



Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex: Race, Madness, Activism (Theater: Theory/Text/Performance)

Tony Perucci

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Actor and singer Paul Robeson's performances in *Othello*, *Show Boat*, and *The Emperor Jones* made him famous, but his midcentury appearances in support of causes ranging from labor and civil rights to antilynching and American warmongering made him notorious. When Robeson announced at the 1949 Paris Peace Conference that it was "unthinkable" for blacks to go to war against the Soviet Union, the mainstream American press declared him insane.

Notions of Communism, blackness, and insanity were interchangeably deployed during the Cold War to discount activism such as Robeson's, just a part of an array of social and cultural practices that author Tony Perucci calls the Cold War performance complex. Focusing on two key Robeson performances---the concerts in Peekskill, New York, in 1949 and his appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1956---Perucci demonstrates how these performances and the government's response to them are central to understanding the history of Cold War culture in the United States. His book provides a transformative new perspective on how the struggle over the politics of performance in the 1950s was also a domestic struggle over freedom and equality. The book closely examines both of these performance events as well as artifacts from Cold War culture---including congressional documents, FBI files, foreign policy papers, the popular literature on mental illness, and government propaganda films---to study the operation of power and activism in American Cold War culture.

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