British press, just as he was in the United States by both the Black and mainstream white press. In an interview with the *London Evening News* and *African World* and reprinted by *The Baltimore African-American* in early fall 1928, Robeson described his career and life. Multiple media themes in this article highlight cultural perspectives of British media, including the physical spectacularization of Robeson. The reporter has described Robeson as:

Black as the ace of spades, immensely tall, his broad shoulders and great torso filled the chair in which he sat. However, it was the broad high forehead, broader than most Negroes have, the almost gentle expression of his curiously light brown eyes, and his long, slim hands that attracted the attention.⁴²⁹

The unnamed interviewer goes on to both compliment and insult Robeson in the same sentence. "I have heard many famous people discuss themselves and indulge in a little introspection, but never have I heard a man talk of himself and his gifts with the detachment, the almost childlike simplicity of this giant Negro genius whose father started life as a slave."⁴³⁰ The rest of the article consists of basic biography, focusing

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ "Robeson in London Can't Explain His Success," in *Paul Robeson Speaks*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press Books, 1978), 76.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

on Robeson's college experience and transcendence of racial expectations, both on the athletic field and in the classroom. Of note is Robeson's observation that his participation on the Rutgers debating team led him to recognize his visibility off the playing field. "It was at that period that I first noticed the attitude of my audience toward me."⁴³¹ Perhaps this long-standing sense of self is what gave rise to his ability to disassociate later in life.

At this point in his career, in high demand as an actor, Robeson found himself embroiled in a legal battle over a contract with Caroline Dudley, a theatrical producer in New York. It reported that "Robeson had made a contract with Miss Dudley early last January to return to New York and take part in rehearsals for a new play."⁴³² However, this came at a time when he was in the midst of performing in *Showboat* in the U.K. and did not want to abandon the play. The judge ruled in Robeson's favor, stating the contract "was expressed in wide terms."⁴³³

Showboat received positive responses by British audiences, including many elected officials from the British Parliament. The *Chicago Defender* reported that Robeson, "whose appearances here in the popular American musical comedy '*Showboat*' ...have been sensational, recently attended a luncheon in the House of Commons. Members of the Labor Party attended the luncheon."⁴³⁴

In a May 1928 piece, Alexander Woolcott writes about Robeson's successes in *Showboat* for *The Baltimore Sun*. In the article, he provided readers some

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² "Wins Legal Tilt," *The Chicago Defender*, 13 October 1928, p. 7.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ "English Parliament Honors Paul Robeson," *The Chicago Defender*, 1 December 1928, p. A1.

background on Robeson's life in Princeton; explicitly Woollcott mentions the removal of Robeson's father from his position as pastor of a local congregation. It is appalling now to read some of the racially charged language Woollcott uses to describe Robeson as a child, at one point saying, "one of the ousted preacher's sons was so small a pickaninny at the time that, he was far from feeling the family's disgrace."⁴³⁵ Woollcott also cites several British reviews, including one from the *Sunday Times* that suggests that "half an hour should be cut out of 'Showboat' and filled by Robeson with his Negro spirituals."⁴³⁶ He also cites a *London Evening Standard* review that praises Robeson saying, "Paul Robeson haunted the piece with as powerful a pathos as I have ever known, and sang in "Old Man River,' a song which brought lumps to many throats."⁴³⁷

1928 Showboat: White Media Reactions

The 1928 UK stage production of *Showboat* would catapult Robeson's career in many ways. In the archival research for this dissertation, there was a noticeable increase in the amount of print media coverage on Robeson after the release of the play. Paul Robeson had been honing his acting ability for many years at the professional level at this point. The improvements in his acting talent resulted from responses from theatre critics in both the US and the UK who heaped praise upon him. When the musical premiered in the US the year before, it was one of the most impactful musicals released up to that point and was one of the first Broadway shows

⁴³⁵ Alexander Woollcott, "Paul Robeson Brings Joy to London," *The Baltimore Sun*, 20 May 1928, p. TM1.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

to feature an integrated cast.⁴³⁸ In the 1928 production the following year, the inclusion of Paul Robeson in the cast playing “Joe” the dock worker would bring the musical to the next level through his powerful and widely recognizable voice in the play. What made the 1928 *Showboat* different from earlier stage plays that Robeson has either starred in or was a cast member was the linkages between the play and the accompanying musical performances, as *Showboat* would go on to become an iconic musical. Robeson’s music would serve as a cornerstone for future productions of the musical with cast selections being deemed as important as the script itself.

Greater Notoriety and Overseas Discrimination

Media coverage about Robeson escalated dramatically in 1929. This was after *Showboat* had completed its run at Drury Lane, and Robeson and Brown had begun a European concert tour that introduced them to wider audiences. *The Chicago Defender* reported that Robeson had “thrilled a packed auditorium here last Wednesday with his melodious voice. The Czechs applauded until the singer complied with their demands by singing an encore of ‘Old Man River.’”⁴³⁹

The performer’s notoriety across the European continent would not shield him from racial realities of the era. A hotel in London refused entry to Robeson and wife Essie. The *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that “before sailing for New York Saturday, Paul Robeson, actor, and singer, wrote to friends that he and Mrs. Robeson had been barred from the dining room of a local hotel on account of his color. Robeson said that he did not want to visit the hotel but had been invited and

⁴³⁸ “*Showboat*” National Public Radio Website <<https://www.npr.org/2000/04/17/1073053/npr-100-i-showboat-i>> (Accessed 1/19/19)

⁴³⁹ “Paul Robeson Pleases Czech Music Lovers,” *The Chicago Defender*, 20 April 1929, p. 3.

importuned by white friends who protested, but waiters and finally the manager refused to change the anti-Negro policy.”⁴⁴⁰ The article mentions that Black newspaper mogul Robert Abbott, owner of *the Chicago Defender*, had also been openly discriminated against in London that same fall by “thirty white hotels.”⁴⁴¹ Robeson, a famous Black celebrity, and Mr. Abbott, one of the wealthiest Black Americans of the day, were not shielded from racism.

Paul Robeson: 1929 Concert Tour

Following a long absence as a performer in the United States, Robeson’s scheduled performances at Carnegie Hall in November 1929 received coverage in numerous Black newspapers, including *the Baltimore Afro-American* and New York Amsterdam News. *The Chicago Defender* featured two separate reviews in the November 16 and November 23 editions of that paper. *The New York Amsterdam News*, reporting on Robeson’s European tour, cited the accolades he had received for those performances and then said: “Arriving here Monday on the S.S. Tuscania, Paul Robeson, baritone, will make his first American concert tour in two years. His concert dates for New York are Nov. fifth and ten at Carnegie Hall.”⁴⁴² The article reported on the large crowds drawn to his recent European performances:

Twice, the Royal Albert Hall of London, seating 8,000 persons, was sold out for his concerts. The huge concert hall of Vienna was jammed to the doors, and a return engagement was immediately arranged and immediately sold out. Prague and Budapest showed such enthusiasm

⁴⁴⁰ “Paul Robeson Barred from London Hotel,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 26 October 1929, p. A1.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Frankye A. Dixon, “Robeson to Appear at Carnegie Hall,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 23 October 1929, p. 11.

that he had to sign up at once for more concerts. His return trip through Europe next spring is already fully booked.⁴⁴³

Paul Robeson's music was in high demand from audiences on both sides of the Atlantic in 1929 and 1930.

A follow up article and review published in *The New York Amsterdam News* discussed in detail Robeson's second concert at Carnegie Hall. As a reflection and measure of Robeson's popularity, writer Frankye Dixon stated, "it is worthy of note that in the face of determined opposition from the majority of Negroes, the spirituals have been kept alive, mainly through the efforts of our musical minds."⁴⁴⁴ Dixon continued, "It is no wonder that Paul Robeson has captivated the entire concert world, for to hear him sing spirituals is to hear them sung under the conditions which gave them birth."⁴⁴⁵ In another review of the Carnegie performances, *The Chicago Defender* offered this more substantial description. "Mr. Robeson's enunciation was particularly noteworthy, and his readings were simple. His voice of velvety texture, warm, deep, rich and flexible. He showed a real gift of interpretation. His stage deportment was superb. He was modest in the acknowledgment of the vigorous and lengthy applause which peeled forth from the audience."⁴⁴⁶ Robeson's Black intellectualism, his mastery and command extended to his vocal and stage presence.

The Chicago Defender published yet another piece, this one by Robeson's friend Chappie Gardner. Gardner was keen on pointing out, "Not only was the big

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Frankye A. Dixon, "Robeson Continues to Captivate," *The New York Amsterdam News*, 13 November 1929, p. 11.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ "Standing Room Sold at Robeson Recital," *The Chicago Defender*, 16 November 1929.

football star, actor, and gentlemen here in person, but was actually called upon to do what no other celebrity had even been known to do, give two recitals in one week. Such is the rule but so popular was the demand for the latest idol of the concert stage that nothing shorter than two appearances would satisfy his many New York followers.”⁴⁴⁷

A *Baltimore Afro-American* piece, written by a white author, compared Robeson’s musical style to that of Roland Hayes’, revealing what was “best” from the reviewer’s racialized perspective. Samuel Chotzinoff is quoted as stating, “Mr. Robeson’s art embodies the traditional simplicity of Negro musical art, kept clean of sophisticated “white influence.” Hayes, on the other hand, consciously subjects Robeson’s native musical gifts to this “alien influence.”⁴⁴⁸ This article exposes a commonly held view of whites and some in the Black community who felt that white influence on Black music was needed to make spirituals and Black folk music more palatable. This article reveals that the language used to highlight the view that Black musical expression was lacking, or in the words of Chotzinoff, “bothersome to modern audiences,” without a measure of white interpretation.⁴⁴⁹ This too reifies the belief by some in the Black community that only with the infusion of white characteristics can Black music can be improved, or even digestible.

Throughout the 1929 tour, Robeson made multiple stops across the East Coast, parts of the Midwest and then Canada, where Robeson and Brown performed

⁴⁴⁷ Chappie Gardner,” Paul Robeson Sings to Big Crowd in N.Y.,” *The Chicago Defender*, 23 November 1929, p. 7.

⁴⁴⁸ “Robeson Acclaimed in New York Recital,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 16 November 1929, p. 9.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

on November 21. Shortly after that, Robeson would return to New Jersey for another concert in Princeton, the town of his birth. In an article in *the Baltimore Afro-American*, reporter J. D. Carr described the upcoming concert: “Under the auspices of a Princeton faculty group, Paul Robeson will appear in concert December 16, in the university auditorium.”⁴⁵⁰ *The Baltimore-Afro American* and the national Edition of *the Chicago Defender* reprinted Carr’s review of Robeson’s performance. Held again in the campus's Alexander Hall, “the ovation which was accorded Robeson was the most sensational that has ever taken place in the auditorium. As he finished his concert, the applause broke out and continued until he had given encore after encore.”⁴⁵¹ The only differences between the reviews published in the *Afro-American* and *Chicago Defender* were the description of the song list.

When Robeson returned to the United States for the first performances of the 1929 tour, there were many excited concert goers in the African American community. For those who were interested in Robeson’s career activities, the release of the UK production of *Showboat* the previous year displayed that he was actively enhancing his method of cultural representation by showing his talents now on the world stage. The newspaper *The New York Amsterdam News* primed its readership for the concert in its description of Robeson performing for sold out shows in London. As this was a unique occasion, the Black media review of the Carnegie Hall performances were highly complementary. In these, we see the media themes on his

⁴⁵⁰ J.D. Carr, “Robeson to Sing for Jim Crow Princeton,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 14 December 1929, p. A1.

⁴⁵¹ J.D. Carr, “Crowd Packs Hall to Hear Robeson Sing: Encores are Many,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 28 December 1929, p. 7.

performance overall, but specifically, his voice therein described in terms that the readership could almost feel, “his voice of velvety texture, warm, deep, rich and flexible.”⁴⁵² These language choices show that attending a performance of Robeson’s was something that went beyond merely listening, but it was an immersive experience as the description shows.

Moreover, there was an additional description of his stage presence, something that he had been improving upon for several years, which revealed “his stage deportment [to be] superb.”⁴⁵³ The ways that Robeson used his body on the stage was an important means of conveying his intellectual and performative capacity as a vocalist. Robeson’s ability earlier in his career, specifically during the stage run of *All Gods Chillun Got Wings* reflects how conversations change and shift over time. Robeson’s work was the outlet for a portrayal of Black masculinity that was still being developed in terms of self-representation. He was a multifaceted Black American and a driving force in the zeitgeist of America and Western Europe. The previous debate over Robeson’s acting ability had largely been settled by the consistent positive press reaction of his theatre and concert work in both the UK and Europe and the large body of the media coverage that was reprinted in both white and Black newspapers in the US. The fact that he was so in demand as a performance artist was noticed by those in the press as well. The article in *The Chicago Defender* suggests that he transcended the norms of a vocal performer where he was asked to

⁴⁵² “Standing Room Sold at Robeson Recital,” *The Chicago Defender*, 16 November 1929.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

“give two recitals in one week,”⁴⁵⁴ to which Robeson obliged. Being so distinguished from other performers of his time placed him outside of many norms and subjected him to many others. This would continue as his international profile expanded. In a certain way, this exemplifies the genesis of his reputation and notoriety as a “man of the people.”

Opinion divided between the Races: African American criticism of “Authentic Blackness.”

Reception of Robeson’s December 9, 1929 performance at Chicago’s Orchestra Hall divided largely along racial lines. While the white reaction was positive, Black criticism was intense and similar to what Robeson had faced during his Kansas City, Missouri performances two years earlier. If we analyze these texts along the lines of class consciousness, and respectability politics, we find that the criticisms bear a strong resemblance to those leveled by Samuel Chotzinoff of Robeson's Carnegie Hall performances the previous month. A critical review by Sylvester Russell, published in the *Black Pittsburgh Courier*, criticizes Robeson as, “not a highly educated singer,” before allowing that he “has improved by practice.” The writer then praises Robeson, saying he had, “as a singer inherited the perfect natural voice of baritone, one of grand opera power of the music drama which constitutes the greatest voices of the world and superior because all of his register is entirely sweet.”⁴⁵⁵ Russell points out that the concert, “drew a two-thirds white

⁴⁵⁴ Chappie Gardner, “Paul Robeson Sings to Big Crowd in N.Y.,” *The Chicago Defender*, 23 November 1929, p. 7.

⁴⁵⁵ Sylvester Russell, “Paul Robeson at Orchestra Hall,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 December 1929, p. 16.

audience who came to hear a spiritual recital and were highly pleased.”⁴⁵⁶ The bulk of his criticism in the article by Russell, however, was directed against Lawrence Brown, whom the reviewer felt, “should not sing even in jubilee with a star in recital because of an inferior voice.”⁴⁵⁷

Lawrence Brown’s accompaniment went far beyond merely playing piano and singing background parts. He was vital to the entire musical process. It was Brown, along with others like James Weldon Johnson, who established the spirituals as an art form suitable for solo performance in concert halls.⁴⁵⁸ Brown and Robeson were musical pioneers during this era of expansion of Black southern music, exposing a national audience to it. As such, they built upon what Henry "Harry" Thacker Burleigh had begun a decade earlier with his arrangement of “Deep River,” the first known arrangement of a Black spiritual for solo voice with independent piano accompaniment.⁴⁵⁹ Criticism of Brown was essentially criticism of Robeson as their musical teamwork intrinsically linked them to one other.

A second critical assessment of the Chicago performance, also coming from the Black press, was harsher. Its description of differences between audience reaction, based on race, was even starker. Published in *the Baltimore Afro-American*, “Races are Divided in Opinion of Robeson: Whites Like Spirituals, but Chicago Negroes are Tired of Them,” cited positive white media reactions. “To one critic Robeson was the ‘Black (Feodor) Chaliapin (Russian opera singer),’ only perhaps better;’ to another,

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Boyle and Bunie, 137.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

he possessed the ‘voice of a generation.’”⁴⁶⁰ By contrast, “There was no such unanimity among members of Robeson’s race. In a program which consisted entirely of spirituals and folk songs, they were aware of none of the simple beauty of the songs or of Robeson’s artless, but effective, manner of singing them. Many of the Negroes were apparently humiliated by the success of such a program.”⁴⁶¹

Criticisms such as this from within the Black community were not uncommon during this phase of Robeson’s career, and reveal differences in thinking about culture, representation, and authenticity at this point in history. Further evidence of such differences is apparent in a review by Chappie Gardner published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*. It provides a vivid example of negative media from within his own community as well as the outsized emphasis on respectability and the view that “authentic” southern Black culture was low class and to be discounted and discredited as a legitimate form of artistic expression. There was a sizable amount of Black society that disliked vernacular Black American cultural expression and was embarrassed by the history of African Americans in bondage that was only one to two generations removed at that point in history.

An example of this point of view comes from Chappie Gardner who wrote, “Robeson’s singing of the class of music makes the Negro look as though he still lives in the land of cotton, corn, and ignorance.”⁴⁶² He excoriated Robeson’s Black critics. “Negroes in New York go wild with glee when two white artists, Amos and

⁴⁶⁰ “Races are Divided in Opinion of Robeson: Whites Like Spirituals, but Chicago Negroes are Tired of Them,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 December 1929, p. A10.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Chappie Gardner, “Along the Rialto,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 January 1930, p. 16.

Andy, are announced on the radio. These are two white men imitating Negro comedians.”⁴⁶³ In other words, those who critiqued Robeson were often the same ones who applauded racist white comedians. He further argues, “Negroes sing the white men’s praises and denounce the Blacks, why? Our boys are original and give a natural interpretation to the Negro dialect. But it doesn’t seem to get notice from our very hard to please Negroes. There is something in the heart of the American Negro akin to rank jealousy – just won’t do things himself and he believes that the weakest efforts of a white man are stronger than the Black man’s best.”⁴⁶⁴ The article provides a full-throated defense of every aspect of Black American culture as well as Robeson’s cultural representation, which at this point in his life was international—exposing European audiences to the exceptional ability of the American Black.

There are considerable media discussions of Robeson’s musical style owing to why it takes up so much discussion in this dissertation. There was considerable anxiety at that time about the depictions of Blackness on display in American society. Some of these anxieties have been discussed in the previous chapter. What makes this conversation even more interesting was that many of those who were critical of Robeson and Lawrence Brown were amongst the more highly educated segments of the Black community. Journalists and writers like Chappie Gardener pushed back against the criticism in the Black media. His article mocks those who were upset by

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

Robeson's engagement with vernacular traditions, dubbing them "very hard to please Negroes" whom Gardner implies were rife with "jealousy."⁴⁶⁵

Interestingly, it may have been this level of criticism, by Black and white media, that prompted Robeson to take a greater level of control over his cultural representation. In the years preceding this decision and in the face of some Black critics, Robeson did have allies like Gardner, but what he excelled at was utilizing a personal style best summarized in the idiom, "the best defense is a good offense." In his rebuff, Gardner had two aims: to shield Robeson and to forcefully push back against the reality that there was a sizable group of Black Americans who were embarrassed by the myriad representations of Blackness.

Back Again to Europe: Breaking Boundaries

Following the 1929 North American tour, Paul and Essie Robeson traveled back across the Atlantic for another European tour. In Paris, Robeson would go on stage without Lawrence Brown and partner with a different piano accompanist. The result of this change would prove to be a source of contention with French audiences. One reviewer wrote, "Paul Robeson has proved almost sensationally popular here, but curiously enough his pianist not only failed to please but seemed cordially disliked."⁴⁶⁶ The disliked pianist, Ralph Lawton, was sponsored by an unnamed "wealthy backer, a woman art patron, (who) was said to have paid Robeson to sing Lawton's arrangements as a means to make the pianist-composer popular. However,

⁴⁶⁵ Chappie Gardner, "Along the Rialto," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 January 1930, p. 16.

⁴⁶⁶ "Paris Wild About Robeson, But Dislikes His Pianist," *The Chicago Defender*, 8 March 1930, p. 7.

this scheme would seem to have failed.” Luckily for Lawton, “Robeson handled the situation with tact, and begged off from as many encores as possible.”⁴⁶⁷

With the Robesons back in Europe, news that Paul was under contract to play the famous Moor character in Othello inspired many positive reactions back in the United States. In *The Baltimore Afro-American*, reviewer Lula Jones Garrett put forth a view expressed by many in the Black community: “Here is what makes me so happy, when Paul Robeson plays Othello. Whether he gives a good performance or whether he gives a poor one, you may bet your boots, he will give an interpretation of the role from a Negro’s point of view.”⁴⁶⁸ Garrett also commented on the mixed reactions to Robeson’s last U.S. concert tour, pointing out that:

While white critics raved, not only over the singer, but also over his voice and his group selections, and while race critics noticeably lacked in their enthusiasm for his all spiritual and folk song program, Robeson went calmly on giving all and sundry just the program he had planned, neither adding to, nor subtracting from, his original schedule of offerings in order to please his audience. He simply had an offering to make.⁴⁶⁹

The writer proceeded to provide a significant reflection on the value of Robeson’s performance contributions to the theater. This offered insight into the iconic role that Robeson would soon be playing. He writes, “Mr. Robeson has a deep sense of the worth of Negro contributions on their own value. Blackened-faced Othellos have

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

never been satisfactory. Then too, there is a subtle emotional interpretation that needs something besides grease paint to bring the proper feeling to the role.”⁴⁷⁰

As his art became more widely seen and comprehended by American and European audiences, interviews with European media aided Robeson in spreading awareness of his unique style of Black American cultural representation. At the same time, some in Europe would retain their racially hostile attitude toward the music of American Negroes. In an interview conducted by T. Thompson of *The Millgate*, Robeson spoke of the importance of spirituals as authentically Black American music and offered his perspectives on Africa at that time, as well as the state of the Negro in 1930s America. In response to criticism his music had received from a British critic, Robeson said:

Negro spirituals have the same value as other folk songs, and there are many excellent melodies amongst them. However, they are also an expression of the yearnings of a childlike people to be delivered from bondage. There seemed to be no signs of good times on this earth for the negro, and the Bible held our promise of better times in the next world. However, in Africa, the negro has a music of his own.⁴⁷¹

Robeson then mentioned his plans to travel to the African continent. “I shall come back from Africa within five years with a music that is as revolutionary as other phases of negro art. The negro in Africa is not tied down to half or quarter tones, or any European musical conventions.”⁴⁷² During another crucial tour stop for Robeson, he would make a strong impression with German audiences in a one-off production of *The Emperor Jones*. Audiences in Berlin were enthusiastic. According to one review,

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ T. Thompson, “Paul Robeson Speaks About Art and the Negro,” *The Millgate* (December 1930): 157.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

“Paul Robeson internationally known baritone singer and actor, received a tremendous ovation here Monday evening from a large audience.”⁴⁷³ In this production, “Mr. Robeson was supported by a cast composed of Germans. The lines were spoken in English instead of German.”⁴⁷⁴ But, in a stunning turn of events, later that same month, an alarming article appeared in *The Baltimore Afro-American*, announcing that the German government was, “revoking the license of all cabarets, beer gardens and dance halls where Negro entertainment including jazz are presented.”⁴⁷⁵ The article noted that “the ban which includes such jazz organizations as Noble Sissle’s band may also extend to Paul Robeson, a concert artist with a repertoire of spirituals.”⁴⁷⁶

The Robesons would return to London in early April 1930 to rehearse for *Othello*.⁴⁷⁷ During this period, Paul would give a radio address that was broadcast in the United States, in which he would comment on *Othello* and its eventual American run. Robeson remarks:

From all I can hear, the present production will come to America. I certainly do want to play *Othello* in the land of my birth, especially in New York, the scene of my first artistic endeavors. I am positive that in the enlightened sections of the United States there can only be one

⁴⁷³ “Germans Give Paul Robeson Great Ovation,” *The Chicago Defender*, 5 April 1930, p. 4.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ “Bootleg Jazz Only Possible in German City,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 19 April 1930, p. 1.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ Duberman, 133.

question: 'Is this a worthy interpretation of one of the great plays of all times?' I sincerely trust that I shall see you in October."⁴⁷⁸

Here we can see Robeson speaking to the themes of respectability, Black intellectualism, and class consciousness, earlier identified to generate interest and audience excitement for a potential U.S. run of the play. Robeson's comments could be interpreted as a challenge to Black critics who in the past questioned not only his acting capacity, but what was truly representative of Black artistry. Unfortunately, a U.S. version would not come to fruition, as the project was sabotaged by the machinations of Maurice Browne, who, as the producer of the London production, attempted to dominate the negotiations of the Broadway reprise.⁴⁷⁹

As Robeson rehearsed for the 1930 production, the racial realities of his portrayal of the famous Moor character were paramount, and another incidence of British racism occurred, this time at a theater. This incident was not without irony. During the opening of a play, *B.J. One*, producer Browne argued with the theatre manager about Robeson being seated in the general section.⁴⁸⁰ Theatre staff rectified the situation when, "at the end, a Black box was found for the great artist. It makes you realize the circumstances in which colored people are struggling towards equality."⁴⁸¹

Othello: African American Media Coverage

The opening of *Othello* on May 19, 1930 was met with mostly positive reactions, although accounts in Black publications were the most enthusiastic. This is

⁴⁷⁸ "Robeson Broadcast Heard in America: Celebrated Actor Expects to Play 'Othello' in New York Next Fall," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 14 June 1930.

⁴⁷⁹ Robeson, Jr., 169.

⁴⁸⁰ "Robeson Feels Sting of London Jim Crow," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 24 May 1930.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

important to note considering previous hostile reactions to his concert tours in the Midwest of the U.S. in previous years. *The Baltimore Afro-American* reported that: “Making his debut in Shakespearean drama, Paul Robeson actor, and singer, gave such an impressive performance in the title role of ‘Othello,’ Monday night that the audience at the Savory rose in a body at the close of the play, forcing the curtain to be raised and lowered twenty times.”⁴⁸² The article then described Robeson’s thoughtful preparation for production. “In an astute way, he has identified himself and his people with the tragedy of Othello.” The writer noted that “Robeson lives the part imaginatively and, of course, his greatest asset is his magnificent voice, which he uses perfectly. There is only an occasional trace of American accent in his speeches, and he shows fine appreciation of the flow and rhythm of verse.”⁴⁸³

An article in the national edition of *The Chicago Defender* looked more deeply into the cultural perspectives of the play, highlighting reactions to its racial element. “The London press and drawing parlors for months have been discussing the acting of Mr. Robeson with a leading white lady. There were many prejudiced persons who condemned the arrangement, but there were also as many or more who lauded the ability and conduct of Mr. Robeson as an actor and a gentleman.”⁴⁸⁴

A follow-up article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* sought to capture British press reaction to the play, reprinting excerpts from white newspaper accounts there. Writing for *The London Daily Express*, Hannen Swaffer stated that, “Paul Robeson

⁴⁸² “London Raves Over Robeson in Othello,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 24 May 1930, p. 9.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ “London Raves Over Robeson as “Othello””: American Actor Gets Big Ovation, *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, 24 May 1930, p. 5.

destroyed the foolish idea accepted for many years that Iago is the better part in ‘Othello.’ He triumphed as a Moor, Black, swarthy, muscular, a real man of deep color.” Swaffler also observed that “colored people sat dotted about the house,” and in reaction “one editor walked out after the third act, saying that he did not like being near colored people; but otherwise there was no murmur.”⁴⁸⁵

Another account from *The Daily Telegraph*, cited in the same article, emphasizes Robeson’s race. “Mr. Robeson comes from a race whose characteristic is to keep control of its passions only to a point and after that point to throw control to the winds. As so, when the madness of jealousy seizes this Othello under the subtle prickings of Iago’s goad, we have no doubts concerning the genuineness of his passion. He is borne away helpless on the tide of that passion and the rest follows inevitably.”⁴⁸⁶ One last British review entitled “Lone Dissenter” took issue with Robeson being cast in the Othello role. Alan Parsons, writing in *the London Daily Mail*, stated: “I have the greatest admiration for Mr. Robeson both as an actor and as a man, and his Othello is undoubtedly magnificent, especially the passionate scenes. Yet the man was a Moor and not an Ethiopian.”⁴⁸⁷

A *Chicago Defender* article noted what Robeson’s fame in the British press might mean for international Black American visibility. The author writes, “In playing his part, Paul Robeson has commanded more space in London newspapers than any other person of any race within recent weeks.”⁴⁸⁸ The article continues: “If

⁴⁸⁵ “London Press on Robeson,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 7 June 1930, p. 9.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ “Paul Robeson: Missionary,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, 7 June 1930, p. 14.

Robeson, through his acting, can make a prejudicial world pause a moment to readjust its idea on certain subjects, he is doing a great service as an actor. If he can cause one white person to see a race question through the eye of one who recognizes the ability of a dark person to act, he has done something of which to be proud.”⁴⁸⁹

As a result of widespread interest in the play, Robeson was the subject of a radio interview which was broadcast both in England and the United States. The Black newspaper, *The New York Amsterdam News*, published a transcript of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) interview. Cesar Saerchinger’s opening provides an interesting media theme about Robeson’s voice. In introducing Robeson, he calls him, “the possessor of the most charming masculine voice in the world today.”⁴⁹⁰ Throughout the interview the racial background of the Moorish character remains a focus, leading Robeson to point out, “In Shakespeare’s time I feel there was no great distinction between the Moor and the brown or Black, surely most of the Moors have Ethiopian blood and come from Africa and to Shakespeare’s mind he was called a Black moor. Further than that in Shakespeare’s own time and through the restoration notably by Garrick, the part was played by a Black man.”⁴⁹¹

Robeson goes on to speak about the physical characteristics of Othello described in the play’s dialogue and to further make the point, “In the play we have references to the sooty Black bosom of Othello, to his thick lips to Desdemona’s name. Being begrimed and Black as Othello’s own face.”⁴⁹² In closing, Robeson

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ “Robeson Tells Over Radio How It Feels to Play Role of ‘Othello,’” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 11 June 1930, p. 4.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

points out racial differences in the characters, providing a further sense of tension: “Apart from the fact of whether he was brown or Black, I think there is no question that he must be of a different race in order to make the jealousy credible. We always hear that Othello’s jealousy is not believable, it comes too quickly, but I feel that is because he is not presented as of a different race, as Shakespeare intended.”⁴⁹³

Robeson’s contributions to Black intellectualism is notable in this interview. Robeson had studied the play and the character closely and his commentary on the ethnic and racial origins of the character is straightforward, yet again highlighting his vast intellect.

The racial tension and anxiety inspired by Robeson playing opposite a white woman bore similarities to white media hysteria over Robeson’s performance in *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, years earlier. *The Chicago Defender* reprinted an interview from the British tabloid, *The Daily Sketch*, in which actress Peggy Ashcroft, who was cast to play Othello’s love interest Desdemona, described her feelings on the matter. The author muses, “It seems so silly, of course, I do not mind. I see no difference in being kissed by Paul Robeson and being kissed by any other man. It is just necessary to the play. I look on it as a real privilege to act with an artist like Paul Robeson.”⁴⁹⁴

Robeson went to great lengths to ensure that his portrayal of the Moor in Othello would be the best he could play. An article from *the New York Herald Tribune*, reprinted in *The Baltimore Afro-American*, describes his preparations and how the experience of living in Europe for extended periods was beneficial to his

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ “Racial Prejudices Are Foolish and Best of Times,” *The Chicago Defender*, National Edition, 14 June 1930, p. 1.

craft. Reporter Irma Craft noted that “Robeson’s art has progressed enormously since the days of ‘*The Emperor Jones*.’ He is now a genuine man of the theater. Behind this progress stands two years of living among English people, absorbing English ways of thinking and approaching Shakespeare in his native land. Behind this performance lies, too, the background of Robeson’s continental experiences. The value that has come to him of knowing French, German, and Russian directors.”⁴⁹⁵

For the most part, there was a positive reception to Robeson’s portrayal of Othello by critics, W. Keith, a writer for *the London Star*, among them. His review, reprinted in *The Baltimore Afro-American*, was a celebration of Robeson. It was written as if Robeson were considered nearly a deity by Black audiences, which as previous examples have demonstrated, was not entirely the case. Perspectives did vary, however. Keith contends that “to Negroes themselves, he (Robeson) stands like a kind of god. Even the fact that he has deserted them and settled in London has not alienated his Black worshipers in America. He is the king of their kind, and the king can do no wrong.”⁴⁹⁶ Keith goes on to describe Robeson’s background, “at college and in sports; he beat white Americans at their own game, a thing few Negroes are allowed even to try in the land of the free and the home of the brave, especially in the legalized warfare which Americans call ‘football.’”⁴⁹⁷

Keith’s piece features an excerpt of an interview Robeson conducted with *The London Morning Post*, in which he describes the characters in Othello from his perspective. Robeson opines: “Here was a member of an alien race, facing a highly

⁴⁹⁵ “Robeson Studied Hard for Difficult Othello Role,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 June 1930, p. 8.

⁴⁹⁶ “Robeson is Greatest Negro, Says Writer,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 5 July 1930, p. 9.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

developed white civilization, knowing exactly where he stood, a great general, but yet in a precarious position because of his race. He stood there, not humble at all, and conscious of his ability, and yet this conflict of race given an ‘edge’ to his whole position.”⁴⁹⁸ Robeson expressed his feelings about Iago, too, stating there “was in no way an inferiority complex. He was susceptible to jealousy in exactly the same way that any man who loves must be, but because of this conflict of race the ground was more easily prepared for Iago’s subtle hint that he knew Desdemona and white women better than he (Othello) ever could.”⁴⁹⁹

The white American media, along with some in the British press, had mixed reactions to Robeson in the London production of *Othello*. The *Baltimore Sun* reported that “high brows are discussing whether Shakespeare intended Othello to be a Moor or an Arab. One group applauds Robeson, while the other deplors his portrayal as sacrilege. Those who forget that Robeson is not a Moor are said to enthuse over his acting, describing his rage and anguish as ‘tremendous.’ One critic declares he has too much American accent.”⁵⁰⁰

Ivan H Browning, the tenor for a male vocal quartet, the Four Harmony Kings, provided an “inside scoop” review of *Othello* for *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Browning recounted racial reactions to Paul Robeson and Peggy Ashcroft playing opposite each other and referred to hysterical reactions in some segments of British society over the kissing scene. According to Browning,

Robeson has been up against many difficult propositions during his lifetime, but of all, just the thought of his playing the role of Othello

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ “Negro Othello Brings Split in London,” *The Baltimore Sun*. 20 July 1930: MR10.

was one which gave him much concern. It was one of his greatest problems. With race prejudice sharpened to razor-edged keenness at the very thought of his playing opposite a white actress in a play which called for such passionate lovemaking and unrestrained kissing, his knowledge of the situation made his decision doubly hard.⁵⁰¹

Browning then provides his perspective on the issue. “Other than a white man’s propaganda and prejudice, a colored person kissing a white person really doesn’t amount to anything.”⁵⁰²

Concerns about the reaction to miscegenation as portrayed in the London production of *Othello* spilled over into negotiations for an American production that would feature Robeson. *The Baltimore Afro-American* published a series of articles on the topic in 1930, including one which stated: “The echoes of ‘Othello’ in which [Robeson] was recently presented in London, are still ringing in our ears. There, the critics were up in arms because he dared to play opposite a young Englishman who enacted the role of the wife of the Black Moor. America, ever ready to raise a howl over the slightest semblance of racial equality, took up the hue and cry and it was practically decided that Broadway would have none of “Othello” with such a cast.”⁵⁰³

1930 Othello African American Media Response

There was clearly considerable media response between Black and white newspapers. One interesting aspect of this is the amount of white media articles either reprinted in Black newspapers or the use of quotes from those articles. From the Black community perspective, it was not surprising why there was so much interest in

⁵⁰¹ Ivan H Browning, “Ivan Browning Tells of Struggles of Paul Robeson in ‘Othello,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 14 June 1930, p. A6.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ “Robeson’s White Wives Have Shocked Two Continents,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 18 October 1930, p. 8.

Robeson's acting work in the famous Shakespeare play. The role he was playing was one of two of the most known Black characters of Shakespeare with the lesser known Aaron the Moor character from the play *Titus Andronicus*. Robeson's acting in *Othello* had the potential for transforming how people internationally looked at Black actors. To this end, Robeson stood as a symbol of Black intellectualism and respectability. He was an icon and a spokesperson for Black American citizenship.

The Baltimore Afro American, for example, points to how "[Robeson] has identified himself and his people with the tragedy of Othello."⁵⁰⁴ The language and the theme of this news article shows was that Robeson was tapping into his past; his upbringing as the son of a former enslaved Black American man helped to shape and influence his ability to play this role. Older African Americans possibly could connect with Robeson's reflections and nods to the past, given they were only a few generations removed from chattel slavery. Additionally, we see in the article that Paul Robeson himself provided multiple interviews in both print media, but also radio broadcasts to describe in his own words and perspective what this role meant for him both personally and professionally. This is a good example of Robeson taking the reins and steering his public persona. He was driving how these images could be used to display his sense of Black masculinity for British audiences. Moreover, he was keenly aware of how fans and foes alike in the U.S. were paying close attention to the productions in which he was starring.

Another *Baltimore Afro-American* article, this one published on May 31, reported "Robeson admitted that no amount of money could induce him to play the

⁵⁰⁴ "London Raves Over Robeson in Othello," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 24 May 1930, p. 9.

role in some parts of the United States.”⁵⁰⁵ There were some parts of his home country—namely the American South—that Robeson avoided most of his entire life. A third article dealing with interracial dramatic productions, also published in the Baltimore paper, described Paul and Eslanda starring in *Borderland*, an experimental film in Switzerland. *Borderland* was “an attempt to treat the Negro as a sensitive, intelligent being, and to show the effect that such a man would have on white people in the neighborhood.”⁵⁰⁶

Robeson speaks for himself!

At the end of the year, in December 1930, Robeson returned to the United States for another concert tour. A *Chicago Defender* article reported, “Paul Robeson, baritone, will begin his American tour with a concert at Carnegie Hall on the evening of Jan. 10. He is to appear in recitals in several of the leading cities of the country before his return to England in the spring.”⁵⁰⁷ That same day *The Baltimore Afro-American* announced “plans were perfected for a recital by Paul Robeson, singer and dramatic actor in the Washington Auditorium January 21 at 9:30.”⁵⁰⁸

A follow-up article concerned a luncheon honoring Robeson at Howard University, with students and faculty present. This article provided additional context for the D.C. concert. Robeson expounded on the difficulties he faced while preparing for the iconic Othello role. He told the audience that the hardest part for him was “to

⁵⁰⁵ “Robeson Would Avoid Kissing Scenes in Othello in America,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 31 May 1930, p. 8.

⁵⁰⁶ “Robeson and Wife to Appear in Swiss Film: Interracial Love is Theme of Play,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 20 Sept 1930.

⁵⁰⁷ Cleveland G. Allen, “Music,” *Chicago Defender*, National Edition, 10 January 193, p. 11.

⁵⁰⁸ “Paul Robeson in D.C. Recital on Jan. 21,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 19 January 1931, p. 15.

learn to speak the English language as the British speak it, and to summon the audacity with which to attempt an interpretation of Shakespeare in his native land.”⁵⁰⁹ Robeson also provided perspective on spiritual music and the importance of Black Americans receiving a college education, a salient point given that many in his audience were Black college students experiencing the Great Depression. When asked about his concerts, “Mr. Robeson said that he sings spirituals because they are a part of him and he feels he can do them best, and that they afford him an opportunity to make a distinct contribution to a world of art.”⁵¹⁰ Regarding a college education, Robeson advised students, “to appreciate their present opportunities as bearing upon their future efforts; that both his college and legal training had aided him very definitely in solving his present problems.”⁵¹¹ Following extensive time in England, Robeson at this juncture was starting to articulate a perspective and express his feelings about the African continent, even though his full immersion into that world would not come until several years later. The paper reported that “He (Robeson) believes that Africa is to have a great influence upon the future culture of the world and is not reflected in England and throughout Europe.”⁵¹²

Robeson’s concert stop in Chicago during his 1931 tour was reviewed in *The Pittsburgh Courier* by Edith Sampson. The concert was said to be a “who’s who” of 1930s Black Chicago. Sampson wrote of the recital: “(Robeson) sang before an audience of nearly 3,000 admirers. He confined his numbers of spirituals and his ‘Old

⁵⁰⁹ “Speaking English Like British Hard Part of Robeson’s Othello,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 31 January 1931, p. 9.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Ibid.

Man River' brought several encores."⁵¹³ Also described in the article are two large social gatherings that Robeson attended with legendary Black Americans, including Robert Abbott, owner of *The Chicago Defender*, and Mrs. Ida Barnett-Wells, NAACP activist and anti-lynching crusader. Sampson was keen to point out that, "in a large room off the mezzanine floor about 300 of the intelligentsia of both races attended."⁵¹⁴

That same day, *The Pittsburgh Courier* reprinted an interview with Robeson conducted by *the Daily Home News*, in which Robeson provided insight into how he was cultivating his own cultural representation. He pushed back forcefully against criticism from some in the Black community about the prominence he gave to Black American spirituals. "Some members of my race want to forget how to sing spirituals. They prefer not to be reminded of their ancestral folkways. They don't like such a play as '*The Emperor Jones*' and they probably wouldn't have liked my London *Othello*." Robeson then compared the genesis of Russian folk music and Black American music by saying, "There will not be a great American Negro composer until one appears who will turn back to folk materials, and indeed to African rhythms. One of the greatest of Russian composers never went to school, but developed his own music, basing it on the Russian folk music, which proceeded out of a similar psychology to that which created the spirituals."⁵¹⁵ He then commented on trends in Black popular music. "As to our modern American Negro musicians; they are

⁵¹³ Edith Sampson, "Robeson Scores in Big Chicago Recital," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 February 1931, p. 9.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

copying the modern French school. But the French moderns are going to Africa for their inspiration. Europe, which has attained the apex of cultural development, is not seeking to import vitality for its art and music from primitive sources, principally Africa.”⁵¹⁶

During a return performance in Kansas City, Missouri on his 1931 tour, Robeson conveyed that his love for those who appreciated his music was more valuable than money. The shortage of money from the concert's promoters led to a delay in the start to the show. They were \$700 short of the agreed-upon \$2,000 contract. Robeson came out on stage and “announced that he was singing against the advice of his management.” He was quoted as saying backstage, “Before I will let the audience be disappointed, I will sing.”⁵¹⁷ The performance was “a great success,” according to the music critic for the *Kansas City Times*, who gave Robeson extravagant praise, especially for songs he performed in German. The critic also predicted great success for him, “in the handling of Russian folk music, which the baritone is studying.”⁵¹⁸ Demonstrating the continued evolution of Robeson’s musical performance, and public and critical reception to it, these remarks were in stark contrast to Robeson's reception the last time he had performed in Kansas City.

Shortly before returning to England, Robeson was interviewed by *The New York Times*. In this interview he responded to his critics in the Black community, saying: “I found a special eagerness among the younger, and I am sorry to say, the more intelligent Negroes, to dismiss the spirituals as something beneath their new

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ “Robeson Refused to Disappoint Hearers,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 February 1931, p. 8.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

pride in their race. It is as if they wanted to put it behind them as something to be ashamed of, something that tied them to a past in which their forefathers were slaves.”⁵¹⁹ Robeson commented on how he viewed the inclusion of non-Black music in his performances:

I prefer a program entirely made up of spirituals because I know that therein lies our sound and enduring contribution. I know that in the concession of the music of other peoples in our Negro programs, magnificent and masterly though they may be, lies the eventual obliteration of their own folk music, the musical idioms to our race. By accepting the white man’s music, we are passing out of the scene as creators and interpreters of the finest expression and the loftiest we have to offer.⁵²⁰

Soon after, Robeson returned to England to begin rehearsals for *The Hairy Ape*, and performances that were well received by British critics. Playwright Eugene O’Neill was the driving force behind this play. A review in the national edition of *The Chicago Defender* made a connection between Robeson’s early success and this one. “It was in the same theater six years ago in 1925, that he made his London debut in another play by O’Neill, *Emperor Jones*.”⁵²¹ It was noted, “Robeson lost his voice temporarily and was forced to cancel several performances.”⁵²² In reality, Robeson was in much worse shape than this implies. According to Martin Duberman, he was bedridden for a week, suffering from strain, nerves, and laryngitis.⁵²³ In August 1931, Robeson wrote a piece for the British newspaper *The Spectator*, in which he provided a British readership his insights into the discourses on race in

⁵¹⁹ “Paul Robeson and Negro Music,” *The New York Times*, 5 April 1931.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ “Paul Robeson Adds Another to His Long List of London Triumphs in ‘The Hairy Ape,’” *The Chicago Defender, National Edition*, 23 May 1931, p. 5.

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Duberman, 149.

America. He also wrote about his background and of how Negroes were the progenitors of authentically American musical expression:

With the passing of the Indians, the Negroes are the most truly, the most indigenous stock in North America. They have grown up with the country, becoming a part of the soil itself. They have had a better chance than any other of the races which have come to America to identify themselves with the atmosphere of the place, if only because they have been there much longer. They have been unhappy and badly treated, but they have retained (though they have not been allowed fully to express) their best and most characteristic qualities: a deep simplicity, a sense of mystery, a capacity for religious feeling, a spontaneous and entirely individual cheerfulness; and these have found expression in the only culture which Americans can point to as truly belonging to their country.⁵²⁴

In the same piece, Robeson offered his thoughts on why European audiences appreciated Black cultural expression. “Their (American Negro) folklore and folk music (though the latter has in recent years been assiduously prostituted all over the civilized world) are still a strong and living tradition. Their rich and colorful life has provided the deepest sources for dramatic treatment in prose or poetry.”⁵²⁵

Europeans, he contended, were embracing his and others’ music and art. “The whole of American culture is deriving from Negro culture those qualities which appeal most directly to the intelligent European who values a depth of native tradition in art. These cultural actualities and potentialities have survived years of repression, but they can develop only with great difficulty in a hostile environment.”⁵²⁶

Paul Robeson would return to the United States for an extensive concert tour in late January 1932. *The Chicago Defender's National Edition* reported that “the first

⁵²⁴ Paul Leroy Robeson, “Thoughts on the Color Bar,” *The Spectator* (8 August 1931): 177-8.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

of his farewell concerts of 1932 was sung to a capacity audience by Paul Robeson, baritone, in Town Hall Sunday."⁵²⁷ A review of the opening concert at New York City Hall, published in *the Baltimore Afro-American*, said that Robeson, "was applauded so vigorously that the number of encores equaled the original program."⁵²⁸ At this point in his career, he was learning new languages and including new songs in his concert repertoire. "Robeson tried a new group of songs, some of which were sung in Russian as an experiment. While excellently done, their appeal was not as great as that of the spiritual, his most popular numbers."⁵²⁹

Regarding his performance in Chicago, Maude Roberts George, writing for *The Chicago Defender*, said that, "perhaps no greater ovation was ever given any singer than Mr. Robeson received."⁵³⁰ George cited multiple concert reviews from white majority newspapers. One, by Edward Moore of *the Chicago Tribune*, commented on the power of Robeson's singing voice, observing that it "held and projected a melodic phrase," and remarking, "how expressive it became in timing and coloring, how every word came from the stage to the audience as plainly as though it had been spoken."⁵³¹ Also featured were excerpts from *The Chicago Evening Post* review written by Karleton Hackett. "Mr. Robeson was in particularly good voice and the great rich tones rolled out most gracefully to the ear. He has a real voice, one of

⁵²⁷ "Capacity House Hears Robeson," *The Chicago Defender National Edition*, 13 March 1932, p. 5.

⁵²⁸ "Robeson Highly Honored at His Alma Mater," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 January 1932, p. 8.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Maude Roberts George, "News of the Music World," *The Chicago Defender*, 13 February 1932, p. 15.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

the best. With the mellow sycophantic quality seemingly inherent to his Race, and also with a solid power most convincing.”⁵³²

Robeson Marriage Difficulties and Tabloid Gossip

In the midst of Robeson’s career achievements on stage, both theater and concerts, his personal life became the subject of a great deal of media attention. Paul and Eslanda decided early on to have a somewhat “flexible” marriage arrangement. But the topic of extramarital affairs would become media fodder when Eslanda wrote and published a book in 1930, *Paul Robeson, A Negro*. Widely panned by critics, the book, though offering several highlights from his college years, was said to have largely misrepresented her husband’s family’s history. What stirred the most interest, though, were the details about their open marriage. Needless to say, publication of the book led to strains between Robeson and Eslanda.

As the rumors of extramarital affairs and other gossip spun out of his control, some genuine and others not, they created considerable problems for Robeson in 1932. An example of the type of gossip style tabloid journalism of which Robeson was the subject is found in an article published in the November 12, 1932 edition of *The Baltimore Afro-American*. It reads: “While Mrs. Robeson in her book about her illustrious husband, referred to her knowledge of his affairs with other women, her close friends do not believe that she would have filed suit for divorce had it not been that these indiscretions were committed more openly as time went on.”⁵³³ The article refutes rumors about Paul’s physical involvement with the wife of a British naval

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ “Other Women Blamed for Robeson Rift,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 12 November 1932, p. 3.

officer, Lord Mountbatten, however, stating, “Reports which connected Robeson’s name with that of Lady Mountbatten are said to be erroneous.”⁵³⁴

In the midst of media scrutiny over the couple’s strained marriage and extramarital affairs came an official announcement that Eslanda Robeson had filed for a divorce. It was said, “In this book, the wife disclosed in a combination of idolatry and expose, the most intimate things about her talented husband.”⁵³⁵ Robeson was questioned about the announcement of Eslanda’s lawsuit seeking divorce. When asked to respond to the suit, Robeson said, “If my wife wants a divorce, I won’t stop her. I’ll give it to her.”⁵³⁶ Despite all this, the two would later reconcile and stay together. Their reconciliation occurred as Robeson returned to Europe and was traveling to Paris to star in a revival of *Showboat*.⁵³⁷ While there, yet another rumor surfaced indicating he intended to marry a white British woman named Yolande Olivia Jackson, but she called off the engagement.⁵³⁸ A report surfaced in a July 1932 article in *The Chicago Defender Foreign News Service*, “there had been an understood and mutual separation between the two (Paul Robeson and his wife Eslanda) for the past two years.”⁵³⁹ More false rumors sprung up about Robeson’s physical involvement with yet another white woman, Nancy Cunard. Those allegations were, however, “proven foundationless.”⁵⁴⁰ Speculation was that

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ “Paul Robeson is Off for Europe,” *The Chicago Defender*, National Edition, 10 September 1932, p. 5.

⁵³⁸ Boyle and Bunie, 262.

⁵³⁹ “Robeson Sued for Divorce: Wife Refuses to Give Name of Woman in the Case,” *Chicago Defender Foreign News Service*, 2 July 1932, p. 1.

⁵⁴⁰ “Robeson Sued for Divorce: Wife Refuses to Give Name of Woman in the Case,” *Chicago Defender Foreign News Service*, 2 July 1932, p. 1.

Eslanda's book might have further strained the relationship, leading to the "foundationless" outcome.

After Robeson's failed engagement to Yolande Olivia Jackson, he returned to England, where he was approached to star in a repertory production of "All God's Chillun Got Wings," directed by 26-year-old Andre Van Gysegghem.⁵⁴¹ The national edition of *The Chicago Defender* praised Robeson's performance as, "appearing to even be better than when he created the role in New York."⁵⁴² More importantly, while in England Robeson was approached by film producer John Krimsky about the possibility of starring in the movie version of *The Emperor Jones*. It was a role he would play in a film that would be received differently by white and Black film critics and audiences, resulting in some illustrative media themes about the film itself, its plot, and Robeson's acting.

Wanda Hale, a critic for *The New York Daily News*, rated the film positively. In her review, republished in *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Hale wrote: "Robeson is probably the only person of this day who is suited in every way to bring the 'Emperor Jones' to the screen, and it is another victory for him. He dominates the picture. His work is something to marvel at, for almost one-third of a film that runs eighty minutes."⁵⁴³ A *New York Times* review by Mordaunt Hall, also reprinted in *The*

⁵⁴¹ "Paul Robeson Stars in Play," *The Chicago Defender*, National Edition, 1 April 1932, p. 5.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ "What the Critics Think of the Emperor Jones," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 30 September 1933, p. 19.

Baltimore Afro-American, said the film, “is a distinguished offering, resolute and firm a most compelling portrayal by Paul Robeson.”⁵⁴⁴

The movie would receive a mixed reaction by many Black Americans. Unlike the positive back media reaction to his U.S. concert tour the previous year, responses to the movie once again revolved around themes of respectability and class consciousness. One highly critical piece, penned by J.A. Rogers for *The Baltimore Afro-American*, exemplifies the criticism leveled at Robeson for performing in the film. From the reviewer’s perspective the movie “represents defeat and pessimism, which is not true of the Negro, for in spite of persecutions that would crush many other people he presses buoyantly on, hoping and working for a better day.”⁵⁴⁵ A private citizen, Miss Lydia T. Brown, offered a response. In taking issue with the criticism Robeson had been receiving, Brown wrote:

The question being asked by our race is ‘just why did Paul Robeson play Brutus Jones in a motion picture which reflects on our race?’ Has ever an actor who is not his own director and boss, been able to cut and sell the public a movie just the way he wanted it to be? No! So why blame Robeson for ‘*Emperor Jones*?’ Paul Robeson has always tried never to accept a part in the movies that did reflect on our race.⁵⁴⁶

Letter writer Brown went on to excoriate Eslanda Robeson for her book that had mostly been written and published at the height of her marital problems. She also took on the Black press for its tabloid style coverage of Robeson’s extramarital affairs, referring to Eslanda as “Paul’s Delilah,” citing the Torah and Old Testament story of Sampson and his treacherous wife Delilah who cuts off Sampson’s hair to

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ “Critics Say Film Reflects on the Race,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 30 September 1933, p. 19.

⁵⁴⁶ Ralph Matthews, “Looking at the Stars,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 November 1933, p. 18.

take away his power and immense strength.⁵⁴⁷ Brown describes the impact: “She...left him bereft of his pride and seared to his soul, for the paltry sum of two dollars a volume.”⁵⁴⁸ She called members of the Negro press, “Philistines,” a reference to the people who lived in the area now known as the Gaza Strip and the people to whom Delilah betrayed Sampson.⁵⁴⁹ “Well we, the Negro press, blinded him with the wrong kind of publicity and left a bewildered, shattered man instead. His dreams, ideals, and pride in the dust of a crumbling temple which he had cherished in his soul.”⁵⁵⁰

In the use of the Delilah character from the preeminent religious text of America in that era, the *Holy Bible*, we can see the continued prominence of the type of references used in print media of the era. The media theme and continuous coverage on the state of the Robesons’ marriage and the context of his career path at this time focused on his evolution as a performance artist. Paul Robeson had come a long way from his days at Rutgers University and the conversations on him often point to this evolution. With that, it is important to note that the celebrity gossip style media coverage on the trouble in the Robesons’ marriage and him coming very close to marrying a British white woman was tabloid fodder. What this exemplifies is how media themes frame topical issues of the era in which they are published, and the context of those themes can change over time. The letter above also excoriates members of the Black press who were publishing the tabloid style articles on the

⁵⁴⁷ Judges 16:4-21 The Holy Bible New International Version, <<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Judges%2016:4-21>>; Accessed 11/16/2017.

⁵⁴⁸ Ralph Matthews, “Looking at the Stars,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 November 1933, p. 18.

⁵⁴⁹ Judges 16:4-21 The Holy Bible New International Version, <<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Judges%2016:4-21>>; accessed November 16, 2017.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

Robeson marriage troubles, describing them as “philistines.”⁵⁵¹ The use of the word in this context is pejorative and is used to describe an individual or group as “uninformed in a special area of knowledge and disdainful of intellectual or artistic values.”⁵⁵² Paul Robeson’s celebrity brought many allies to his side who sought to defend him from the criticism leveled against him, one that should have been a private matter. The letter in this article under the subheading “a Woman’s Defense of Robeson,” was written by a regular woman citizen and not a media critic. The letter is essentially an unvarnished opinion-based defense of Robeson. She closed her letter with the statement that “he (Robeson) preferred the more cultured, dramatic stage, and his music of which he was very proud and so as a race, so are we.”⁵⁵³ This letter was a full-throated fan defense of Robeson against Black media critics, showing that celebrities will often have a cadre of supporters who will push back against criticism that they feel portrays an entertainer in a bad light.

Throughout the selected set of print media articles after the birth of Paul Robeson Jr in the chapter, we can observe several developments. The intra community deliberation around “authentic Blackness” was still ongoing within the Black community. This, at times, hostile discussion is clearly present in the Black media themes and can be seen in numerous newspaper articles from the colored press of the dissertation timeframe. The negative characterization of Robeson’s music, in particular, seemed the most prevalent away from the East coast of America and in the

⁵⁵¹ Ralph Matthews, “Looking at the Stars,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 November 1933, p. 18.

⁵⁵² Merriam- Webster dictionary, “Philistine,” <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Philistine>> (Accessed 4/16/19).

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

Midwest in Kansas City, Mo, and Chicago, Il. Regardless of location, it is clear that at this point in his career, Paul Robeson began to take a higher level of control in how his work was framed in the media and pushed back against critics by providing interviews with media directly so that he could frame his performativity in his own words and perspective.

The use of the open coding technique to analyze media coverage of Paul Robeson during the selected time frame of this dissertation highlights how his professional career grew. Moreover, it illustrates that Robeson was clear it was up to him to extrapolate on the meaning and intent of his words, actions, and theater and concert work. From the archival newspaper selections highlighted throughout these two chapters we can see that he started providing a higher number of interviews so that fans and detractors could hear his perspective on the value of the projects that he signed onto. This is particularly true when he increased his inclusion of non-English language music in his professional concert repertoire. His appetite for learning was insatiable, and this is an aspect that all readers of this dissertation should take as a source of inspiration to engage in furthering their understanding of themselves and society.

Chapter 6: Visual Representations: The Power of Photography

As illustrated in chapters four and five, we know most of the impact Paul Robeson had on vast audiences (on both sides of the Atlantic) because of the print media coverage of his career. At the same time, photography and still images also played a key role. This historiographic reality is vital to portraying the sociocultural environment that Robeson grew up in, even in the period of his career when he did not have as strong of an activist voice as he eventually would after attending London University's School of Oriental and African Studies.⁵⁵⁴ This experience would serve as a point of departure for his internationalist career. He was already heading in this direction with his language studies, beginning to include songs in German and Russian in his concert performances as early as 1931.⁵⁵⁵

The power of images of a young man providing a positive, intellectual presentation of Black masculinity cannot be overstated. In their introduction to *Pictures and Progress: Early Photographs and the Making of African American Identity*, Maurice Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith note that one cannot overstate the importance Frederick Douglass attributed to photographic images. Douglass wrote: "The process by which man is able to invert his own subjective consciousness into the objective form, considered in all its range, is in truth the highest attribute of man's nature."⁵⁵⁶ That photographs had become accessible to more Americans during the postbellum period only served to enhance their power. Douglass saw the potential

⁵⁵⁴ School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Twitter image of Robeson SOAS Application <<https://twitter.com/soas/status/1050025312770244609>> (Assessed 1/20/19)

⁵⁵⁵ "Robeson Refused to Disappoint Hearers," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 February 1931, p. 8

⁵⁵⁶ Frederick Douglass, "Pictures and Progress" [1895] Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress, accessed January 3, 2018, <<https://www.loc.gov/resource/mfd.28009/?sp=12>>.

of photographic images to act as a catalyst for social change; this was the very foundation of progress.⁵⁵⁷

While Douglass viewed still images as potential catalysts for social change, it is important to note that he was keenly aware of the struggle over and for representation.⁵⁵⁸ He knew that photographs circulated in a contested visual culture.⁵⁵⁹ Early twentieth-century visual culture was a contested space. It is evident in how Robeson, and then his wife, using photographs, sought to cultivate a particular image and therefore control public perception. It is within this context that images of Paul Robeson proved deeply meaningful to Black Americans. In conveying the career achievements of a young, multi-talented Black man, who not only competed with whites on the field of athletic competition but also beat them in a fair contest, these images represented the evolution of social reality for Blacks. These types of images provided a rebuttal to the continuous portrayal of Black males as stereotypes that prevailed in the US throughout this era.

Photographs played a central role throughout Robeson's career. This was so much the case that an influential museum exhibition opened in 2008 on the visuality of Robeson. Titled *Body and Soul: Paul Robeson, Race and Representation*, the exhibition was housed at the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill's Sonja Hynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History. In the written introduction to this exhibition, curator Mora J.

⁵⁵⁷ Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds. *Pictures and Progress: Early Photographs and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

⁵⁵⁸ Douglass, "Pictures and Progress"; Wallace and Smith, 8.

⁵⁵⁹ Douglass, "Pictures and Progress."

Beauchamp-Byrd laid out a methodology for analysis, cataloging, and displaying the visual components of Paul Robeson's life throughout several important career stages. Beauchamp-Byrd's approach when developing these image categories revolves around the reality that during his early career, and even after, there were "differing uses of Robeson's body by film studios, by theatrical producers, record companies and by various kinds of presses."⁵⁶⁰ This applied to both athletic- and non-athletic-related imagery. From this initial question, Beauchamp-Byrd then lays out the vital question: "how was Robeson depicted in various forms of visual culture throughout his career, and what do such images reveal about the aesthetic, cultural, and socio-political factors that shaped their construction?"⁵⁶¹ This question helps to explain the categories of images that Dr. Beauchamp-Byrd articulates.

Beauchamp-Byrd's exhibit included eight categories, but since some of these are outside the scope of this work, like the "Robeson as Elder Statesman"⁵⁶² category, they will not be discussed here. Those that are applicable include: "Robeson as giant,"⁵⁶³ "Robeson as Work of Art," "Robeson as dapper concert performer," "Robeson as tyrant," and "Robeson as hero."⁵⁶⁴ The image categories in the context of the archival materials used for this dissertation provide an essential way to distinguish the different phases of Robeson's pictorial legacy. Robeson as "tyrant," for example, is a category in which images show him playing a "bad guy" role. The images from the film version of *Emperor Jones* fall into the separate categories of "tyrant," where

⁵⁶⁰ Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, "Body and Soul: Paul Robeson, Race, and Representation" Exhibition Introduction. <<https://stonecenter.unc.edu/files/2016/08/ROBESONbook.pdf>> (Accessed 1/12/18), 4.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁶² Ibid., 8.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

he is in his tyrannical Brutus Jones character, and there are two in which he is relaxed and smiling in the same costume portraying a much more heroic icon. There is a third image of Robeson in a posed seated position as "a dapper concert performer." All of the photos of Robeson in the four-image collage were taken by the famous photographer Edward Steichen and are primary sources from the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, NY. Unlike the exhibition, this dissertation includes Paul Robeson's undergraduate experience. As such, "Robeson as Giant" is an image category that features images from both his college athletic and performance career. Robeson's time in New Brunswick includes the different ways that Rutgers University utilized imagery of their stand-out athlete, particularly in the school's yearbooks. It is here that the descriptor of physical spectacularization rises to the fore. The category of "Robeson as Art" is an image category that includes the primary source images from Nickolas Murray held by the George Eastman museum. Both of the pictures featured are primary sources from the archival locations outlined in the introduction of this dissertation. Across the gamut of the visual legacy of Robeson, it is important to note that "these images functioned in varying ways during their respective period, sometimes in a progressive manner, and other times in a negative vein. Most of all they provide us with a heightened degree of insight into many of the underlying ideas affecting race, masculinity, and visual representation in the 20th century.⁵⁶⁵"

In addition to Beauchamp-Byrd's methodological categorization, I also engage the theoretical approach laid out by Ginger Hill in *Pictures and Progress: Early*

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 9.

Photographs and the Making of African American Identity. Hill's work discusses how Frederick Douglass's 19th-century lectures on the role that photography plays in cultural representation of Black Americans provide a unique way to interpolate the images of Robeson. This is highly significant because both Douglass in his era, but also Robeson in his own, recognized the importance of properly representing one's self as the key positive to representation and influence. Frederick Douglass was insistent on presenting a very "[P]articlar sense of his character to solidify his claims to nothing less than full humanity."⁵⁶⁶ By presenting a poised, dignified depiction of himself to the public, he was establishing an "image of veracity and respectability."⁵⁶⁷ In his lectures on the importance of photography for Black cultural representation, Douglass discussed his theory on "thought pictures."⁵⁶⁸ This is a visual theory about systems of representation that broadened into a theory of subjectivity and outline of a picture of progress.⁵⁶⁹ Douglass's thought pictures as a visual theory pose two central arguments:

First, even perceived objects have their own mode of givenness, and for humans perceived in the line of sight of others, for humans as objects, this means those viewed have their own internal intentionality, whether or not it is recognized by the viewing subject. Furthermore, all humans, contrary to the thinking of racial pseudoscience, possess the faculty of thought pictures, to imagine forms. These theories of perception and imagination specifically address the constitution of knowledge of the world and the self and the continual distinction and permeability between the two. How and what we view as viewing

⁵⁶⁶ Ginger Hill, "Rightly Viewed: Theorizations of Self in Frederick Douglass's Lecture on Pictures." In *Pictures and Progress: Early Photographs and the Making of African American Identity*, Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 45.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 70.

subjects see in the world is experientially conditioned, via circulating, possessing, and accumulating representations.⁵⁷⁰

Through combining the photo categorization and exhibition methodology of Beauchamp- Byrd and that of Ginger Hill's description of Frederick Douglass's "thought pictures," this chapter will analyze several of Robeson's images to illustrate how the gaze was imposed on Robeson, but more importantly, how he eventually regained a measure of control over the public use of his body through images. The theory will aid in conceptualizing how Robeson recognized that he needed to make himself an "object of the photo gaze" in order to portray positively his "self-possession as a public icon."⁵⁷¹ This was a realization that Douglass came to and eventually so would Robeson.

This chapter will continue the discussion of the realities of Black masculinity during the timeframe examined in this dissertation. Next, I provide links between early twentieth century discourses on race, citizenship, and civilization. Lastly, each of the photograph categories outlined by Beauchamp-Byrd are laid out to analyze the selected images of Robeson from his college and early professional years, 1915 to late 1933. In each of the image categories, analysis of Robeson's visual legacy is contextualized within Douglass's "thought pictures" theory. The following images of Robeson are from two important university archives and one museum's special collection. In the end, the chapter will demonstrate that the combined methodological approach of Beauchamp-Byrd and that of Ginger provide an essential contribution to the body of American Studies scholarship. This is done by showing similar processes

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 50.

of gaining and maintaining control of one's public image and how representation was a key component for the ways Black masculinity was conceptualized in the early twentieth century.

Black Masculinity in the Face of Oppression

Systemic racism is as old as the inception of America, the Jamestown colony, Nathaniel Bacon's rebellion, and British policy toward Blacks in the Caribbean. Once in this country, beginning as slaves, Black men could not express their masculinity in the same ways as white men. This was due to constant threats of racial violence and the general nature of life under slave codes, precursors to Jim Crow. These circumstances tied the discourses surrounding citizenship, civilization, and race together. This is rooted in myths established by influential, white, majority figures during colonialism and the origins of a Black presence in British North America. The result has been entrenched white supremacy. Masculinity, a cultural process that assigns individuals a preexisting social category based on gendered traits, and expression of it, has deep historical roots. Many leadership figures, regardless of race or ethnicity, have sought to embody and practice what is considered to be "masculine" behavior. This led to a solidified color line between Black and white indentured servants, which in turn accelerated the rate of Africans brought to the North American continent, a British policy.

Since at least the Victorian Era, white Americans were heavily invested in these ideologies and discourses and Black Americans have experienced oppression stemming from them. In a speech delivered in 1890, five years prior to his death, Frederick Douglass challenged those who spoke of a "Negro problem," a phrase often

used during the Gilded Age to refer to the failures of Reconstruction across all levels of government. This "problem" was not solved during the Progressive Era that followed. Douglass argued that an entire population had been disenfranchised twice, first through the chattel slavery system, and then through the failure of the radical reconstruction plan. He noted that it was inherently unjust to speak of "relations between whites and the colored peoples of this country as the 'Negro problem,' as if the Negro had precipitated this problem, and as if he were in any way responsible for the problem." Douglass realized that despite a long life and career devoted to advocating for the rights of Black Americans, the struggle would continue after he was gone. He signaled that it would fall to the next generation of Black political and cultural leaders to take up the charge, a generation that included Paul Robeson.

Robeson's life and achievements can be viewed through this lens, as his life and achievements correlate with expressions of masculinity at a time when masculinity and gender remained closely tied to citizenship, civilization, and race. Like his father, Paul was committed to challenging Jim Crow. Both men found themselves in the position of doing for themselves what the government and state leaders refused to do. For them, this meant acting on behalf of their communities and neighbors. The elder Robeson, like others of his generation, sought to provide for his family and make positive contributions to society, primarily through church leadership.

Meanwhile, Paul, from a young age, cut a higher, national profile. Through his commitment to excellence, he would carve out his sphere of influence. During the height of an era when civilization was invoked in order to strengthen masculinity, the

younger Robeson stood out as a transformative figure who contested the era's myths defining manhood concerning race, nation, and one's ability to contribute to American society. He was able to challenge prevailing ideas about masculinity through a multitude of professional and personal accomplishments in athletics and stage performances throughout college and up to his enrollment at the University of London's School of African and Oriental Studies. From here, internationalist viewpoints sprouted that took his career in new directions beyond the scope of this work.

With Robeson, we see an individual who exemplified the "proper" type of masculinity. "The giant colored football player at Rutgers was the hero," reported NAACP's *Crisis* in January 1918.⁵⁷² This very first mention of Robeson in the national Black press reveals what the "proper" type of Black masculinity was thought to be in early twentieth-century America. Robeson's physical size would invariably influence his life's direction, including his participation in theatre and other forms of entertainment. Through all of these chapters, his career helped realign what it meant to be a Black man of notoriety in the early twentieth century. Through careful management of his masculinity via his performances, and in so many other areas, Robeson's role in subverting the discourses about civilization of the early twentieth century, helped to normalize the Black American experience.

Codifying Self-Imagery and Self-Representation

With this dissertation's focus on Paul Robeson's early life, college years, and emergence as a professional artist by late 1933, the archival images analysis begins

⁵⁷² *The Crisis* 1 (January 1918): 144.

with college, as images of Robeson as a youth are held mainly in family and other private collections. One exception is the book, *The Whole World in His Hands: A Pictorial Biography of Paul Robeson*, by Susan Robeson, daughter of Paul Robeson, Jr., which captures the visual legacy of her grandfather. Childhood and family photos featured in that work have proven a vital primary source. However, as demonstrated in chapters three and four, the attention given to his public career by media mostly began while he was a Rutgers undergraduate, celebrated as a genius destined for glory.⁵⁷³ Photos of Robeson, the college athlete, helped solidify his legacy as a boundary-breaking powerhouse at a time when Black Americans were substantially underrepresented on majority white campuses, and even more so in athletic programs.

Viewers interpreted images of Robeson through social and racial lenses of the society in which they lived; a society that was not only hyper-segregated but one that saw racial diversity and the success of a young Black American as a threat to the racial order under de facto Jim Crow that shaped people's experiences.

Rutgers University Scholar-Athlete, Selected Archival Images: "Robeson as Giant"

The majority of photographs of Paul Robeson during his college years focused on his athleticism, and unlike photographs from his post-collegiate career, were largely team pictures. Rare are those of him alone, posed, or in action on the field of play. In undergraduate photographs, the image of Robeson as the sole Black body in a sea of whiteness is a defining factor. Moreover, his "sole body" was far larger than all

⁵⁷³ Deborah Willis, "The Image and Paul Robeson" in *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 64.

others depicted in both the athletic photographs as well as the scant few academic images of him at Rutgers University.

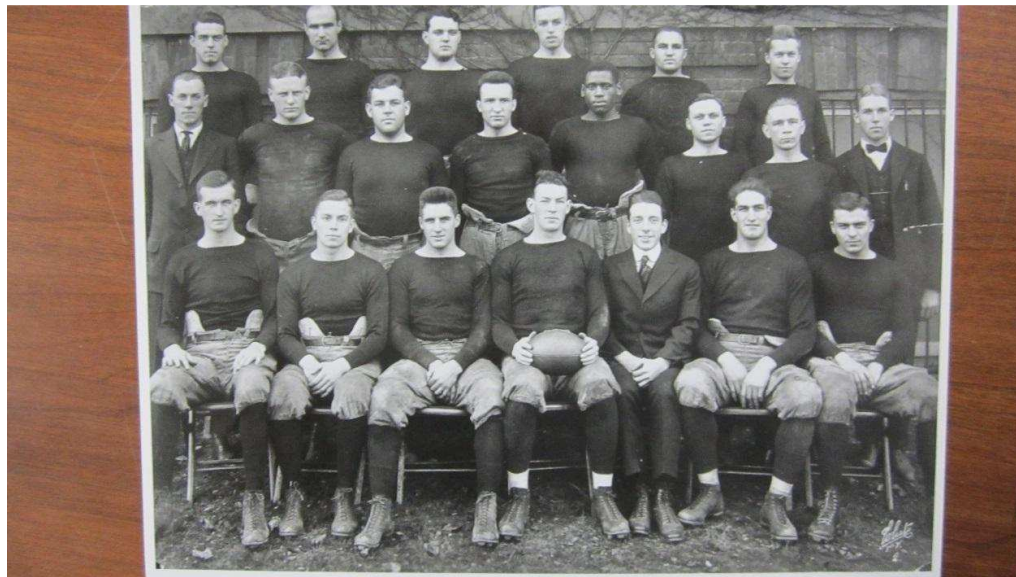


Figure 20: Rutgers University Football Team Photo, 1917. Permissions: Special Collection and University Archives: Rutgers University Libraries

This team photograph, taken during Robeson's freshman year, is an excellent early example of a photo that captured the young athlete, whose physique was still developing. Even at his still young age, he was taller and broader shouldered than his teammates; he would gain more muscle and bulk in the next two years of his collegiate career. Compared to his teammates, his physical size was substantial, particularly so when compared to the two men standing to his immediate right in this team photo. Robeson's placement in the near center of the photograph was likely intentional. Given that at that point he was only the third Black student to attend Rutgers, and the very first accepted into the football program, his presence was highly unusual, and, as seen in chapter three, reception of him was often brutal.

The stark difference in physicality is displayed in the posed picture below of Rutgers football team's offensive line with Robeson on the far right-side playing

tackle and dwarfing his teammates. This image also helps viewers visualize the physical advantages Robeson had over his contemporaries not only in height but weight, strength, and speed. This image is quintessential "Robeson as giant" because it provides viewers with a clear depiction of the size contrast between Robeson and his teammates, but also how he would dwarf any opposing player on defense when in contest against the Scarlet Knights of Rutgers University and would be difficult, if not impossible to tackle on offense.



Figure 21: Rutgers University Football Team Offense. Permission: Special Collection and University Archives: Rutgers University Libraries

In a later photo, figure 22, Robeson is seated in the front row, on the right.



Figure 22: Rutgers University Football Team. Permission: Special Collection and University Archives: Rutgers University Libraries

His continual physical growth is even more evident here, as he is seen rotating his upper torso to fit into his space on the bench. The players on his immediate right and left are squeezed next to him. In the team photographs held by the Rutgers University library's special collection, figure 22 is the most acute in the size comparisons of Robeson to that of his teammates and the most reflective of Dr. Beauchamp-Byrd's "Robeson as Giant" visual category.

The next image is from the famous 1917 Rutgers versus Naval Reserve game, at the height of Robeson's collegiate football career. It highlights his abilities as a "high impact player. On the football field he was fast, smart, and a punishing hitter."⁵⁷⁴ Given the far slower shutter speeds of cameras of the era, "action photos" of Robeson on the field of play were far less common, but the caption of "Robey comes through" implies the extreme difficulty of stopping and or tackling a ball carrying player of his size, power, and speed. This was so much so that articles describing

⁵⁷⁴ Michael Pellowski, *Rutgers Football: A Gridiron Tradition in Scarlet* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 24.

games in the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation describe multiple players being needed to bring him down, at times after being dragged some distance by Robeson.⁵⁷⁵



ROBEY COMES THROUGH

Figure 23: From 1919 Rutgers University Scarlet Letter Yearbook. Permission: Charles L. Blockson Special Collection, Temple University

Robeson's size and presence are unmistakable in a 1916 baseball team photo on the following page. In this image, his Blackness is contrasted with the bleached whiteness of the team uniforms. Robeson is standing in the second row, in the middle of the team photo.

⁵⁷⁵ Frederick G. Lieb "Rutgers Football Legions Overthrow Fordham Team," *New York Sun*, 28 October 1917.



Figure 24: Rutgers 1916 Baseball Team Photo. Permission: Special Collection and University Archives: Rutgers University Libraries

While there were many photos taken of Paul Robeson the athlete, the photo below is one of the few that highlights his intellectual prowess. As we have seen, Robeson's debating experience extended back to his years at Somerville High School. Miss Miller, the teacher who encouraged him to pursue acting, was the faculty member in charge of the school's debate team.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷⁶ Brown, 48.

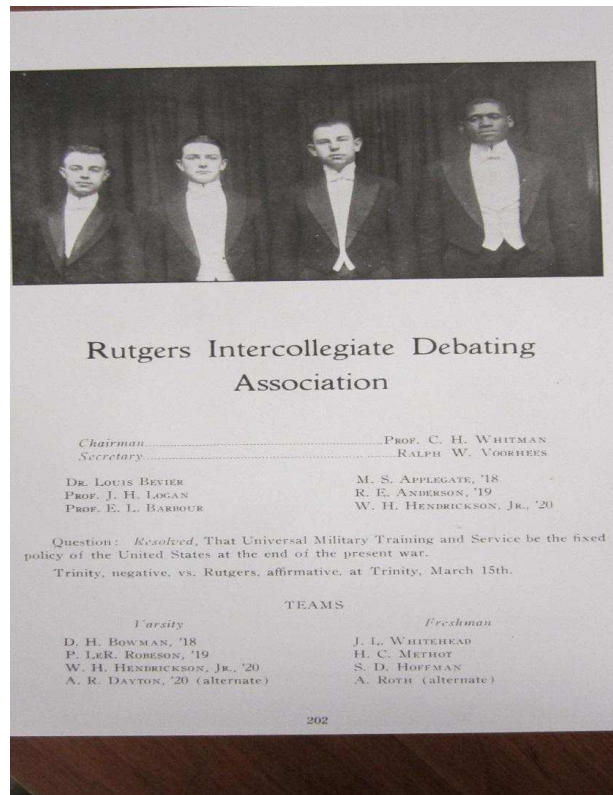


Figure 26: Rutgers Intercollegiate Debate Team, *Scarlet Letter Yearbook*, 1919. Permission: Special Collection and University Archives: Rutgers University Libraries

Here, it is clear how Robeson's abilities as an orator linked to his experience as an actor. The Rutgers yearbook image shows him posed stoically on a stage wearing a tuxedo, alongside his debate teammates. The contrast of “Robeson as Giant” standing on the end of the debate team line-up, seemingly posed shortest to tallest from left to right, is obvious. For this team, Robeson's brain and critical thinking skills were the strength that he lent to his debate cohort. The image also reveals that Rutgers’ debate team was victorious over their Trinity College opponents, with Robeson’s side upholding the affirmative in the debate.⁵⁷⁷

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 84.

This photograph not only contrasts the athletic-heavy photo legacy of Paul Robeson while at Rutgers but reveals something about discourses on race, citizenship, and civilization, essential components to the system of white domination and de facto Jim Crow prevalent across the northeastern region of the United States at the turn of the century. Not only is Robeson wearing a tuxedo, but he is standing alongside whites as equals on the team.

Throughout this image category established by Dr. Beauchamp-Byrd, the genesis of Paul Robeson's public persona is seen. Robeson himself did not orchestrate the taking of these images, yet they display the genesis of his establishment of being a "self-made man," meaning that it was not wealth, power, or influence that elevated Robeson to this position on Rutgers University's New Brunswick campus during the early twentieth century. It was through his sheer ability and drive, (along with the guidance and inspiration from his father William) that he became a lauded icon of the Rutgers Scarlet Knights. Fredrick Douglass in his visual theorist lectures celebrated self-made men, who through their striving, rise above their condition and surpass their peers to accomplish great deeds.⁵⁷⁸ Douglass himself epitomized a self-made man in his era, and Paul Robeson would help define a self-made race man in the early twentieth century, expanding this concept dramatically beyond the scope of what Douglass envisioned in the nineteenth century. With Douglass's theory on self-made men, it reflects the importance of self-possession through photography. Photographs in his theory were ways to accumulate characteristics of self-possession. They don't

⁵⁷⁸ Hill, 45.

reflect but make a self,⁵⁷⁹ in this case through visual representations of Robeson's activities. The undergraduate photographs of Robeson were essentially vehicles to display Robeson engaging in his athletic and academic pursuits. He did not directly control, nor take these photos, but he likely was aware that these images, along with the print media coverage, provided insights into his career to the viewing public. Additionally, the undergraduate yearbook images of Robeson were the genesis of his "self" in terms of realizing the importance of how he would be represented and remembered for his time at the campus in New Brunswick and the legacy he would leave for other Black American undergraduate students.

Columbia Law School and the Harlem Renaissance: Selected Archival Images,
"Robeson as Art"

As a result of his theater and singing performances, Robeson's career and public profile greatly expanded during the 1920s. Still, many media accounts of those performances homed in on his physical attributes, not only his height but musculature and bulk. This was also the era of modernism, a movement that encompassed architecture, literature, fashion, and art. A formulated ideological or aesthetic definition rarely accompanied the concept of modernism; rather it was used to describe the new or, in a slightly different form, a person who was an advocate of the new (a modernist).⁵⁸⁰ Because of his newfound visibility in society, many modernists viewed Robeson as a physical representation of the "new" era in which they were living.

⁵⁷⁹ Hill, 53.

⁵⁸⁰ Christopher Wilk, ed., *Modernism 1914-1939: Designing a New World* (London: V & A Publication, 2006), 13.

Nickolas Muray, the well-known Hungarian immigrant photographer and Olympic athlete, sought to photograph Robeson's physique with hopes of establishing a connection between the African American male body and the state of the national soul.⁵⁸¹ Images of Robeson taken by Muray produced a series of cultural imaginations that culminated in Robeson's elevation to the status of national icon.⁵⁸²

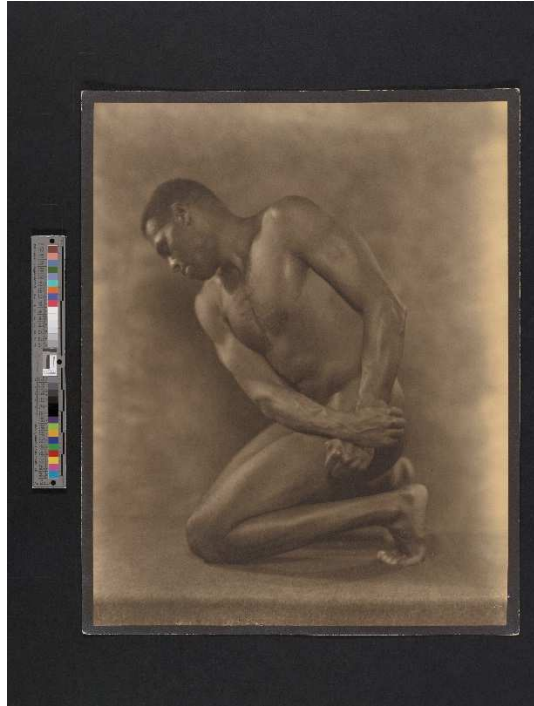


Figure 27: Paul Robeson by Nickolas Muray, 1925. Permission: George Eastman House Museum Special Collection

In the photographs composed during a session with Robeson, Muray produced a subject with a dialectical image, a series of pictures whose primary function was to illustrate the co-existence of contrary or simply different readings of a single image.⁵⁸³ Differences in perspective and readings fell along racial and aesthetic lines.

⁵⁸¹ Carby, 48.

⁵⁸² Ibid.

⁵⁸³ WJT Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 45.

One example that crystallizes these ideas is a 1926 article written by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant for *The New Republic*. In it, Sergeant articulates her views on what Robeson represents for the “new” era Americans were living in:

Unlike most moderns, Paul Robeson is not half a dozen men in one torn and striving body. He is one, and clear cut, in the Greek or primitive sense. This sureness of essential being takes him across the concert stage, as it did across the football field, with a fine, free movement of his strong athletic body, which is the reflection in action of an inward goal. Paul Robeson knows where he is bound and has confidence defined to most performers that his arms and legs will take him there with no conscious effort or control.⁵⁸⁴

Her description of his body and the connections she draws between his vocal and theatrical performances, and his collegiate athletic prowess, within the context of the modernist imagination of Murray's photos, further captures the "modernist mold" that Hazel Carby describes in her book *Race Men*. Here, Carby describes the Murray images and the Sergeant article as examples of the modernist ideas of Robeson into which visions of his body were poured, and which produced a series of cultural imaginations that culminated in his elevation into the status of national icon.⁵⁸⁵

Sergeant's modernist rendering of Robeson's essence is representative of the broader modernist perspective that is often thought to have been obsessed by the tensions, anxieties, and contradictory desires of the modern age. The modernist's cultural texts, both critical and performative, have come to be seen as the public area on which these were staged.⁵⁸⁶ When Shipley Sergeant's article is put into conversation with the Murray images, we can see how dialectical images reveal the

⁵⁸⁴ Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, “The Man with His Home in a Rock: Paul Robeson,” *New Republic* (3 March 1926): 40.

⁵⁸⁵ Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 48.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

inextricable weaving together of representation and discourse.⁵⁸⁷ Moreover, these images serve the modernist idea to be desired by other men, a standard for social ideals of masculinity, and a means for bringing to account the masculinity of the male viewer.⁵⁸⁸



Figure 28: Paul Robeson by Nickolas Muray, 1925. Permission: George Eastman House Museum Special Collection

The featured primary source photographs of Robeson taken by Nickolas Muray centralize on Robeson's nude and barefoot form. In figure twenty-seven, we can see Robeson kneeling with his upper torso turned to have the dual role of obscuring his groin area, while also highlighting his musculature. He is turned to the

⁵⁸⁷ Mitchell, 83.

⁵⁸⁸ Carby, 56.

side with the lighting to the left side of the image. This is to highlight the developed and flexed lateral head of his right triceps, along with his anterior and medial deltoid shoulder muscles. All three catch the light, along with his flexed brachioradialis (top of his forearm) of his right arms as well. On his left side the same muscles are flexed, but because of the way he is posed in the photo with his torso turned, the light catches the upper portion of his pectoralis major (chest muscle.) The viewer can see a hint of his developed Serratus anterior (muscle under his left arm) along with the lighting highlighting his deltoids and biceps brachii (the outer, long head of the biceps muscle) and lateral triceps head of his left arm. Robeson's line of sight is cast downward towards the floor with his face evoking a sense of concentration. In figure twenty-seven, his fists are clenched espousing the raw masculine power in the modernist mold of Muray's vision for this photo series. In figure twenty-eight, Robeson is posed kneeling, but more upright and not nearly resting his torso on his heels as he was in figure twenty-seven. Here, Robeson is posed between two wooden boxes, turned away from the camera, with his sight cast downward towards the lower left corner of the wooden box on the right side of the image. The lighting in figure twenty-eight is from the right-hand side. His hands are rested against the wood boxes he is posed between with his left arm bent (accentuating his posterior deltoid.) His weight is distributed between his knees and his left arm which is being used to stabilize him as his right arm is outstretched, holding the wooden box on his right side at its most right corner and balancing it on its rear edge. It was likely that Muray had Robeson do this to flex his right latissimus dorsi further to create a visual contrast against his right side external oblique abdominal muscles and Gluteus Medius muscle

(the upper muscle in his posterior.) As he is balancing the right wooden box on its rear edge, his vastus lateralis is flexed as well (the outer portion of the quadriceps muscle in the leg) to aid in stabilizing his body.

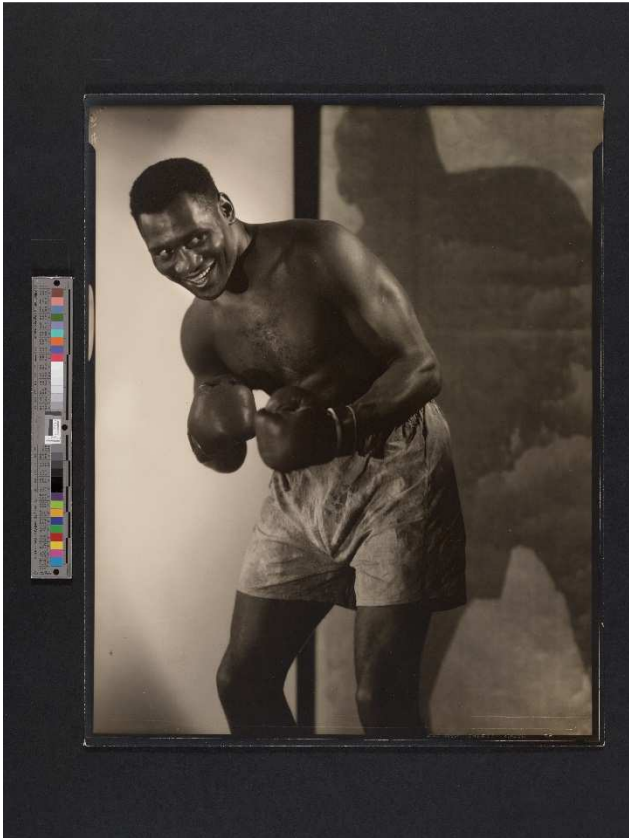


Figure 29: Paul Robeson in “Black Boy” by Edward Steichen, 1926. Permission: George Eastman House Museum Special Collection

The photo above, from the 1927 theatrical production of *Black Boy*, presents a continuation of the modernist “standard for social ideals of masculinity.”⁵⁸⁹ Here, Robeson is posed smiling with boxing gloves and shorts in a fighter’s stance. His gloves are up in the low hand guard position with his muscles flexed as if he was

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

preparing to defend himself, albeit with a smile on his face. The lighting is targeted towards his left shoulder, highlighting his flexed deltoids, lateral triceps, long outer head of his bicep down to his brachialis (the muscle that traverses the upper and lower portion of the arm and helps to flex the elbow joint.) This juxtaposition shows his preparation for a fight, with the lighting highlighting the potential punching power of his left arm. That this is done with a smile is indicative of the play's narrative, with its script recounting a humble Black man's dream of winning the world heavyweight championship and with it, wealth, power, and the final plum, the love of a white woman.⁵⁹⁰

Once again, the Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant *New Republic* article can be viewed to gain insights into the play's script and modernist messages. "Paul Robeson is not merely an actor and singer of Negro spirituals but a symbol. A sort of sublimation of what the Negro may be in the Golden Age hangs about him and imparts to his appearances an atmosphere of affection and delight that is seldom felt in an American audience."⁵⁹¹ The narrative twist of the play also reflects a modernist perspective on the racial anxieties and tension of the then-modern era. Historian Philip Foner, the editor of *Paul Robeson Speaks*, explains this twist. "He (Robeson's character) loses a championship fight when he is made drunk by the girl he loves,

⁵⁹⁰ Boyle and Bunie, 175.

⁵⁹¹ Sergeant.

Irene, who has been blackmailed into betraying Black Boy by the threat to disclose the fact that she is a Negro passing as white.”⁵⁹²

The play was produced by Horace Liveright, its script written by Jim Tully and Frank Mitchell Dazey. Throughout the script, Robeson was forced to endure considerable indignities both through speaking parts and songs, at one point singing a spiritual while shining the shoes of his manager’s mistress. He also had lines like, “no good nevah comes ov niggahs fightin white men.”⁵⁹³ Although degrading, at this point in his career, Robeson needed the work, and while the reviews of his performance were mainly complimentary, the play itself received mixed notices. It ran for only a few weeks.⁵⁹⁴ Shepley Sergeant touches on Robeson as a modernist symbol, but also a symbol that could be magnified or minimized according to one’s prejudices or desires.⁵⁹⁵ Taking this modernist interpretation of Robeson’s image and putting it into the theoretical context of Douglass's lectures on visual theory, we can see how one could magnify or minimize Robeson's symbolism. The viewing public of his era had a variety of views, but the lens of racial discrimination is a profound aspect of American culture in the 1920s. Racism is maintained though socially habited visual perception, and may be challenged through both visual objects and, more importantly scrutinizing the habit of looking.”⁵⁹⁶ One's view of the world and those of different racial origin is based upon “subjective perspective.”⁵⁹⁷ This is what

⁵⁹² Foner, 507.

⁵⁹³ Boyle and Bunie, 175.

⁵⁹⁴ Swindall, 50.

⁵⁹⁵ Sergeant, 43.

⁵⁹⁶ Hill, 42.

⁵⁹⁷ Hill, 43.

Frederick Douglass called “individual truths”⁵⁹⁸ formed via sensorial engagement with phenomena. (Photographs.) That newly formed self acts upon and transforms his or her world.⁵⁹⁹ Images of a transformative figure like Paul Robeson can form, or change, people's views on African Americans people, and Black men.

Early Professional Career, 1928-1933: Selected Archival Images, “Robeson as Worldly Sophisticate”

The photo likely used for promotional purposes, given the detailed description on the back, is a performance headshot taken for Robeson’s first concert upon returning to the United States from the U.K. on January 10, 1930, held at New York’s Carnegie Hall. The back of the photo, originally from the Metropolitan Musical Bureau on 33 W 42nd St. in New York, now a part of Temple University's Charles L. Blockson Collection, describes Robeson's career highlights:

Back in New York after six months sojourn in Europe, Paul Robeson, Negro baritone, will give a recital of classic songs and Negro spirituals in his first New York appearance in Carnegie Hall Saturday evening, January 10th. Since the close of his engagement in London at the Savoy in the role of Othello, Robeson has been busy concertizing in the English provinces and on the continent.⁶⁰⁰

Looking for meaning and intent, we see how this photo serves as an example of how Robeson was seeking to cultivate his persona. He had just finished the production of a transformative play in the U.K., as the second Black actor to portray Othello. Ira Aldridge had experienced a similar response from British audiences, suggesting that the play involving a "Moor" in a contradictory relationship with the state tapped into

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁰ Paul Robeson Carnegie Hall concert headshot for January 10, 1930 performance. Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University.

unresolved dilemmas about racism.⁶⁰¹ Robeson was cognizant of the meaning of the character, and also of the similar public response.

With this 1930 performance headshot, this image has Robeson seated, front lit, in suit and tie, looking into the camera with a facial expression that is warm, partially smiling but also conveying a sense of seriousness, and professionalism. This photo is a professional headshot in a year when Robeson began to enact a higher level of control over his image and cultural representation. The UK production of *Othello* had managed to generate \$ 20,000 a week in profit, but negative reviews eventually took their toll.⁶⁰² The bulk of the criticism centered on the play's producer Maurice Brown (who had appointed his own artistically unqualified ex-wife to direct,)⁶⁰³ but Robeson was still developing his acting techniques, and many of the British theater critics pointed this out. Regardless, by 1930 Robeson had arrived as a professional, multifaceted creative. To display this, he and Eslanda were actively promoting him to the British press. Part of the publicity was a series of press interviews, carefully planned to show Robeson as a cultured, erudite family man.⁶⁰⁴ The release by the Robesons of this professional headshot is another outcome of the efforts to enact direct control over depiction to viewing audiences. As he was returning home to America after *Othello*, the photo itself is a continuation of their efforts.

In the context of Frederick Douglass's "thought pictures" theory, we can interpret the 1930 headshot in the context of the "self-made man" representation that

⁶⁰¹ Gerald Horne, *Paul Robeson: The Artist and Revolutionary* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2016), 41.

⁶⁰² Boyle and Bunie, 229.

⁶⁰³ Boyle and Bunie, 224.

⁶⁰⁴ Boyle and Bunie, 220.

Douglas personified in his era; Robeson was an early twentieth-century portrayal of this style and approach to enacting consistent direct control of one's cultural representation. Both in the late nineteenth century for Douglass and Robeson in the early twentieth, race and citizenship were intertwined. For Douglass, and later Robeson releasing photos of themselves were specific acts seeking to project an image of veracity and respectability, the foundation upon which any man could claim citizenship and the protective and protected natural rights attached to that legal designation.⁶⁰⁵



Figure 32: Robeson Studying Russian Song for Concert at Albert Hall (UK), Before 1931 U.S. Tour. Permission: Special Collection and University Archives: Rutgers University Libraries

Featured above is a photograph of Robeson studying a song in Russian while in England. It is one of the most multilayered of the materials gathered in terms of its subjectivity and the reality of a Negro American not just learning the Russian language, but performing it is transformational in the sense of Robeson transcending the racial realities of his time. It also demolishes myths maintained by whites of that era of the limits of Black American intellectual capacity, thus emphasizing his

⁶⁰⁵ Hill, 46.

remarkable academic achievements while an undergraduate at Rutgers. At this point in his career, Robeson had experienced an almost meteoric rise as a public persona, and this image captures that. In an interview with an English newspaper, the *Timely Digest*, Robeson said: “I found at once that the (Russian) language and the music suit my voice, and I think there is a psychological explanation. There is a kinship between the Russians and the Negroes. They were both serfs, and in the music, there is the same note of melancholy touched with mysticism.”⁶⁰⁶

The following four images of Robeson, two of him wearing his “Brutus Jones costume” from *Emperor Jones*, and one of him in a seated portrait, were all taken by Edward Steichen, a well-known photographer, painter, and curator, who took many

⁶⁰⁶ Paul Robeson, Jr., *Timely Digest* (London, September-October 1931): 185.

photos of Robeson as part of his work for Conde Nast Publications, one of the most prolific magazine publishing companies in the United States.

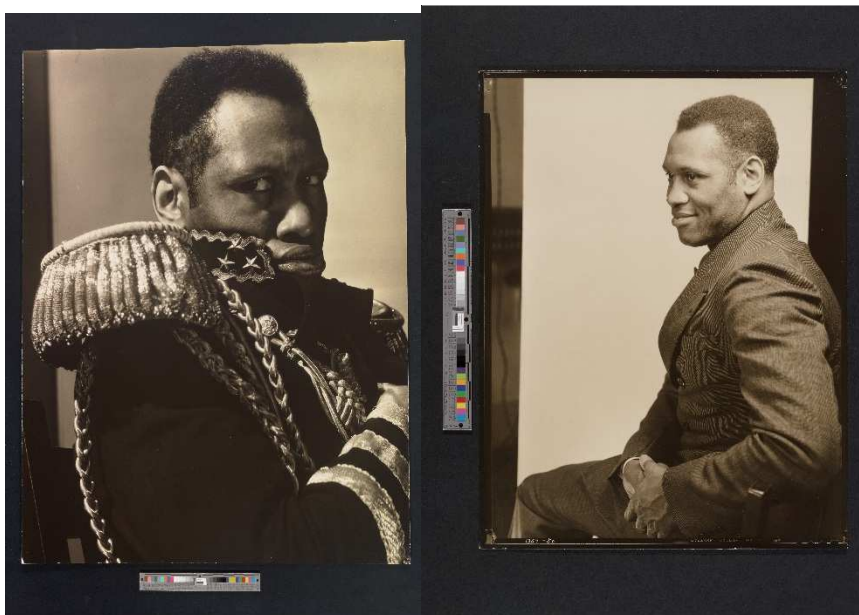


Figure 33: Paul Robeson in "Emperor Jones" by Edward Steichen, 1932-33. Permission: George Eastman House Museum Special Collection

Since 1923 Steichen had been the chief photographer for the publisher of a list of magazines that included *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *House & Garden*.⁶⁰⁷ In this role, Steichen was tasked with producing portrait photographs of prominent people.⁶⁰⁸ As Robeson's career was steadily rising, especially since his time at Columbia Law School, his image was captured by Steichen on several occasions. In the 1920s, Steichen had pioneered "a chic style of celebrity and fashion photography, characterized by a theatrical flair for dramatic lighting and simple props."⁶⁰⁹ Steichen's images of Robeson and the way the lighting and shade are used, along with his positioning of Robeson himself, were taken using this approach.

With the onset of the Great Depression and substantial changes in society caused by it, Steichen began capitalizing commercially on his camera as a vehicle for social commentary.⁶¹⁰ His work commented on subjects outside his social realm, as he sought out environments and people who were influencing society, including Black performance icons like Paul Robeson, whose notoriety among audiences on both sides of the color line had won him accolades for his multifaceted performance ability. As we have seen time and time again, Robeson's performance artistry connected to his physical stature and the power of his baritone voice.

During the years Steichen captured images of Robeson, he developed a certain mentality that he applied to his craft. He believed that the camera could be as powerful a communicator as language itself.⁶¹¹ What was being communicated in his

⁶⁰⁷ Penelope Niven, *Steichen, A Biography* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publications, 1997), 500.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁹ The Cleveland Museum of Art, Edward Steichen Collection "Paul Robeson as 'Emperor Jones,' 1933," <<http://www.clevelandart.org/art/2001.7>>. Accessed April 29, 2018,

⁶¹⁰ Niven, 541.

⁶¹¹ Niven, 543.

photographs of Robeson was how a Black man could transcend his circumstances, as well as artificial limitations imposed upon his community through racial discrimination and achievement of unprecedented notoriety. For the viewing audience of these images, this Black male performer embodied a new era of change, and Robeson himself was the vehicle for that change. For viewers who adore pictures, they do so because their own human self-creation takes place via pictures, as does all human progress.⁶¹² This was particularly apt for Paul Robeson as he was the direct descendant of a former slave. Ultimately, Robeson served to bridge the old world and the "new" via the modernist perspective. For Steichen and other whites who were captivated by his physical presence, images depicting Robeson reflected an evolution in American society. At the same time, these visual images reverberated with meaning and subtext.⁶¹³ When putting this into conversation with the "thought pictures" theory, we can further unpack these subtexts and meanings. Thought pictures was a means of contesting scientific racism and, even further, underscored processes of self-development.⁶¹⁴ Robeson's self-development was a central component of his continuous improvement as a vocal performer and the evolution he experienced as a stage performer. Steichen's images of Robeson reflect the similar

⁶¹² Hill, 71.

⁶¹³ Ibid.

⁶¹⁴ Hill, 56.

sentiment with which Frederick Douglass viewed pictures as combining minute, detailed empirical information and emotional appeal.⁶¹⁵

Within the collage of the four images above, we see Robeson wearing his Brutus Jones costume from *Emperor Jones*, the seated portrait also taken by Steichen, and a modernist perspective similar to the earlier nude study by Nikolas Muray in 1925. Whereas Muray focused overtly on Robeson's musculature and physicality, the Steichen images portray Robeson as a performer who had come into his own, an international star of vocal performance, theater, as well as motion pictures. This range of talents embodied by the variety of photos of Robeson reflects an additional aspect of visuality. That pictures and groupings of pictures are not just visual metaphors for human interiority but metaphors for how interiority is constructed.⁶¹⁶ Interiority of the human self was of vital importance for Douglass because it is the process by which an individual grapples with the complexity of what it means to live an embodied existence.⁶¹⁷ The Steichen photos of him in his performance costume are multilayered examples of Black American progress and cultural representation. There is an additional parallel that we can see between the images of Robeson and the thought picture theory of Douglass. In his lectures on pictures, Douglass stated that truth is figured as a constant revelation, a process of perpetual movement.⁶¹⁸ To restate the use of "truth" in Douglass's visual theory lectures, these are subjective perspectives that are formed via sensorial engagements with phenomena.⁶¹⁹ That phenomenon is

⁶¹⁵ Hill, 58.

⁶¹⁶ Hill, 58.

⁶¹⁷ Wallace and Smith, 42.

⁶¹⁸ Hill, 59.

⁶¹⁹ Hill, 43.

photographic imagery. The truths that Robeson embodied in both his persona and his work as a performer were that his artistry was a manifestation of a multilayered representative of American Blackness and positive Black masculine expression reflected in his wide range of talents.

Through the creation of the film version of *Emperor Jones* Robeson could not only reach a broader audience with his best asset, his voice, but also serve the broader Black community by being the first African American actor to headline a major motion picture.⁶²⁰ This displays Robeson's "possessive individualism," a conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities.⁶²¹ This achievement of being the main star in a Hollywood film was the outcome of his extremely laborious performance career. Frederick Douglass's visual theory lectures lauded autonomous possessive individualism.⁶²² Douglass extolled the possessive individualism of photos in the nineteenth century and Robeson's possessive individualism would carry the torch for this "multifaceted theory of subjectivity"⁶²³ in the early 1930s. In the images of Robeson wearing a costume to evoke Brutus Jones, we see a variety of facial expressions, two smiling with one scowling image, conveying the colonial oppression imposed by Brutus Jones over the island population in the film. What makes these Steichen images so fascinating is that the scowling image is the only one from this selection widely seen in public images. One

⁶²⁰ Swindall, 66.

⁶²¹ Leroy Taylor, Reviewed Work: "The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism (Hobbes to Locke) by C. B. Macpherson" *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (June 1965): 240.

⁶²² Hill, 54.

⁶²³ Hill, 55.

need only type "*Emperor Jones*" into an internet search engine, and this classic Steichen image will be one of the top results. The other photographs depicting Robeson smiling during his photo session with Steichen are much less familiar. It was very surprising to find them during a visit to the George Eastman House Museum in Rochester, New York. These pictures show a completely different side of Robeson wearing the Brutus Jones costume, but not playing the character, and showing his personal warmth.

The portrait photograph of Robeson suggests something beyond performing. It speaks to Robeson himself, and not the vision of a theater critic, or a producer. In this photo, Robeson is turned three-fourths at his waist, facing the camera at an angle, his hands folded neatly and smartly in his lap. His slight smile evokes not just civilized comportment, but also a serious and professional demeanor. We can assume that when Steichen showed Robeson the proofs of this photoshoot, he selected the image that was the most indicative of the professional persona he sought to exemplify. When thinking deeply about the intended role that this seated portrait played, Douglass's theory aids in rationalizing the more profound sense of interiority that Robeson intended to project. Thought pictures develop an understanding of the world and facilitate the creation of the self, a bringing forth of a newly formed interiority.⁶²⁴ Robeson's new interiority was his fresh internationalist perspective and sociopolitical views that were still coming together.

With Steichen's photographs of Paul Robeson, we see how Robeson was bringing a new level of control over his public image, conscious of cultural representation, not just for himself but the wider Black American community. The book jacket of Penelope Niven's "comprehensive" biography of Steichen states that "not since 1929 has there been a biography of Edward Steichen."⁶²⁵ It completely omits the most famous subject of his body of work during the 1930s. This erasure is not only of Robeson but of all Black Americans whom he photographed. The words "Black," "Negro," "Colored," or "African American" are absent in the book's index.

This omission may be due to several factors, including Paul Robeson being targeted by the second Red Scare during the 1950s, or pure sloppiness in research, which is difficult to fathom given Niven's extensive publishing history, authoring biographies of Carl Sandburg and Thornton Wilder, and the attention to detail she infuses into her writing. Personal prejudice is not likely either, given that she worked with and co-authored James Earl Jones's biography, *Voices and Silences*, first published in 1993. Suffice it to say, the complete omission of Paul Robeson from her book is highly curious.

⁶²⁴ Hill, 64.

⁶²⁵ Niven, book jacket.

Closing Thoughts

It is important to note that the images examined throughout this chapter represent only a small selection of the photographic record of Paul Robeson. However, many of these images, particularly those by Steichen, with one exception, the iconic scowling photo of Robeson portraying Brutus Jones, are less prominent. This chapter intends to examine a selection of images of Robeson, with a specific eye to how viewers of these images in public responded to them through the sociocultural lens of the culture in which they lived. This is vital because when these photographs were first taken and circulated publicly, the social practices and perspectives of race, masculinity, and civilization were the primary lenses through which audiences interpreted them. Additionally, these selected images help targeted audiences understand that the photographic record of Robeson was multifaceted. They inform the public of his career direction and the evolution of his cultural representations for both American and European audiences, and they display how he eventually cultivated his public persona through his visual depictions.

Through the combination of the exhibition methodology and photograph categorization of Beauchamp-Byrd with Ginger Hill's interpretation of Frederick Douglass's lectures on visual theory, we can see the genesis of Paul Robeson, not just as an artist, but as a representative of change, Black masculinity, and unprecedented cultural representation through the diversity of performative and artistic media that he was engaged in during the pre-London University phase of his career.

Chapter 7: Conclusion: Reclaiming Robeson

Focused on Paul Robeson's early years and young adulthood, this dissertation is a departure from most scholarship on Robeson, with its emphasis on the outcome of the federal government's seizure of his passport in 1955, during the Red Scare, and the impact that action had on his life and career. Once one of the most celebrated African American figures, known worldwide, Paul Robeson was primarily erased from history books for almost a decade after he began speaking out about injustices at home and abroad. This erasure would have an impact up to the modern era, and only with targeted scholarship and other works in both the academic and popular realm can this wrong be repaired.

The purpose of this concluding chapter is first to review the findings of previous chapters, and then to elaborate on the dissertation's goal of reclamation. As noted in my introduction, it is rare for undergraduate students in my African American studies classes to have heard of this illustrious man. Although this lack of awareness spans generations, the post-millennials I teach are one intended audience for this work. My project of reclamation joins other scholarship that aims to restore

Paul Robeson to his proper place in history. I hope it plays a role in prompting a new wave of research on the subject.

Methodological Contributions

With interest in exploring the role that the skin and masculinity of Paul Robeson played in his early career, and more specifically how the resulting gaze was imposed on his body, including Robeson's role in that process, I have employed textual critical discourse analysis, for chapters four and five. For chapter six, Mora Beauchamp- Byrd's exhibition categorization and methodology and Frederick Douglass's visual theories directly assisted in the interpolation of the photographic legacy of Robeson. Of interest, too, has been how Robeson developed as a person and an artist to become one of the most celebrated men of the twentieth century, before largely being omitted from a substantial range of academic and popular accounts of the early twentieth century.

Using the technique of open coding, and the hybrid methodology from chapter six, a deeper understanding of the role of visual culture representations of Robeson during his early career was discussed at length in the sixth chapter. The application of open coding to my close reading of the article set helped me identify the principal media themes about Robeson and understand better the world and culture that he inhabited in his early career. Open coding has also distilled how the print media recorded how people understood that world and Robeson's prominence and place in both American and European culture. Those media themes were discussed at length in chapters four and five, with the visual representations discussed throughout chapter

six. In four and five, the close reading of a very large set of articles about Robeson published in both black and white newspapers and magazines was the central focus.

For the published materials, each example was analyzed individually and then categorized in terms of date, subject matter, and identifying theme and whether they were from black newspapers or white newspapers. The photographs I focused on for chapter six were categorized in terms of career era of Robeson, the photographer or source of the imagery, and whether or not Robeson himself had any input in their framing. This methodological approach helped to organize the materials examined, before incorporating their overall themes into a discussion of the range of discourses that surrounded Robeson and his career across the early twentieth-century color line. This helped to explore the overall significance and impact of selected Robeson images that I had uncovered in my archival research. The images selected present a range of depictions of Robeson during his undergraduate years, capturing him in the roles he performed as an athlete and actor. Each, in turn, presents a unique way of seeing Robeson. With Robeson as an example of a multi-talented, black cultural icon, textual discourse analysis methodology demonstrates how to construct specific views of the social world that Paul Robeson inhabited in the early phase of his public life and career.

Finally, this dissertation has aimed to develop a "thick" description of Robeson's influences on black masculinity during the Roaring Twenties and the years of the Great Depression that followed. As defined by cultural anthropologist, Clifford

Geertz, "thick description" as a methodology examines not only behavior but the reasoning behind and purposes for that behavior.⁶²⁶

Chapters of a Life

This dissertation began with an exploration of Paul Robeson's family's origins and early socialization, in chapter one. As we saw, no one was more influential in molding Paul's early life than his father, William Drew Robeson. A former slave, William's early years were spent in Robersonville, North Carolina, a town named after the family who owned the plantation where he was enslaved.

At the earliest stages of his personal development, Paul was heavily influenced by three things: his father's experiences of enslavement, the elder Robeson's drive to receive an education, and a growing understanding of the obstacles he, his family, and other black Americans faced under Jim Crow. Over time, Paul would recognize that his family's social mobility was hampered by factors of racism stemming from his father's status as a former slave and dark skin tone. With this knowledge, he would eventually forge an understanding of how to maneuver and negotiate a complicated and unjust society.

Also shaping Paul's understanding of the world were his experiences as the youngest member of his family, the difficult circumstances surrounding his mother's tragic and untimely death, his father's uneven employment, as well as some of the positive cross-racial relations he experienced. By the time he arrived on the overwhelmingly white Rutgers campus in 1915, Paul Robeson had grown to become a physically large, deep-voiced black American male. Gifted athletically, and highly

⁶²⁶ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*.

intelligent, he went on to showcase his abilities as a black man at a highly visible majority white school. All eyes were upon him. This was due first to his physicality as a dark-skinned black man, and then, even more so, as he demonstrated his ability to deal with abject racism, displayed his intellectual capability, and proved his aptitude to work with others across the racial divide. As demonstrated in chapter two, he would succeed in all endeavors, on the sports field, and in the classroom.

With only six days' notice, Robeson was asked to speak as class valedictorian. We saw how he used that opportunity to address the racial dynamics of American society, and the need for black Americans to show their potential through action, stating, "[U]nity is impossible without freedom, and freedom presupposes a reverence for the individual and a recognition of the claims of human personality to full development." In that speech, he also commented on the duties of the white community. "It is necessary that you of the favored race catch a new vision and exemplify in your actions this new American spirit." He defined this as, "That spirit which prompts you to compassion, a motive instinctive but cultivated and intensified by Christianity, embodying the desire to relieve the manifest distress of your fellows." Staff writers from local newspapers hoped that Robeson would set an example for other black Americans, editorializing, "In you, other members of your race may well find a noble example, and this leadership is your new duty." This glowing tribute would foreshadow the brilliance Robeson displayed in New York City, as he embarked on the next chapter of his academic and professional career.

As his multifaceted career unfolded, we saw in chapter four how it spanned the color line, calling attention to black ability across a variety of cultural outlets,

ranging from scholastic achievement to accomplishments in athletics, and then acclaimed vocal and stage acting performances. News reporters on both sides of the color line were eager to disseminate Robeson's career events and what they meant for the readership of print media and yet, Robeson's emergence as a race man beginning in the 1920s was deeply entrenched in the racial realities of the society in which he lived, something most evident in the constant flow of observations and commentary about his physical size in the media of his day.

In chapter five, after Robeson's short career hiatus when his son was born, we saw how his performances in a repertory production of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, and a movie version of *Emperor Jones* were received differently by white and black film critics and audiences. Especially noteworthy are the contrasting strains of discourse about the *Emperor Jones* film, its plot, and Robeson's acting. Writers in both the black and white press questioned his choice of role, although one commentator defended it, stating: "The question being asked by our race is 'just why did Paul Robeson play Brutus Jones in a motion picture which reflects on our race?' Has ever an actor who is not his director and boss, been able to cut and sell the public a movie just the way he wanted it to be? No! So why blame Robeson for 'Emperor Jones?' Paul Robeson has always tried never to accept a part in the movies that did reflect on our race."

Finally, in chapter six, we saw how Robeson had an impact on vast audiences in the United States and Europe through the production and circulation of photographic images. Many of the select images featured in that chapter, particularly those by Edward Steichen, are not well known, with one exception, the iconic

scowling photo of Robeson portraying Brutus Jones. Here, the objective was to read the photographic images with combined methodological approach of Mora Beauchamp-Byrd and the visual theory lectures of Fredrick Douglass interpreted by Ginger Hill. When these photographs were taken initially and circulated publicly, the social practices and perspectives of race, masculinity, and civilization were the primary lenses through which audiences interpreted them. These images informed the public of Robeson's career and the evolution of his cultural representation. We also see in them how he came to cultivate his public persona through such visual depictions. A very important "so what" of this project is that, eventually, Robeson was able to transcend the gaze imposed upon him and forcefully craft his image, a public persona that surpassed those that had been created for him by those who sought to mitigate his level of visibility in American society. We see this in the photographic legacy of Robeson and the complex nature of imagery in America.

The Black Heritage Stamp and the Campaign for Reclamation

Again, a primary goal of this dissertation has been reclamation, shining a light on one of the most important and accomplished black figures in United States history, who because of his political views has mostly been erased from the historical record. As a black athlete, singer, and film and theatrical performer, Paul Robeson's accomplishments were many. For example, he was the first nonwhite U.S. film star to play a lead role in a film, the 1933 version of *Emperor Jones*. For all he achieved,

Robeson is unknown to most Americans today, and indeed the post-millennial generation of my students.

One of the earliest and most important ways that supporters of Paul Robeson have sought to have his place in history restored was through the United States Postal Service (USPS). There is an office within the USPS that directly reviews proposals and eventually approves new stamp designs, including commemorative stamps, that have served as symbols of iconographic prominence for sports stars, prominent historical figures, and social movements. "Since 1957, the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee has evaluated all stamp proposals. The group selects subjects for recommendations for future stamp issues, made with all postal customers in mind, including stamp collectors."⁶²⁷ This is an effort to "celebrate the people, events, and cultural milestones that are unique to our great nation." In 1978, with the creation of a Black Heritage series, the USPS sought to, "honor African-Americans and the vital role they have played in U. S. history."⁶²⁸ Today it is the longest running U.S. stamp series.⁶²⁹

Because of Paul Robeson's prominence as a historical figure, his inclusion in the Black Heritage stamp series is highly significant, and it was controversial, requiring a concerted effort on the part of his supporters. After all, advocates were petitioning the same government that had sought to destroy him and his legacy during an earlier chapter of history. At the time advocates campaigned for a Robeson stamp, Bill Clinton was serving as president, with William J. Henderson, the seventy-first

⁶²⁷ United States Postal Service, "The Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee: Background," <<https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/csac/background.html>>; accessed June 20, 2018.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

Postmaster General of the United States.⁶³⁰ Irving Kessler, Ph.D., coordinator of an effort on behalf of the Paul Robeson Community Center and South Side Cultural Society, Inc., of Los Angeles, wrote a letter that stated:

Paul Robeson was more than a man with a keen mind, resonant voice and athletic prowess. He was deeply committed to the struggle for peace against racism; however, he paid dearly for the courage of his convictions. During the 1950s, when the country was consumed with anti-Communist witch hunts, Paul Robeson was hounded by the House Un-American Activities Committee until he could no longer work anywhere in this country. Denied a United States passport, Robeson was virtually driven into exile.⁶³¹

The letter goes on to articulate a goal similar to this dissertation's:

"Unfortunately, most young people today know nothing about the accomplishments and struggle of Paul Robeson. Moreover, while some cities do have libraries, university buildings, and public schools which bear his name, references to this important historical figure seem to have been deliberately purged from high school and college history books."⁶³² In many ways, this dissertation is a twenty-first-century continuation of the thinking, effort, and values that drove the Paul Robeson centennial stamp project.

The six-year campaign for a Paul Robeson centennial stamp was ultimately successful. The publication *Playbill*, the monthly magazine for theatre fans, featured an article in its January 14, 2004 issue, recognizing the success. "Paul Robeson, the performer whose sonorous voice made famous his rendition of 'Ol' Man River,' will be commemorated with a U.S. postage stamp as the 2004 honoree in the Postal

⁶³⁰ William J. Henderson, Biography, <<https://www.axiom.com/about-us/corporate-governance/board-of-directors/william-j-henderson/>>; accessed June 20, 2018.

⁶³¹ Irving Kessler, primary source letter, Paul Robeson Community Center and South Side Cultural Society, Inc. of Los Angeles.

⁶³² Ibid.

Service's Black Heritage series."⁶³³ With the success of this campaign, Paul Robeson's handsome visage would be circulating on pieces of mail crossing America.

Upon the stamp's approval, a conference was scheduled for September 23, 2003, at Columbia University to unveil it to the public. Because Robeson was a graduate of Columbia University Law School, it was highly significant that the announcement be made there. This, regardless of the fact that his experiences as a black man exposed to the inner-workings of the legal system in the early 1920s led to profound disillusionment.⁶³⁴ Although he never utilized his law degree or sought to take the state of New York Bar examination, Robeson remains one of the most prominent black American alumni of Columbia's Law School.

At that event, it was reported that "professor Manning Marable, director of Columbia's Institute for Research in African American Studies, told the news conference that Robeson 'was a man who spoke truth to power.'"⁶³⁵ Robeson's life, he said, "is an argument for affirmative action to increase enrollment in the nation's colleges and universities by men and women of color."⁶³⁶ As a scholar who could speak about Robeson with considerable expertise and knowledge, Marable belonged

⁶³³ Ernio Hernandez, "'Ol' Man River' Singer Paul Robeson Commemorated on U.S. Postage Stamp," <<http://www.playbill.com/article/ol-man-river-singer-paul-roberson-commemorated-on-us-postage-stamp-com-117335>>; accessed June 26, 2018.

⁶³⁴ Brown, 122. Although he was counted as a member of the Class of 1922 and was featured in the official portrait of that class, Robeson graduated a year and a half after the rest of his classmates. This resulted in the university listing him as one of the members of the class of 1923. This was through no fault of Robeson's. He had transferred into Columbia from New York University's law school in February of 1920.

⁶³⁵ Mark AlMBERG, "Paul Robeson Honored with Postage Stamp," <<http://www.peoplesworld.org/article/paul-roberson-honored-with-postage-stamp/>>; accessed June 26, 2018.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

to a cadre of black academics who were acutely aware of the need, not just for a stamp, essentially a symbolic representation, but for full recognition and celebration of Robeson's remarkable career path and work ethic.

Celebrating the Activist Robeson Became

Another crucial part of Robeson's awakening as a race man and advocate for justice was his experience at the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). This more than anything set him on a path to becoming an international, anti-colonial activist, a powerful symbol and spokesperson for freedom and justice everywhere.

It was while studying in London that Robeson learned of many essential nuances of African history and culture, including regional differences and the vast linguistic diversity across the continent. Because he felt strongly that people of African descent could learn most from traditional Chinese culture, with its emphasis on "the inner development of man," Robeson came to champion, "the ideological strength of Chinese philosophy."⁶³⁷ As a result, he set out to learn the Mandarin language while attending SOAS. Robeson's appreciation of Chinese culture would further expand when he recorded a version of the song "March of the Volunteers" in 1941.⁶³⁸ His version helped popularize the song in China, leading it to become a

⁶³⁷ Robeson, Jr., 209.

⁶³⁸ David Bandurski "There's an American story at the heart of China's national anthem," <https://qz.com/1017782/the-chinese-national-anthems-long-relationship-with-america/>; accessed June 28, 2018.

rallying cry after the Japanese invaded and occupied mainland China during World War II.

Because of the song's acclaim, "it quickly became part of Robeson's repertoire in his solo vocal performances, and he enjoyed singing it in both Chinese and English."⁶³⁹ "March of the Volunteers" eventually became the official Chinese national anthem, when the National People's Congress (Chinese Parliament) "[I]n March 2004, passed an amendment to make the song's status constitutional."⁶⁴⁰ It was extremely rare for someone to have such influence on another nation's official musical declaration of self.

In addition to SOAS's influence on him, a film project during this period contributed to Robeson's ideological awakening. When he returned to the United Kingdom after finishing filming *Emperor Jones*, he enrolled in SOAS and began playing Chief Bosambo in *Sanders on the River*. Robeson was fully aware that this film was a love letter to the British empire and its colonial influence. At the same time, it depicted genuine African culture and permitted him to play a hero who was entirely a "good guy."⁶⁴¹ Even more impressive, between cast and extras, the film featured 400 black people. Working on the project, Robeson was able to practice speaking African languages and learn firsthand about African culture and politics.⁶⁴² His son, Paul Robeson, Jr., reported that the Nigerians his father befriended, "having listened to the rhythm and tonalities of his English-speaking voice were convinced

⁶³⁹ "Paul Robeson: A Voice That Inspired China," http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/se/txt/2009-01/15/content_174808.htm; accessed June 28, 2018.

⁶⁴⁰ Bandurski.

⁶⁴¹ Robeson, Jr., 211.

⁶⁴² Ibid.

that he was descended from their Ibo tribe, and after careful research, Robeson decided that the Nigerians were right in their conclusions about his ancestry."⁶⁴³ This experience was profoundly influential, setting Robeson more firmly on a path that led to his rise as an international icon for freedom.

Commemorating Robeson in the Built Environment

In addition to print media coverage and photography, Robeson's legacy has been enshrined in other ways. Buildings, including schools, community, and student centers, all bear Robeson's name. One of the most visible is the Paul Robeson Cultural Center on Rutgers' main campus. According to its mission statement:

The Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC) was founded in 1967 and is dedicated to serving the Rutgers University community by offering a wealth of programs, initiatives, and services that reflect the robust history, heritage, and diversity of the African diaspora. Widely recognized as the first black cultural center on a college campus in the United States, PRCC, like most black cultural centers was established in response to the activism/struggle of black students, who organized a campaign calling for greater representation of black faculty, students and staff members. Named after one of Rutgers University's most esteemed alumni, Paul Robeson, PRCC has functioned as a safe haven, 'home away from home' and community hub for our students, staff/faculty, alumni and community members of the greater New Brunswick/New Jersey area. As the Paul Robeson Cultural Center celebrates and honors Black diasporic experiences/identities, we consider ourselves a vibrant and instrumental component of University life, committed to make Rutgers an inclusive and welcoming space for all populations by way of community outreach, student support, and cultural/educational resources.⁶⁴⁴

Reflective of how Rutgers is seeking to treat students with dignity and respect, the Paul Robeson Cultural Center aims to be inclusive and welcoming to all students.

This distinguishes it from the myriad of experiences that Paul Robeson had on

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ Rutgers University: Paul Robeson Cultural Center, "About Us, Who are We?" <<http://prcc.rutgers.edu/about-us-2/>>; accessed June 28, 2018.

campus and in the town of New Brunswick in his early years, although it bears repeating that even within that reality, many non-black coaches and administrators supported him.



*Figure 35: Paul Robeson Cultural Center, Rutgers University, New Brunswick.*⁶⁴⁵

Another building celebrating the legacy of Paul Robeson is located in Princeton, his original hometown. That it exists at all reflects changes in culture and politics over time. In the early 2000s, Princeton’s municipal leadership chose to celebrate the youngest son of a family that had been ostracized from their church and

⁶⁴⁵ Gopa Praturi, “The Paul Robeson Legacy: Spotlight on the PRCC,” <<http://i-am.rutgers.edu/2018/03/paul-robesson-legacy-spotlight-paul-robesson-cultural-center/>>; accessed June 28, 2018.

community in 1900, when William Robeson was removed from his pastorate at Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church.⁶⁴⁶



*Figure 36: Paul Robeson Center for the Arts.*⁶⁴⁷

This statement captures the thinking of Princeton’s local leaders: “The local Arts Council of Princeton renovated and reopened the building at the intersection of Witherspoon Street and Robeson Place on June 5, 2008. It was christened the Paul Robeson Center for the Arts, another honor to the life and contributions of Paul Robeson and the Witherspoon-Jackson Neighborhood of his childhood home.”⁶⁴⁸

One final example of Robeson’s legacy being preserved as part of the built environment is the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, located on the University of Pennsylvania campus. This one stands out because there is little historical connection

⁶⁴⁶ Brown, 26.

⁶⁴⁷ Arts Council of Princeton “Visit Us.” Accessed June 20, 2018.

<http://artscouncilofprinceton.org/about/contact/>.

⁶⁴⁸ Kathleen Helen Levey, “Courage: Paul Robeson,” <<https://kathleenhelenlevey.com/paul-robeson-courage/>>; accessed June 28, 2018.

between that particular site and the man, except that it is relatively close to the home of his sister Marion, which is where he spent the last several years of his life before his passing on January 23, 1976.

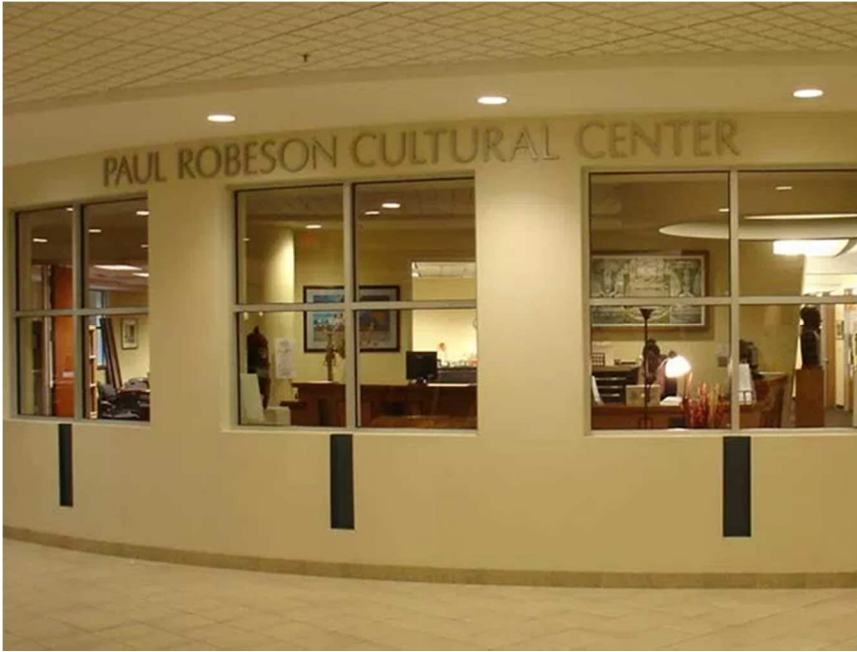


Figure 37: Paul Robeson Cultural Center, University of Pennsylvania.⁶⁴⁹

The campus's rationale for housing such a Center: "Robeson was and still is for many organizations, institutions and people everywhere a model for true academic, athletic and artistic excellence, with a humanitarian spirit. The PRCC, then, was established with the goal not only to serve as a space of refuge for students of color at this campus but also to emphasize the diversity of people of color."⁶⁵⁰ This wording is very similar to that used at Rutgers. The language used by both schools reflects how Robeson remains highly relevant, a prominent historical example of

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Shana-Kay Hart, "Paul Robeson Cultural Center is 'all in' this semester," <https://www.psuunderground.com/2017/09/29/paul-robeson-cultural-center-is-all-in-this-semester/>; accessed June 28, 2018.

black Americans' resolute capacity to transcend hardships that are imposed upon them and thrive.

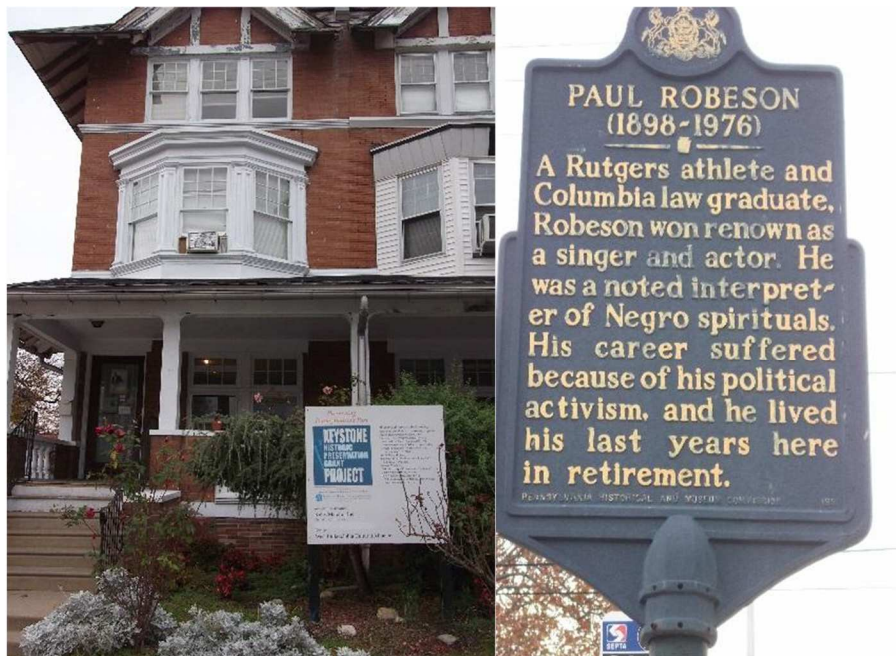


Figure 38: Paul Robeson House Museum (photos taken by the author)

That Paul Robeson has been an inspiration to many, both during and after his lifetime, is apparent in the story of one person who ended up portraying him on stage, actor James Earl Jones. In his memoir, *James Earl Jones: Voices and Silences*, co-authored by Penelope Nivens, Jones recounts the first time he met Robeson. In the early 1950s, Jones was an ROTC cadet at the University of Michigan, who had traveled to New York to attend a Robeson concert with his father, Robert Earl Jones. Before the concert, there was an exchange between father and son. That exchange also illustrates how prevalent Paul Robeson's evolved political influence had become.

The younger Jones had traveled wearing his ROTC uniform, the only formal outfit he possessed. His father sought to discourage James from wearing his uniform, citing an address Robeson had delivered at the Congress of World Partisans of Peace

in Paris in 1949.⁶⁵¹ The widespread misrepresentation of Robeson's actual words, along with lack of fact checking, was in many ways the beginning of the end for Robeson's international travels, as this was when the U.S. State Department became directly involved. In their disagreement over what he should wear, the younger man persisted and attended the concert in uniform. His recollection of the performance is remarkable given that he would go on to portray Paul Robeson on stage in 1977:

The concert hall was sold out, so I stood in the back. Even at that distance, when Robeson opened his mouth to sing, I felt my body vibrate, at once jolted by his energy and soothed, as if I was being rocked in a cradle. The magnetic power of his voice hit me physically as well as emotionally. I felt my body vibrate with emotion. I felt his presence.⁶⁵²

After witnessing Robeson's artistry together, firsthand, Robert Earl Jones brought his son backstage to meet Robeson, "and to Robert's surprise," James would later recall, "Robeson embraced me, uniform and all. I could tell that for Robeson the issue of black soldiers fighting yellow soldiers was an international political issue, not a personal one. To my gratitude, he accepted me as I was, as the son of Robert Earl Jones."⁶⁵³

In Closing

This dissertation is a modern continuation of efforts to re-enshrine Paul Robeson into the cultural legacy of black America. What makes it original is that it has pursued this goal through an examination of Robeson's early life and career, as a way of helping readers conceptualize how deeply influential this man has been to

⁶⁵¹ Duberman, 342.

⁶⁵² James Earl Jones and Penelope Nivens, *James Earl Jones: Voices and Silences* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), 81.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

black America--a man, who to this day, remains unrepresented and undervalued in many circles due to political reverberations that stem back to the second Red Scare. This dissertation forcefully rejects the simplistic and condescending portrayals of Paul Robeson as "un-American." If anything, it argues that he is a lion for freedom of expression, fairness, and justice both in his era and for this time. He was a beacon for what was possible if one had a keen intellect and kept an open mind.

In the end, an argument can be made that no black American icon has had as significant an impact on the international community as Paul Robeson. Americans in 2018 and beyond would do well to turn to and learn from his experiences and cultural influence, holding him up as a model, one that calls on us to strive to be better and more inclusive, especially when it comes to those who may not look like us, or speak the same language.

Regardless of what linguistic system Robeson was using when he spoke or sang, it was in service of freedom for oppressed people everywhere, first for his community, then for others across the nation, and then the world. The post-millennial generation and other readers of this work will be well served if they view this dissertation as a point of departure for seeking out more information about Paul Leroy Robeson and his vital contributions to humanity.

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