Modern American History (2023), 1–19
doi:10.1017/mah.2023.39

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

SOAPBOX: PROGRESSIVE PATRIOTS

Patriotism and Black Internationalism

Nicholas Grant

Department of American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

On February 2, 2023, Ilhan Omar took to the floor of the House of Representatives to address what being an American meant to her. Responding to Republican efforts to remove her from the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, the representative for Minnesota's fifth congressional district asked, "Who gets to be an American? What opinions do you have to have to be counted as American?"[1] In attacking Omar for her past comments on Israel and track record of criticizing U.S. foreign policy, House Republicans were conflating progressive politics with foreignness, arguing that this combination is subversive and represents a real threat to the American government and the stability of the nation.[2] Indeed, the vote to remove Omar came just a few years after President Donald J. Trump had implored Omar and her progressive allies in "The Squad"—House Democrats Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib—to "go back" to the "crime infested places from which they came."[3] Acknowledging how her race and identity were once again being used by Republicans to question her Americanness and delegitimize her politics, Omar offered the following rebuttal:

> Representation matters. Continuing to expand our ideas of who is American and who can partake in the American experiment is a good thing. I am an American … Someone who knows what it means to have a shot at a better life here in the United States. And someone who believes in the American dream, in the American possibility and the promise, and the ability to voice that in a democratic process.[4]

Ilhan Omar is an example of a twenty-first-century progressive who strategically embraces the language of patriotism when critiquing American power—both at home and abroad. As such,

I would like to thank Say Burgin, Julio Decker, Merve Fejzula, Claire Hynes, Emma Long, and E. James West for commenting on this work as it has developed. I am also incredibly grateful for the invaluable collective insights from everyone in my U.S. international history writing group, as well as for the incisive feedback from the editors of *Modern American History*, and the anonymous peer reviewers for this piece.

[1]Ilhan Omar, "Rep. Omar's Speech on Republicans' Partisan Efforts to Remove Her from Foreign Affairs Committee," Feb. 2, 2023, http://omar.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-omars-speech-republicans-partisan-efforts-remove-her-foreign-affairs (accessed June 16, 2023).

[2]Carole Boyce Davies, "Deportable Subjects: U.S. Immigration Laws and the Criminalizing of Communism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 4 (Oct. 2001): 949–66.

[3]Katie Rogers and Nicholas Fandos, "Trump Tells Congresswomen to 'Go Back' to the Countries They Came From," *New York Times*, July 14, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/14/us/politics/trump-twitter-squad-congress.html (accessed June 16, 2023). In response to Trump, Omar argued, "True patriotism is not about blindly supporting a single Administration. True patriotism is about fighting for our country and its dignity. True patriotism means making sure people of our country and our Constitution are uplifted and protected." Ilhan Omar, Tweet (@IlhanMN), July 16, 2019, 3:50 p.m., https://twitter.com/IlhanMN/status/1151217500480315394.

[4]Omar, "Rep. Omar's Speech on Republicans' Partisan Efforts to Remove Her from Foreign Affairs Committee"; Karoun Demirjian, "House Ousts Ilhan Omar from Foreign Affairs Panel as G.O.P. Exacts Revenge," *The New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/02/us/politics/ilhan-omar-house-committee-republicans.html (accessed June 16, 2023).

she reminds us that patriotism and forms of internationalism are often intertwined. By proudly proclaiming her identity as an American, Omar was participating in a centuries-old debate over what kind of country America was, is, and should aspire to be.[5] Indeed, her insistence on the need to expand the contours of the nation represents a dissident form of Americanism—a deliberate effort to complicate universalizing national myths, to grapple with histories of racial violence and exclusion, and to demand a radical transformation of U.S. democracy.[6] None of this negates her desire to forge political solidarities across borders in the name of civil and human rights.

In the mid-twentieth century, the actor, singer, and activist Paul Robeson was one of several radical Black activists also grappling with the limitations of the nation and the question of patriotism. Robeson's talent as a college football player, singer, and actor had—by the 1940s—made him one of the most instantly recognizable and celebrated Americans on the world stage.[7] However, as anticommunist fever took hold during the early years of the Cold War, his activism came to be seen as a dangerous by many in the United States.[8] Denounced as "un-American" by the American government and blacklisted in the entertainment industry, the politics of anticommunism threatened both Robeson's livelihood as well as his radical Black international vision that connected the struggle for racial and economic justice in the United States to anticolonial movements around the world. Fearful of being branded "subversive," many Black leaders—from conservatives such as Manning Johnson and George Schuyler to former allies including National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Executive Secretary Walter White—argued that Robeson had lost his way and was out of touch with ordinary African Americans.[9] Some white politicians and reactionary voices in the media went further, insisting that if he did not like it in America he should "go back to Russia," impugning him in ways that made him a target of white supremacist violence.[10] Like Omar, Robeson's

[5]Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism*, new ed. (Princeton, NJ, 2018).

[6]On the politics of patriotic protest, see Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties* (Philadelphia, 2011); Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, eds., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006); and Ben Railton, *Of Thee I Sing: The Contested History of American Patriotism* (Lanham, MD, 2021).

[7]There have been some excellent biographies of Robeson. See Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York, 2005); Jordan Goodman, *Paul Robeson: A Watched Man* (London, 2013); Gerald Horne, *Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London, 2016); Lindsey R. Swindall, *Paul Robeson: A Life of Activism and Art* (Lanham, MD, 2013); Paul Robeson Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939–1976* (New York, 2010); and Paul Robeson Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898–1939* (New York, 2001).

[8]For more on the ways in which the Cold War placed limitations on Black radicalism, see Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (New York, 2003); Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (Albany, NY, 1986); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); and Penny Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY, 1997).

[9]In 1949, the African American anticommunist informant Manning Johnson told a congressional hearing that Robeson dreamt of becoming "a Black Stalin"; see Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 115. For an example of how Black moderates denounced Robeson, see Walter White, "The Strange Case of Paul Robeson," *Ebony*, Feb. 1951, 79, 80–3. These tensions are discussed in detail in Goodman, *Paul Robeson*, 53–7; Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 343–4; and Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post–Civil Rights Era* (New York, 2008), 37–41. For the broader Black liberal response to Cold War anticommunism, see Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); Eric Arnesen, "Civil Rights and the Cold War at Home: Postwar Activism, Anticommunism, and the Decline of the Left," *American Communist History* 11, no. 1 (2012): 5–44; and Manfred Berg, "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 75–96.

[10]Howard Fast, *Peekskill USA: Inside the Infamous 1949 Riots* (New York, 2011). For an earlier important example of the violence and hostility directed towards Robeson as a political artist, see Peter Cole and Ricky Newcomb, "Can't Play in Peoria: Paul Robeson's Canceled Concert, Civil Rights Unionism, and the Second Red Scare," *The Journal of African American History* 107, no. 4 (Sept. 2022): 548–74.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

progressive politics were denounced as foreign, disloyal, and incongruous with the American way of life.

In many ways, Paul Robeson was the dictionary definition of a "citizen of the world."[11] His travels, performances, and political associations all point to the impossibility of reading his life and Black politics solely through the lens of the nation-state. Nevertheless, his activism—like Omar's in the twenty-first century—was intimately grounded in his relationship with the United States and his precarious status as an American citizen. Furthermore, he repeatedly framed himself as a patriotic and loyal American. We need to take Robeson's patriotic declarations seriously. Not least because they tell us something about the way in which Black radicals responded to the repressive politics of McCarthyism that denounced them as foreign and disloyal. But also, and perhaps most significantly, we must take his declarations seriously because these pronouncements have important implications for the study of Black international activism. This vibrant body of scholarship rightly demands that we grapple with Black history's global vision and move beyond national frameworks.[12] However, it is important to note how even the most expansive forms of Black internationalism are rooted in specific national circumstances.[13] Black international politics do not always represent an escape from, or an outright rejection of, the nation. Instead, this mode of political engagement often demands a fundamental reckoning with the politics of nationalism and the nation in order to challenge global inequalities.

Examining Paul Robeson's "cosmopolitan patriotism" therefore offers us an insight into the ways in which Black international activists navigated the complex interplay between their global and national affiliations.[14] Robeson strategically reworked the history and meaning of the nation to produce a dissident form of patriotism that exposed the embedded violence of white supremacy, fascism, and settler colonialism in the United Sates. Combining the radical politics of Black internationalism with patriotic pronouncements of belonging, he spoke back to the repressive politics of McCarthyism by redefining what it meant to be "un-American." In the process, he dismantled powerful national myths while simultaneously working to build the alternative histories, structures, and ideas that were needed for Black liberation on a global scale. Ultimately, Robeson's patriotic politics were a means through which he demanded Black liberation across national borders. He worked to transform the nation from the inside as a way of challenging empire, colonialism, and capitalism everywhere.[15]

[11]Shirley Graham Du Bois's title of her biography of the great baritone emphasizes this point; see Shirley Graham Du Bois, *Paul Robeson, Citizen of the World* (New York, 1946).

[12]Robin D. G. Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision, 1883–1950," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 1045–77. For a brilliant discussion of both Kelley's article and key issues in the study of Black internationalism, see Monique Bedasse et al., "AHR Conversation: Black Internationalism," *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 5 (Dec. 2020): 1699–739.

[13]For the relationship between place and Black internationalism, see Sarah C. Dunstan, "The Capital of Race Capitals: Toward a Connective Cartography of Black Internationalisms," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 82, no. 4 (2021): 637–60.

[14]This terminology is used by the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (Apr. 1997): 618; and Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York, 2007), 81. On how anticolonial thinkers complicated the boundary between nationalism and cosmopolitanism and warned against centralized forms of statehood, see Merve Fejzula, "The Cosmopolitan Historiography of Twentieth Century Federalism," *The Historical Journal* 64, no. 2 (Mar. 2021), 477–500.

[15]While her focus is on Africa and the Caribbean, Adom Getachew's work on anticolonial nationalism and world-making has influenced my analysis of Robeson's engagement with nationalism from the United States. See Adom Getachew, "Kwame Nkrumah and the Quest for Independence," *Dissent Magazine* (blog), Summer 2019, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/kwame-nkrumah-and-the-quest-for-independence (accessed June 16, 2023); and Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Becoming Un-American

In April 1949, Paul Robeson traveled to Paris. In the midst of a four-month concert tour throughout Europe, his travels coincided with the Congress of the World Partisans of Peace that saw 2,000 delegates from 60 countries descend on the City of Light to debate the political changes needed to stave off yet another global conflict.[16] Robeson was joined in Paris by W. E. B. Du Bois, who led the U.S. delegation, while artistic and scientific luminaries Pablo Picasso, Louis Aragon, Frédéric Joilot-Curie, and J. D. Bernal also attended. However, it was the great baritone's appearance on the opening night of the Congress that sparked proceedings into life and grabbed newspaper headlines around the world. He captivated the delegates by singing a few classic numbers including "Old Man River" and the revolutionary folk songs "Joe Hill" and "Four Insurgent Generals," while delivering a short yet wide-ranging address that took aim at empire, demanded human rights for all regardless of race, and insisted that the last thing that colonized peoples around the world wanted was to be dragged into a conflict for global dominance between "the West" and the Soviet Union.[17] As a number of scholars have documented when tracing the mutually constitutive relationship between racism and anticommunism, Robeson's words were quickly seized upon by liberal and reactionary forces back in the United States to cast him as disloyal, treasonous, and an agent of a foreign power.[18]

The meaning of peace and how it would be maintained represented a key battleground in the rapidly escalating Cold War. The U.S. authorities were unflinching in their view that sharing a stage with Soviet delegates and calling for an end to global conflict constituted a subversive act.[19] As Mao Zedong's People's Liberation Army advanced in China and the Western powers established the North Atlantic Treaty, Robeson's speech was twisted, distorted, and denounced as treasonous. By the time news of his appearance had crossed the Atlantic, most U.S. newspapers had him declaring that, "It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind…."[20] While Robeson immediately insisted that he had been misquoted, the damage had already been done.[21] Paris marked his transformation from universally celebrated artist to political troublemaker. Surveilled, suppressed, and shunned by those who adhered to the anticommunist line, he was cast as the embodiment of the incendiary "un-American."[22]

Four key facets of Robeson's life and politics all but assured his status as persona non grata in the United States during the Second Red Scare. His Black international politics

[16]World Peace Congress, World Peace Congress press release, Apr. 15, 1949, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, Amherst, MA [hereafter W. E. B. Du Bois Papers].

[17]In the United States, it was reported that Robeson had said, "It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war" against the Soviet Union. See, for example, P. L. Prattis, "Robeson, Dubois Cause Uproar at Paris Meet," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Apr. 30, 1949, 3. However, Jordan Goodman details how Robeson was misquoted, citing French newspaper reports and the official congress bulletin to show that he did not say African Americans would refuse to fight for the United States, but rather that a third world war would be disastrous for all Black and colonized peoples everywhere. Goodman, *Paul Robeson*, 47–51. See also, Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 687.

[18]Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 341–2; Goodman, *Paul Robeson*, 40–50; Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 115; Swindall, *Paul Robeson*, 121–2.

[19]Petra Goedde, *The Politics of Peace: A Global Cold War History* (New York, 2019), 7, ch 2.

[20]Quoted in Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 34.

[21]Goodman, *Paul Robeson*, 40–5; Swindall, *Paul Robeson*, 121.

[22]Horne, *Paul Robeson*, ch 7; Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 36–7. For more on "un-Americanism" during the early Cold War, see Andrew Lanham, "When W. E. B. Du Bois Was Un-American," *Boston Review*, Jan. 13, 2017, https://bostonreview.net/race-politics/andrew-lanham-when-w-e-b-du-bois-was-un-american (accessed June 16, 2023); and Bill Mullen, *Un-American: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Century of World Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were welded to his opposition to colonialism, capitalism, and fascism—connected in ways that fundamentally challenged the racial politics of American imperialism.[23] Robeson's work with the radical anti-imperialist lobby the International Council on African Affairs (ICAA) illuminates the relationship between each of these supposedly "subversive" elements of his political identity.

The ICAA was founded in London in 1936 with the help of a donation from Paul's wife, the noted anthropologist, writer, and activist, Eslanda Goode Robeson. The brainchild of Max Yergan, an American YMCA missionary who Eslanda had met in South Africa earlier that year, the ICAA brought together a transnational network of activists dedicated to promoting colonial independence.[24] Between 1928 and 1939, the Robesons were based in London while Paul starred in the West End, acted in a series of British produced films, and toured Europe as a singer. During this time, London was home to a vibrant community of anticolonial activists from the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia.[25] In Britain, the Robesons met a range of radical Black intellectuals, including the Caribbean activists C. L. R. James, George Padmore, and Amy Ashwood Garvey, as well as several from Africa, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, and Nnamdi Azikiwe, who would go on to be the first leaders of independent Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria respectively. Exposure to the work of these individuals and organizations such as the West African Students Union (WASU) and the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) profoundly shaped their world views, as Eslanda and Paul navigated this dynamic anticolonial, antifascist, and cosmopolitan milieu.[26] They both noted that it was in London where they first really engaged with African politics and explored this aspect of their own identities. As Paul later wrote in the South African anti-apartheid publication *Fighting Talk*, "I 'discovered' Africa in London. That discovery—back in the Twenties—profoundly influenced my life. Like most of Africa's children in America, I had known little about the land of our fathers. But in England, where my career as an actor and a singer took me, I came to know many Africans."[27]

By 1941, the ICAA—along with Yergan and the Robesons—had moved to New York City. The organization was rebranded the Council on African Affairs (CAA) and, with Paul installed as chair, worked to lobby the U.S. government for the rights of colonized peoples.[28] As America's global influence expanded, the CAA adjusted its antifascist and anticolonial critiques accordingly, taking aim at the imperial motivations that underpinned U.S. foreign policy. Bringing together an extensive transnational network of activists, the Council held mass rallies,

[23]John Munro, "Imperial Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement in the Early Cold War," *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 52–75.

[24]Charles Denton Johnson, "Re-Thinking the Emergence of the Struggle for South African Liberation in the United States: Max Yergan and the Council on African Affairs, 1922–1946," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, no. 1 (2013): 171–92; Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven, CT, 2013), 111; Eslanda Goode Robeson, *African Journey* (New York, 1945).

[25]Marika Sherwood, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Years Abroad, 1935–1947* (Accra, Ghana, 1996); Hakim Adi, *West Africans in Britain 1900–1960: Nationalism, Pan-Africanism and Communism* (London, 1998); Hakim Adi, "Amy Ashwood Garvey and the Nigerian Progress Union," in *Gendering the African Diaspora*, eds. Judith A. Byfield, LaRay Denzer, and Anthea Morrison (Bloomington, IN, 2010), 199–219; Hakim Adi, "Communism and Black Liberation," in *The Black International: From Toussaint to Tupac*, eds. Michael O. West, Fanon C. Wilkins, and William G. Martin (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009), 155–79; Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London Is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (New York, 2016); Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, CA, 2015).

[26]Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement*, new ed. (Amherst, MA, 2005), 320; Ransby, *Eslanda*, 86–8.

[27]Paul Robeson, "Robeson Discovers Africa," *Fighting Talk*, Apr. 1954, 4; Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (London, 1958), 41–2.

[28]Johnson, "Re-Thinking the Emergence of the Struggle for South African Liberation in the United States", 185–91.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ran fundraising campaigns, and published materials in order to disseminate their view that the problems of colonialism and Jim Crow were interconnected.[29] As CAA Educational Director William Alphaeus Hunton noted in a pamphlet entitled *Resistance to Fascist Enslavement in South Africa*,

> … there are some who may say that we have enough to do in cleaning *our own* backyard: it is perhaps not quite as ugly as South Africa's, but still surely bad enough. True, there IS a big job to be done defending and winning our rights here at home. But can we separate the problem of Jim Crow in America from the problem of Apartheid in South Africa? Can the octopus of racism and fascism be killed by simply cutting off *one* menacing tentacle?[30]

For CAA activists both fascism and imperialism were interconnected evils that harnessed the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation to oppress people of African descent across national borders. Robeson's involvement in the founding and development of the CAA sheds light on the constituent parts of his global political vision. From discovering Africa in London, to working with activists across borders to demand an end to colonialism and imperial exploitation, he insisted that the only way to dismantle the oppressive systems that extended and reinforced white supremacy was through coordinated Black international action. In the process, he challenged dominant political narratives concerning the "special character" of American democracy. In the aftermath of the Second World War, as the United States attempted to assume the mantle of Leader of the Free World, this insistence that the fascist and imperialistic character of American capitalism directly contradicted the national myths that U.S. politicians liked to tell themselves, and the rest of the world.[31]

In what was a depressingly familiar story, Robeson and his allies were made to pay for their rejection of Cold War liberalism.[32] A year after his Paris address, the State Department refused to reissue Robeson's passport, reasoning that, "The diplomatic embarrassment that could arise from the presence abroad of such a political meddler, travelling under the production of an American passport, is easily imaginable."[33] He was ultimately barred from traveling overseas for eight years. Blacklisted at home and unable to pursue employment opportunities abroad, Robeson's livelihood was threatened and his public platform circumscribed. At the same time, in 1955, the CAA folded after being denounced as a Communist-front organization by the U.S. Attorney General and facing increasing pressure to register as an agent of a foreign power under the Foreign Agents Registration Act.[34] The following year, Robeson was hauled in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and grilled about his political affiliations and statements. In a fiery response to the committee, he defended his activism and once again decried the continued existence of racism and fascism in the United States,

[29]Hollis Ralph Lynch, *Black American Radicals and the Liberation of Africa: The Council on African Affairs, 1937–1955* (Ithaca, NY, 1978).

[30]William Alphaeus Hunton, "Resistance: Against Fascist Enslavement in South Africa," 1953, Reel 2, slide. 42, William Alphaeus Hunton Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York.

[31]Sarah C. Dunstan, *Race, Rights and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK, 2021), 223; Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis, 2011), xvii.

[32]Gerald Horne has written extensively on the persecution of Black radicals during the early Cold War. For instance, see Gerald Horne, *Black and Red*; *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark, DE, 1994).

[33]Lloyd L. Brown, "State Dept. Says African Freedom 'Against Best Interests of U.S.,'" *Freedom* 2, no. 4 (Apr. 1952): 5; "Robeson Demands Passport: Cancelled Because of Support for African People," *New Age*, Mar. 10, 1955, 3; "A Lesson from Our South African Brothers and Sisters," *Freedom*, Sept. 1952, In Paul Robeson, *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918–1974* (New York, 1978), 326.

[34]United States, Attorney-General, *Petition against Council on African American Affairs*, Apr. 20, 1954, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

telling the stunned congressmen, "You are the nonpatriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves."[35]

As the Black Studies scholar Charisse Burden-Stelly has noted, Robeson became a victim of the pervasive "antiforeignness" that structured the repressive politics of McCarthyism. His transnational travels and interactions were used to cast him as a threat to the "American way of life" and to denounce his political world view as both foreign and subversive. As Burden-Stelly states, during the early Cold War, "The foreigner, the radical, and the Black became interchangeable as suspicious, subversive, and inherently destabilizing. Because of the actual and presumed challenge to U.S. forms of governmentality, they became represented as aligned with enemies of the United States, and undeserving of citizenship, rights, privileges, and entitlements."[36] Unsurprisingly, Robeson and his allies staunchly rejected the perverse logic of Cold War anticommunism, anti-radicalism, and anti-Blackness. They repeatedly insisted that he was no "foreigner," responding to these accusations by rhetorically re-inserting himself into the fabric of the American nation—both past and present. These political trials did not lead to an outright rejection of the nation-form, but instead demanded a complete transformation and expansion of its boundaries.

Rethinking Robeson

As the historian Nikhil Pal Singh demonstrates, African American thinkers have often invoked liberal and republican ideas relating to American universalism, reinvesting these ideas "with the symbolic power of their own struggles."[37] My efforts to "rethink" Paul Robeson are particularly indebted to these important insights. However, while Singh acknowledges how Black activists interrogated the nation, he ultimately emphasizes the need to move beyond Americanism in order to realize Black liberation. His argument is informed by the ways in which the virulent anticommunism of the Second Red Scare reinforced uncritical and exceptionalist visions of American universalism, while restricting Black international networks that challenged racial capitalism and connected the fate of African Americans to anticolonial movements around the world.[38] As someone who fell afoul of this repressive political shift, Robeson is often cast as a "tragic" figure who lost everything during the early Cold War.[39] Furthermore, his patriotic statements are either ignored or explained away as an effort to restore his reputation in the

[35]Testimony of Paul Robeson before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Jun. 12, 1956, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440/ (accessed June 16, 2023). For Robeson's performance before HUAC see, Tony Perucci, "The Red Mask of Sanity: Paul Robeson, HUAC, and the Sound of Cold War Performance," *TDR/The Drama Review* 53, no. 4 (Nov. 2009): 18–48; and Shana L. Redmond, *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson* (Durham, NC, 2020), 53–4.

[36]Charisse Burden-Stelly, "Constructing Deportable Subjectivity: Antiforeignness, Antiradicalism, and Antiblackness during the McCarthyist Structure of Feeling," *Souls* 19, no. 3 (July 2017): 345. See also Rachel Ida Buff, *Against the Deportation Terror: Organizing for Immigrant Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia, 2017); and Davies, "Deportable Subjects," 949–66.

[37]Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 126. These debates have recently been reignited by Nikole Hannah-Jones and the contributors to "The 1619 Project." See, in particular, Nikole Hannah-Jones, "America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One," *The New York Times*, Aug. 14, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html (accessed June 16, 2023).

[38]Nikhil Pal Singh, "Culture/Wars: Recoding Empire in an Age of Democracy," *American Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1998): 499–502; Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, reprint ed. (Princeton, NJ, 2017), 267.

[39]Scholars sometimes refer to the "tragedy" of Robeson's life when discussing his trials and tribulations during the Second Red Scare. For example, Martin Duberman asserts, "That a man so deeply loved all over the world could evoke in his own country such an outpouring of fear and anger maybe the central tragedy—the American tragedy—of Paul Robeson's story." Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, xiii. While efforts to marginalize such a vital political figure were indeed a tragedy, my concern is that this dominant framing leaves little room to examine how Robeson responded to this situation by employing his experiences as a lens through which to further interrogate United States power. See also Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

United States after years of scathing attacks.[40] It is certainly important not to minimize the immense personal, professional, and political damage that anticommunism inflicted on Black radicals. However, it is equally vital to account for how these activists responded to the oppressive forces they faced in ways which did not fit into neat Cold War binaries and continued to offer a powerful critique of American democracy at home and abroad.[41]

Robeson directly confronted accusations of disloyalty by arguing for a fundamental transformation of the nation and its self-professed ideals.[42] In this, he was again greatly influenced by Eslanda Robeson's political experience and striking ability to engage, rework, and appropriate powerful structures and ideas in the name of liberation.[43] Indeed, when called to appear in front of Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-WI)'s U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in July 1953, she refused to answer whether she had ever been a member of the communist party by invoking the Fifteenth Amendment, arguing that the existence of racial voting restrictions made a mockery of American democracy and its institutions.[44] In self-consciously engaging with the politics of American patriotism throughout the 1950s, the Robesons harnessed the power of American universalism for their own interests, as well as for the interests of ordinary people—both in the United States and overseas. This was not a patriotism of unquestioning loyalty, but of radical critique.[45] It represented a battle over the meaning of national values and the insistence that it was possible to embrace both an American and a broader cosmopolitan identity. As Andrew Arsan, Su Lin Lewis, and Anne-Isabelle Richard have pointed out, historical actors have regularly "moved up and down the scales of mobilization, sometimes engaging intensely with their immediate surrounds, at other times seeking to broker broader, cross-border understandings and alliances, integrating various levels of engagement."[46] For Paul Robeson, the politics of patriotism and Black internationalism were not mutually exclusive. Indeed, this multifaceted perspective was vital when pushing for a more progressive and egalitarian United States.[47] His efforts point to the persistence and continued power of Black internationalism during the Second Red Scare, as radical activists interrogated the meaning of nationalism, citizenship, and patriotism within a global

[40]Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 453.

[41]Saloman Gabrile Mindel provides an excellent example of this in his study of Robeson's performances at the U.S.–Canada border. Saloman Gabrile Mindel, "Performing Abolition: Paul Robeson in the Canadian Borderlands," *Resonance* 2, no. 3 (Sept. 2021): 411–26.

[42]Carl Rowan, "Has Paul Robeson Betrayed the Negro?" *Ebony*, Oct. 1957, 41–2.

[43]Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, "Feminist Networks and Diasporic Practices: Eslanda Robeson's Travels in Africa," in *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism*, eds. Keisha Blain and Tiffany M. Gill (Champaign, IL, 2019), 38–54. Both Barbara Ransby and Imaobong Umoren have shown how central Eslanda was in shaping the public persona of the Robesons as a couple, as well as the ways in which Black radicals responded to their harassment during the Second Red Scare. See Ransby, *Eslanda*; Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Berkeley, CA, 2018); and Imaobong Umoren, "'We Americans Are Not Just American Citizens Any Longer': Eslanda Robeson, World Citizenship, and the New World Review in the 1950s," *Journal of Women's History* 30, no. 4 (Dec. 2018): 134–58.

[44]For Eslanda's account of her appearance in front of McCarthy's Senate committee, see Eslanda Goode Robeson, "Mrs. Robeson On McCarthy: 'McCarthy Called Me'—Her Views," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1953, 1–2; "Mrs. Robeson Proves Too Much for Sen. McCarthy," *Afro-American*, Jul. 18, 1953, 1–2; Alice A. Dunnigan, "I Am a Loyal American—Mrs. Robeson," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jul. 18, 1953, 19; Eslanda Robeson, "Here's My Story—How about the Gov't Being Loyal to the People of the U.S.A," *Freedom*, Oct. 1953, 1, 6; Barbara Ransby, "Eslanda Robeson and Cold War Politics," *Race & Class* 54, no. 4 (Apr. 2013): 105–6.

[45]For patriotic politics and the Left, see Michael Kazin, "A Patriotic Left," *Dissent Magazine* (blog), https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/a-patriotic-left (accessed Jun. 16, 2023); Todd Gitlin, "Varieties of Patriotic Experience" in *The Fight Is for Democracy: Winning the War of Ideas in America and the World*, ed. George Packer (New York, 2003), 107–136.

[46]Andrew Arsan, Su Lin Lewis, and Anne-Isabelle Richard, "Editorial—the Roots of Global Civil Society and the Interwar Moment," *Journal of Global History* 7, no. 2 (July 2012): 160.

[47]Alexa Weik, "'The Uses and Hazards of Expatriation': Richard Wright's Cosmopolitanism in Process," *African American Review* 41, no. 3 (2007): 466–7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

political context.[48] Confronting the repressive power of the state head on, Robeson rhetorically outmaneuvered conservative forces by redefining what it meant to be a "proud" and "loyal" American. In the process he emphasized how the United States might learn the real meanings of freedom, democracy, and justice from nations engaged in the struggle for decolonization. This was not an uncritical embrace of his Americanness; neither was it an effort to speak the same language as his conservative critics. Instead, Robeson advanced a vision of what the literary scholar Annette Joseph-Gabriel terms "decolonial citizenship," which drew attention to the abject failings of American democracy while also "untether[ing] citizenship from the narrow confines of the nation state."[49]

Robeson's appearance before HUAC in June 1956 provides a dramatic case in point. In this particularly ill-tempered hearing, the committee asked if he would prefer to live in Russia.[50] Robeson responded with a resounding "no," defiantly stating, "Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I'm going to stay here, and have a part of it just like you. And no Fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?"[51] The process of redefining and subverting the reactionary politics of "un-Americanism" meant acknowledging interconnected histories of anti-Black racism, fascism, and violence. Robeson insisted that it was imperative that Americans recognize the centrality of slavery and white supremacy to the founding of the United States, while at the same time demanding recognition for the labor and sacrifices made by Black Americans that made possible the expansion of the nation. He made clear the willful erasure of Black suffering and how this was central to the politics of anticommunism.[52] Ultimately, Robeson gave the United States a history lesson throughout his hearing. Making clear the many failures of American democracy, he skilfully weaved together his commitment to those engaged in political struggle throughout the "colonial world" with his identity as a patriotic citizen. Furthermore, by publicly denouncing American fascism and imperialism, he transported what were often dismissed as "European" problems back home to the United States in ways that challenged the core assumptions of Cold War liberalism.

If the politics of anticommunism cast Blackness and radicalism as foreign, Robeson and the Black left responded by emphasizing how the experiences of African Americans were, in fact, integral to the United States's national story. This message came through clearly in the pages of *Freedom* newspaper. Robeson founded this monthly publication with Louis Burnham in 1951, with the name a reference to America's first Black-owned and -run newspaper, John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish's *Freedom Journal*.[53] With the tagline, "Where one is enslaved, all are in chains!" emblazoned on its masthead, the newspaper was established to provide "a voice for the

[48]The following studies document the ways in which Black radicals responded and challenged the repressive politics of the Second Red Scare: Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC, 2008); Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945–1960* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017); Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York, 2011); Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers on the Black Left, 1945–1995* (Chicago, 2011); Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC, 2011); John Munro, *The Anticolonial Front: The African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonisation, 1945–1960* (Cambridge, UK, 2017); and Mary Helen Washington, *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (New York, 2014).

[49]Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire* (Champaign, IL, 2019), 11–2.

[50]Tony Perucci, "The Red Mask of Sanity: Paul Robeson, HUAC, and the Sound of Cold War Performance," *TDR/The Drama Review* 53, no. 4 (Nov. 2009): 18–48; Redmond, *Everything Man*, 50–67.

[51]Testimony of Paul Robeson before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, in Tony Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex: Race, Madness, Activism* (Ann Arbor, 2012), 163–172.

[52]Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 27.

[53]Munro, *The Anticolonial Front*, 129–40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

poor and disinherited among us."[54] Bringing together writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Lorraine Hansberry, Eslanda Robeson, and Vicki Garvin, *Freedom* militantly challenged racism, capitalism, and imperialism.[55] Paul's column, "Here's My Story," appeared in almost every issue and became a vital space where he could respond to state harassment and set out his global political vision. However, Robeson also regularly used this platform to address his Americanism and his relationship with the United States.[56] In the inaugural issue of *Freedom*, he outlined his family's roots in the South and on the plantation, commenting that, "Many times, I have stood on the very soil on which my father was a slave, where some of my cousins are sharecroppers and unemployed tobacco workers." He noted how in these moments, "I reflected upon the wealth bled from my near relatives alone, and of the very basic wealth of all this America beaten out of millions of the Negro people, enslaved, freed, newly enslaved until this very day."[57] The rise of the United States to the status of global superpower was only made possible by the enslavement and exploitation of Africans brought to its shores. Robeson argued that this labor and the enforced extraction of wealth from his own people made the accusations of disloyalty he faced all the more outrageous. As he asserted,

> I defy any errand boys, Uncle Toms of the Negro people to challenge my Americanism, because by word and deed I challenge this vicious system to the death: because, I refuse to let my personal success, as part of a fraction of one percent of the Negro people, to explain away the injustices to fourteen million of my people; because with all the energy at my command, I fight for the right of the Negro people and other oppressed labor-driven Americans to have decent homes, decent jobs, and the dignity that belongs to every human being![58]

The failure to eradicate Jim Crow and the continued denial of basic human rights to every U.S. citizen constituted a national betrayal. Demonstrating loyalty to the nation meant working to eradicate these inequalities while also questioning complacent narratives of American progress when it came to issues of race and class. Robeson's centering of slavery in the origin story of the nation provides a powerful corrective to the racist politics of American exceptionalism. The literary scholar Michelle M. Wright notes how this focus can sometimes lead in the construction of a "middle passage epistemology" that works to homogenize and essentialize Blackness in the United States. Writing in response to Nikole Hannah-Jones and "The 1619 Project," Wright argues that this kind of narrative can produce oversimplifications, hierarchies, and erasures that fail to account for the complicated and multifaceted nature of Black life.[59] For example, Robeson's history of the United States denies native sovereignty and largely overlooks the struggles of indigenous peoples. As the historian Kyle T. Mays argues, there is much to be gained

[54]Editorial, "A New Voice," *Freedom*, Nov. 1950, 4.

[55]*Freedom* was a key site where these writers honed and expressed their Black international vision. See Dayo Gore, "From Communist Politics to Black Power: The Visionary Politics and Transnational Solidarities of Victoria 'Vicki' Ama Garvin," in *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, eds. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York, 2009), 72–94; Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 57–58; Imani Perry, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (Boston, 2018), 12, 51–9; Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, eds. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 183–204; Fanon Che Wilkins, "Beyond Bandung: The Critical Nationalism of Lorraine Hansberry, 1950–1965," *Radical History Review* 2006, no. 95 (May 1, 2006): 191–210.

[56]Daniel A. Holder, "'I Got a Home in That Rock.'" *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 27, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): 85.

[57]Paul Robeson, "Here's My Story," *Freedom*, Apr. 1951, 4.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Michelle M. Wright, "1619: The Danger of a Single Origin Story," *American Literary History* 32, no. 4 (Dec. 2020): 4–7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from recognizing moments of confluence and solidarities when it comes to Black and indigenous histories that have often been deliberately sealed off from one another with damaging consequences.[60] While this tendency points to some of the inherent limitations of civic nationalism as a political discourse when it comes to forging solidarities in opposition to settler colonialism and capitalism, Robeson's discussion of slavery is nevertheless significant as it exposed the fascist and imperialistic character of the of the nation in the age of McCarthy. As he wrote in the November 1953 issue of *Freedom*, "Let us remember that at one time in our national life the victims of hysteria were Jefferson and his colleagues, friends of the new revolutionary French republic of 1789. At another, the sufferers were Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, fighters for our freedom. They happened to be abolitionists."[61] Positioning his allies on the Black left—including Benjamin Davis, James Jackson, Henry Winston, and Claudia Jones—as "proud inheritors of these magnificent traditions," Robeson contended that McCarthyism was "an American brand of fascism" that could only be nullified through a wholehearted embrace of the nation's "democratic heritage" of free speech and protest.[62] Anticommunism threatened these vital American traditions in that it sought to silence those who recognized the fallibility of the nation. The Red Scare was an affront to these values in that it served the interests of the capitalist class and those who relied on segregation and racial discord for profits—the elected officials, businessmen, and elites that Robeson argued belonged to the "robber-baron gangster-imperialist tradition of American life."[63] In this configuration there were two, competing Americas: one deluded by its insistence on American "progress" and shackled by its unwavering faith in racial capitalism; the other the real and "true America," made up of ordinary working people and committed to the expansion of political, economic, and human rights around the world.[64]

Robeson therefore responded to the government harassment he and his comrades faced by articulating an alternative version of nation that deliberately centered the histories, ideas, and beliefs that he believed should define what it really meant to be American. Rejecting demands for blind loyalty to the United States during the early Cold War, he instead maintained that Black Americans were entitled to fair and equal treatment from law makers and state actors. Loyalty, he argued, worked both ways. This version of patriotism relied on remembering alternative national histories that emphasized Black resistance and insisted on a re-reading of the nation's foundational documents as part of a broader interrogation of the meaning of American democracy. "True" Americanism, could only be brought about by a coalition of Black militants and ordinary working people. As Robeson commented following Du Bois's acquittal after being charged with violating the Foreign Agent's Registration Act,

> Let us channel all these forces into the final victory of the restoration of the real democratic forces of our American life, the setting of this great nation, conceived in liberty on its destined path of granting justice and equality to all, of striving ever honestly for genuine world cooperation and peace, of profound respect for the aspirations of all peoples everywhere.[65]

[60]Kyle T. Mays, *An Afro-Indigenous History of the United States* (Boston, 2021). See also Tiya Miles, "Uncle Tom Was an Indian: Tracing the Red in Black Slavery," in *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*, ed. Natalia Molina (Berkeley, CA, 2019), 124.

[61]Paul Robeson, "Here's My Story," *Freedom*, Nov. 1953, 4.

[62]Ibid. For the ways in which debates over the meaning of fascism and totalitarianism shaped critiques of anti-Black racism in the U.S., see Vaughn Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), especially ch 2.

[63]Paul Robeson, "Here's My Story," Apr. 1951, 4.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Paul Robeson, "Here's My Story," *Freedom*, Dec. 1951, 6. For more on Du Bois's peace activism and the disruptive effects of anticommunism, see Charisse Burden-Stelly, "In Battle for Peace During 'Scoundrel Time':

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Recognizing the global significance of these debates regarding the meaning of America, Robeson and his allies were adamant that the nation could still be saved from the interconnected forces of white supremacy, fascism, capitalism, and imperialism.

Patriotism and Black Internationalism

In 1958, Paul Robeson published *Here I Stand*, a short but revealing autobiography, written with his friend Lloyd L. Brown. Robeson saw the book as an opportunity to put the record straight regarding his political views, insisting throughout the text, "I shall try to make clear exactly what my ideas are and how I came to hold them."[66] *Here I Stand* was an important avenue for Robeson to respond to the harassment he faced and to remind people of his American roots.[67] The autobiographical form provided him another space to share his own thoughts on the meanings of home and patriotism.[68] When grappling with this question, Robeson again pushed hard to identify a place for himself, and Black Americans more broadly, within the national narrative of the United States.[69] As he argues in the preface to *Here I Stand*,

> I am a Negro. The house I live in is in Harlem—in this city within a city, Negro metropolis of America. And now as I write of things that are urgent in my mind and heart, I feel the press of all that is around me here where I live, at home among my people… Yes, here is my homeground. Here, and in all the Negro communities throughout the land. Here I stand.[70]

Locating himself firmly in the unofficial Black capital of the United States, Robeson maintained that he was indisputably a product of, and would always belong to, Black America. Reflecting on how the experience of growing up in his father's church in Princeton, New Jersey, had bound him spiritually to figures such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, who had earlier "played their part in the glorious tradition of our church," he concluded by referencing a famous spiritual and defiantly asserting, "Yes, I've got a home in that rock!"[71] Martin Duberman has interpreted *Here I Stand* as part of a broader effort from Robeson to rhetorically distance himself from the Soviet line and "refurbish" his image within the African American community.[72] While it is certainly true that the anticommunist climate made such a move politically beneficial, this argument downplays the consistency of Robeson's Americanism as well as the extent to which his patriotic declarations were still intimately bound up with his radical Black international politics.

The question of home and belonging reappears in the text when Robeson recalls his travels and life overseas. Discussing his time in Britain, he notes that, "My experiences abroad, in the twelve years … that I made my home in London, brought me to understand that, no matter where else I might travel, my home-ground must be America."[73] Robeson deliberately grounded his foreign sojourns, along with the cosmopolitan friendships and political alliances, in terms of his "Americanness." His time abroad, he argues, did not result in a distancing from the country of his birth, but in fact led him to further embrace the United States as his home

W. E. B. Du Bois and United States Repression of Radical Black Peace Activism," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 1–20.

[66]*Robeson*, *Here I Stand*, 36.

[67]Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 55.

[68]Holder, "'I Got a Home in That Rock,'" 67–100.

[69]Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 55.

[70]*Robeson*, *Here I Stand*, 9–10.

[71]Ibid., 10; Swindall, *Paul Robeson*, 158.

[72]Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 453, 458–9.

[73]*Robeson*, *Here I Stand*, 56.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and African Americans as "his people." Robeson's historical situatedness—his formative experiences growing up Black in the United States, as well as the long, ongoing struggles of his people against white supremacy—were fundamental to his sense of self and played an important role in shaping his political worldview. As he made clear early on in *Here I Stand*,

> I speak as an American Negro whose life is dedicated, first and foremost, to winning full freedom, and nothing less than full freedom, for my people in America. In these pages I have discussed what this fight for Negro freedom means in the crisis of today, of how it represents the decisive front in our struggle for democracy in our country, of how it relates to the cause of peace and liberation throughout the world.[74]

Robeson did not consider the insistence that the United States was his "home-ground" as a retreat from his global political activities.[75] In fact, throughout his autobiography, he positions America as the specific location from which his cosmopolitan and Black international politics were necessarily articulated. For Robeson, his Blackness and close affiliation with ordinary Americans—the "Etcetera's and the And-so-forths, that do the work"—made it impossible for this activism to be contained within national borders.[76] As he asks in the text, "What future can America have without the free and unfettered contributions of our sixteen millions? What place of honor can our country have in the new world a-borning if our heritage is still denied?"[77] The success or failure of the African American freedom struggle would have global implications. Indeed, how could the United States engage with the rest of the world if African Americans continued to be oppressed? Robeson was in no way seeking to pave the way for further American expansion into Asia or Africa as the supposed "Leader of the Free World." Nor was he positioning the need to eradicate Jim Crow as a means of bolstering American strategic interests on the world stage as part of the battle against global communism, as many African American liberals argued at the time.[78] Rather, he called out racism and fascism in the United States as a means of pushing for the extension of human rights to people of color around the world.

Ruminating on the constituent parts of his identity Robeson commented that, "The belief in the oneness of humankind, about which I have often spoken in concerts and elsewhere, has existed within me side-by-side with my deep attachment to the cause of my own race."[79] Robeson's Blackness, his Americanism, and what the historian Nico Slate has termed "colored cosmopolitanism" were not mutually exclusive.[80] White supremacy, imperialism, and capitalist exploitation crossed national borders and therefore demanded a coordinated international response. In *Here I Stand*, and in his broader resistance to McCarthyism, Robeson makes clear that his geographical location, experiences, and personal history in the United States meant that his activism was bound to the fate of peoples struggling against race and class oppression globally. In defiantly proclaiming his patriotism, and crucially insisting on the centrality of Black contributions to U.S. history, his "home-ground" was rhetorically transformed

[74]*Ibid.*, 11.

[75]Nico Slate, "From Colored Cosmopolitanism to Human Rights: A Historical Overview of the Transnational Black Freedom Struggle," *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 1, no. 1 (2015): 10–1.

[76]*Robeson*, *Here I Stand*, 12; Holder, "'I Got a Home in That Rock,'" 83. This is a reference to a line from the song "Ballad for Americans" (1939) by Earl Robinson and John La Touche, which Robeson first performed in 1939.

[77]*Robeson*, *Here I Stand*, 10.

[78]Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*; Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

[79]*Robeson*, *Here I Stand*, 56.

[80]Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Nico Slate, *The Prism of Race: W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and the Colored World of Cedric Dover* (New York, 2014), ch 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as the foundation for his radical Black international politics. As he commented when addressing the need for African Americans to join with the "rising colored peoples of the world" in large-scale political action,

> This is not merely a matter of racial identification and common sentiments: the course of history has made it so. The plunder of Africa by the nations of Europe, which brought our ancestors to this hemisphere as slaves, was the beginning of the era that brought most of Asia, too, under white domination. Now when that era is ending, it is inevitable that our own destiny is involved.[81]

Robeson placed the history of American slavery and racism within its global imperial context, contending that Jim Crow and colonial exploitation were deeply connected and reinforced one another. Influenced by pioneering Black scholars such as Du Bois, as well as his engagement with international communism, Robeson traced the global contours of race and class oppression.[82] He implored African Americans to recognize their status as world-historical actors and to actively engage with the global politics of decolonization.[83] Robeson's patriotism was globally oriented, informed by the forces and connections that had shaped the lives of people of African descent across national borders. The imperial character of the U.S. nation meant African Americans could not isolate themselves from the rest of the world.[84] Any radical reorientation of U.S. democracy required a fundamental reassessment of America's influence overseas, as well as the nation's historical and contemporary engagement with the racial politics of empire and colonialism.

The international significance of these debates over the status and meaning of American democracy coalesced around the issue of Robeson's passport and his right to travel.[85] In a legal brief submitted to the court of appeals in the spring of 1952, the State Department publicly affirmed that Robeson's passport had been revoked, "in view of applicant's frank admission that he has been extremely active politically on behalf of the independence of the colonial peoples of Africa" (see Figure 1).[86] Discussing the significance of this decision in *Here I Stand*, Robeson rejected outright the view that his anticolonial activism "was not in the best interests" of the United States. Asking instead, "What are the best interests of *Negro* Americans in this matter? Can we oppose White Supremacy in South Carolina and not oppose that same vicious system in South Africa?" He concluded in strikingly gendered terms, that, "Yes, I have been active for African freedom for many years and I will never cease that activity no matter what the State Department or anybody else thinks about it. This is my right as a Negro, as

[81]Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 92–3.

[82]As Gerald Horne has noted, "Paul Robeson never hesitated to cite his intellectual and political debt to Du Bois." See, Horne, *Black and Red*, 258. For more on Robeson and Du Bois's relationship and political defense of one another, see Murali Balaji, *The Professor and the Pupil: The Politics and Friendship of W. E. B Du Bois and Paul Robeson* (New York, 2007). For Du Bois's defense of Robeson in the aftermath of the Paris Peace Conference, see W. E. B. *Du Bois*, "Paul *Robeson*: *Right*," *Negro Digest*, Mar. 1950, 8, 10–14.

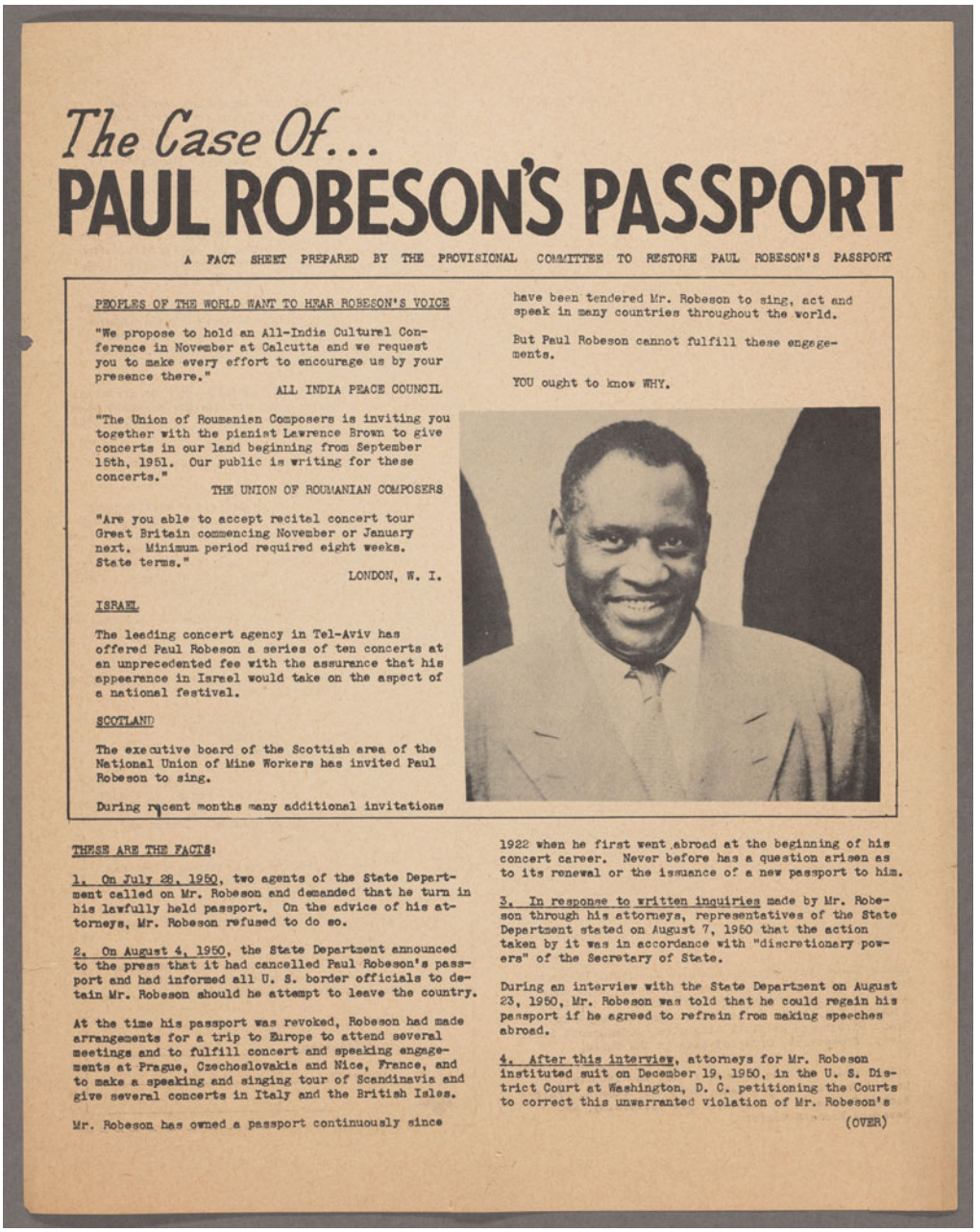
[83]In this, Robeson was following in the footsteps of a number of pioneering Black intellectuals, including Du Bois. See Robin D. G. Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision, 1883–1950," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 1066–75.

[84]On the importance of considering United States history in imperial terms, see Paul A. Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1348–91.

[85]On passport denial, managing mobility, and the rise of the national security state, see Sam Lebovic, "No Right to Leave the Nation: The Politics of Passport Denial and the Rise of the National Security State," *Studies in American Political Development* 34, no. 1 (Apr. 2020): 170–93.

[86]Lloyd L. Brown, "State Dept. Says African Freedom 'Against Best Interests of U.S.,'" *Freedom*, Apr. 1952.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press



The Case Of...

PAUL ROBESON'S PASSPORT

A FACT SHEET PREPARED BY THE PROVISIONAL COMMITTEE TO RESTORE PAUL ROBESON'S PASSPORT

PEOPLES OF THE WORLD WANT TO HEAR ROBESON'S VOICE

"We propose to hold an All-India Cultural Conference in November at Calcutta and we request you to make every effort to encourage us by your presence there."

ALL INDIA PEACE COUNCIL

"The Union of Roumenian Composers is inviting you together with the pianist Lawrence Brown to give concerts in our land beginning from September 15th, 1951. Our public is writing for these concerts."

THE UNION OF ROUMANIAN COMPOSERS

"Are you able to accept recital concert tour Great Britain commencing November or January next. Minimum period required eight weeks. State terms."

LONDON, W. I.

ISRAEL

The leading concert agency in Tel-Aviv has offered Paul Robeson a series of ten concerts at an unprecedented fee with the assurance that his appearance in Israel would take on the aspect of a national festival.

SCOTLAND

The executive board of the Scottish area of the National Union of Mine Workers has invited Paul Robeson to sing.

During recent months many additional invitations have been tendered Mr. Robeson to sing, act and speak in many countries throughout the world.

But Paul Robeson cannot fulfill these engagements.

YOU ought to know WHY.

THESE ARE THE FACTS:

1. On July 28, 1950, two agents of the State Department called on Mr. Robeson and demanded that he turn in his lawfully held passport. On the advice of his attorneys, Mr. Robeson refused to do so.

2. On August 4, 1950, the State Department announced to the press that it had cancelled Paul Robeson's passport and had informed all U. S. border officials to detain Mr. Robeson should he attempt to leave the country.

At the time his passport was revoked, Robeson had made arrangements for a trip to Europe to attend several meetings and to fulfill concert and speaking engagements at Prague, Czechoslovakia and Nice, France, and to make a speaking and singing tour of Scandinavia and give several concerts in Italy and the British Isles.

Mr. Robeson has owned a passport continuously since 1922 when he first went abroad at the beginning of his concert career. Never before has a question arisen as to its renewal or the issuance of a new passport to him.

3. In response to written inquiries made by Mr. Robeson through his attorneys, representatives of the State Department stated on August 7, 1950 that the action taken by it was in accordance with "discretionary powers" of the Secretary of State.

During an interview with the State Department on August 23, 1950, Mr. Robeson was told that he could regain his passport if he agreed to refrain from making speeches abroad.

4. After this interview, attorneys for Mr. Robeson instituted suit on December 19, 1950, in the U. S. District Court at Washington, D. C. petitioning the Courts to correct this unwarranted violation of Mr. Robeson's

(OVER)

Figure 1. Pamphlet, "The Case of Paul Robeson's Passport."[87]

an American, as a man!"[88] Robeson maintained that it was his patriotic duty to challenge injustice wherever it is found.[89] He argued that the rights enshrined in the First Amendment should not disappear when a citizen engages with political issues beyond the borders of the

[87]"The Case of Paul Robeson's Passport," undated c. 1951, New York Public Library Digital Collections, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/62257aa0-3c95-0139-4043-0242ac110003 (accessed June 16, 2023).

[88]Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 72.

[89]Robeson's lawyers launched a civil action against Secretary of State Dean Acheson challenging the decision to remove his passport. This complaint described Robeson as "a loyal, native-born American citizen." Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 393.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

United States, contending that, "The right to travel is a Constitutional right. And there's nothing in that document that says you have to be muzzled before you can pack your bag."[90]

Robeson insisted that the right to freedom of expression and to petition the government were especially pressing given the expansion of American power following the Second World War. Noting that, "Our country is strong and mighty among the nations of the world, but America cannot survive if she insists upon bearing the burden of the crumbling system of Imperialism," he claimed that the denial of his passport was an unconstitutional act that provided clear evidence that the hypocrisy of the United States at home and overseas. On this latter point he added, "The fact that the men who direct our government feel it necessary to present their support of Imperialism in terms of defending the 'Free World' is proof that the American people generally have a democratic outlook and belief in the independence of nations."[91]

Robeson positioned his passport case as a fight over the meaning of American values and justice. He stressed that his ability to travel effectively acted as a barometer for whether the United States could ever realize its self-proclaimed democratic ideals, both domestically and internationally. As he concluded in his biography, "He who upholds the democratic principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights is no less a patriot when he does so abroad, and if such conduct is 'embarrassing' to anyone at home—well, shame on him!"[92] By revoking his passport, the U.S. government was clearly signaling that its desire for global political and economic supremacy mattered more than any rhetorical commitment it may have to freedoms enshrined in the nation's founding documents. Robeson argued that true patriots had a duty call out this double standard and to enlist sympathetic allies committed to the fight against race and class exploitation on a global scale.[93] If the United States was to ever be considered a force for freedom and democracy, it would need to be transformed from the outside in.[94]

In a response that resonated with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its insistence that "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country," Robeson once again used the history of the African American freedom struggle to frame the right to travel as a key marker of citizenship.[95] Specifically, he noted that the ability to travel had been historically vital for Black Americans when it came to resisting—and often literally escaping—enslavement and white racial violence. With the racialized politics of travel and mobility firmly in mind, Robeson claimed that the withdrawal of his passport also contravened the Fifth Amendment, which deemed it unconstitutional for a citizen to be "deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law." While this was a clear nod to the detrimental effect that his confinement within the United States had on his ability to make a living as a performer, he worked to make a broader point about the relationship between freedom of movement and individual liberty. Recounting the history of the Underground Railroad, as well as the recurrence of the train and the boat as symbols of salvation in Black popular culture, Robeson stated, "From the days of chattel slavery until today, the concept of *travel* has been

[90]In the summer of 1955, a federal district judge upheld the State Department's decision not to offer Paul Robeson a passport, insisting he must sign a "non-communist affidavit" before he could appeal the decision further in the courts. See, "Paul Robeson Pushes Passport Fight; Support Needed," *Freedom*, Jul.–Aug. 1955. For more on race, the constitutional right to travel, and Black internationalism during the early Cold War, see H. Timothy Lovelace, "William Worthy's Passport: Travel Restrictions and the Cold War Struggle for Civil and Human Rights," *Journal of American History* 103, no. 1 (Jun. 2016): 125–7.

[91]*Robeson*, *Here I Stand*, 72–3.

[92]Ibid., 74.

[93]Robeson was engaging in the process of what Adom Getachew calls "anticolonial worldmaking," which emphasized the need to eradicate the racial and economic hierarchies of the international order. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ, 2019).

[94]Andrew Preston and Doug Rossinow, "Introduction: America Within the World," in *Outside In: The Transnational Circuitry of US History*, eds. Andrew Preston and Doug Rossinow (Oxford, UK, 2017), 7–8.

[95]United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, Article 13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inseparably linked in the minds of our people with the concept of *freedom*."[96] Elaborating further, he positioned himself within the longer global history of the African American freedom struggle, documenting the trans-Atlantic travels of figures such as Frederick Douglass, Nathanial Paul, and William Wells Brown—emphasizing how their overseas activism played a vital role in garnering international support for the abolitionist cause.[97] Celebrating this activism, Robeson commented that, "The good work they did abroad lives on in our own time, for the pressure that comes today from Europe on our behalf is in part a precious heritage from those early sojourners for freedom who crossed the sea to champion the rights of black men in America."[98]

There was nothing suspicious or un-American about traveling overseas and soliciting foreign support in the fight against white supremacy. In fact, the forging of transnational networks of solidarity was a long-established political strategy aimed at exposing and challenging American racism. These connections were vital in the contemporary moment as Black Americans worked to eradicate Jim Crow in the era of decolonization. Robeson positioned himself as an inheritor of this important tradition and insisted that it was his duty as a patriotic American to carry on the work of internationalizing the Black freedom struggle in the United States. Referencing a vital forerunner in the effort to globalize the struggle for African American liberation, he concluded that,

> To achieve the full right of citizenship which is our just demand, we must ever speak and act like free men. When we criticize the treatment of Negroes in America and tell our fellow citizens at home and the peoples abroad what is wrong with our country, each of us can say with Frederick Douglass: "In doing this, I shall feel myself discharging the duty of a true patriot; for he is a lover of his country who rebukes and does not excuse its sins."[99]

"The Best Kind of American"

In November 1951, Lloyd L. Brown, working in conjunction with the Provisional Committee to Restore Paul Robeson's Passport, published *Lift Every Voice for Paul Robeson* (see Figure 2). The front cover of the pamphlet—drawn by the noted illustrator, muralist, and Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) member Hugo Gellert—imagined Robeson as an alternative Statue of Liberty figure, bound down on the docks of Manhattan, as the real "Lady Liberty," head in hand, wept in the background. Inside, Brown noted that Robeson's politics had only ever been guided by the principles outlined in both the U.S. Constitution and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Drawing once again on the long history of the African American freedom struggle, Brown declared, "Robeson is the [Frederick] Douglass of today. He is a loyal American, the best kind of American, and only those who support the '100% Americanism' of the [Ku Klux Klan] lynchers can hold that his activities are not in the best interests of our country."[100] Robeson's patriotic rebuttals to the accusation that he was "disloyal" drew on the liberatory promise of the Black freedom struggle and was rooted in a deep-seated critique of American hypocrisy when it came to race and democracy. This was an Americanism of dissent and deep skepticism. It was not, in anyway, about forgetting or forgiveness. Instead, Robeson's patriotism was rooted in the need to recognize, account for, and confront both domestic and international racisms. As anticommunism threatened his livelihood and liberty, he mounted a defensive but nonetheless

[96]*Robeson*, *Here I Stand*, 74–5.

[97]Hannah-Rose Murray, "'I Shall Speak Out against This and Other Evils': African American Activism in the British Isles 1865–1903," *Slavery & Abolition* 41, no. 1 (Jan. 2020): 79–92.

[98]Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 75.

[99]Ibid., 81.

[100]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

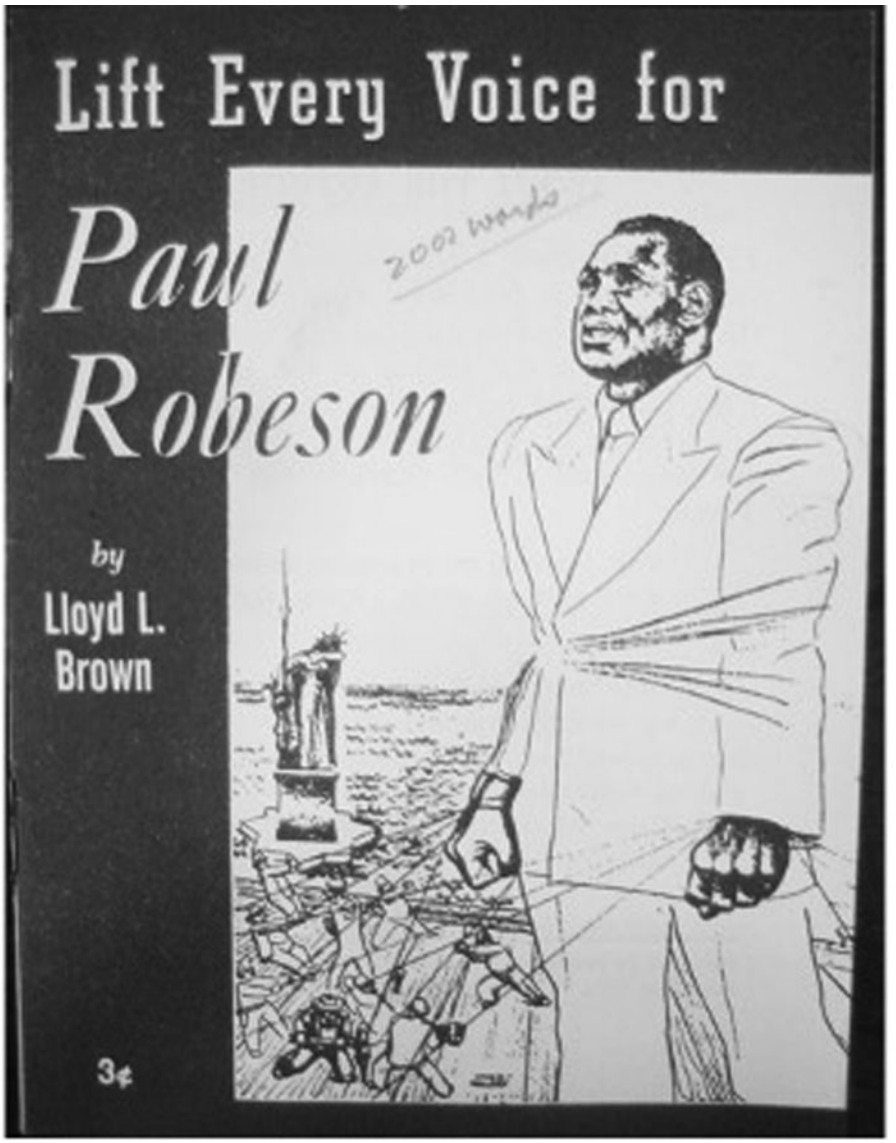


Figure 2. Lloyd L. Brown, "Lift Every Voice for Paul Robeson."[101]

militant attack on what he saw as the corruption of American values. He did not reject the United States, but instead insisted that the nation needed to be wrestled back from those in power and transformed in ways that centered antiracism, anti-imperialism, and class exploitation. To do this, he harnessed the rhetorical and political power of patriotism.

This under-acknowledged aspect of Robeson's activism makes clear how the politics of Black internationalism are tethered to the nation. As historians, we should not lose sight of the pull of national politics even as we work to trace the border-crossing nature of Black activism in its entirety. Furthermore, it is clear that patriotic politics do not always demand the shedding of transnational solidarities and alliances. Black radicals forged multiple avenues of belonging, embracing a global political vision to further interrogate the nation. This was not an either/or; it

[101]Lloyd L. Brown, *Lift Every Voice for Paul Robeson*, Pamphlet, Nov. 1951, Doxey Wilkerson Papers, Box. 7, Folder 3, 13, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was done simultaneously. The politics of patriotism and Black internationalism were always in dialogue with one another. Given how the global politics of racism, fascism, and imperialism were central to the development of the United States, efforts to fundamentally transform the nation would also have to be internationally oriented. As Robeson makes clear in his writings, to think and act across borders was a patriotic duty. It is perhaps Eslanda Robeson who summed this up best when crafting the couple's response to the nascent anti-apartheid movement in South Africa: "In this fight it will be well to remember that as American citizens, we have interests and responsibilities abroad, as well as at home."[102]

Finally, Paul Robeson's reply to the charge that he was "un-American" reminds us of the resilience and creativity of Black radical politics during the Second Red Scare. While anticommunist hysteria dismantled organizations that acted globally and disrupted transnational solidarities, these forces could not fully contain the politics of Black radicalism. Inspired by anticolonial struggles around the world, Robeson created a patriotic counternarrative of the nation that demanded a radical transformation of U.S. democracy. He asked how these ideas and modes of organizing might, in turn, be used to confront the ways in which racial capitalism trampled human rights and disfigured the meaning of democracy in the United States and overseas.[103]

[102]Eslanda Goode Robeson, "Letter to the Editor," c. March 1952, Box. 12, Eslanda G. Robeson Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.

[103]Weik, "The Uses and Hazards of Expatriation," 468–72.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press