

The Rise of the Black Internationale:

Anti-imperialist Activism and Aesthetics in Britain during the 1930s

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Just five months after returning to the United States from a decade-long exile in Britain, Paul Robeson appeared on a radio broadcast that was almost immediately recognized as one of the defining moments of Popular Front culture in the United States. Unlike Orson Welles' terrifying broadcast of *War of the Worlds* a year earlier, which provoked mass hysteria by purporting to document an alien invasion, Robeson's rendition of Earl Robinson and John Latouche's popular cantata *Ballad for Americans* played on the image of a national body unified despite its ethnic diversity, one founded on the inclusive and egalitarian ideals of social democracy.¹ Of course, such ideals were largely unrealized in the United States in 1939. One of the first performances by an explicitly radical artist-activist on a mainstream radio program, Robeson's *Ballad for Americans* articulated a crisis of national self-definition, one that according to Michael Denning's influential re-reading of the Popular Front hinged on intense conflicts over the trajectory of US history, and in particular on the nation's festering racial inequalities.² Yet the *Ballad* located the travails of African Americans at the core not simply of American national identity but of the Popular Front's ethic of interracial, international unity in the face of exploitation and oppression. Thus, if the *Ballad for Americans* emphasized the constitutive role of racial inequality in US history, Robeson's rendition of the cantata also offered radio listeners an exemplary assertion of belonging grounded in African American culture and history, a species of local message with global implications.³

1 For detailed musicological analysis of the Ballad, see Barg, "Paul Robeson's *Ballad for Americans*."

2 Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 129.

3 On the dependence of US national identity on anti-black tropes, see Singh, *Black is a Country*, 114, 216-223.

It was, however, in Britain rather than in the US that Robeson developed his distinctive musical repertoire and the vision of international solidarity on which it was founded. As he wrote later, during the difficult years of the Red Scare:

It was in Britain – among the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish people of that land – that I first learned that the essential character of a nation is determined not by the upper classes, but by the common people, and that the common people of all nations are truly brothers in the great family of mankind. If in Britain there were those who lived by plundering the colonial peoples, there were also the many millions who earned their bread by honest toil. And even as I grew to feel more negro in spirit, or African as I put it then, I also came to feel a sense of oneness with the white working people whom I came to know and love.⁴

In addition to establishing solidarity with white working-class people, Robeson also immersed himself in the vibrant milieu of expatriate colonial students, intellectuals, and workers who lived in London during these years. It was here that he came to know leaders of anti-colonial nationalist movements such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, as well as prominent British radicals such Victor Gollancz, Harold Laski, and H. G. Wells.⁵ Indeed, it was ironically at the center of the British Empire that Robeson “discovered” Africa, both through meeting African students and intellectuals in exile at venues such as the West African Students Union (WASU) and through studying African languages and culture at the London School of Oriental Languages.⁶ In addition, and crucially, Robeson also became part of the circle of anti-imperialist activists and theoreticians in London that gravitated around C.L.R. James and George Padmore, who together founded the International African Service Bureau (IASB) to support anti-colonial movements throughout Africa following fascist Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia, the last remaining independent country on the continent, in London in 1935. Although it has received far less attention than Paris, London

4 Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 48.

5 *Ibid.*, 35.

6 *Ibid.*, 33.

was, in other words, also a key site that afforded black artists and activists from around the colonial world a cosmopolitan space in which they could forge the ties and strategies that would lead to liberation.⁷

Surprisingly little has been written on the extraordinary group of black and Asian activists encountered by Robeson during his British sojourn.⁸ Indeed, discussion of the overlapping circles of African, Caribbean, and South Asian intellectuals who congregated in London during these years promises to correct some of the elisions in seminal work on black radicalism such as that of Paul Gilroy, who has been criticized for ignoring Afro-Asian interactions.⁹ One of the principal goals of this article is to explore Robeson's changing public persona as he circulated among this cadre of anti-imperialist activists in the imperial core, a group whose varied provenance and keen awareness of transnational links offers one of the most elaborated examples of what Alys Weinbaum has called "racial globality": an international, revolutionary project for black belonging in the world.¹⁰ Indeed, the collective biography of the activist intellectuals with whom Robeson affiliated himself while in Britain may be said to track the rise of an exemplary Black Internationale.¹¹ Although I explore the world of the anti-colonial, anti-fascist intelligentsia in Britain in more detail elsewhere, in this article I contend that we can follow many of the era's debates through examining the shifting roles adopted by Paul Robeson during his British sojourn. In recovering this moment of anti-imperialist activism in Britain, I

7 For discussion of Paris as a cosmopolitan space for black internationalism, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*.

8 Although biographers of James, Padmore, and Robeson have touched on the individuals involved, Cedric Robinson's "Black Intellectuals at the British Core" remains one of the sole extended treatments of this seminal moment in British anti-imperialist and anti-racist history. Also important is Penny Von Eschen's *Race Against Empire*, a sub-section of which is devoted to the anti-imperialist constellation in Britain during the 1930s.

9 Gilroy curiously completely ignores the radical milieu of the 1930s in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic*.

10 Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Reproducing Black Globality."

11 The term "Black Internationale" was used by American journalist George Schuyler in a strident article published in the NAACP's journal *Crisis* in 1938 that lambasted the models of black internationalism put into circulation not simply by James and Padmore, but also by US-based writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Claude McKay, as well as by a global network of periodicals such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Negro Worker*, and *La Dépêche africaine*. For a discussion of Schuyler's work, see Bain, "Shocks Americana!"

intend additionally to illuminate a seminal but ill-documented moment in the pre-history of contemporary British anti-racism.

It is as a result of these global connections that Paul Robeson was able to argue not simply that his outlook on world affairs was formed during his residence in London, but that it was in the imperial metropolis that he came to understand fully the global significance of the African American struggle for equality.¹² In a 1937 interview, Robeson stated that, “events in Abyssinia, Spain, and China have led me beyond the racial problem to the world problem of which it is a part – the problem of defending democracy against the onslaught of Fascism. Democracy should be widened, but instead a drive is being made to subjugate not only my group but all oppressed peoples throughout the world.”¹³

This global awareness of oppression also led Robeson to embrace an explicitly politicized aesthetic project. As he put it during a benefit concert for the Spanish Republican cause held at London’s Albert Hall on June 24, 1937:

Fascism fights to destroy the culture which society has created; created through pain and suffering, through desperate toil, but with unconquerable will and lofty vision. Progressive and democratic mankind fight not alone to save this cultural heritage accumulated through the ages, but also fight today to prevent a war of unimaginable atrocity from engulfing the world. The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice.¹⁴

If the rise of fascism forced artists of the 1930s to take sides, the result was not necessarily, as critics of Popular Front aesthetics have often alleged, a one-dimensional social realism committed to sentimental populism and narrow nationalism.¹⁵ On the contrary, Robeson’s concert programs, for example, wildly popular among working class audiences throughout the British Isles, offered a medley of folk songs from

12 Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 48.

13 Quoted in Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 286.

14 *Ibid.*, 292.

15 For a discussion and rebuttal of these aesthetic slurs, first articulated during the era of the Popular Front by New York intellectuals, see Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 115-135.

around the world grounded in the characteristic Popular Front notion of a global federation of exploited working-class and peasant nationalities.¹⁶

In tandem with the emphasis on a transnational working-class federation, Popular Front culture was characterized by an effort to hijack the emerging culture industry in order to forge a radical conception of the nation.¹⁷ Faced with the rise of the culture industry, the temptation, to which many artists of the period succumbed, was to turn to elitist conceptions of the autonomous intellectual or the revolutionary vanguard as an alternative to the homogenized products of mass communications. Such conceptions of the artist, however, directly contradicted the ideal of a radical democratic nation-popular embodied in the alternative modernism in evidence in Robeson's concerts and in other key texts of Popular Front culture. A central aim of this article is therefore to explore the success of Robeson's efforts to project his political aesthetic using the organs of mass media in Britain. To what extent did his contact with the Black Internationale in Britain shape Robeson's conception of the identity and role of the artist, moving it away from residual elitist models? How successful was he in translating his alternative modernist aesthetic from the concert stage into the far more commercial and mediated genre of the motion picture? Finally, how did Robeson's presence impact members of the Black Internationale in their efforts to transform the dominant aesthetic forms of the era? In exploring these questions, I discuss two films produced in Britain following Robeson's turn towards explicit political alignment, *Song of Freedom* (1936) and *The Proud Valley* (1939), both of which attempt to embody the ideal of a radical working-class federation in aesthetic form. In counterpoint to these two films, I also analyze C.L.R. James's play *Toussaint Louverture*, produced in March 1936 in London with Robeson in the lead role. Despite the undeniable compromises involved in the production of these three texts, they offer important insights into the complex interaction of aesthetics and activism during the rise of the Black Internationale.

16 On the pan-ethnic character of Popular Front internationalism, see Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 129-135.

17 Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 114.

African American Vanguardism and the Return to Africa

In 1928, delegates to the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern meeting in Moscow passed a series of resolutions which held that blacks living in the US South and in South Africa constituted oppressed nations within a nation. The Comintern's resolutions maintained that these groups possessed an inherent right to self-determination. If Stalin's subsequent definition of a nation as a "community of culture" tended to simplify and homogenize the complex interweaving of traditions that produces a national culture, it nevertheless gave an official imprimatur to efforts by black radicals of the period to search for the roots of revolutionary traditions within cultural and religious movements such as Voodoo and the Watchtower Movement, which at the time were largely seen by European radicals and liberals alike as expressions of savagery or superstition.¹⁸ While there was certainly an element of opportunism in the Comintern's resolutions, which allowed the Communist Party to appropriate the doctrines and recruit the members of organizations such as Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the international character of the organization and its doctrines of global unity among oppressed peoples helped establish the foundation for what Robin Kelley calls "a vision of black anti-imperialism that could transcend without negating a completely racialized worldview."¹⁹

By the mid-1930s, Paul Robeson had become determined to appear only in films that depicted the kinds of black liberation struggles highlighted by the Comintern's various theses on the so-called "Negro question." Near the end of 1934, the great Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein invited Robeson to visit Moscow to discuss his potential starring role in a film on the life of Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture.²⁰ Although Eisenstein's contretemps with the Stalinist bureaucracy prevented these exciting plans from coming to fruition, discussions for the project, as well as the experience of being in the Soviet Union in general, strengthened the radical new direction in Robeson's thinking.

¹⁸ Kelley, "Introduction," 16.

¹⁹ Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 108.

²⁰ For details of the dramatic impact of this visit to the Soviet Union, see Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 184-191.

Song of Freedom was the first film that not only allowed Robeson to escape the humiliating and derogatory roles within which he had previously been confined, but that also sought to depict black struggles for freedom. Produced at British Lion Studios in Beaconsfield, the film was based on Claude Williams and Dorothy Hathaway's novel *The Kingdom of Zinga*. *Song of Freedom*'s protagonist John Zinga, heir to an African throne, has been unrightfully dispossessed through devious witchcraft and brutality and regains his crown through his innate nobility and through the superior knowledge he has acquired during his exile among Europeans. The film is laced with overt criticisms of the insulting stereotypical roles Robeson had played in previous movies. In addition, *Song of Freedom* mobilizes notions of sovereignty and identity indebted to key pan-Africanist discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As we shall see, black autonomy tended to be equated with masculine agency in central strains of pan-Africanist thought.²¹ *Song of Freedom* consequently reveals the allure as well as the contradictions of black cultural nationalism.

Opening in the year 1700 on the imaginary island kingdom of Casanga off the western coast of Africa, *Song of Freedom* begins with the tyrannical ruler, Queen Zinga, a cackling madwoman with her hair in total disarray, about to murder one of her subjects. The queen exemplifies the pseudo-Darwinian racial doctrines widely accepted in Europe during the late imperial period, which held that African women were the lowest, most atavistic step in the ladder-like Great Family of Man that culminated in white masculinity.²² Horrified by the violence unfolding at the queen's behest, her son flees his inheritance. The rightful heir is dispossessed a second time when he is captured and subjected to the genocidal conditions of the Atlantic slave trade. The film's powerful images of the grotesque conditions in the hold of the slave ship make *Song of Freedom* one of the first motion pictures to depict such scenes openly. The film cuts short its examination of the slave trade, however, quickly whisking the viewer from the scene of Prince Zinga's capture to the moment of the slave trade's abolition in 1838.

21 For a discussion of the masculinist imaginary of pan-Africanism, see Michelle Stephens, *Black Empire*.

22 For analysis of these pseudo-scientific racist doctrines, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.

From these scenes of suffering and liberation, the film abruptly moves to the present and to a group of gregarious dockworkers in London's East End. Here the viewer sees Paul Robeson for the first time, playing the naturally talented singer John Zinga, who works happily alongside white members of the British working class. Robeson's John Zinga conforms to many of the gender paradigms that characterized what Michelle Stephens calls texts of black empire during this period. Like the prototypical New Negro, for example, Zinga is a member of the working class,²³ yet, despite this background, embodies a quiet nobleness that makes him a natural gentleman, an embodiment of the Victorian British ideals of moral "uprightness" and self-restraint that helped shape masculinity throughout the Empire. Zinga's idealized masculinity is contrasted explicitly with what are depicted as the dithering and effete characteristics of upper-class European men after an Italian composer and impresario discovers him while he sings on his way home from work. Through this contrast of Robeson's character, with his massive build, restrained bearing, and sensitive treatment of his wife, with the decadent European upper classes, *Song of Freedom* suggests that the moral virtues of masculinity now inhere in innately noble lower-class men such as Zinga.

When Zinga returns to Casanga, consequently, it is in the form of a Westernized patriarch capable of leading his people away from their benighted traditions while embracing his repressed but never forgotten African roots. *Song of Freedom* hence reproduces many of the central tropes of the texts of black empire, including elitist Eurocentric discourses of racial uplift. Instead of a "talented tenth" forming a vanguard capable of leading their sisters and brothers to freedom, however, in *Song of Freedom* it is the enlightened royal heir John Zinga who promises to liberate his subjects from oppressive tradition. Thus, although *Song of Freedom* seeks to criticize explicitly racist depictions of Africa and deploys populist discourses of liberation from an oppressive elite, its message of freedom is contradicted not simply by the film's recirculation of stereotypical representations of Africans but by the Eurocentric developmentalism and social hierarchy

²³ Stephens, *Black Empire*, 44.

exemplified in the restoration of the Westernized John Zinga to his rightful place as enlightened despot of Casanga. It is precisely these paternalistic discourses that Robeson's interactions with expatriate radicals such as C.L.R. James during the rest of the decade would place in question.

Black Political Autonomy and Popular Culture

In October 1935, Mussolini sent his fascist troops into Ethiopia, promising the Italian people a "place in the sun" equivalent to those enjoyed by European colonial powers such as France and Britain. The invasion of Ethiopia had a galvanizing impact on black populations around the world, helping to internationalize their political consciousness and knit them together more closely. The International African Friends of Ethiopia (IAFE), a London-based organization founded and chaired by C.L.R. James, became the hub of a global protest movement.²⁴ If the fascist invasion of Ethiopia helped strengthen the political solidarity of the black diaspora, it also underlined the perfidy of Europe's liberal democracies. Aware of their own colonial entanglements, nations such as Britain and France refused to back sanctions against Italy at the League of Nations. Even more shocking for black radicals who had been swayed by the Comintern's theses on black self-determination were press revelations that the Soviet Union was furnishing arms to the Italians in contravention of the sanctions eventually passed at the request of Ethiopian ruler Haile Selassie. While few black radicals had any illusions about the feudal character of Ethiopian society under Emperor Selassie, the collusion of both liberal democracy and communism with fascist colonialism provided a bitter education.

By the 1930s, the rise of fascism was seen by much of the British Left as an inevitable if extreme result of the underlying crisis dynamics of "capitalism-imperialism." James's bitter indictment of the invasion of Ethiopia focused on the cooperation of European colonial powers such as France and Britain with

²⁴ It cannot be a coincidence that Robeson helped found one of the most significant internationalist African American organizations, the Council on African Affairs (CAA), in 1937, two years after encountering James's IAFE in London. For discussion of the CAA, see Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 17-21.

fascism,²⁵ but debates between James and his comrades at the time also reflected anger at the Soviet Union's collusion with imperialism. Although James's childhood friend George Padmore continued to argue for the necessity of combined anti-fascist and anti-colonial activism in European nations and their colonies,²⁶ James not only looked increasingly to the autonomous activity of the black masses but to the centrality of black culture as a historical repository and vehicle of revolutionary energies.

When James met Paul Robeson, he seemed to embody precisely these alternative black traditions. Robert Hill has described the "profound" impact of Robeson's physique and personality in "shatter[ing] James's colonial conception of the black physique [and the] unconscious prototype of the white Englishman and woman as [the] absolute standards of physical perfection";²⁷ it seems small surprise, then, that James asked Robeson to perform the title role in his play *Toussaint Louverture*, a stage version and early prototype of James's magisterial history of the successful slave uprising in the French colony of San Domingo.²⁸

James's play follows classical models loosely: divided into three acts with several scenes each, it nonetheless spans a twelve year period in the history of the Haitian revolution; although it focuses on a broad array of characters, Toussaint L'Ouverture occupies the central role as a heroic figure whose powerful personality drives the revolution but whose betrayal ultimately dooms him to defeat and exile. If it seems relatively indebted to European classical dramatic tradition in form, *Toussaint Louverture* nevertheless offers a fundamental critique of the Eurocentrism of contemporary radical discourse. James's demolition of both established dramatic convention and traditional models of political agency is clear from the play's outset with his stage directions. He calls for a stage whose action is cut across by the "insistent beating of drums"

25 James, "Abyssinia and the Imperialists," 63.

26 Hooker, *Black Revolutionary*, 42-46.

27 Quoted in Robinson, "Black Intellectuals," 200.

28 James revised the text of the play that I am using for this reading during the late 1960s. Unfortunately I lack the space here for an extensive discussion of James's revisions. The later version of the play, renamed *The Black Jacobins*, is available in the *C.L.R. James Reader*.

associated with Voodoo and the slave uprising.²⁹ Behind these brief directions lies James's dedication to the notion of popular agency. Unlike many of his comrades, who had reached Britain by highly circuitous routes, James had spent years immersed in radical British working-class circles while living with West Indian cricketer Learie Constantine in the Midlands.³⁰ Here he absorbed the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism and the elaboration of Lenin's doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat into a theory of permanent revolution.³¹ This radical orientation helped James chart a political course very different from the concern with black sovereignty and hierarchy evident in *Song of Freedom* and other black empire texts. Indeed, *Toussaint Louverture* reflects this theoretical insistence on popular agency not simply through its stage directions, but also in the dialectical interplay that such directions suggest between the masses gathered at the back of the stage and the leaders whose deliberations take place downstage.

Foremost among these leaders, of course, is Toussaint L'Ouverture. James's play depicts Toussaint's transformation from a humble slave to an accomplished military leader, but devotes far more attention to Toussaint's later anguished reflections on the ideal form of government for his recently liberated people. In Act I, scene iii, for instance, Toussaint is tempted to promise his allegiance to the Spanish crown, represented by a freed slave who, despite having been elevated to the rank of general, is represented as a buffoon hoodwinked by the paternalistic rhetoric of the European monarchs. James's satirical dig at General Macoya challenges the notion that there are static cultural values that lead Africans to accept hierarchical systems of power. Instead, he implicitly argues, it is by virtue of the very oppression to which they have been subjected that the freed slaves are devoted to the keyword of the French revolution: *liberté*. Resistance to slavery, colonialism, and imperialism is thus not grounded in a shared, trans-historical racial essence, but rather in the

29 James, *Toussaint Louverture*, 1.

30 For a detailed discussion of these years, see Buhle, *C.L.R. James*, 38-53. Further discussion of James's thought during this period can be found in King and Kelley and Lemelle.

31 Cedric Robinson makes this point in relation to James's history of the Haitian revolution, but it applies equally if not more powerfully to the play under discussion. See Robinson, "Black Intellectuals," 182.

specific experiences of oppression to which people of African descent and other colonized people have been subjected. This analysis lays the ground for the kind of anti-racist solidarity across ethnic and cultural differences that characterized the Popular Front era and, later, politicized constructions of black British identity.

Like one of Brecht's contemporaneous *Lehrstücke*, James's play engages his audience critically by presenting a debate on stage that dramatizes the burning questions of the nascent anti-colonial movement. Should the leaders of the uprising listen to the Afro-Spanish General Macoya and side with one of the established European powers such as Spain or Britain, who promise them arms, money, and personal prestige in their rebellion against France? Or should the ex-slaves drive all the whites into the sea and declare the island independent, as Dessalines repeatedly urges? Rejecting both these alternatives, Toussaint ultimately sides with France after the revolutionary government declares the abolition of slavery in all the republic's colonial territories. This section of the play is particularly interesting for its insertion of a scene from the Revolutionary Convention of 1794 during which slavery was abolished. Following this intertextual fragment, the revolutionary commissioner Roume proclaims, "The Republic is in danger. In Europe the ancient monarchies are attacking us on all our borders, determined to crush this first great uprising of the people in the whole history of mankind. More than our bullets and guns they fear the words liberty, equality, and fraternity, which tear the veils of tradition from the minds of all the oppressed who hear them. Tyranny the world over is trembling."³² The parallel between revolutionary France and the Soviet Union must have been immediately apparent to James and Robeson's audience. Toussaint's vicissitudes following his decision to side with the revolutionary principles of the Republic inevitably would have raised corresponding questions about the dependability of the communist party for anti-colonial militants during the 1930s. Much of the rest of the play offers a bitter lesson in the betrayal of the uprising in San Domingo by the French in general and Bonaparte in

³² James, *Toussaint Louverture*, 32.

particular. James dramatizes the First Consul's racial arrogance particularly baldly. The parallels with the Comintern's perfidy, decried by James and Padmore in the context of the colonization of Abyssinia, must have been quite apparent.

Yet Toussaint is not simply a naïve believer in the hollow egalitarian promises of European revolutionaries. There are also some pragmatic calculations behind his enduring loyalty to the French, for he believes that the island needs both French education and technology in order to develop its resources adequately and French military protection from imperial vultures such as Britain and the United States.³³ Toussaint's dilemma thus reflects that facing any revolutionary government in a peripheral nation: a successful internal insurrection is likely to confront myriad external enemies as well as a mass population without enough education to successfully manage its own affairs.³⁴

Toussaint's downfall is ultimately a product of the foolhardiness of his fellow generals. The original version of the play, that is, differs sharply from the rewrite, in which it is Toussaint's disconnection from the revolutionary sentiments of the people that dooms him.³⁵ In the version of 1936, Toussaint steadfastly resists the invading French expeditionary force, led by Bonaparte's brother-in-law General Leclerc. Indeed, Toussaint even demands that his sons, whom he has sent to France to be educated as a sign of good faith in the revolution, choose between him and the French.³⁶ In the original version of the play, in other words, Toussaint retains his link with his people's hunger for freedom. He is betrayed not by his own credulousness but rather by Christophe, who surrenders to Leclerc in the hope of saving his own skin. When he hears of this surrender, Toussaint appears overcome with despair:

33 Ibid., 48.

34 Paul Buhle notes the similarity in this regard between the issues confronted by revolutionary leaders in the Soviet Union and in Haiti, suggesting that James's reading of the situation in the latter was influenced by Trotsky's discussion of conditions in the former. See Buhle, *C.L.R. James*, 60.

35 On this disconnection as Toussaint's tragic flaw, see Rabbitt, "C.L.R. James's Figuring," 122-123, and Buhle, *C.L.R. James*, 60-61, although both of these discussions are based on the later version of the play.

36 *Toussaint Louverture*, 65.

If [the fortress at] Mornay is gone then the armies are lost and Negroes slaves again [...] The whites will never leave us – never. Black skin cursed by God – white God, black God. Same flesh, same blood, but black skin – born to be slaves. Oh, my people! To sweat in the sun in the white man’s field – to cook the white man’s food – to groom the white man’s horse – to clean the white man’s shoes. They will never leave us – never. Oh, Christophe! Christophe! If Mornay is gone the armies are cut off, and Negroes slaves again.³⁷

Despite this apparent despair following his generals’ betrayal, however, Toussaint retains his faith in the revolutionary capacity of the people themselves. During his imprisonment in Europe, Toussaint, worn down by torture, hunger, and cold, nevertheless affirms that,

You can defeat an army, but you cannot defeat a people in arms. Do you think any army could drive those hundreds of thousands back into the fields? You have got rid of one leader. But there are two thousand other leaders to be got rid of as well, and two thousand more when those are killed.³⁸

Toussaint’s faith in the people is validated in the following scene, in which a despairing General Leclerc repeats Toussaint’s words verbatim, acknowledging that he cannot defeat the people of San Domingo, whom Toussaint armed before the defeat of his army.

Although Toussaint has consistently rejected his advice, it is ultimately Dessalines who declares the island independent. From the beginning of the play, Dessalines is associated with the revolutionary popular culture of the freed slaves. Unlike the other generals, for example, Dessalines refuses to don the captured silks and brocades of the planter elite after the uprising begins. From the play’s outset, he insists that the uprising should forego the support of French revolutionary forces and instead establish its autonomy by force of arms. In a particularly telling exchange with Toussaint early in the play, Dessalines rejects the notion that French education is a key to developing the island, saying, “If we had depended on education and religion we would never have got our freedom.”³⁹ Dessalines thus represents a searing rejection of the gradualist position so

37 Ibid., 72-73.

38 Ibid., 88.

39 Ibid., 49.

common in Britain during the 1930s, one predicated on the necessary economic and political maturation of colonial subjects *prior to* liberation.⁴⁰ James's play suggests that it would be popular agency that would triumph over not just colonialism but over the gradualist positions often adopted by the colonial political elite in years to come.

Despite the relative acclaim with which the production of James's play at the Westminster Theatre in London was greeted, political differences between James and Robeson prevented the play from having a commercial run.⁴¹ The play's thinly veiled critique of the Comintern was no doubt difficult for Robeson to countenance given the loyalty he continued to express to the Soviet Union during this period. Indeed, it is highly revealing that James and Robeson took turns playing Toussaint and Dessalines during the play's short run in London. These role reversals attest to the ongoing dialogue between the two men concerning popular agency in the context of anti-fascist and anti-imperialist politics.⁴² Although it is difficult to know exactly how much his participation in the production of *Toussaint Louverture* influenced Paul Robeson's thinking, his subsequent outings on stage and screen reflect a decisive shift away from the unalloyed great leader roles that characterized productions such as *Song of Freedom*.

Towards a Transnational Working-Class Federation

Paul Robeson's first encounter with Welsh miners took place in 1928, as he left a dinner in London. Dressed in a dinner jacket, Robeson spontaneously joined the Welshmen's protest march against low wages, following along as they traversed the streets of the capital and singing the miners a celebratory song when they reached their destination.⁴³ Ten years later, shortly after returning from the battlefields of Spain, Robeson sang again for the Welsh, this time at a memorial meeting at Mountain Ash for Welsh members of the

40 For a discussion of the dominant colonial ideologies of the era, see Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*.

41 Buhle, *C.L.R. James*, 57.

42 Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 311.

43 For biographical details of Robeson's association with Welsh mining communities, see Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 229.

International Brigade who gave their lives defending the Spanish Republic. That same year, Robeson joined his colleague Herbert Marshall, a producer and director of the radical Unity Theatre in London, to found an independent film company whose first production was to be *The Proud Valley* in which Robeson played a black man working in a Welsh mine and singing at an eisteddfod, a Welsh cultural festival. In this, his final British film, Robeson plays a character ennobled not through the discovery of some long-secret link with an African monarchy, but rather through his quotidian but nonetheless heroic efforts of solidarity with the miners' struggles. *The Proud Valley* thus offers a culminating expression of Robeson's growing devotion to the idea of a non-hierarchical federation of working-class peoples, a form of solidarity grounded in cultural pluralism and mutual respect.

Although *The Proud Valley* offers several melodramatic plot threads to keep its viewers engaged, it is grounded in the documentary ethic that became increasingly prominent during this era, with a particular focus on the crimped lives of miners during the Great Depression. Elements of the documentary genre are engaged as part of a broader project of a transnational, radically democratizing ethos forged *in opposition* to fascism and imperialism. Indeed, *The Proud Valley* embodies the three central democratizing values that, according to Michael Denning, characterized Popular Front culture: social democratic labor politics based on militant industrial unionism; an anti-racist ethnic pluralism; and, finally, an anti-fascist politics of international solidarity.⁴⁴

This democratizing ethos finds expression in *The Proud Valley* in Robeson's character David Goliath's solidarity efforts with the Welsh mining community of Blaendy. The Biblical resonance of this protagonist's name is particularly suggestive, suggesting a unification of antagonistic nations as well as a harmonization of strength and wisdom. Like John Zinga, the physically imposing but sweet tempered Goliath is graced with a natural singing ability. Unlike Robeson's earlier role, however, Goliath's ability does not

44 Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 125.

catapult him to fame and fortune in the elite concert halls of Europe, but rather gains him a place in the working-class household of Dick Parry and in the miners' choir he directs. When Parry is killed working alongside him at the mine face, Goliath sings the spiritual "Deep River" at the eisteddfod held in his memory. The powerful response that this African American spiritual evokes from the spectators at the eisteddfod seals Goliath's place in the community, suggesting a cross-cultural identification with loss and mourning grounded in common experiences that knit together working-class people across ethnic differences.

If *The Proud Valley* celebrates the possibility of anti-racist ethnic solidarity, it also engages directly with the militant union efforts that characterized Britain during the Depression years. *The Proud Valley* offers a fictional version of this growing militancy when Dick Parry's son Emlyn comes up with the idea of sending a delegation to London to protest the closure of the Blaendy mine following the gas leak that killed his father. True to the documentary ethos, this march is a more or less direct reenactment of events such as the Jarrow Crusade of 1936, as well, of course, as the miners' protest march that Paul Robeson encountered in 1928.

After the miners arrive in London, they manage to talk their way into a meeting of the company bosses, who are lamenting their inability to meet the augmented government orders for coal that have resulted from the gathering clouds of war. Although the bosses are initially resistant to Emlyn's suggestions on how to reopen the pit, Old Ned, one of Emlyn and David's comrades, tells them that, "Tomorrow we may be at war; you know the risks that will have to be faced by our soldiers. Coal in wartime is as much a part of our national defense as guns or anything else, so why not let us take our chance down the pit?" This argument convinces the bosses but, perhaps more importantly, it also knits the miners' struggle into the broader anti-fascist war effort. As a result, their travails in the mines are transformed from a narrow working-class struggle into a vital expression of the national interest. The Popular Front ethos of international anti-fascist solidarity, implicit in this cross-class national-popular coalition forged in the face of the coming Nazi onslaught, was seen by some radicals as a betrayal of proletarian avant-gardism, yet it must be noted that in *The Proud Valley* the war

effort, in the form of Emlyn's plan to reopen the Blaendy coal mine, is conceived and led by members of the working class.

There is, however, an international component to this effort. David Goliath is killed saving his fellow miners following a rock fall as they reopen the pit. His act of self-sacrifice caps the solidarity that he has evinced from the beginning with the community of Blaendy, transforming him into an icon of heroic self-sacrifice for Wales and for democracy more generally, akin to the Welsh workers who laid down their lives in Spain.⁴⁵ Shortly after his death, *The Proud Valley* closes with shots of coal trucks emerging from the mine accompanied by Welsh choral music. Robeson's strong bass voice swells over this choral accompaniment as the film ends; the camera glides past Emlyn and his family standing at the pit head, pans across the rolling green hills, and soars into the towering clouds that hover above the valleys of Wales. The explicit spiritual symbolism of this concluding scene evoke Goliath's moving rendition of "Deep River" following Dick Parry's death. The lyrics of the spiritual become even more significant in this context, as a profound bond is forged between the struggles of African Americans and the Welsh working class for social justice and democracy:

My Lord, he calls me

He calls me by the thunder.

The trumpet sounds within my soul:

I ain't got long to stay here.

Deep river, my home is over Jordan,

Deep river, Lord, I'm gonna cross over into campground.

45 While Goliath's death may suggest the problematic American literary and cinematic tradition of black self-sacrifice for white characters, the poly-ethnic militancy of the Popular Front culture within which *The Proud Valley* is situated hardly supports such a reading of black subordination. For a discussion of the tradition of black self-sacrifice, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mamies, and Bucks*.

Conclusion

Two days after seeing an early rough cut of *The Proud Valley*, Paul Robeson and his family packed their bags and left London for good. It was the end of a twelve-year sojourn in Britain during which Robeson's personal values and identity as a performer had changed profoundly. From his meetings with radical colonial expatriates such as Jomo Kenyatta, C.L.R. James, and George Padmore, to his encounters with African American members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the grim battles to save the Spanish Republic, Robeson developed a definitive persona as an international activist that reflected and inflected the key values of the Popular Front. Indeed, it was during his visits to Republican forces in Spain that Robeson came to see the link between black struggles and anti-Facism most clearly. As he later wrote,

I went to Spain in 1938, and that was a major turning point in my life. There I saw that it was the working men and women of Spain who were heroically giving "their last full measure of devotion" to the cause of democracy in that bloody conflict [...] A new, warm feeling for my homeland grew within me as I met the men of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion – the thousands of brave young Americans who had crossed the sea to fight and die that another "government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth." My heart was filled with admiration and love for these white Americans, and there was a sense of great pride in my own people when I saw that there were Negroes, too, in the ranks of the Lincoln men in Spain.⁴⁶

When Robeson sang in Wales to commemorate fallen members of the International Brigade or on CBS radio in the *Ballad for Americans*, he deployed what Lisa Barg calls a "sonic internationalism" grounded in the interwoven national and international texts of the songs themselves in a critical consciousness that revealed the common roots of slavery, segregation, fascism, and imperialism.⁴⁷ As Penny Von Eschen has argued, this sense of transnational unity was fostered not by essentialist notions of cultural commonality, but rather by an

⁴⁶ Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 53.

⁴⁷ Barg, "Paul Robeson's Ballad", 54.

awareness of shared histories of oppression.⁴⁸ The pan-ethnic unity Robeson conjured up in his repertoire was the product of collective suffering at the hands of a capitalist system whose insatiable demand for profit led to a never ending search for new markets and raw materials, which in turn generated slavery, imperialism, and fascism. If earlier projects in which Robeson participated, including *Song of Freedom* and *Toussaint Louverture*, reveal the extent to which this position of pan-ethnic solidarity was reached through critical dialogue with US-based Pan-African discourses of black empire and with the autonomist positions of black radicals such as C.L.R. James and George Padmore, it was this sense of a common, systemic oppression that informed Robeson's final project in Britain and his activism when he returned to the US.

If the development of the political aesthetics of the Black Internationale was grounded in the Popular Front politics of the 1930s, its legacy can be seen in later manifestations of black British culture. A similar powerful sense of internationalism, for example, is evident in the activist work of a figure like Claudia Jones, who was instrumental in organizing the first Caribbean Carnival in the community of Notting Hill following the race riots of 1958. Although Jones cut her political teeth as an activist and journalist in radical circles in New York, her understanding of the dynamic underlying racism and imperialism has strong theoretical ties to the Black Internationale of which Robeson was a part during his London years. Indeed, Jones, who was first imprisoned and then forced into exile in Britain during the McCarthy era, may be seen as bridging the world of Atlantic radical anti-racism in a manner akin to Robeson two decades before. The message of unity implicit in her calls to dismantle the "artificial divisions and antagonisms" created by the imperial legacy resonates with Paul Robeson's earlier project of fostering pan-ethnic, anti-fascist solidarity.⁴⁹

It is the enduring resonance of this message in Britain during the post-1945 era that perhaps distinguishes it from the US, where, as historians such as Penny Von Eschen have documented, a concerted

48 Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 40.

49 For a more detailed discussion of Claudia Jones's activist work in Britain, see Dawson, *Mongrel Nation*, 92-96.

and highly successful campaign against black internationalism was carried out during the 1940s and 1950s. It may, in other words, be due to the radical roots nurtured by the Black Internationale in Britain during the 1930s that apparently singular forms of black British culture developed in the decades after Claudia Jones settled in London. The rediscovery of C.L.R. James's work during the 1970s and 1980s was certainly a key force in the recuperation of definitions of black identity in Britain based less on homogeneous ethnic identity, as tended to be the case in the US, than on a sense of common oppression at the hands of imperialism and racism.⁵⁰ The point is that we should not see this rediscovery in a vacuum. The politicized, pan-ethnic definition of blackness and vision of anti-imperialist, anti-racist solidarity advanced by James and the circle that included Robeson in inter-war London continues to resonate within the politics of black British culture and activism.⁵¹ These intergenerational links suggest that the activism and aesthetics of Paul Robeson and the Black Internationale laid important foundations, establishing powerful anti-imperialist traditions that prevailed after the eclipse of the Popular Front and beyond the apparently brief heyday of British anti-fascism.

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50 The foremost champion of this non-essentialist, pan-ethnic definition of blackness remains A. Sivanandan. For discussion of the history behind "black" British identity, see his *Communities of Resistance*.

51 Examples of this legacy can be found in such disparate phenomena as the radical aesthetics of bands like Asian Dub Foundation and in the organization of the important Rock Against Racism campaigns. On these phenomena see Dawson, "This is the Digital Underclass," and "Love Music, Hate Racism" respectively.

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