

A black and white photograph of Paul Robeson, an African American man, wearing a dark suit and tie. He is looking down and to the right, holding a small globe of the Earth in his hands. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light.

Denkfest
Celebrating
the
Kant Jubilee

The
Universalism
of
Paul Robeson

International Conference

Thursday, Sep 26 – Saturday, Sep 28, 2024

Einstein Forum, Potsdam

EINSTEIN
FORUM

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When W.E.B. Dubois called Paul Robeson “the best-known American on earth”, he wasn’t exaggerating. The activist and artist whose own father was born in slavery rose to become the most famous performer in the world. His songs and films were played on every continent, and his passionate engagement for justice and peace inspired many millions. 27 countries, from Mexico to China, organized celebrations for his 60th birthday; they were held in four different cities in India alone. Yet his socialist activism led the United States government to withdraw his passport and prevent him from speaking or performing for many years, and when he is remembered today it is as a forerunner of the American Civil Rights Movement. This he surely was, but his deep commitment to international solidarity is often forgotten in an age that is wary of anything which suggests ties to socialism. By inviting speakers and singers from many countries who will discuss Robeson’s importance for Wales, East Germany, South Africa, Spain, India as well as for the United States, we intend not only to honor his memory, but to inspire others to take up his spirit.

Margaret Burnham (Boston)

Paul Robeson and the Rise and Fall of Freedom

Hounded by McCarthy, Robeson found himself with his passport withdrawn and severely restricted opportunities to perform. He moved to Harlem and founded *Freedom*, a newspaper published monthly from 1950 to 1955, dedicated to African-American issues. It was during its run a leading voice of the African American Left. In this talk, we will look at the context of the origins and audience, influence and ultimate closure, of this unique contribution to African American political discussion and activism.

Margaret A. Burnham is University Distinguished Professor of Law; Director of Reparations and Restorative Justice Initiatives; Director, Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project; Faculty Co-Director, Center for Law, Equity and Race (CLEAR) at Northeastern University, School of Law. The first African American woman, in 1977, to serve in the Massachusetts judiciary, Professor Burnham's current work focuses on the history of mid-twentieth century racial violence in the United States, with her critically acclaimed and highly awarded book, *By Hands Now Known: Jim Crow's Legal Executioners* (2022). Professor Burnham served on a precursor commission to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, held fellowships at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College and Harvard University's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Studies, and in 2016 won a prestigious Carnegie Fellowship, which she put towards furthering the work of the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project, which seeks justice for the crimes of the civil rights era. She was inducted into the *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly* Hall of Fame in 2023.

Peter N. Carroll (Los Angeles)

Paul Robeson and the Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War (1936–39), pitting fascism against the legal Spanish Republic, had a powerful impact on Paul Robeson’s political perspective—not least his change of the lyrics of his most famous song, “Ol’ Man River.” Speaking and singing as an anti-fascist, he journeyed with his wife Essie to embattled Spain in 1938 to support the soldiers of the International Brigades. Besides meeting African American members of the Abraham Lincoln brigade, he expanded his research on Flamenco and Cante Jondo (deep song) and left a legacy to poets and singers like Harry Belafonte.

Peter N. Carroll is the author and editor of over 20 books, including *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (1994), *The Good Fight Continues: World War II Letters from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (2006), and *Facing Fascism: New York and the Spanish Civil War* (2007). He is co-curator of two museum exhibitions: “Shouts From the Wall: Posters of the Spanish Civil War” (with Cary Nelson) and “They Still Draw Pictures: Children’s Art in Wartime From the Spanish Civil War to Kosovo” (with Anthony L. Geist). He is an editor of *The Volunteer*, and he serves as a trustee of the Puffin Nation Prize for creative citizenship. He is also the author of nine poetry collections, most recently *Sketches From Spain: The Legacy of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (2024) which has been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Korey Garibaldi (South Bend)

From Princeton to Pushkin

Paul Robeson in and Beyond the Black Press

This talk explores how Paul Robeson was portrayed and reported on in the American media over the course of his career. From the publication of Eslanda Robeson's *Paul Robeson, Negro* (1930), the literate public learned how Paul's early life was shaped by racially segregated Princeton—which he fought against. Decades later, popular sympathy with Robeson's challenges to the American color line was diminished during the early Cold War years, when his patriotism was questioned. This talk will consider how these shifts coincided with Robeson's highly-publicized celebration of Russia's mixed-race national poet, Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837).

Korey Garibaldi is Associate Professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He studies the social and intellectual history of the United States and Europe from the 18th to the 20th century, with particular interests ranging from Henry James to Aleksandr Pushkin. His courses focus on histories of citizenship, imperialism, cultural and economic thought, and the African diaspora. Garibaldi's first book, *Impermanent Blackness: The Making and Unmaking of Interracial Literary Culture in Modern America* (2023), examines and reinterprets the intermittent flourishing of cross-racial industrial print production in the United States between the early 1910s and the late 1960s. *Impermanent Blackness* shows how innumerable professional and technological challenges to the publishing industry's color line, now taken for granted, were once central to the promotion of cosmopolitan habits and mentalities during the first seven decades of the twentieth century.

Victor Grossman (Berlin)

The German Democratic Republic's Engagement with Paul Robeson

When Paul Robeson visited East Germany for the first time in 1960, he said, “I have seen the real Germany, the human Germany, humane Germany. Those who are inheritors, yes, of Beethoven’s ‘Alle Menschen werden Brüder’.” He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Humboldt University (1960), and the German Peace Medal of the German Peace Council (1960) and widely cherished for his music and his political activism. After his health broke down, he sought treatment in East Berlin, where a street was later named for him. The talk considers the relationship between Paul Robeson and the German Democratic Republic, and the place he held in the East German public discourse.

Victor Grossman is a journalist and author of many books. Born in New York City, he studied at Harvard, worked in factories, and defected to the East Bloc by swimming across the Danube while serving in the US Army in Bavaria in 1952. He studied journalism at Karl-Marx-University in Leipzig, and remained working and writing in the German Democratic Republic, and later the Federal Republic of Germany. From 1965 to 1968 he was Director of the Paul Robeson Archive of the Academy of Art. His books include *If I Had a Song – Lieder und Sänger der USA* (1988), *Crossing the River: A Memoir of the American Left, the Cold War, and Life in East Germany* (2003), *Madrid du Wunderbare* (2006), *A Socialist Defector: From Harvard to Karl-Marx-Allee* (2019) and *Rebel Girls: 34 amerikanische Frauen im Porträt* (second revised edition 2024). He is currently the author and editor of the monthly *Berlin Bulletins*.

Susan Neiman (Potsdam)

Paul Robeson and the Question of Stalinism

During the McCarthy Era, Robeson's deep ties to socialism, and the Soviet Union, led to the loss of his health, his wealth and his passport. Today's anti-communists are more subtle but all the more insidious: many praise Robeson's activism on behalf of African-Americans, but leave out mention of his socialist engagement. When unable to ignore them, authors seek to excuse them by pointing out that the Communist Party was better on civil rights questions than others. This is true, given its commitment to international solidarity. But Robeson's commitment to that solidarity was never tribalist. While there is no evidence that he joined the Communist Party, his appreciation of many of its principles and his love of the Soviet Union never wavered, even during Stalinism's darkest days. I will examine the reasons for the position which puzzle and disturb some of his admirers.

Susan Neiman lives in Berlin and is Director of the Einstein Forum. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Neiman studied philosophy at Harvard, completing her Ph.D. under John Rawls and Stanley Cavell. She also studied at the Freie Universität Berlin, and was professor of philosophy at Yale and at Tel Aviv University. Her books, translated into many languages, include *Slow Fire: Jewish Notes from Berlin* (1991); *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (1994); *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (2002); *Fremde sehen anders* (2005); *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-up Idealists* (2008); *Why Grow Up?* (2014); *Widerstand der Vernunft. Ein Manifest in postfaktischen Zeiten* (2017); *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (2019); and *Left is not Woke* (2023). She has also published over one hundred essays in many newspapers, magazines and journals. She is a member of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and the American Philosophical Society.

Nell Painter (Newark)

The Life of a Southern Negro Communist Hosea Hudson (1898–1988)

Hosea Hudson, a comrade of Paul Robeson's from Birmingham, Alabama, did not move in Robeson's lofty circles, but admired him from afar. The Narrative of *Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (1979), my second book, recounts Hudson's experiences as a local activist, building Birmingham's labor movement, and creating the city's first voting rights organization. Just as Paul Robeson embodied the glamorous, international dimension of the twentieth-century American Left, Hudson personified the importance of its rank and file in the crucial territory of the segregated American South.

Nell Painter is Edwards Professor of American History Emerita at Princeton University, and formerly director of Princeton's Program in African-American Studies. She has published acclaimed works on 19th and 20th Century history of the Southern United States (*Standing at Armageddon*, 1989; *The History of White People*, 2011), and has been awarded the American Historical Association's Award for Scholarly Distinction. Professor Painter currently holds a fellowship at the American Academy in Berlin. In addition to her writing, she creates art revolving around the discrimination against African Americans, both displaying this artwork and incorporating it into her written work, as in her most recent volume of essays, *I Just Keep Talking* (2024).

Susan Robeson (New York)

Susan Robeson, an American author and producer, has been a filmmaker and broadcast journalist for most of her career. Her works, including the feature documentary *Don't Believe the Hype*, have appeared on PBS, Channel 4/UK, NBC and ABC affiliates, and at the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum and Lincoln Center Film Society.

As executive producer of PBS in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Robeson transformed the station's second channel into a model for community empowerment and development, working with BIPOC communities, as well as street gangs around the nation documenting their efforts to organize peace treaties. Robeson also trained township activists in post-apartheid South Africa in broadcast-quality production, and she designed a nationwide citizen journalism initiative for the President of Timor-Leste—the Nobel Peace laureate Dr. Ramos-Horta—to help build democracy in this first new nation of the 21st century. Early in her career, she co-founded Third World Newsreel, an independent film production and distribution collective and co-produced *LIKE IT IS with GIL NOBLE*, the longest-running Black produced program on television.

Robeson has been a visiting professor in film, communications and Africana Studies at Macalester College, Carleton College, William Paterson University and Rutgers University, where she is a part-time lecturer.

Robeson is executive producer of *Paul Robeson: Voice of Freedom—The Complete Columbia, RCA HMV and Victor Recordings*, a SONY 14-CD box set with remastered tracks and a richly illustrated 160-page book for which she contributed an essay. She is the author of *The Whole Word In His Hands: A Pictorial Biography of Paul Robeson*; *Grandpa Stops A War*; and author/editor of the forthcoming, *Paul Robeson and Eslanda G. Robeson: Unpublished and Selected Correspondence, Diaries and Writings, 1922–1973*.

Albie Sachs (Capetown)

The Importance of Paul Robeson to the South African Struggle

Paul Robeson's work for racial and economic justice stands out for its global scope. He was actively concerned with racism and other forms of oppression everywhere, with particular interest in the anti-colonial struggles in Africa. For this work, the United Nations honoured him with a posthumous special tribute on the occasion of his 80th birthday, in 1978, at which Mfanafuthi J. Makatini, representing the ANC, said, "To the African people...and the oppressed and struggling people of South Africa in particular, Paul Robeson was more than a legendary artist... To our people, Paul Robeson was also an outstanding and selfless freedom fighter...an outstanding champion of the emancipation of the country". This talk will look into the details of Paul Robeson's life, work, and thought which warranted this place within the South African fight against Apartheid.

Albie Sachs is a South African lawyer, activist, and writer. He was appointed a judge in first Constitutional Court of South Africa, and became an internationally recognised common law judge. After several detentions in the late 1960s on account of his activist work against Apartheid, Sachs was forced to leave South Africa. He continued his ANC work abroad, including first England and then Mozambique, where he survived an assassination attempt in 1988. Sachs was able to return to South Africa in 1990, where he was subsequently closely involved in the creation of the post-apartheid 1996 constitution. Sachs has written several books on justice in South Africa and his experiences as an activist judge, and has won many awards both for the books—e.g., *Soft Vengeance of a Freedom Fighter* (2009); *Strange Alchemy of Life and Law* (1990)—and for his contributions to peace and justice: e.g., the Reconciliation Award (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation); the Legion of Honour (France); Order of the Southern Cross (Brazil).

Penny M. Von Eschen (Charlottesville)

Paul Robeson and the Anti-Imperialist Imagination

Focusing on Robeson's relationships with South Asian and African activists including the Assamese musician Bhupen Hazarika, the paper will discuss Robeson's anti-colonial and anti-imperialist politics from the 1930s through the Cold War and the expansion of U.S. imperial projects in the wake of World War II. The global appeal of Robeson's anti-imperialist vision proved profoundly threatening to the U.S. State, with multiple government agencies going to extraordinary lengths to silence him. I will examine important remembrances of Robeson's legacy, including that of the late African American poet, Jayne Cortez, while also noting that contemporary writers continue to distort Robeson's legacy by consciously or unconsciously invoking anti-communism, and/or evading the capaciousness of his universalist commitments.

Penny M. Von Eschen is Professor of History and William R Kenan, Jr Professor in American Studies at the University of Virginia. She works at the intersections of African American history, cultural history, the global cold war, and the study of the United States in global and transnational dimensions, with monographs such as *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (2004), *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (1997) and *Paradoxes of Nostalgia: Cold War Triumphalism and Global Disorder Since 1989* (2022). She has written on Duke Ellington in Baghdad (2007), and co-curated "Jam Sessions: American's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World," a photography exhibition on the jazz ambassador tours, with Meridian International Center, Washington D.C. She is currently working on a book exploring crises of authority in anti-colonial counter-publics in the years following the Second World War.

Daniel G. Williams (Swansea)

Paul Robeson and Wales Towards a Particularist Universalism

In an interview of 1958, Paul Robeson suggested that the fusion of class and ethnic identities in his thought was a result of his experiences in Wales: “[T]oday I feel as much at home in the Welsh valley[s] as I would in my own Negro section in any city in the United States. I just did a broadcast by transatlantic cable to the Welsh valley[s], a few weeks ago, and here was the first understanding that the struggle of the Negro people, or of any people, cannot be by itself – that is, the human struggle...That defines my philosophy. It’s a joining one. We are a working people, a laboring people – the Negro people.” This passage is striking due to the apparent tension between the declaration of ethnic particularity – ‘the Negro people’ – and an internationalist, universalist commitment to ‘the human struggle’. My paper will consider Wales a space where the tensions between universalist internationalism and ethnic particularism in Robeson’s thought were played out, both during his life and posthumously.

Daniel Gwydion Williams is a cultural critic and one of Wales’ leading public intellectuals. His research interests range from the 19th century to the present, encompassing Welsh language and English language literatures on both sides of the Atlantic. These interests are linked by a concern with questions of nationalism, ethnicity and identity. Williams was born in Aberystwyth in 1972 and educated at Ysgol Gymraeg Aberystwyth and Ysgol Gyfun Penweddig. He studied for his PhD in English Literature (2001) at Cambridge University where his time at King’s College was funded by the then AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board). Williams began teaching at Swansea University in January 2000. Beyond academia, he is particularly interested in music and politics. He is a semi-professional jazz saxophonist and founder-member of the jazz-folk sextet Burum who have released three albums: *Alawon* (2007), *Caniadau* (2012), *Llef* (2016). He lives in the Neath constituency where he stood as the Plaid Cymru/ Party of Wales candidate in the Westminster elections of 2017 and 2019.

Benjamin Zachariah (Potsdam)

Paul Robeson, Travelling Ideas, Migrating Songs Reflexions on Lingering Internationalisms

My talk explores the historical contexts of Robeson's itineraries across the world, with some of Paul Robeson's Indian circles, which were actually circles made in London and concerned with Spain, the Comintern, and anti-fascism, at the centre. These circles included the future Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the 'Eurasian' and future Civil Rights activist Cedric Dover. Robeson never made it to India, though he was scheduled to perform there in 1961, but his music was sung in translation in Bengali, songs were composed about him, and his 60th birthday was celebrated in three Indian cities in 1958. The paper also discusses the music of the Popular Front, in India, and then in India after independence.

Benjamin Zachariah is a member of the Einstein Forum research staff. He completed his undergraduate degree history, philosophy and literature at Presidency College, Calcutta, and his PhD in history at Trinity College, Cambridge. He taught for many years at Sheffield University, was Professor of History in Calcutta and Halle, and has held previous senior research fellowships at the University of Trier, the Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University, and the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, among other places. His research interests include the politics of historical knowledge, historical theory and historiography, global fascism, transnational revolutionary networks, nationalisms, and memory. Zachariah is the author of *Nehru* (2004), *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History, c. 1930–1950* (2005), *Playing the Nation Game: The Ambiguities of Nationalism in India* (2011, 2016; revised edition *Nation Games* 2020), and *After the Last Post: The Lives of Indian Historiography in India* (2019; South Asia edition 2023). He is co-editor of *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, and World Views 1917–1939* (2015), and of *What's Left of Marxism: Historiography and the Possibility of Thinking with Marxian Themes and Concepts* (2020; paperback 2022).



Paul Robeson mit Albert Einstein, 1948 © Gettyimages /Foto Bettmann

Exhibit

The Whole World In His Hands

Photographs from the collection of the Robeson Family Trust

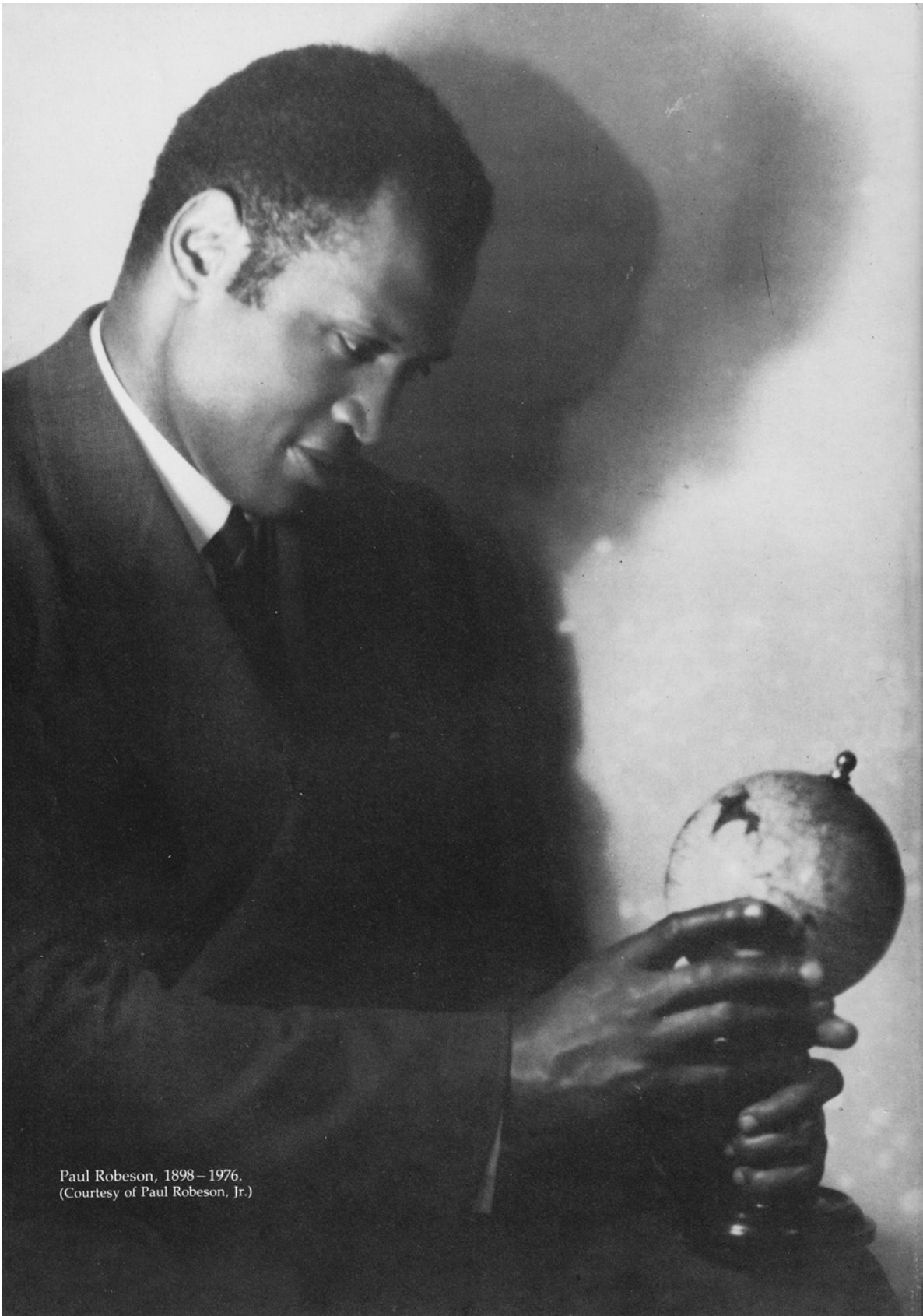
Descriptions of Paul Robeson by those who knew him are so consistently rapturous you might suspect he was invented. But there are very, very many, and they've been vetted by good historians. All the evidence suggests that his talents and achievement embodied the very highest of which humankind is capable. On top of it all he was tall, strong, and in younger years so beautiful that sculptors and photographers begged to portray him. Susan Robeson has assembled many photographs of her grandfather in her pictorial biography *The Whole World in His Hands*, from which we have chosen a selection for our exhibit. We are grateful to the Robeson Family Trust, which owns the copyright, for allowing us to display them at the Einstein Forum.

Showing at the Einstein Forum: Thurs 26 Sept 2024 to Fri 28 February 2025



Concert at Peace Arch Park, 1952 (Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.)

© Robeson Family Trust. Photography of the exhibit is not permitted.



Paul Robeson, 1898–1976.
(Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.)

Paul Robeson, 1898–1976 (Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.)

© Robeson Family Trust. Photography of the exhibit is not permitted.

Denkfest: Celebrating the Kant Jubilee

2024 is the 300th anniversary of Immanuel Kant's birthday. To celebrate the greatest philosopher of the Enlightenment, the Einstein Forum hosted a series of events taking up Kant's own challenge to put the ideas of the Enlightenment to the test and showing its ability to withstand recent critiques. For abandoning the Enlightenment, as many urge us to do today, means not only abandoning efforts to cultivate our capacities for reason, but also three principles at the core of any progressive worldview: a commitment to universalism over tribalism, to a firm distinction between justice and power, and a belief in the possibility of progress itself. To engage the public with these questions, our Denkfest comprised several events:

Enlightenment on Trial

International Conference at the Einstein Forum, 5–8 July, 2024

Including Aleida Assmann, David Bell, Lorraine Daston, Stephen Holmes, Daniel Kehlmann, Philip Kitcher, Claire Messud, Fintan O'Toole, Lea Ypi

The Power of Enlightenment – Walking with Kant

Installation by Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway

Orangerie, Neuer Garten, Potsdam (24 Aug–25 Sept 2024)

Enlightenment in the World

Conference at the Einstein Forum and the Humboldt Forum (29–31 Aug 2024)

Including Aziz Al-Azmeh, Teresa Koloma Beck, Ibrahima Diop, Sankar Muthu, Mithu Sanyal, Keidrick Roy, Carlos Pena, Olufemi Taiwo, Raef Zreik

Tino Sehgal: *This Situation*

Experimental Salon, Einstein Forum (6–8 Aug 2024)

Herr der Luft – Lord of the Air (Ballad Play based on Daniel Kehlmann's *Tyll*)

by Christian Dawid, Daniel Kahn, Stella Morgenstern, and Jerry Merose

Orangerie, Neuer Garten, Potsdam (13, 14, & 15 Sept 2024)

Die Zauberflöte – The Magic Flute, performed by Wild Arts

Orangerie, Neuer Garten, Potsdam (19, 21–22 Sept 2024)

Martha Nussbaum: *Die Zauberflöte. Mozart and the Freemasons*

20 Sept 2024, Einstein Forum (Potsdam)

The Original Position – Der Urzustand (Educational project)

with *mediale pfade*. Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin (24 Sept 2024)

The Universalism of Paul Robeson

Conference at the Einstein Forum, Potsdam (26–28 Sept 2024)

Program

Thursday 26 September

16:00 Susan Neiman
Introduction

16:15 Susan Robeson
Keynote Address

18:00 *Performance*
Paul Robeson Choir

Friday 27 September

10:30 Korey Garibaldi
*From Princeton to Pushkin
Paul Robeson in and
beyond the Black Press*

11:30 Margaret Burnham
*Paul Robeson and the Rise
and Fall of Freedom*

12:30 *Film Screening*
Jericho (UK 1937)
Starring Paul Robeson

15:15 Peter N. Carroll
*Paul Robeson and the
Spanish Civil War*
[Read by Sebastian Faber]

16:00 Penny Van Eschen
*Paul Robeson and
the Anti-Imperialist
Imagination*

17:15 Nell Painter
*The Life of a Southern
Negro Communist: Hosea
Hudson, 1898–1988*

18:30 *Performance*
Julia Schell
Lara Secord-Haid

Saturday 28 September

10:30 Daniel G. Williams
*Paul Robeson and Wales:
Towards a Particularist
Universalism*

11:30 Victor Grossman
*The German Democratic
Republic's Engagement with
Paul Robeson*

12:45 Susan Neiman
*Paul Robeson and the
Question of Stalinism*

15:00 Benjamin Zachariah
*Paul Robeson, Travelling
Ideas, Migrating Songs:
Reflexions on Lingering
Internationalisms*

16:15 Albie Sachs
*The Importance of Paul
Robeson to the South African
Struggle*

17:30 *Performance*
by the band
Cultural Appropriation,
with Elizabeth Neiman