

# PAUL ROBESON SINGS At Blaine

Sunday, August 16



BRITISH COLUMBIA DISTRICT  
INTERNATIONAL UNION OF MINE, MILL & SMELTER WORKERS  
VANCOUVER B. C.

May 1st, 1932.

Dear G. S. Friends:

Once again this year our union has the honor of being host to your own fellow countryman--and beloved citizen of the world--Mr. Paul Robeson at the International Peace Arch which stands as a symbol of brotherhood on the borders of our two countries.

Last year some 40,000 persons, mostly from Canada, greeted and heard Mr. Robeson in an inspiring concert. From all sides came demands that we make this an annual event. This we hope to do. We know that many thousands more from your country would have attended last year had they known about it. This year we know it will be different when Mr. Robeson sings on Sunday, August 16.

All of us are proud of our symbolic Peace Arch, built by the parents from the school children of Canada and the United States, as well as of the beautiful park maintained by our two countries as a lovely setting for it.

So it is a pleasure to invite all of you our neighbors--regardless of race, creed, color or beliefs, to join with us in an afternoon of song and international fellowship.

Mr. Robeson will sing at 1:30 p.m. So we say pack a picnic lunch and bring the family.

Hoping to see you Sunday, August 16 at the Peace Arch.

Fraternally,

*E. L. Haller*

E. L. Haller - Secretary, Treasurer  
B. C. District Union-21222-30

ELH:cm

CHARTERED BUS TICKETS FROM SEATTLE  
MUST BE PURCHASED BEFORE AUGUST 9.  
FOR INFORMATION CALL: LOGAN 0745  
OR-LANDER 4392. ADMISSION TO THE  
CONCERT IS FREE.

**GA**  
 THE GERMAN-AMERICAN  
 15 Cents  
 INDEPENDENT PUBLICATION  
 VOL. X. APRIL, 1951 No. 1.

### Paul Robeson begrüsst Berliner Arbeiterkonferenz

Paul Robeson, einer der hervorragenden Repräsentanten der amerikanischen Friedensbewegung, sandte das auf dieser Seite abgebildete Begrüßungs-telegramm an die "Europäische Arbeiterkonferenz gegen die Remilitarisierung Westdeutschlands".

(Näheres ueber die Konferenz Seite 7)

**WESTERN UNION**  
 W. P. MARSHALL, PRESIDENT


EUROPEAN WORKERS CONFERENCE  
 BERLIN GERMANY

HEARTFELT GREETINGS FROM AMERICANS OF ALL GROUPS  
 ESPECIALLY FROM RACES OF NEGRO AND WHITE WORKERS  
 WHO DESIRE AND FIGHT FOR PEACE . NOW INSPIRING  
 TO KNOW THAT WORKERS OF WESTERN GERMANY UNDERSTAND  
 CRYING NEED FOR PEACE AND REFUSE TO SERVE AS  
 HUMAN FODDER FOR WAR PROFITEERS WHO DO NOT  
 REPRESENT TRUE AMERICA . ALL THE BEST TO YOU IN  
 THIS CONGRESS . BY OUR UNITED EFFORTS WE SHALL  
 YET IMPOSE THE PEACE AND LIVE IN FREEDOM AND  
 COOPERATION WITH ALL PEOPLES.

PAUL ROBESON

1951

Callers who use this page will be sent at their full rate	
FULL RATE	DEFERRED
DUE	NIGHT LETTER



*Translation: Paul Robeson greets the Berlin Workers' Conference. Paul Robeson, one of the most outstanding representatives of the German peace movement, stands beside the telegram he sent to the European Workers' Conference Against the Remilitarization of West Germany.*

# A Man of His Times: Paul Robeson and the Press, 1924-1976

Mary E. Cygan  
*University of Connecticut*

The majority of the negroes in Washington before the great war were well behaved. . . . Most of them admitted the superiority of the white race, and troubles between the two races were undreamed of. Now and then a negro intent on enforcing a civil rights law would force his way into a saloon or a theatre and demand to be treated the same as whites were, but if the manager objected he usually gave in without more than a protest.

The *New York Times* printed the editorial from which these sentences are taken on July 23, 1919, a few weeks after Paul Robeson graduated from Rutgers University and only five years before the reviews of his early performances appeared.

The white mainstream press covered Paul Robeson's career from his acting debut in 1924 until his death in 1976. The story of how Robeson was silenced at the height of his career, how the federal government hounded him, how contracts were canceled, how halls were closed to him, how his films were withdrawn from circulation, and how he was denied the right to travel even to Canada and Mexico has been told elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. DuBois believed that in the 1950s and 1960s, Robeson was "the best known American on earth, to the largest number of human beings. His voice [was] known in Europe, Asia and Africa, in the West Indies and South America and in the islands of the seas. . . . Only in his native land [was] he without honor and rights."<sup>2</sup> The press played a key role in the process of making Robeson disappear from public view in the United States. The white mainstream press moved from reporting on anti-Communist attacks on Robeson in the early 1940s, to participating in the demonization of Robeson in its massive coverage of his activities in 1949, including his remarks before the Paris Peace Conference and his attempt to give a concert at picnic grounds outside Peekskill, New York. The following year, Robeson became a non-person in his homeland.

This article examines what was said about Robeson in the press before and after 1949, seeking in those reports a clue about how an artist and political figure of Robeson's stature could be so completely erased in the 1950s. It demonstrates that tension and limits to the coverage could already be seen before 1949, and that the way the image of Robeson was manipulated in the late 1960s and 1970s, when he was "rehabilitated," parallels the way other controversial African Americans have been treated by the press. Robeson's career,

as filtered in the American press, can be seen to fall into five main periods: 1) The New Negro, 1924-1939, 2) *Othello* and Civil Rights, 1939-1948, 3) Turning Point, 1949-1950, 4) Silence, 1950-1958, and 5) The Tragic Figure, 1958-1976.

### The New Negro, 1924-1939

In the first years of Robeson's public career, the white press portrayed him as a figure who entertained, and also reassured, white audiences. We can see in the press coverage of this period the positive influence of the Harlem Renaissance, but also tendencies from 1920s nativism. The exotic cultural artifact or performance, whether from Black Harlem or a European peasant past, was welcome, but only as a "contribution" to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. Robeson appeared as a romantic figure who stirred the imagination but never threatened prevailing presumptions.

Interviews and personal profiles portrayed Robeson not only as "the greatest actor of his race,"<sup>3</sup> but as a model African American. His opinions were characterized as those of "the intelligent Negro," "the educated Negro," or "the New Negro." (In the *New York Times*, he was "Paul Robeson, negro actor"—and, at least once, "giant negro actor"—until April 1930 when he became the "Negro singer and actor."<sup>4</sup>) A reviewer of Robeson's pathbreaking 1925 concert devoted entirely to African-American spirituals and secular songs concluded that "the voice of Paul Robeson is the embodiment of the aspirations of the New Negro who pleads best the race's progress by adhering strictly to the true endowment of his ancestors."<sup>5</sup> When reports circulated after Robeson's successful performance as *Othello* in London that an American production casting Robeson opposite Lillian Gish might be in the works, a reviewer announced that the production would be a "milestone in the struggle of a race."<sup>6</sup> According to the press, Robeson and his wife, Eslanda were "in a position to help tremendously the cause of their people in the United States."<sup>7</sup>

Robeson was not seen so much as a token as a trailblazer, a successful phenomenon who presaged a new era of understanding and optimistic accommodation. Interviews focused on his accomplishments as well as his wife's. A report on Robeson's acting debut in *All God's Chillun'* in 1924 noted that Eslanda Goode Robeson held an unprecedented position as a technologist in a New York hospital and that the young couple had "friends of both races," demonstrating "hope for the younger generation."<sup>8</sup>

In this period, the press was surprisingly ready to acknowledge that Robeson faced racial discrimination, though in the 1950s it would deny that race played any role in attacks on Robeson. The *New York World* noted public criticism by members of the Dutch Treat Club when, after Robeson sang there, the officers declined to confer an honorary membership as was customary.<sup>9</sup> Similarly when the Philadelphia Art Alliance refused to allow the display of Antonio Salemme's

celebrated statue of Robeson, newspaper coverage was generally sympathetic to Robeson and implied that the art organization offered only weak excuses for its position.<sup>10</sup>

In reporting the outrage over these insults, reporters and columnists implied that racists were a dying breed, that thanks to African Americans like Robeson, racism was in decline. All that was required was more people like Robeson who could put white people at ease and who, with his charm and outstanding talent, could dissolve barriers painlessly (for both blacks and whites). A review of Eslanda Goode Robeson's 1930 biography of her husband appeared under the headline: "Up From Slavery Indeed! Paul Robeson's Life Written by Wife Is Glowing Record of What Talented Negro May Accomplish." The review concluded that though Robeson was a "northern Negro . . . his wife takes pains to show that he was never 'uppity.' He simply moved along on his tremendous natural momentum, finding white friends aplenty who were glad to call him Paul . . . he was not only the King of Harlem, he was free all over town."<sup>11</sup>

Press coverage of this period portrayed Robeson's growing interest in African-American and African cultures and the connections between them as a curious hobby—a sort of dabbling in a "noble savage" mystique. Robeson reassured critics when he wore a tuxedo to perform his debut concert of spirituals, which a critic pointed out was presented "without deference or apology."<sup>12</sup> But Robeson initially alarmed reporters when he spoke before the League of Colored People in London and said that the "Negro race should redeem its African heritage." The *Associated Press* pressed for a clarification and reported that Robeson had "no intention of quitting civilization for a leopard-skin life in the interior of Africa—or somewhere."<sup>13</sup> He could present folkloric gifts, so long as he accommodated the values and assumptions of the white world.

### *Othello* and Civil Rights, 1939

In 1939, Robeson returned to the United States after nearly a decade abroad, more visible thanks to his European success, and more vocal. He now protested segregation and strained the image of someone effortlessly "breaking barriers." A more threatening figure, Robeson no longer fit the model of the New Negro as fashioned by the white press. During this period, while his image was in flux between the old Robeson as the press had filtered him and the new, politically active Robeson, the *New York Times* printed no editorials about him—though editorials had appeared in the earlier period and many would appear in the following period, when a new, negative image emerged.

Robeson's performances received enthusiastic coverage. Reports of his concerts consistently noted the warm ovations he received from his audiences. The 1943 New York production of *Othello* enjoyed wide and serious discussion.

Despite criticism for some details of Margaret Webster's production, New York critics were as impressed by Robeson's new performance as Othello as London critics had been thirteen years earlier. But an unease with his stronger political voice crept into the personal profiles. A backstage interview included the observation that Robeson's manner was "normally friendly but can grow coldly stern in defense of his race."<sup>14</sup>

The *New York Times* did not cover Robeson's first major protest of segregated seating at a Kansas City concert in February of 1942, though other newspapers, like the *New York World-Telegram* did.<sup>15</sup> But by April 1942, the *New York Times* acknowledged Robeson's growing activism, running an article describing Robeson as a politically involved artist, a universal humanist:

Experience in other movements, he feels, far from damaging him as a musician, has enriched him both as a human being and as an artist. . . . Finding something bigger than himself and linking himself to the whole progressive movement . . . has also made him more serious about his work . . . he feels . . . he represents the forces of freedom.<sup>16</sup>

In a few years, the *New York Times* would claim Robeson represented very different forces. Several headlines on Robeson's views as chair of the Council on African Affairs reveal the direction of the trend:

WOULD HELP COLONIES (April 25, 1944)  
 SINGER PLEADS FOR AFRICA (May 15, 1946)  
 ROBESON ACCUSES THE U.S. OF EXPLOITING AFRICA  
 (April 7, 1948)

Robeson had decried colonialism in Africa and the United States support of European imperialism since the 1930s, but the press did not begin to characterize his criticisms as attacks on the United States until the late 1940s.

Anti-Communist politicians began investigating Robeson as early as 1942 when Martin Dies, Chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) included Paul Robeson's name on a list of alleged Communists. In 1946 Robeson was called before the Tenney Committee of the California state legislature where he publicly denied that he was a member of the Communist Party. By 1947 Senator J. Parnell Thomas was taking testimony against Robeson before HUAC, and some reporters began asking Robeson if he were a Communist.<sup>17</sup> But in this period, Robeson was still identified as a representative of African American opinion—as "Negro actor" or "Negro singer." For example:

Paul Robeson, Negro actor and singer, declared yesterday afternoon in an interview that the temper of the American Negro had changed during the war and that the Negro now “wants his freedom.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1944, when Robeson was denied the use of a Baltimore theater, the *New York Times* noted that the same theater had refused a joint request by Eleanor Roosevelt and the NAACP for a meeting place. By 1947, when Robeson was refused a hall for a scheduled concert in Peoria, and was forced to get a court writ to sing in an Albany high school, his political views were seen as a major cause of the opposition to him, but racism was also identified as a contributing factor. In reporting on the Albany incident, the *New York Times* quoted Robeson’s lawyer that the ban was a “slur on the Negro people as a whole,” sought a quote from the pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and covered a protest of the ban by thirteen clergymen. After 1949, the *New York Times* would ignore similar protests by African Americans though they would appear in African-American newspapers. Until 1949, the *New York Times* reported on the red-baiting of Paul Robeson but refrained from actively developing the image of Paul Robeson as “un-American.”

### Turning Point, 1949-1950

In 1949 and 1950, as the press worked through and settled on a new interpretation of Robeson, the amount of space devoted to him increased significantly. From 1940 to 1948 an average of 12.6 articles a year in the *New York Times* mentioned Robeson. The peak year in that period was 1947, the year in which Robeson announced he was giving up singing to devote himself to civil rights work when 22 articles about him appeared. In 1949, the *New York Times* ran 159 articles (77 of them on the Peekskill affair) mentioning Robeson. In 1950 another 37 articles appeared. After this period, coverage would drop significantly to less than eight or nine brief notices, a few sentences each, per year until the 1960s when Robeson disappeared altogether from the press.

Once the new interpretation of Robeson as a Communist sympathizer appeared in 1949-50, the *New York Times* separated him from the African-American community. Attacks on him, which the press previously interpreted as racially motivated, now were alleged to be reactions to Robeson’s politics pure and simple. The African-American press, in contrast, occasionally disavowed specific political positions taken by Robeson, but insisted that the racial dimension of the attacks on him should be acknowledged.

The Baltimore *Afro-American* summed up its view during the anti-Communist witch hunts of the 1950s:

The word "COMMUNIST" has developed into the nation's No. 1 "curse-word." If a person wants to "put you in the dozens," compare your forefathers with lower animals, use God's name in vain when describing you, he does it all simply by calling you a "d\_\_n COMMUNIST." You are deep-red if you stand against racial segregation. You can kiss the feet of Stalin, wear a red rag around your head, have a sickle and hammer engraved on your teeth, oppose the Marshall Plan, take trips to Moscow—and you will only be a "suspected Communist." You will be investigated before you are condemned.

But the moment you reveal that you hate Jim Crow, that you really stand for the equality of all mankind before the face of God, that the color of a man's skin has nothing to do with the quality of his mind or the goodness of his heart, you immediately become a 'd\_\_n RED'." <sup>19</sup>

Robeson's appearance at the Paris Peace Conference protesting the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in April 1949 would precipitate the thorough-going reinterpretation of his person in 1949-1950. Delivering a speech at the conference on behalf of the London Coordinating Committee of Colonial Peoples, he warned against pressuring Third World countries into taking sides in the increasingly tense stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union. According to his memoirs, Robeson added the remark that it was "unthinkable" that African Americans would take up arms to fight for the United States in an imperialist war—"In the name of an Eastland [Senator from South Carolina]." <sup>20</sup> He said later that, "I thought it was healthy for Americans to consider whether or not Negroes should fight for people who kick them around." <sup>21</sup>

Robeson's comments were met with an agitated response. The *New York Times* printed three editorials about Robeson in the three months following the Paris Peace Conference and gave extensive coverage to African Americans appearing before HUAC to refute Robeson's comments. <sup>22</sup> In July 15, 1949, a *New York Times* article on testimony about Robeson's Communist affiliation as alleged by Manning Johnson before HUAC bore the inflammatory headline: "Black Stalin Aim Laid to Robeson." <sup>23</sup> And in 1949 and 1950 a special category appeared in the *New York Times* index exclusively for articles about Robeson's comments at the Paris conference: "international relations/big powers/Negroes (American) stand in case of war."

The three editorials took Paul Robeson to task for stepping outside of the image created for him. Whereas Robeson had been the pre-eminent African American, now he was disassociated from the black community altogether. The editors promoted other persons who could be interpreted as figures vanquishing (still) disappearing racism. Though the term "New Negro" no longer appeared in the *New York Times*, the role still remained to be cast by new candidates.



We do not believe that making speeches of any sort can do as much for the American Negro as is being done by great American Negroes who in their own personalities demonstrate how hollow is prejudice and how ill-grounded is discrimination. Nothing that Mr. Robeson can say will be half as important as the fact of the existence of Roland Hayes and Ralph Bunche, of Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson, of Marian Anderson and Dorothy Maynard and yes, of Paul Robeson.<sup>24</sup>

The editors gave Robeson one last chance to reassume the old role.

He is mistaken and misled, as many other persons are and have been. We hope profoundly, that his passion for a good cause will not lead him permanently into support for a bad one. We want him to sing and to go on being Paul Robeson.<sup>25</sup>

The other two editorials recommended Ralph Bunche and Jackie Robinson as praiseworthy African Americans in contrast to Robeson whom they further discredited. "Jackie Robinson's statement [repudiating Robeson's comments] is impressive testimony to the vitality of American democracy, to the determination to keep on 'fighting race discrimination until we've got it licked.'" <sup>26</sup>

Throughout the late spring and early summer of 1949, the *New York Times* ran a series of articles showcasing African Americans who denied that Paul Robeson could speak for the African-American community (including two front page articles in July). Among those cited as disavowing Robeson was Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. (a member of Congress from the twenty-second district and pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem) whose statement ran under the headline, "Robeson as Speaker for Negroes Denied." <sup>27</sup> The same day, a different article reported that "Walter White [executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] . . . said that Mr. Robeson's remarks in Paris did not represent the views of the majority of American Negroes." <sup>28</sup> In an article headlined "Red Failures Here Told By Minorities," a rabbi claimed that Jews were anti-Communist and "another Negro, Thomas W. Young of Norfolk, a publisher, declared that Robeson has broken the bond he once had with the Negro mind." <sup>29</sup> A few days later, a front page headline, spanning two columns announced, "Jackie Robinson Terms Stand of Robeson on Negroes False." <sup>30</sup>

The *New York Times* gave the impression that the African-American community unanimously and unequivocally condemned Robeson. In so doing, it ignored African-American newspapers which saw a much more complex picture, often distancing themselves from Robeson's left-wing affiliations, but affirming his importance as a critic of segregation. During the same summer that the three *New York Times* editorials appeared denying Robeson could

speak for African Americans, the Baltimore *Afro-American* printed an editorial which decried the tendency to discredit Robeson's civil rights activism. The real issue, it claimed, was:

What will happen when there are 10,000 Robesons or 2,000,000 or 10,000,000? All any oppressed masses need is leadership and the House Un-American Activities Committee is simply fearful that Mr. Robeson represents that type of leadership.<sup>31</sup>

In its reporting on the spring 1949 Paris Peace Conference and its aftermath, the *New York Times* consistently selected and highlighted quotations from the African American community which conformed to its own interpretation of the affair and ignored or downplayed those which did not. We can see the same pattern in reporting on events surrounding an outdoor concert near Peekskill, New York in late summer 1949.

Robeson had agreed to sing at an August 27 benefit for the Harlem Chapter of the Civil Rights Congress. The day before the scheduled concert, eleven Westchester residents asked for police protection for concert-goers and Robeson citing "inflammatory statements" in local newspapers about the concert and publicity for a demonstration planned by the Joint Veterans Council of Westchester County.<sup>32</sup> However, only four deputy sheriffs were on hand as concert-goers arrived. The violence which ensued as the demonstrating veterans blocked the entrance to the concert grounds—trapping a handful inside and preventing any additional persons from entering—lasted two and a half hours. Robeson, whose car was turned away before it reached the concert grounds, never sang. Soon after, the Civil Rights Congress announced plans to reschedule the concert.<sup>33</sup>

On September 4, chartered buses, private cars, and trains brought a crowd of 15,000 to hear Robeson sing at a Westchester County picnic ground near Peekskill while several thousand veterans sympathetic to Robeson formed a defense perimeter around the concert area. According to the *New York Times*, the veterans supporting the concert organizers "were strictly disciplined and obeyed almost without exception the orders of their committeemen who ran the encampment as if they were setting up a headquarters post in an enemy area."<sup>34</sup> Approximately 1,000 protesting veterans paraded at the entrance to the concert grounds but were separated from concert-goers by hundreds of state troopers and local law enforcement officers. By late afternoon, unruly crowds assembled and attacked the concert-goers as they left the grounds. The attacks continued until late at night and, according to state police, ranged over ten square miles.

*New York Times* reports published on September 5 and 6,<sup>35</sup> in the immediate aftermath of the concert, included many telling details which would drop out

of summaries of the incidents in later reports and be ignored or contradicted in three editorials. On-the-scene reporting described a diverse crowd of rioters, including “men and women who looked normally like law-abiding citizens,” “housewives [who] were seen walking along the roads batting at passing cars with sticks,” and youths “who [in the presence of police] started casually flipping pebbles [and] stepped up their missiles to boulders before the police intervened.” Though spokespersons for the Joint Veterans Council alleged that the veterans had no connection to the violence because they ended their protest and left the area before the attacks began, *New York Times* reporters described youths with the word “vet” chalked on their shirts, and quoted a local man in a bar saying, “Why should we get sweated up? The kids can do a better job and the cops don’t run them in.”

Stories on September 5 and 6 covered numerous, independent, yet consistent accounts by those who arrived in Manhattan late on the evening of the 4th describing stoning (broken bus windows corroborated the stories) and complaining of police who made little effort to rein in the attacks. Accounts from passengers and the drivers of the chartered buses coincided. (Some drivers frightened by the stone-throwing crowds abandoned their buses in Westchester County leaving passengers to drive the buses themselves or seek other transportation).<sup>36</sup> Two buses with African-American passengers returning from an afternoon excursion to Hyde Park, New York and not connected to the concert had also been stoned. At least sixteen cars were overturned and authorities verified nearly 150 injuries requiring medical treatment. Reporters covered a press conference held the day after the concert in which Robeson charged not only that state troopers had allowed attacks to occur in the hope of provoking a reaction from concert-goers but that a state trooper had clubbed Robeson’s own car while shouting an epithet. Robeson praised the concert-goers and the veterans protecting them for their self-discipline and restraint.

Despite detailed coverage which included ample evidence that a racial element characterized the attacks and that authorities did not act to prevent the violence,<sup>37</sup> editorials and later coverage show how the editors reinterpreted the events to support a different conclusion, backing away from troubling information in the *New York Times*’ own on-the-scene reports. A headline of September 8 already indicated the direction of this reinterpretation: “Police Commended in Peekskill Fray.”

As early as August 29, in the wake of the first attempt to hold the concert, the *New York Times* printed an editorial that was mildly supportive of Robeson but already noted the limits of the editors’ sympathy. It concluded that the audience of August 27 “went there to hear Mr. Robeson sing, not to get into a fight.” The editorial upheld Robeson’s right to sing regardless of the “twisted thinking” on the Soviet Union “that is ruining Robeson’s great career.” But an editorial on September 6 described the audience at the second concert in

different terms: "a crowd of 15,000 persons, many of them Communists . . . [assembled] more or less as a gesture of defiance against those who had forcibly prevented a similar concert from being held eight days previously." This editorial outlined the three main themes that would characterize *New York Times* coverage of two official inquiries into the violence at Peekskill: a report by the Westchester County District Attorney sent to the governor on September 7, 1949 and the report of a grand jury filed in June 1950.

The first theme was that Robeson's supporters sought the mantle of martyrdom and provoked the violence by displaying their strength. On September 6 the editors wrote: "Obviously the persons who promoted this concert knew that there might be trouble, and it is more than likely that a good many of them hoped there would be. Any form of extremism thrives on martyrdom." An editorial of June 18, 1950 echoed this view: "The one thing the Communists can use now most effectively is the role of martyr. It should not be given to them." Though the editors were willing to concede to Robeson the abstract right to hold the concert, they condemned him for rescheduling it. No one alleged that Robeson's supporters had taken part in the violence, but this fact was portrayed as part of a plan to appear to be victims as well as, simultaneously, to appear strong. The editors scoffed at the guards' attempts to prevent violence: "The Communists had at their disposal a well-trained and closely knit quasi-military 'defense' organization . . . its discipline was good. This makes it all the more alarming . . . It was a calculated display of Communist organizational strength."<sup>38</sup>

The second theme was that the demonstrating veterans were innocent of the violence which followed the demonstrations. The September 6 editorial argued that "Little groups—mostly youths too young ever to have been war veterans—hurled insults and . . . rocks." Not only did on-the-scene reporters describe a more diverse crowd attacking concert-goers, but an article in the same issue of the *New York Times* reported that among the eleven arrested on various charges, including malicious violence, were the son of the Peekskill police chief and the son of an American Legion official.

The third theme was that racism played no part in the attack on Robeson. The June 18, 1950 editorial put it most succinctly: "in the resistance to the Communist display of strength the motives were anti-Communist and not anti-Negro or anti-semitic. It is a good thing to recognize the Communist tactic of trying to play upon presumptive race prejudice and to create its shadow even if its substance is absent." This position ignored much evidence that racism played a large role in the attacks including a dramatic detail, first reported in the *New York Times* on August 28 (and repeated in three later reports): during the attacks on the first night that Robeson attempted to sing, "someone turned off the flood-lights in the park. A few moments later, several fiery crosses, emblematic of the Ku Klux Klan, blazed on the field."<sup>39</sup>

The editors chose to ignore statements by African Americans about the racial dimension of the violence, even those which appeared in earlier reports published in the *New York Times*. Thus a statement by the NAACP that “anti-Negro sentiment was clearly discernible” at Peekskill was buried in a long article on September 7, 1949. But when A. Philip Randolph wrote a letter a few weeks later which said that the demonstrators were anti-Communist more than anti-Negro and praised the police, the editors ran the letter under the headline: “The Peekskill Concert/Robeson Fracas is Discussed from Negro Standpoint.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the official “Negro standpoint” exactly matched the views expressed in *New York Times* editorials.

The *New York Amsterdam News* provided a very different “Negro Standpoint.” While the editors agreed with the first of the three *New York Times*’ points (predicting that, “the Communist Party will certainly make shrewd use of the issue”<sup>41</sup>), it resoundingly rejected the remaining two. The *Amsterdam News* headlined its coverage of the September 4 events with, “Blame Cops in Riot,” and printed a front-page photograph of police striking Eugene Bullard, identified in the caption as the “first Negro WWI pilot.” The front page also carried an eye-witness account of the violence that charged that the police attempted “to provoke the husky-looking Negroes” and beat others. An editorial the following week argued that officers were “sympathetic to the veterans’ plans and publicly encouraged them,” and called for the governor to discipline the Westchester District Attorney and sheriff (rather than put them in charge of an official state report).<sup>42</sup> And the *Amsterdam News* clearly and repeatedly portrayed the Peekskill violence as racially inspired. Accounts on September 10 referred several times to “racial insults” and “racial slurs” hurled at concert-goers. The editorial of September 17 concluded that the “mob at Peekskill was a close blood relation to the lynch mobs of Georgia and Florida.” The editors called on the NAACP to play a leading role in “securing corrective action.”

Though the *New York Times* implied that it was reporting on African-American opinion, none of the complexity in the contemporary views of a popular African-American newspaper like to *Amsterdam News* or the *Afro-American* appeared in the *New York Times*.<sup>43</sup> By the end of the Peekskill reports, the *New York Times* editors consistently portrayed Robeson as a maverick, someone on the fringe of the black community. No reader of the *New York Times* would know that many African Americans, even those strongly opposed to Robeson’s views on the Soviet Union, believed that Robeson still represented the community in his outspoken criticism of segregation, and had concluded that racism accounted for many of the attacks on Robeson.

By 1950, the editors of the *New York Times* stopped using the prefix “Negro” to describe Robeson. During the Peekskill events he became “the baritone and Communist Singer,” “the left-wing singer,” the “pro-Communist singer,” and,

Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.



*Concert before forty thousand at Peace Arch Park, United States—Canada border, Washington, May 18, 1952, at a time when Robeson was refused permission to travel outside the United States.*

once, the “political storm center.” Concert goers became “left-wing followers of Paul Robeson.” The *New York Times* so thoroughly recast Robeson as a left-wing figure that an article on September 9, 1950 could claim that, “Mr. Robeson echoed the Communist party belief that all the world’s trouble could be settled in peace.”

## Silence: 1950-1958

With the June 18, 1950 editorial, the *New York Times* editors closed the book on Paul Robeson. Coverage shrank to a few articles a year, mostly brief reports, a few sentences in length, about legal appeals Robeson filed for return of his passport (revoked in 1950), or mention of awards he received from socialist countries.<sup>44</sup> There were no interviews, and no editorials until his death in 1976. The *New York Times* covered Robeson's stormy appearance before HUAC in 1956 in a brief article that also discussed contempt citations for two other witnesses who refused to surrender passports to the committee.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, African-American papers were much more impressed with Robeson's combative statements before the committee. Robeson quoted, in his autobiography, positive coverage in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *San Francisco Sun-Reporter*, the *Charlottesville-Albemarle Tribune*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Oakland California Voice*. The *Afro-American* said, "We agree with Mr. Robeson that its [HUAC's] members could more profitably spend their time . . . bringing in for questioning such un-American elements as . . . white supremacists."<sup>46</sup>

Though Robeson's career was seriously curtailed, he continued to sing and speak in African-American churches and union halls (no small accomplishment since the church or union could endure intimidating queries by the Federal Bureau of Investigation or other forms of pressure).<sup>47</sup> These appearances were not covered by the white, mainstream press. Even larger events failed to pierce the shroud of silence. For example, the British National Paul Robeson Committee (including twenty-seven members of Parliament among its supporters) arranged for Robeson to give a "live" concert in London via trans-Atlantic hook-up in May 1957. Though representatives of all American newspapers with London offices were invited to witness this defiance of the travel ban placed on Robeson by the State Department, no American papers carried news of the concert.<sup>48</sup>

When Robeson's autobiography *Here I Stand* was published in 1958, it received no reviews in the white mainstream press, and was not even listed in the *New York Times* "Books Out Today" section. The silence was unique to the white American press. The book was enthusiastically reviewed by African-American newspapers and by the foreign press, including the *Times* of London.<sup>49</sup> However, in 1967 a biography by Edwin P. Hoyt which presented Robeson as a tragic figure, politically inexperienced and duped by Communists, was reviewed twice in the *New York Times*.<sup>50</sup>

## The Tragic Figure: 1958-1976

Hoyt's biography captured the view of Robeson that had gradually replaced the image of the "pro-Communist singer." Robeson was now seen as politically gullible, as a victim of his own misjudgment, as a talented, but tragic, figure.

Robeson's supporters, as well, were viewed as naive or unaware of his politics. The shift began around 1958 when the State Department received renewed international pressure to restore Robeson's right to travel. Early in the year, the silence still held as greetings on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday poured in from around the world. All were ignored by the press except for a proclamation by Jawaharlal Nehru. In reporting on the proclamation and a planned celebratory program in New Delhi the *New York Times* explained:

The case of Mr. Robeson is used frequently . . . by Indian Communists in efforts to sustain their allegations that the United States suppresses civil liberties and mistreats Negroes. . . . The planned celebrations . . . have attracted some Indians who would be astonished at any idea that they were helping the Communists.<sup>51</sup>

By May 1958, a recital Robeson gave at Carnegie Hall (his first in New York in eleven years) received a favorable review confined to artistic matters. Later that year, Robeson received a passport and left the United States for a long series of performances in Europe. When he returned to the United States in 1963, the term "self-imposed exile" was used routinely to describe his five years abroad, as though some hatred that he carried within himself had brought him to leave the United States. The reports did not mention that when he left, there were few places in the country where he could perform, or that the press had helped to create the atmosphere which denied him a venue.

Three years before Robeson's death, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, friends and supporters staged a tribute at Carnegie Hall. Among the celebrants were Harry Bellefonte, Roscoe Lee Brown, Ramsey Clark, Angela Davis, Ruby Dee, Dizzy Gillespie, Mayor Richard Hatcher, James Earl Jones, Zero Mostel, Odetta, and Pete Seeger. While the organizers of the tribute celebrated both Robeson's artistic career and his political activity, a review of the event quoted only two persons from the audience: a black professional who said that he was "not interested in politics" and a corporate lawyer who said he had only recently heard of Robeson. The review downplayed the political sympathies of the audience which gave a standing ovation to Angela Davis, inexplicably reporting only "light applause" for her remarks.<sup>52</sup>

The *Amsterdam News* reported the tribute in more triumphant terms and reprinted the full text of Richard Hatcher's speech. Alongside the speech ran an editorial which asserted,

To us the issue is not whether you agreed or disagreed, or now agree, or disagree, with the political views of Paul Robeson. The fundamental issue is whether or not the Black community will define its own heroes on its terms, or whether the white print and electronic media and our



government will determine who is, and who is not, an “acceptable Black.”<sup>53</sup>

When Robeson died in January 1976, the *New York Times* ran articles covering his wake and funeral, a lengthy obituary, and an editorial. In an echo of Peekskill, deadline reporting gave a fuller, more complex picture than the editorial. According to the reports, the wake attracted a steady stream of “mourners, mostly ordinary workers, retired and church-going, [who] . . . praised the man who made them feel that there was no distance between them.” The funeral was “attended by more than 5,000 people—most of whom were simply dressed and not well-known.”<sup>54</sup> The editorial, on the other hand, referred again to Robeson’s “self-imposed exile” and recapitulated old themes with the mellowed tone introduced in the last years of his life: Robeson, though gifted, was his own worst enemy.

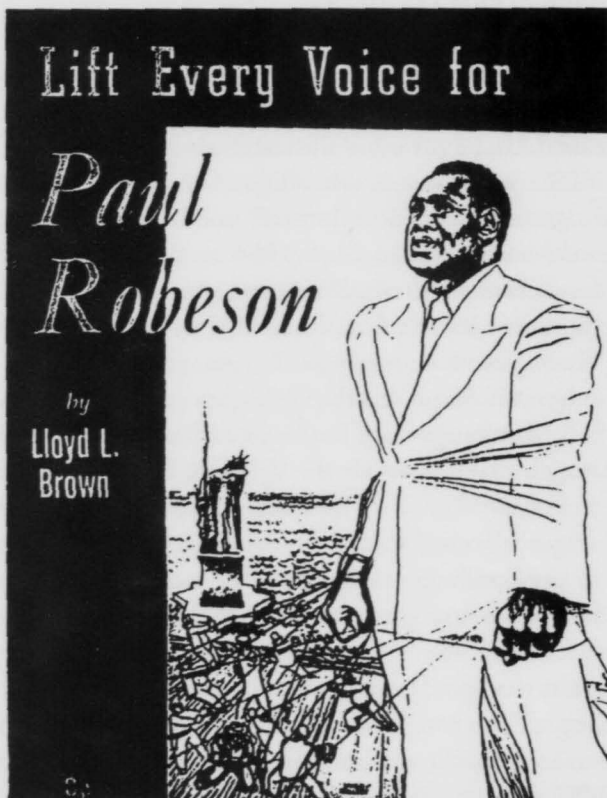
The tragedy of Paul Robeson, like that of Othello was stark: virtue and misjudgment were sharply juxtaposed. . . . Ultimately he chose politics over art, and the world lost a source of inspiration. . . . For reasons of politics, his native country had abruptly and callously turned its back on him long ago.<sup>55</sup>

Though not necessarily acting with a conscious policy, the white mainstream press handled Robeson essentially as would the press in George Orwell’s Oceania. After a period of silence, during which a troublesome figure is made invisible, the person is rehabilitated and a sanitized version of the career and its significance replaces the older one. Thomas J. Kelly, in a study of four Chicago downtown dailies from 1954 to 1968, discovered that such a pattern held for press coverage of other African-American figures. He concluded that when prominent African Americans directly challenged American racial conditions, “the papers denounced the dissent, not the racism.”<sup>56</sup>

For example, Kelly found that the Chicago papers supported Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott, but condemned him when he brought his struggle to the North. In the 1960s the Chicago *Sun-Times* criticized King in every editorial discussing his northern open-housing demonstrations asking, “Is his goal decent housing for Negroes or keeping himself and his movement in the headlines and on the TV screens?” The Chicago *Tribune* denounced the open-housing marches as a “deliberate campaign of sabotage.” King was accused by all four Chicago dailies of inciting violence and seeking the role of a martyr by generating hostility. After King’s death silenced him, all of the papers agreed on a softer image: a “man of goodwill and great heart” who “sought to lead black and white Americans to a new concept of Christian brotherhood.”<sup>57</sup>

Kelly showed that the motives of other dissenting African Americans were similarly questioned<sup>58</sup> while, at the same time, all of the dailies spotlighted success stories, suggesting that racial strife was all in the past. Discussing various awards, promotions, and government appointments the papers used such telling phrases as, "a wonderful example of the American success story," "just one more example of how Negro citizens have raced upward in their progress toward equality with other Americans," and that "his life story should be known around the world as an example of the opportunities in today's America for its Negro citizens."<sup>59</sup> We see in such reporting themes that appeared in the first period of Robeson's career, the optimistic and superficial assumptions that the white press attached to the idea of the "New Negro," the notion that full racial equality had been nearly achieved and that leaders who appeared friendly and reassuring to white Americans would be most effective in fulfilling the promise of America.

Though much had changed since the *New York Times* editorial of 1919, the press still preferred to write of African Americans who were "well-behaved" and to dwell on instances when "troubles between the two races were undreamed of." By the early 1970s, the line had shifted, the nomenclature was revised, but the pattern remained the same.



## Notes

I would like to thank Lawrence Grisham and Sterling Stuckey for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1. Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).
2. Robeson, p. x.
3. *New York Times*, April 30, 1925.
4. *New York Times*, September 12, 1925. As late as February 17, 1930 (well after other newspapers had begun to capitalize "Negro") the *New York Times* referred to Robeson as the "American negro tenor."
5. Paul Robeson clippings, Manuscript, Archives and Rarebook Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, *New York Daily News*, April 25, 1925. All citations for the 1920s and 1930s, except for the *New York Times*, are taken from the clipping file in the Schomburg collection. Five years after this phenomenally successful debut concert devoted exclusively to African American song, a *New York Times* reviewer in London was still not convinced. "Negro spirituals are, as a form of art, of so little value that it is hard to make them sustain an evening in the sophisticated circumstances of a theatre. They need a special emotional impetus, for they make little appeal to the mind, and emotion of the quality appropriate to them can scarcely be communicated by one singer and his accompanist to a skeptical audience." *New York Times*, September 14, 1930. A reviewer in 1925, however, said of the first series of Robeson's recitals of this type (in New York's Greenwich Village Theatre) that the performance was "a remarkable demonstration of dramatic power which the negro actor has brought to the singing both of the 'spirituals' and secular songs of his race." *New York Times*, May 4, 1925.
6. Unidentified newspaper, Schomburg collection clipping, dated May 21, 1930.
7. *New York World*, June 29, 1930.
8. *New Brunswick Sunday Times*, June 15, 1924.
9. *New York World*, May 22, 1930.
10. *New York World*, May 22, 1930. The *New York Times* did not comment on the Philadelphia incident but covered a similar incident later that year. When the New York Union League club borrowed the Salemme statue but then failed to display it as expected in a special show, the *New York Times* reported without comment, on November 18, 1930, the League's explanation that the statue was intended for another show in the vague future.
11. Review by George Britt, unidentified newspaper, July 1, 1930.
12. *New York Daily News*, April 25, 1925.
13. *New York Sun*, Dec. (n.d.) 1934.
14. *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 1943.
15. *New York World-Telegram*, Feb. 19, 1942.
16. *New York Times*, April 19, 1942.
17. *Boston PM*, (Associated Press) May 11, 1947.
18. *New York Times*, April 12, 1944.
19. *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 2, 1958.
20. The *New York Times* reported his comments as, "It is unthinkable . . . [that American Negroes] would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations . . . [against a country] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind." April 21, 1949.
21. Robeson, pp. 41-42.
22. *New York Times*, April 25, 1949 ("The Case of Paul Robeson"), July 19, 1949 ("Dr. Bunche and Mr. Robeson"), July 20, 1949 ("Communist Shut-Out"). The third editorial did not mention Robeson by name, but commended Jackie Robinson's remarks before HUAC (featured in two lengthy articles the previous day) which denied Robeson could be a legitimate spokesperson for the African-American community.
23. The article, about 1,000 words, did quote Lester B. Granger, executive director of the National Urban League as saying that "Authentic Negro leadership in this country finds itself confronted by two enemies on opposite sides. One enemy is the Communist who seeks to destroy the democratic ideal and practice which constitute the Negro's sole hope of eventual victory in this fight for equal citizenship. The other enemy is that American

racist who perverts and corrupts the democratic concept into a debased philosophy of life." The headline and the tone of this article, like other articles in the *New York Times* during this period, downplayed the careful distinction that many African Americans made between rejecting Robeson's political affiliation and supporting his criticism of racism.

24. *New York Times*, April 25, 1949.

25. *New York Times*, April 25, 1949.

26. *New York Times*, July 20, 1949.

27. *New York Times*, April 24, 1949.

28. *New York Times*, April 24, 1949.

29. *New York Times*, July 14, 1949.

30. *New York Times*, July 19, 1949.

31. *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 6, 1949.

32. *New York Times*, August 27, 1949. The *Times* also reported that the Civil Rights Congress was on Attorney General Tom Clark's list of subversive organizations.

33. *New York Times*, August 28, 1949. A book-length account published by the organization holding the concert agrees on these details: Howard Fast, *Peekskill, USA*, (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1951).

34. *New York Times*, Sept. 5, 1949.

35. Nine separate articles appeared on September 5 and 6, 1949. On September 8, 1949 a long article covered the Westchester County District Attorney's report to the governor and was accompanied by the 2500 word report reprinted in full.

36. New York City police halted buses driven by passengers at 218th and Broadway refusing to allow drivers lacking chauffeur licenses to proceed further. One hundred passengers had to arrange private transportation from the police station to their homes. *New York Times*, Sept. 5, 1949.

37. Martin Duberman cites eye-witnesses who saw police participate in the attacks, clubbing and dragging concert-goers. Duberman, pp. 369, 695, note 17.

38. *New York Times*, editorial, June 18, 1950.

39. In addition to the report on August 28, 1949, burning crosses were mentioned in reports on August 29, 30 and 31.

40. A. Philip Randolph's letter appeared on October 9, 1949.

41. *New York Amsterdam News*, September 17, 1949. The *Amsterdam News* was one of the

more conservative African American newspapers, in that it gave extensive coverage to African Americans who criticized Robeson's comments at the Paris Peace Council. *New York Amsterdam News*, April 30, 1949. Yet, even though the editors objected to Robeson's political ties, they argued that many attacks on him as well as the violence at Peekskill were due to racism. And columnists were not as quick to criticize Robeson's political ties as the editors: on September 17, columnist Earl Brown, argued that Robeson's insight into racism was "the reason he is . . . doing the things he does."

42. *Amsterdam News*, September 10, 17, 1949.

43. *Amsterdam News* coverage of the Harlem rally preceding the September 4 Peekskill concert also differed substantially from *New York Times* coverage. The *Amsterdam News* stressed Robeson's proposed boycott of Peekskill merchants and his recommendation that African Americans in the South use boycotts to protest racist violence. The paper quoted one Harlem woman who remarked after a protest march that ended the rally, "See what he meant. If we were to spend our money like we march, we wouldn't be worrying about where we're going to find jobs." The *New York Times* did not mention the boycott issue.

44. From 1951 to 1958, on average, 8.7 articles a year mentioned Robeson, but most of these articles were only a few sentences on the mentioned topics. A brief upsurge in coverage with the reinstatement of Robeson's passport raised the number of articles in 1958 and 1959 (27 and 17 respectively). By the 1960s he was mentioned once or twice a year or not at all.

45. *New York Times*, June 13, 1956.

46. Robeson, pp. 42-44. In May 1956, just before Robeson's HUAC testimony, Langston Hughes in the *Chicago Defender* devoted a column to William Faulkner's statement regarding the integration of the University of Alabama: "If it came to fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes." Hughes asked why this remark did not create the same furor as Robeson's statement to the Paris Peace Conference. Christopher C. DeSantis, ed., *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender* (Urbana: University

of Illinois Press, 1995, pp. 91-2, 247, n.7.

47. Marie Seton, *Paul Robeson* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1958), p. 231.

48. Duberman, pp. 449-450. In June 1952 Robeson sang to thousands in Washington Park on Chicago's southside without an echo in the New York press, something which would have been noticed a few years before; Seton, p. 234.

49. The lack of American reviews also meant that the book did not appear in *Book Review Digest*. Duberman quotes from the Baltimore *Afro-American*, the *Chicago Crusader*, and from an extended interview with Carl T. Rowan in *Ebony*: Duberman, pp. 459-460; other quotes from the foreign press and the African American press appear in Lloyd L. Brown's introduction to *Here I Stand*, pp. xi-xvi. The book was initially published by a group of supporters, the Othello Associates. It was republished by Beacon Press in 1971. Two years later, the *New York Times Book Review* printed an essay by Sterling Stuckey about Robeson which discussed *Here I Stand*:

NYTBR, October 21, 1973, p. 40.

50. Edwin P. Hoyt, *Paul Robeson: American Othello* (World, 1967); *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1967, December 21, 1967.

51. *New York Times*, March 22, 1958. On other congratulatory programs and messages see Duberman, pp. 460-62.

52. *New York Times*, April 16, 1973. The author was present at the event.

53. *Amsterdam News*, April 21, 1973.

54. *New York Times*, January 27, 28, 1976.

55. *New York Times*, January 24, 1976.

56. Thomas J. Kelly, "Editorials on Race," *The Chicago Journalism Review*, vol. 5, no. 8 (August 1972).

57. Kelly, p. 22.

58. For example, when Dick Gregory became active in the civil rights movement, the *Chicago Daily News* labeled his activities "plain press-agentry with no visible benefit to anyone except for the headlines it grabbed for Gregory." Kelly, p. 4.

59. Kelly, p. 4.

# DON'T STILL HIS VOICE!

The government would put Paul Robeson's glorious voice behind an iron curtain of silence.

They've taken his passport and are trying to halt his great leadership of the people's fight for peace and freedom.

They've closed the doors of regular concert halls to him.

BUT, the people demand to hear him!



# HEAR PAUL ROBESON!

*This is our answer to those who would gag Paul Robeson! Even though they would silence him, we will hear him!*

*You will hear him! And you can fight the iron curtain around him by helping to CELEBRATE HIS BIRTHDAY.*

COME ONE . . . COME ALL . . .

# GALA BIRTHDAY CONCERT!

**THURSDAY, MAY 8th—8 P. M.**

**ROCKLAND PALACE, 155th Street and 8th Avenue**

**Hear Paul Robeson and Other Artists**

**ADMISSION: \$1.20**



Auspices: FREEDOM FUND  
.53 W. 125th St., New York  
ENright 9-3980