

# Preface—Keynote Address at the Long Island University Paul Robeson Conference, Saturday, January 28, 1998 (edited for publication)

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*Brooklyn, New York*

Paul Robeson was born on April 9, 1898, in Princeton, New Jersey, the son of an escaped slave. He rose to heights unparalleled in the century in which he lived. Here are just some of his accomplishments:

He was hailed for more than three decades as one of the greatest singers and actors in the world, fluent in twelve languages and conversant with the cultures of Europe, Asia, and Africa.

In 1918 he was elected to membership in the Phi Beta Kappa honorary academic society.

He was twice winner of All-American football honors at Rutgers College, in 1918 and 1919. He also starred in baseball, basketball, and track, and earned twelve athletic letters in four sports.

Early in his career, he was recognized for his important contributions to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s as the first who made the Negro spiritual an accepted art form and for his performances in two plays by Eugene O'Neill, America's foremost dramatist—*The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun' Got Wings*.

He was the recipient of honorary degrees from Rutgers College in 1932, from Hamilton College in 1940, from Morehouse College in 1943, and from Howard University in 1945.

In December, 1943, he led a delegation of African-American newspaper publishers that met with baseball commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis and with the top officials of all the major league baseball clubs, to urge the breaching of the color line in baseball—which paved the way for the historic breakthrough, three and a half years later, when Jackie Robinson was signed as the first African-American player in baseball's major leagues.

He received the Donaldson Award in 1944 for outstanding male actors for his performance in Shakespeare's *Othello*, which held the record as the longest running Shakespearean play on Broadway up to that time. It eclipsed the record held by Orson Welles' production of *Julius Caesar*.

He appeared in eleven feature films in Hollywood and England, including *Show Boat* and *The Emperor Jones*.

In November, 1939, he introduced on CBS Radio the *Ballad for Americans*, which received such a tumultuous response that for a while, it possessed the status of a second national anthem. In 1940, the *Ballad* was sung at the conventions of the Democratic, Republican and Communist parties—and you can't get more universal than that!

Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.



*With Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona in Othello, Savoy Theatre, London, 1930.*

During World War II, he became a national symbol of unity in the fight against fascism abroad and racism at home, giving benefit concerts for war relief agencies, touring war plants, and speaking at war bond rallies. In 1945, while our armed forces were still segregated, he sang to U.S. troops in Europe as part of the first interracial USO-sponsored overseas show.

In November, 1943, he received the Lincoln Medal from Abraham Lincoln High School, in Brooklyn as the citizen who had rendered the most distinguished service to New York City. In February, 1998, when I spoke to a meeting of the Brooklyn Chapter of OWL—the Older Women's League—there was a woman present who had been at the Lincoln presentation, and she said it was an event she would never forget. The auditorium was packed to the doors. Robeson spoke and sang, without accompaniment, and she estimated that his voice was heard in far-off Sea Gate!

He also received the prestigious Spingarn Medal from the NAACP in 1945 for “his active concern for the rights of the common man of every race, color, religion and nationality.”

He played a leading role in the major civil rights struggles of the 1940s—to end the crime of lynching, to eliminate the poll tax, and to fight against job discrimination—all of which laid the basis for the groundbreaking civil rights victories of the 1960s. In 1946, he led a delegation that met with President Harry Truman to demand passage of a federal anti-lynching law. To our shame, that year, there were a total of 54 lynchings perpetrated against African Americans, some of whom had just returned from fighting for their country against fascism. When Truman was asked to make a statement against lynching, he refused on the ground that it was not “politically opportune.”

Robeson was also a firm and unwavering supporter of the American labor movement during the period of its greatest growth and influence in the 1930s and 1940s. He marched on picket lines, assisted in organizing drives, sang in union halls, and was awarded honorary lifetime memberships in more unions than any other public figure of his time. His speeches and writings played a decisive role in the successful campaign in 1940 of the United Automobile Workers to organize that bastion of the open shop—the Ford Motor Company.

He helped focus the attention of our nation and the world on the struggles of all colonial people for freedom. He founded and later chaired the Council on African Affairs where he worked tirelessly, along with his good friend, Alphaeus Hunton, in the cause of African freedom.

At the height of his career, he earned the highest income of any concert performer in the world and was probably the most internationally renowned American, second only, perhaps, to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

He was inducted in 1972 as the only African-American charter member of the National Theater Hall of Fame that is housed in New York City’s Gershwin Theater.

He was inducted into the National College Football Hall of Fame in 1995, almost fifty years after it was established. It is something of a commentary that it took almost half a century to recognize the greatest college football player of his time.

And finally, in February, 1998, he was the recipient of one of the lifetime achievement awards from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, otherwise known as a lifetime “Grammy” Award.

A person with this almost incredible record of accomplishments became, in effect, a non-person as a result of a campaign of intimidation and harassment conducted by the FBI and other agents of our government that was only matched, some years later, by the attack on another great fighter for freedom—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Let me tell you about just one of the essays in this collection. I was asked to deliver a talk to the Brooklyn Chapter of OWL—the Older Women's League—on the subject, understandably, in view of the nature of the organization, “Paul Robeson and the Women Who Influenced His Life”—his mother, Maria Louise Bustill Robeson, his wife, Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson, and his sister, Marion Robeson Forsythe. In the preparation of that talk, I relied to a great extent on the work of a scholar who lived right here in Park Slope, Brooklyn—Robert Schaffer—whose paper is entitled, appropriately enough, “Out of the Shadows: The Political Writings of Eslanda Goode Robeson.” It tells the story of the woman that Robeson married in 1921, who not only had a profound influence on his life, but who also carved out a career of her own in the course of which she helped immeasurably to heighten our country's awareness of Africa, its people, and their own contributions.

Let me conclude by relating my own personal contact with Paul Robeson. In 1949, I was an officer of the International Fur and Leather Workers' Union, one of the unions that had bestowed honorary lifetime memberships on Robeson. That summer, he was invited to perform at our union's Fur Workers' Resort at White Lake in upstate New York. I was asked, and gladly agreed, to write a radio script that would be used to introduce him. I did so, and I shall always treasure his inscription on the first page of the script—“Thanks a million, Paul.” A few weeks later, I was part of the cordon of World War II veterans assigned to protect him during the second Peekskill concert, about which you will be reading from one of the principal figures at the concert, the distinguished writer, Howard Fast. When the concert was over, I was asked to drive Ewart Guinier, then an outstanding labor leader and the father of law professor Lani Guinier, one of the early victims of President Clinton's lack of courage. We had to run a gauntlet of a jeering mob, armed with rocks and other missiles, while hundreds of state troopers stood by and did nothing. Because Mr. Guinier was a stately African-American, some in the mob mistook him for Robeson and our car was the object of a special venom.

I had one more link with Paul Robeson and that was through my late brother, Dr. Philip S. Foner, who was introduced to Robeson by Eslanda's mother, the daughter of Francis L. Cardozo, one of the leading figures of the much-maligned Reconstruction period. Together, Robeson and Phil made tentative plans for him to record some of the speeches of Frederick Douglass, on whose biography my brother was working. That project never reached fruition, but it was carried through by another great African American, Ossie Davis.

In short, I am sure that these essays, along with other publications and events commemorating Robeson's centennial, will restore this giant figure to the recognition he so well deserves.

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