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Résumé de l'article

Tales of Manhattan (Julien Duvivier, 1942) est le dernier film de fiction dans lequel Paul Robeson ait joué, un film que la star afro-américaine finira d’ailleurs par dénoncer pour ses stéréotypes raciaux dégradants. Les spécialistes de Robeson se sont fait l’écho de ces remarques négatives, tout comme les critiques français qui considèrent ce film comme une oeuvre mineure de Duvivier. Cet article se propose de réexaminer le film en le resituant dans son contexte historique et avance que la partie centrée autour de la communauté noire, dès lors qu’on l’appréhende de manière intertextuelle, s’avère beaucoup plus riche et plus progressiste qu’on le prétend généralement. Conçu avant la Seconde Guerre mondiale et projeté pour la première fois dix mois après Pearl Harbor, *Tales of Manhattan* apparaît comme un film historiquement « déphasé ».

Paul Robeson and the End of His "Movie" Career

Charles Musser

ABSTRACT

Paul Robeson made his last fiction film appearance in *Tales of Manhattan* (directed by Julien Duvivier, 1942), which the black star ended up denouncing for its demeaning racial stereotypes. Robeson scholars have echoed this negative assessment while French critics have likewise dismissed the film as a minor effort in Duvivier's oeuvre. This article reassesses and resituates the film historically, arguing that the black-cast sequence, when viewed intertextually, was much richer and more progressive than generally appreciated. In production before World War II and released almost ten months after Pearl Harbor, *Tales of Manhattan* was historically out of sync.

Voir le résumé français à la fin de l'article

> In just a few hours, I too had become fond of this man. And I felt [Robeson] had left some of his power and strength with me. He had become my hero.
>
> Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*

Paul Robeson was a towering artistic figure of the twentieth century. Star of stage, screen and the concert hall; at home with both popular and high culture; indeed playing the high-low interface with diabolical cleverness; he moved among the bohemian little theatre movement of Greenwich Village, the commercial world of Broadway, the black theatre of Harlem and the leftist theatre of Revolutionary Russia—and was just as comfortable with the correspondingly diverse realms in film. Moreover, Robeson was also a towering figure politically. As my friends on the West Coast like to say—he was a superstar.[1]

Given the time period in which Paul Robeson lived, it is inevitable that film has proved crucial to any serious understanding of his career as a performer. Most simply, film serves as an audio-visual record that gives us some general sense of Robeson's personality and style of acting—the way he moves and smiles. More concretely we must consider his career in the cinema itself: the ways he used film both artistically and as a cultural intervention. But to examine Paul Robeson's film career is a complex undertaking. With film as with many other endeavours, Robeson was "the great forerunner," the powerful black film star who could carry his own pictures—the man to whom Sidney Poitier would later look (Robeson *et al.* 1985; Poitier 2000, pp. 76, 88, 124, 135). At the same time, Robeson renounced most of his film career—leaving little of it untainted. He never mentioned his first appearance in a feature film, *Body and Soul* (1925), and he denounced his last, *Tales of Manhattan* (1942). In between, in 1938, he remarked:

> I grew more and more dissatisfied with the stories I played in. Certain elements in a story would attract me and I would agree to play in it. But by the time producers and distributors had got through with it, the story was usually very different, and so were my feelings about it. *Sanders of the River*, for example, attracted me because the material that London Films brought back from Africa seemed to me good honest pictures of African folk ways. . . . But in the completed version, *Sanders of the River* resolved itself into a piece of flag waving, in which I wasn't interested. As far as I was concerned it was a total loss.
> But I didn't realise how seriously people might take the film until I went back to New York. There I was met by a deputation who wanted to know how the hell I had come to play in a film which stood for everything they rightly thought I opposed.[2]

Interestingly, when the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at Rutgers and my co-curator Ed Guerrero wanted to undertake a full retrospective of Robeson's film career at the Museum of Modern Art, there was some resistance. From one quarter we were told that certain films were so embarrassing they should not be shown to the general public. These individuals, including Paul Robeson, Jr., and members of an outreach board at the Museum, expressed concern that we were out to destroy or

undermine Robeson's public integrity. Of course this was not our intention. We were and are interested in understanding this career, and it is my experience as a historian that "forbidden" or neglected areas are always among the most important to such a project. This essay is a re-examination of *Tales of Manhattan*, the film that disappointed Robeson so profoundly and threatened his public standing so severely that he renounced it *and* moviemaking. How can we better understand this picture? What intrigued Robeson about this movie to begin with? Like Robeson, many of the people working on the film were leftists. So "what in the hell" were they trying to do?

Approaching Robeson's Film Work: Four Rules for Engagement

In pursuing a critical engagement with Robeson's film, I have found four observations to be fruitful in reaching some deeper understanding.

1) My first point has been said before: Robeson criticism (as with discussions of black performance and characters more generally) has focused too much on positive and negative images—on stereotypes. This is not entirely unproductive, but Robeson himself was sceptical about these concerns and often flaunted his disdain for such middle-class moralizing.[3] Moreover, the resulting "image" has often kept us on the surface, revealing a discomfort—often understandable—with a deeper critical engagement of the works themselves. Sustained textual engagement involves, as Michele Wallace (2001, p. 55) has emphasized, examining historical change rather than frozen categories of "Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks." Nonetheless, many still find it difficult to credit Robeson and others with working creatively with types and stereotypes in ways that were theoretically sophisticated. Many still find it hard to consider him more than an unwitting victim of deeply racist culture industries.[4] Moreover, to move beyond questions of positive and negative images points towards the importance of intertextuality. Robeson's films become more interesting and more worthy achievements the more we situate them in relationship to other texts.

In his study of African American literature, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., suggests an approach we can use to understand and more fully appreciate many of Robeson's films. Gates argues that African American culture has always had an apparent narrowness of theme, a redundancy of subject that takes attention away from the signified and focuses on the signifier. It foregrounds how something is used or reused, re-formed or deformed. That is, it focuses on form rather than content. Thus it is the differences—made evident by strong similarities—that are important (Gates 1988). This is perhaps another way of saying the same thing: that intertexts, more than self-contained images and characterizations, are crucial to unlocking a text's meaning. At the same time these shifts, at least in the case of *Tales of Manhattan*, cannot be considered instances of an African American aesthetic at work but rather of a critical, self-conscious engagement with genre conventions, motifs and ideology. (Nonetheless, Robeson's initial participation in this project might be understood as an appreciation for its *modus operandi*—a mode congruent in some ways with his African American sensibility.) This suggests various complex issues that must for the moment be deferred: the relationship between Hollywood pastiche and a black aesthetic as characterized by Gates, Clyde Taylor (1998), Arthur Jafa (2001) and others. Certainly the handful of all-black-cast films made in Hollywood during the first decade of recorded sound—notably *Hallelujah!* (1929) and *Green Pastures* (1936)—provide a crucial intertextual framework for appreciating *Tales of Manhattan*.

2) My second observation is this: As scholars we must recognize and pursue the theatre-film connection. Theatre and film were deeply interconnected in the African American community. For black actors during the 1920s and 1930s, film was only one, and almost never the primary source of employment. Actors in race films of the 1920s, such as Evelyn Preer, Mattie Wilkes, Lawrence Chenault, Walker Thompson and J. Lawrence Criner, made most of their money in the dramatic theatre, often with the Lafayette Players Dramatic Stock Company. Others—including Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, J. Homer Tutt and Salem Tutt Whitney—appeared in films but worked in popular theatrical forms such as musical comedy. In larger cities, audi-

ences frequenting high-end race theatres often saw a film on a bill that included a play or revue.

Certainly the mainstream film industry appropriated freely from the stage—adapting plays, hiring actors and directors and, as Gaylyn Studlar (1996, pp. 95-111) reminds us, winning over and re-forming its early audiences. Nevertheless, the relationship between theatrical and film practices was far more fluid, intimate and above all reciprocal in the African American community. Robeson's first film, *Body and Soul* (1925), illustrates this point well. Made by African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, *Body and Soul* is difficult to understand as anything more than a sensational and eccentric cultural work unless it is recognized as an engagement with and critique of three plays by white playwrights that were purportedly about the Negro soul: Nan Bagby Stephen's *Roseanne* (1923) and Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun' Got Wings* (1924). Moreover, all three plays had featured Paul Robeson in the spring and summer of 1924. When dealing with African American culture in the period between the wars, looking for likely interactions between theatre and film is crucial.

3) A third point simply re-emphasizes another under-appreciated aspect of Robeson's film work: We should not lose sight of Paul Robeson's noteworthy, ongoing career in non-fiction film. This began in 1936 with *My Song Goes Forth*, a documentary on South Africa, and did not really end until the late 1950s or early 1960s. Of course he has often been a subject of documentaries before and after his death, including St. Claire Bourne's recent achievement *Paul Robeson: Here I Stand* (1999). Documentary has enabled filmmakers within black communities to present images of these communities to African Americans and to others at low cost—a more direct if still mediated form of representation. This has given it a particular value in African American culture. For the Robeson retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, we discovered his involvement in a number of documentary projects that went unmentioned or unspecified in Martin Duberman's fine biography of Robeson.[5]

4) My final remark is a more broadly based observation: Creative work is incredibly difficult. We must try to be

generous, and not just to Paul Robeson. This remark raises complex and perhaps under-examined questions about the historian/scholar/writer's relationship to her or his subject, her or his material. I do believe that deep sympathy and curiosity followed by—that is alternating with—a level of critical reflection are crucial. This calls for a double perspective—a wish to hold these two positions in some kind of tension. In practice, the process of writing history is more organic and complex. Many of us find ourselves grappling with authors, films, periods and genres that are under-appreciated, marginalized and/or seen negatively. Leaping quickly to embrace the other position can be too facile; rather I find myself working towards a new position. I have concluded that Oscar Micheaux is one of the great feature film directors of the silent era (along with Charlie Chaplin, Erich von Stroheim, D.W. Griffith, Ernst Lubitsch, F.W. Murnau, Germaine Dulac, Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov) and that *Body and Soul* is an extraordinarily rich achievement. But I could not have written that ten years ago, at least with the deep conviction I write it today. Yet we must also try to recognize and understand the position of performers, writers and critics such as George Schuyler and Paul Robeson, who vehemently disagreed with Micheaux and disliked the filmmaker's work. Should one favour Micheaux or Robeson in such encounters, which continue in somewhat different form even to this day? In the end, as scholars we can consider Robeson's and Micheaux's achievements—their alternate solutions to the same problems—without condemning one while embracing the other. This pertains to the dialectical movement of critical insight or historical knowledge. If Robeson and Micheaux represent alternate reactions to the social nightmare facing black people in the United States between World War I and World War II, both American and African American culture would be sorely impoverished if either one had not existed (indeed thrived) in the face of astounding difficulties. Indeed, our appreciation of one artist is necessarily enhanced by our understanding of the other. What we might call "critical sympathy" is a key to recognizing the achievements of Robeson, Micheaux, Edwin S. Porter, Lois Weber and many other artists

who have not been canonized within traditional paradigms informed by New Criticism.

Tales of Manhattan: Julien Duvivier and Popular Front Culture

All four of these points are crucial for thinking about Robeson's last fiction film, *Tales of Manhattan*, which was shot in the final months of 1941 and early 1942 but not released until August-September 1942. This feature fiction film contains six self-contained episodes that are linked together by a dress coat that passes from hand to hand, from one episode or self-contained story to the next. Those who wear it experience a mixture of misfortune and good luck until the coat, filled with money from a hold-up, lands in a Southern cotton field. Starting "at the top rung of society,"[6] each episode functions in a somewhat different genre with a different set of intertexts as it works its way to the bottom rung. The first episode is a sophisticated drama about romance and betrayal, infidelity and deception somewhat in the nature of Ferenc Molnar's play *The Guardsman* (1924; film 1931). The second explores some of the same themes but the characters are more youthful and it takes the shape of romantic comedy; featuring Henry Fonda, it evokes *The Lady Eve* (1941). The third is a version of the musical bio-pic that was popular in the 1940s, while the fourth reverses a riches to rags story with some pathos and human decency. In a brief transitional segment (the fifth), gangsters hold up an illegal casino, then escape via airplane. When the plane catches fire, the dress coat filled with loot falls to earth.

The concluding sequence unfurls in a locale radically different from Manhattan—the rural black South. This desolate part of the world is depicted in a highly stylized manner, which differs from the earlier parts of the film. These expressionist renderings of a devastated countryside recall images of World War I battlefields—contorted landscapes only slightly more realistic than those found in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919). They express the cruelty of its racist environment. In an odd mixture of leftist sentiment and Hollywood stereotypes, sharecroppers Luke (Paul Robeson) and Esther (Ethel Waters) find the money-filled dress coat. Luke initially plans to keep the

Tales of Manhattan (Duvivier, 1942): Luke (Paul Robeson) and Esther (Ethel Waters) find the money-filled dress coat. (Courtesy Museum of Modern Art)

money for himself, but his wife considers the windfall to be a present from the Lord and insists that it be used to fulfill the prayers of all members in the community. Money is handed out to children who need shoes and clothing, and to an old man who wants a coffin. In this brief (14-minute) episode, Luke goes through a rapid transformation in which he embraces a new-found revolutionary consciousness (perhaps a too rapid conversion to be entirely credible without evoking unfortunate racial stereotypes of black men going through rapid moral or ethical conversions and equally rapid falls). With more than enough money left over, Luke displays his new political verve by declaring that the balance will be used to buy land that the black sharecroppers will own in common:

> Luke: It's a mighty amount of money folks, and it ain't going to waste.
> Rev Lazarus: I can see the new church right now, standing on the hill, shining in the sun.
> Off camera voice: Buy a hospital!
> Luke: We're going to buy the land, do you hear? The land. And it will be our'n. And we're going to buy tools with edges so sharp

> the earth will jump up to meet them. And we're going to work that land side by side. Raising corn and cotton. And what we gets, we shares. There'll be no rich and no more poor. A new day is borning.

Luke's statement is powerful and articulate—perhaps as good an example of Communist ideological preaching as one might find in a Hollywood film. How did this come to be?

With *Tales of Manhattan*, the filmmakers intended to evoke a progressive, collective spirit that was at the heart of the Popular Front in the United States (Denning 1996). In some sense, this was evident from the early stages of pre-production. Producers Sam Spiegel (S.P. Eagle) and Boris Morros imagined a series of linked episodes, each penned by one or more prominent screenwriters, each performed by a different group of stars, and each directed by an A-list director. The film's progressive aspirations are evident in the specific personnel associated with the film. Musical director turned producer Boris Morros was a member of the Communist Party.[7] Its left-leaning writers included Communist Donald Ogden Stewart, Alan Campbell and the liberal Ben Hecht. Many of the actors also had progressive credentials, including Robeson, Charles Laughton and Edgar G. Robinson.[8] Among the directors envisioned for the film, the producers wanted such figures as Ernst Lubitsch, Leo McCarey, William Wyler and John Ford. At some point the producers approached Julien Duvivier, who had made Popular Front films in France before fleeing the Nazis. According to Eric Bonnefille, they asked him to direct several episodes not associated with a specific director. While expressing considerable enthusiasm for the project, the Frenchman was willing to direct either one episode or the whole picture but not something in between. With the other directors proving difficult to pin down, the producers hired Duvivier to make the entire film (Bonnefille 2002, Vol. 2, pp. 12-19).

Director Julien Duvivier was a veteran French director who had assisted stage-turned-film director André Antoine in the late 1910s and then went on to direct his own films from the mid 1920s onward. His international hits included *Pépé le Moko* (1936), and he made *The Great Waltz* (1938) in Hollywood

before the floodgates of war had opened. With the onset of war in Europe, he returned to the United States and became a member of the greatly expanded French community in Los Angeles: directors Jean Renoir and René Clair; actors Jean Gabin, Simone Simon and Marcel Dalio; as well as writers, cinematographers, set designers and producers. Duvivier created an elegant, international style for *Tales of Manhattan*, with what appears to be an auteurist evocation of his earlier French-made films—notably *La belle équipe* (1936) and *Un carnet de bal* (1938).[9] His use of a series of loosely connected episodes in *Tales of Manhattan* recycled the structuring principle of *Carnet de bal* and elements from *La belle équipe*, which focuses on five men who win a lottery and, rather than divide their winnings, decide to use the money to buy a cafe and work together. Here Duvivier evoked themes of the French Popular Front, including unemployment and collective ventures. Such themes were reworked in the final section of the film. Certain commonalities can be found in other Duvivier films such as *Au bonheur des dames* (1930), which pits department store magnate Octave Mouret against small shopkeeper Baudu, whose failing business across the street bears witness to the costs of large-scale capitalism. By the film's final scenes, Baudu's store has become an expressionist rendering of his desperate mental state. This claustrophobic, out-of-kilter world, buttressed by the razed buildings that surround it, anticipates the expressionist sets of the final, black-cast sequence in *Tales of Manhattan*.

Spiegel, Morros and Duvivier sought to make a bold intervention with their film. Even so, *Tales of Manhattan* was not without its problems from the outset. When Robeson read a draft of the script, he commented that the final episode was "naive, childish . . . my character must not believe all came from heaven. . . . At this point cannot wholly approve."[10] Some of these unsatisfactory qualities were inherent to the genre in which Robeson's sequence was designed to operate. As already suggested, the last portion of *Tales of Manhattan* can be understood as an ambitious engagement in the admittedly limited tradition of black-cast Hollywood cinema. *Green Pastures*, based on Marc Connelly's extremely popular play of that title, was an

inevitable starting point for critics and audiences alike. This look at the Bible through the innocent imaginations of black children begins with church elders and children getting ready for and attending Sunday school. The church in *Green Pastures* is a sparse, wooden structure—clean and well tended. There are plain, sturdy chairs for the children to sit in. And these children are equally clean in their Sunday best—as attentive to their religious training as one could reasonably expect. Mr. D.J., the Sunday school teacher, possesses folk wisdom and interprets the Bible with a charming naïveté. He and the minister are decent men, embodiments of simple, godly peasant virtues. This should not be dismissed too quickly. Certainly from some perspectives we can see how this was intended to be respectful. Depicting people in a dignified way (albeit with a false nostalgia of Southern black life) has a certain integrity, even if it conceals the true ordeal of their existence—as well as the true nature of Southern black religion. *Tales of Manhattan* turns much of this

Tales of Manhattan (Duvivier, 1942): Esther (Ethel Waters), Rev. Lazurus (Eddie "Rochester" Anderson) and Luke (Paul Robeson) discuss the source of the money and how it should be used. (Courtesy Museum of Modern Art)

upside down. The battered, barely standing church has holes in the roof, while the children are dressed in rags and perched on the rooftop. The church has no chairs. Reverend Lazarus, the minister played by Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, lacks the moral principles of the churchmen in *Green Pastures* and is ready to run off with the money that Esther and Luke had found. He is a self-interested opportunist.

More broadly, as Judith Weisenfeld has suggested (2004), the previous black-cast films emanating from Hollywood depicted black religion as apolitical and naïve. Christianity focuses on the moral battle of good and evil, in which religious faith provides the crucial ballast for African Americans to lead responsible lives. *Tales of Manhattan*, in contrast, rejects these films' assumption that black people lack self-discipline except to the extent that religion and the threat of a wrathful God can provide it. On one hand, the film suggests the radical political potential of the black church—as Esther and Luke use Christian principles to social ends. On the other, leaders of the church—as represented by Rev. Lazarus—can be unprincipled and lack the very moral virtues that they preach. They are ready to siphon money away from daily human concerns and use the money to elevate their standing rather than the goals of their faith. In short, the church—rather than Christian principles—is shown to be a drag on the people's struggles for a decent life.

Tales of Manhattan also engaged what was, at the time of its conceptualization, a very successful all-black-cast theatrical presentation: *Cabin in the Sky*. This stage musical offered yet another "naïve" and apolitical depiction of black religion with the devil and the Lord fighting over the soul of one Little Joe. Billed as "a Negro fantasy," *Cabin in the Sky* opened at Broadway's Martin Beck Theater on 25 October 1940 (Atkinson 1940, p. 19).[11] Directed by George Balanchine, it starred Ethel Waters as Petunia Jackson, Dooley Wilson as her husband "Little Joe" Jackson, Rex Ingram as Lucifer, Jr., and dancer Katherine Dunham as Georgia Brown. Another high-profile depiction of African American life and imagination in the tradition of the long-running stage hit *Green Pastures*, *Cabin in the Sky* was greeted with general critical acclaim by the white and black

press. Dan Burley (1940, p. 20) in the *New York Amsterdam News* described it as "the answer to a show-goer's prayer, and a sudden and marvelous antidote for the blues which afflict so many of us, these dark, uncertain days."[12]

After 32 weeks in New York City and on the road (Detroit for two weeks beginning 31 March 1941), the company arrived in Los Angeles on Tuesday, June 3, 1941.[13] The musical had a two-week run at the Philharmonic Auditorium as a presentation of the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera Association, then moved on to the Curran Theater in San Francisco for two more, beginning 23 June 1941.[14] With thousands turned away from the Philharmonic Auditorium, the record-breaking show returned to Los Angeles and its Biltmore Theater for a two-week engagement opening 21 July. Basking in the show's success, Waters turned down opportunities back East and mounted a West Coast rendition of *Mamba's Daughters*, which opened in early September.[15] Her desire to return to pictures under these favourable circumstances also influenced her decision to stay in or near Hollywood. *Cabin in the Sky* was considered certain to be filmed in the near future and in August Waters seemed close to signing a deal with RKO (Levette 1941, p. 2B).

The creative team behind *Tales of Manhattan* appropriated and reconfigured numerous aspects of *Cabin in the Sky*, as they added a Southern black-cast sequence in the late summer of 1941. By early September Robeson was hired to appear in the picture for a fee of $10,000.[16] The Duvivier film was in production by November 1941, with the final black-cast section before the cameras in December, about the time of Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry into war (Morris 1941, p. 3B).[17] The war and other factors delayed the translation of *Cabin in the Sky* from stage to screen. The musical would not go before the camera until the last day of August 1942 and would not be released until March 1943. This meant that *Tales of Manhattan*'s intertextual engagement with *Cabin in the Sky* was obscured for virtually all moviegoers. Duvivier's film was released one year after the original theatrical musical had closed, but eight months before the film version opened in Los Angeles and New York (Dunkleberger and Hanson 1999, pp. 345-346).[18]

Poster: *Tales of Manhattan* (1942)

Of the many elements that *Tales of Manhattan* took from *Cabin in the Sky*, the wholesale appropriation of the Ethel Waters character (Petunia) is perhaps the most obvious. Petunia is a powerful and morally upright, deeply religious woman and the wife of a man who has few of these virtues. As far as the Robeson character is concerned, the appropriation was more oblique but also more critical. Robeson had played many "Joes" in his day: *Show Boat* and *Big Fella* are but two examples. Here he plays Luke. This may seem somewhat of a departure—until we recognize that Luke and "Little Joe" are names that share the first and last letters. Clearly then, Luke can be compared to the central male figure of Balanchine's musical. He may initially appear similar on the outside (the L and E) but inside he is different (uk vs. ittle Jo). Like Little Joe, Luke's first reaction is a selfish one: he wants to spend the money on himself. But deep inside, once he is given the chance to reflect, he is different and defends the common good.

Cabin in the Sky, set in the Louisiana Delta, begins as Little Joe (Dooley Wilson in the stage version, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson in the film) lies mortally wounded in a fight with razor blades over crooked dice.[19] About to go to Hell, Little Joe is given a six-month reprieve by de Lawd, due to the powerful prayers of Petunia. The battle between good and evil in Little Joe's soul will be allowed to continue. De Lawd or de Debbil—who will win? Understanding the terms of this battle is crucial. To follow the Lord entails contentment in a modest job: After his recovery Little Joe is employed at a mill stacking sacks of flour, working with such verve that he threatens to send two of his co-workers to the unemployment line. Goodness involves devotion to hearth and home. It means devotion to Petunia, not the sensuality of Georgia Brown (Katherine Dunham in the play or Lena Horne in the movie). Most importantly it involves monogamy. The devil's work involves speculation, gambling, easy living, expensive and sexy clothes, fast beautiful women, jazz, amusement, dancing, staying out late and burning the candle at both ends. It involves pleasure.

Though distanced in some ways by the self-consciously naïve nature of the folk musical, *Cabin in the Sky* repeats and

reinforces the binary terms of black life articulated by *Hallelujah!* and *Green Pastures*. In these films and stage musicals, black men have trouble staying on track. Although Lucifer, Jr., seems to be losing the battle for Little Joe's soul, his lieutenants come up with the idea of having Little Joe win the Irish Sweepstakes. Notice of his fortune comes from "under the sea"—that is, from "down there." Little Joe quickly becomes a big spender and hangs out at a night club with Georgia Brown. Too much money for black folks can get them in a whole lot of trouble. It sure seems best if they stay kind of poor and hungry. That is, if Little Joe is a representative of black manhood.

The problems inherent in the play were noted by John Kinloch of the *California Eagle*, though muted in that the *Eagle*'s principal commitment was to promoting black employment in the film and theatre industries. Kinloch remarked:

> The white brother's favorite story about the colored brother has seldom, if ever, been told with such compelling charm and inoffensive exuberance as it is in Ethel Waters' triumph, *Cabin in the Sky*.
> Once you accept the fact that this is another story about black folks and their childlike conception of divinity, it becomes a revelation of beauty and joy. The entire production is staged with such apparent good nature and sincerity that the stock figures of de Debbil and de Lawd which have benighted Afro-Americans' theatrical history lose their bad taste and are transformed into beings of unstifled gayety.[20]

Kinloch's strongest impression of the show, however, was that "its actors had moulded it into something far greater than the original script." It could have easily been "an indifferent, even an offensive production."[21] Waters's performance, the musical's critical success and the employment of more than 50 actors and dancers made the difference.

The final section of *Tales of Manhattan* works to counter the stage musical's clichéd tropes. First, the setting is much bleaker: Duvivier employed a striking expressionism in his effort to depict the poverty of Southern black sharecroppers. In *Cabin in the Sky*, we often see the local people in their Sunday best. Their church is well tended and comfortable. Even in their work-a-

day lives, these people are a prosperous peasantry. In *Tales of Manhattan*, the black sharecroppers lack the most basic necessities of life: Not a washing machine like the one that Little Joe wants for Petunia but the clothes one would need to put in it. The hilltop on which we find Luke and Esther looks like a gruesome battlefield. These folk have always been fighting a war—a war for existence, a struggle against racism. Of course *Tales of Manhattan* was made by displaced Europeans who had fled another war zone—that of World War II. This war zone not only reminds us of the landscapes of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, it also recalls the end section of *Cabin in the Sky*. In the musical, a fight among black people causes God to send a tornado and destroy their town and dance club (like the Sodom and Gomorrah sequence in *Green Pastures*). The devastation is a by-product—collateral damage—in the fight of good against evil, morality against pleasure. In *Tales of Manhattan*, it is the economics of share cropping that are responsible for the devastated land. Here again this Popular Front film moves in the opposite direction. The narrative trajectory of *Cabin in the Sky* leads from a prosperous peasantry to devastation and death (though these are transcended by Petunia's and Little Joe's entrance into Heaven). In *Tales of Manhattan*, the barren expressionist battlefield of tenant sharecropping will be transformed into a garden. In both cases, however, money is the catalyst.

In *Tales of Manhattan*, as with *Cabin in the Sky*, a large amount of money literally comes out of nowhere. *Cabin in the Sky* suggests that this is a problem: it is bad for blacks to have too much money. The money comes from the devil: "from below." In Duvivier's film, the money comes from the opposite direction—it "falls from the sky" (on Christmas Eve no less). Money can be on the side of good. Lest this appear to be pure coincidence, *Tales of Manhattan* contains a protracted discussion between Esther and the pastor about the money's provenance. Did it come from the devil (as the pastor suggests), or the lord (as Esther insists)? In a kind of cosmic justice, the money that has been extracted from poor black farmers is returned to them. In one case, money is an agent of moral corruption while in the other it is an agent of empowerment.

The struggle between good and evil in *Cabin* has its parallels in *Tales*. In Duvivier's film, evil is found not so much in excessive, self-destructive consumption but in the all-too-human impulse to try to keep wealth for oneself. At first, Luke wants two or three tractors when he only needs one. With two or three he could become a capitalist, a wealthy landlord. In contrast to selfish capitalism (human weakness or evil), the film proposes a set of principles that are quite Marxist—to each according to his need (a divine or holy idea). When provided with a little money, poor blacks do not begin to play dice, run around with young women, and live carefree irresponsible lives. They use it to better themselves and their community, to build a decent life. Seeing the final vignette of *Tales of Manhattan* intertextually, in relation to *Cabin in the Sky* and *Green Pastures*, we can see that the film makes a strong, even remarkable, intervention.

In *Tales of Manhattan*, it is the pastor (played by Eddie "Rochester" Anderson) who wavers, ready to take the money and run. Only Esther's vigilance and his own momentary hesitancy prevent him from absconding. The poor everyday citizens are more truthful and trustworthy. Again this departs from both *Green Pastures*, where the pastor is noble and upright and becomes a model for de Lawd in the minds of the young children, and *Cabin in the Sky*, where the pastor consoles Petunia and provides her with needed counselling and support. With Anderson playing the role, the preacher becomes a buffoonish and opportunistic figure with comic overtones to keep it light. Nonetheless, Reverend Lazarus bears a family resemblance to many of the unprincipled parsons in black-authored writing and film—including the fake preacher Robeson played in Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul*.[22] There is also a resemblance to many of the preachers whose shenanigans were reported on the front page of black newspapers.

Luke as played by Robeson, who often played Joe, experiences some initial vacillation in his desires and intentions that are comparable to those of Little Joe in *Cabin in the Sky*—though along a quite different trajectory. Luke is the character who changes, who quickly outgrows his initial, selfish response and articulates a grander, more radical vision. Ester may point

him towards this vision, but it exceeds her own intent. It is a powerful transformation, a coming of political consciousness that originates from *within* the sharecropper—that does not involve a vacillating, externalized struggle between forces of good and evil. The terms of this change are perhaps underdeveloped and under-motivated, leaving it open to charges of being instinctive, unreflective and perhaps therefore incredible. But the change is powerful and fundamentally different from the weak efforts of reform undertaken by Little Joe in *Cabin in the Sky*.

Critical Reactions to *Tales of Manhattan*

It is not surprising that *Tales of Manhattan*, given its larger number of stars, had a protracted production history: filming was not apparently finished until the spring of 1942, which resulted in a mid-summer/early fall release. Twentieth Century Fox had a trade screening in New York City on 3 August 1942 and finally premiered the picture on Wednesday evening, 5 August at Grauman's Chinese theatre in Hollywood. The next day it opened at four additional first-run houses in Los Angeles, including the Loew's State and the Fox Wilshire theatres. It opened in New York City at Radio City Music Hall on 24 September.[23] Critics generally hailed the star-filled picture, and it proved a box-office success.[24] Bosley Crowther (1942, p. 25) of the *New York Times* considered it "one of those rare films—a tricky departure from the norm, which in spite of its five-ring circus nature, achieves an impressive effect."[25] Some critics, such as Dan Burley, hailed Duvivier's film for its political achievements; Burley (1942, p. 17) thought it "the most powerful indictment of the absentee landlord, and sharecropper system in the South I have ever seen on the screen." Certainly the political aspirations of the black-cast segment are strengthened if we place the film in relation to a series of books and documentaries from the second half of the 1930s: Pare Lorentz's film *The River* (1937), Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's book-length photo essay Y*ou Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) and Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941). These had heightened audience awareness of the horrific and highly exploitative conditions faced by black sharecroppers.[26]

In the black and leftist press, however, enthusiasm for the picture was rare as *Tales of Manhattan* quickly became a source of intense controversy. *The New York Amsterdam News* ran numerous articles over a two-month period: the first was headed "Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters Let Us Down."[27] Critic Marian Freeman asserted, "It is difficult to reconcile the Paul Robeson, who has almost single-handedly waged the battle for recognition of the Negro as a true artist, with the 'Luke' of this film." She then asked: "Why must our greatest stars of music and stage be forever relegated to humiliating roles? Why must the American screen consistently project the Negro as a mentally inferior human being? Why can't our stars make some concerted effort to raise the standards, and refuse, in no uncertain terms, offers of this type?"[28] With the active support of two newspapers, picket lines were thrown up at Loew's State Theater.[29]

Robeson supported the pickets, claiming the criticism was justified and that he "didn't realize it made the Negro look ridiculous until the shooting and then he tried unsuccessfully to get Producer Boris Morros to change the script" (Freeman 1942a, p.14). To the *New York Times* he commented:

> I thought I could change the picture as we went along . . . and I did make some headway. But in the end it turned out to be the same old thing—the Negro solving his problem by singing his way to glory. This is very offensive to my people. It makes the Negro child-like and innocent and is in the old plantation tradition. But Hollywood says you can't make the Negro in any other role because it won't be box office in the South. The South wants its Negroes in the old style.[30]

In fact, according to the script supervisor for *Tales of Manhattan*, who attended a Robeson Symposium at UCLA in October 1998, by the time of filming Robeson did not protest the script, at least publicly. It would seem likely that his earlier reservations were not entirely addressed and that he continued to express his concerns privately. At the same time, Robeson must have seen Luke and Esther as the kind of people from whom the Negro Spirituals had emerged and been kept alive. His role and the entire episode had both strengths and weaknesses. And yet after critics had levelled the charge that the role of Luke was a humil-

iating one, it was difficult or impossible to refute. Rather than Robeson transforming the role through his personality and authority, the role demeaned both him and his race. Such unflattering characterizations, once asserted, seemed obviously true. It thus became necessary for Robeson to distance himself from the film.

Further Reflections

To better understand what went wrong with *Tales of Manhattan*, let us return to the three different approaches to his work outlined at the beginning of this article.

First, let us begin by reflecting on how this episode was understood intertextually. Taken on its own, apart from the rest of the film, and viewed in relation to previous black-cast Hollywood films (as well as the exposé of the sharecropper system), the sequence at issue is quite powerful and has considerable merit. However, as the concluding episode of the picture's six-part narrative, the episode becomes far more problematic. *Tales of Manhattan* as a historical intervention vis-à-vis other texts was considerably weakened if not undermined because the episode is part of a larger narrative or work (the movie). This final episode is preceded by four others in which sophisticated white characters ruminate on the differences between appearance and reality. Famed actor Orman (Charles Boyer) is shot by rich industrialist Halloway (Thomas Mitchell) as each seeks to hold on to Ethel, the femme fatale played by Rita Hayworth. Orman fakes his death to ascertain Ethel's real allegiances, but comes back to life as she and her husband plot the disposal of his body. Orman then departs, concealing his wound. In episode three Browne (Edgar G. Robinson) conceals his recent life on skid row until forced to take off his dress coat and reveal his lack of a dress shirt. Even poverty has panache. In this context, the black sharecroppers become simple, naïve "folk." Of course, one might argue that the self-involvement and societal norms of Duvivier's white Manhattan-dwellers are, in fact, condemned in light of the real poverty of the concluding scene. The rich white adults act like children, while the poor black children are forced to take on adult concerns. Such may have been the

filmmakers' intention, but the weight of *Tales of Manhattan* made it otherwise. The juxtaposition of episodes from different genres distilled and reinforced the internal logic of their conventions. The naïve folk quality of these black sharecroppers is foregrounded, obscuring the film's more critical aspirations.

Perhaps even more importantly, the entry of the United States into World War II had profoundly changed the historical context in which films were viewed. In the time between the film's production and its release, Walter White and the NAACP had been active in Hollywood, trying to convince the industry to put an end to demeaning stereotypes. A luncheon on 18 July 1942 featuring White and Wendell Willkie, hosted by Walter Wanger and Col. Darryl F. Zanuck at the 20th Century Fox studio cafe, was attended by seventy of the industry's most powerful figures. "You can make a magnificent contribution, which you have already started to make by correcting the misinformation which is the basis of the entire problem of the Negro race," remarked White. "By avoiding the perpetuation of the stereo-

Charles Boyer talks to Julien Duvivier during the making of *Tales of Manhattan* (Duvivier, 1942). (Courtesy Museum of Modern Art)

types and broadening the treatment you can lessen the load of misunderstanding from which the Negro is suffering."[31] With the focus shifting to the issue of negative images, and the war calling for positive, patriotic images of America, the terms of discourse had changed. Given this new framework, Robeson's support of the protesters was a way to support Walter White and the NAACP, with whom he had not yet parted company. In the arena of racial politics, the pace of change had simply passed *Tales of Manhattan* by.[32] Text and intertexts were to be relegated to the slag heap. Indeed, the very same critics who criticized *Tales of Manhattan* in black newspapers would attack Vincente Minnelli's film version of *Cabin in the Sky* in almost identical terms (as "an insult masking behind the label of folklore"), when it was finally released the following year.[33] Again newly empowered black critics declared, "This is the kind of thing that keeps alive misconceptions of the Negro."[34]

Second, let us return to the theatre-film connection: Before *Tales of Manhattan* had entered the theatres, Robeson had begun his *Othello* project with Jose Ferrer and Uta Hagen. Indeed, one of the very few mistakes I found in Martin Duberman's Robeson biography—my bible—has to do with the release of *Tales of Manhattan*. It was not released in May 1942 as he suggests (Duberman 1988, p. 259). The critical attacks on *Tales of Manhattan* came from the black press in early August 1942—at the very moment that *Othello* opened (10 August). The contrast between the roles of Luke and Othello, between the final vignette in the Duvivier film and the Shakespeare play, were striking. *Othello*, which posed "the problem of a black man in a white society," excited Robeson. It was its own particular kind of breakthrough (Elie 1942). As Marian Freeman, film critic for the *New York Amsterdam News*, remarked (1942, p. 15), "For the first time in American history, a Negro—Paul Robeson—played 'Othello' with a white company in support." *Tales of Manhattan* paled in comparison and now it threatened to get in the way of a new project that was controversial and risky. Robeson's move to the high culture of *Othello* foregrounded the reductive cardboard nature of Luke and of Hollywood's portrayal of blacks more generally. Distancing himself from *Tales of*

Manhattan was, among other things, a necessary move if he was to protect his current and in many respects more daring theatrical project. Not only was his role in the film quite modest—not at all comparable to the starring role in one of Shakespeare's tragedies—but he had already received his pay for acting in *Tales of Manhattan* while his monies from *Othello* depended on future box-office and thus the play's reception.

Denouncing *Tales of Manhattan* was one way to protect his cultural and economic investment in *Othello*. At the same time Robeson's prestige, his prominence in the theatre and on the concert stage, gave him multiple sources of income and so the freedom to alienate Hollywood's powerful. In contrast, at this same moment, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson was being cast for the male lead (the role of Little Joe) in the film version of *Cabin in the Sky*. He was necessarily eager to keep in the good graces of Hollywood's moguls. When *Tales of Manhattan* came under attack, Anderson was quick to defend it. Several hundred black actors attended a secret meeting at his "palatial estate" and denounced the newspapers that were organizing the picketing.[35] For Anderson, according to one profile released in the midst of this controversy, the part was his equivalent to Othello:

> "Tales of Manhattan" is one of the most revolutionary pictures in film history. . . . It is "Rochester's" biggest role—his permanent contribution to cinematic history—and he has come off with flying colors. Nothing he has ever done, probably nothing he will ever again do, will equal the magnitude of his work in this picture.[36]

For reasons that had underlying similarities, Robeson and Anderson offered radically different assessments of the film and the characters they played.

Robeson's embrace of Shakespeare in the American context occurred as his public persona was developing and changing in stature and impact. When singing before a crowd of 11,000 in Philadelphia on 28 July 1942 (a week before *Tales* premiered and less than two weeks before the opening of *Othello*), several audience members asked for an encore of "De Glory Road."[37] This 1928 song was written by Clement Wood and Jacques Wolfe "in the idiom of the Negro Spiritual" and featured "the

usual naïve intimacy with divinity."[38] Robeson denounced it as "an insult to the entire Negro race" and refused to sing it.[39] Although "Make Ways for the Glory Days," the song that Luke and the ensemble sing in *Tales of Manhattan* after his utopian declaration and again as the film ends, took a different tack, Robeson may have found underlying parallels between the two songs (i.e., "the Negro singing his way to glory") increasingly painful. Although the star's rejection of the film had pragmatic dimensions, it also involved deeper, underlying principles. Robeson had become a more militant artist as well as an important political figure in his own right. When he visited Los Angeles to participate in a victory rally, Robeson dominated the front page of the *California Eagle*. During a visit to the Los Angeles Mayor's office he told reporters, "Negro citizens must have their full rights now because this is the way to lick Hitler."[40]

This leads to my third point: paying more careful attention to Robeson's career in documentary. With *Native Land* released in May 1942, Robeson had reactivated his film activities in the non-fiction arena. *Native Land*, as Duberman (1988, p. 261) points out, was the kind of more militant film with which he aspired to be associated. Robeson, moreover, not all at once—for there was talk at various points of Robeson returning to Hollywood either for cameo appearances or in a film version of *Othello*—but more gradually, lost interest in the gap between his persona and the characters he played in films. Certainly emphasizing this gap was one way to redeem the charges against Robeson's Luke. The simple sharecropper was being played by a Phi Beta Kappa scholar and a Shakespearean actor. If this gap had been productive when Robeson starred in *Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun' Got Wings*, it had also proved to be problematic. Now the trade-off seemed increasingly unacceptable. Henceforth the film persona that Robeson played on the screen was going to be his own. Certainly we can think of Robeson as performing for the many newsreels in which he appeared. Explaining his interest in *Othello*, speaking at a Paris peace conference, wearing a jaunty beret, spontaneously joining a group of African dancers at an East German political gathering—

Robeson was able to fully display the multi-dimensionality of his remarkably complex character.

Robeson was more than a subject for other people's newsreels, however. He also participated in making documentaries and other non-fiction programming. This was the most obvious news of the 1999 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Documentaries such as the campaign film for Vito Marcantonio, *People's Congressman* (1948), which he narrates and in which he appears, have not been part of our understanding of Robeson and film. (Marcantonio was an American Labor Party candidate for Congress in the district embracing East Harlem. He won re-election when the Democrats and Republicans split the vote.) Robeson knew how to use film, and when he was prevented from travelling abroad on at least one occasion he and Earl Robinson produced a concert film for which they performed. The film, *Bridge Over the Ocean*, was seen abroad in East Germany and the Soviet Union as part of his 60th birthday celebration.

Bridge Over the Ocean was shot on a single, small set, with Robeson and Robinson performing against a plain stage curtain. This lack of a locatable space underscores their semi-outlaw status—and Robeson's own predicament as an enemy of the state. Indeed, the film lacks any head or tail credits, reflecting his artistic and social isolation in the United States. (Robeson actually discouraged people from seeing him or embracing him on the street: they might easily become tainted by associating with a "known communist" or "fellow traveller" such as himself.) Nonetheless, these constricted conditions of production, including the narrowness and simplicity of the space, yield a forceful intimacy. His circumstances and the film's mise en scène connect powerfully with one of his songs, in particular "The House I Live In." The everyday, expansive world of America, which the song describes, has been reduced to this claustrophobic, secretive studio space. The numerous "people that I meet" contrast with the obvious isolation of the set (no supporting cast, no host, not even a studio audience) and the fact that meeting Robeson was a dangerous undertaking. "The howdy and the handshake," "the air of feeling free" and "the right to speak my

mind out" are the very things that he has been denied. The song articulates a utopian and optimistic view of America that is contradicted by the conditions under which Robeson lived and worked. At the same time the song expresses a faith in what America could be, should be, and has been at its best moments. This sense of hope and possibility is powerfully expressed through Robeson's voice and his rendering of the song. The nature of contradiction in Robeson's films may have shifted, but it did not disappear. Robeson's abandonment of fiction film and his work in documentary were elements of a larger shift in his artistic career.

Tales of Manhattan may have concluded Robeson's career in Hollywood, but then it was only his second Hollywood film. It certainly did not end his acting career—that flourished on the stage. Nor did it end his film career—that continued, albeit more quietly, in documentary. Whether in the end it was actually Robeson's own choice to end his film acting career is something else yet again. Though frustrated with the movies in which he had appeared, the actor also expressed a readiness to return to fiction film when circumstances had changed. When, in the spring of 1943, Gordon Parks (1986, pp. 240-41) asked him, "Will you be doing any more motion pictures soon?" he replied: "Not until that industry gives the Negro actor more serious and respectable roles . . . and that may be a long way off." The cinema had played a crucial role in Robeson's rise to international stardom and the formation of his persona. It was not something to be abandoned lightly. Although the situation in Hollywood did change, it did so in ways that proved unfavourable to the performer. During World War II, many actors had little to do with Hollywood, making his absence unexceptional (certainly Robeson was a presence in Los Angeles!). After World War II, Robeson soon became too controversial. He was blacklisted—not in motion pictures per se (because he had apparently left Hollywood behind) but in all aspects of performance. He was dropped by record labels and never appeared on American television. For many years he could not even rent a theatre in which to sing. The U.S. government had confiscated his passport, which prevented him from making

a living overseas. What was perhaps intended to be a hiatus with a dramatic return became a permanent departure. And yet, Robeson's refusal to perform in fiction films and his denunciation of past efforts gradually became part of his artistic (and political) persona—his legacy. Robeson's film acting career was always too important to ignore entirely but it was also not part of his artistic identity in that heroic and then tragic period for which Robeson was and is best known: the 1940s and 1950s. Even today, the challenge we face is to reclaim and re-examine much of Robeson's creative work between the Great War and World War II.

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NOTES

1. When Mark Reid from University of Florida, Ed Guerrero from New York University and I co-curated the "Paul Robeson: Star of Stage and Screen" retrospective at the UCLA Film & Television Archives, we divided up the program notes for each film. The last film to be chosen was *Tales of Manhattan* (released in 1942). Because I lost the draw, the task of writing about it went to me. Since none of us was eager to write about it, I received a certain amount of good-natured ribbing from my colleagues. However, I do share at least one quietly perverse belief with my mentor Jay Leyda: that those unwanted films generally prove to be among the most interesting and compelling. This article is at least an attempt in that direction—indebted, as so much of my work is, to Leyda, who first met Robeson in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. Special thanks to Rae Alexander Minter, former director of the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, who brought me into the *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen* exhibition as a consultant and co-curator of two Robeson film retrospectives. Thanks also to Mia Mask for her helpful comments on a late draft of this essay. Finally I express my deepest gratitude to Paul Robeson, Jr., for our afternoon conversations and hard-won friendship. If he finds this article up to his standard, it is dedicated to him.

2. "Paul Robeson Tells Us Why," *The Cine–Technician*, September-October 1938 (pp. 74-75), reprinted in Foner 1978 (p. 121).

3. There is the character and there is the actor: the two should not be conflated. The character of Jim in *All God's Chillun'* can't pass his bar exam—but the actor playing that role, Paul Robeson, did not have that problem. Quite the contrary. The link between these "negative images" and Robeson's public identity is hard to escape, resulting in contradictions that are potentially powerful.

4. See, for example, Holt 2002.

5. Unfortunately the history of African American documentary has been generally ignored, although the recent collection of essays by Phyllis Klotman and Janet Cutler (1999) has been an important intervention in this regard.

6. "Rochester, Robeson, Waters in 'Tales of Manhattan,'" *California Eagle*, 13 November 1941 (p. 3B).

7. Boris Morros was also a spy for the Soviets and, after 1947, a counter-spy for the United States. See Morros 1959.

8. Along with this collective spirit, the producers were eager to be iconoclastic in still other ways. Laughton, for example, had been stereotyped as a villain in earlier Hollywood films but, as Susan Ohmer (1997, pp. 430-31) tells us, was dying to do some comedy. The studios resisted, but in *Tales of Manhattan* Laughton was given just such a role.

9. Several books have been written about Julien Duvivier (all in French), but they have paid very little attention to *Tales of Manhattan*, even though it was shown in newly liberated Paris on the first day that the city's movie theatres re-opened. Released with the French title of *Six Destins*, it was not well received. Such disappointment may have carried over in later assessments. Dealing with the film only in passing, Yves Desrichard (2001, p. 58) argues that the "cineaste abdicated all ambition as an auteur." Such a dismissal seems premature if not ill-founded. See also Chirat 1968 and Bonnefille 2002.

10. Paul Robeson to Robert Rockmore, 20 November 1941, quoted in Schlosser (1985, p. 325).

11. The Martin Beck Theater on 45th Street between 8th and 9th avenues has recently been renamed the Al Hirshfeld Theater.

12. According to Mary E. Finger (1940, p. 4) of the *New York Age*, it "merits the tremendous press notices throughout the metropolitan areas."

13. "Ethel Waters Company Here for Civic Opera at Philharmonic," *California Eagle*, 5 June 1941 (p. 7A). In her autobiography, Waters recalled opening *Cabin in the Sky* in Los Angeles in March 1941.

14. Programmes, *Cabin in the Sky,* Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library.

15. "Screen Radio," *California Eagle*, 31 July 1941 (p. 2B); "Ethel Waters Opens in 'Mamba's Daughters,'" *California Eagle*, 11 September 1941 (p. 4B). While John Kinloch (1941, p. 4B) thought that Waters's performance in *Mamba's Daughters* was "the greatest thing seen on any stage in a whale of a long time," he found the play itself to be "weak." Waters also appeared at the Paramount Theater for a week, presenting a stage revue before the Paramount film *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*, starring Mary Martin and Don Ameche and featuring Rochester Anderson ("Ethel Waters, Kate Dunham on Para Bill," *California Eagle*, 7 August 1941 [p. 2B]).

16. "Paul Robeson Cast for Film Comeback," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 6 September 1941 (p. 13). See also Kinloch 1941.

17. Robeson was making appearances on the concert stage in Los Angeles in this period, including 8 and 22 December ("Robeson Will Sing at Big Defense Rally," *California Eagle*, 18 December 1941 [p. 1A]).

18. *Cabin in the Sky* had its premiere in Dallas, Texas, on 11 March 1943, but did not open in Los Angeles until 7 May and in New York City until 27 May. Hollywood delayed these big-city premieres because it feared the kind of negative reaction that the film in fact generated.

19. *Cabin in the Sky: A New Musical* (1940): book by Lynn Root, lyrics by John Latouche, music by Vernon Duke. Crap shoots and razor fights were stereotypical images that were already being translated to celluloid by turn-of-the-century filmmakers such as William Selig (see Selig Polyscope Company, *1903 Complete Catalogue*, p. 4). The film version of *Cabin in the Sky*, following standard Hollywood practice, "opens up" the play, providing some introductory scenes in which Little Joe is trying to give up gambling and wild women. He is trying to go straight and be on the side of the Lord, thanks to the patient guidance of his God-fearing wife Petunia. He has found an important job as an elevator operator in a new hotel. It has

air-conditioning and with his earnings Little Joe hopes to buy air-conditioning for his home as well (though first of all he needs to get electricity). The good, God-fearing Little Joe is about to become a responsible consumer, a model citizen, using his wages to buy appliances for his wife. Then, after being virtually kidnapped by his old gambling partners (agents of the devil), he is felled in a shoot-out.

20. "Cabin in the Sky," *California Eagle*, 12 June 1941 (p. 2B).

21. *Ibid.*

22. Rochester's preacher is also somewhat like Noah (also a preacher), played by Rochester in *Green Pastures*. Noah would like to take two barrels of liquor on the ark for "medicinal purposes," but God only lets him take one. He naïvely tries to engage in a battle of wits with God—a losing proposition.

23. Advertisement, *California Eagle*, 8 August 1942 (p. 2B).

24. "'Tales of Manhattan,' Held Over," *California Eagle*, 13 August 1942 (p. 2B).

25. See also "Little by Little: 'Tales of Manhattan' Boosts the Stock of the Short Story in Films," *New York Times*, 4 October 1942. Trade journals (*Variety*, 5 August 1942; *Daily Variety*, 4 August 1942; *Hollywood Reporter*, 4 August 1942; etc.) applauded the film while *The New Yorker*, 26 September 1942, was unenthusiastic and the *New York Herald Tribune* was mildly negative—though not for the reasons expressed in the black press.

26. Readers of black weekly newspapers encountered frequent stories of sharecropper peonage in the South. For example "Land of the Noble and Free," *New York Age*, 8 August 1942 (p. 8), and "Seek Extradition of Former Sharecropper To South Carolina For Verbal Contract Breach," *New York Age*, 5 September 1942 (p. 10). In truth, it was these conditions that had caused many African Americans to leave the South.

27. *New York Amsterdam News*, 15 August 1942 (p. 15).

28. *Ibid.*

29. "Sepia Hollywood Stars Denounce Picketing of 'Tales of Manhattan,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 29 August 1942 (p. 14).

30. "Robeson Hits Hollywood," *New York Times*, 23 September 1942 (p. 28).

31. "Walter White and Wendell Wilkie Honored by Motion Picture Industry," *New York Age*, 1 August 1942 (p. 10).

32. The Office of War Information was suddenly blocking the release of MGM's bio-pic of Andrew Johnson, *Tennessee Johnson* (1943), for its racial politics—only temporarily as it turned out, though MGM was forced to re-shoot portions of the film. This controversy erupted in August 1942 as *Tales of Manhattan* was going into release. See Koppes and Black 1987 (pp. 87-90) and "Act to Halt Distribution of MGM Anti-Negro Film; U.S. Aroused," *California Eagle*, 3 September 1942 (p. 1).

33. "'Cabin' Picture Called Insult," *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 June 1943 (p. 17).

34. *Ibid.*

35. "Sepia Hollywood Stars Denounce Picketing of 'Tales of Manhattan,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 29 August 1942 (p. 14).

36. "Rochester 'tops' Role in 'Tales of Manhattan,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 10 October 1942 (p. 17). Anderson, arguably the leading Hollywood-based black male actor in the late 1930s and early 1940s, generally received positive notice in the black press. According to one columnist, "Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson to my knowledge, is the only sepia star who is doing his share in a big way for his country and his race" (Morris 1942, p. 2B).

37. "Robeson Terms 'Glory Road' Negro Slur," *Variety*, 29 July 1942 (p. 1).

38. Card catalogue description, Music Section, Performing Arts Library, New York Public Library.

39. "Robeson Terms 'Glory Road' Negro Slur," *Variety*, 29 July 1942 (p. 15). "Make Ways for the Glory Days" was the song that Robeson and the ensemble sang in *Tales of Manhattan* after his utopian declaration and as the film ended. It suggests that while Robeson's rejection of the film had a pragmatic dimension, it also involved principles.

40. "Robeson Serenades War Plant, Thousands to Storm Rally!" *California Eagle*, 17 September 1942 (p. 1).

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RÉSUMÉ

Paul Robeson et la fin de sa carrière cinématographique

Charles Musser

Tales of Manhattan (Julien Duvivier, 1942) est le dernier film de fiction dans lequel Paul Robeson ait joué, un film que la star afro-américaine finira d'ailleurs par dénoncer pour ses stéréotypes raciaux dégradants. Les spécialistes de Robeson se sont fait l'écho de ces remarques négatives, tout comme les critiques français qui considèrent ce film comme une œuvre mineure de Duvivier. Cet article se propose de réexaminer le film en le resituant dans son contexte historique et avance que la partie centrée autour de la communauté noire, dès lors qu'on l'appréhende de manière intertextuelle, s'avère beaucoup plus riche et plus progressiste qu'on le prétend généralement. Conçu avant la Seconde Guerre mondiale et projeté pour la première fois dix mois après Pearl Harbor, *Tales of Manhattan* apparaît comme un film historiquement « déphasé ».