

Expanding the African American Studies Curriculum: “Paul Robeson: An American life”

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For almost twenty years since beginning teaching in 1968 at the University of California, I dealt regularly in class with the multifaceted accomplishments of Paul Robeson in many of my interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences courses. Because my focus has largely been on twentieth century cultural and political history, and because I have often emphasized the central problem of race and racism, my Robeson references have been both pedagogically appropriate and personally compelling. Paul Robeson is arguably the greatest Renaissance person in American history and one of the central cultural figures of the twentieth century. An exceptional scholar, lawyer, athlete, stage and screen actor, singer, and civil rights and political activist, he performed brilliantly in every professional enterprise he undertook. Few human beings have ever achieved his levels of excellence in even one field, much less several.

Yet despite his extraordinary accomplishments, he remains virtually unknown by millions of educated Americans. In my own work as a university teacher, I rarely encountered students familiar with his many accomplishments. Indeed, most of my students, including African Americans, had not even heard of him. I often found it necessary to interrupt my regular course progression to inform students of Paul Robeson's life and work and to offer various explanations for the discouraging lack of public knowledge about the artist/activist and his colossal impact.

As a human being, I found this widespread ignorance disturbing and depressing. As an educator, I resolved to address the problem by initiating a new course that would simultaneously address this egregious educational deficiency and expand the curriculum in African American Studies. My goal was to offer UCLA students a systematic opportunity to learn about Paul Robeson and to provide, through a detailed examination of his life, a unique approach to study twentieth century history more generally. Because Robeson's spectacular talents in theater, film, music, and politics encourage students to understand culture in broader historical perspective, I also envisioned that the course would augment the interdisciplinary emphasis of African American Studies—a perspective that distinguishes the field from the conventional disciplines that have dominated university life for many decades.

Believing that the time had come for a comprehensive examination of the man and his times for a university audience, I approached the UCLA Center for African American Studies. Quickly responding, the Center offered me the opportunity to present the upper division and graduate level course I entitled

“Paul Robeson: An American Life” in 1988. Because the course has been well received by undergraduate and graduate students alike, I have had the good fortune to present it each academic year.

As I explain in detail at the first class session, the course attempts to accomplish several intellectual objectives. On one level, the inquiry into Robeson’s life encourages students to understand more fully the psychology and sociology of human creativity. They are invited to comprehend how one person can accomplish so much so well. In addition, they examine the social conditions that both encourage and inhibit human potential, especially the extent and persistence of racism in American history.

At the outset, I also indicate that the course has a concurrent and deeper objective. For in many ways the story of Paul Robeson is also the story of America throughout much of the twentieth century. An intensive treatment of Robeson’s life, focusing substantially on his artistic and political activities, yields valuable insights into the character of American society. Accordingly, the course uses biography as a window for a wider understanding of art, history, politics, and race relations. Through course readings, guest speakers, films, records, and personal research projects, students become more capable of understanding the complex and fascinating connections between the several disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

During the ten-week academic quarter, the course focuses on each dimension of Robeson’s life and its linkage to the historical currents of the times. I encourage students throughout the term to make connections between the past and the present, enabling them to appreciate the deeper relevance of historical inquiry. For example, when I teach about Robeson’s difficult and unpleasant encounters with racism as a Rutgers undergraduate, I invite my present students to examine the extent of change (or lack of change) for contemporary African-American undergraduates at large, predominantly white colleges and universities. Similarly, when I present material about the racial hostility Robeson encountered as an award-winning athlete and later as a lawyer in a New York law firm, I compare his early twentieth century experiences with the more subtle persistence of racism in sports and in law in the century’s final decade. This contemporary application, in fact, constitutes a major theme of the entire course and has been responsible for the high quality and robust discussion that has characterized each offering of “Paul Robeson: An American Life” since its inception.

The following themes represent the intellectual substance and direction of the course:

Introduction and Overview

At the outset, students explore the use of biography as an approach to historical and social inquiry. Several examples of major historical and contemporary personalities are briefly examined for breadth and perspective

on this issue. I identify several strengths and limitations of such an approach. Thereafter, I present a specific overview of the life and multifaceted career of Paul Robeson. I begin the course with two video presentations, both widely available for educational use, in order to provide a biographical outline for students, providing a common knowledge base for the more analytically complex material to follow. I use the PBS documentary "Paul Robeson: Tribute to the Artist" and the play "Paul Robeson," starring James Earl Jones as Robeson. These visual documents provide a glimpse into each aspect of his life treated in greater depth throughout the academic quarter: athlete, dramatic actor, film star, singer, and civil rights and political activist, all within the context of twentieth century U.S. history and politics.

The Early Days

In this unit, students examine Paul Robeson's early life. They learn, for example, about the immense influence of his father, an escaped slave. They also examine his early contact with racial discrimination in Princeton, New Jersey and its implications for his future political consciousness. I discuss his lifelong reaction to the specific racism he encountered in his high school principal. I examine too the influence of his siblings, including that of his brother Reeve, whose emotional hostility to racism both precipitated his early death and provided an enduring legacy of militancy for his younger brother Paul. I then delve into his life and struggles as a Phi Beta Kappa student at Rutgers University. Similarly, I present material about his studies at Columbia Law school and his subsequent work as a member of a New York law firm. In particular, I examine the role of an African-American scholar and lawyer in a segregated society in the early part of the twentieth century. Readings include substantial excerpts from Paul Robeson's own book, *Here I Stand*, Susan Robeson's book, *The Whole World In His Hands*, and Martin Duberman's comprehensive biography, *Paul Robeson*.

Robeson the Athlete

During the next segment, students learn about Robeson's athletic career at Rutgers. In particular, they come to understand his accomplishments in baseball, basketball, track, and football. I give extended attention to his record as an All-American football player. I also note his brief career as a professional football player. Most important, students examine why Robeson's athletic greatness still receives scant mention in contemporary sports circles. As a bridge to future themes in the course, I focus on his exclusion, until 1995, for political reasons from the College Football Hall of Fame. Finally, I discuss his personal athletic accomplishments in light of the continuing use of racial stereotyping and discrimination in American athletics. Readings include additional excerpts from *The Whole World In His Hands* and various scholarly articles by University of California, Berkeley sociologist Harry Edwards.

Robeson the Stage and Screen Actor: The Stage

This course unit investigates Robeson's highly acclaimed accomplishments on the New York and British stage. A brief history of the Harlem Renaissance serves as the background for Robeson's personal accomplishments as a dramatic artist in the 20's and 30's. Among the examples I cover are his work in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *The Emperor Jones*, *Show Boat*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *Othello*. I pay particular attention to *Othello*, because Robeson was the first major African-American actor to perform the role of the tragic Moor in the United States. I play excerpts from his 1943 performance of *Othello* from a Columbia LP record; this is a relatively rare resource, but it can be found with diligent effort. Class discussions concentrate on Robeson's insistence that the central tragedy of the drama involved race and honor rather than mere jealousy. Students are invited to examine the racial implications of the play and, as usual, to draw whatever contemporary applications they believe are warranted. Readings include the entire text of Shakespeare's *Othello* and further excerpts from *The Whole World Is In His Hands* and *Paul Robeson*.

Robeson the Stage and Screen Actor: The Screen

Because Paul Robeson was also a star in eleven motion pictures, I also examine this feature of his artistic career in depth. Students view and discuss such films as *The Emperor Jones*, *Jericho* and *Songs of Freedom*, all widely available at present. A major emphasis is on his portrayals of partially strong black characters, which I compare to more stereotypical images of blacks throughout American film history. I also encourage students to think about the deeper reasons for Robeson's determination to abandon his film career because he was unable to obtain more positive roles about his people. Finally, students discuss the continuing problems that racial minorities encounter in the film industry and explore the limited options for both African American actors and producers. Martin Duberman's biography provides the main reading for this unit.

Robeson the Singer: African American Origins

A great bass-baritone, Paul Robeson excelled as a concert singer throughout most of his life. Because records, tapes, and compact disks of his performances are also widely available in commercial outlets, I use them so that students can listen to numerous examples of his concerts and other performances. In the first part of this two week course segment, students explore the African-American roots of Robeson's singing career, concentrating especially on spiritual and freedom songs. While the main materials consist of musical primary sources, I also make available excerpts from Robeson's own writings on music and various secondary sources relevant to his musical career.

Robeson the Singer: Topical Folk Songs

Since many of his songs dealt with various struggles for racial justice and other social themes, this segment of the class is also especially useful in stimulating students to understand the connections between social life and artistic creativity. In particular, students listen to a wide range of Robeson's music with social and political content such as the Spanish Civil War, labor struggles, civil rights, and related themes. I also investigate Robeson's place in the broader American tradition of topical music and compare his work to that of such performers as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Leadbelly, Josh White, Odetta, Bob Dylan, and others. Once again, musical recordings serve as the chief source material.

Robeson the Political Activist: African Nationalism & Civil Rights

Throughout his entire life, Robeson was committed to the liberation of his fellow African Americans and to several broader struggles for human dignity and liberation. In his first week of the concluding unit of the course, I emphasize Robeson's specific work on behalf of international black liberation. I explore his deep commitment to African freedom struggles, using in particular Sterling Stuckey's essay "I Want To Be African": Paul Robeson and the Ends of Nationalist Theory and Practice, 1914-1945." I also assign and promote discussion about Robeson's personal writings on this topic. Finally, I ask students to make an assessment of his role as a militant civil rights activist in the historical tradition of Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and others.

Robeson the Political Activist: McCarthyism

From the end of World War II to his death, Paul Robeson was effectively blacklisted and unable to perform his work as a dramatic and vocal artist. During this week, students learn of his encounter with McCarthyism during this dubious era of the recent American past. In particular, I present such themes as the Peekskill Riot, the passport denials from the Department of State, and his appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). I address the impact of this political persecution on Robeson's physical and mental health. My readings include excerpts from *Here I Stand*, Robeson's complete testimony before HUAC, excerpts from David Cauter's *The Great Fear*, Duberman's *Paul Robeson*, and Eric Bentley's play *Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been?*

Robeson the Political Activist: The Issue of Communism

For much of his life, Robeson had a close association with the American Communist Party and with the Soviet Union. Although denying personal membership in the Party, Robeson clearly knew, admired, and worked with

many of its members and leaders. Moreover, he spent considerable time, personally and professionally, in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Robeson's acceptance of a peace prize from the Soviet Union during the reign of Joseph Stalin exacerbated his difficulties with U.S. authorities during the era of McCarthyism and strikingly split the African-American community. In this final week of the class, students attempt to assess the significance of his relationship with domestic and foreign communists. We explore its impact on his career, on his emotional life and difficulties, and on his broader public reputation. This final theme generates the kind of interdisciplinary fusion of personal biography and social and historical analysis that underlies the course as a whole.

I have found that the uniquely great life of Paul Robeson provides an exciting opportunity for students to examine deeper issues in African-American history, politics, and culture. The course's pedagogical appeal stems in part from students' intrinsic interest in the lives and struggles of real human beings. Robeson's extraordinary accomplishments in so many different areas, moreover, make linkage to historical currents especially easy. His encounters with racism in education, athletics, the theater, the film industry, and with various United States government agencies also encourage serious consideration of the contemporary problems of racism in these same institutions.

The easy access of multimedia presentations for the course similarly engages student attention. Viewing original films, listening to original recordings, and reading original documents add vitality to historical inquiry and motivate students to develop a deeper appreciation for historical knowledge generally. Interdisciplinary African American Studies courses like "Paul Robeson: An American Life," moreover, encourage students to transcend arbitrary disciplinary boundaries and develop a more dynamic sense of the complex and fascinating relationships between various areas of human knowledge.

The Robeson course also has immense value for African-American students still struggling to overcome the pervasive and insidious effect of negative stereotypes in the media and popular culture. For the past nine years, many of my African-American students have commented on the profound impact of Paul Robeson as a role model for young people. That one black man could do so much in the face of profound institutional obstacles is clearly a major source of inspiration. One of the most gratifying educational outcomes of the course over the years has involved presentations by my UCLA students to middle and high school students about the life and impact of Paul Robeson. Equally important, the story of Robeson's multiple talents and achievements is educationally beneficial for non-African American students. Whites, Asian-Americans, Latinos, and others also need to understand that excellence in any field is never determined by one's racial origins, an insight of particular

significance in an era where the destructive mythology of race-based intellectual inferiority still has currency in many quarters.

This course (and many others following a similar pedagogical model) is easily adaptable in whole or in part in American colleges and universities. Although most appropriate to an African American Studies curricular format, the course can be usefully presented throughout the humanities and social sciences. The wide availability of readings, films, recordings and other materials should facilitate the more systematic educational treatment of Paul Robeson, an especially appropriate outcome as we celebrate the centennial of his birth in 1998. Above all, my good fortune with this course at UCLA has reinforced my view that curricular developments in ethnic studies generally have made a major and progressive difference in higher learning, a durable legacy of the historic struggles for civil rights a generation ago.

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Last home of Paul Robeson, 4951 Walnut St., Philadelphia, PA.



Sculpture by Epstein

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