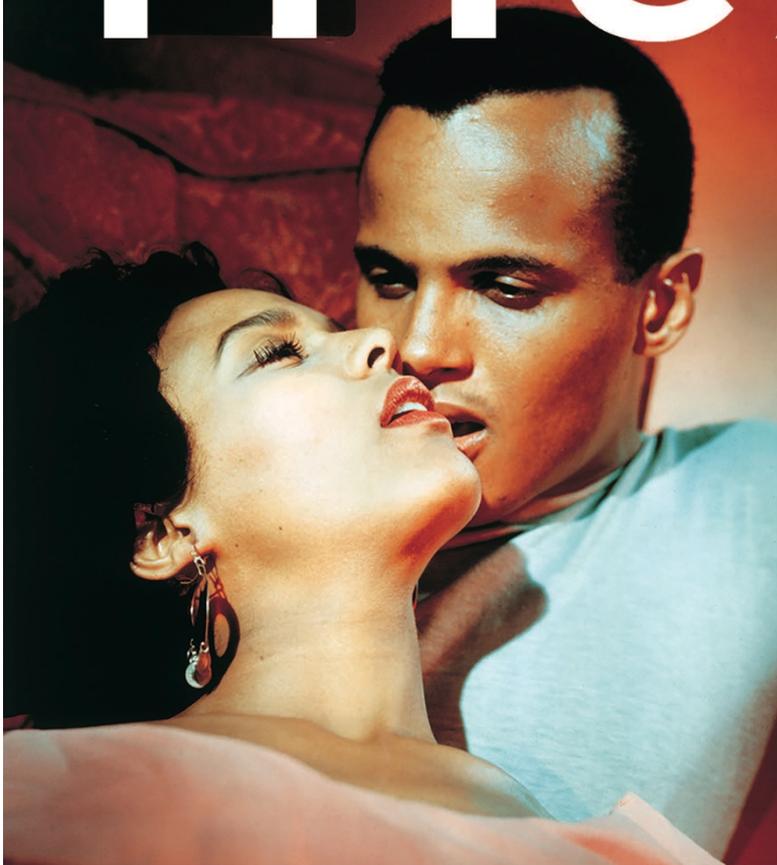


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Our Skin Is A Monument

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Partisan's Songs

Can the story of performer and activist Paul Robeson help us reconcile universalism with Black progress?

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BY SUSAN NEIMAN IN FEATURES , MUSIC | 30 SEP 20



Can a White woman have Black heroes? As it happens, I have several: Bryan Stevenson, defence attorney and creator of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama; Bob Moses, the voting-rights activist who organized Freedom Summer in 1964; and Toni Morrison, who needs no introduction. They all have something important in common: fierce anti-racists, they are also universalists who reject the essentialist idea that you are defined by, or reducible to, your tribal origins – or even, as Stevenson says, the worst thing you ever did. (It's a standpoint shared by my White heroes as well.) But, of all those whose lives and works I admire, the one who inspires me most is Paul Robeson.



Paul-Robeson-Straße in Berlin, 2009. Courtesy and photograph: Friedemann Schmidt

There's a Paul-Robeson-Straße in what used to be East Berlin, as well as a Paul Robeson Choir – a group of ageing former East Germans who meet every Monday

night to keep his music and memory alive. While few people remember him now, for about 40 years of the mid-20th century he was the most famous Black person – some say the most famous American – in the world. He was courted by royalty and heads of state; he sang for striking Welsh miners on the streets of London and republican troops on the battlefields of the Spanish Civil War. The erasure of his memory was deliberate, for though Robeson never joined the Communist Party he was a proud socialist whose US passport was rescinded during the McCarthy era, imprisoning him in the land of his birth while it simultaneously closed its theatres and concert halls to his performances, which had sold out to thousands just weeks before. In 1956, when Robeson was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, he was asked why he didn't go back to Russia, where he had lived for a time. 'Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here and have a part of it just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?' No one hearing his defiant testimony could accuse him of trying to ingratiate himself with White power structures. Yet Robeson, a close friend of W.E.B. Du Bois and Albert Einstein, with whom he worked on the American Crusade Against Lynching, remained as committed to universalism as to socialism till the day he died, broken and impoverished, in Philadelphia in 1976.

Both socialism and universalism are shunned today by those who know nothing more than their caricatures. Thanks to the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, French economist Thomas Piketty, and the increasingly apparent disasters of neoliberalism, socialism is no longer anathema to most readers of this publication. Universalism, however, is almost as derided on the left as socialism is on the right. Yet, understood properly, the two go together.



Paul Robeson performing as Othello, Shubert Theatre, New York, 1943. Courtesy and photograph: Afro-American Newspapers/Gado/Getty Images

Understood properly. Most progressives today confuse universalism with globalism: the neoliberal claim that the road to happiness is an iPhone in every pocket. If globalism assumes any form of universalism, it's a universal desire for commodities. True universalism affirms universal rights, not only to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but the means to realize those rights. That is why universalism and socialism go together. Contemporary critics of universalism confuse it with the false universalism that affirms human rights only as long as they are exercised on behalf of European cultural paradigms. In fact, the much-maligned Enlightenment movement of the 18th century was the first in history to attack Eurocentrism and to argue that Europeans had much to learn from China, Persia, Africa and Tahiti – to name some examples given by Enlightenment thinkers such as Denis Diderot, Immanuel Kant, Charles-Louis Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Christian Wolff. Yes, many of these men – and they were almost always men – were products of their time. They made racist remarks that are repeated today on an endless loop without any exploration of the deeply anti-colonialist thrust of their work as a whole. To see how we have learned to reject their prejudices is to see how we've made progress. But we couldn't have done so without the foundations they laid. Enlightenment thinkers, who introduced the idea that humankind can make moral progress, would have cheered our steps forward.

Robeson was committed to the Enlightenment in the truest sense of the word. The son of an enslaved man, who became a star scholar and athlete, then a lawyer, he turned to singing and acting as the best way to express all his talents and aims. As the artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen said in conversation with philosopher Cornel West at the Whitney Museum in 2016: 'Art can pierce armour.' (In 2014, McQueen announced he was making a biopic of Robeson, but the film is still officially in pre-production; meanwhile, he produced 'End Credits', 2012-ongoing, a video featuring thousands of documents from Robeson's FBI files, most of them still redacted.) Robeson performed in 11 languages, six of which he spoke with near-native fluency, because he saw no contradiction in celebrating cultural differences while insisting on universal values. On the contrary: working to enter into another culture is the only way to understand its people's humanity – as well as your own. Of course, your perspective on another culture will never be the same as that of someone who fell asleep to its lullabies. But outsiders' perspectives, when they are thoughtful, can sometimes shed light that insiders' cannot.

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stating that they were fighting for freedom of the world and peace.

██████████ advised that the Council of Greek Americans is a new Greek Communist Organization.

Confidential Informant ██████████, of known reliability advised that a reception was attended by the subject at the home of JAMES S. TATE, 2006 Main Street, Hartford, Connecticut, after the concert given by the subject at the Weaver High School on Saturday Evening, November 15, 1952. He further advised that ROBESON spent the night at the TATE home.

██████████ stated that ██████████, a young colored woman whose identity is unknown to the informant, suggested to ROBESON, that there are other ways to help the Negro people besides Communism. ROBESON replied, "My dear girl, my best friends are Communists, I am a Communist and proud to be one, one of my best friends, BEN DAVIS is a Communist and he is in jail right now." According to the Informant, shortly thereafter a male negro, whose identity was also unknown to the Informant stated that he admired ROBESON for his artistic ability, but differed with him in everything he stands for. At this point, according to ██████████ ROBESON replied, "Here's one Negro boy who if he gets a bullet through his chest tomorrow will die happy because I put this government on the spot when I made that speech in Paris that shook all the world."

██████████ reported ROBESON as having stated "We progressives have been too soft, we must toughen up and come out fighting. I will personally be the first one to punch WALTER WINCHELL right in the nose."

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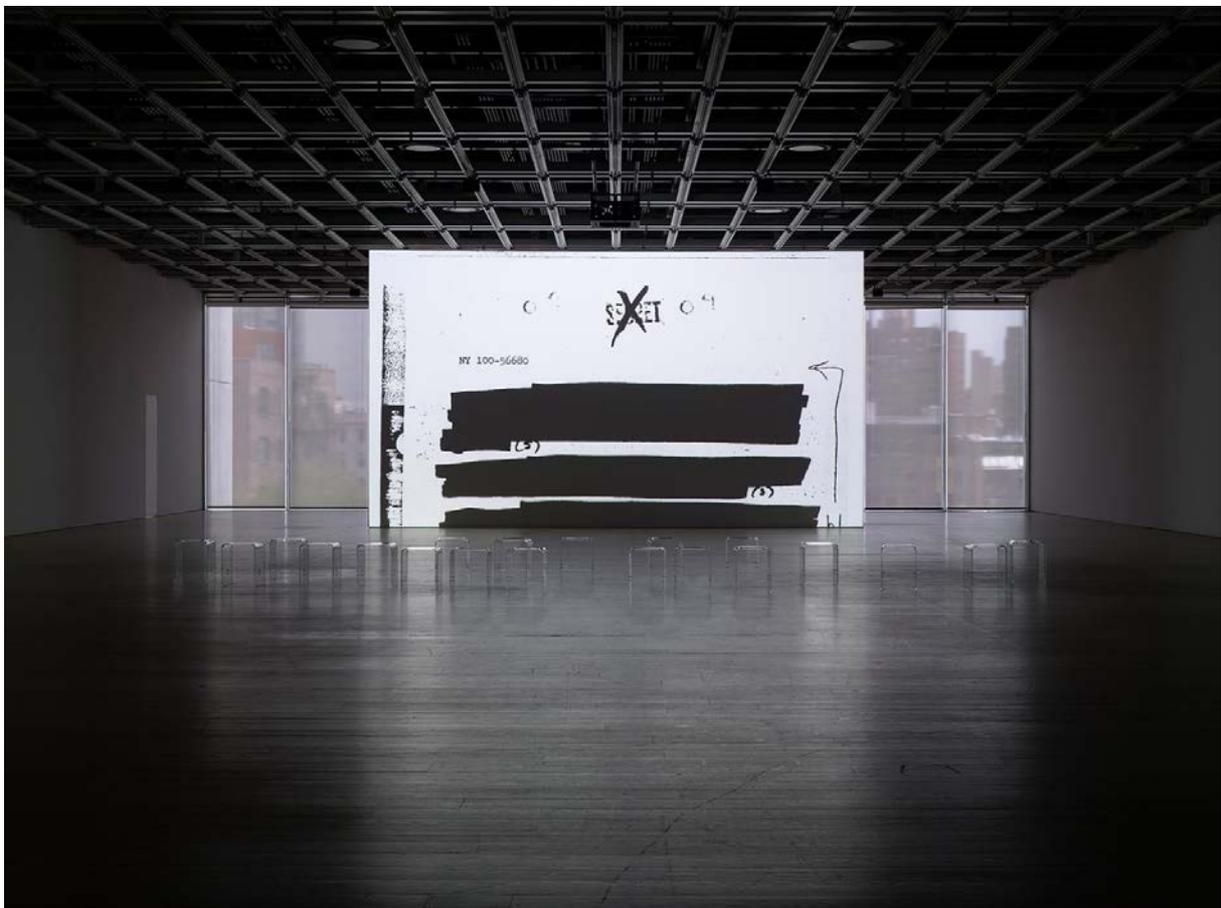
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Steve McQueen, *End Credits*, 2012-ongoing, video still. Courtesy: © Steve McQueen, Thomas Dane Gallery, London/Naples, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

There are few things more moving than Robeson's rendition of 'Zog nit Keynmol', a Yiddish song of resistance to fascism, written in the Vilna Ghetto by Hirsh Glick in 1943. And the fact that he sang it in Moscow in 1949, in both Yiddish and Russian, as Stalin's anti-semitism began to sweep the Soviet Union, shows he knew exactly how to use it. Was that cultural appropriation - or a commitment to the struggle for universal justice?

Robeson's answer would have been clear. He was the first person to fill a concert hall with African American spirituals at a time when they were regarded as lowbrow slave songs – if they were regarded at all. His express pride in the culture of those he always called 'my people' was never in conflict with his hunger to perform Shakespeare, or Russian folk music, or Spanish freedom songs. On the contrary, in one of his testimonies to Congress, he insisted he'd seen 'Yugoslavian peasants suffering like Negroes in the South', and on their common humanity. He would have agreed with Kwame Anthony Appiah's powerful book *The Lies That Bind* (2018), which argues that 'all cultural practices and objects are mobile; they like to spread, and almost all are themselves creations of admixture'. Appiah, who was raised in Ghana, shows how Kente cloth, Asante's best-known cultural product, was itself created from dyed silk thread imported from the East. The problem, he argues, is not simply that it's rarely possible to decide who truly owns cultural artefacts, but that the very idea of ownership is the wrong model to impose on cultural production.



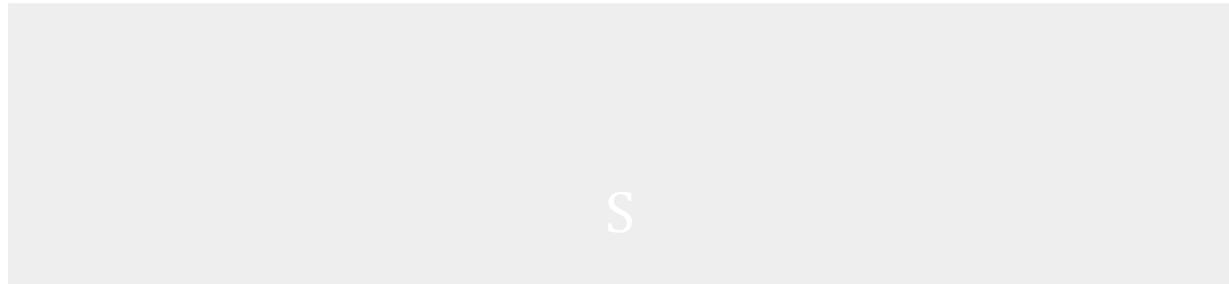
Steve McQueen, *End Credits*, 2012–ongoing, installation view. Courtesy: © Steve McQueen, Thomas Dane Gallery, London/Naples, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

Cultural appropriation is not the same as cultural exploitation, and it's important to call out, and make reparations for, what has often been simple theft: whether of colonial objects in European museums or undervalued Black musicians who were paid a pittance for work that made millions for others. These are transgressions that must be repaired. But to move from a demand for justice to the idea that culture only belongs to a particular tribe is to deny the value and power of culture itself.

It's no accident that Robeson is better remembered in the former East Germany than in West Germany. For, while there is much to criticize about the GDR, its leadership was principally committed to the socialist universalism for which Robeson sacrificed his life – and whose basic principles, suitably updated for the 21st century, are sorely needed today. McQueen's biopic can't come soon enough.

This article first appeared in frieze issue 214 with the headline 'Partisans' Songs'.

Main image: Paul Robeson performing in front of Max Beckmann's *Temptation*, 1936–37, during the exhibition '20th-Century German Art', New Burlington Galleries, London, 1938. Courtesy and photograph: Hudson/Getty Images



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