

## Remembering Slavery on Screen: Paul Robeson in *The Song of Freedom* (1936)

### Abstract

This article examines cinematic remembrances of the Atlantic slave trade through the lens of Paul Robeson-starring British film *The Song of Freedom* (1936). An exceptional visualization of the horrors of the Middle Passage in transatlantic interwar cinema, the production nevertheless recapitulates an abolitionist visual paradigm characterized by lacunae and distortion. Yet, it also serves as an exploration of African independence driven by Robeson's self-reflexive performance, demand for script approval and stardom. Robeson's measure of authorial influence over the film represents a unique instance in British cinema in which a Black performer was able to reframe dehumanizing representations of historical Black experiences into a hopeful vision of an independent Black future.

### Key words

Paul Robeson, *The Song of Freedom* (1936), British interwar cinema, British colonialism, anti-imperialism, slavery in cinema

On the cover of the pressbook for the 1936 British film *The Song of Freedom*, a group of Black men marches single file as if chained together. The figures' downcast, loincloth-clad bodies are taken from a montage sequence early in the production which depicts more than one hundred years of transatlantic slavery. Behind the men, a white overseer cracks his whip, which renders the figures' enslavement unequivocal and points up their abjection. A rare exception to enduring erasures of the Atlantic

slave trade from UK and US cinema, the image and film that it advertises nevertheless capitulate to a dominant visual paradigm in which those in bondage were dehumanized as passive victims dependent for emancipation on white abolitionist intervention. And yet, such a reading is complicated by the presence in the foreground of the film's star, the African American artist and activist Paul Robeson, who marches before the men to lead them to freedom. The position and stance of Robeson, who was himself the son of a man who escaped from slavery, allude to historically elided feats of slave heroism whilst simultaneously invoking the possibility of African political self-determination. Such an image is extraordinary given *The Song of Freedom's* status as a mainstream film made at the height and heart of the British Empire. Visual references to Robeson's stardom play into his projection of Black heroism. The actor holds aloft a banner that reads 'THE MIGHTY PAUL ROBESON' and wears the military attire of his best-known role, the emperor in Eugene O'Neill's stage play *The Emperor Jones* (1920). The costume emphasizes Robeson's authority and transforms the play's depiction of a despotic Black ruler into a celebration of Robeson's embodiment of Black independence.

Robeson's intervention in *The Song of Freedom* should be understood as a deliberate negotiation of a limited cinematic engagement with slavery's memory to nevertheless foster a radical aesthetics of Black subjecthood and challenge historical constructions of enslaved men and women in British visual culture. The film encapsulates a wider treatment of slavery in Robeson's transatlantic screen career, in which remembrances of the practice are allowed to exist only as censored traces in cinematic visual narratives. Such treatment points to an enduring obfuscation of slavery's legacies in US and UK interwar cinema, a cultural elision of historical wrongdoing that continues to endure. Yet, if the film participates in a deliberate

forgetting of white culpability in the Atlantic slave trade in British visual culture, it nevertheless serves as the point of entry for a cinematic exploration of an independent Black future and therefore as a subtle counterpoint to slavery-derived representations of Black lives. Such a vision is driven by Robeson's self-reflexive performance and unusually high level of control over his screen image and the film's script. By allowing Robeson a measure of authorial influence, *The Song of Freedom* represents a unique instance in British cinema in which a Black performer was able to reframe dehumanizing representations of historical Black experiences into a hopeful vision of an independent Black future. That the film nevertheless capitulates to dominant racial paradigms should be understood within Robeson's need to engage pragmatically with dominant cultural frameworks to achieve the widest possible platform for his construction of dignified and independent Black subjecthood.

*The Song of Freedom*, a Lion-Hammer production, was released in the midst of Robeson's decade-long UK sojourn in the 1930s. One of eight British films to feature Robeson during this period and the first of two by British director J. Elder Wills, the other being 1937's *Big Fella*, the production has only recently begun to receive scholarly consideration. Nevertheless, its cultural impact was substantial and wide-ranging: it was an international commercial success and enjoyed a cinematic re-release in the UK ten years after its original screening.<sup>i</sup> Moreover, it is historically significant as a cinematic reimagining of Atlantic slavery in British cinema. As recently as 1997, historian Jeffrey Richards observed that the production 'uniquely in British films depicts the horrors of the eighteenth-century slave trade as well as its abolition in 1838'.<sup>ii</sup> That the film was released in the US only in Black movie houses is indicative of its radical deviation from a then-pervasive Hollywood falsification of slave history characterized by benevolent slave owners and happy slaves.<sup>iii</sup> Yet, as we

will see, *The Song of Freedom*'s remembrance of slavery is also misrepresentative: it invests in dominant cultural distortions by reducing the practice to a simplistic and dehumanizing visual paradigm. This is not to suggest that cultural re-enactments of slavery could possibly hope to recreate its complex human realities, especially when such re-enactments are fleeting, audiences are almost always physically removed from the original event, and survivor testimonies of experiences such as the Middle Passage, which comprises much of the film's vision of slavery, are rare.<sup>iv</sup> Nevertheless, the film evidences the limited extent to which interwar British culture, a society underpinned by colonialism and threatened by fascism, chose to memorialize its slave past. What such cultural remembrances help to recover, therefore, is the ways in which a society chooses to speak its history, as well as what it chooses to misremember or forget.

And yet, *The Song of Freedom* also functions as a site in which such cultural remembrances can be called into question and even transgressed. Unlike single-authored still images, a film features numerous authorial voices and therefore has the potential for multivocality; that is, different players can potentially influence the finished product, allowing the potential for deviation from the production's intended visual and narrative framework. In her consideration of cinematic reconstructions of the Atlantic slave trade, Natalie Zemon Davis argues that, 'historical films can be a thought experiment about the past, involving many participants' and that,

What the film looks and sounds like will depend on small decisions from many sources – including the interpretive performance of the actors (tightly controlled by some directors, given free rein by others), the style of the directors of photography and music, unexpected events during filming, and post-editing interventions by producers.<sup>v</sup>

For Davis, therefore, a film's numerous authorial voices, including those of its actors, can play a role in shaping its visual narrative, which can in turn lead to complex and

creative engagements with the past on screen. In *The Song of Freedom*, Robeson not only starred in but also approved the film's script, which afforded him substantial input into the production. As we will see, Robeson's authorial and performative presence in the film allows for self-reflexivity and subversion, facilitating a challenge to white mainstream histories of slavery and its aftermath.

The production begins on Casanga, a fictional island off the west coast of Africa, in 1700. In a community not yet affected by slavery, a despotic ruler, Queen Zinga, puts to death a man who has dared to threaten her throne and her teenage son and his girlfriend flee with a royal medallion. Encountering a docked slave ship, they plead with its captain to let them board. The audience witnesses their horror as they enter the crowded ship and walk past chained, abject bodies. A montage sequence conveys the servitude to which their descendants are subjected as the medallion is passed down the generations. The action then shifts to 1930s London and the life of a Black dockworker with exceptional vocal talents, John Zinga (Robeson), who has inherited the medallion and yearns to trace his ancestry. Discovered by chance while singing on the docks, he quickly becomes an international opera star. After performing onstage in 'The Black Emperor', a role modeled on the 1933 operatic version of *The Emperor Jones*, Zinga recites in half-remembered form an ancestral song, the 'song of freedom' of the film's title, and an audience member identifies him as a descendant of the rulers of Casanga. Zinga and his wife Ruth (Elisabeth Welch) travel to the island to claim Zinga's heritage and 'civilize' its tribe. However, the witch doctor-governed community takes umbrage at their interventions. Faced with the imminent execution of his wife for breaching Casanga's archaic gender codes, Zinga finally recalls the 'song of freedom' in its entirety, which leads to his recognition as the community's rightful ruler. Zinga then chooses to combine his

kingship with his operatic career, using his earnings to bring aid and governance to the island.

If the narrative degrades Black cultures in its crude depiction of African societal 'backwardness', radical aesthetic implications are nevertheless evident in the film's memorial to the Atlantic slave trade, which represents a rare and extremely early attempt to recreate cinematically the atrocities of the practice onscreen. As Queen Zinga's son and girlfriend board the slave ship, a camera shot from the hold reveals dozens of chained hands raised in supplication. Moans and cries are heard from the captives. An overhead shot captures an African trader as he brings his whip down on the captives when they disobey his orders to be silent. The camera then follows the young pair inside the hold as they walk past chained bodies, recording in close-up their looks of horrified realization and fear together with the despondency of the ship's human cargo. The shadow of a seemingly endless trail of bodies is projected onto the ship's sails, which acknowledges the vast numbers of people subjected to the Middle Passage. In subsequent footage presented in a series of short edits, figures marching in different directions are overlaid with one another, reinforcing the vision of slavery as an endless cycle of suffering. The overall effect to the viewer is jolting and the sequence's fragmentary visual and narrative technique hints at the ruptured lives of those enslaved as well as the impossibility of recovering voices missing from the historical record. In a particularly evocative shot, three tiers of bodies are shown walking in opposite directions, with another line of bodies superimposed over them, overlaid in turn with the figure of a Black slaver who cracks his whip. The date shifts forward fifty years, transporting the viewer to a scene in which grieving relatives remove the medallion from a worn-out corpse, presumably Queen Zinga's son. The passing of the film's original protagonist so early in the

narrative serves as a shocking reminder for audiences that, for the majority of enslaved men and women, the only escape was death. The date shifts forward another fifty years to 1800 and, in another evocative image, a man naked from the waist up and perhaps chained rests against a wall. His demeanor indicates despair. Overlaying all of this footage is a close-up shot of the medallion, the one constant image in a montage depicting more than two hundred years of transatlantic slavery.

The sequence's fractured footage confronts visually the atrocities of slavery at the same time that it hints at the problems of remembrance. In so doing, the film presents a striking contrast to deliberate US cinematic distortions and elisions of slavery's memory. Such a contrast is exemplified by the absence of references to the practice in Robeson's only starring US feature, *The Emperor Jones* (1933). A black-cast production made outside of Hollywood, *The Emperor Jones* represented a perhaps unique attempt by 1930s US cinema to visualize the psychological legacy of slavery. In O'Neill's original stage play, as Jones's dethroned emperor attempts to evade his revolting subjects, he hallucinates that he is trapped on an auction block and slave ship. In its portrayal of a despotic Black ruler of a Caribbean island, the work also drew on the experiences of Haiti, which became a Black republic following a slave revolt in 1791, thus alluding to historical acts of white oppression and the possibility of Black retribution. However, the final cut of the film omits slavery entirely. Jones's imagined encounters with an auction block and slave ship are not shown. As Richard Dyer has observed, 'the film empties the play of its historical dimension, of the reality of black oppression'.<sup>vi</sup> Such sequences were filmed, but the Hays Office, Hollywood's official regulatory body from the 1930s through to the 1960s, ordered them to be removed and the footage is now thought to be lost, which signals a deliberate policing of slavery's memory in US visual culture. By contrast,

*The Song of Freedom* visually confronts historical realities of Black oppression and does so in a manner that forces viewers to recognize slavery as an inescapable cycle of violence and exploitation. Whilst *The Emperor Jones* evidences a concerted effort to excise the memory of slavery from US cinema, *The Song of Freedom* suggests that the 1930s British film industry was willing to confront the injustices of its slave trade heritage.

Yet, *The Song of Freedom*'s slavery sequence should still be understood within a British cultural tendency towards obfuscation, and even willful misremembering, of the practice. In a study of representations of slavery in British visual culture, Marcus Wood identifies 'a brilliantly constructed aesthetic system for the control of white guilt and black suffering and for the disguise of white culpability and black outrage'.<sup>vii</sup> Despite acknowledging the physical brutalities of slavery, white accountability is visually negated in the film: Black traders perform most acts of violence and white abolitionists are credited with ending the trade. Near the montage's conclusion, a white abolitionist is shown standing on a platform and appealing to a crowd. Behind him, a giant sign reads 'ABOLISH THE SLAVE TRADE' in a visual aggrandizement of the white abolition movements' emancipatory influence. The sequence therefore dehumanizes enslaved men and women as passive objects in the abolition of slavery while exonerating British society from its responsibility for the practice by positioning its citizens ultimately as the 'saviors' of those held in bondage. Such a vision is compounded by the resignation of the enslaved men in the earlier footage and a subsequent shot in which Black men wait patiently to have their chains broken. White moral innocence and perceived Black weakness are emphasized further by the fact that, apart from Prince Zinga's girlfriend, who boards the slave ship willingly, if innocently, there are no women or children in



the montage. Such an omission can be read as an attempt to avoid capitulating to the pornographic thematics of a great deal of nineteenth-century abolitionist visual material, in which violence inflicted on enslaved men and women's bodies was constructed as sexualized display for white viewers' pleasure. Nevertheless, by omitting women from the historical record, the film occludes crimes such as sexual violence and family displacement and emasculates those who had the misfortune to be caught. None of the enslaved men is shown being captured, allowing them to be read as prisoners of war and thus as African soldiers unable to defend themselves against superior European power. Further, freedom is depicted within an enduring visual tradition, identified by Wood, which situates it as an 'immediate, extravagant, and permanent gift from the slave power to the slave populations': footage of a pile of broken chains together with a sudden narrative shift to 1930s London presents abolition as sudden and complete.<sup>viii</sup> The economic and social struggles of Zinga's recently freed ancestors are not shown.

The sequence does hint at Black participation in the end of the trade and enduring social struggles, but only obliquely. In acknowledging 1838 as year in which British slavery finally came to an end, the film points up the flaws in recent cultural fixations on 1807, the year of the Slave Trade Act, which ended the British slave trade but not slavery. It also highlights the limitations of the 1834 Slavery Abolition Act, which passed abolition into law but did not immediately end slavery. Instead, in a legal move intended to last until 1840, enslaved men and women in the Caribbean over the age of six were redesignated 'apprentices' and forced to endure continued deprivations. However, they resisted their mistreatment, forcing the British government, which feared rebellion, to end the system two years early. Despite *The Song of Freedom's* exceptional status as a cinematic memorialization to those who

endured the Atlantic slave trade, it is therefore ultimately extremely limited in its acknowledgement of white culpability and draws on a tendency in nineteenth-century abolitionist propaganda to render its subjects abject, thus dehumanizing enslaved men and women and obscuring their manifold struggles. The film shows how interwar British culture inherited and capitulated to a nineteenth-century abolitionist visual paradigm characterized by lacunae and distortion. Moreover, it points to unwillingness by a leading colonial empire to explore culturally moral issues underpinning its ongoing colonial presence in Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere.

If *The Song of Freedom* fails to rewrite dominant historical narratives of white altruism and Black victimhood, Robeson's participation in and influence over the film nevertheless challenge these representations, enabling him to present a subtle cinematic counterpoint to such imagery and, in turn, British imperialism. The film was made at the height of Robeson's British screen career and represents a rare instance of Black stardom in 1930s mainstream film. By the 1950s, barred from US television and denied a passport for his perceived communist sympathies, Robeson was prohibited from engaging with the moving image. Yet, in the 1930s he was internationally famous and enjoyed a path-breaking transatlantic film career. Historian Stephen Bourne recently observed that a second Black actor has still to achieve star status in British films.<sup>ix</sup> The production is even more unusual for affording Robeson some control over his image. *The Song of Freedom's* vision of a Black dockworker who travels to Africa to become the successful leader of his ancestral homeland should be understood as Robeson's response to the criticism he received for his first major British film, *Sanders of the River* (1935), in which he played an African tribal leader who supports colonialism. This cinematic experience precipitated an attempt to secure greater control over his screen image and *The Song*

*of Freedom* was the first film in which he made approval of the script and takes of his songs part of his contract. In contrast to Sanders, *The Song of Freedom* enables the actor to take on the role of the rightful ruler of an African community and Robeson imbues his performance with authority and dignity. Robeson's recognition of the social significance of his role is evident in contemporary interviews. Upon the film's release, he declared that,

'Song Of Freedom' is a kind of test piece. It gives me a *real* part for the first time ... The story presents me as a real man – no more romanticised than a white man would be in a similar role. It is the first step in my effort to break down the prejudice that somehow Negroes must always be 'different' on the screen.<sup>x</sup>

As we will see, such a depiction counters the distortions of Black lives seen in the slavery montage. It allows Robeson to present an image of Black leadership and self-sufficiency, thus problematizing the earlier scenes of Black abjection and in turn questioning the righteousness of Britain's colonial presence in Africa.

The 1930s were an important period in the development of Robeson's political and cultural identity. The performer spent most of the decade living in the UK, a period of his life that has yet to receive substantive scholarly attention but which nonetheless engendered a cultural appreciation of African societies and a political awakening in which he came to view the legacy of slavery and the status of colonized peoples as equivalent, thus becoming a vocal supporter of anticolonialism and workers' rights. In his 1958 autobiography *Here I Stand*, Robeson wrote that, 'It was in London, in the years that I lived among the people of the British Isles and traveled back and forth to many other lands, that my outlook on world affairs was formed'.<sup>xi</sup> Whilst living in the UK, Robeson explored the richness of African languages at the School of Oriental Studies and forged friendships with African students and intellectuals. His wife Eslanda trained as an anthropologist at the London School of

Economics, specializing in the work of Ugandan herdswomen, and journeyed through the continent with the couple's eight-year-old son, Pauli, as soon as *The Song of Freedom* was completed.<sup>xii</sup> Robeson had hoped to visit Africa at this time but filming commitments prevented him from doing so. When he made *The Song of Freedom*, the star therefore understood that the continent was not in need of 'uplift' but that the world had a tremendous amount to learn from African societies. Shortly before filming *The Song of Freedom*, he remarked that, 'I believe it would be a good thing for the American Negro to have more consciousness of his African tradition, to be proud of it. Africa has contributed great culture to the world, and will continue to do so'.<sup>xiii</sup> Robeson sought to challenge slavery-derived caricatures of Black identities. He hoped to reframe cinematic racial codes and draw attention to the cultural and social sophistication of African societies.

Robeson's association with anti-colonial intellectuals such as Jomo Kenyatta, Nnamdi Azikiwe and C. L. R. James in London shaped his growing understanding of continuums between slavery, colonialism and fascism. He equated slavery with fascism at a benefit concert for Spanish refugee children at London's Albert Hall in 1937, and, in an interview with socialist magazine *The Millgate* the following year, linked slavery to the oppressions endured by those living under colonial rule.<sup>xiv</sup> Recalling that his father, William Drew Robeson, had been born into slavery, he declared that,

I got a better deal, but not the people I came from. For them things got worse, in fact. They are prevented from joining trade unions, and are shot down, as in Jamaica and Trinidad. There is no extension of democracy for them; things, on the contrary, are being tightened up'.<sup>xv</sup>

Ashley Dawson has identified a growing anti-imperial consciousness in Robeson's British films, asserting that they 'articulated a radical political aesthetics that

resonated with audiences galvanized by the rise of fascism in Europe and the intensification of imperialism around the world'.<sup>xvi</sup> The year before making *The Song of Freedom*, Robeson encountered fascism firsthand when he found himself surrounded by a mob of Nazi Brownshirts at a Berlin train station. Equally significantly, *The Song of Freedom* was made in 1936, the year that Roberto Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, the last remaining independent state in Africa. In January of that year, Robeson expressed his support for an independent African future, asserting that 'The African states will be free some day', and even dared to speculate on the possibility of a 'sudden overturn' of European colonialism.<sup>xvii</sup>

Robeson's vocal assertion of African cultural and political sophistication contrasted with *The Song of Freedom's* distorted representation of past and present Black experiences. The film's vision of a British-educated Black man who travels to Africa to 'enlighten' the superstitious 'natives' repeats *Sanders of the River's* colonial fantasy of the continent's peoples. It enacts a cultural elision of Britain's leading role in the slave trade and other acts of wrongdoing on the continent by positioning the nation's values as 'civilizing' and African societies as incapable of self-government. In his *Millgate* interview, Robeson expressed shame that his cultural visibility had seemingly done nothing to halt colonial oppression. Explaining the reasons for a temporary turn away from commercial films and plays to work with London's working-class Unity theatre just a year after making *The Song of Freedom*, he concluded bitterly that, 'My personal success as an artiste has not helped [the people I came from] ... I found myself acting in films and plays that cut against the very people and ideas that I wanted to help'.<sup>xviii</sup> Such statements point up slavery's influence on Robeson's activism, but they also evidence the difficulties of challenging mainstream histories of Black experiences. In an attempt to distance himself from

*The Song of Freedom*'s condescending vision of African lives, Robeson later remarked that he only screened the first half of the film before its release, up to, but not including, the Zingas' arrival in Africa.<sup>xix</sup> Although this claim was not true, it suggests that Robeson undertook his own acts of cultural forgetting in order to justify his involvement in cinematic misrepresentations of Black histories.

Nevertheless, Robeson's apparent dissatisfaction belies a sophisticated engagement with the film's aesthetics and narrative. Dawson attributes Robeson's eventual disavowal of colonial narratives to his interaction with Black intellectuals such as Trinidadian writer C. L. R. James at the end of the 1930s.<sup>xx</sup> However, Robeson was already contesting such 'racial uplift' narratives when he made *The Song of Freedom*, suggesting that he knowingly intervened in colonial ideologies in the belief that he could use his stardom to challenge such representations on screen. An example of Robeson's willingness to mediate racist paradigms can be found in his involvement in one of James's plays, *Toussaint Louverture* (1936), which was staged just a few months before *The Song of Freedom* was filmed. Robeson played the title role in the production, which dealt with an enslaved man who becomes the first Black ruler of Haiti and, like *The Song of Freedom*, also addressed contemporary issues of Black independence. In her consideration of *Toussaint Louverture*, Fionnghuala Sweeney argues that the play consciously minimized its critique of British imperialism in an effort to achieve public notice. Sweeney asserts that,

it needed, in the interests of being heard, to posit a set of blameless future friendships based on mutual respect and shared culture between the former heart of empire and its once-upon-a-time colonial subjects, subjects who would remain true to imperial type in the aftermath of independence.<sup>xxi</sup>

Such a reading can be applied equally to Robeson's presence in *The Song of Freedom*.

The star's involvement in *Toussaint* suggests that he already understood the necessity

of mediating the politics of a culture underpinned by colonialism in order to achieve the widest possible audience for his vision of an independent African future. It suggests that Robeson was prepared to negotiate a cultural framework in which Britain's responsibility for the slave trade would be censored and present colonial injustices ignored in order to achieve the wider purpose of humanizing Black subjects and pointing up their rights to independence.

Such mediation also evidences the limits of Robeson's control over his cinematic representation and his need to negotiate dominant cultural frameworks in order to achieve any kind of positive construction of Black identities onscreen. It would be wrong to overemphasize the extent of Robeson's ability to shape the film's depiction of Black experiences. As Mark A. Reid observes, 'it is absurd to suggest that an actor, even of Paul Robeson's professional stature, determines the roles that the film industry offers'.<sup>xxii</sup> Robeson did attempt to make more radical films about slave heroism, but these efforts were frustrated. His enduring association with the USSR began with a visit to the nation in 1935 to make plans with director Sergei Eisenstein for a film about Toussaint Louverture, a project that failed ultimately to secure Soviet authority approval.<sup>xxiii</sup> Attempts to make a film about Louverture with James Whale, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, who had worked with Robeson on *Show Boat* (1936), also came to nothing.<sup>xxiv</sup> Robeson did manage to express a much more radical sentiment in his self-penned prologue to South African documentary *My Song Goes Forth* (1937), over which he acted as narrator, and in which he declared, 'Every foot of Africa is now parceled out among the white races ... Africa was opened up by the white man for the benefit of himself – to obtain the wealth it contained'.<sup>xxv</sup> However, this production failed to secure a wide cinematic release. Robeson's son, Paul Robeson, Jr., asserts that, because very few roles were

available to Black actors at this time, his father compromised: 'he made a conscious decision to settle for mediocre but commercial stories with a relatively weak social message in order to portray powerful Black male images that could deliver a positive cultural message'.<sup>xxvi</sup> Pointing up the performer's emphasis on projecting a celebratory star image, Robeson Jr. refers to his father's decision to work mainly in British cinema as evidence that he recognized that he could only hope to create a celebratory vision of Black subjecthood away from Hollywood racial frameworks.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Yet, Robeson did still enjoy an unprecedented level of control over both *The Song of Freedom*'s narrative and his performance in the film. The role was written specifically for Robeson with the intention of capitalizing on his stardom and the filmmakers pandered to his public image and political concerns.<sup>xxviii</sup> In choosing to chart Zinga's rise to fame as an international opera singer, the film positions itself as a semi-biographical celebration of Robeson's critical and commercial success as a world-leading concert performer. Although Robeson denied that the film was autobiographical, critics noted similarities between his career trajectory and the international fame enjoyed by his character.<sup>xxix</sup> Early scenes of Black and white dockworkers living and working in harmony, which are exceptional in 1930s British cinema, also reflect Robeson's desire to associate himself with the plight of the laboring classes throughout the world. Despite its distorted remembrance of slavery and crude vision of an uncivilized Africa, the film enables Robeson to transgress 1930s Britain's colonial imaginary by allowing him to bring authority and dignity to his performance, thereby positioning himself a Black hero never before seen on screen and the rightful ruler of an independent African community. Suggesting that *The Song of Freedom* 'atoned, in some ways', for *Sanders* and also 'provided an antidote to the mass of Hollywood poison being pumped out yearly at the time of its



release', Peter Noble, writing in the 1940s, focused on the dignity of Robeson's performance, affirming that, 'Robeson is shown as a natural aristocrat, the king of an African tribe, a splendid figure of a man'.<sup>xxx</sup> Along with Welsh mining drama *The Proud Valley* (1940), *The Song of Freedom* was one of only two films of which Robeson continued to express pride throughout his career.<sup>xxxi</sup>

As well as vetting the film's script, Robeson exercised approval over takes of his songs, suggesting that he enjoyed a significant level of control over his portrayal in these sequences. Throughout the film, audiences express enchantment with Zinga's singing, which serves as a visual cue to the viewer to appreciate Robeson's vocal talents, and the narrative can be read as a series of interludes joining together the star's musical performances. Robeson's depiction in these scenes represents a rare aestheticization of a Black performer in 1930s cinema and a striking visual counterpoint to the portrayal of enslaved men earlier in the film. Given his level of control over these scenes, it suggests that he sought deliberately to use his self-image to rupture the film's earlier vision of Black abjection. In particular, a montage depicting Zinga's rise to fame recalls stylistically the Middle Passage sequence, yet it reimagines the earlier scene of enslavement as a celebration of Zinga's critical and commercial triumph. Kaleidoscopic imagery featuring allusions to leading European cultural venues, plane, train and boat rides, contract signing and cascading money, superimposed behind a close-up shot of Robeson singing chart Zinga's rise to stardom. The experimental photographic and editing techniques employed in this sequence to celebrate Robeson's commanding physical presence and voice were praised as 'remarkable' by African American newspaper the *New York Amsterdam News*.<sup>xxxii</sup> Robeson's representation in this scene calls into question the film's crude memorial to those enslaved, presenting a confident and dignified vision of Black

humanity and imagining a future in which Black men and women are respected world leaders, at least on the cultural stage. The sequence also points up slavery's injustices by celebrating Zinga's freedom of movement in opposition to the forced removal of enslaved men depicted in the previous montage and also by allowing him to triumph over European capitals responsible for a history of Black oppression. Such an effect recalls travel's psychological significance for enslaved men and women as a means of reclaiming one's sense of self in the face of bondage and dispossession, and the scene functions as an assertion of Black pride.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

That Robeson sought to create a performance that would subvert the film's dehumanizing portrayal of enslaved subjects is even more clearly in evidence in another scene over which he exercised footage approval: the premiere of Zinga's starring role in 'The Black Emperor', which immediately follows the second montage sequence. Although the lead in Louis Gruenberg's 1933 operatic version of O'Neill's play was performed not by Robeson but by a white singer in blackface, Robeson's association with the character situates the scene as a self-consciously biographical celebration of his stardom and artistry. The sold-out performance takes place at the Theatre Royal, London's oldest theatre, which underscores Zinga's place at the heart of Britain's cultural establishment. Imagery of clapping hands overlaying Zinga's name in lights introduce the scene, which emphasizes the character's and, consequently, Robeson's, fame. The sequence, which depicts Jones's death, allows Robeson to display his dramatic range as an actor. Robeson's carefully crafted, self-reflexive interpretation of the role is emotionally expressive and multifaceted: it incorporates fear and self-pity but also defiance. The crawling, cowering figure depicted at the climax of O'Neill's original stage version of *The Emperor Jones* is gone; instead, Jones rises up as he prepares to die. In a further contrast to O'Neill's

play, Jones retains his dignity by committing suicide rather than be murdered by his subjects. In allowing Jones to kill himself, the production was drawing on the opera's narrative. Yet *The Song of Freedom* permits Jones to die with even greater dignity. At the end of the opera, Jones declares defensively, 'You won't git me. I'se Emperor yit!!'<sup>xxxiv</sup> However, in the film, Jones proclaims, 'No-on dares to slay a king except a king, and as a king I die'. This amendment to Jones's final words suggests that Robeson exercised approval over, and even possibly wrote, some of his own lines, and the actor is physically commanding, rising up as he prepares to shoot himself. Robeson therefore reworks the slavery sequence's depiction of Black abjection into an authoritative image of Black subjecthood. In so doing, he makes a claim for Black men's leadership capabilities and therefore Black societies' rights to self-government.

That Robeson succeeded in creating a film which, for all its cultural misrepresentations, was widely regarded as a radical in its depiction of Black pasts and futures, is evidenced by African American newspapers' almost unanimously positive reactions to the film. Dan Burley in the *New York Amsterdam News* recalled that, 'I had to convince myself that I wasn't in a dream' whilst watching the production, which he described as 'everything the Negro has longed to see about himself on the screen'.<sup>xxxv</sup> Both Burley and Louis Lautier, writing in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, chose to ignore the film's distortions of slavery and negative depiction of African cultures and instead emphasized its positive contrast to the racial codes of Hollywood, with Lautier hailing the film as the 'finest story of colored folk yet brought to the screen' and a production that 'must be seen'.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Such a view appears to have been widely shared by African American audiences. The *Chicago Defender* cited prominent citizens of Chicago's South Side as sharing the view that 'it has everything'.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Although there is few direct accounts of ordinary viewers'

responses to the film, Langston Hughes reported to Eslanda Robeson that, “Harlem liked ‘Song of Freedom.’”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Such views were echoed even in British colonial Africa, which serves as further evidence at the strength of Robeson’s performance in challenging the film’s portrayal of Black abjection. Fourteen years after the film’s original release, the Convention People’s Party, which would soon become the governing body of the independent nation of Ghana, screened the film at a meeting celebrating of its second anniversary as the Gold Coast’s independence party.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Robeson’s performance in *The Song of Freedom* represents a deliberate engagement with distorting and limited remembrances of the Atlantic slave trade in British visual culture to nevertheless assert Black people’s dignity and African nations’ right to political independence. The production’s visualization of two hundred years of Atlantic slavery is an exceptional acknowledgement in UK cinema of its atrocities and protracted duration and a striking contrast to the burlesque reimaginings of the practice that permeated classical Hollywood and which worked both to occlude historical wrongdoings and to mock those who endured them. However, the film ultimately denies British culpability for the practice at the same time that it dehumanizes Black men. Further, its reference to slavery is brief and kept at a safe temporal distance from the nation’s interwar imperial interventions in Africa and elsewhere. Nevertheless, Robeson’s demand for authorial influence over his representation in the film results in a production that panders to his public image and which allows him to construct a character that operates in counterpoint to slavery-derived fantasies of Black subjects in mainstream cinema. The film shows how, in his effort to articulate the viability of an independent Black future, Robeson succeeded in presenting a commanding, dignified and highly aestheticized vision of

Black subjecthood never before seen on screen and thus to challenge historical misconstructions and omissions of enslaved men and women in British visual culture.

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1948), 117.
- <sup>ii</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 73.
- <sup>iii</sup> According to his son, Paul Robeson, Jr., Robeson refused a part as an enslaved man, most probably field hand 'Big Sam', in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), classical Hollywood's epic revision of the US South during the Civil War and Reconstruction. See Paul Robeson, Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898-1939* (New York: Wiley, 2001), 288.
- <sup>iv</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis makes the point that, 'In the narratives of ex-slaves collected in 1936-38 by the Federal Writers' Project, the speakers with parents or grandparents born in Africa will sometimes tell how they were "stolen" or tricked on board boat, but details on the Middle Passage are sparse'. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 71.
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 & 12.
- <sup>vi</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1986; London: Routledge, 2004), 98.
- <sup>vii</sup> Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010), 28.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.
- <sup>ix</sup> Stephen Bourne, *Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (2001; London: Continuum, 2005), xiii.
- <sup>x</sup> *Film Weekly*, 19 September 1936. Cited in Noble, *The Negro in Films*, 117.
- <sup>xi</sup> Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (1958; Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 32.
- <sup>xii</sup> For Eslanda Robeson's account of her experiences in Africa, see Eslanda Goode Robeson, *African Journey* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946).
- <sup>xiii</sup> 'Robeson Finds a Natural Link to the Songs of African Tribes', Interview by Marguerite Tazelaar, *New York Herald-Tribune*, 27 October 1935, in *Paul Robeson Speaks*, ed. Philip S. Foner (London: Quartet Books, 1978), 103.
- <sup>xiv</sup> 'The Artist Must Take Sides', *Daily Worker*, 4 November 1937, in *Ibid.*, 119, and K. A. Harvey, 'Paul Robeson – The Man and His Art', *The Millgate*, 33.2.396 (September 1938), 710.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 710. William Drew Robeson (1844-1918) was born on a North Carolina plantation. At fifteen, on the eve of the US Civil War, he escaped from bondage.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ashley Dawson, 'The Rise of the Black Internationale: Anti-Imperialist Activism and Aesthetics in Britain during the 1930s', *Atlantic Studies* 6.2 (2009), 159.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *New York Herald-Tribune*, 12 January 1936. Cited in Robeson, Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 286.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Harvey, 'Paul Robeson', 710.
- <sup>xix</sup> Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 349.
- <sup>xx</sup> Dawson, 'The Rise of the Black Internationale', 164.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Fionnghuala Sweeney, 'The Haitian Play: C.L.R. James' *Toussaint Louverture* (1936)', *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 14.1-2 (Spring 2011), 153.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Mark A. Reid, 'Race, Working-Class Consciousness, and Dreaming in Africa: *Song of Freedom* and *Jericho*', in *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 167.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 190.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-97.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 203.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Robeson Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 237.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Major Claude Wallace and Dorothy Holloway wrote *The Song of Freedom* especially for Robeson after meeting him on the set of *Sanders*, on which they worked as technical advisor and casting director. Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, 72.

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<sup>xxix</sup> See 'Paul Robeson's New Film', *Manchester Guardian*, 28 March 1936, 18, and 'Robeson To Film His Life Story', *Philadelphia Tribune*, 12 March 1936, 13.

<sup>xxx</sup> Noble, *The Negro in Films*, 116-7.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 204.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Dan Burley, 'Paul Robeson Brilliant in "Song of Freedom": Elizabeth [sic] Welch Gets Big Role in British Picture', *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 July 1938, A8.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> In his consideration of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), Mark Simpson calls for a more nuanced understanding of travel, not simply as a leisure activity, but as a key space of psychological freedom and independence for enslaved men and women. For Simpson, 'Travel meant selfhood, which meant freedom, which meant movement; slave meant chattel, which meant bondage, which meant ground'. See Mark Simpson, 'Nat Turner and the Limits of Travel', *Cultural Critique* 37 (Autumn 1997), 33-34, & 43.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Marjorie Mackay Shapiro, 'A Strange Case: Louis Gruenberg's Forgotten "Great American" Opera – *The Emperor Jones*', in *Opera and the Golden West: The Past, Present, and Future of Opera in the U.S.A.*, ed. John Louis DiGaetani (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), 240.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Burley, 'Paul Robeson Brilliant in "Song of Freedom"', A8.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Louis Lautier, 'British Film Robeson in First Story of Triumph', *Afro-American*, 29 May 1937, 10.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> 'Paul Robeson is Star in British Picture: "Song of Freedom" Hailed by Critics', *Chicago Defender*, 23 July 1938, 19.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 204.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Marie Seton, *Paul Robeson* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1958), 107.