



## 7. PAUL ROBESON

*My Answer*  
(1949)

PAUL LEROY ROBESON (1898–1976) was a supremely talented African-American entertainer and political activist. He was born in Princeton, New Jersey, and he graduated at the top of his class from Rutgers University in 1919, where he was also an All-American running back. Then he attended Columbia Law School and briefly became a lawyer, before pursuing his real loves of singing and acting in the early 1920s. In 1930 he earned his reputation as one of the great Shakespearian actors when he played the part of the Moor in *Othello*. However, he also encountered a great deal of racism during his career as a performer, and soon he began immersing himself in political activism. In the 1940s he became notorious as a result of his statements in favor of the Soviet Union, which he believed was superior to the United States in many respects. In retaliation, the U.S. government denied him a passport to travel abroad, thereby helping to ruin his career. In the remarks below, Robeson defended his controversial beliefs in favor of black equality, black cultural nationalism, and an end to colonialism in Africa.

SOURCE: Paul Robeson, "My Answer," as told to Dan Burley, *New York Age* (August 6, 13, 20 and September 3, 17, 1949), reprinted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918–1974*.

SELECTED READINGS: Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (2005). Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (1988).

I'm in the headlines and they're saying all manner of things about me such as "enemy" of the land of my birth, "traitor" to my country, "dangerous radical" and that I am an "ungrateful" cur. But they can't say that I am not 100 per cent for my people. The American Press has set out on its own campaign of deliberate misquotation and distortion of the things I say and do, trying to set my people against me, but they can't win because what I say is the unadulterated truth which cannot be denied.

Everybody is trying to explain Paul Robeson. That isn't hard. I'm just an ordinary guy like anyone else, trying to do what I can to make things match, to find and tie up the loose ends. I am asked, do I think the salvation of the American Negro lies in complete integration—social, political and economic, or in a highly developed Negro nationalism. Let me answer it in my way.

The whole Negro problem has its basis in the South—in the cotton belt where Negroes are in the majority. That is the only thing that explains me completely. The Negro upper class wants to know why I am out here struggling in behalf of the oppressed, exploited Negro of the South when I could isolate myself from them like they do and become wealthy by keeping quiet on such disturbing subjects. This, I have found, would not be true of me. What I earn doesn't help my people that much. I have relatives in the South still struggling to make a living. The other night in Newark, one relative of mine was in the audience. He is a mason and a carpenter. What I do personally doesn't help him. I found I have to think of the whole background of the Negro problem. Therefore I have taken my obligations to the Negro people very seriously.

I have asked myself, just what Negro people am I fighting for? The big Negroes take it that I am fighting for them and since they're comfortable and living good, they don't want too much fighting or things said that might prove embarrassing to their positions. My travels abroad, however, have shown me what and whom I am fighting for. During my travels, I met native Africans, West Indians, Chinese,

East Indians and other dark people who are fighting for the same thing—freedom from bondage of the imperialistic Wall St., the bankers and the plantation bosses, whether in London or in New York. The big Negro wants somebody to fight for him, but his objectives are purely selfish. If I am fighting for the Negroes on Strivers Row, I must fight for every Negro, wherever he may be.

Let's return again to the fact that the whole Negro problem has its basis in the South. Do you know that out of 15 million Negroes in the United States, nearly 10 million live and die in the South? I've got to be interested in basic problems, the people and conditions on the lower levels of life. I found that Negroes constitute 98 per cent of the population of the West Indies. Without the Negro there could be no economic South and there could be no economic West Indies to make the bankers and overlords of Wall St. fabulously wealthy. In the South, Negroes do most of the work and get nothing from it in return.

I understand these things better on my travels abroad. In England I met boys and girls from Africa working on ships, in the schools and elsewhere and I met fellows from the West Indian Islands, all trying to work out their destinies the best way they could. It became very clear to me what is happening to them. The continent of Africa belongs to them and should belong to them now. The same goes for the West Indies which the Negro built up, only to have a few people from the United States and from England move in and take it away from them and then rule them by absentee landlordism with headquarters in Wall St. and in London. These are the people who own the sugar plantations in the West Indies and in Louisiana and the tobacco plantations in North Carolina.

It is very easy to see, as in the question of India, China, Africa and the West Indies, the future of these people in the independence of their own countries. I see the Negro's struggle as demanding great concentration on the question as to where he is going and who is leading him there. We must come together as a people, unite and close ranks and with our own unity we must try and find the right allies—those whose struggles are identical to our own. We cannot escape the fact that our struggles over the last 300 years have driven us together.

Suppose that in the South, where the Negroes are in the majority in the agricultural belt, we had the vote like everyone else. What would happen? Wouldn't Negroes be in Congress, be governors, judges, mayors, sheriffs and so on? Wouldn't they be in control in the South and run things as the minority people down there are doing at this very moment?

There you have your answer to that charge that I am fomenting strife and plotting with a foreign government to establish a Black Republic in the South. What would happen—even tomorrow—if the Negro was allowed to vote? Without any nonsense, you would have a tremendous concentration of Negro power in the United States. Many people would object and oppose it on various grounds, principally racial and economic, but you have a concentration of Irish power in Boston, Italian power in New York, and so on. Nobody has made a major issue of that, have they? What is wrong with our struggle for our right to vote, for economic liberation, for civil rights? To me, from the economic point of view, we should think of spreading our strength around so as not to put all our wealth and power into the hands of a few Negroes who would exploit that power like any reactionary banker to the detriment of Negroes in the United States.

There are two groups of people who are worried stiff about the growth of the unified power of the Negro people: one group includes the Dixiecrats like Rankin of Mississippi, Wood and George of Georgia, Tom Connally of Texas and Eastland of Mississippi. The other includes the reactionary industrialists and financiers who own many of the farms and plantations in the South on which my people and your people are enslaved right now. These are the people who work to keep the Negro in bondage.

My basic point is that these are the fellows who want the Negro to be loyal to them, to die for them in war, to make a profit for them.

We Negroes must think this thing out. What America are we fighting for? Obviously we don't live alone in America, so we must choose the right allies, as I said before, and these allies cannot be those Dixiecrats as named here. They cannot be those bankers and international financiers who run most of the country and own today all the resources of the South built on the labor of the Negro people. They

own the sugar, the tobacco, the mineral wealth. They own the West Indies where Negroes are 98 per cent of the population.

They are the ones who helped take Africa from the African people—our allies must be the progressive section of the American people—the honest progressives who find kinship in the common struggle for freedom, equality and unity. And who are these progressives? They are those who swell the ranks of labor: the poor white sharecropper of the South, presently being used as a tool by the rich plantation owners and bankers to pull their chestnuts out of the fire by warring on their Negro neighbors; the small business man and others of all races, colors, creeds and national origins, including the small, independent farmer—people who are passed up when the profits are handed out but who are the first thrown into the pot to cook up those profits for someone else. The Dixiecrats, like Wood of Georgia and those powerful reactionaries who hope to stamp out the militant struggle of the Negro for complete freedom, equality and civil rights, hope to keep all the wealth for themselves.

They are the ones who are behind the House Un-American Committee. They are the ones ceaselessly pushing the persecution of those unafraid to speak out and to champion the man down under, whether he be black or white.

When some of our leading Negroes select those most guilty of exploiting their people to get thick with in their social and economic affairs, they pick the wrong people no matter what excuse might be presented. Leopards don't change their spots and neither do those who think about us adversely change their thoughts overnight. This sort of thing I'd call "20th Century Uncle Tommism"—going back to the Big House to fawn at the boss' feet—and we shouldn't tolerate it one minute if we expect to get ahead.

Me? I'm out with the field hand. That's the only way I can see it. They tell us to stay in our place. Well, I'm staying in mine—out here with the field hand—the little fellow, the guy who gets pushed around, the fellow who has to do all the hard work and gets nothing from it.

I'm talking about the sharecroppers, Negro and white, on the sprawling plantations in the South.

I'm talking about the tobacco, steel and lumber workers; the men who tote the sandbags with chains about their legs to stem the Mississippi at flood time so as to save the empire of some guy in New York, London or Paris who has never seen the land which keeps him in luxury nor met and talked with the people on whose backs his kingdom rests.

Yes, that's the only way I can see it—stay with, work with, fight with and sing with the field hand, and if we stick it out long enough—we'll get the Big House!

We must solve our problem where we find it. Not by going thousands of miles away to take up something we are not familiar with.

Why should we leave the United States without first getting what is coming to us through a militant struggle to gain the profits that have come from our labor, our blood, our sweat, our tears? I'm talking now about the various schemes that would arouse false hopes in the Negro people about taking some other land as a homeland when we already have our home right here on American soil which will be ours when we make it our own.

Think what a Federation of the West Indies would mean economically. With Negroes 98 per cent of the West Indian population, why shouldn't they control the sugar, tourist trade, the banana and rum industries and the possibilities of further industrial development of the islands? Think of the amount of base metals and the other natural wealth to be found there.

A Federation of the West Indies would give Negroes a completely integrated economy that would make the West Indies one of the most important places in the world—connected with the Latin and South American mainland. Think of the strategic position a native West Indian—controlled political and economic federation would command. Think of the weight such a setup would throw in United Nations circles.

Suppose Africa were free and a great nation like China. We have to think for ourselves and also to include in intelligent thought those who are closest to us through the ties of blood, nationality, common interest and mutual aspirations. We want as many areas in this changing world of control as we can get as Negro people. Suppose we won

the right to vote plus our proper share of the economic spoils of the South: think of the tremendous pressure Negroes could bring upon the United Nations to help kindred people in other parts of the world. There is no reason to change what have become very significant and historic facts. Certainly, any Negro in the world would have a deep feeling for his own people, wherever they are, whatever conditions they might be in.

As chairman of the Council on African Affairs, I can truthfully say that the African people are highly cultured and not savage and cannibalistic as the newspaper, radio, book and lecture propagandists would make them. That is the Dixiecrat program to keep us fighting one another and to lead us away from the true paths that lead to the doorway to freedom from which we have been detoured over the centuries.

I am proud of my African heritage. In fact, I'm so proud of it that I have made it my work to learn several African languages for conversation and musical purposes. Mrs. Robeson has been in South Africa, in the Uganda and in the Belgian Congo and the French Cameroons. She has written a book on Africa, *African Journey*. I expect to be in Nigeria and French West Africa next year. There is a tremendous liberation movement now under way in Nigeria of which Azikiwe is the brilliant, capable and resourceful leader. It is very possible that Nigeria will be the first African nation to win complete liberation. Understand that we over here, whether from the West Indies or from New York, should consult with the Africans about taking something from them. This is in answer to the question: What Do You Think of the Back-to-Africa Movement?

At the Paris Peace Conference which brought all the reactionaries of America down on my neck, a Negro from French Africa spoke for an organization of one million Africans formed into trade unions in West Africa. In East Africa, Uganda and Kenya, there are very powerful movements for the rights of the African peoples. We must be very much aware of our allies of this time—and here we are dealing with 150 million in Africa, 40 to 60 million in the Caribbean and Latin America. All these people are to be considered, to be thought of as strengthening their own position in the areas where they live.

Likewise Negroes in the South and West Indies must think of the areas in which they live as land that belongs to them. That is where they worked or were worked to build up things—to till the soil, plant and harvest; to chop down trees and milk them of turpentine and other basic products for the industrial mills of the imperialists and warmongers.

They—the Negroes of the South—must not grow to thank John Rankin for being allowed to live down there. They must realize that they are the ones who built that which has been and still is being taken from them. Maybe, they should think of someday gaining control through constitutional means of that which should have been theirs all along.

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? I mean completely free the Negro from the shackles of the greedy exploiters of his labor and his talents. To be completely free from the chains that bind him, the Negro must be part of the progressive forces which are fighting the overall battle of the little guy—the sharecropper, the drugstore clerk, the auto mechanic, the porter and the maid, the owner of the corner diner, the truck driver, the garment, mill and steel workers. The progressive section sees no color line and views the whole problem of race and color prejudices and discrimination as a divisional tactic of those busy pitting class against class, dividing the masses into tiny, warring factions that produce nothing for them but discord and misery while a scant, privileged few takes all the wealth, holds the power and dictates the terms. This concentration of power in the hands of less than a hundred men is so strong that it can decide who shall eat and who shall not, who shall have decent homes and who shall be doomed to crowded tenements that are firetraps and rat-infested holes where children must be reared and the occupants live and die in despair.

I am well equipped now, although I have not always been so, to make the supreme fight for my people and all the other underprivileged masses wherever they may be. Here, I speak of those bereft

of uncompromising, courageous leadership that cannot be bought, cannot be intimidated, and cannot be swerved from its purpose of bringing true freedom to those who follow it. God gave me the voice that people want to hear, whether in song or in speech. I shall take my voice wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom or the words that might inspire hope and courage in the face of despair and fear.

I told the American Legion that I have been to Memphis, Tennessee, the stamping grounds of such Negro-haters as Ed Crump and others of the cracker breed, and I have been to the lynch belt of Florida. I told the Legion I would return to Peekskill. I did. I will go North, South, East or West, Europe, Africa, South America, Asia or Australia and fight for the freedom of the people. This thing burns in me and it is not my nature nor inclination to be scared off.

They revile me, scandalize me, and try to holler me down on all sides. That's all right. It's okay. Let them continue. My voice topped the blare of the Legion bands and the hoots of the hired hoodlums who attempted to break up my concert appearance for the Harlem Division of the Civil Rights Congress. 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 bloodhounds of the cracker sheriffs in the backwoods of the South, the trained voices of the choirs of hate. The song of freedom must prevail.