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Performing History: Remembering Paul Robeson and the Peekskill Riots through Tayo Aluko's Call Mr. Robeson

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Abstract

In 1949 Paul Robeson (with support from Pete Seeger, Woodie Guthrie, Howard Fast, and others) attempted to and then successfully held a civil and workers' rights concert in Peekskill, New York. Marring these performances, however, were protests that turned progressively violent. These violent protests have come to be known as the Peekskill Riots and serve as a major milestone in the nation's history surrounding protest, music, politics, and Paul Robeson. This paper reflects on this relationship, particularly how it is being remembered today. Through field research, including participant observation, interviews, landscape analysis, and primary and secondary archival research, I demonstrate how British-Nigerian writer, singer, actor, activist, and architect Tayo Aluko "performs history" through his musical *Call Mr. Robeson*. This includes how Paul Robeson and the Peekskill Riots are remembered through performance and how the continued performances place the identity and history of Peekskill in a state of becoming. This is also a case study more broadly for how social movements are influenced, fueled, and remembered through performance.

Introduction

Anyone familiar with Paul Robeson may have noticed the increasing presence and attention the world-renowned actor, athlete, activist, singer, and scholar has had over the past two decades. This presence does not exclude various methods of performance, be it poetry, film, theatre, or music, however the major problem of obscurity still exists, especially in the United States, where few people are familiar with Robeson. This paper analyzes this intersection of memory and performance, representation and education, and how the memory of Paul Robeson, his beliefs, and the events surrounding his life such as the Peekskill Riots, are influenced, fueled, and remembered through the performance of Tayo Aluko's *Call Mr. Robeson*. This paper, and others like it, act as a check and critical eye of representations of Robeson. It provides rich insights into how history is performed, what role these art forms have in processes of memorialization, the creation of collective memory, and the agency given to the audience to shape their own perceptions.

Paul Robeson

Paul Robeson was arguably the most well-known individual of the mid-twentieth century. Born in Princeton, NJ, in 1898 to Rev. William Drew and Maria Louisa Bustill Robeson, Paul Robeson excelled throughout his life. He was a two-time All-American college football player for Rutgers University (where he graduated as the valedictorian), played professionally for the Hammond Pros, the Akron Pros, and the Milwaukee Badgers, and coached for a period of time at Lincoln University (Harris 1998). Robeson starred in films on both sides of the Atlantic, such as *Show Boat*, *The Emperor Jones*, and *The Proud Valley*. He also acted in both West End and Broadway shows such as *Show Boat*, *All God's Chillin' Got Wings*, and *Othello*. He was the first person to bring African American spirituals to the concert stage. He was so successful that he performed around the world in venues such as Carnegie Hall and St. Paul's Cathedral. His voice also made him both a United States and a British icon through CBS's broadcasting of the incredibly successful war-time song "Ballad for Americans" (Barg 2008; Shapiro 2015) and his being chosen as the most popular radio artist in the United Kingdom (Dunn 1987; Coughlan

2006). The memory of Paul Robeson today continues on in these three veins of acting, singing, and athletic performance. Robeson has a Hollywood Star, a posthumous Grammy, is in the Pro-Football Hall of Fame, and still holds the record for longest running Shakespearean play on Broadway. Representing him in this light excludes two vital aspects of his life: his activism and his scholarship (Rhodes 2015).

Many people don't think of Paul Robeson as an ethnomusicologist or musicologist, but ethnomusicology was at the heart of Robeson's work as he traveled and learned the languages, cultures, and music of people around the world. Additionally, Robeson earned a law degree from Columbia University, which he utilized throughout his life. Both of these examples figured highly in his role as a scholar, something discussed further in the analysis of the *Call Mr. Robeson* performance.

Furthermore, Paul Robeson's activism is often forgotten. As seen in Figure 1, Robeson is described as a "World Renown Athlete, Actor, Singer, Scholar," but not as a social or political activist. Overall, he was a champion of a number of different campaigns. In the United States, he worked tirelessly to end Jim Crow and segregation, to put an international spotlight on lynching and other acts of genocide, and to support the works of labor through unions and politics. In the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and many countries in the Caribbean, Robeson further supported local labor unions, labor rights, and the international labor movement. Lastly, in India, Spain, Australia, the United States, Ghana, Ethiopia, and many other countries in Africa and around the world, Robeson campaigned tirelessly against colonialism and fascism. Overall, three philosophies emerged that defined Paul Robeson's philosophical framework and permeated all aspects of his life, including his singing, acting, athletic interest, and scholarship: anti-colonialism, human rights activism, and socialism (Robeson 1958; Rhodes 2016).

Despite his endless achievements, Paul Robeson was blacklisted in the 1950s for these philosophies and quite literally written out of history. Thus, the memory of him today in the United States is almost non-existent (Dorinson 2002; Stewart 2002) and is extremely susceptible to processes of memorialization. Because of a lack of public knowledge, performance has a two-fold role in the continuation of Paul Robeson's memory. First of all, quite simply, it

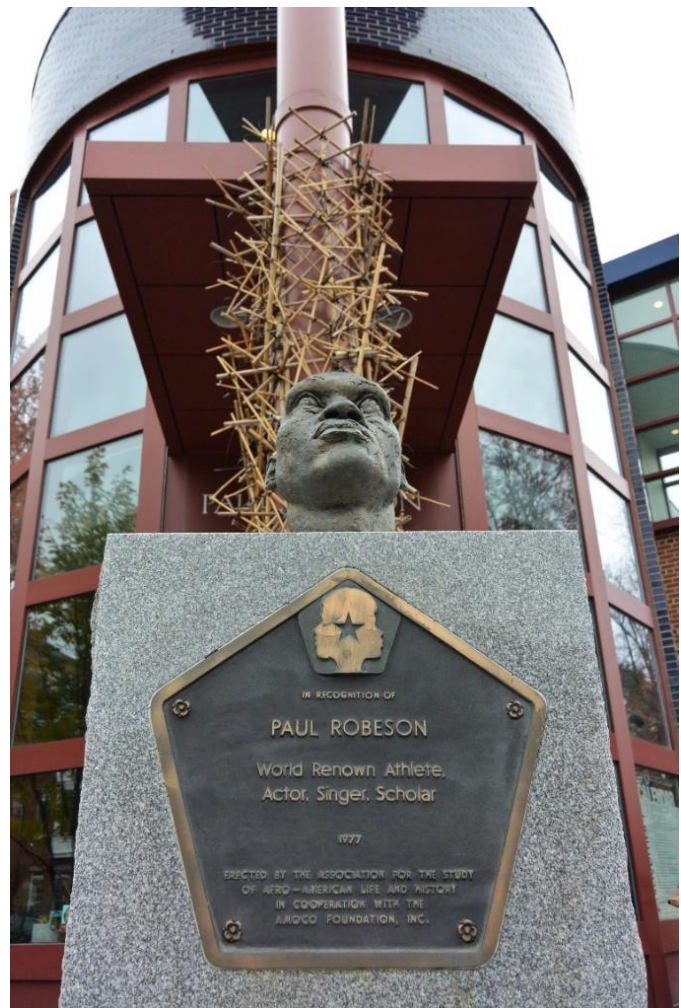


Figure 1. Bust and plaque of Robeson in front of the Paul Robeson Center for the Arts in Princeton, NJ (November 2015). *Source:* author.

helps to continue and rekindle the living memory that does exist and bring that memory back into the public eye. Secondly, and most importantly, art and performance, through theatre, film, music, and visual exhibitions, get to “tell the story” of Robeson.

Performing History

Call Mr. Robeson is a prime example of performing history through which Tayo Aluko creates a sense of public memory, and the elements of people and place have an intricate role in this process. Analyzing how *Call Mr. Robeson* “performs history” reveals evidence to answer three major questions (1) what is the unique power of music and theatre in the representation of history?; (2) How does audience engagement determine that power?; and (3) what is the role of place, particularly Peekskill, in this representation and engagement? Of course, these questions are not independent of one another. However, with these questions in mind, this paper presents *Call Mr. Robeson* as not just a musical, but Tayo Aluko’s interactive and agency filled creation of soundscape, landscape, and history.

Call Mr. Robeson, of course, is not the only example of performing history. This is even true within the Paul Robeson legacy, and scholarship acknowledges this fact to varying degrees. Rather than performing history from the historian-basis (Paul 2011), Shakespearean (Walsh 2004), or Edwardian sense (Lau 2011), this paper instead explores the concept of performing history as the actor-audience relationship of portraying a historic person, event, or organization contemporarily. In addition, a sense of place further complicates the situation. In that, unlike Ridner and Cemens-Bruder’s (2014) analysis of *Another River Flows*, which was a locally produced historical performance of African American history in the area, *Call Mr. Robeson* is locally connected to the community of Peekskill, New York, however the musical was not locally produced.

Rokem (2000) similarly analyzed performances depicting the French Revolution and the Holocaust, relating them not only to their respected historical representations, but to the variance between places. How those places shaped both the performances and the audiences’ engagement and perceptions of the historical events, and the performances depicting them is another element represented in Rokem’s monograph.

Call Mr. Robeson is preceded by a number of other theatrical performances depicting Paul Robeson. Overall, there has been no coherent analysis of this theatrical memorialization. *Paul Robeson* by Phillip Hayes Dean (1978) was the first theatrical representation of Robeson, where once again a single individual portrays Robeson’s life. Both James Earl Jones and Avery Brooks performed *Paul Robeson* in major productions. Two lesser known productions are Daniel Beaty’s one-man-show, *Tallest Tree in the Forest*, (Als 2015) and Greg Cullen’s *Paul Robeson Knew My Father* (2006), which is less about Robeson’s life than a cursory implementation of Robeson’s philosophies.

The role of music in the history and memorialization of Paul Robeson is also fundamental to a critical analysis of Aluko’s musical. Just as theater representing Robeson has rarely been discussed, music about Robeson has received little attention, despite his presence in popular songs or songs by popular artists. *Let Robeson Sing*, the hit song by the popular Welsh rock group Manic Street Preachers, serves for many as their introduction to Paul Robeson. Tayo Aluko even commented on this during the question and answer session of his performance, when an attendee asked the typical age of his audience and he responded that it is often older. However, he did distinctly remember one 17-year-old girl who attended his performance in

Wales, *because* she first heard of Paul Robeson through the Manic Street Preachers' song. Pete Seeger also recorded two songs about Paul Robeson. The first is simply named "Paul Robeson," written and sung by Rev. Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick (1972) accompanied by Pete Seeger and Jeanne Humphries. The second is the slightly better known "Hold the Line" by Pete Seeger (1961) about the Peekskill Riots. The song, without explicitly mentioning Robeson, described the events surrounding the riots from the very direct perspective of Pete Seeger, who was with Robeson, Guthrie, and others at the concert.

The power of place and space, as far as history and performance of Paul Robeson and the Peekskill Riots are concerned, is very important to keep in mind. Neither performance nor history takes place in a vacuum and the historical and cultural geography of Robeson and the riots are necessary to understand not only why Aluko's performance may be exceptionally relevant in Peekskill, but the intricate embeddedness of history to the audience. Kruse (2005) and Jackiewicz and Craine (2009) discussed these intricacies between music, space, and political activism. Billy Bragg (the English singer-songwriter), for example, was analyzed for his cross-scalar use of music in activism and how he impacted not only local arenas of political debate, but had global reverberations through physical and digital music distribution (Jackiewicz and Craine 2009). Research on Bragg incorporates this multi-scalar approach to its analysis, but I also incorporated a more temporal element to my analysis of the place through its changing meaning over time.

I accomplished these goals by visiting Peekskill, NY, the different sites of the Peekskill Riots, and most importantly attending the *Call Mr. Robeson* performance in Peekskill. From a combination of secondary sources, primary interviews, and observation data, I pieced together the role of the performance and Tayo Aluko in performing history. This personal observation and analysis was reinforced by interviews with audience members to determine if understandings of Paul Robeson and the Peekskill Riots were changed by the performance and what they viewed as the most powerful aspect of the event. Through these primary and secondary sources, a better picture can be obtained of *Call Mr. Robeson's* role in the representation of Paul Robeson, but more importantly the Peekskill Riots.

The Peekskill Riots

Peekskill, New York served as the crashing point of two entrenched perspectives of 1949 America: the socialist and civil liberty-leaning left and the anti-socialist fascist-leaning right. Having spoken to individuals in Peekskill about that time-period, many cited deep media-inspired fear rather than a true anti-socialist or fascist-minded perspective. None-the-less, when organizers from the Civil Rights Congress attempted to hold a concert featuring Paul Robeson on the night of August 27th, they were confronted by those simply motivated by fear, as well as by others whose motivations were founded directly within hatred and violence. Initially, during a parade and peaceful demonstrations by veterans and others, organizers and concert-goers were attacked by members of the Klu Klux Klan and local citizens armed with rocks and makeshift weapons. The concert's stage, seating, and music were destroyed and books and a giant cross were burnt for display. As a result, the concert was cancelled before it began and Paul Robeson never made it to the concert location. However, Peekskill became a national symbol for both sides of this politicized event and issue. On September 4th, 1949, when Paul Robeson and others turned out 25,000 strong, their opposition did likewise with around 5,000 protestors-turned rioters (Fast 1951; Wright 1975; Walwik 2002).

What happened on September 4th remains an unstable point of American history. From the (a) Call Mr. Robeson performance, (b) the question and answer session following the performance, (c) interview data, and (d) personal interactions in the community, it is clear that those who played an active role in the riots believed that they were justified in their involvement, though predominantly for the peaceful protests over the violent riots. Alternately, some interviewees appeared to regret their family's role in the event. Furthermore, the controversy caused in the community by the *Call Mr. Robeson* show coming to Peekskill validates this event's continued presence and relevance in the community. Unlike the first riot, the second riot started after a successful concert performance. The large numbers of concert-goers on September 4th, 1949 were further fueled by the presence of 900 police officers and 2500 volunteer labor union body-guards. As the concert-goers began to file out of the venue on foot, in cars, and on busses, once again rocks and other weapons damaged cars, some were overturned by the rioters, and 150 concert goers were injured. Not a single participant in the riots were issued citations. In fact, as Walwik (2002) and Wright (1975) described, the only citations that were given were to the concert-goers for speeding, having broken windows, and having improper papers in an instance where a driver abandoned a bus and one of the passengers started driving in order to escape the onslaught. The fallout from the riots included a number of civil, state, and federal suits and complaints, which all ended without judicial results. Furthermore, the country, through the media, was left with a story that praised the destruction of civil liberties in favor of anti-communist sentiment.

Robeson was very clear in his understanding of the events and his opinion permeated much of the world and pockets of the United States (Wright 1975). Robeson saw the violence at Peekskill as the precursor for what was to come (devastatingly ironic and relevant to police violence across the country and racially motivated attacks today). He asked in an interview several days after the riots, "where will the next Peekskill be? What new battle ground have the reactionary police and those behind them selected? Where will they demonstrate further the "old Southern Custom" of beating in the heads of Negroes and all those identified with the struggle to free the Negro people" (1978, 229)? In a letter to President Truman, Robeson (1978, 234-235) described the riots as "[a] criminal assault made against the American people and their rights...[and]...mounting anti-Negro violence and contempt for human rights," likening the events to "Hitlerite Germany" where fascism began through mob violence under the guise of patriotism.

The power of performance, music, and art is revealed through Robeson's response to the violence and denial of civil rights expunged at Peekskill. Robeson (1978) stated:

I told the [American] Legion I would return to Peekskill. I did. ... They revile me, scandalize me, and try to holler me down on all sides... Let them continue. My voice topped the blare of the Legion bands and the hoods of the hired hoodlums who attempted to break up my concert...It will be heard above the screams of the intolerant, the jeers of the ignorant pawns of the small groups of the lousy rich who would drown out the voice of a champion of the underdog. My weapons are peaceful for it is only by peace that peace can be attained. Their weapons are the nightsticks of the fascist police...the trained voices of the choirs of hate. The song of freedom must prevail. (230)

Call Mr. Robeson: A Life with Songs

Call Mr. Robeson tells this story and many others as Tayo Aluko actively attempts to utilize the power of Robeson's voice to topple continuing vestiges of violence, hate, and intolerance around the world. Aluko's playbill for the Peekskill performance (Appendix 1) describes such an attempt. It is through a combination of musical performance, historical representation, and audience interaction that Aluko's (and Robeson's) goals of utilizing performance as a means of social justice are audible. The use of music in the performance is extremely calculated and the affect it delivers is one of the strongest aspects of his performance. On the other hand, the historical representation of Robeson, the events surrounding Robeson's life (like the Peekskill Riots), and the power of place itself adds additional depth to the use of music and performance. Finally, audience reaction and participation is key, and through Aluko's performance and the interviews and observations gathered, there is ample evidence to back this up. This combination of audience, history, and performance serve as a catalyst for *Call Mr. Robeson* to convey not only history, but a continued message of history's social movements and the enduring agency of the voice of Paul Robeson.

Call Mr. Robeson began in 1995 when Tayo Aluko performed at a Summer Solstice event in Liverpool. After singing at the event, Aluko explained that a lady approached him and said, "You remind me of Paul Robeson. Do you sing many of his songs?" He continued the story:

And that may have been the first time I heard of his name. That was June 1995. I was thirty-three years old at the time. I'd had three degrees in architecture by then, a Black man, and I think I had never heard of Paul Robeson. And then, by pure chance, two months after that I was at a library in Liverpool looking for something else and the biography by Martin Duberman (1988) literally fell off of the shelf into my hands, and that was it. That's how it started. (Tayo Aluko, personal conversation, 2014)

The performance, and especially the space and power that it constructs, is hard to summarize briefly on paper, but the play basically follows Robeson's life through time. It started with the sound of a needle hitting a record and an old man carrying a chair across the stage, which he then sat in and began to speak to the audience. So, in two ways Aluko gave the impression that this was a story being told. As the story progressed, Aluko's depiction of Robeson became much less like an old man and more of an embodiment of Robeson in the different stages of his life, eventually circling back around to the weary old man from the beginning.

Music

Aluko's use of music and theatre in the play is paramount to representing a figure who himself was a champion of the stage and song. In my interview, I asked Aluko where the inspiration to turn the biography into a musical came from and how he went about some of the more technical aspects of creating the show. Aluko replied, saying:

As I was reading the book, I was just basically amazed by literally every page of this guy, and the fact that I knew so little about him, and knowing that part of the reason for that

was the fact that it had been a deliberate policy on part of the U.S. state to bury him. It just felt to me like the right thing...I needed to get the story told somehow. ...bearing in mind at the time I was a full-time architect; I had never written a play or anything. Basically I said I have got to find somebody to write this story. So I then went looking for playwrights. ...I had it with two white guys in Liverpool, one of them lasted a bit longer, more experienced writers than me, and in fact we had a number of readings, but it never felt quite right. And then in 2005, a whole ten years after I first read the book, I said I'd have a go at writing it myself. So, I started in 2005, and I had always had ideas, so it started off with 6 characters. I submitted that script to the Liverpool Everyman theatre, and they asked me in for a meeting, which was really exciting. The meeting was really to tell me that it was no good. ...But, the interesting thing is that first draft I also sent to a woman that I had met...at this Kodaly workshop.... I sent it to her and she saw some promise in it and agreed to work with me on it. So that started a relationship with her which lasts to this day, because she originally directed and dramaturged it. Her name is Olusola Oyeleye. (Tayo Aluko, personal conversation, 2014)

While there was a focus on the theatrical element of the performance and justification behind the performance, the use of music, which drew on Paul Robeson's ethnomusicological expertise, was clear throughout the event. Starting from the beginning with Dennis Nelson's arranged piano prelude that featured the songs "My Lord What a Morning," "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "Balm in Gilead," and "He's Got the Whole World in his Hands," the musical continued highlighting music that was either sung, written, or influenced by Paul Robeson. The music of the performance almost acted as the current running through the conduit of theatre in order to connect the various historical moments and ideas.

Aluko's first songs on stage were "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," the original version of "Ol' Man River" where the word "nigger" is used to describe African American dock workers, and then a slightly modified version of "Ol' Man River" using the words "colored folks" instead. Then the well-known African American lament "Steal Away," a traditional song signal to other slaves that it was an optimal time to attempt an escape, was used as both a tribute to Robeson's father, as well as a connection to slavery.

A recording of Welsh male voice choir music was played overtop of Aluko's introduction of socialism and to highlight Robeson's relationship to Wales and working-class Europe. "Canoe Song" was sung as a symbol of British colonial deception in the use of Robeson for British films. And, to further confirm Robeson's Welsh ties, not only via socialism, but via anti-colonialism, Aluko reintroduced the theme by singing "Lord God of Abraham" from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, a song used in the film *Proud Valley*. The character Robeson played in the film sang with a Welsh male voice miners' choir. This allowed Aluko to connect Robeson's popularity in Wales to all of the British Isles. Further addressing Robeson's popularity, Aluko focused again on the United States and the immensely popular "Ballad for Americans," which Robeson premiered during World War II on CBS, and due to its popularity it became a new proxy national anthem (Barg 2008; Shapiro 2015).

"Swanee River" was one of the last traditional and semi-apolitical songs used by Aluko as he performed Paul Robeson singing at his Kansas City concert in 1942. At this concert Robeson realized halfway through that he was singing to a segregated audience, and almost canceled the concert. However, he decided to switch to performing only songs that empowered the working class, especially those experiencing discrimination due to race. So, instead of

singing “Swanee River,” a very melodic song, Aluko chose to sing one of Robeson’s most popular Gospel marches, “Joshua Fit de Battle Ob Jericho,” which marked a distinct turning point in the performance. From this point on, Robeson’s activism and academics overpowered his other skills. The emotional strain and society’s critical viewpoint of Robeson’s life through his extra-marital affairs and mental health added to the overall humanizing and empathizing portrayal of Paul Robeson.

Aluko’s next scene portrayed Robeson’s 1949 Peekskill performance. As soon as Aluko began the scene, there was an immediate and unexpected outburst of applause from the audience. Aluko’s use of soundscape made the Peekskill scene one of the most powerful in the play, despite the event’s venue. He performed as Robeson singing at the concert, but both the song he sang and the strategic use of atmospheric sounds combined to shape the performance into a living and interactive soundscape beyond simply a representation of Robeson. Aluko sang “Ol’ Man River,” but this time he sang a Robeson arrangement where there were no lyrics referencing dock workers at all and the lyrics “gets a little drunk an’ you lands in jail” and “I gets weary an’ sick of tryin’, but I keeps laughin’ until I’m dyin’” changed to “show a little grit and you lands in jail” and “[b]ut I keeps laughin’ instead of cryin’, I must keep fightin’ until I’m dyin’” (Whiteman and Robeson 1928; Robeson 1998). Over the top of Aluko’s singing, a recording of audience applause was played. However, it was difficult to hear either Aluko or the audience because of a fourth sound (Aluko, Nelson, and the recorded audience being the other three). As the song progressed it became louder and more apparent that the sound was that of the police helicopter, which Aluko mentioned earlier in his narrative. Toward the end, both Aluko and Nelson deliberately increased their volume to a point where the entire hall was enveloped in sound. This soundscape, including the previously mentioned rendition of “Ol’ Man River,” accompanied by the fear and anger portrayed by Aluko in his performance (Figure 2), illuminated the Peekskill Riots as an eruption of emotion charged by vehemently differing philosophies and feelings and further hindered by institutional (in)action.



Figure 2. Tayo Aluko at the Paramount Theatre in Peekskill, NY performing the Peekskill scene in *Call Mr. Robeson* where he portrays Paul Robeson attempting to sing and shout “Ol’ Man River” over the sound of police helicopters (November 2015). *Source:* author.

Aluko's emotive performance continued through the remaining songs of the event. His wearied use of "Joe Hill," the internationally recognized labor-rights song, brought to life Robeson's battered continuance of activism during his blacklisted years. The original ending of "Ol' Man River"¹ was again utilized to humanize Robeson during the portrayal of his attempted suicide prompted by mental illness (a hotly debated point within Robeson scholarship). Strength and perseverance were embodied through African spirituality and represented by traditional drumming. These drums played throughout Robeson's trial scenes before the House Un-American Affairs Committee and the penultimate scene where Aluko connected Robeson, his legacy, and philosophy to Africa via W. E. B. DuBois. The songs "Didn't my Lord Deliver Daniel" and "Git on Board, Little Children" were utilized to represent Robeson's struggles over his illegally seized passport and the subsequent ruling that granted him back his right to travel. Lastly, to capture Robeson's own passing and the passing of his wife Eslanda, Aluko powerfully and respectfully sang "Goin' Home" and "Just a Wearyin' for You."

Finally, within Aluko's utilization of music, he portrayed Robeson as a musicologist and an ethnomusicologist. In the performance he described Robeson as a bibliophile, an African historian, an expert of world music (ethnomusicologist), musicologist, and polyglot. Through Robeson's travels and studies and his focus on folk music, Aluko revealed Robeson's ability to trace music cross-culturally. Robeson saw folk music as a universal language and as the connecting force of Anti-colonial, human rights, and socialist activism. More specifically, Aluko illuminated the use of the pentatonic scale. During the play Aluko went to the piano, and while playing he very deliberately stated "Black" keys perform very similar songs, including "Iwe Kiko," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "An Eriskay Love Lilt," from Nigerian, African American spiritual, and Scottish folk traditions, respectfully.

As already alluded to, the audience's responses during the performance clearly illustrated an engagement with the music of the performance, however additional interview data provided further evidence to that effect. Three of the ten interview subjects specifically mention the role of music in the performance. One interviewee, when asked what was the most powerful aspect of the event, responded saying "[t]he singing. The songs are just so well known" (personal conversation with interview subject 2). Two other interviewees mentioned the role of music in the performance, but in yet another light. They both commented on how Aluko "projects" Robeson well, but his voice wasn't the same, and that they were expecting Robeson's "deep large voice that just rumbles on" (Interview Subjects 4 and 5). These comments are further evidence that the performance *of* Paul Robeson is just as important to audience members as the performance *about* Paul Robeson, and music plays a key role. Tayo Aluko not only performed a historic representation of Robeson and his music, but the role Robeson had within music; all within the purview of audience interaction and the shaping of the soundscape of theatrical performance, which is the conduit through which Aluko's music flowed.

Theatre

While speaking about the power of theatre, Aluko was very clear about its potential. He stated:

It is incredibly powerful, and it's funny because when I was reading the book, I said I could just see it as a play. I didn't think it was a movie, I didn't think about writing

¹ I gets weary an' sick of trying. I'm tired of livin' an' scared of dyin' (Whiteman and Robeson 1928).

anything. I thought the best way was through a play with songs. ... When I came to England for the first time, I remember going to the theatre somewhere in London at the age of 16 or 17 to see *Fiddler on the Roof*, and being incredibly moved and remembering one particular piece, which was the chorus. The People singing as they are leaving their town, Anatevka. Very sad. Basically they were being forced to leave and they sang this song and it moved me to tears. So, for a 17-year-old Nigerian to be moved by this story of something happening in some part of the Soviet Union a hundred years ago, and thinking “this isn’t right, this is beautiful, this is moving,” I just have never forgotten what power theatre has to move people, to make them think, to inspire them, and so on. And it’s just amazing for me to think that Paul Robeson, who I knew nothing about, basically sent this woman to me to mention his name, and I used to be an architect. I’ve now traveled around the world telling his story through the means of theatre, it’s just amazing. I didn’t know that I was going to be doing it myself...

I think it’s more powerful a medium than any other. I think to be honest because it’s primal. You can see, feel, hear, see the spit coming out of people. You can always see tears; you can see sweat. And the wonderful thing, one of my best memories, is performing this show in Washington D.C. many years ago in this small theatre. And I was talking to a lady afterward, and she said, “you came out on stage carrying that chair and the first thing I thought was ‘he’s not big enough to be Robeson. His voice is not deep enough to play Paul Robeson, but halfway through the play I had to keep reminding myself that it wasn’t really Robeson. So, she had actually believed because it was theatre and my performance that she was in the presence of Robeson and some people have said that before and you can’t get that in any other medium. (Tayo Aluko, personal conversation, 2014)

As stated above, Robeson’s philosophical framework consisted of three elements: anti-colonialism, the equality of human rights, and socialism (Rhodes 2016). Unlike most representations of Robeson, which tend to focus on one or two of those elements more than others, *Call Mr. Robeson* does not inequitably utilize one component over another. Robeson’s anti-colonialism and more specifically his Pan-Africanism and nationalism were expressed through Aluko’s use of criticism of British colonial film. This philosophy was also expressed in the famous quote from Robeson that despite the U.S. State Department seizing his passport for meddling in the colonial affairs of Africa, he would just have to “continue to meddle.” Furthermore, mentions of Africa and national pride were utilized throughout the performance, and the flags of the United States, the U.S.S.R., the International Brigades of the Spanish Republic, and Wales were significant focal points of the set design. Robeson’s fight for human rights was brought out clearly during the Kansas City scene, as well as many other references in the music, script, and the question and answer time following the performance, all shedding light on Robeson’s early role in the civil rights movement fighting for desegregation and anti-lynching laws. Socialism was also not ignored, as it often is within more American contexts of Paul Robeson. The relevance of the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom to Robeson’s understandings of socialism were clearly expressed. Especially the role that education in London and his interaction with unions in Wales gave Robeson a very union-centric and labor rights-oriented idea of socialism.

It is also important to recognize within *Call Mr. Robeson* that as much as he is celebrated, he is not de-humanized, and Aluko spends much of his time attempting to help the

audience relate to Robeson on an empathetic and human level. Aluko's depiction of Robeson's potential mental illness, the stress, strain, and pain he experienced because of his beliefs, and the emotional turmoil that he endured through the loss of family and friends were all deeply expressed in the performance. In return, possibly the most significant outcome of the play is its power to change the audience's perspective, not just their knowledge of Robeson.

Peekskill and the Power of Place



Figure 3. The Hollow Brook Golf Course in Cortlandt on the land where the September 4th, 1949 concert was held (November 2015). *Source:* author.

Tayo Aluko stated to a local news source:

This is probably the most significant and exciting one of the many hundreds of performances I have done of this play, because it is in Peekskill - a place so central to Paul Robeson's amazing and inspiring story. I am honored to be celebrating Mr. Robeson's legacy with the community, living at the heart of what was such a seminal moment in civil rights history. I can't wait! (Paramount Hudson Valley 2015)

As the above quote clarifies, the power of the show being in Peekskill (where the riots took place as shown in Figure 3) was evident not only through the audience's reaction, but through the performer, himself. Aluko has always held the Peekskill scene in his performance as one of the most important. In a conversation two years ago (before either of us knew he would be performing at Peekskill) he mentioned it a number of times both in the effect it had in his program and the effect it continues to have on the people who were involved. He told me a story (which he repeated during the question and answer session at the end of his performance in Peekskill) about one of his U.S. performances:

I was in Dearborn, Michigan at a national labor event. People came from all over the USA, and I did a presentation... When I was singing, this white man was sitting at front, staring at me. He actually made me uncomfortable, but he just stared at me solid all the way through, and he then came up to me. He would have been about late 70s, and he came up to me and said, "I just wanted to let you know that I met Paul Robeson, and in fact I was at Peekskill, and what you did today..." He burst into tears and put his head on my shoulder. (Tayo Aluko, personal conversation, 2014)

That old man is now great friends with Aluko and is actually one of his best supporters. Many similar situations occurred as I conducted interviews with audience members and as Aluko held his post-performance question and answer session. Most of the people in the audience were

from Peekskill, and most were older individuals who were either at the events or had parents who were, and everyone had a story to tell.

Another key element to the power of place and the effect historic representation through music or theatre might have, is through the actual geographic distribution of the audience. The experience of someone local to Peekskill, who perhaps grew up hearing stories about the riots and Paul Robeson's involvement, would be very different from someone coming from Harlem, who may have known Robeson very well, but not the riots. Of course, someone from elsewhere who never heard of Peekskill, Paul Robeson, nor the riots, would be experiencing them all for the first time. In this case, according to the venue staff, almost the entire audience came from within a ten-mile radius of Peekskill.

Of the ten people interviewed, everyone had heard of Paul Robeson before and everyone knew about the Peekskill Riots to some extent. While it's not a representative sample of the 250 audience members, it was surprising that all ten knew of Robeson when the average rate was about two-fifths. This figure not only reflected on the audience of this event, but of the community itself, especially when so many of the audience members were from Peekskill.

This higher than average knowledge of Robeson however, serves as my final point, that through audience engagement, history can be shaped and created. Especially in this circumstance with such a high knowledge of Robeson, the fact that six of the ten interviewees expressed that their understanding of Paul Robeson or the Peekskill Riots changed through their attendance of event. This speaks to the musical's overarching power. One interviewee knew of the events via Pete Seeger, but they didn't know that they were actually two separate days. Three others were much more impacted by their increased knowledge of Robeson. One person (whose father-in-law was one of the protestors) said that they now have much more empathy for what Robeson went through and see him in a completely different light knowing the mental stress he was under that was brought out in the performance. Even for myself, I had not experienced a representation of Robeson (outside of his own work) that emphasized his humanity in such a way. Aluko brings to the table issues of suicide, racism, mental illness, personal loss, and violence in a way that brings you as an audience member into the narrative, so that you and Robeson together can navigate these emotions through Aluko's performance. Finally, one other interviewee didn't give any specifics as to how their understanding changed, except that they wanted to know more. The performance had spiked their interest in both Robeson and the Peekskill Riots, which was a goal of Aluko's. As much as theatre, music, film, narrative, etc. can provide a historic representation, it is only one representation. A better picture will always come from a broader and deeper multi-sourced understanding of history. As much as *Call Mr. Robeson* can convey that understanding of Robeson as a person and the Peekskill Riots as an event in a place, inspiring further knowledge building may be the greatest success of the performance.

Conclusion

Tayo Aluko captures the meaning of performing history in his performance of *Call Mr. Robeson: A Life, with Songs*. His performance not only highlights an individual often left out of history and includes events such as the Peekskill Riots, which are equally unknown, but he does so through music, theatre, and place. Outside of Peekskill, few people in the United States have heard of the Peekskill Riots or Paul Robeson and audience reaction to these narratives is key to the reintroduction of these topics into society as public knowledge. As discussed, the audience reaction to theatre and music is, of course, highly dependent upon place. Place shapes not only

how Aluko presents the performance, but what the audience takes away and how the audience engages with the performance. In Peekskill, many people *have* heard of Robeson and the riots, but Aluko's performance acted as a form of public pedagogy widening and deepening the audience's knowledge beyond any formal education.

Aluko's creation of soundscape, utilization of historically relevant music, and power in controlling the medium of theatre strengthened both his performance and the agency of the audience and their response. As revealed in my results, the audience saw the music as one of the most powerful aspects of the performance. Theatre, likewise, is not always considered for the power that it has, but acts as the conduit for the power of music to flow. Thus, Aluko (performing Robeson) is a prime example of the continuing and increasing role of theatre as a powerful shaper of history. Aluko uses his performance to negotiate issues of first amendment rights, nationalism, racism, and other social and economic divides. His celebrity further fuels his role in social movements as his various performances other than Robeson (such as *What Happens?*, his jazz theatre tribute to Langston Hughes), websites, playbills, and social media platforms influence, fuel, and remember movements that continue to be relevant today.²

Finally, more so than just an example of musical theatre performing and shaping history, *Call Mr. Robeson* exemplifies individual action for the telling of a story. Ten years ago Tayo Aluko was a full-time green architect with no playwriting, producing, or professional acting experience. A single woman who remembered Robeson then introduced Tayo to the subject matter of his profession. Martin Duberman's biography on Paul Robeson served as the catalyst and background information for the script. Olusola Oyeleye was the only person to see the potential in the script enough to dramaturge and direct the musical. And the owners and staff at the Paramount Theatre in Peekskill saw beyond the community's qualms about bringing a controversial topic into the area, which in many cases opened up discussion of the riots for the first time. As much as this is a story about Paul Robeson and the Peekskill Riots, it is about telling stories and about the power that individuals have in shaping history.

² While in the case of *Call Mr. Robeson* there is little evidence of "tampering with" or "romanticizing" history, it is important to remember that theatre and music are not universally tools of social justice. Some of the most recent work on performing history reveal not only the power performance has, but how that power can often be controlled and manipulated in ways which misrepresent events and individuals, causing negative political and social changes or simply incorrect understandings of the past (Bose 2015; Feilla 2016).

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Appendix I

CALL MR. ROBESON: A life, with songs.

Written and Performed by Tayo Aluko, with Dennis Nelson, Piano

Paramount Hudson Valley, Peekskill, NY. Saturday Nov 7, 2015

Greetings. Could it be that NBC chose this very night to have Donald Trump host Saturday Night Live, in order to prevent people coming out in their hundreds to hear Paul Robeson's story? It wouldn't be the first time the network has contributed to his being side-lined: 65 years ago, they cancelled a scheduled appearance by him on Eleanor Roosevelt's show (at her invitation), following the infamous "Peekskill riots" when he performed in Cortlandt in September 1949. And the reason for the riots? Robeson dared to go on an international stage and criticize his country's treatment of his people, and its imperialist foreign policies. He also concerned himself with the plight of working people here and around the world, and joined with those calling for peace and brotherhood among nations. Yet the media portrayed him as one of the most dangerous people in America, turning the population against him. NBC offices were picketed in 1950 over their censorship of Robeson, and by coincidence they are being picketed today over Mr. Trump's appearance. It appears therefore that things haven't changed that much, which is simultaneously discouraging and encouraging – discouraging that the media appear to give prominence to figures who promote division (a wall across the southern border?) and suppress those who challenge the status quo, or expose unpleasant truths that the powers-that-be prefer to keep hidden. It is however encouraging that concerned citizens continue to make their voices heard by taking to the streets and using whatever other means they have at their disposal, and continue to call - as Robeson did - for equality, peace and justice. Rather than lament the continued suppression of beautiful, hopeful stories like Robeson's, one can perhaps draw hope from the fact that when the American people knew that the world was seeing the ugliest parts of their country on their TV screens during the civil rights struggle, they demanded and got change. One can hardly describe SNL tonight as the prettiest showcase for your country, so perhaps one can see this is a hopeful sign of better things to come, including having beautiful and uplifting art and artists being celebrated on the likes of NBC. I hope you enjoy the show.

Tayo Aluko. Writer, Performer. Tayo was born in Nigeria, and now lives in Liverpool. He worked previously as an architect and property developer, with a special but as yet frustrated interest in eco-friendly construction. He has fronted orchestras as baritone soloist in concert halls, and has also performed lead roles in operas and musicals including *Nabucco*, *Kiss Me Kate* and *Anything Goes*. *CALL MR ROBESON* has won numerous awards at festivals in the UK and Canada, as well as highly favourable reviews in the press – most notably in *the Guardian* and on *BBC Radio 4*. He has toured the play around the UK, the USA, Canada, Jamaica and Nigeria, and at New York's Carnegie Hall in February 2012 on his 50th birthday. He also delivers a lecture/concert called *PAUL ROBESON – THE GIANT, IN A NUTSHELL*, and another one titled *FROM BLACK AFRICA TO THE WHITE HOUSE: a talk about Black Political Resistance*, illustrated with spirituals has been performed in three continents. He researched, wrote and narrated to camera a piece on West African History before the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which forms part of the permanent exhibit at Liverpool's International Slavery Museum. His 15-minute play, *HALF MOON*, which also deals with ancient Africa has been performed several times in the UK. He recently developed a piece titled *WHAT HAPPENS?* featuring the writings of African American Langston Hughes, for performance with live jazz accompaniment. He has been published in *The Guardian*, *The Morning Star*, *NERVE Magazine*, *Modern Ghana* and *Searchlight Magazine*. He is currently working on a new play.

Dennis A. Nelson, Piano. Dennis Nelson studied music at the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music and is a graduate of Hofstra University. He serves as organist and choir director for Trinity Baptist Church in Brooklyn, and accompanist for the New York City Labor Chorus, in addition to accompanying various soloists and choirs. He is also a member of The New Hope Ensemble, a gospel/jazz quintet, and Instrumental Sounds Of Praise (ISOP), a gospel big band aggregation. His songs have been recorded by noted gospel and R&B singers, and he has several recording credits as keyboardist and writer.

Olusola Oyeleye, Director and Dramaturge. Olusola is an award winning writer, director and producer working in opera, music theatre, visual arts and dance. Theatre includes: *Tin* (The Lowry), *Ti-Jean and his Brothers* (Collective Artistes & Sustained Theatre, Cottesloe), Resident director on Trevor Nunn's West End production of *Porgy and Bess* (Savoy Theatre), staff producer at English National Opera, Spirit of Okin and Sankofa for Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble, (National & International tours), *Coming Up For Air* (The Drum & UK tour), *The Resurrection of Roscoe Powell* (Soho Theatre), *The Shelter* (RSC Barbican Theatre), *Medea* (Ariya, Royal National Theatre Studio), *The Playground* (Polka Theatre, Time Out Critics' Choice Pick of the Year), *High Life*, (Hampstead Theatre), *Maybe Father*, (Talawa, Young Vic), *Twelfth Night* (British Council Tour, Zimbabwe) and *Ella*, a monodrama about Ella Fitzgerald (Rich Mix). Opera includes: Akin Euba's *Orunmila's Voices: Songs from the Beginning of Time* (Jefferson's Arts Centre, New Orleans) and *Chaka: An Opera in Two Chants* with the St. Louis African Chorus, *Dido and Aeneas* (Tricycle/BAC), *God's Trombones* (Fairfield Halls) and the second cast revival of Jonathan Miller's production of *The Mikado* (English National Opera). Olusola has also worked in Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Hungary and the Czech Republic. She has been a visiting lecturer and Artist at Universities in South Africa and London, and was Head of the Acting Studio at Morley College. Her poetry has been set to music by Akin Euba and performed at both Harvard and Cambridge Universities. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts.

Phil Newman, Designer & Assistant Director. Phil's Set & Costume Design credits include: *Saint/Jeanne* and *Spring Awakening - The Musical* (Chelsea Theatre), *Hairspray*, *Cabaret & Attempts on her Life* (Amersham & Wycombe College), *Lord of the Flies & Grimm Tales* (Colet Court School), *The Tempest & Pinocchio* (UK/UAE tours for Shakespeare4Kidz), *The Wizard of Oz*, *A Christmas Carol & Peter Pan* (Tickled Pink), an open-air *Romeo & Juliet* (Cornucopia Theatre), *The Liar* (South Hill Park), *Dance or Die* (Hoxton Hall), *Voices in the Alleyway & Yes, I Still Exist* (Spread Expression Dance), *The Fiddler* (Unicorn Theatre) and film short *The Judge* for Faith Drama, *The Riddle of the Sands & Laurel and Hardy* (Jermyn St Theatre), *The Famous Five* (Tabard Theatre), *Hansel & Gretel* (UK tour), *Stockholm* (BAC), open-air tours of *The Merchant of Venice & The Railway Children* (Heartbreak) and the award-winning UK/international touring production of *Hannah & Hanna*. His Set Design credits include *Our House* (Elgiva Theatre), *Cinderella* (Library Theatre, Luton) and *Next Door* (Cockpit Theatre). Other collaborations with director Olusola Oyeleye include *A Wing*, *A Prey*, *A Song* (Guest Projects Africa), *High Life* (Hampstead Theatre), *The Security Guard* (Merton AbbeyFest 2012), *Ella* (RichMix), *Coming Up for Air* (UK tour), *The Playground* (Polka Theatre) and *Ma Joyce's Tales from the Parlour* (Oval House/Edinburgh). He has just completed Set Design work on Rouge28 Theatre's new tour of *Kwaidan*, a Japanese ghost story with puppets.

Sound Design: David Darlington & Liam McDermott. **Sound Engineering:** Derek Murray. **Lighting Design:** Gareth Starkey. **Recorded Percussion:** Oludele Olaseinde **Voices:** Shamus Maxwell, Paul O'Neill, Felix Pring, Kat Bishop, Suzanne Goldberg, Harry Arkwright, and from the original HUAC hearing of June 12 1956, "Honorable" Senators Walter, Arens and Scherer. **Male Voice Choir:** Liverpool Male Voice Choir

Forthcoming Performances Include:

Nov 12 - 15: Centenary College, Hackettstown, New Jersey;
Nov 19 - 22: Bus Stop Theatre, Halifax, Nova Scotia; **January 9:** The Ustinov Studio, Theatre Royal, Bath; **January 29:** Bolton Socialist Club; **February 25 - 28:** Anvil Theatre, New Westminster, BC, Canada; **March 17:** Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton; **March 26:** Derby Theatre

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