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Einstein on Race and Racism

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More than one hundred biographies and monographs of Einstein have been published, yet not one mentions the name Paul Robeson, let alone Einstein's friendship with him, or the name W. E. B. Du Bois, let alone Einstein's support for him. Nor is there any discussion of the many Civil Rights campaigns Einstein actively supported. Finally – or firstly – nowhere in the ocean of Einsteinia – anthologies, biographies, articles, calendars, posters, tee-shirts – will one find even an islet of information about Einstein's visits and ties to the people in Princeton's African American community. One explanation for this historical amnesia is that Einstein's biographers and others who shape public memories, felt that some of his "controversial" friends like, Robeson, and activities, like co-chairing the American Crusade to End Lynching, might somehow tarnish Einstein as an American icon. That icon, sanctified by *Time* magazine when it dubbed Einstein "person of the century," is a myth, albeit a marvelous myth. In fact, as myths go, Einstein's is hard to beat: The world's most brilliant scientist is also a kindly, lovably bumbling, grandfather figure: Professor Genius combined with Dr. Feelgood! Opinion-molders may have concluded that such an appealing icon would help the public feel better about science or about America. Politics, after all, is ugly, making teeth grind and fists clench, so why splash politics over Einstein's icon? Yet it is not so much the motive for the omission, but the consequence that should concern us: Americans and the millions of Einstein fans around this increasingly tribalized world are left unaware that he was an outspoken, passionate, committed anti-racist. If racism in America depends for its survival in large part on the smothering of anti-racist voices, especially when those voices come from popular and widely respected individuals – like Albert Einstein – then this presentation aspires to play a small role in a grand un-smothering.