

**“I'm the everybody who's nobody”:**

**Genealogies of the New World Slave in Paul Robeson's Performances of the 1930s**

by

Michelle A. Stephens

The Negro has not become a master. When there are no longer slaves,  
there are no longer masters.

--Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*<sup>1</sup>

In 1939, after traveling for a number of years throughout Europe and Africa, the African American actor and singer Paul Robeson returned home with his family to Harlem. Almost immediately he was asked to perform the song “Ballad for Americans” in a radio broadcast that aired later that year. In his biography of Robeson, Martin Duberman describes the broadcast as “an instant sensation” bringing Robeson a level of acclaim that mirrored his earlier rise as a concert singer of the spirituals.<sup>2</sup> In the 1920s, however, both black and white American audiences understood Robeson to be conveying in the spirituals the racial music of the black slave. The audience’s reception of the radio performance was markedly different because now the black singer seemed able to represent the entire national community, the very embodiment of the country’s cherished political ideals.

By the mid-1940s, Paul Robeson’s status as a national cultural hero would be tainted by his avowed socialism and support for the Soviet regime. However, in debates concerning Robeson’s ‘Americanism’ and the extent of his patriotism in relationship to his commitments to

internationalist ideology, few discuss the specifically *hemispheric* dimensions of his popularity for black audiences during the first third of the twentieth century. In his signature first novel published in England in 1953, for example, the Anglophone Caribbean author George Lamming describes a Robeson performance as the very vehicle that enables two characters, the young, island boys Trumper and the narrator G., to a deeper apprehension of the race as a source of identity alongside other possible utopian and imagined notions of community.<sup>3</sup> In the words of Lamming's Caribbean character Trumper, Robeson reminded the black man that, unlike the "Englishman, an' the Frenchman, an' the...man of America," black identity "ain't have nothin' to do with where you born."<sup>4</sup>

In a recent interview Lamming described Robeson's continued importance in the Caribbean throughout the 1940s as a figure of black male identity that transcended country and nation.<sup>5</sup> His popularity in the islands was unchanged even as he was understood in more negative terms as a subversive in the United States. If one traces the various paths taken by this African American performer throughout the 1920s and 1930s, one finds alongside the typical debate between nationalism and internationalism that shapes the writing of radical histories in the United States during this period, evidence of an alternative form of race radicalism that also questioned the specifically *national* dimensions of liberatory politics. In the Lamming novel, freedom and the "rights o' the NEGRO" are detached from the sense that one's political identity is grounded in nationality, or nativity. The specifically hemispheric dimensions of black identity bring into focus instead the intimate and contested relationship between discourses of race and nation, *as* discourses of political freedom, from the very onset and creation of the Atlantic New World.

This essay explores the competing political genealogies Robeson represented as an embodiment of the New World slave throughout the 1930s, one whose various performances—whether in song, in the press, onstage, or onscreen—resonated both nationally for white and black American audiences and hemispherically in the surrounding black communities throughout the diaspora. His performance of the “Ballad for Americans” came at the end of a decades-long struggle in which the singer tried to understand the various meanings his blackness evoked in both national and transatlantic spaces. As we explore Robeson’s own efforts to gain control of the meaning of his performances, we discover the contradictory understandings of freedom he generated amongst the two racial audiences he addressed throughout much of his career, whites across transatlantic and imperial spaces and blacks across diasporic and colonial worlds.

Our understanding of the historical influence of this cultural figure for many different ‘American’ communities needs to move beyond the accounts of his later reputation as a socialist. We need to travel backward to the 1920s and 1930s, the formative decades in Robeson’s development of a narrative of race that would later guide his internationalist class politics. In addition, Robeson’s multiple geographies of influence—the meanings generated from his performances as they traveled nationally, hemispherically, and globally—reveal the role of the figure of the New World slave in popular and political discourses of freedom during this period.

### **Transatlantic Discourses and the Figure of the New World Slave**

Despite the elision of the Haitian Revolution in continental political theory, the protagonist whom we most immediately associate with the struggle for freedom in modernity is the American slave.<sup>6</sup> Feminist scholars in African diaspora studies have argued that the masculinism of much black and colonial nationalist discourse depends on the elision of slavery

through its projection onto the body of the female slave.<sup>7</sup> But the slave on the plantation, a figure for the oppressed, colonized and conquered, is not the same figure as the fugitive slave imagined in flight from the plantation, and a notion of the slave's quest toward a future freedom involves a slightly different, and more universalizing, rhetoric than the language of struggles for national independence. In his autobiographical writings Paul Robeson linked his own fate to that of the fugitive slave, defending his right to travel after the denial of a United States passport in the 1950s by proclaiming: "From the very beginning of Negro history in our land, Negroes have asserted their right to freedom of movement. Tens of thousands of Negro slaves, like my own father, [ran away]...[some] to foreign countries not to secure their own freedom but to gain liberation for their kinsmen in chains."<sup>8</sup>

The discourse of freedom projected in the racialized voice of the black slave uncannily mirrors certain aspects of the revolutionary political discourse of the slaves' masters. As Michel Foucault argues, in Europe alongside the reframing of monarchical sovereignty in revolutionary republicanism, a form of anti-sovereign political discourse also emerged that drew from a racial language. Modernity represents precisely the moment when political struggle, the defense of the rights of both the individual and the nation-state, were evoked not in the name of *the* people but in the name of *a* people, a special, chosen people in world history. During the revolutionary era, in the hands of those newly in power, the struggle against sovereignty became one of protecting this chosen race from conquest, tyranny, oppression and slavery.<sup>9</sup> Foucault's argument helps us to broaden our understanding of discourses of racial and cultural nationalism in the Americas. While this mode of understanding history through a racial lens lay submerged in European discourses of sovereignty, it gained much more ground in the New World as a way of recounting various struggles for freedom against the colonial empires.<sup>10</sup>

We find forms of this mode of history-telling in the revolutionary languages of liberty developed by colonial elites in the Americas—the vernaculars of “creole pioneer” nationalisms Benedict Anderson describes as originating in Latin America and the United States and traveling back across the Atlantic to the metropolises. Simultaneously we find this discourse of freedom in the alternative ideological formation taking shape under the broader rubric of anti-slavery radicalism.<sup>11</sup> Both of these modes of historical speech, borrowing from metropolitan discourses of race and liberation, have had a purchase within black diasporic narrative traditions as a way of recounting the linked histories of African-descended New World subjects. They appear in the form of the “revolutionary romance,” whose “fairly recognizable structure,” David Scott notes, “typically begins with a dark age of oppression and domination...followed by the emergence of the great struggle against that oppression and domination, and the gradual building of that struggle as it goes through ups and downs, temporary breakthroughs and setbacks, but moving steadily and assuredly toward the final overcoming, the final emancipation.”<sup>12</sup>

Classic anti-colonial texts such as C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* rely on this narrative structure to tell a history of the race that legitimates black revolutionary action.<sup>13</sup> For both Afro-Caribbean and African American writers, the slave’s flight from the plantation provides a key narrative scenario for this parallel discourse of racial freedom, a source for ideologies of black struggle and statehood in the twentieth century. So, for example, in his appendix to the 1962 reprinting of *The Black Jacobins* C. L. R. James states, “Wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed a pattern.... an original pattern, not European, not African, not a part of the American main.”<sup>14</sup> For James, this uniquely West Indian pattern linked the Haitian and Cuban revolutions across their respective centuries. Later, James would add the figure of the North American fugitive slave to his

narrative account of historical, black, revolutionary action in the New World, arguing that the runaway slave served as a fundamental catalyst in United States political history.<sup>15</sup> James's Caribbean and American discourses reflect, respectively, the symbolic importance of the figure of the slave in intersecting diasporic and national histories.<sup>16</sup>

Later in his life Paul Robeson would recall how his father's tales of slavery "haunted his memory and infused his singing of the slave spirituals with a special knowledge and poignancy."<sup>17</sup> However, when Robeson evoked the oratorical legacy he inherited as the proud "son of an ex-slave," not even he was aware of the full extent of contradictory historical meanings such a figure already represented in the New World imaginary. As the primary performative space for his early portrayal of and construction as the New World slave, the spirituals would become the site for his re-staging of broader legacies of oppression and discourses of freedom in United States national political discourse.

With the immediate success of his first concert on April 19<sup>th</sup> of 1925 which "propelled [him] into a stratosphere of acclaim," the slave songs established an indissoluble link between the singer and the American past. This link led simultaneously to his appeal amongst white audiences and his disfavor amongst the New Negro intelligentsia in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s. For members of the black cultural elite, the spirituals signified a racial performance that brought them "'down' to the level of 'the slave people' among whom the songs had originated." But the songs resonated for a national audience precisely because their racialism was perceived to be of the soul rather than of the black body.<sup>18</sup>

Robeson's slave in the spirituals was a noble soul, and in his singing he enabled national audiences to project their own universally held investments in the political meaning of suffering and oppression onto the black male body. Hazel Carby has argued that Robeson's performances

of the spirituals “enabled the public to appreciate a cultural form that had its source in the history of slavery without the uncomfortable associations with exploitation and oppression that the nation would prefer to forget.”<sup>19</sup> She continues, “Negroes, the people whose ‘sorrow and hopes’ Robeson is said to express and to embody, are the cultural vessels which contain liberal amounts of spiritual and religious experience upon which the [national] audience can draw.” However, while it is true that the popularity of Robeson’s spirituals amongst white audiences relied on a certain historical evasion of black slavery, it is also true that his performances fit within a desired narrative of freedom in American political and popular culture. To the degree that Robeson represented the displaced voice of the slave past, the American people as a ‘race’ could find in blackness a way of understanding the nation’s disavowed past of conquest and slavery.

The special poignancy of the spirituals as both Negro and American music reflects and parallels Robeson’s dual role as a racial and national cultural hero. In his performance of the slave Robeson acted as a surrogate, allowing a national, white audience not so much to forget slavery as to reclaim it as a part of their redemptive inheritance in the nation’s journey toward freedom and political liberty. The simultaneous effect of this act of reclamation was the disavowal of the real historical subjects most recently to inherit that history as a racial narrative. Robeson’s surrogated performance did not allow the disavowing of slavery and oppression *per se*. On the contrary, it provided a way of integrating slavery into the rhetorical and discursive inheritance of the nation, while simultaneously evading the black bodies that still bore the burdens of that enslavement in the racially segregated world of the early twentieth century.

Robeson’s cultural politics throughout the 1930s represented precisely an effort to disconnect his art from the rhetorical boundaries of the slave as *trope* in American national discourse. If the spirituals were at first his pathway to a sphere of performative influence within

the nation, by the early 1930s Robeson sought to establish a deeper genealogy for black music outside the nation, in the transatlantic past. His increasing politicization can be tracked in public statements in which he paired an indictment of American culture with a certain kind of racial speech, one that located the source of the spirituals beyond the specificity of his own New World history and in a broader genealogy of the cultural origins of the race. As Robeson would state for the press in 1933: “We [blacks] are a great race, greater in tradition and culture than the American race.... I am going to produce plays, make films, sing chants and prayers, all with one view in mind—to show my poor people that their culture traces back directly to the great civilizations of Persia, China, and the Jews.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Robeson’s Developing Politics and the Racial Genealogy of Cultural Forms**

In his understanding of the spirituals throughout the 1930s as reflections of universal patterns in human culture, Robeson’s approach to the slave songs resembled that of his contemporary, W. E. B. Du Bois. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois represented the spirituals as universalistic folk songs in order to locate them as products of American history and society.<sup>21</sup> As Carby argues, the spirituals became in Du Bois’s hands “the very means for imagining black people as integral to the national political community and for imagining black culture as a form of national culture.”<sup>22</sup> However, Robeson took his belief in the form’s universality in a very different direction, seeking to reconnect black American history to older cultural patterns embedded in folk-music, political patterns in which one could find the racial outcry against forgotten acts of oppression and conquest.

Initially, and somewhat predictably, Robeson’s study of the spirituals led him to a focus on African origins. As his biographer also describes: “As if *one* dam within him had burst, and

overflowing with new ideas, Robeson started to jot down notes—a gauge of his excitement, since he rarely committed thoughts to paper. In the Western world, he wrote, in North and South America, the West Indies and the Caribbean, the black man [contributes primarily] to American culture,” and “the culture of his respective milieu” in the various nations of the New World. Hence, the “Westernized black” was “decadent, cut off from his source,” and Africa alone could provide the key to the future of black cultures in the Americas—“From there will come his real contribution to [the] culture of the world.”<sup>23</sup> But soon Robeson would develop an even broader understanding of the genealogy of race discourse itself as a universal cultural form, one deeply and inextricably embedded in a political narrative.

During a tour of Central Europe, Robeson described “Slav peasant music” as having “a great deal in common with ours,” elaborating, “in the countries which have for centuries suffered under an alien yoke, I found a more instinctive response...than in countries like England, who have forgotten what it is like to be conquered.”<sup>24</sup> Underlying the cultural connections Robeson was making lay a forgotten, racial and political etymology of slavery, as Srinivas Aravamudan has also described. Aravamudan asserts: “the etymology of *slavery* refers back to the particular servitude of Slavs rather than the later history of the commodification and enforced transportation of Africans, [which] may be suggested by some, is the proper and natural signification of slavery. In this case, the proper and natural signification is itself the result of having forgotten an earlier ethnography.”<sup>25</sup> In his own ethnographic journey, Robeson discovered in the spirituals not just a notion of culture as the carrier of specific racial content. He also excavated a deeper politics of form in which the very desire to express a counter narrative of racial and political oppression was part of the very structure of human cultures. In his notes Robeson wrote, “I, however, am more profoundly impressed by likenesses in cultural

forms which seem to transcend the boundaries of Nationality. Whatever be the Social and Economic content of the culture—Archaic, Clan and Tribal organization, Feudalism, Capitalism, or Socialism—this cultural Form seems to persist, and to be of vital importance to the people concerned.”<sup>26</sup>

A closer reading of the ways in which Robeson’s race discourse was moving him into more complex territory than the search for racial origins is crucial to understanding the sophisticated ways in which race would later serve as the foundation for his internationalist class politics. Robeson was making distinctions that went far beyond the mere observation that race is a social construction. Racial discourse is also the result of a shared, intercultural, performance in which peoples construct meaning, and their own culture, out of their political interactions with each other. Robeson wrote in his notes: “all races, all Peoples are not nearly as different one from the other as textbooks would have it.... Most differences [are] only superficial. History of Mankind proves this. No pure race. No pure culture. No people has lived by itself.” These insights would lead Robeson to take explicitly anti-nationalist cultural positions: “I am not a Nationalist...To me, the time seems long past when people can afford to think exclusively in terms of national units. The field of activity is far wider.” Robeson called instead for something very similar to Joseph Roach’s notion of intercultures performing in the presence of each other: “‘if the world is to prosper [it must be] broadened to transcend national boundaries,’ toward the ‘possible synthesis of, and on the other hand, constant interplay between related cultural forms.”<sup>27</sup>

Understanding race diachronically, as an intercultural and discursive form present throughout human cultures, did not prevent Robeson from arguing for the specific relevance of racial discourse, the language of an oppressed group spoken from the shadows of a suppressed

history, in synchronic political contexts. In this way, Robeson traced the genealogy of race back to the future, from Old World contexts of empire and serfdom back to New World futures of race and nation. In his paralleling of the history of the Russian peasant with that of the African slave, Duberman explains, “Robeson was not trying to postulate a common origin among these varied cultures and races but, rather, to pinpoint ‘a common element of centuries of serfdom...[and therefore a] common way of looking at life’.”<sup>28</sup> Robeson argued that one could see in the racial discourse of the American slave a newly emergent political narrative, born in the colonial hemisphere and now aligning itself against modernity’s national “way of looking at life.” “[Blacks] are a race...but not a people,” Robeson would assert, “as disharmonious as the white race is.”<sup>29</sup> His distinction between race and peoplehood represented his unwillingness to ascribe the racial group’s unity to black nationalist discourses of imagined community. Rather, New World black subjects participated together across various territorial borders in creating a hemispheric discourse of race as a counter narrative to nationalist narratives of Western modernity. Even if not identical, the overlapping political world-views of members of a diasporic intercultural were generated from their shared histories of colonial conquest, slavery, and oppression, across Caribbean, Latin American, and African American geographies.

In his singing Robeson tried to reconfigure the historical meanings attached to the voice of the New World slave, to see his national story in light of the hemispheric, transatlantic and global histories that surrounded it. In his acting Robeson would also represent, consciously and unconsciously, the synchronic political implications of blackness as a modern discourse of racial resistance. As Duberman describes, “At the same time that Robeson was trying to formulate a theoretical position, he was trying on a practical level to incorporate his new values into his work as an actor.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, at the kinesthetic level where meaning is expressed by and mapped onto the

body, the actor was also forced to struggle with a range of visual connotations that affixed blackness to his male body in racial and gender specific ways in a segregated society.

Simultaneous with his attempt to infuse his vocal performances with a broader sense of the race narrative as a human, intercultural, political possession, Robeson was also determined to fit the black male body onto the American stage in a natural way, and to find in film a narrative scenario that the black actor could control. Amidst the color lines of contemporary North American society, Robeson would attempt to limn on stage the bodylines of a free black male subjectivity, delineating through his physical movements and acting choices the kinds of environments within which his performances could be meaningful for a diasporic and resistant racial politics.<sup>31</sup>

### **Acts of Blackness: Robeson and the Semiotics of Black Masculinity Onstage and Onscreen**

As Robeson learned to manipulate the boundaries within which he could represent black freedom in the American theater, he also envisioned using film to take his message to a broader diasporic community. The more he explored the genealogy of the New World slave, the more he looked for a hero to serve as the narrative vehicle for the story of the race. This was the quest he communicated in a 1932 interview for the Jamaican newspaper, *The Daily Gleaner*, where Robeson is quoted saying, “If the real great man of the Negro race will be born, he will spring from North America. The Negro Gandhi or Mussolini cannot be begotten but in the land of ancient oppression and revolutionary emancipation.”<sup>32</sup> If the cultural narrative of the race lay in a genealogy of folk forms that retold not just the story of Africa but also of the slave’s New World diaspora and scattering, for Robeson, the descendant of African American fugitive slaves, the political narrative of the race would begin on the stage of American national discourse. Together

his stage and screen performances in the 1930s reveal the different prescriptions and possibilities shaping his portrayals of black masculinity during the decade and his reception by multi-racial and multi-national audiences.

Throughout the 1930s Robeson would struggle with the realization that, in his performance of black masculinity onstage for national audiences in the United States, racial physiognomy outweighed historical narrative, and the color line threatened to subsume the heroic storyline and racial genealogy he hoped to convey. David Scott has pointed out that in the narrative of revolutionary romance, the racial hero functions as a literary vehicle that “embodies the forward historical movement and drives the narrative out of the dark and into the light.”<sup>33</sup> This is also the figure that speaks from the shadows declaiming, as Foucault described, “we had no rights, and that is why we are beginning to speak and to tell of our history.”<sup>34</sup> Robeson’s quest for such a racial hero was taking place in a national culture and social environment in which the black male actor was praised not for his skill in translating narratives of freedom theatrically, but for the supposed instinctive nature of his dramatic performance. The gendered meanings imposed upon Robeson’s body in a national American context—the Negro’s supposedly natural and emotive expressiveness; the hypervisibility of black masculine appearance, color, size, and shape—posed a challenge to his deep desire to place the history of the New World Negro, and of race discourse itself, in the much broader hemispheric context of African transplantation, slavery and revolution.

Robeson’s physique and appearance would become central features of reviewers’ evaluations of his talents as an actor, his physical attributes interpreted and described as naturally dramatic features of his body. Even C. L. R. James took this tack, recalling that in his performance in *Black Majesty*, “Robeson’s power onstage was primarily due not to his acting

skills *per se* but to the immensity of his personality.” “It’s not a question of acting” James would continue but rather, “The physique and the voice, the *spirit* behind him—you could see it when he was on stage.” In rehearsals for his stage performance as Jim Harris in *All God’s Chillun*, the play’s director, André Van Gyseghem, felt Robeson was “not a finished actor,” because of certain “technical deficiencies—awkward body movement, a tendency to declaim.” Then, as Robeson refined the more kinesthetic features of his performance, another critic doubted whether Robeson even understood “how he created the ‘beautiful’ effects he did with his voice, hands, and ‘somewhat ungainly body.’”<sup>35</sup>

Robeson was very aware of the regulatory environment in which he worked, a knowledge reflected in the self-conscious ways he carried his body in the early stages of his career. The challenges he faced in this regard were very visible in his early rehearsals for O’Neill’s play *The Emperor Jones*—Robeson’s portrayal of the title character, Brutus Jones, was one of his first popular stage performances. As observed by his wife Essie Robeson, the black actor was awkward “in moving his six-foot-two-inch frame around a small stage...without seeming to mince” forcing his director to continually coach him saying, “Don’t hold yourself in; you look as though you’re afraid to move.” “I am,” Paul answered, continuing “I’m so big I feel if I take a few steps I’ll be off this tiny stage.” Robeson had to be encouraged by the director’s instruction: “You must have complete freedom and control over your body and your voice, if you are to control your audience.” Essie Robeson also recounted the lengthy process by which Robeson trained both his voice and his body to ‘act natural’ in the role of the black emperor. During rehearsals Robeson “fell to work in earnest...memorizing his part,” and if “sometimes the lines came out too much like an oration or a declamation...Paul went back to work, phrase by phrase, word by word, ‘digging down to the meaning of every single comma’—until the speech came

out sounding natural.” Far from not knowing how he created the ‘beautiful’ effects he did with his voice, hands, and ‘somewhat ungainly body,’ Robeson worked hard to learn precisely how best to fit himself, literally and figuratively, onto the American stage. He handled his body so well that one reviewer would exclaim after seeing Robeson in *The Emperor Jones*, “Physically this full-blooded negro fitted the role.”<sup>36</sup>

If the Negro was a born actor then essentially there was no actor, no black interiority, only the surface—epidermis—of the act of blackness itself. For the Negro actor, the role of the noble American slave was often prescribed as an instinctive act, a role the black actor could master naturally in performance but not with any conscious control over the narrative within which that performance gained meaning. Onstage, Robeson would attempt to counter this national cultural discourse of a natural blackness with a self-consciousness attention to the actual movements and semiotic meanings of his body. The high level of kinesthetic awareness Robeson brought to his performances reflected his wish to change the parameters within which his physicality could be perceived, and thus reconfigure the potentials for meaning-making represented by the black male body in American culture.

However, increasingly throughout the 1930s the actor felt the need to go beyond bodylines to the racial storylines that lay within black male subjectivity. In his film projects and choices of roles, Robeson hoped to offer his own rendition of a natural, masculine blackness, embodied not in the national figure of the American slave but in a figure more resonant for diasporic and hemispheric audiences—the figure of the black sovereign. The film industry became a key site for Robeson as he struggled to locate roles that would allow him to elaborate further onscreen the politics of representation he had started to develop in his study and later performances of the spirituals. Comparing the two dramatic mediums of the stage and the screen,

Robeson appreciatively described the latter's ability to bring the actor's performance, if not the actor himself, closer to his audience than was possible on stage.

As early as 1930, Robeson was both aware of and actively avoiding the kinds of roles that awaited him in Hollywood, as he told one British reporter: 'I'm afraid of Hollywood.... Hollywood can only realize the plantation type of Negro.' The actor hoped instead to use the cinema to tell a much broader story of the New World slave, looking for films with "a fine romantic story and an excellent Negro part, [such as] stories of the great Negro emperors—Menelik, Chaka." In so doing he knew he was going against national type, as he told members of the British press, "America... would hardly believe that there had ever been such a person as great as a Negro emperor, but in England you know it. You have had to conquer one or two."<sup>37</sup> Robeson thought he had succeeded in finding such a cinematic vehicle when the reknowned Soviet filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein, approached him to play Toussaint L'Ouverture onscreen. When this project fell through Robeson persisted to "cast around for a film role that might foster the ideals he had come to espouse."<sup>38</sup> Two films in particular would provide Robeson with this opportunity—*Song of Freedom* (1936) and *Jericho* (1937). In their narratives and plots, each film offered the actor a cinematic scenario in which he could reclaim both the voice of the slave and the body of the black male sovereign.

In *Song of Freedom* Robeson played a concert singer who abandons his stage career in the United States to pursue his own genealogy as an African king. The plot of the film provided an almost direct analogy with Robeson's own efforts to understand the genealogy of the music of the American slave. As Duberman describes the plot further:

Based on Claude Williams and Dorothy Holloway's *The Kingdom of the Zinga*, the film... tells the story of John Zinga (played by Robeson), a London

dockworker whose glorious bass voice is accidentally discovered, launching him into international success as a concert singer.... Zinga learns that [he is also] the King of Casanga. Abandoning his concert career to return to his people, he is met with scorn...until he bursts into sacred song, thus persuading them of his royal heritage.<sup>39</sup>

Many of these plot elements replicated details and events in Robeson's own artistic biography—the rise to national and international fame as a concert singer (of the spirituals rather than the opera); the 'discovery' of an African past (ideologically rather than biographically); the locating of the roots of black music in a continental past (Robeson's own tracing of the spirituals back to Old World cultures and political forms versus John Zinga's sacred song). Consciously or not the film allowed Robeson to communicate his own individual journey as a broader metaphor for the race's quest for self-knowledge and cultural liberation. Proof that this storyline addressed a communal need amongst black audiences was evidenced by the fact that, of all his films, this was one of the few to find favor in Harlem. Duberman recounts, "the Pittsburgh *Courier* welcomed *Song of Freedom* as the 'finest story of colored folks yet brought to the screen'...[and] Langston Hughes wrote Essie, 'Harlem liked *Song of Freedom*.'"<sup>40</sup> {See Figure 1 }

*Jericho*, on the other hand, was set in Cairo and afforded Robeson access to a much broader geographic and historical landscape with which to tell the New World Negro's story than was available to him on the American stage. In Cairo, Robeson and his costars would encounter aspects of the Old World that were part of the cultural legacy of the human race. One costar tells of Robeson's impromptu singing performance in "the King's chamber at the geometric center" of the Great Pyramid of Giza: "The first note...almost crumbled the place...and [when] the last reverberation had gone away...I was crying, the dragoman was crying...and Paul was crying....

There were tears going down our faces. And we almost daren't breathe to break the spell of the thing."<sup>41</sup> The story captures a particularly moving moment of New World subjects finding themselves in the presence of a monument to the shared human past, now rendered apprehensible through their intimate communion in Robeson's song. Here the voice of the slave takes the group away from their respective nationalities to a very different narrative of their racial past, one in which the dark sands of history have preserved African sovereignty as a testament to the intercultural history of the species, rather than as the possession of peoples and nationalities in power.

*Jericho*, which also played in New York under the title *Dark Sands*, created a further diasporic connection between Robeson and North African culture. His female lead and counterpart, the Princess Kouka, was not an actress but a member of a Sudanese royal family, acting for the first time as the female counterpart to Robeson's character, Jericho Jackson, a fugitive soldier who escapes the United States to lead a North African tribe. While *Jericho*, like *Song of Freedom*, appeared at first to rely on a straight-forward back to Africa narrative, cinematic techniques such as the switch back shot (enabling a film, after editing, to tell a story that can switch back and forth between different scenes, shots and locations) kept the storylines in the present, moving back and forth between America, Europe, and Africa. In so doing, both films established genealogical connections between these three spaces as a context for the New World black subject's self-transformation. The narrative of linear descent proved to be a mere backdrop for an intersecting story of intimacy and communication between African Americans and Africans situated co-evally in space and time. This cultural intimacy, metaphorically reflected in the romance between Princess Kouka and Jericho Jackson, was taking place not only

in the racial past but also in the geopolitical present of the early twentieth century. {See Figure 2}

Robeson was proud of his roles in both of these films, describing *Song of Freedom* as providing “a *real* part for the first time,” and stating even more enthusiastically about *Jericho*, “It’s the best part I have ever had for a picture.”<sup>42</sup> *Jericho* also added another dimension to Robeson’s efforts to achieve verisimilitude in his acting. Robeson felt the film was a particularly good vehicle for his voice—“He felt he could use it in a ‘perfectly natural’ way while filmmaking, without having to strain for volume and projection, as he sometimes had to onstage or in concert.” The declaiming and awkward movements that had so hampered his ability to act blackness naturally onstage for white audiences, now became secondary to elements of plot and characterization in the films he chose to participate in. In these movies he hoped to find the means to represent black political power as a natural feature of hemispheric and transatlantic modernity, but one separate from the American discourses of freedom embodied by the slave.

### **Hemispheric Scenarios: Reading the National Against the Grain**

As we move across several disciplinary boundaries, borrowing methodologies from performance studies and race and gender studies and combining readings of various kinds of texts—film, song, narrative, biography—the goal here is to trace around the borders of the nation alternative ways of organizing transnational, cultural and political histories in the Americas. The close reading of narrative in dialogue with performance, archive in relationship to repertoire, is crucial for understanding the hemispheric scenarios within which national discourses are constructed and staged.<sup>43</sup> When both United States and black literary studies limit themselves to reading narratives and cultural figures strictly within national parameters, they miss the moments

when a text or a performance attempts to qualify and subvert the discourse of the nation by revealing new or alternative racial and gendered genealogies.<sup>44</sup> In the geographies charted by Paul Robeson and his cultural choices during the 1930s, we learn that we need not shift our focus from the American national subject to a more global, internationalist stage. Rather, we need to see this subject through the lens of other discourses of race and subjectivity that lie just outside his country's shadow.

For too long Robeson's political meaningfulness in American studies has remained wholly set within the narrative of his national alienation as a socialist, with little recognition or understanding of how a politics of race, shaped by his attentiveness to circum-atlantic hemispheric histories, may have impacted both his radicalism and his subsequent incompatibility with United States cultural politics. Similarly, when scholars in African American and Caribbean studies define their fields along strictly national lines, they miss an opportunity to explore the various intersecting meanings of gender and blackness uniting black male subjects in conversation across diasporic spaces. Since Robeson spent much of the decade traveling away from the United States, both literally and figuratively, it is a central irony of his 1930s career that upon his return to the country he should be asked, serendipitously, to sing the "Ballad for Americans." This performance immediately reinstated him as a national cultural hero, the figure for a freedom now embodied by *both* the slave *and* the American state. This profound irony serves here as a useful point of closure, for it offers the opportunity to read the ballad both as a textual artifact of an unambiguously national performance, and simultaneously, as a transcript of the hemispheric, racial geography within which that performance accumulated its various meanings.

While we do not have access to the immediacy and resonance of Robeson's act in 1939, by reading the lyrics of the ballad against the grain we can re-imagine how he embodied the nation's song by reconstructing the textual role of the slave. On the surface of the text, "Ballad for Americans" is an account of a national peoples' evolving faith, their belief that their country represents the very essence of political liberty.<sup>45</sup> Beginning "in seventy-six [when] the sky was red" the ballad proceeds over the course of seventeen stanzas to describe the nation-building project—"Building a nation is awful tough./ The people found the going rough"—as one which involves winning the hearts and minds of different types of people in the national community. The stanzas are organized not just as a conversation but as a dialogue with a persuasive intent—to convince the listener that America stands for "a mighty fine idea," that of "Liberty or death." Belief is the central issue at stake throughout the song—"Did they all believe in liberty those days?/ Nobody who was anybody believed it./ Ev'rybody who was anybody doubted it./ Nobody had faith." Furthermore, this (New World) belief in liberty is set defiantly against (Old World) sovereignty in the ballad's opening lines: "In seventy-six the sky was red/ thunder rumbling overhead/ Bad King George couldn't sleep in his bed/ And on that stormy morn, Ol' Uncle Sam was born."

Despite the opening focus on the political values the nation stands for, the "Ballad for Americans" is often remembered for its later verses that retell the typically American story of different peoples' cultural and social assimilation. In this land of social equality and cultural diversity, various figures for the people continually morph into each other as we follow along the country's history. Over time and stanzas the song moves from the founding fathers, to the miners and pioneers, to Abe Lincoln, to the rich and the poor, and then finally to the verse often cited as the crescendo of the song's multicultural and multi-class message:

Well, I'm an  
 Engineer, musician, street cleaner, carpenter, teacher,  
 How about a farmer? Also. Office clerk? Yes sir!  
 That's right. Certainly!  
 Factory worker? You said it. Yes ma'am.  
 Absotively! Posolutely!  
 Truck driver? Definitely!  
 Miner, seamstress, ditchdigger, all of them.  
 I am the "etceteras" and the "and so forths" that do the work.  
 Now hold on here, what are you trying to give us?  
 Are you an American?  
 Am I an American?  
 I'm just an Irish, Jewish, Italian,  
 French and English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Polish,  
 Scotch, Hungarian, Swedish, Finnish, Greek and Turk and Czech.

In later installments, revisions of the ballad's lyrics have added new types of immigrants to this list, all of them (tellingly) members of groups we now describe as people of color. The ballad itself, however, is democratically free of such racial distinctions; included through their ethnic designation these people make up merely more of the diverse cultures that interact to make a multi-cultural America. They also blend in nicely with the array of people from other types of categories, for example of religion and employment, all of a mix in this more progressive vision of the culture(s) of the United States:

(additions in parentheses)

Well, I'm an  
 Engineer, musician, street cleaner, carpenter, teacher,  
 How about a farmer? Also. Office clerk? Yes sir!  
 That's right. (Homemaker?) Certainly!  
 Factory worker? You said it. (Mail carrier?) Yes ma'am.  
 (Hospital worker?) Absotively! (Social worker?) Posolutely!  
 Truck driver? Definitely!  
 Miner, seamstress, ditchdigger, all of them.  
 I am the "etceteras" and the "and so forths" that do the work.  
 Now hold on here, what are you trying to give us?  
 Are you an American?  
  
 Am I an American?  
 I'm just an Irish, (African), Jewish, Italian,

French and English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Polish, Scotch, Hungarian, (Jamaican), Swedish, Finnish, (Dominican), Greek and Turk and Czech and (Native American).

The focus on this narrative of cultural diversity, whether in celebration or in critique, misses the ways in which it continues to overshadow the *political form* of the nation described in the ballad's beginning stanzas. In other words, the question of who deserves citizenship in the nation is a separate and very different question from who can represent it, and it is in answering this latter question, both in the positive and in the negative, that the racial dimensions of the tale assert themselves. These dimensions also map the ballad's hemispheric inheritance, a political discourse of race that relies on particular narrative modes to define a people as worthy of freedom, democracy and national self-determination.

Despite the theme of racial, cultural, gender, and class democracy in "Ballad for Americans," the *political* narrative the ballad tells is one where certain hierarchies and structures of the *race* narrative emerge. The song's language clearly mirrors the anti-sovereign discourse Foucault described, and the sense that the country and the "nobodies" who are its people speak from the shadows: "Our country's strong, our country's young,/ And her greatest songs are still unsung./ From her plains and mountains we have sprung,/ To keep the faith with those who went before/.... We nobodies who are anybody believe it./ We anybodies who are everybody have no doubts." The narrative rhythm David Scott described, of trials and tribulations that will be overcome, shapes the ballad's tone of uplift: "As America grew in peace and war./ And a million wheels went around and 'round./ The cities reached into the sky,/ And dug down deep into the ground./ And some got rich and some got poor./ But the people carried through,/ So our country grew." When the struggle against slavery enters the narrative, it comes with a well-defined

national hero to drive this people's history from darkness into light—"Let my people go. That's the idea!/ Old Abe Lincoln was thin and long,/ His heart was high and his faith was strong./ But he hated oppression, he hated wrong,/ And he went down to his grave to free the slave."

One line in the ballad tellingly reveals the slave's position in relationship to this larger story. In the nation's song, one man is freed for the redemption of another—"A man in white skin can never be free while his black brother is in slavery." As the ballad describes the process by which *a* people go from being nobodies to becoming Americans, the political meaning of the nation is founded on the need to believe in (white) freedom, while the cultural becomes the space to incorporate ethnic others into that idea of racial freedom. Politically, however, there is still a nobody—the (black) slave as the racial nobody—who defines non-freedom and exists in a space simultaneously present within and invisible to the national community. This is a figure that also slides in and out of view in the song, hovering in the shadows, somewhat outside of the community created in and by the ballad's chronicle.

While Robeson sang this song to the thrilling amazement of national audiences, he remained uninvited to the various social occasions honoring the song's composers. His own present but invisible status was also evident in the many occasions he was asked to eat in his room after a performance so that the white patrons of his hotel would not see him publicly. This disavowal of the racial subject was knit into the very text of the ballad itself, in the voice of the balladeer reciting the song. The text is narrated in the first person by someone who keeps trying to name himself, but as the story of the nation takes over, by the end he is told who he is supposed to be. This narrator first appears in the fifth stanza when he defines his own political will to believe in the nation as the very source of his identity. He soon gains a respondent and we realize that the discussion is a three-way conversation, with multiple players representing

multiple layers of persuasion, each dependent on the other's performance of belief and faith. A third voice in the ballad represents a chorus of the nation's believers, who then vie with the narrator for the telling of the story. As the balladeer begins a line the (national) chorus ends it, continuing on to recount many of the important political stories the song contains. When the narrator finally names himself as the entirety of the long list of peoples who constitute the nation, the ballad closes with his assertion—"For I have always believed it, and I believe it now,/ And now you know who I am./ Who are you?/ America! America!"

Just before this moment, however, the balladeer reflects in more rueful tones on his representative role in the song:

Still nobody who was anybody believed it.

Everybody who was anybody they doubted it.

And they are doubting still,

And I guess they always will...

Say, will you please tell us who you are?

What's your name, Buddy? Where you goin'? Who are you?

Well, I'm the everybody who's nobody,

I'm the nobody who's everybody.

The balladeer's willingness to perform his identity as the "nobody who's everybody" is crucial to this conversation about the meaning of the nation-state and its continued existence through the faith of its people.

When we imagine Paul Robeson as this rueful balladeer, the racial subject standing in the shadows of the national hero he is supposed to represent, the black male performer also becomes

a figure for the nation's disavowed, racial and historical character. In his 1939 performance of the "Ballad for Americans" Robeson, the proud descendant of the ever-present New World slave, ended the decade still on the outskirts of the imagined national community. Yet, he was also given the role of assuring that community of its distance from a much less noble racial past. It is only within the context of Robeson's embodied performance that the ballad can be read against the national grain, as part of a larger hemispheric scenario in which the national and the racial co-exist.

Some years later, Robeson's Francophone Caribbean counterpart, Frantz Fanon, would assert in his own genealogy of race, *Black Skin, White Masks*, "I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors."<sup>46</sup> Here Fanon took himself, and his readers, away from the resonant power of narratives of racial oppression in which the struggle for freedom is projected onto the black male body. "Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*?" Fanon asked, interrogating the process by which the black body becomes the cipher or metonym for a reduced sense of racial meaning. The trope of the New World slave slips easily into a discourse where race becomes representative of the body of a people, rather than the signifier for various forms of intercultural address in which 'peoples' come to understand themselves in relation to others. In contrast, Fanon held out the vision of a more deconstructive and intersectional process by which he, as a black man, could consciously assess the genealogies of power shaping his own performance of black masculinity: "My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!"

Fanon asked us to explore the forms of agency we achieve when we perceive ourselves as subjects constructed within and against certain constraints. It is in this sense that his words evoke Paul Robeson, given the great importance the actor placed on studying the forms of racial

narrative constructing his own sense of self. As in Fanon's call, Robeson's body became the ground from which he attempted to use his freedom to address his audience as they recreated their own racial identity through his. Our ability to read his gendered body and performance of blackness in these complex ways depends on our willingness to understand racial discourse dialogically, as constituted in national spaces constantly crosscut by and reacting to transnational, intercultural, processes.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), p. 219.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: The New Press, 1989), p. 236.

<sup>3</sup> George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1991). As they listen to Robeson singing the words, 'Let my people go,' the following dialogue ensues between the two characters:

[G.:] "I like it.... That was really beautiful."

"You know the voice?" Trumper asked.... "Paul Robeson," he said. "One o' the greatest o' my people."

"What people?" I asked. I was a bit puzzled....

"My people," he said again, "or better, my race.... None o' you here on this islan' know what it mean to fin' race" (pp. 294-295).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>5</sup> David Scott, "The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming," *Small Axe*, no. 12 (September 2002).

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<sup>6</sup> See Sibylle Fischer's excellent discussion of the Haitian Revolution as a silenced text, in her introduction to *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Two works in particular that explore this representative elision of the female slave in both African American and Caribbean revolutionary contexts are Hazel Carby's *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) and Belinda Edmondson's *Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority, and Women's Writing in Caribbean Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958), pp. 63, 66-67.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), pp. 59, 61.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70. For Foucault, this anti-sovereign discourse spoke in a distinctive voice: "the story of the race struggle will of course speak from the side that is in darkness, from within the shadows. It will be the discourse of those who have no glory...a disruptive speech, an appeal... We came out of the shadows, we had no glory and we had no rights, and that is why we are beginning to speak and to tell of our history."

<sup>11</sup> For more on the creole pioneers see chapter 4 in Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. ed., New York: Verso, 1992). See Fischer for more on anti-slavery radicalism as a hemispheric political alternative to creole nationalisms in the region. Fischer credits this latter political formation as the hemispheric context for the Haitian Revolution, stating, "In response to the colonial slaveholders' structuring of the hemisphere through slave routes and slave markets, a radically heterogeneous, transnational cultural network emerged whose political imaginary mirrored the global scope of

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the slave trade and whose projects and fantasies of emancipation converged, at least for a few years, around Haiti” (1).

<sup>12</sup> See Stuart Hall’s interview with David Scott, online in *BOMB Magazine*, No. 90, Winter 2004/5.

<sup>13</sup> C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Allison & Busby Ltd., 1989); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963).

<sup>14</sup> C. L. R. James, “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro,” in Anna Grimshaw, ed., *The C. L. R. James Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 296.

<sup>15</sup> C. L. R. James, *American Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> While in James’s narrative of a “Caribbean quest for national identity” the slave is a transnational figure whose political movement from one island to another shifts the entire hemisphere historically away from slavery and diaspora and toward revolution, in the context of United States history the fugitive slave’s actions bring the individual nation-state closer to fulfilling its emancipatory ideals. James discusses the Caribbean quest in “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro” (Grimshaw, p. 296) and the role of the fugitive slave in essays such as “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the USA” (Grimshaw, p. 182). See also Scott McLemee’s edited collection, *C. L. R. James on the ‘Negro Question’* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Carby, *Race Men*, *ibid.*, 92-93, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, *ibid.*, p. 169.

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<sup>21</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> Carby, *Race Men*, *ibid.*, 89, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, *ibid.*, 169-173.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>25</sup> Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, *ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202. In *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Joseph Roach argues for an understanding of hemispheric culture as an *inter-cultural* formation, where relationships and interactions *between* peoples defined what then became central to each culture's values and sets of meaning.

<sup>28</sup> Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, *ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>31</sup> In *Race Men* Carby coins the term "bodylines" to describe a performative world in which the black male body can be seen and portrayed as "both autonomous and inspirational" (p. 3). Her discussion of Toussaint L'Ouverture's distinctive role in C. L. R. James's writings provides a context for Robeson's portrayal of the Haitian liberator in James's 1936 play, *Black Majesty*. Carby argues that James, in his imaginings of the Haitian Revolution during the 1930s, "developed representations of autonomous, self-determining, revolutionary, black manhood" and a "gendered aesthetics of body lines that are inherent in its imagining" (p. 113). With this notion of bodylines Carby identifies a form of kinesthetic imagination that reproduces, in specific performative contexts, a visual and dramatic vocabulary of the revolutionary black male body.

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<sup>32</sup> Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, *ibid.*, p. 133. His 1932 interview in Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* was ultimately titled, "Paul Robeson Looks for a Negro Mussolini" (Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, *ibid.*, p. 610).

<sup>33</sup> Hall, "David Scott" interview, *ibid.*.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>35</sup> Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, *ibid.*, pp. 197, 167, 64-65.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 204, 209.

<sup>43</sup> For more of a discussion of the scenario as the basic meaning-making unit of a performance, see Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> Also see Roach's notion of circum-atlantic "genealogies of performance" in *Cities of the Dead*, *ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>45</sup> All lyrics from "The Ballad for Americas," both in the original and the revised, are taken from the online website, International Lyrics Playground, at <http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/b/balladforamericans.shtml>.

<sup>46</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, *ibid.*, pp. 230-232.

