



*Paul Robeson for Beginners* (For Beginners LLC: Danbury, CT, 2013. 133 pp., ISBN: 978-1-934389-81-2) by Paul Von Blum and illustrated by Elizabeth Von Notias and Ramsess. Reviewed by Aimee Glocke (aimee.glocke@csun.edu) of the Department of Africana Studies at California State University, Northridge.

*Paul Robeson for Beginners* was written by Paul Von Blum and illustrated by Elizabeth Von Notias and the artist, Ramsess. This book is part of the *For Beginners* series that publishes texts on a variety of topics such as: anarchy, astronomy, deconstruction, Eastern philosophy, gender and sexuality, linguistics, and more. They have also published several books on the African/Black experience including: *African History for Beginners*; *Black History for Beginners*; *The Black Holocaust for Beginners*; *Black Women for Beginners*; *Malcolm X for Beginners*; and *Pan Africanism for Beginners*. In addition to telling the story of a particular topic in a way that is easy to understand, each text also includes black and white graphic illustrations and photographs to help the reader visualize the story being told. Although many of the books in this series resemble more of a graphic novel because of their emphases on illustrations; Von Blum's discussion of Paul Robeson is detailed, thorough, and comprehensive. This is exactly the type of approach that is required if one wishes to accurately discuss the life and legacy of this amazing African American man.

Paul Robeson, born in 1898 and transitioned in 1976, was an athlete, stage and screen actor, singer, recording artist, lawyer, intellectual, and political activist involved in affairs both domestic and international. Born to a father who escaped enslavement through the Underground Railroad, Robeson always stayed grounded in African/Black culture while constantly fighting against racism and white supremacy. Von Blum quotes Robeson saying “[I]n my music, my plays, my films, I want to carry this central idea: to be African. Multitudes of men have died for less worthy ideals; it is even more eminently worth living for” (79). Despite the many obstacles that stood in his way, Robeson was able to accomplish many remarkable achievements throughout his life such as: starring in over 12 stage shows and musicals in New York City and London, including *Othello* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*; starring in at least 12 films, most notably *Emperor Jones* and *Show Boat*; performing concerts all over the world in locations such as Spain, New Zealand, the Soviet Union, England, Germany, and Central America; and excelling in several sports in high school and college including football, baseball, basketball, and track and field, and even playing professional football for the Milwaukee Badgers.

Because Paul Robeson was successful at virtually everything he did, he drew the attention of the United States government who placed him under FBI surveillance in 1941; revoked his passport for 8 years between 1950-1958; and subpoenaed him to appear in front of the Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California in 1946 and the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956.

His very public fight against globalized racism, white supremacy, lynching, oppression, colonialism, classism, and fascism was incorrectly perceived, by the United States government, as a fight against America, or, more specifically, a fight against capitalism and democracy. Von Blum states, “Robeson’s dramatic repudiation of this racist view and his unapologetic advocacy of African American advancement in a racist society doubtless generated white hostility” (11). This is what led to the intentional and strategic erasure of Paul Robeson’s life and legacy from American society, and is the reason why so many people, still today, have no idea who Robeson is. But, no matter how hard the United States government tried to thwart Robeson’s actions while he was alive and suppress Robeson’s legacy after his death, they failed miserably because we are more interested in Paul Robeson than ever before, and this text is an example of it.

Consequently, Von Blum’s text begins with “Chapter One: Introduction” where he discusses the many ways that Paul Robeson has finally been reintroduced to American society since his death in 1976. This includes: the presentation of a stage play in 1978 entitled *Paul Robeson* starring James Earl Jones, Ben Guillory, and Avery Brooks, and the release of a 1979 documentary about Robeson entitled *Tribute of an Artist* narrated by Sidney Poitier. Robeson also received a Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1979; a Grammy award in 1980; was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1995; and a Paul Robeson United States postage stamp was issued in 2004. He also became the subject of academic discourse when an undergraduate/graduate course on Paul Robeson was offered by Von Blum himself at UCLA beginning in 1988. Several texts have also been published by and about Robeson, most notably the reissue of *Here I Stand* by Robeson in 1988 and *Paul Robeson* by Martin Bauml Duberman in 1989, and numerous academic conferences on Paul Robeson have been held throughout the country at schools such as Long Island University and Lafayette College. 1998 also commemorated the centennial of Robeson’s birth initiating over 400 celebrations all over the world honoring his legacy.

“Chapter 2: The Early Days” moves on to discuss Robeson’s parents; his childhood in Princeton, NJ; the loss of his mother; his high school career; his undergraduate studies at Rutgers College; law school at New York University and then Columbia University; his marriage to Eslanda Cardoza Goode; and his short law career. This chapter also highlights the obscene amount of racism and white supremacy Robeson endured early in life. This includes his high school principal, Dr. Ackerman, who believed that African/Black people were inferior, and treated Robeson accordingly. At Rutgers’s, Robeson was forced to eat in the cafeteria by himself; was excluded from most of the social events on campus; and was only allowed to sing at home Glee club performances. But, the most powerful event took place while Robeson was working at the law firm of Louis W. Stotesbury when a legal secretary refused to take dictation from him saying “she would not take dictation ‘from a nigger’” (25). This event was the reason Robeson gave up a law career and decided to pursue a career on the stage and big screen instead. Von Blum states that “the law’s loss was the world’s gain” (26).

Unlike the first two chapters, Chapters 3 through 8 are organized thematically and only focus on one of Robeson's life activities at a time. For example: "Chapter 3: Paul Robeson the Athlete;" "Chapter 4: Paul Robeson the Stage Actor," "Chapter 5: Paul Robeson the Screen Actor;" "Chapter 6: Paul Robeson the Singer;" "Chapter 7: Paul Robeson the International Political Activist;" and "Chapter 8: Paul Robeson the Domestic Political Activist." Although organizing Robeson's life thematically can make it difficult to understand what events were occurring in what order and at what point in his life, this is by far the most advantageous way to organize this text, especially considering the enormous amount of events and activities that encompass Robeson's life.

This text concludes with "Chapter 9: The Final Years and His Lasting Legacy" covering Robeson's final twenty years. More specifically, Von Blum discusses Robeson's travels and performances overseas after his passport was reinstated; the death of his wife and his inability to attend her funeral; and his 75th birthday celebration at Carnegie Hall that was "...produced by Harry Belafonte, the event drew celebrities from the entertainment and political arenas, including Pete Seeger, Dizzy Gillespie, Odetta, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Zero Mostel, Ramsey Clark, Angela Davis, Delores Huerta and others" (122). The chapter closes with Robeson's health issues that will eventually lead to his death in 1976.

Despite Von Blum's profound respect for Paul Robeson, he does not hesitate to critique his actions or lack thereof. One of Von Blum's critiques is of the roles Robeson chose to portray in his films. Taking into consideration that Robeson was a film actor in the 1930's and 1940's, he was able to push some of the racial boundaries at the time. But, the question is: could he have done more? Von Blum states, "There is little doubt that Robeson wanted his roles to reflect a strong and positive vision of his people, especially as he grew increasingly conscious of his social and ethical responsibilities as a public screen artist" (50). He believes Robeson succeeded in upholding his vision of African/Black people in many of his films, but "sometimes his talents were exploited in order to demean the black race even further" (50).

For example, his character, Brutus Jones, in the 1933 film *Emperor Jones*, was presented as "...irresponsible, gambling and womanizing..." (53). His 1935 film, *Sanders of the River*, was "...a cinematic justification of British rule in Africa" (53). *Song of Freedom*, in 1936, was a "...movie also extensively depicted Africans as the 'savage natives' that the Tarzan movies of the 1930s and 1940s showcased so pervasively" (54). Robeson did eventually become frustrated with the film industry when his 1942 film, *Tales of Manhattan*, was released and "the final result so disturbed him that he said he would join those who would picket the film because they found it racially offensive" (58). Soon after, Robeson "...announced his decision to refrain from making any more films for major studios, effectively ending his eighteen-year run as a major film actor"(58-59). If he could not bring dignity to African/Black people through the roles he played, he was no longer interested in making films. Thus, like his law career, he walked away.

Von Blum also critiques Robeson's romanticized view of the Soviet Union and his lack of criticism of Russian leader, Joseph Stalin. Robeson was treated like a human being in the Soviet Union making him reluctant to publically critique the country and its leader. Even though Robeson was aware of the Soviet Union's anti-Semitism, especially since many of his Jewish friends were directly affected by it; he still said nothing. Von Blum states, "It is understandable that a talented artist like Robeson would respond positively to a Soviet society that treated him with dignity and acclaim, in contrast to a racially divided America that too often expressed disrespect and disdain for him and his fellow African Americans" (93). Because of Robeson's loyalty, he was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize in 1952 and also wrote a Eulogy for Stalin in 1953 entitled "To You Beloved Comrade" (93). But, not speaking up about what was occurring in the Soviet Union was, as Von Blum explains, "...not Paul Robeson's finest moments" (93).

Von Blum is also not afraid to discuss the many personal and internal struggles that Robeson endured near the end of his life. As we have seen with other revolutionary leaders who were lucky enough to live through this type of governmental persecution, being under surveillance by the FBI does eventually take a toll on one's spirit. This is why it is important that Von Blum is not afraid to discuss the suicide attempt Robeson made in 1961 in Moscow, or how Robeson was under psychiatric treatment in England and East Germany after being diagnosed with "manic depressive personality" (119). Robeson's son, Paul Robeson, Jr., said that "...the US Central Intelligence Agency may have drugged his father during a visit to Moscow as well as influenced his ineffective treatment in the London Hospital" (119). This is important because it is not the first time the child of a famous artist has come to this conclusion. Julia Wright, daughter of well-known writer and activist Richard Wright, still believes that her father was slowly poisoned by the CIA and FBI while living in Paris, leading to his death in 1961. Like Robeson, Wright was under surveillance, living and traveling abroad, and not afraid to speak out against the oppressive policies and actions of the United States government despite their attempts to silence him. Here, Von Blum goes beyond basic information about Robeson and offers the reader a glimpse into a larger theoretical conversation about the United States government and their tradition of targeting African/Black activists, intellectuals, and artists.

Overall, Paul Von Blum is the perfect person to take on this task of relaying the incredible legacy of Paul Robeson to the general public. As a well-known Robeson scholar, Von Blum has dedicated his academic career to preserving Robeson's legacy, and ensuring that a new generation of not only students, but the general community, knows who Robeson is and what he achieved. No matter how talented Robeson was, he was still a man of the people. This means that conversations about him should not just be limited to the university, but should include everyone in society. Therefore, Von Blum's text is an important step in returning Robeson to the people in the hope that one day, everyone will know Paul Robeson's name.