



Paul Robeson as Black Hegelian? Dialectical Aesthetics in *The Emperor Jones*

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I have my self-consciousness not in myself but in the other. I am satisfied and have peace with myself only in this other and I am only because I have peace with myself; if I did not have it then I would be a contradiction that falls to pieces. This other, because it likewise exists outside itself, has its self-consciousness only in me; and both the other and I are only this consciousness of being-outside-ourselves and of our identity; we are only this intuition, feeling, and knowledge of our unity. This is love, and without knowing that love is both a distinguishing and the sublation of this distinction, one speaks empty of it.

– G. W. F. Hegel

Come on, comrades, come around and I'll sing for you.

– Paul Robeson

The African American and Afro-Trinidadian writers W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) and C. L. R. James (1901-1989) are pioneers of the African American intellectual tradition. Du Bois's and James's studies of race, identity, recognition, and experience are prisms through which countless Americans view the world. Their analyses of African diasporic groups in the Americas have influenced generations of artists, activists, and scholars. One major source of discussion and dispute for scholars is how Du Bois and James turned to German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel to explore the unique experiences of African diasporic groups in the Americas as agents of change and resistance.

When Black American intellectuals turned to Hegel to seek philosophical answers to the social concerns of Black Americans in the twentieth century, they did so not in some abstract manner, but developed their study from the history of American intellectuals mining Hegelian thought (Kaag and Jensen 2017: 670-698; Kelly 1972: 3-36; Kulick 2001; Anderson 2004: 22-34). The Black intellectuals, writers, and artists who possibly held and created "Black Hegelian" perspectives, essentially inspired by Du Bois and later, James, were acquainted with each other's work and often in almost constant dialogue and discussion about historical, cultural, and aesthetic matters. None, however, considered themselves as belonging to a unified school of thought. While it is unclear if the disciples of Du Bois or James actually read Hegel, undoubtedly ideas were passed



between them, as these figures formed what Benedict Anderson might call a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (2006: 16).

What I term “Black Hegelianism,” then, is not something that encompasses all those who may belong to this informal philosophical tradition, nor acts as a complete intellectual history of the German philosopher’s influence upon Black intellectual thought (I will leave that to philosophers and intellectual historians). Instead, I argue for two possibilities. First, that “Black Hegelianism” imagines the unique rethinking of Hegel within a Black historical and cultural framework by tracking the Hegelian influence in African American aesthetics;¹ and second, the Du Boisian adaptation of Hegel’s concepts of self, recognition, and dialectics as a possible artistic articulation of Black emancipation. Ultimately, this essay explores a Black Hegelian aesthetic by examining the dialectical² performativity of all the interrelated political, sociological, and philosophical influences and elements that resonate in the performance of the indomitable actor and singer, Paul Robeson, in *The Emperor Jones* (1933).

The Possibility of a Black Hegelianism

If there is a beginning to Black Hegelianism, it is Du Bois’s “radical adaptation” of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).³ Although drawn to Hegel’s historical analysis, Du Bois rejects Hegel’s racist understanding of Africa and African history and culture and the infamous claim that Africa is irrelevant to world history (Hegel 2007: 91-99; Kuykendall 1993: 572). Instead, Du Bois decentralizes Hegel from his Eurocentricity to explore and examine the exploitation of millions of Black slave laborers and future marginalized communities of the African diaspora in the Americas, who have actually lived the long-suffering “labor of the negative” (Hegel 1977: § Preface). In turn, Du Bois becomes more Hegelian than Hegel himself (cf. Žižek 2012: 23, 47), in the way he interjects a (Black) Hegelian thinking to explore the rich history and culture of the very African and African diasporic peoples whom Hegel dismissed.

¹ While the concept of Black Hegelians is deepened in my graduate work, where I examined dialectical philosophy in the aesthetics of Du Bois, James, Robeson, and Langston Hughes, calling them “Black Hegelians,” what is here is more of what Jürgen Habermas calls a general interpretation as opposed to a general theory (Henry 2000: 101).

² “Dialectic,” and variations of it, appear throughout this essay, most often as a general form of Hegelian logic, whereby artists and thinkers within the essay orchestrate opposing modes of being, concepts, and aesthetics against one another in order to understand new potentialities that may arise.

³ The intersections of Du Bois, race, and Hegel have been discussed and debated by many commentators and scholars of philosophy, literature, and cultural studies (Williamson 1978; Adell 1994; Zamir 1995; Reed 1997, Allen Jr 2002; Gooding-Williams 2009; Buck-Morss 2000, 2009, Frank Kirkland 2008, 2012, 2013; Shaw 2013, Paul Kirkland 2015; Basevich 2019).



Du Bois mined Hegel's speculative dialectical synthesis to study slavery's effects upon people of the African diaspora in the United States. Du Bois especially focused on Hegel's analysis of recognition, servitude, and self in the so-called Master/Slave dialectic (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*), where synthesis and recognition are achieved when opposing forms struggle against one and another. Du Bois especially responds to Hegel's dialectical method or "speculative mode of cognition" (1991 §10) in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and "the succession of experiences through which consciousness passes" (1977 § 87) as it advances toward and surpasses its own limitations. Through experiencing opposing forms, one may complete a better or a fuller sense of self. For Du Bois, this meant reconciling the troubling sense of duality, his "two-ness," the "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (2007: 8), to strive for what Howard Winant writes as "the black soul's striving for wholeness, for synthesis and integration" (2004: 28).

Similar to his attention of consciousness as self-consciousness, Du Bois adapts Hegel's world-spirit idea into a developmental narrative of African subjectivities that pass through dialectical moments of time. In doing so, Du Bois outlines how Black Americans, as well as all people of color, may achieve self-actuality, analogously to Hegel's reading of history, as a developmental project, to achieve self-realization of where one is in the world, and to become a part of the universal world spirit. Du Bois re-conceptualizes this vision of universal connection as the moment when people of color, and in particular Black Americans, achieve equality and freedom.

Du Bois looks to Hegel's dialectical process of unsettled consciousness-as-self-consciousness struggling with competing consciousnesses as a form of recognition—as one achieves recognition for oneself and by the other form—to diagnose the struggle of competing Black and American consciousnesses (Adell 1994: 15-16). Du Bois conceptualized Hegel's notions of consciousness into a "dramatization," depicting the structural and symbolic violence that millions of Black Americans faced at the dawn of the twentieth century (Zamir 1995: 113). His "dialectical formalism" (Cooppan 2005: 308) of investigating Black American subjectivity, dealing with the effects of slavery and subjugation within Black American consciousness (Zamir 1995: 136), inaugurates a doubled mode of thinking, a "double-consciousness" (Du Bois 2007: 8), of being both Black and American.

Ultimately, Hegel's concepts of self, recognition, and dialectics were viewed by Du Bois as possible expressions of a multipurpose aesthetic of Black liberation. Du Bois sought artistic avenues to widen his dialectical vision of Black subjectivity and recognition. He believed that to bring Black American experiences to broader social and cultural consciousnesses in the United States, one must become "a co-worker in the kingdom of culture" (Du Bois 2007: 9). Du Bois believed that art is a critical space where



knowledge, ideas, and experiences may be processed to educate and instruct those who partake of it. Du Bois insisted that art functions as propagandistic agitation and protest, and as a racial, historical, socio-economic, and cultural instruction; that art, packed with knowledge and direction, should provide the audience with some form of edification and education (Rampersad 1976: 132). Knowing the constraints of political artists in entrenching their intellectuality in their art, Du Bois looked to embed his social and political theories into his creative writing, wanting to edify and instruct his readers on aspects of African American history and culture (Du Bois 2014: 269; Aptheker 1989: 323). Becoming a coworker in culture meant a dual assertion that art should function as an amalgamation of activism and cultural instruction. This notion⁴ influenced countless of Black American intellectuals and artists, like Paul Robeson, to expound and edify readers and audiences with their social, economic, political, psychological, and philosophical ideas in their aesthetics.

Robeson's art was inextricably bound by what he saw as the interrelated conditions of history and culture of "his people" (Wilson 2013: 730). Aesthetics, then, functioned as the means to both deepen Robeson's understanding of the Black American experience and to showcase Black subjectivity to audiences. He knew, as a Black American artist, that he dealt with "aesthetic questions" that other American artists "never confronted or understood" (Baraka 1998: 8), and thus sought artistic methods to frame his knowledge to wider audiences. Just as Du Bois understood that broader American audiences may not look at socio-philosophical treatises on understanding the Black American experience (Du Bois 2014: 269; Aptheker 1989: 323), Robeson pursued artistic ways in which to inculcate his social and political ideas.

Robeson's philosophical contribution, then, building on Du Bois's Black Hegelian logic, is found in his philosophic performativity. In particular, Robeson goes beyond Du Bois's doubleness to include multiplicities that he himself embodied. As an actor, Robeson understood that one must operate with a multitude of influences, and similarly, he also apprehends that he is not simply double, "ever feel[ing] his twoness" (2007: 8), as noted above, but multiple. Robeson "feels" his Blackness, Americanness, manhood, communism, aesthetics, performance, and so on. Akin to Darlene Clark Hine's notion of "fiveness," stemming from her criticism of Du Bois's invisibilizing Black women's subjectivity (1993: 338), Robeson portrays all the interrelated political, sociological, and philosophical influences and elements that resonate in his art.

⁴ While recent scholarship from Kwame Anthony Appiah, Shamoan Zamir, Stephanie Jo Shaw, and others, holds to a Hegelian introduction to general Black intellectual thought by way of Du Bois's early work (Appiah, *Lines of Descent*; Shaw *Du Bois and The Souls of Black Folk*; Zamir, *Dark Voices*), I argue that the philosophical-aesthetic traditions prepared by Du Bois also relate to many Black American artists as well. Thus, in considering a "Black Hegelian" notion of art as a philosophic endeavor, my study seeks what Jürgen Habermas calls a general interpretation as opposed to a general theory.



Robeson's performances, therefore, are the space of his dialectical processes and of his multiplicity. Through performance and artistic modes of production, Robeson mediated and negotiated contesting elements of fame, material wealth, and his social and political ideology. Robeson designed his performative work as dialectical constructs that synthesized his social and political philosophy with his aesthetic commitment to produce genuinely social-conscious artwork. In doing so, Robeson attempted to understand Black American consciousness as Du Bois and others did in their theoretical work, and to provide an intellectual path for others to understand their own experiences. Thus, Robeson's philosophic contribution to what we may perceive as Black Hegelian is embodied in his performative work and examined here.

Robeson and *The Emperor Jones* (1933)

C. L. R. James argued that Robeson was "a man whose history is not to be understood unless seen in the context of the most profound historical movements of our century" (Swindall 2013: 7). Indeed, the same historical forces that impacted his philosophical forbearers, Du Bois and James, impacted Robeson in equal and yet profoundly different ways. Born in 1898 to a father who was a minister and former runaway slave, and to a mother from a distinguished Philadelphia family, Robeson is famous for his athleticism, activism, performativity, and artistry. Robeson is also arguably the greatest baritone singer the world has ever known. Throughout his considerable life and career, from the 1930s onward, Robeson was measured as one the most famous and important Americans in the world. However, at the height of his success, the United States government blacklisted and banished Robeson for a decade because of his unwavering support of anti-racist, anti-colonialist, and socialist civil rights causes, nearly relegating Robeson to a cultural and historical footnote.

Contemporary scholars have sought to retrieve Robeson from historical obscurity (Swindall 2013; Goodman 2013; Duberman 2014; Horne 2016; Redmond 2020) and to redeem the figure that "represented so much," as James wrote, for people of color, workers, and for music and culture (James 2013: 222). Robeson's impact upon a Black consciousness and culture, as James again identifies, was not only "his singing, his public performance, his tremendous personality." When Robeson rose to fame:

People were beginning at last to recognize that black people were people like anyone else. [...] People began to have a different attitude. And the attitude was not only in politics and in word, the attitude was not only in people who were acting and singing—the attitude was expressed very sharply and concretely in the personality of Paul Robeson. (James 2013: 221)



Robeson's celebrity as actor, performer, and singer provided him interesting and unique avenues in which to speak upon the social and political ills of the world as his figure cut across important shifts in both American and world history.

Robeson was not merely gifted with performance and words, but also with ideas. Philosophy, culture, and politics all intersected in his performative imagination in powerful ways. While his intellectual curiosity was perhaps camouflaged by his personality or his philosophical contemporaries, Robeson conceived and portrayed himself as an artist of cultural, social, and political ideology.

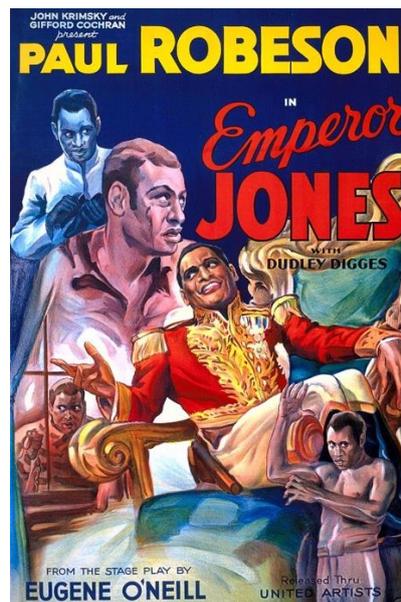


Fig. 1. Theatrical release poster, United Artists, 1933.

Robeson's portrayal of Brutus Jones in the 1933 film, *The Emperor Jones*, and the surrounding artistic production of his performance, perhaps best captures his Black Hegelian contribution. The film begins with a performative metaphor that echoes Robeson's own origins. There is a Baptist church full of singing and praying congregants. Led by a pastor and his deacons, the church members are singing for their own Brutus Jones, in celebration of his employment as a Pullman porter. Marking the achievement, the pastor leads his flock in prayer over Jones and his future. Upon entering the church, Jones regales his wife with tales of glorious futurity, stories filled with fame and fortune. On cue, Jones enters the church and leads the congregation in the old spiritual "Let Me Fly." The pastor and church devotees seek to touch, hug, and lay their hands upon Jones as if placing their hopes and dreams upon him as he walks down the church aisle. Jones, as a vessel, is released into the world, instilled with Black aspirations and desires. Robeson (as Jones) materializes from the singing and shouting of the congregants, his deep baritone voice vibrating in song.



Directed by Dudley Murphy, *The Emperor Jones* is based on the 1920 Eugene O'Neill play of the same name. Murphy, an emerging independent filmmaker along with screenwriter DeBose Heywood, adapted O'Neill's modernist allegorical fable into a film that follows Jones as he descends into crime, prison, and tyranny. After escaping prison to a small, underdeveloped Caribbean island, Jones sets himself up as emperor. Through vice and corruption, Jones loses the respect of the people and absconds to the jungle in an attempt to flee his rebellious subjects. While in the jungle, past misdeeds haunt Jones. The film ends with his Jones's death at the hands of his subjects.

O'Neil's experimental integration of expressionism and realism in the play inspires many of the intense dream-like sequences in the film. Jennie Saxena argues that Murphy's progressive approach in filming, as well as the usage of music techniques, made the film an important example of early 1930s filmmaking (2003: 44). However, the film rapidly fell into controversy due to the portrayal of problematic racialized characters and social themes. Thomas Doherty explains that the film performed poorly in the South, as audiences took offense at the sight of a Black man ordering whites around. In the North, especially among Black communities, the film soured due to its use of racial epithets (1999: 288). Influential Black publications such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender* lambasted the representation of Black Americans (Saxena 2003: 47; Doherty 1999: 288).

Overall, Black representation in *Emperor Jones* was at the heart of the film's polemic reception. Maurice Jackson argued that critics decried Jones, a Black worker who plunges into crime and murder and becomes an abusive ruler over aboriginal islanders, because he reinforced negative stereotypes found in Black communities (2013: 149). The play and the film, inspired by O'Neill's perspective of Haiti, received harsh criticism over the portrayal of Islanders seen as primitive and naïve (Jackson 2013: 149). Many Black critics were shocked to see Robeson performing such a dubious character that vocalizes a number of racial epithets (Jackson 2013: 149; Doherty 1999: 288). In particular, the negative portrayal of one who turns on his own was deemed dispiriting for many Black American audiences (Jackson 2013: 149).

Robeson himself had doubts in post-production about his role as well (Saxena 2003: 43). He felt that the play had more exposition than the film, as the film had to go through several screenings of Motion Picture Production Code ("Hays Codes") censoring and post-production edits (Saxena 2003: 46; Doherty 1999: 288). Despite Robeson's trepidation upon the film's release, the role of Brutus Jones did provide Robeson a rich, albeit problematic, character to perform. Robeson's desire to perform Brutus Jones, making the character his own, is especially important to note since it exemplifies Robeson's becoming an intellectual and dialectical artist.



Robeson conceives and portrays himself as an artist of cultural, social, and political ideology. “The artist must take sides,” he famously argued and the duty as an artist to “fight for freedom” informs his performative imagination (Robeson 1978: 119). As a dialectical artist, Robeson manages the dialectical encounters that occur when one places conflicting ideologies and concepts together. Throughout his work, he commits to an artistic endeavor that includes cultural theory and practice, by attempting to synthesize his social and political commitments with his creative work. Robeson orchestrates an aesthetic that seeks to integrate his artistic expression with the philosophical, sociological, psychological, and historical aspects that impact his life and work.

Additionally, Robeson is interested in how his art—including that in which he is acting and performing—is dialectically produced, performed, written, and visualized. In the role of Brutus Jones, Robeson approached *The Emperor Jones* with an authorial intent on how to represent the character. This control was due to Robeson’s emerging star power. O’Neill had a non-negotiable stipulation for selling the rights of the play to the filmmakers; only Robeson could play Brutus Jones (Eisler 2010: 150). With this authority, Robeson was free to shift and adapt the role and make it his own. The artistic control that Robeson held provided him room to maneuver the character to what he and the screenwriters felt was a more authentic representation of Black Americans (Eisler 2010: 150).

As an emerging star, Robeson’s first authoritative requirement dealt with the filming location. He would not participate in any filming in the South, so as to not work or live under Jim Crow (Duberman 2014: 168). In this initial staging power, Robeson forced the film production to acknowledge his political and social consciousness. Robeson dialectically negotiated his various consciousnesses against an oppressive social, economic, and political reality that was considerably anti-Black in the early 1930s. Although this performative action is unknown to most audiences of the film, Robeson’s performances meditate upon that reality and dialectically challenge the production and the cultural apparatuses that support anti-Black repression as well.

Robeson performed Brutus Jones in both film and stage for many years. He approached the film’s racial exploration and performativity as an authority figure and ingrained his performance with the social practices learned from being Black in the United States. These performative practices, following Stuart Hall, turn Robeson’s performance as Brutus Jones into an activity through which Robeson can make his history known to the spectator (1990: 63). Thus, we can recuperate Robeson’s performance of Jones from criticism by understanding that through Robeson’s performance, he can, as Elin Diamond argues, tailor his performance to “enable new subject positions and new perspectives to emerge” (1996: 6). Against the problematic



conventions and assumptions about Black Americans that critics focused on, Robeson instead saw his role as Brutus Jones as an artistic space for philosophical contemplation (Robeson 1978: 70).

Robeson's performance as Jones emphasizes what I term "performative consciousness," or the dialectical process of contesting and conflicting consciousnesses that an artist presents during a performative production. Hegel describes art as "beauty of deep feeling" (*Aesthetics 1* 1975: 531), and performative consciousness links that affective response to what Diana Taylor calls "animatives," meaning "part movement, as in animation; part identity, [as in] being, or soul," (2007: 1417). Performance, Taylor contends, is a range of modes and categories that encompasses "the series of practices, conventions, presentations of self, and the aesthetics of everyday life" (2007: 1417). It is these essential classifications that performative consciousness seizes and forms into an expressed performative praxis. If performance "allows one to look at acts, things, and ideas as performance" (Taylor 2007: 1417), then analyzing the film *The Emperor Jones* (1933) provides a useful introduction to how Robeson intermediates influences and elements from his life.

Film is a useful form in which to study performative consciousness, as it is an "intentional technology" according to Vivian Sobchack, that presents "a certain way of being-in-the-world" to audiences (1992: 165). Sobchack writes that film is an "activity of embodied consciousness" connecting spectators and performers in "visual and visible" ways (1992: 7). Likewise, Steven Shaviro argues that film deepens the "corporeal sensation[s]" of audience members (1994: 266), forcing audiences to "respond viscerally to visual forms" (1994: 26). Thus, when Robeson portrays "the woes and wrongs of his people" as Brutus Jones (Robeson 1978: 70), audiences register the severe racial disparities within American society. Even if "answers" to those social ills are not provided in *The Emperor Jones*, Robeson is still able to "perform" his consciousness, showcasing the process of working through his experiences and modes of thinking to his viewers.

Robeson embodies his roles so thoroughly, Shannon Steen writes, that it allows his audiences to "step into [his] flesh" (2000: 349). Robeson's invitation for spectators to participate in his interiority creates a shared subjectivity, implicating the "real," as Peggy Phelan believes, through the presence of Robeson's "living body" (1996: 148). Shaviro writes that film "explores the minutiae of bodily postures and behaviors, investing, investigating, and embracing the flesh" (1994: 257). Robeson's "cinematic body," borrowing from Shaviro, "provokes and compels us;" forces spectators "to think" (Shaviro 1994: 257).



Robeson's embodied performativity of consciousness "counts," as Sobchack writes, as "direct experience" to his spectators (1992: 3-4). Moreover, his performances demonstrate "the expression of experience by experience" (Sobchacks 1992: 3), submitting his audiences to what Sobchack contends as "an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood" (1992: 3). Thus, through Robeson's invitation to step into his embodied portrayal, audiences become participants in "seeing" Robeson's dialectical negotiation and intermediation of the contesting multiple elements and influences in his performance.

By embodying Brutus Jones, Robeson can demonstrate his dialectical attempts in synthesizing the multiple cultural-historical perspectives that inform his role and character. Robeson guides spectators through the process of being Jones by imbuing his performance with shared specificities of what being Black means in the United States. Thus, spectators either know through a shared subjectivity or learn through Robeson's "living body" (Phelan 1996: 148) what complexities are within a figure such as Brutus Jones. Through his dialectical performance, then, Robeson is attempting to reconcile often contesting—racial, social, political, cultural—consciousnesses.

Robeson playing, or in a more phenomenological approach, "existing" as Jones, enables him to embody a character in a way that fulfills both artistic expression and philosophical representation. Bert States questions the limitations of characters portrayed by an actor "who is not the character but who forms the entire perceptual ground from which any such essence as a character can appear" (2007: 30). It is here, though, where Robeson's invitation to spectators to "step into the flesh of Brutus Jones" is instructive (Steen 2000: 349).

An attempt at reconciliation here is crucial as it deepens Robeson's Black Hegelian performance in the film. For Hegel, characters in a drama were free to act in pursuit of their interests, similar to Greek tragic characters, moved to act by the ethical (or otherwise justified) interest with which they identify. Even if, as in *The Emperor Jones*, Brutus Jones's actions led to a violent death, the audience is satisfied by the outcome, because, as Hegel notes, the audience sees the "eternal justice" (*Aesthetics 2* 1975: 1198; 1215) at work, as Jones meets his death at the hands of those he oppressed. This sense of justice, therefore, provides a "reconciliation which art should never lack" (*Aesthetics 2* 1975: 1173).

Consequently, as Brutus Jones progresses through the film, Robeson portrays various aspects of Black life. His body functions as the performed representation and mechanism of dialectical interrogation, pitting the psychological highs and lows of Jones, demonstrations of employment, crime, prison labor against his physical beauty,



highlighted by his display of his naked upper body (fig. 2). The audience especially “sees” this conflict when Jones escapes from his pursuers in the final act of the film, where Robeson dramatizes the haunting experiences of being African American in contrast with the beauty of his body and voice in demonstrative supplication.



Fig. 2. Robeson, as Jones, in supplication, *The Emperor Jones*, screenshot, United Artists, 1933.

Just as Shaviri explores the relations between film and the body in *The Cinematic Body*, writing “the cinematic body is ... a zone of affective intensity, an anchoring point for the articulation of passions and desires, a site of continual political struggle” (Shaviri 1994: 266), so too does Robeson present his body as a means of multi-representational intermediation. In *The Emperor Jones*, audiences glimpse Robeson’s synthesized identification of visual pleasure of the body with that of the suffering of Black Americans, as writers and producers envisioned Brutus Jones as both “a figure of masculine beauty to be possessed” but also as a “protagonist with whom the spectator is meant to identify” (Steen 2000: 349). The spectator, at the same time, “sees” Robeson’s dialectical process of embedding his body with Black subjectivity “of his people,” against that of a beauty possessed by external social and political forces. Therefore, the performative body is the text which we can analyze, as States writes, at “the moment of absorption” of the viewer when exploring the “meaning and feeling” of “the art object” (2007: 27).

Robeson was not just an artist performing in film, but a performer dialectically thinking through his filmic performances. The technical nature of film relates Robeson’s “modes of thought” with the vivid rendering of his body’s “technical methods” (Sobchack 1992: 165). Thus, as a medium, film is able to visually communicate Jones’s descent into madness through a series of emotive scenes. The final third of *The Emperor Jones* finds Jones alternating in supplicating to God for direction or defending poor



decisions when results turn against him. In concluding scenes, Robeson exhibits a philosophical discourse that illustrates a shared understanding of what many Black Americans face in the racist United States, but problematically, does not attempt to reconcile that fact with what Black Americans must do in order to transcend those harsh realities. Instead, the audience is left with Jones's violent death, a lack of clarity or understanding of Jones's motivations, and ultimately the negation "of a human soul" (Robeson 1978: 70).

Throughout the film, Jones presents different forms of consciousness: Pullman porter, convict, emperor, and fugitive. It is the penultimate scene, however, that best depicts the dialectical contest of those consciousnesses. As Jones is chased into the jungle by his subjects (and their drumming), he has a series of contemplations and hallucinations. In the moments of contemplation, Jones tells himself that everything has all been "a part of the game" (*The Emperor Jones* 1933), suggesting that the experiences he has had in his life were a process of negotiating different forms. This is further demonstrated by the way he slowly undresses, removing the military coat he wore as emperor. Once he is freed from the confines of the coat, he exhales with some finality, "now I can breathe" (*The Emperor Jones* 1933), expressing a form of fugitive consciousness. A stage not unlike what Hegel might regard as "the negation of certain determinations" (1991: § 82), whereby something else might possibly arise (1977: § 79).

While on the run, Jones psychologically deteriorates and begins hallucinating people that he has harmed and betrayed in his life. He becomes erratic and accusatory, challenging the hallucinatory images with a pistol, shooting at the images to dispel them.



Fig. 3. Robeson, as Jones, aims at his hallucination, *The Emperor Jones*, screenshot, United Artists, 1933.



These hallucinations represent experiences that showcase the movement of Jones's consciousnesses at important times in his life. The use of force, in the form of the pistol, underscores the action that is needed to work through opposing forms and ideas. The film ends with a feverish Jones stumbling upon those who are hunting him and being shot and killed. There is no reconciliation, no denouement.

The complexity of Jones dying in disrepair is part of what drew Robeson to the performance. As noted above, in these closing scenes of desperation and hallucination, Robeson was attempting to synthesize contrasting forms of consciousness, bonding Jones's experiences with those in the audience, especially African Americans (Robeson 1978: 70). In contemplating the role, Robeson remarks that there is something to gain from Brutus Jones:

His [Jones] is the exultant tragedy of the disintegration of a human soul. How we suffer as we see him in the depths of the forest re-living all the sins of his past—experiencing all the woes and wrongs of his people—throwing off one by one the layers of civilization until he returns to the primitive soil from which he came. And yet we exult when we realize that here was a man who in the midst of all his trouble fought to the end and finally died. (1978: 70)

Even in death Robeson expects audiences to “exult” in the fact that Jones fought to the end. As Black Hegelian, then, Robeson suggests utilizing experiences gained from his role as Brutus Jones for a benefit in the future – awaiting a “new form” to arise from Jones's death-as-determinate negation (1977 § 79). In true Hegelian form, then, Robeson proposes that his portrayal of Jones, even in his violent death, is not some finality, but a moment of change and fluidity, where a future Jones may recover and push to what Hegel might term totality (1991: §147), or what we would think of as “the whole.”

Robeson's “Ocean of Tone”:⁵ Music in *The Emperor Jones*

A vital aspect of Robeson's performance in *The Emperor Jones* is his voice in song. In the film, and elsewhere in his storied career, Robeson brought the genre of spiritual and Black labor ballads to a broader American and world audiences. In one demonstrative scene, Robeson as Jones works through adopted black labor ballads and spirituals, such as “John Henry” and “Water Boy,” at the prison labor camp. Through his powerful baritone, Robeson addresses the struggles found in suppressed racial and worker identities. Through song, he also outlines forms of resistance within those struggles. While working, Robeson leads his fellow inmates in song and stops swinging his hammer to sing the lead (fig. 4, 5).

⁵ Charles D. Isaacson, *New York Telegram*, 7 November 1929 (quoted in Olwage 2015: 550).



Fig. 4. Robeson (center-left) as Jones, at prison-labor camp, *The Emperor Jones*, screenshot, United Artists, 1933.



Fig. 5. Robeson singing, as Jones, in *The Emperor Jones*, screenshot, United Artists, 1933.

The symbology of spiritual-turned-labor hymns, with Robeson bare-chested working and singing (fig. 5), uplifts those around him in the prison camp and showcases the coded messages of liberation found in the music (Kelley 2008: 262). Viewers are left wanting, however, as Jones does very little to help others transcend the bondage they find themselves in. The scene of this performed symbolism of synthesized song and labor ends with Jones attacking and killing (albeit off-screen, to avoid white viewer backlash) a white prison guard in defense of another Black inmate. Again, instead of using this scene of righteous direct action for liberty from oppression, Jones is seen later



only saving himself from the consequences, which calls into question what self emerges when one attempts to dialectically process the influences and elements that mediate the self.

However, the songs chosen here are important. The Black folk ballads that Robeson sings in the film represents what Robert Gooding-Williams calls a “collectively shared folk-spirit” (2009: 140) of Black people. Like many, Robeson believed that the spirituals are a significant addition to Black culture in the United States. For Robeson, like his mentor Du Bois (Balaji 2007), Black folk music, developed from the spiritual, functioned as a unifying self-expression for Black Americans, with “an eye to Hegel’s notions of *Volkgeist*” (Gooding- Williams 2009: 140). No doubt that same collective spirit informs Robeson’s understanding and performance of Black folk songs in *The Emperor Jones*.

Robeson believed that Black folk music contains “songs of love and longing, songs of trails and triumphs, deep-flowing rivers and rollicking brooks, hymn-song and ragtime ballad, gospels and blues, and the healing comfort to be found in the illimitable sorrow of the spirituals” (Robeson 1971:15). This thought tracks a parallel Hegelian belief that music allows the listener to hear and enjoy the dialectical movement of the soul, passing through transformation and difference into a unity with itself. For Robeson, the power of music is connected with the performance:

As I act, civilization falls away from me. My plight becomes real, the horrors terrible facts. I feel the terror of the slave mart, the degradation of man bought and sold into slavery. Well, I am the son of an emancipated slave and the stories of old father are vivid on the tablets of my memory. (quoted in Musser 1998: 94)

Thus, along the way, Robeson’s music expresses and instructs listeners through countless emotions (Hegel *Aesthetics 2* 1975: 940).

As Hegel writes that music expresses the profound movements of the soul (cf. *Aesthetics 2* 1975: 934), Robeson connected this power of music in his musical performance in the film. His portrayal of Jones sought to make visible the shared experiences of African Americans, as he notes:

As I act, civilization falls away from me. My plight becomes real, the horrors terrible facts. I feel the terror of the slave mart, the degradation of man bought and sold into slavery. Well, I am the son of an emancipated slave and the stories of old father are vivid on the tablets of my memory. (quoted in Musser 1998: 94)

Robeson, through his performances, attempted to connect to broader notions of both world folk music and what Hegel wrote as culture-consciousness and Du Bois’s “co-worker in the kingdom of culture.”



Thus, as Black Hegelian, Robeson shadows Hegel in that the purpose of music should enable the listener and performer to experience a sense of resolution and fulfillment in what one encounters (*Aesthetics 2* 1975: 940). Music allows for those who listen to transcend via what Hegel calls “cadenced interjection” (*Aesthetics 2* 1975: 903), beyond the mere arrangement of musical sounds, into an “embodied” structure of feeling (Eldridge 2007: 120). Robeson’s singing during the prison scene in *The Emperor Jones* similarly idealizes music to be more than just an instant sensation for the audience. More than mere singing, Robeson’s choice of music, as “co-author”⁶ of the film’s music composition (Eisler 2010: 153), is the structured manifestation of one’s inner subjectivity.

Additionally, Robeson complements to Hegel’s understanding of music that through his voice, he can fulfill art’s aim to express the movements of the soul (*Aesthetics 2* 1975: 894). Therefore, the invitation underscores Robeson’s awareness of the dialectical process that he and his audiences go through in producing and seeing his art, which in turn allows Robeson to submit his own philosophical and artistic struggles for others to follow, to uncover a cultural connection they might seek. This was a “task” that Robeson believed was his duty to fulfill when performing and singing (Robeson 1978: 86).

Robeson’s singing and musical selection in *The Emperor Jones*, similar to much of his filmic and live performances, direct attention to how he understands and interprets “Negro soul through Negro song” (Schlosser 1978: 87). Music and performance become the intellectual and artistic space for Robeson to dialectically mediate and unify the influences that emanate in his life and work. Similar to the invitation to “step into his flesh,” Robeson proposes that listeners step into his voice and explore and examine along with him the social and political underpinnings in his music. This offer to step into his voice allows witnesses to view and analyze Robeson’s dialectical Black Hegelian performativity.

“The Huge Constellation Called Paul Robeson”

In dialectical fashion, the examination of Robeson’s dialectical form and method in the portrayal of Brutus Jones, functions as an opening for further investigative possibilities. Far beyond just a performer playing a part, his invitation for audiences to “step into [his] flesh” while performing shows Robeson as a performer *thinking*. His Black Hegelian aesthetic underscores the management of dialectical encounters that occur when he places contesting ideologies and concepts together in his performances. Robeson’s philosophic contribution, therefore, emerges in how he allows observers to become

⁶ The film’s composer is J. Rosamond Johnson, a “popular Harlem musician” (Eisler 2010: 153).



participants in the “seeing” and “being” of his dialectical management of identity, being, and soul in his performances.

This exploration of Robeson’s awareness of, and attempts at, negotiating a synthesis of influential social, political, and aesthetic elements in his performance in *The Emperor Jones* points to a Black Hegelian analytic—a lens to better understand Robeson’s “huge constellation” of artistry, performance, and scholarship (Baraka quoted in Rhodes 2016: 250; Redmond 2020: 117). This brief study reveals his dialectical aesthetic and points to unique philosophic positions beyond his philosophic forbearers.

Robeson’s performance commits to an intellectual artistic endeavor that underscores the presence of multiplicities of consciousnesses, the range of Black subjectivities, and offers the dialectical form in which one may navigate and contemplate those multiplicities. In this way, Robeson’s dialectical performativity also illuminates the possibilities of further Black Hegelian perspectives in the aesthetics of those within African diasporic groups who equally navigate the multiplicity of influences, consciousnesses, and souls in their cultural aesthetics.

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