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Robert Sawyer*

Performing Protest in Cross-Cultural Spaces: Paul Robeson and *Othello*

Abstract: When the famous African-American actor and singer Paul Robeson played the lead in Shakespeare's *Othello* in London in 1930, tickets were in high demand during the production's first week. The critical response, however, was less positive, although the reviews unanimously praised his bass-baritone delivery. When Robeson again played *Othello* on Broadway thirteen years later, critics praised not only his voice but also his acting, the drama running for 296 performances. My argument concerning Robeson uses elements first noted by Henri Lefebvre in his seminal work, *The Production of Space*, while I also draw on Paul Connerton's work on commemorative practices. Using spatial and memorial theories as a backdrop for examining his two portrayals, I suggest that Robeson's nascent geopolitical awareness following the 1930 production, combined with his already celebrated musical voice, allowed him to perform the role more dramatically in 1943.

Keywords: Paul Robeson, *Othello*, Savoy Theatre, Margaret Webster, Spanish Civil War, Henri Lefebvre, Peggy Ashcroft, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. "Ol' Man River," *Show Boat*, José Ferrer, Paul Connerton, commemoration, fascism, protest.

In 1930, the famous African-American actor and singer Paul Robeson played the lead in Shakespeare's *Othello* in London. Although the first week of performances sold well, the critical response was less positive, even as the reviews unanimously praised his baritone delivery, one that had been praised during the years leading up to his stage performance. Various described as "the most charming masculine voice in the world today," complete with a "gorgeously rich and flexible" range, a number of critics even compared it to a musical instrument, one possessing an "organ-like ease and power."¹ Will

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¹ The reviews come from the following: *The New York Herald Tribune* (9 June 1930); Glenn Dillard Gunn, *London Evening News and African World* [rpt. in *Baltimore Afro-American*] (22 September 1928); and the *Chicago Herald-Examiner* (11 February 1926).

Friedwald has recently gone even further, declaring that Robeson's "deep, rich voice had a sound that could bypass both the ears and the brain and communicate directly with the soul" (*WSJ*, online). When Robeson played *Othello* on Broadway thirteen years later, however, critics extended the praise from his voice to his acting as well, and the production ran for a record 296 performances. Using spatial theories as a backdrop for examining his portrayals, I suggest that the geopolitical awakening of Robeson following the 1930 production, added to his already celebrated musical voice, allowed him to perform the role much more successfully in 1943.

My argument concerning Robeson combines two elements first noted by Henri Lefebvre in his seminal work, *The Production of Space*.² Not only does he discuss monumental space, and its subset, "theatrical space," to which we will return, but he also emphasizes the historical impact of music on the history of his theories, a point almost always overlooked. After pointing out that "in the eighteenth century music was in command," serving as "the pilot of the arts," he reminds us that the pervasiveness of musical exploration at the time concerned not only artists and mathematicians, but also philosophers and logicians. As Lefebvre points out, this diverse group particularly focused on the "powerful concept" of "Harmony," which for thinkers at the time "united the Cosmos and the World" (284-285). Indeed, Lefebvre asserts that even "monumental architecture," such as the palace and gardens of Versailles designed primarily for their visual impact, "suffered the onslaught of music;" more importantly, Lefebvre suggests that the power of music also symbolized "the revenge of the body" (284) over manufactured artifices and structures. This concept helps us to understand how Robeson's bodily voice and often political message could not be constrained or contained by the spaces in which he performed, soaring beyond the concert halls, political arenas, dramatic theatres, and even the combat zones he visited.

Even though the venues changed, Robeson's pronouncements on the oppressed became more strident and global during the course of his career; we should also remember that Robeson studied hard to achieve this more international perspective. His combination of music and activism accelerated during the 1930s, particularly in 1934, when he first enrolled in the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. His aim was not only to learn African dialects (eventually he mastered almost a dozen of them) but also to study other languages, including Russian, Hebrew, and Spanish so he could understand the customs and folk songs of other oppressed peoples. Transforming this foreign cultural exploration into political action, Robeson spoke out against a number of

² While literary critics have recently embraced spatial possibilities the notion of spatial production dates back to at least work Lefebvre did in the 1970s but was only translated into English in 1991.

dictators in Europe during the 1930s. I conclude that Robeson's voice, newly accented by the political activism in his speeches and songs of freedom, enabled his celebrated Shakespearean portrayal of Othello in 1943 to strike a meaningful chord by being more empathetic, more engaging, and more global.

I. Cross-Cultural Currents at the Savoy Theatre and Hotel

A number of troubling issues occurred in both the public sphere and the performative space during the run-up to, and the production of, the London *Othello*, both connected to the Savoy Hotel and its adjacent Theatre where he would soon portray Shakespeare's Moor. A few months before he was scheduled to debut onstage in 1930, he and his wife Essie were invited by Lady Sybil Colefax to join her for a midnight meal and nightcap to celebrate the upcoming engagement. Settling on the Grill Room restaurant in the Hotel as an appropriate place to toast the deal, they arrived around midnight only to be denied admission. After requesting to speak to the supervisor, Robeson was informed that "the management did not permit Negroes to enter the rooms any longer" (Hamilton 55). When the incident was reported in the press, many politicians rushed to Robeson's defense, and even the Prime Minister at the time, Ramsay MacDonald, "expressed mild concern, but refused to intervene" (Hamilton 55). The important point about this particular incident is that while Robeson was accustomed to such treatment back in the U.S., he had come to believe that the so-called "color-bar" did not exist outside the States, particularly in the U.K., a feeling that was suddenly shaken.

While no one would dispute the blatant prejudice involved in the refusal to admit Robeson's party into the restaurant, the cancelled ceremony becomes even more significant when we consider the ways in which the consumption of food and drink in social spaces may function in a ritualistic manner, for many commemorative meals are transformed from events simply to satisfy hunger, into occasions "for the celebration of artistic refinement and ethical value," ceremonial enactments granting elevated status to the participants (Connerton 84). As Paul Connerton reminds us: "Decorum enjoins that appetite must be satisfied in appropriate form," and we think about the etiquette of eating—the use of utensils, the seating plan, the sequence of the meal courses and so on—we become acutely aware of the stylized mechanics of eating in public places (84). Equally important, such ritualized acts as "fine dining" tend to mask more bodily practices such as the mere and often messy consumption of physical food. During these public spatial events, as Pierre Bourdieu explains, the "antithesis" between "quantity and quality" is highlighted, and often "the taste of necessity, which favors the most 'filling' and most economical foods" is superseded by the

“taste of liberty or luxury,” a freedom which again serves to disguise bodily function (7). In Robeson’s case, not only was the commemoration of his cross-cultural contract never ritualized by the breaking of symbolic bread, but even his physical access to the sanctified space of class-conscious dining was closed off.

Although the celebration was curtailed, the production of the play went on as scheduled. Maurice Browne, building on his reputation as an innovative West End producer, cast Robeson as the first black man to play Othello since Ira Aldridge in the nineteenth century. His recent successful projects, such as directing John Gielgud and the Old Vic company in *Hamlet* at the Queen’s Theatre, also allowed Browne to offer Robeson almost double the going rate for lead actors of the day, a record £300 per week. The director made other equally smart decisions. While he initially cast himself as Iago, he gave up the role once he realized he could not keep up with Robeson onstage, and he also had the good sense to cast Ralph Richardson as Roderigo and Sybil Thorndike as Emilia. Perhaps most importantly, he let Robeson help him decide which actress would play Desdemona, and the choice of the young Peggy Ashcroft turned out to be successful, if somewhat controversial, in the course of the eighteen-week run. As Robeson explained later in an interview: during “the first two weeks in every scene I played with Desdemona that girl couldn’t get near” me, because I “was backin’ away from her all the time,” not unlike “a plantation hand in the parlor, that clumsy” (Van Gelder 152). In other words, this stereotypical portrayal was culled from his personal experiences in the American south of the early twentieth century, and so was, understandably, performed in binary terms of black and white.

The reviews of the play were similarly rooted in the same racial (if not racist) soil, and a number of them employed slightly back-handed compliments about the “natural” ability of Robeson to perform the role. For instance, when they characterized Robeson’s restrained performance as “natural,” some reviewers meant unschooled, or even childlike, while other critiques simply degenerated into racist rants. The review by James Agate, the prominent critic for the *Sunday [London] Times*, did both. He not only referred to the performance as “negro Shakespeare,” but he challenged the compliment that Robeson’s “natural” acting was successful, by complaining in his review, “natural according to whose nature, that of Shakespeare’s Moor or of the player who enacted him?” He eventually ended his diatribe by condemning any “Negro actor” who tries “to recite Shakespeare’s blank verse” (19 May 1930). While most critiques were not so prejudiced nor so negative, most critics, and even the cast themselves, felt that something was lacking in their production.

Connerton’s work on commemoration may explain one crux of this performative problem: “If we are to play a believable role before an audience of relative strangers,” he suggests, “we must produce or at least imply a history

of ourselves: an informal account which indicates something of our origins and which justifies or perhaps excuses our present status and actions in relation to that audience” (17). In other words, Robeson would need to demonstrate in some ways both his credibility as an outsider “Other”—which his identity as a black man growing up in the United States safely secured—but also as a Shakespearean actor, which his performance credentials, at least in 1930 did not. Robeson’s own overall assessment suggests the point I am making about the London production being a somewhat contradictory experience. The notices were okay, Robeson concluded later, so he “got over it,” mostly meaning his fear of contact with a white woman onstage, but surely also hinting at the various derogatory comments directed toward him personally and toward his portrayal. While Robeson “got over it,” however, the treatment at the Savoy Hotel on and off the stage affected him deeply, fostering a wider study of the plight of the oppressed, as his awareness broadened to include other skin colors, religious beliefs, and national origins.

II. The Transnational Fight against Fascism

Three years after the Savoy *Othello*, Robeson once again chose a performative space to articulate his increasingly strident political views. When a benefit performance in 1933 was arranged to help the increasing number of Jewish refugees fleeing from Germany the same year as Hitler became Chancellor, Robeson agreed to participate by reprising his starring role in Eugene O’Neill’s play *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*. While the extent of Hitler’s tyranny was not yet apparent to Robeson (nor many others) in 1933, he agreed to volunteer his time because of his empathy with the immigrants, a kinship with the Jewish race he often noted in interviews. When discussing his treatment in the U.S., for example, he claimed more than once that the “white people who have been kindest to me in America have been Jewish” (Seaton 30). Robeson would later declare that the charity event that evening “marked the beginning of his political awareness” (Forner 30), an awakening also accelerated by the ongoing events in Germany.

One year later, Robeson would be affected in a much more personal way by Hitler’s oppression of the Jews as scapegoat “Others,” even as the Nazis themselves were performing commemorative acts in public spaces as a way to promote quickly and without question their own political agenda.³ At this exact

³ One only has to recall the ritualized spaces of the Nuremberg rallies or the annual celebratory parade through the Brandenburg Gate every April on the Führer’s birthday to sense the power of such gatherings.

juncture, and as a result of Robeson's increasing interest in Russian culture, he decided to travel to that country with his wife Essie, along with his British biographer Marie Seton (who had written about race relations) to meet with Sergei Eisenstein in order to discuss a collaborative film project.⁴ But because there was no direct train, they were forced to stay overnight in Berlin; while there they encountered extreme racism from brown-shirted soldiers, perhaps fresh from ritualistic festivals promoting the new Nazi regime. Robeson's group felt so threatened by the storm troopers that they decided they should all stay close to the hotel. When they attempted to board the train the next day, Nazi soldiers began to circle around them, staring at and cursing them. As Eslanda (Essie) would write in her diary, they seemed like "wolves waiting to spring" (21 December 1934); Robeson himself called it "a day of horror—in an atmosphere of hatred, fear and suspicion" (Vern Smith 95). While nothing violent occurred because the train arrived just in time, the sinister atmosphere in Berlin so contrasted with his earlier entertainment tours of the country that the occasion is always cited as instrumental in Robeson's growing anti-fascism. As Robeson later declared about that day in 1934: "I never understood what fascism was before" that incident, but now he pledged to "fight it wherever [he] found it from now on," even back in the U.S. in the more disguised forms of racial discrimination (Robeson, *Here I Stand* 98).

III. The Space of Vocal Protest

By the late 1930s, Robeson made good on his promise to fight fascism in increasingly more public arenas; and as the military threat spread across Europe, Robeson's concern also broadened to include not just Germany, but also the Ethiopian conflict, and, most significantly, the fight for democracy in Spain against the fascist Franco. One of his most prominent pronouncements occurred at a rally organized by the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief at the Royal Albert Hall in London in June of 1937, and headed by H.G. Welles, W. H. Auden and Virginia Woolf among others. Robeson's address to the audience that night, commonly referred to as "The Artist Must Take Sides" speech, signaled loudly his movement from an apolitical artist, to an avowed revolutionary: "The freedom of all the Peoples of the world is at stake in this conflict in Spain," he claimed. "These men who have gone to Spain have done and are doing their part," and so, he declared, "Surely we must do ours." Robeson explained in his

⁴ Seaton, who referred to herself as "a Citizen of the World," wrote biographies of Sergei Eisenstein, Robeson, and Jawaharlal Nehru. She was the "go-between" for Robeson's meeting with Eisenstein (Duberman 182).

booming voice that “he had made [his] choice” because he had “no alternative. He concluded by declaring, “I stand with you in unalterable support of the government of Spain, duly and regularly chosen by its lawful sons and daughters” (Robeson, “Artist,” 119). By extending his vision to oppressed “Others” across a wider spectrum, he made it clear that the fight in Spain was not a battle bound by any geographical borders: “the liberation of Spain from the oppression of fascist reactionaries is not a private matter of the Spaniards, but the common cause of all advanced and progressive humanity” (119).

Six months later Robeson played a Christmastime benefit for the Spanish Loyalists on 19 December. Performing in support of “arms, food and justice” he chose to sing one of his most popular and recognizable songs, in part, because “the crush of martial music and the sound of jackboots [had] drowned out the songs of peace and brotherhood” (*Here I Stand*, 51), he had been trying to spread. In order to combat such militaristic noise, Robeson employed his most potent weapon: his bass-baritone voice. The song he chose to sing that night was “Ol’ Man River,” from the musical *Show Boat*, in which he had played a black riverman, stereotypically carrying bales of cotton as he sang. On the night of the benefit performance, however, he altered the song scored by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, in a subtle but powerful way. Although the well-known last line in the original stated, “Ah gets weary an’ sick of tryin’ / I’m tired of livin’ and skeered of dyin,’” when Robeson performed it that night he changed the line to signal a much more defiant tone: “But I keeps laffin’ instead of crying / I must keep fightin’ until I’m dyin’.” While Hammerstein was supposedly incensed by the improvisation, Robeson’s move was clearly calculated. Not unlike changing a phrase in a liturgy such as The Lord’s Prayer, listeners would be jarred into re-hearing and hopefully re-thinking the original message.

The following year (1938), Robeson decided to go even further to protest against the forces of fascism, and so he even entered the space of militarized conflict, just miles from the actual combat zone.⁵ Traveling first to Barcelona, before being transported by truck to Tarazona, he sang for the troops of the Fifteenth International Brigade composed of fighters from fifty-two countries. In an interview during this time with Nicolás Guillén (and published in the contemporary Cuban newspaper *Mediodía*), he re-emphasized the notion that the fight for democracy took place across landscapes and vistas around the globe, a battle that symbolized many nations and peoples: “At the side of democracy in Spain, and on every front of struggle for its triumph, there are men

⁵ By the first World War, according to Lefebvre, “the centuries-old space of wars, instead of sinking into oblivion, became the rich and thickly populated space that incubated capitalism,” and so a “paradoxical fact” after war in Western Europe had unleashed both “destructive and creative” forces (276-277).

of the most diverse races, from the most diverse places in the world” (Guillén). He then enumerated the soldiers serving in this multicultural militia, noting the “Silent Chinese who fire their rifles at Italians and Germans, confident that it is the same as their fight against the Japanese who profane Nanking,” as well as “the sad Hindus who traded the dirty banks of the Ganges for the narrow waters of the Jamara,” and including those in Cuba along with “Blacks born in the Yankee south,” as well as with those in “Cuba, in Jamaica [and] in Brazil” (Guillén). East and west, north and south Robeson saw the struggle in Spain as a microcosm for the basic human rights struggle which encircled the globe, and he marshaled his musical and vocal talents to contest such abuses.⁶



Figure 1. Robeson in Tarazona, Spain. Courtesy of Paul Robeson Archive

Robeson ended his discussion with the newspaper reporter by confessing that he hoped to star in a film about Oliver Laws, whom Robeson met while in Spain, the Black commander of the so-called Lincoln Brigade which consisted of mostly English-speaking volunteers, and who later died in combat. Yet even as he spoke those words in 1938, he realized that because the “great American and English companies are controlled by big capital . . . they will never let me do the [motion] picture I want,” but instead would force him to act in films which portray a “caricature image of the Black” such as Joe in *Show Boat*, which “amuses the white bourgeoisie” (Guillén). In any case, he held out hope that one day he could “bring to the screen the heroic atmosphere” that he had “breathed in Spain,” depicting in some measure his personal and a political journey of awareness which he often called “a major turning point in [his] life” (Guillén).

⁶ It is hard not to recall that Woody Guthrie, the U.S. folk singer/songwriter, used music to achieve a similar goal, going so far as to print on his guitar in 1941: “THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS.”

Even though he was denied his goal of intervening in the emerging space of cinematic capitalism because he refused to be stereotyped, his vocal protests could not be silenced.

IV. Performing the Fight Against Fascism at Home

The collapsing of political, performative, and personal space manifested itself most clearly and articulately in 1943 during the Broadway run of *Othello*. The origins of this new opportunity in his native country to champion freedom from fascism and discrimination occurred at the close of his decade of intensive study of other cultures in the 1930s. On 23 June 1939, he cabled his wife about upcoming job possibilities, including singing engagements, as well as acting offers. But he ended the note with the following sentence typed in all capital letters: “MARGARET WEBSTER WANTS [ME] TO DO OTHELLO.”⁷ His wife Essie must have realized the significance of the opportunity, for she replied almost immediately on June 25:

Of all the ideas, I think the most interesting one is the proposal of *Othello* with Margaret Webster. . . . Webster is intelligent, very widely experienced, [and] has the formal background and classical knowledge” necessary to direct the play successfully, in part because “she is not mannered, not ultra, not arty-crafty, nor super-psychological or super-technical; so the production might also come out honest, straightforward, modern and powerful.” (qtd. in Robeson, Jr. 327)

The semi-sarcasm in the letter refers to the 1930 production at the Savoy, the sneers about “arty-crafty” and “super-psychological” were aimed at Maurice Browne, and specifically at his wife Nellie Volkenburg’s direction, which Essie, among many others, blamed for the lukewarm reception of the play in London. Whether Robeson’s wife was right about the failures of 1930 version, she was certainly correct about Webster’s capabilities as a director, for the actress-director’s decision to enhance the performative space of the theatre using multi-racial casting in 1942 would not only elucidate the themes of her history-making production, but also influence Robeson’s portrayal of Shakespeare’s tragic Moor.

⁷ Webster’s parents were two icons of the British Theatre: Dame May Whitty (1865-1948) and Ben Webster (1864-1947). By the late 1920s, Webster was acting with the Ben Greet Players, who performed Shakespeare and other classical productions in outdoor venues. In the following decade, she directed successful productions of *Richard II* (1937) and *Hamlet* (1938).

Even though Webster had seen *Othello* at the Savoy, and in spite of the fact that she “thought him very bad” in 1930 (Webster 107), she and Robeson began to communicate by mail, the latter telling her he was studying the part and hoping to play it again in the future, all this occurring at the exact time he was rethinking the question of race and oppression. While in 1930, Robeson had claimed the play was a mirror for the “position as a coloured man in America to-day” (“My Fight,” 1100), by time of the New York production, and due to Robeson’s increased awareness of racial prejudice around the world, he considered it a play about all oppressed people. To emphasize that point, he and Webster together decided it should be performed as a cross-cultural encounter, so they cast Josè Ferrer, the Puerto Rican-born actor, as Iago, eliminating any simple black/white racial binary found in the 1930 production. In fact, the play is cited as the first time in Broadway history that the two leading male roles in a Shakespearean production were played by minority actors. The result, as we noted at the outset, proved to be a blockbuster hit, reviewers showering it with adjectives such as “magnificent” and “absorbing,” as well as a “landmark event for the American stage”; Robeson’s performance itself was described as one of “epic grandeur and transcendent nobility” (Sillen 24).⁸

But how does this performance in theatrical spaces in the U.S. during wartime connect with the militarized space of the transnational fight against fascism? As Robeson himself explained, he hoped the play would achieve “a double victory,” one against tyranny abroad, which tried to silence any dissenting or diverse voices, and one challenging domestic fascism at home, particularly in the form of racial discrimination (Swindall 70). Robeson went so far as to demand in his contract that the play not be performed at any segregated theatres, despite the protests of the accountants. The cost for tickets was also set at a more affordable price so when the production toured the U.S., the ticket buyers proved to be quite diverse. The Detroit audience, for example, was typical of such mixed spectators. As Robeson noted, “there were very few rich folks in the audience”; instead the blue collar workers for the local automotive plants “had most of the seats,” specifically “Ford workers, negro and white” who sat side-by-side in the audience (Robeson, “Here’s My Story,” 286). In its home on Broadway, the tickets were equally inexpensive so that during the New York run, soldiers and sailors sat beside European refugees and Harlem residents. When Robeson founded his own record company in 1952, it was named *Othello Records* (see image below), and it too was formed to share Robeson’s distinctive and determined voice of protest with a cross-cultural and global audience.

⁸ Burton Roscoe in *The World Telegram* (20 October 1943); Robert Coleman in *The Daily Mirror* (20 October 1943), and Samuel Sillen, *New Masses* (2 November 1943). Robeson would reprise the role just one more time in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1959.



Figure 2. Robeson as Othello and Jose Ferrera as Iago in 1942 Broadway production. Photo by Edward Copeland

V. Conclusion: Global Performances on Stage and in Song

Freed from the traditional dichotomy of white and black, this version of the play extended the bounds of the theatrical space from the local to the global, while blurring class lines as well; in so doing the play anticipates the recent theoretical call of Daniel Vitkus, following Timothy Powell, “to go beyond the binary in order to better describe cultural identity in a multicultural context” (2). When comparing Robeson’s performance in the 1930 *Othello* and his portrayal of the same protagonist in 1943, Connerton again proves helpful, arguing that a “repeated performance of the same play by different actors at different times accentuates the specific nature of each performance and brings to our attention the differences between these performances” (67). Even more significantly, the “‘repeated’ perception of the same text . . . discloses the development of the perceiver’s consciousness,” meaning in this instance, in the auditors’ minds (67). In Robeson’s case, the performance of Shakespeare’s tragic “Other” by the same actor following a twelve-year hiatus may also help us to chart his developing

consciousness as he modified his role. Not only did the 1943 version highlight Robeson's growth as an actor, but it also emphasized his increasing awareness of global social injustice. As Lindsey R. Swindall explains, Robeson "concentrated less on the characterization of the lead role and more on the political implications of the play as a whole" (74).

Believing the play had a deep social meaning for the present, Robeson adamantly articulated in every interview that the "play is about the problem of minority groups" of every race and color (Interview in *PM* magazine, 145). One leading Black American newspaper at the time succinctly summarized the expanded empathy I have been tracing: "More than any other American unless it be [President] Roosevelt himself," the newspaper claimed, Paul Robeson "typifies the individual whose world outlook contains a sympathetic understanding of the commonness of every nation, race and time" (qtd. in Hamilton 97).

Robeson's global concerns reached one zenith in the years he was preparing to, and then performing in, the 1943 *Othello*. Webster's version had a trail run in 1942 at the Brattle Theater in Cambridge, and was successful enough to generate overwhelming interest for bringing it to Broadway. But Robeson had already committed to speaking engagements and a concert tour following the Cambridge performances. In one speech Robeson delivered during this interim, he insisted that the fight against Axis powers was "not a war for liberation of Europeans and European nations," but instead "a war for the liberation of all peoples, all races, all colors oppressed anywhere in the world" (qtd. in Duberman 266). Less than a year later, and even as Robeson was in final preparation for the Broadway production, he performed the longest concert tour he had ever undertaken, partly because his vocal performances paid much more than his acting roles. Consisting of almost seventy performances, the tour culminated in April 1943 in Mansfield, Ohio. At this show, which garnered thirteen encores, some 1300 people swarmed to see what the local paper called "a sort of United Nations tribute," including folk songs from England, Russia, France, China, and the U.S., and concluding with "Ballad for Americans," and "The Star Spangled Banner" (*Mansfield Times* 6 April 1942).⁹ Such lucrative singing engagements allowed him to be very selective about the roles he acted, and in fact, *Othello* was the only role Robeson played onstage for the next ten years. It is also important to recall one last connection between his voice and his

⁹ "Ballad for Americans," was no jingoistic patriotic cantata. Originally entitled "Ballad of Uncle Sam," the song had been written by John LeTouche and put to music by Earl Robinson (who also composed the labor anthem, "Joe Hill"). Robeson embraced the song because it did not shy away from the struggle against slavery, noting that "Old Abe Lincoln . . . went down to his grave to free the slave," with one line even proclaiming that "Man in white skin can never be free / While his black brother is in slavery."

acting. When Robeson founded his own record company in 1952, it was named the Othello Recording Corporation, and it too was formed to share Robeson's distinctive and determined voice of protest with a cross-cultural and global audience.



Figure 3. LP pressed by Robeson's Othello Recording Corporation
Courtesy of Paul Robeson Archive

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