



**EVERYTHING**  
**MAN**  
**THE**  
**FORM**  
**AND**  
**FUNCTION**  
**OF**  
**PAUL**  
**ROBESON**

SHANA L. REDMOND

**EVERYTHING MAN**

REFIGURING AMERICAN MUSIC

*A series edited by Ronald Radano, Josh Kun, and Nina Sun Eidsheim  
Charles McGovern, contributing editor*

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For Paul Robeson,  
who continues to become,  
*and*  
To Robeson Cade Haley-Redmond  
and all that they will be.

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*If you really need someone to help you make it through,  
I'm here and I'll be ready when it's time to make that move.  
Let me be the one who provides a helping hand,  
coming to the rescue for the things that no one can:  
Your everything man.*

—Daybreak, “Everything Man” (P. Adams/V. Dodson)

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## A Preface Element

What man can look upon this state of things without resolving to cast his influence with the elements which are to come down in ten-fold thunder and dash this state of things to atoms.

— FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Thinkers of all religious and philosophical traditions have long sought the world's irreducible elements—those building blocks from which all material, all life derives. Greek philosophers produced a dominant cosmology composed of four elements: erupting from the core and reconstituting it again is the earth; blue-hot at its center, fire both sustains existence and exacts damages unimaginable; air is a ubiquitous (though far from neutral) life force; while water lives and moves en masse beyond continental borders but is, inside of them, often a prized commodity. Centuries of scientists and believers understood these elements as organic, fundamental, indivisible. These are the pieces that, when combined, produce the new world, its environment and atmosphere. We stand on it, breathe it, feel and taste it, engaging in a wide variety of encounters and hopes cosmically designed and, perhaps, destined. These elements compose the past that we compel ourselves to recall and the futures that we do not yet know.

A fugitive intellectual, elocutionist, writer, and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass too imagined the foundations and essential character(istics) of the world in front of him. His world, however, was not a serene portrait of wading pools and an incontrovertible democracy like the Greek civilization before him; his was replete with unfreedoms organized by the failed, yet persistent, calculus of racial logics (“the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving,” as Katherine McKittrick names them).<sup>1</sup> An alchemist working with the unfinished, sentient materials of blackness, democracy, and revolution, Douglass thought of and through the world’s elements, yet his reckoning, cited above, was organized not by chemical equations or hypotheticals but instead by animate subjects and the trials of lived experience. His call to those living in a moment of danger, precarity, and radical harm anticipated that “the elements” would coalesce, becoming greater than their individual selves, and, with the velocity of their numbers, perfectly deconstruct “this state of things” to the atom—the most essential and universal form of ordinary matter. He predicted that all who were alive to the voice of personkind would combine to face corruption and racism in order to, as was later theorized, “break it down so that it can always and forever be broken.”<sup>2</sup> From this eruption and consequent brokenness, our liberated future would emerge, led by those who “most faithfully rebuke” their oppressors.

Douglass’s projection of the new world was studied and mobilized in the twentieth century by a man who coalesced the elements in such force that nations trembled at the sound of his Voice. His power—the “thunder” of his convictions—was unwavering, his beliefs entrenched and immobile even to “one-thousandth of an inch.”<sup>3</sup> This man was the indomitable Paul Robeson, a shape-shifting scientist possessed of innumerable talents and visions. Douglass did not yet see Paul Robeson as he spoke of the new world atom, but it is possible that he conjured him, for surely Douglass’s breath enlivened Robeson’s song and activated the four elements that composed this world giant. Just as any given organism or object is decided by its properties and ingredients, so too was Robeson, a man (re)produced by and of a movement formula. Proximity to enslavement and other unfree labor, the gospel that permeated his childhood home, the speech and muscle that defined his youth, and the prohibitions of his race in law, film, recording, and stage produced his radical dimen-

sionality that could be heard over great distances and with great impact. Robeson's continued vibration within global political imaginaries is the impetus and guide for the adventure undertaken in these pages.

It was Robeson's musicianship that made for the complex matter(s) of his life and legacy. His study of the vocal instrument and the global folk music form, which is evidenced in part by his extensive library of scholarship on vocal technique, language, and composition, announced his unique contributions and talents in the making of new political worlds. He was a scientist, and the stage was his laboratory.

"The musician combines sounds in the same way the chemist combines substances. The note is the musical element as the simple body is the chemical element. . . . It is true that musician and chemist reason in their respective fields in the same way, despite the profound difference of the materials they use."<sup>4</sup> Chemist Santiago Alvarez offers a reference for a thick reading of Robeson, who not only used the raw materials of the note, with the piano forming his periodic table, but also changed his form and shape in order to become the material by which other equations of liberation were made possible.

Robeson's scientific rationale or reason for his musicianship was inspired by both form and function. He harbored a profound respect for what he called "people's songs"—those inspired by and composed from the cultures of everyday communities. Folk songs arranged his repertoire throughout his forty-year career and led him into communion with the ethnolinguistic traditions of many nations. By the 1930s, his science spoke to a global audience of untold numbers, and it was Negro spirituals that made the introduction. This music, lovingly anthologized by writer-activist James Weldon Johnson and his pianist-composer brother J. Rosamond Johnson, was described as the penultimate representation of the Black condition.

In many of the Spirituals the Negro gave wide play to his imagination; in them he told his stories and drew his morals therefrom; he dreamed his dreams and declared his visions; he uttered his despair and prophesized his victories; he also spoke the group wisdom and expressed the group philosophy of life. Indeed, the Spirituals taken as a whole contain a record and a revelation of the deeper thoughts and experiences of the Negro in this country for a period beginning three hundred years ago and covering two and a half centuries. If you wish to know

what they are you will find them written more plainly in these songs than in any pages of history.<sup>5</sup>

The Negro spirituals are both documentary evidence of those who have lived and the process by which their descendants continue doing so, having been left an archive of detailed and painful histories as well as a method of encounter and imagination that sustains and builds new possibilities. The spirituals, therefore, are fundamental to the sonic lifeworlds of the continent and its diasporas, and in Robeson they found their most astute, committed, and precocious cantor.

Beyond the aesthetic and sonic qualities of the form, Robeson was invested in the histories of this music as well as the futures that might be enlivened by its performance. These songs were compellingly functional; in Robeson's care, they had a role to play in the unfolding world in which they were sung. Attached to his iconic body and delivered by his impressive Voice, these songs—including “Go Down, Moses,” “There's a Man Going Round Takin' Names,” and “Water Boy”—were fundamental to the transnational Black and working-class political cultures that by midcentury galvanized the rebellion of entire nations. Robeson's sound-labor, which he launched from stages all over the world, was formative in the thought of progressive, radical, and Third World liberationist actors and organizations, the workers and the lovers, the thinkers as well as the musicians. He was called, drawn upon, requested, followed, mimicked, used, invoked, challenged by, and subservient to “The People,” whom he described as “the real guardians of our hopes and dreams.”<sup>6</sup>

To those generations who survived war and depression and learned to love and organize in a world crying for decolonization and an end to racism, Robeson was an essential element of their living in the present. He was selfless, offering too much of himself in order to sustain others; according to mentee and actor-activist Ossie Davis, “Paul confirmed us in our impudent wasting by never denying that he was air, or water to our every need.”<sup>7</sup> Numerous creators—especially the poets—believed as Davis believed, arranging Paul during and after his lifetime as the four classical elements, being compared to, measured by, and constitutive of them. Chilean poet-philosopher Pablo Neruda's “Ode to Paul Robeson” is an expansive excavation of his indefatigable presence as guide and method in people's struggles throughout the African and working world. He is described as source and his Voice is the movement science that broke the

enforced quietude, motivating creation, narrative, and possibility. Neruda organizes recurrent scenes of Robeson as and in relation to earth, fire, water, and air, stimulating our reception of Robeson as organic and fundamental. He is portrayed as “the song of germinating earth, the river and the movement of nature,” “the potent voice of the water over the fire,” and the “voice of the earth” whose “river of a heart was deeper, was wider than the silence.” Allusions to water—“you were a subterranean river”—reflect and extend his proximity and relationship to the *Show Boat* role that made him a star as well as to the laboring peoples on the Mississippi and Niger who taught him his history through the languages and cultures of African peoples.<sup>8</sup>

Narrative and lyrical representations of Robeson frequently document sound as the authentic revelation of his beliefs, materiality, and transit across and beneath the oceans. Through music, his character and contributions are uniquely congealed, forming a spectacular and complex substance of body, meaning, and air: the Voice.

*Once he did not exist  
But his voice was there, waiting.*

*Light parted from darkness,  
day from night,  
earth from the primal waters.*

*And the voice of Paul Robeson was divided from the silence.<sup>9</sup>*

“Once he did not exist but his voice was there, waiting” is as illustrative, as fundamental as “in the beginning was the word.” Paul Robeson’s Voice—powerful in its mastery and message—carried its own time; coeval with the earth and water, it existed well before he entered the earthly realm and would continue well beyond his departure.

The origin story that Neruda tells begins with sound, rather than body, suggesting that Robeson’s gift is unique and eternal, unbound by the anxieties of the earth that crumbles and the water that inevitably runs dry. Even as it announces its form, sound dislocates the fixation with the body, freeing us from a focus on the ocular and instead demanding a new vocabulary and experience of blackness and liberation. Neruda orchestrates that extension by listening closely to the vibrations of a quotidian and revolutionary diaspora. As his “Ode” also demonstrates elsewhere, he

stretches the narrative of Robeson's vocal power to various moments of deafness and silence broken only by his song. From the devastation of Hiroshima, darkness and trembling sun, "all people lifted their blood to the light in your voice, and earth and sky, fire and darkness and water rose up with your song." Robeson's Voice—an otherworldly phenomenon—was that which coalesced all else: the speculated fifth element, ether.

With roots in Greek lore, this form of extraterrestrial clear sky was mythologized as the air of the gods. Known also as quintessence, ether is beyond our tangible reach but nonetheless is used to explain natural phenomena that we experience daily, such as light and gravity. Yet ether is that which fills spaces that we cannot account for, between definable bodies and ideas. Robeson's Voice is indicative of both that which we experience and that which we struggle to know. His musicology, which listened closely to the interned, imprisoned, dead and dying, was studied and experiential, producing a program of songs that became his signature intervention in a world that called out for new methods, new texts.

Neruda provides the language for Robeson's algorithmic song, which was so dense, so compelling, and so powerful in its problem solving that it was capable of organizing collectives beyond his immediate reach. His studied attention to and investment in the style and use of his musics signal his stature as the most important singer of the twentieth century. Yet it is not by his works alone that this claim is true. It is his return to public conversation, representation, and debate during periods of isolation and many decades after his death that assists in proving his stature as global troubadour. Though less iconic than the younger Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or Nelson Mandela, Robeson is nonetheless a featured player in our political times, even if his reappearance is as sound rather than image. In the contemporary moment of coordinated Black eruption in the U.S., South Africa, Palestine, England, Canada, and elsewhere, one must believe that Robeson's presence among us is intentional, purposeful. The question then is why. Why is he back? What are the conditions and stakes that make for his reappearance? What are his forms, and what function does he serve? This is the work that I undertake in the chapters that follow. Through engaging the work and labors of artists, musicians, politicians, and activists his role as a world freedom fighter is heard, seen, and felt.

Thinking of Robeson as indicative of the five elements is one foundation for the ways in which *Everything Man* calls him back, again, into

the present through his constant (re)iteration not as the classical elements (solely) but as a series of alternative states of being, time, and motion. I trail Robeson as ghostly muse around the world in order to document his continued role as executor of Douglass's demand. This pursuit, which unfolds over multiple continents, additionally maps contemporary movement collectives who are unconvinced by linear progress narratives and undeterred by death. They understand that "we are coeval with the dead."<sup>10</sup> In this way, this book is less about memory than it is about deliberative, present action. Robeson still stands among those elements, projecting the "state of things" that yet might be. And so, we follow.

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This path has its share of discomfort and obstacles—both intentional and subconscious—that prohibit our engagements with this person (in particular) and others like him (in general). "The Epic Hero is not very fashionable at the moment," wrote Benny Green in a 1960-era souvenir Robeson program booklet, and these words remain true today. "A certain current sickness of the human spirit tends to make most of us uncomfortable at the mere thought of moral greatness, so we shuffle uncomfortably and feel unaccountably ashamed in some obscure way. *And most exasperating of all, we cannot wholly explain any kind of greatness, not with all our scientific sorcery, our statistics and our psychology.* That is why the figure of Paul Robeson, as it towers over us, enigmatic and strangely moving, baffles so many of us."<sup>11</sup> We who are "weary of the ways of the world" remain skeptical of both the need for and the presence of (charismatic) leadership; within the academy, we necessarily trouble narratives of great (and not so great) men.<sup>12</sup> I write this book in light of these shared positions and in hopes of providing another vantage. The story that unfolds over these chapters is more than a praise song for a singular man. As Ossie Davis argued, "the question of Paul's identity is not facetious or academic to black people, rather it is urgent and fundamental—a matter of life and death."<sup>13</sup> My search for him was, in fact, a matter of life. He compelled me back into his care and study after thinking that I had learned all that I need know of him for *Anthem*.<sup>14</sup> This could not have been further from the truth, and yet even with this book there is so much more to be revealed. Paul Robeson Jr. suggested to a friend that once his father gripped you, he would never let you go. In my case, this has proven absolutely true. The conversations into which I was swept made me not simply interested

but invested, completely. And while the academy trains its participants to deal in cold calculation, the task of knowing this person required new approaches and a willingness to be vulnerable. The intimacy that I've organized here is grown from an investment in knowing this subject in as complicated and as varied a series of ways as I can manage in book form.

I make no pretense to objectivity in the sense of Western epistemes, which curate the writer outside of and without relation to the peoples being discussed and the stories being told. Paul Robeson Sr. is not a stranger. In order to know him, I had to forgo my own comfort with distance and come close, in the process awakening muscles and methods that I had hitherto reserved for those persons personal and animate. I embraced the rigorous intellectualisms and “powerful social force” of love as a means of telling a story that is ongoing and multifold, for it is of Paul Robeson but attended to and created by many others.<sup>15</sup> And while the story at times may seem fantastical or even bordering on hagiography, the imperfect work of tracing his ongoing presence is grounded not by myth or sainthood but imagination, which is, as so many other wise people have argued, the most important political tool at our disposal.<sup>16</sup> *Everything Man* is, therefore, the curation of a political present and future tuned to the frequencies of a manifold individual. While this project is in conversation with, informed by, and organized by archives, performance texts, and existing scholarship, I have additionally taken interpretive cues from those curious and committed enough to dream. They carry some of the characteristics that they announce as his; in order to know him and them, we will work our way from the inside out.

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# An Introduction **Vibration**

It's now quotidian technology: the cell phone—a device that holds our friends and family, ideas, and access to the wider world in pocket-size form. The sounds produced by cell phones vary from snippets of pop tunes to nonmelodical pulses meant to gain our attention without disrupting our environment. In the quiet of a lecture or movie, theater or church, you flip a switch or press a button for the reminder or signal that one feels more than one hears: vibrate.

Vibration is a call, a reminder, an alert deserving attention and response, leaving a “something to be done.”<sup>1</sup> It's a pesky notice but nonetheless indicative of our reliance on nonverbal communicative strategies, highlighting the form's everywhere and regularity in human and animal exchange. Just as elephants can speak through the earth over long distances, the human singer is capable of radical exchange through the alphabetic mechanics of the voice. Hover one's hand just above the skin, hum, feel the power of the voice to generate animation, energy, and proximity without appendage and beyond narrative. This is a talent that some have studied, refined, and elevated to the level of superpower. This was the labor and gift of Paul Robeson, a man described as “the most talented person of the twentieth century.”<sup>2</sup> An athlete, lawyer, orator, scholar, actor, singer, humanitarian, and organizer, Robeson labored as a tactical orchestra whose instruments could be excerpted and tasked

for impressive projects around the world. Through various metaphysical shifts, reincarnations, and ventriloquism, Robeson was vibration, and this is the essential science that we might know more perfectly by listening to his symphonic life.

Vibration is a product of the voice as sound but is present in the literature oftentimes as a hard science—one that reveals little interest in questions of representation, politics, or identity. Defined as “a periodic motion, *i.e.*, a motion which repeats itself in all its particulars after a certain interval of time,” vibration is the evidence that nothing remains still for long. Everything is working or being worked on, making for the repeated tremor of infinite speech. The “simplest kind of periodic motion is a *harmonic motion*,” suggesting to those of us with ears and minds tuned toward organized noise that the simultaneity of pitches and chords constitutive of harmony are the most common, accessible—and therefore most revolutionary—vibrations available.<sup>3</sup> Robeson understood this. Vibration was a key feature in his creation of a movement science in which he combined his exceptional technique with the “new knowledge, new theories, new questions” that, Robin D. G. Kelley proves, are generated by social movement collectives.<sup>4</sup> Just as Robeson vibrated in his performances, so too did these quotidian movement diasporas who simmered and shook with ongoing freedom dreams even in the midst of imperiled tomorrows. This kineticism models how humans come into knowledge of themselves through a practice—in this case, with the complexities of music, sound, vibration; indeed, “for a relationship with sound to take place, we must be willing to take part in, propagate, transmit, and—in some cases—transduce its vibrations.”<sup>5</sup> This participatory equation of singing and listening, give and take, holding and living through is the relation that builds Robeson’s career and afterlife. His vibration was often the initial call or catalyst that brought them together, while theirs affirmed his recognition of a laboring world coordinated in its pursuit for unity. He recalled,

When I sang my American folk melodies in Budapest, Prague, Tiflis, Moscow, Oslo, the Hebrides, or on the Spanish front, the people understood and wept and rejoiced with the spirit of the songs. I found that where forces have been the same, whether people weave, build, pick cotton or dig in the mines, they understand each other in the common language of work, suffering and protest. . . . When I sing “Let my People Go,” I can feel sympathetic vibrations from my audience,

whatever its nationality. It is no longer just a Negro song—it is a symbol of those seeking freedom from the dungeon of fascism.<sup>6</sup>

In Robeson's care, "Let My People Go" is a sonic vault. The sound is so rich that the listener is trapped inside it, bringing into existence what Nina Sun Eidsheim describes as the "relational sphere," which proves that singing and listening are "intermaterial vibrational practices."<sup>7</sup> His delivery of this Negro spiritual produces a wall of sound—insurmountable but detailed in its composition and vibrational pattern. While often performed with accompaniment, Robeson's voice is undoubtedly the means through which we hear and know this song. During the verse, the piano is delicate and lovely but functional as a rhythmic intervention; it is only during the chorus that its melodic qualities are realized and even then they cater to him, not us. The secondary position of the piano is surely the expected order of things when supporting a solo vocalist, but there is something distinct about Robeson's voice through this song and within his wider repertoire. He was uniquely in command of that song and in control of the other instruments around him. He was a vocal Magneto, drawing all other sonic material to him in order to build new musical experiences and environments. This is the science that he struggled with and wielded for the People's liberation.

He stood before them to sing, having been called to do so by the listeners who, in turn, received his response and affirmed his humane science. The degrees of freedom exhibited by Robeson—those opportunities, within the syntax of mechanical engineering, for objects to rotate and move—were produced by his thinking, fighting body engaged in the world as well as his Voice in the built environment. His body, as a solid, rigid mass, was, according to the science, able to move freely through space with at least six degrees of freedom: three translations and three rotations. Indeed, translation, which in the case of Robeson included linguistic capacity in two dozen languages, made possible his movement (rotations) around the world. This freedom, as they name it, was the circumference in which he might vibrate in relation to proximate subjects, objects, and landscapes. Yet his Voice also vibrated on and through the same proximities.

First were the people worked upon by his vibration. As Gunnar Myrdal argued in his 1944 tome *An American Dilemma*, "Great singers like Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, and Paul Robeson have their prestige augmented by the eager vibrations of pride and hope from the whole Negro people act-

ing as a huge sounding board.”<sup>8</sup> These musicians sang to and for communities whose equilibrium was disrupted through the act of participatory listening, being charged by and reactive to the stimulus of song through which the movement of bodies—those both politic and individual—was produced. The Negro spirituals made much of this work possible. A system of beliefs, values, directives, codes, and hopes, these songs were a reflection of the terrifying conditions of the enslaved as well as a plan for deliverance. The play, storytelling, and prophecy of these songs divined new methods of speech; Roland Hayes noted, “This language of our original ancestors must have possessed such high-frequency vibration that it became an effective medium of communication between Nature, God, and themselves.”<sup>9</sup> If the spirituals indeed were capable of reaching, reflecting, and recomposing the heavens, imagine what they could do and be on earth.

Robeson was unique even among Myrdal’s cohort for a technique that not only spoke to and built coherent, organized collectives but also revealed, through a dense multilingual repertoire, his relation to an entire orchestra of symphonic effect. The use of simile to describe Robeson’s performances provides further evidence of his vibrational influence. The relation of his voice to various hollow-bodied, cylindrical wind instruments was marked throughout his career. One listener recalled, “I remember this absolutely enormous presence. He had a voice like a big bassoon. Your bones would vibrate because it was just a big voice. I’ve never heard anything like that.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it was Robeson’s “organ-like tones” that tuned composer Jerome Kern’s ear toward the composition and dedication of “Ol’ Man River” for and to the singer.<sup>11</sup> His popular vibrations in the moment of Kern’s listening were so powerful that they approached a type of synesthesia as he readily shook the pulpit and filmic frame as a preacher in Oscar Micheaux’s silent film *Body and Soul* (1925) (fig. I.1). That same year heard him revolutionize the classical concert phenomena of singing spirituals as art music, demonstrating the beginnings of a lifetime commitment. Robeson was possessed of knowledge—experiential and scholarly—that produced in his Voice conditions of escape for the Souls dancing in the staves of W. E. B. Du Bois’s epigraphs. He sang for them, as he would later sing for so many, becoming a conduit for a right to imagine and fight for new futures. This was the substance of his antiphonal life during which he was called repeatedly and responded at all times through various tones, compositions, and methods of passage.

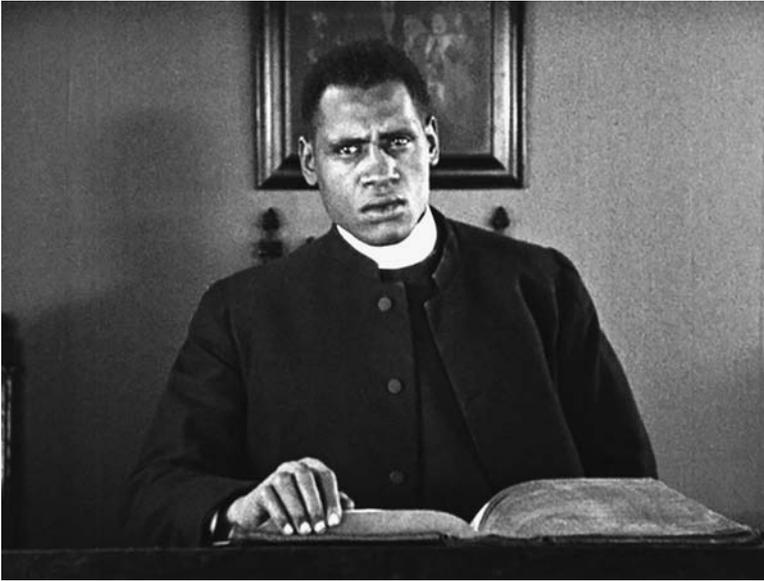


FIG. 1.1 Paul Robeson standing at the pulpit in character as Rev. Isaiah T. Jenkins in Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1925). Courtesy of Kino Lorber, Inc.

Robeson was the raw material that, in turn, made possible other types of building, both literal and figurative. His presence at the construction of the Sydney Opera House in November 1960 after the reinstatement of his passport was a defining moment for the Opera House: he was, in fact, its first performer (fig. 1.2). He sang that opera into being. Standing, without elevation, alongside the workers at the open-air work site, Robeson began to sing his standards a cappella, in the process differently imagining the work and sound of that space. Perhaps it was his anthem “Ol’ Man River” that elicited the most response from the laboring men of the Building Workers’ Industrial Union. Their preemptory clapping led to his low hum as he found his pitch and characteristically raised his right hand to his ear. With a discernibly lower register than that of his heyday, his sound was delivered as vibration and propelled back as such through both the rapt attention and camaraderie of the workers and its collision with the steel scaffolding of the Opera House structure, the rigidity of which provided a din of its own in confrontation with Robeson’s rich bass. The stiffness or elasticity of the pipes allowed for the pressure or stress that determined the possibility for execution of longitudinal vibration. Even



FIG. 1.2 Paul Robeson sings to workers at the Sydney Opera House construction site (1960). Reproduced by permission of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation—Library Sales. © 1960 ABC.

as Robeson held his hand to his ear to recoup some part of his vibration, these pipes conducted his vocal energy; strong enough to hold the many workers struggling for a better view, this scaffolding pulsed with his song, becoming stronger and more resilient for the fact of his voice's challenge and announcing back to him that he was well received. This luscious call and response in the man-sized steel Tinkertoy of sun and sweat developed in distinction to the finished Sydney Opera House, which is renowned for its poor acoustics. Paul never performed inside; he was received and revered without walls or the artifice of acoustic clouds. His tone and delivery made for reverberative possibilities that cannot be constructed with concrete and steel, even if those same materials, in bare form, become part of his experimental, open-air performance.

Though less intimate in many respects, other formal Sydney venues recorded his impact while on tour with fantastic language that, one can imagine, could hardly approach the original scene. Ray Castles of the *Sydney Morning Herald* described Robeson's éclat with geotectonic expression: "It is as if the ground were to quake in musical terms, as if a sudden fissure had opened to reveal some subterranean reservoir of resonant darkness. This cosmic belch of a voice still has the power to astonish by sheer carpeted magnificence."<sup>12</sup> After sixty-two years of life and forty in career struggle, Robeson still moved the earth with his song, demonstrat-

ing the consistency of his beliefs, his sound, his audience. What stamina is required to perpetually vibrate over a career? A lifetime and beyond? Robeson—this man whom poet Pablo Neruda argued “never stopped singing”—is the inspiration and model for what follows, which is a critical listening to and against the disturbances and liberatory futures exhibited and exhausted in the lower registers.

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He is Poetry. Image. Craft and Metaphor. He is Paul Leroy Robeson, one of the most widely and unceremoniously reproduced icons of the twentieth century; one materialized in small workshops and movement organizations, on stages and screens in isolated locations, and in the faded pages of long-forgotten tomes. His original disappearance was not a simple case of forgetting but rather an active destruction that, though calculated, is imperfect and incomplete. And his return is not a resurrection, for he never died, “says he. ‘I never died,’ says he.”<sup>13</sup> His reanimation is a return and a never gone, a collective will to experimentation, conjuring, and transformation that maps an illusory and provisional vibration. “Illusory,” according to Ashon Crawley, “because the thing itself is both given and withheld from view, from earshot. . . . Provisional because it—the vibration, the sonic event, the sound—is not and cannot ever be stilled absolutely. It keeps going, it keeps moving, it is open-ended. It can be felt and detected but remains almost obscure, almost unnoticed. And this for its protection. And this, its gift.”<sup>14</sup> Paul is the continual “vibration, the sonic event, the sound,” while his serial repetition is the (re)creative intervention of communities in struggle, who, in the years following his political erasure and death, dissected and reconstructed his body as evidence of residual, reserve power. Robeson’s returns from the mid-twentieth century through the early stages of the twenty-first establish the radical imagination of his labors and legacy while also bringing critical attention to form in the art/work of Black political cultures.

*Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson* considers the mid- to late twentieth- and twenty-first-century assemblage of Paul Robeson by Black and working communities around the world. Like Joshua Chambers-Letson, I am interested in those “minoritarian subjects who keep each other alive, mobilizing performance to open up the possibility for new worlds and new ways of being in the world together.”<sup>15</sup> In seeking that transformative potential, I ask how and why Paul is condensed and

brought to the location, the moment, the issue of his listeners and supporters whose place, time, and political articulation or rebellion are beyond his reach due to detention, disappearance, silence, or death. My periodization is marked by two dates: the first is his passport revocation by the United States federal government from 1950 to 1958, which, due to the political leverage gathered by the McCarthyite anti-Communist coalition, effectively ended the superstar stage of his career, killed his music industry recording opportunities, and isolated him from the political collectives whom he sustained and who sustained him in turn. While effective in some respects, the state ultimately failed. He simply would not be kept from his communities. He instead innovated the technique of his hearing and technologies of being heard and proved to the world that he would not be still, even after his passing in 1976. This final rest is the second period of examination that leads me to contend with his reanimation by successive generations of artists and movement actors.

*Everything Man* is not a biography; it builds on and extends Robeson's history by considering him as collective rather than singular and contending with who he becomes instead of who he was. His reincarnation in a variety of forms, from hologram in Bandung and New York City, to art installation in Washington, DC, and Wales, to environment in Central Asia and New Jersey, demonstrate his continued evolution and elevation. Yet the extraordinariness of his Voice and scale do not overshadow his consistent and insistent ordinariness. His states of return are revealed through both spectacular and quotidian political expressions that additionally record how he became an everyman now capable of most anything asked of him: *Everything Man*.

This project is, of necessity, wildly but carefully undisciplined. I inhabited spaces, laboring to understand what of them was him, and gave chase to a man who lived life through melodies that often lasted less than three minutes. He moves quickly and appears widely, and so I listen to his antiphonal life. This formation, in which the repetition of a call is met by his response in and beyond his time of physical animation, is non-linear and open-ended. And as the "anti" in "antiphonal" suggests, this exchange is not only phonic or working as we expect phonics should but exists in complicated tension and exchange with sound and language as well as a host of other media and modalities of "ever-shifting, relationally dependent phenomen[a]."<sup>16</sup> There is no expectation of the form of

response—his response may, in fact, be another call; he comes and goes as he pleases in and through whichever shape he’s imagined, making for my careful steps across the Black Atlantic, a space described by Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods as “a geographic region that can also represent the political histories of the disappeared.”<sup>17</sup> Each chapter searches for Paul through a different form or arrangement in order to complicate and undermine the state’s efforts at deletion while also championing the inventive science through which communities, artists, and activists revive and reimagine him as presently functional years after his (forced) disappearance or death. While this book is about Robeson, he is less subject than opportunity for an experiment that attends to crucial questions of representation and form through examinations of the multitextual, technological, and international afterlife of Black political cultures in the long twentieth century.

He is a remarkable man; to that most anyone can attest—even his detractors, which included the U.S. State Department and a number of Black elites like scholar-critic Harold Cruse and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader and author Walter White.<sup>18</sup> In a single, brief article from 1950 in which he took a negative position on Robeson’s politics against the favorable W. E. B. Du Bois, White described Paul’s views on Russia and Communism as “wrong, naïve and unrealistic” while also extolling him as a “decent and courageous man” and a “great artist” with an “excellent and honest Phi Beta Kappa mind.”<sup>19</sup> Even when disavowed, praise for Paul was often not far behind for simple fact of his ever-present talents.

There are only two things, of which I have evidence, that he could not do: whistle and swim. While the latter may be of only episodic significance, the former was fundamental to who he would become and how he remains. It was for a failure to whistle in the British production of the play *Voodoo* (1922) that Paul began to sing on stage. This pivotal moment led him to his unique and unobstructed vibration, delivered via the Voice to which poets Gwendolyn Brooks, Pablo Neruda, Nikki Giovanni, and so many others drew reader/listener attention.

*on the road to damascus*  
*to slay the christians*  
*saul saw the light*

*and was blinded by that light  
and looked into the Darkness  
and embraced that Darkness  
and saul arose from the great white way  
saying "I Am Paul  
who would slay you  
but I saw the Darkness  
and I am that Darkness"  
then he raised his voice  
singing red black and green songs  
saying "I am the lion  
in daniel's den  
I am the lion thrown to slaughter"  
  
do not fear the lion  
for he is us  
and we are all  
in daniel's den<sup>20</sup>*

Giovanni's "The Lion in Daniel's Den (*for Paul Robeson, Sr.*)" uses the biblical conversion of Saul to announce Paul's embrace of the "Darkness" of which he was formed and for whom he would then sing "red black and green songs." Through them he identifies not only with those whom he is sent to vanquish but the other agents sent to do the same, being made to do so by those empowered to decide who lives and who dies. Mirroring his infamous relationship to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), he is not only darkness/agent but also lion/criminal; not only was he asked to inform on others (his friend and Communist Ben Davis, for example) but he too was informed on (by Jackie Robinson and others). Yet it is through his Voice that the parable's truth and HUAC's reality are revealed: those who are vulnerable shall also be those triumphant.

The thickness of his Voice produced a vast vocality that, according to Katherine Meizel, holds within it all of the constituent parts that make vocalists like Paul, and performances like his, dense with signification. Vocality, she argues, "goes beyond qualities like timbre and practice, and encourages us to consider *everything* that is being vocalized—sounded and heard as vocal—and offers a way to talk about a voice beyond simply the words it imparts or its color or production techniques. Instead it

encapsulates the entire experience of the speaker or singer and of the listener, all of the physiological, psychoacoustic, and sociopolitical dynamics that impact our perception of ourselves and each other.”<sup>21</sup>

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Vocality is a reading practice as much as one of performance and is utilized throughout this book as “Voice” in order to examine the cacophony of interpretations and meanings inside Paul’s musical performances as well as the multivalent uses to which his singing was put. Inside composition, inside struggle, his Voice was an offering given freely as sustenance and strategy. Cultivated throughout the expanse of the African diaspora and finding root in locations connected to one another by descendancy factuals and fictions of unity, his Voice linked and enlivened the histories and futures of a multilingual diaspora of workers, lovers, and dissidents. This critical technique distinguishes his repertoire and resonance from all else and is the control variable for the experiment that follows.

The organization of Robeson as a core set of elements that converge in *VIBRATION* is the necessary introduction to his transition to *HOLOGRAM* in chapter 1. This physical science is understood as purely visual; of interest to me are its sonic elements, which I investigate by tracing the call by organizers and his responses in Indonesia, Wales, and New York City. If, as numerous reviewers and scholars have documented, Robeson’s Voice was uniquely his and recognized as such, it is possible to imagine that it—in replay on wax and tape—could develop a hologram in those spaces where he was physically absent due to restriction or death. In knowing his Voice as well as his highly trafficked image, one could hear the borders of his instrument—his body—through the recording, manifesting his three-dimensional shape as hologram.

Chapter 2 listens to Robeson at/as *PLAY* through close readings of his appearance on stage. Numerous theatrical commemorations and one-man shows have emerged since his passing in 1976; no longer heard on radio, these are the texts through which he is animated for the latest generation of theater audiences who launched his impressive career a century ago. His training as an athlete forms the theoretical core for a life in motion and suggests his investment in practice and rehearsal as dense techniques of sustenance and political investment. The attention to play also signals the very present audibility of his attendance and the ways in which he could be pressed or made to perform under certain circumstances. Like

play, the focus on INSTALLATION in chapter 3 listens to the ways in which Robeson has been productively and spectacularly curated, this time in exhibition form. A national campaign in Wales as well as a mixed-media project by visual artist Glenn Ligon both depend upon the fixity of his memory for public interest and yet are vulnerable to the transitory nature of display, preservation, and markets. Robeson embodied this tension as a performer, revealing that he is solidly in these spaces and doing a certain amount and type of work for thinking through performance as a historically and politically situated experience of the present.

The Paul Robeson House and Museum in Philadelphia is a location of transition that highlights Robeson's resistance to ephemerality through his function as a (semi)permanent marker of the global ENVIRONMENT. He has a physical home, graces others', and appears elsewhere as arbor, while Princeton, New Jersey, and Berlin host streets in his honor. Not to be outdone, Mount Paul Robeson in the Tien Shan Mountains is an eruption that at one time assisted in bracing the geopolitical infrastructure of Communism in Soviet Central Asia. While each demonstrates significance in their historical moment of dedication, I examine how these spaces continue to impress upon the landscape urgent questions of political allegiance, racial solidarity, and performance in the present. Robeson's establishment as a fixture of the built and natural environment materializes his repeated presence in our sociopolitical moment—loud, quiet, and otherwise.

Robeson's conjuring throughout his popular career and well after his death is suggestive of more than his incredible talents and leadership; it also exposes a critical characteristic of social and political movement formations: that those who call him and others back from the brink of obscurity see their present as a continuation of, rather than a break with, global-scale histories of oppression and violence. They acknowledge and respond to the Black afterlife—described by Saidiya Hartman as “the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril”—through diverse methods, including those conveyed atop sound waves.<sup>22</sup> In lieu of a conclusion, the last statements of *Everything Man* compose a continuation that takes up FREQUENCY as a manipulation of sonic time and, in the case of Robeson, a manipulation of political time that holds important but submerged truths about Black music and cul-

ture and its ability to hold competing melodies, tempos, and approaches to revolution.

Behind the symphonic simplicity and brevity of Robeson's spirituals and folk songs loomed a great virtuosic talent whose skills extended well beyond the musical score and written page. His talent was not a marker of his exceptionality but rather his deep and abiding connection to cultures throughout the world in his manifold role as organizer, chronicler, interpreter, steward, and champion. It is precisely those enduring relationships that return him to us, again and again, and to which we now listen.

# One Hologram

EVERYTHING, EVERYBODY, asked him to be EVERYWHERE.

—ESLANDA GOODE ROBESON

The setup is straightforward enough: “Hello there. I’m Bing Crosby, crooner, actor, and did I mention I’m *doo-be-doo-be* dead?” Light beams illuminate the faint image of *Saturday Night Live* actor Beck Bennett in a light gray double-breasted suit and burgundy bowtie. He’s seated in a leather club chair in an old-time study of dark wood and hardcover books. The lighting is dim, setting the mood for his invitational. As the camera closes in, the light spectrum reveals the transparency of his form. “So how am I talking to you now?” he continues. “Through the magic of holograms, of course. Thanks to this exciting new science from the ’90s, we can re-create great artists from the past and make them sing the songs of today.” Crosby is the spokesman for a compilation titled “Dead Bopz,” in which nine of our favorite singers of yesteryear are re-animated visually and sonically for a younger listening audience. Club hits like Justin Bieber’s “Sorry” (2015) and Rihanna’s “Bitch Better Have My Money” (2015) are simulated through the distinct performance styles of the deceased, including a melancholy Roy Orbison and vampy Eartha Kitt (respectively). Introduced as star of *Porgy and Bess* and “one of the

great singers and civil rights leaders of his day,” Paul Robeson contributes to the album a cover of New Jersey rapper Fetty Wap’s 2014 release, “Trap Queen.” A love song staged by weed smoking, stacks of cash, and stripper poles, Wap’s hit song is delivered by actor Kenan Thompson in a lower baritone register with exaggerated enunciation of the text: “I’m like, ‘Hey, what’s up hello. / Seen your pretty ass soon as you came in the door.’/ Showed her how to whip it now she remixin’ for low. / She’s my trap queen.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s a ludicrous pairing, even for a comedy sketch show. To imagine “Trap Queen” as a part of Robeson’s repertoire of spirituals and international folk songs is absurd. Yet there is a tragic humor embedded in the portrayal. Corporate manipulations such as these do happen; even if less ostentatious, Black musical icons like Nina Simone have been used in death to generate profit for products ranging from perfume to weight loss plans. Reflected here too is the vexed relationship that contemporary Black music has with its past iterations.<sup>2</sup> What is most significant in the *Saturday Night Live* sketch is the revival itself and how it is produced. The sketch argues the optic science of holography as necessarily enlivened by sonic faculties, suggesting that the two have a closer relation than the science concedes, and it is Robeson’s form that most explicitly brings them into communion. Within his “Dead Bopz” cohort of Crosby, Orbison, Kitt, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Ethel Merman, Lesley Gore, and Tupac, Robeson is distinct due to his intentional erasure by several Western and colonial nations, which begs the question, How recognizable was he to the audience and, if known, what did they know of him? It’s unlikely that many knew much, making for a situation in which Robeson was being invented for listeners without context and under duress. As Crosby explains, “We used a computer to *make him sing* ‘Trap Queen.’”<sup>3</sup> Robeson delivered the 2015 “egalitarian banger” reluctantly, by force, being made to perform for the pleasure and support of capital.<sup>4</sup> This was a zombie recording, one in which he remained dead rather than being made whole, alive, to sing for those with whom he still communed and to those open to a radically new approach to hearing and living.

Paul had other (re)visions for how he might assist even after his forced disappearance and his son, Paul Robeson Jr., picked up on one request in particular: that he be allowed to continue singing. In commemoration of the centennial of his birth, a concert was staged at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Featuring Hollywood luminaries Whoopi Goldberg,

Paul Newman, and Alfre Woodard, the event was a composite of celebrity narration—telling his story of faithfulness to communities in struggle—and people’s performance. His voice was paired with and ultimately accompanied by the Onllwyn Male Voice Choir from Wales. Paul Jr. was the vice president of the choir at the time and asked them to join in the centennial as its featured vocal ensemble. Paul Sr.’s long relationship with Welsh labor and music is highlighted early in the script, which tells of an encounter (to which I will return later) with striking Welsh miners during Robeson’s famed London run of *Show Boat*. Onllwyn punctuates these stories of Robeson’s deep and persistent solidarities with song—those from Wales, such as “Ar Hyd y Nos” as well as those like “Jerusalem,” which was popularized and performed by the star during his forty-year career. In the final scene of the concert, he joined with the choir in a duet performance of his “Ol’ Man River.”<sup>5</sup> Like the Grammy Award–winning “Unforgettable” sung by the deceased Nat “King” Cole and his daughter Natalie Cole seven years earlier, Robeson and the choir modeled the fact that “the living do not one-sidedly handle the dead, but participate in an inter-handling, a mutually effective co-laboring.”<sup>6</sup> While he began, “There’s an ol’ man called the Mississippi, / that’s the ol’ man I don’t like to be,” the Onllwyn choir hummed as his backing, providing a moving and dynamic buzz that announced a hologram: his vibrating body revealed through magnetic tape.

As a global superstar, Robeson was recognizable beyond his image. There was an extracorporeal element at work in his performances, which developed his body and its visualization in spaces where he could not be physically present. His voice had a life of its own—it is a living, breathing approximation of his body that was sent around the world during and after his lifetime—and it composes his “personhood,” which Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut argue “is not equivalent to a lone body, but is distributed among and articulated with other entities that are textual, technological, juridical, and affective. Personhood is always collaborative, cutting across clear distinctions of materiality/discourse, technology/organicity, and bounded lifetimes/eternal deaths.”<sup>7</sup> Varied transmissions and proximities produce his hologram and its transit, as it is willed to membership in locations otherwise inaccessible. Three scenes poignantly document his sonico-optic animation during the high tide of decolonization and antiapartheid—in one moment, 1955, in Indonesia, where he presided over the ceremonies of the Bandung Conference in absentia;

another, two years later, when he crossed the Atlantic by cable in support of the miners of South Wales; and, finally, in 1978 in New York City, two years after his death. In each scene, his voice placed him at the center of discussion and debate through its contributions to the vibrant intellectualisms produced therein as well as its mobilization as strategy for movement activity. As the state responded to mounting global alliances, he and his comrades responded in kind by creating their own technologies of possibility. Through his voice and its memory, Robeson was an exemplary elocutionist in the efforts to give voice to the silenced, forgotten, and deceased.

### **Body Borders**

To understand Paul Robeson, one must begin with sound. Described in the 1940s as “democracy’s greatest voice,” his was a method of great intrigue and capacity. He was the “only man in the world who [could] turn a concert into a rally for the rights of minority groups” and it was in recognition of this power that he perfected his vocal technology: “God gave me the voice that people want to hear, whether in song or in speech. I shall take my voice wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom or the words that might inspire hope and courage in the face of despair and fear.”<sup>8</sup> The travels of his Voice, through concerts, rallies, and recordings alike, spoke to communities in all reaches of the globe but started in dramatic fashion at home. Mississippi-born actress, poet, playwright, and activist Beah Richards also spoke on behalf of others through her characters and portrayals, yet she argued at the height of Robeson’s infamy that he spoke for her. In 1951, she provided near-documentary imagery of his influence in a lyrical poem:

*Paul Robeson!*  
*How proudly your name flourishes on my tongue even yet.*  
*Tho there are those who ask, “What did you say?”*  
*I always repeat, Paul Robeson speaks for me . . . even yet.*

*For long ago, when quite young*  
*I lived in voiceless penury,*  
*you sang a song for me and mine*

*for those of us who hear each day the tyrant scream  
Laggart, lowbirth, mean  
and juggled with our pay  
so that life required the labor of the whole day  
and half the night.*

*You sang,  
Walk together children, don't you get weary  
There is balm in Gilead your song said.  
I remember there was a boy next door to us who sang.  
No, not so well as you, but twas his ambition.  
"Sugar Babies," he sang as he fed the chickens  
and the backyard rang with the sweetness of his voice.*

*But then,  
his song was stopped.  
His lungs could not survive the Mississippi plot of  
hunger and one day poured forth a flood of blood  
instead of pure sweet melody.  
He died.  
Dan did. And something of his death was caught up  
in your song . . .  
. . . "You and me we sweat, strain, bodies aching, racked with pain" . . .  
You sang for him then . . . Your song said  
He should have lived to sing for himself. Twas his  
right, justice, your song said tis wrong to die of hunger.*

*So now, that I have found my tongue,  
I say I'll bless his life with mind . . .  
And proudly proclaim . . .  
Paul Robeson speaks for me . . .  
even yet.*

*But, most of all your songs have  
taught me how to fight  
To speak out, stand up for what is right.  
So now I say NO to those who clasp unseemly silence  
on your golden tongue,  
who dare obscure the light of life . . .  
Paul Robeson must speak*

*for Dan*  
*for me*  
*for us*  
*Even yet. Today.*<sup>9</sup>

The essence and truth of Robeson's impact is documented here by Richards as his persistent ("even yet") and repetitive sonic faculty. Even when the voice of a fellow traveler was stilled, Robeson continued to speak and sing the truths that they shared. His singing on concert stages and wax was public, but its ability to perforate the divisions between performer and listener made it exceptionally intimate; as Richards argues, he spoke for them, through them, as they labored for poverty wages or sought their own tones and beliefs. His songs became their tune and light, namely those spirituals of sustenance and faith, and in the process, those who sang imagined their own justice in situated locales of intense vulnerability. Sometimes he inhabited them, forcing their voices out with his words. At other times, their voices were perfectly pitched to his and delivered on his breath. By that transference Robeson was multiply present, embodied, and accessible well beyond his immediate time and space; he was sought, conjured, and enlivened through sound and thought by poets, singers, and communities near and far.

As independence and civil rights movements spread throughout the colonial and African world, Robeson developed a repertoire of sonic methods in order to be present there too, even in the absence of his right to travel. He understood that social movements are about feeling as much as cognition—sensing that others are with you even when you can't see them (due to distance, incarceration, or even death). Robeson's sound migrations—the performances that allowed his detained or silenced voice to take flight—are indicative of a rising wind of Black internationalism and compel an investigation of the relationship between sound and sight, fixity and enclosure, geography and citizenship.<sup>10</sup> Through his practices of music making, Robeson's Black voice became what Alexander Weheliye elsewhere theorizes as "a series of strategies and/or techniques of corporeality" that allowed him to transcend and transgress physical and geopolitical borders as well as racial boundaries.<sup>11</sup> The tortured and circuitous transfer of his voice through technologies of mobility, the body, amplification, and recording during the period of his U.S. detention made anthems out of ballads and bodies out of aural fragments. In the process,

Robeson was made manifest globally without travel, without consent, and without reservation.

Various technologies and strategies coalesced in Robeson's performances during and after the 1950s, and they were used to rage against his national captivity. A corporeal technology of sound is the first element at work in his repertoire. In performance, he manipulated physics and chemistry in order to mobilize his instrument: the voice, which is produced in the stockade of the body. The receptacle and enclosure for the voice is the body, most often devoid of extra technologies or sound appendages, making its manufacture unique. Various chemical impulses, muscle twitches, and the expansion and contraction of vital organs make the body function as a sound technology. In order for sound to be produced, air must be compressed and stretched as vibration through enclosure, whether that enclosure is the brass tubing of a trumpet or the thin wood of a violin. For the vocalist, the body is the first and final frontier for this sound production. The lungs and diaphragm force air through the chest, throat, and head, where they vibrate, pushing against the walls of the container, being both absorbed and repelled back into the cavity to echo and reverberate, thereby producing pitched sound. The waves constantly test and challenge the limits of the walls containing them, and through this, the singing, moaning, crying voice manifests the borders of the body.

Robeson appeared and was present through a voice that was incredibly distinct in its tone and timbre. As early as 1926, reviewers documented his unique sound, writing, "His voice is exceptional for its racial quality, which means a lusciousness rarely to be found outside the throats of colored men and women. Added to his vocal qualifications, he has a fine intelligence and a deep understanding of the songs he is giving, this last something that is so often lacking in singers who try to give the spirituals."<sup>12</sup> In this review the voice, and specifically the voice through song, serves as not simply pleasure for the audience but is also evidence in that it makes apparent, or exposes, various of Robeson's qualities and qualifications as a person and performer. Beyond his excellence as a singer, his education and his race are examined because they are part and parcel of the reception of his Voice. The reviewer thought himself capable of placing Robeson racially through sound, not sight, a process that at once renders obsolete and reinvents the sense of vision by removing the voice from the body as an essence and then reattaching it to a physical representation

through racial taxonomies. The conclusions made by the reviewer model the relay at the core of the acousmatic question (“Who is this?”), which convinces the listener that there are “truth claims” inside of what we hear from a singer—claims that then reveal the singer’s identity without sight or other knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Through the act of listening, Robeson was imagined to be bare, de-composed, and his Voice was the method of exposure.

As “a strapping man with a voice that rolls out of him like a vibrant tide,” Robeson’s sound could not be divorced from his body, his body from his gender, his gender from his race.<sup>14</sup> All were sutured to one another, making the event of listening a visual experience as well. During his early acting career, a critic mused, “Robeson . . . is one of the most thoroughly eloquent, impressive, and convincing actors that I have *looked at and listened to* in almost twenty years of professional theater-going.”<sup>15</sup> This symbiosis of sight and sound is critically important to the success of his metaphysical travels and considers the unique requests and desires of his audiences. Concert and rally attendees received his sound through their own particular technology—that of the mind and inner ear. Fritz Winckel argues that “although sounds and even more general noise emissions are not visible and not tangible, they are nonetheless physical realities inasmuch as they exist as pressure differences in the air, mechanical vibrations in the middle ear, liquid vibrations in the inner ear, and finally as electrical impulses in the nerves leading to the brain.”<sup>16</sup> This biotechnology intimately connects the audience to the performer, creating bodily, psychic, and political relations in which “the listener mimics the singer, expresses physical sympathy, appreciation or exultation.”<sup>17</sup> As Nina Sun Eidsheim argues, “Voice is not singular; it is collective,” producing “communal technologies attuned to cultural values.”<sup>18</sup> These expressions of solidarity tailored the relationship between Robeson and his audiences and developed particular chemistries within the spaces in which his Voice was heard, composing, as Beah Richards detailed, possibility and change. This chemical equation produced a bisensory politics: an audiovisual performance of collaborative and imperfect imaginaries. Their movement—both physical responses to pleasure and political motivation—was singularly propelled through Robeson’s inimitable Voice.

More than other instrumentalists, it is singers who are capable of making these intimacies possible. Our connection to singers through vocal musics is, most often, only mediated by the ability of the performer to speak to us. As Richards beautifully documented in “Paul Robeson

Speaks for Me,” if the singer indeed speaks, transference occurs; according to Wayne Koestenbaum, “The singer, through osmosis, passes through the self’s porous membrane, and discredits the fiction that bodies are separate, boundaried packages” by “destroy[ing] the division between her body and our own, for her sound enters our system.”<sup>19</sup> The sound transgresses the borders that separate our bodies, initiating a full-body experience as the voice enters our ears as well as our minds and hearts. Robeson possessed a distinctive Voice but also was unique in his ability to perforate those divisions between singer and receiver. The quality of his sound propelled this process but additionally was carried by its content, which offered instruction to a world population of workers and people of color who, in their role as audience members, were united with one another through his music. His Voice, then, became the technology (often within a technology) through which identity was heard and mediated, developing a method of long-distance intervention and a new historical record.

## **Bandung Futures**

The 1955 Bandung Conference was a test case for Robeson’s method of political work. Taking place just over halfway through the fight to reinstate his passport, the Afro-Asian Conference invited newly independent and decolonizing nations into conversation and camaraderie with one another, though the synergies were not always clear. “What had these nations in common?” asked attendee Richard Wright. “Nothing, it seemed to me, but what their past relationship to the Western world had made them feel.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, feelings of relation and shared purpose, often coerced through global North violence, brought these nations together and made for a complicated yet enduring synergy. Through much discussion and debate, representatives of these twenty-nine nations, including President Sukarno of Indonesia and Jawaharlal Nehru of independent India, developed a ten-point platform inclusive of respect for UN conventions, peaceful dispute resolution internationally, and “recognition of the equality of all races and of the equality of all nations large and small.”<sup>21</sup> These were the agreements and best practices that developed deep solidarities across difference. Robeson was keenly aware of these divisions, yet he advanced the idea of one people and predicted that their actions would

meaningfully contribute to their shared victory in the fall of colonialism. As he announced in his speech to the attendees,

One of the most important causes of world tension has been and continues to be imperialist enslavement of nations. Peace in Asia is directly linked with the problems of freedom and full sovereign rights for the nations of Asia. As for Africa, most of that vast continent, as we know, still groans in chains. In North Africa, in Kenya, East Africa, and in other areas imperialist terror has been unleashed in an attempt to keep freedom aspiring peoples in subjection. . . . But this is the time of liberation, and Africa too shall shout in freedom and glory. Soon. Yes, *now in our day!*<sup>22</sup>

In his comments, Robeson displayed his keen and long-standing attention to and affinity with the continent of Africa. He filmed in eastern Africa, learned numerous African languages, and was a comrade to and colleague with a rising guard of African decolonization activists, including the postindependence Ghanaian premier Kwame Nkrumah and Kenyan freedom icon Jomo Kenyatta. Beyond this, as early as 1935 he argued that he was an African, an identification that escalated the amount of surveillance that he endured in Britain and the United States. Robeson gloried in his Bandung relationships as well as the anti-imperialist politics and visions for peace shared by its participants. With 1.5 billion of the earth's inhabitants shared between the two continents, this Indonesian collective represented and modeled the new world that Robeson tirelessly envisioned and sang of, to, and for.

He was, of course, not physically present. He was cloistered in the U.S. without a passport, far from the proceedings though nonetheless among them. Robeson created assembly, and stimulated that feeling that Wright mentions, with his Voice. In addition to his speech, Robeson sent a recording to Bandung including three songs: the spiritual “No More Auction Block,” the peace ballad “Hymn for Nations,” and his anthem “Ol’ Man River.”<sup>23</sup> Just as “Robeson’s performances emerged as a central domestic [U.S.] site for the waging of the Cold War,” so too did his overseas performances—enabled by various technologies—extend global South challenges to the formation of Cold War empires.<sup>24</sup> Even with this intervention, however, the appearance of Paul’s Voice on tape does not diminish its inevitable fade and decay as material artifact. It is the tense relationship between (audible) sound and (visible) body that riddles this perfor-

mance with questions of sustainability, especially when one considers the highly organized surveillance and detention apparatus constructed to forestall Robeson's efforts. Questions of permanency are central to Weheliye's "sonic Afro-modernity," in which "the 'sounds of blackness' articulated through constantly shifting sonic technologies represent a crucial signifying locus for the formation of (black) subjectivities throughout the twentieth century and help recalibrate the identity-subject gulf by calling attention to their mutual interreliance."<sup>25</sup>

Even as his ideological positions remained steady, recordings of Robeson's musical performance document the trajectory of his constantly changing matter from air (song) to solid (record) back to air (song). The simultaneity of these forms kept him and his Voice in constant circulation, outmaneuvering even the most ardent of state restrictions. Recording and the process of replaying were some of the sciences behind Robeson's presence; they're practices that Mark Katz argues remove music "from its original setting, [therefore] losing its unique spatial and temporal identity."<sup>26</sup> Robeson's fixity in the years after his passport revocation challenge this claim. To hear his Voice during the 1950s was to hear his body performing under the conditions of McCarthyism—a particularly situated geotemporal event. As Richard Leppert contends, "the only purpose in preserving—making replicable—sounds is that they mean something."<sup>27</sup> Robeson's sound project—from homemade studio sessions in New York to the distribution of his recordings around the world—was to make his technologically produced Voice mean something through its representational approximation of a contested Black body, in a distinct time, history, and place, effectively offering his "body as a palimpsest" through sound.<sup>28</sup> His "envoiced" subjectivity allowed the audience to bridge the separation of his Voice and body through a process by which the "materiality [of sound] was displaced onto the recording apparatus itself and the practices surrounding it and, as a result, rematerialized the sonic source."<sup>29</sup> Replaying Robeson's Voice in Indonesia configured him differently in relation to his listeners who understood his detention as a unique condition of his sound; Bandung audiences could hear both the political structures that held him captive (Jim Crow segregation, McCarthyism, and U.S. investment in colonial enterprises in East and Southeast Asia and Africa) as well as the alternative visions engendered through his Negro spirituals and folk songs. It's this recording that perfectly indexed his intervention that day. His Voice betrayed his physically situated body

through its flight: as he (in body) struggled against racism, classism, and confinement in the U.S., his Voice was located where he believed that it ought to be: in the Third World, a constellation of desires, hopes, dreams, and objectives that, according to Vijay Prashad, is not a place but a “project” and another possibility.<sup>30</sup>

Robeson’s dismemberment—body in U.S., Voice in Indonesia—is a function of his passport revocation but is also part and parcel of the struggles of the singer. Koestenbaum describes that opera seeks to “recombine words and music, the severed halves of the body.” Because the listener is aware of this disjuncture, they “no longer believe in coherence” because “the idea of a unified body seems tyrannical.”<sup>31</sup> Tony Perucci identifies this moment of disarticulation in Bandung as “Robeson’s voice’s body,” which he argues is a type of resistive objecthood.<sup>32</sup> Yet the Voice is plainly his, which makes not for the redundancy of an embodied voice or even objecthood but a calculated and thoughtful division meant to contain all relevant information, from Robeson’s form to his ideas to his tone.<sup>33</sup> The fragmented nature of the body, spoken to by postcolonial theorist-worker Frantz Fanon, was not lost on the Bandung participants, nor was the critically insistent question of unity.<sup>34</sup> These nations labored under tension within the wider world and with one another in their efforts to construct alternatives outside of capitalist and Communist forms of empire. It was through Robeson’s recording that these postcolonial subjects could begin the reconstruction and reunification of his body and incorporate it fully into their shifting political body of nonaligned states.

The inclusion of critical voices was a documented part of proceeding reviews. According to reports, “Criticism in the Asian press and among delegates generally was equally sharp and widespread for ‘Voice of America’ speeches on the conference floor which were felt to be ‘out of tune’ with the spirit of the conference.”<sup>35</sup> The descriptions of pro-U.S. speechmakers as “out of tune” was precisely the context in which Robeson made his grand intervention as a pitch-perfect guest of honor. His three-dimensional reconstitution in Bandung facilitated the imaginative and practical creation of decolonization, which forgoes neat teleologies of origin and discovery for the messy insurgencies of imagination. As a project fundamentally entangled with culture, decolonization begs the question of method. Robeson’s process and contribution included an order of sensory operations that first privileged his great sonic talent, and, perhaps unintentionally, sight quickly followed. The act of hearing develops the

presence and “relation to [the singer’s] body” that makes possible an image of the performer in our mind. If in fact we can hear Robeson through his Voice, and his Voice defines the contours of his body through its reverberation as an instrument, then we can imagine his silhouette sharing in the project of the Third World within the Bandung proceedings. The fantastic boom of his Voice within the Indonesian hall was only contained by its genesis within his body—a space that through its special alchemy turned air into music and, once released through the mouth, exploded the borders of its origins. “Each instance of the solo enfleshed the airy space with the black symphonic. You hear the density of the space when there is abandonment and reanimation of sound, when there is the leaving and arrival, the breaking away from and coming back to of instruments.”<sup>36</sup> In this description of a different musical scene, Ashon Crawley suggests how we might see, through hearing, how Black instrumentality escapes from and returns to acoustical space, changing its dynamics. It is because we can hear Paul’s Voice that we can also hear its limits within the recomposed area. This is the body, his image, and the final technology of the hologram that may be imagined by the sound of Robeson’s Voice on tape.

Because Robeson’s instrument was the voice, his performance functions as both a sound and visual recording as sound outlines the structure and peripheries of his body. The composite form was bordered on one side by his complicated allegiance to the Soviet Union—which he references in his Bandung speech with a praiseworthy mention of the 1917 Russian Revolution—and, on the other, by his well-defined distance from Negro storytellers of U.S. equality like Senator Adam Clayton Powell, who was sent to Bandung by the same U.S. State Department that, as Robeson argued, “arrogantly and arbitrarily restricts my movements”:

How I would love to see my brothers from Africa, India, China, Indonesia and from all the people represented at Bandung. . . . And I might have come as an observer had I been granted a passport by the State Department whose lawyers have argued that “in view of the applicant’s frank admission that he has been fighting for the freedom of the colonial people of Africa . . . the diplomatic embarrassment that could arise from the presence abroad of such a political meddler travelling under the protection of an American passport, is easily imaginable!”<sup>37</sup>

In invoking his present threat to the U.S. state, as well as intimacy with a number of the attendees, some of whom he’d known since the 1930s,

Robeson invited more than his memory to the proceedings—he was immediately not there, closely absent, as he also reanimated long-held commitments and alliances. In combination with his songs, his speech identified an alert and urgent presence with an attendant opacity that produced a hologram within Merdeka (Freedom) Hall.

Holograms developed as a physical science in the late 1940s—the most fantastic decade of Robeson’s international stardom—and are defined as two-dimensional recorded images that are later reconstructed three dimensionally. Robeson’s three-dimensional reconstruction at Bandung was accomplished similarly through the matching of his image with his two-dimensional record. With his likeness and sound in rapid and diverse circulation, Robeson could easily be invented in the minds of those who called on him, especially since he was interpolated into political scenes that he had long championed. As physicist Sean Johnston argues, “The appreciation of a hologram is a product of its time, context, and audience. [It] is both a permanent product and a fleeting perceptual experience.”<sup>38</sup> He was called to this location as a constituent member of an experience that, while lasting only three days, would have incalculable impact in the years to come for untold numbers of the world’s population.

The specificity of the holographic event requires paying attention to its details; beyond the physics that make its science possible, there are political, physical, and creative considerations as well. Robeson’s freedom to travel during the Cold War was, like holographic perception, fleeting; his passport was revoked under suspicion of Communist affiliation in 1950 and required visits to the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Supreme Court as well as an international campaign in order for it to be reinstated eight years later. The exception to his travel prohibition was sound. His audibility allowed for the continued presence of his image since, as Weheliye documents of Black subjects, “the *phono* and the *optic* cannot materialize without each other.”<sup>39</sup> Hazel Carby argues that Robeson’s body was made into a modernist masterpiece during his spectacular fame in the 1920s and ’30s and “established links both to a classical past and to the possibilities of a utopian future.” Naked portraits by Nickolas Muray, along with his growing film repertoire, ensured a visibility unparalleled by any other Black male artist in the United States. Through scandal and praise, his image remained in circulation around the world and its “physics . . . were mixed and blended in stages.”<sup>40</sup> The Bandung stage was a torturous one, filled with no uncertain amount of danger, yet

it was also a hopeful period as Bandung was in a sense a homecoming for Robeson; the personal relationships that he shared with attendees and the collective investment in a peaceful end to colonialism established recognition between the participants without sight. His holographic image was a “fleeting perceptual experience,” but his Voice remained as “permanent product,” artifact, and the proof of his presence there.

## Telepresence

Robeson’s ability to live an antiphonal life was dependent on an increasing number of inventions and innovations during the 1950s. Overseas telephone calls were one such technology that did not always deliver the clarity or precision that he requested of his performances. Indeed, there was “a time when such calls were a bit like being in a vast cave and shouting out into the darkness: You might get echoes of your own voice, there would be a noticeable delay before you received a reply from anyone other than yourself, and that other person’s voice might sound faint and distant.”<sup>41</sup> His Voice undoubtedly lost luster and subtlety when converted to electricity and back due to the telephone’s infrastructure: “A basic phone consists of a microphone (which you talk into), an apparatus to change your voice into electric signals, a means of sending the signals to their destination (say, your friend’s ear), and (on your friend’s end) a receiver which then changes the electric signals back into your voice (or an approximation thereof).”<sup>42</sup> Robeson’s familiarity with the microphone was undoubtedly challenged by its encasement and cumbersome maneuverability, which required it to be in close proximity to his mouth at all times. No sight lines to his audience similarly burdened his interactions as so many of his performances were intended to meet people eye to eye, to speak directly to them with limited mediation, and to gain strength from their vibrations. The deliverance of his Voice as “an approximation” of its true form from within his body is again the holographic; he was (re)produced through currents, wires, and waves that replicated his instrument (body) in the atmosphere organized and filled by his Voice.

Overcoming the elements upset telephony and compromised its use toward any true internationalism. Long-distance calls nationally did not have to contend with the curve of the earth and used radio waves, while transatlantic long-distance calls were bound by line of sight, in which mi-

crowaves could be blocked by objects or go off course if faced with curvature. Even as innovation in microwave transmission grew, its limits were recognizable, necessitating the continued development of insulation and construction technology for underground and underwater cable, particularly between the U.S. and U.K. It was only in the 1950s—after much trial and error in the development and use of wave and wire technology—that the first transatlantic telephone call was made. Robeson and his audiences quickly picked up on and transformed its capabilities in defiance of the U.S. federal government. He understood what his travel meant during the high tide of (inter)national liberation struggle; as he wrote in his autobiography, “I have criticized [Negro] conditions abroad as I have at home, and I shall continue to do so until those conditions are changed. What is the Negro traveler supposed to do—keep silent or lie about what is happening to his people back home? Not I! Furthermore, as long as other Americans are not required to be silent or false in reference to their interests, I shall insist that to impose such restrictions on Negroes is unjust, discriminatory and intolerable.”<sup>43</sup> His seditious labors by phone exposed the fascism of the state as he defied the ban on his travel by sending the sounds of his body under the ocean.

Robeson’s aquatic transference was by invitation of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) of South Wales, who were eager to receive his hologram. Familiar with the union and its workers at least since the early 1930s, Paul’s relationship with organized labor proved to be his lifeline during much of the decade.<sup>44</sup> Their call for his participation, which they’d made yearly since 1953, was met with another call—that was also a response—that allowed him to join in their *eisteddfod*, a musical festival and competition that the union began to host annually in South Wales in 1948. The miners’ efforts were separate from the national *eisteddfod*, which continues to take place in a new Welsh city every year.<sup>45</sup> Organized historically by choral singing in the hymn tradition—especially male choirs—the form of the *eisteddfod*, which celebrates Welsh language and culture, is a fitting connection to Robeson, whose childhood was filled with hymns and whose spirituals became a part of that global canon as well. Though he is regularly credited with bringing Negro spirituals to Wales, the Fisk Jubilee Singers visited in the late nineteenth century and were influential in expanding the national choral culture. The Welsh familiarity with spirituals and the ease of musical progressions facilitated through shared language and tonality made this occasion of a

joint concert between Robeson and the NUM choir of South Wales a musical alliance of international proportion.

Joined by his wife and comrade Eslanda Goode Robeson, son Paul Jr. (who often served as recording engineer), daughter-in-law Marilyn, grandchildren Susan and David, and accompanist Alan Booth, Paul sang to them in May 1957 from a studio in New York City. By this point in his national detention, he was exceptionally familiar with do-it-yourself sessions; his independent Othello Records had produced a number of records for audiences outside the United States. His kineticism behind the microphone was readily transferred by his chosen songs and, in the process, his body too was live, even as it was meant for preservation in wax. “Songs are a way to get to singing,” as singer-activist-scholar Bernice Johnson Reagon described. “The singing is what you’re aiming for and the singing is running this sound through your body. You cannot sing a song and not change your condition.”<sup>46</sup> The studio was a space of teleportation for Robeson, and the pressure of his surrounding world created new conditions and states of matter as he sublimated from solid (body) to gas (Voice) without ever losing his density. The request from those who called was that he be present in as literal a form as possible, and so he contorted himself in whichever way was necessary to ensure that his response was poignant and enduring. Paul remained with them that day for more than an hour, making recognition a possibility without a line of sight.

As a technology that originally communicated through interruptions (for example, seven interruptions in the signal would mean the number seven had been dialed), Robeson’s choice of the telephone as his method of communication with an anxious world was a concession even if also a crucial opportunity for speech and connection. His attempts to create intimacy by phone were also interrupted, unsteady, and awkward, as he spoke to his imagined audience and imagined their responses in return. In his opening greeting, Robeson sounds hesitant as he negotiates the reality of distance. His recording from New York was the continuation of a conversation that began in Porthcawl with an introduction by the NUM, yet he sounds as if he is trapped between the words of the introduction and the anticipated response of the audience as he says in a slow, deliberate, and arrhythmic style, “Thank you so much . . . for . . . your . . . very kind words.” From this shaky start, his rhythm returns as if he is speaking from the podium there among them: “My warmest greetings to the people of my beloved Wales. And a special ‘hello’ to the miners of South

Wales at this great festival.” He is poised, ready to regain his lauded stage presence, though here it is delivered remotely as telepresence, a virtual project that sent abroad his most representative part: Voice.

“I’m going to begin with one of my own songs,” he says, setting the stage for the recital to come.<sup>47</sup> His songs were, of course, Negro spirituals, which writer-anthologist James Weldon Johnson argued in 1926 were the “main force in breaking down the immemorial stereotype that the Negro in America is nothing more than a beggar at the gate of the nation, waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization; that he is here only to receive; to be shaped into something new and unquestionably better.”<sup>48</sup> All of this Paul’s Voice too disproved. Song one of the transmission was “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel.” There’s the faint sound of feedback as the track opens on the recording, alerting the listener to the fact that this is no ordinary session. Were it an album for a band with electric instruments, the sound may have seemed unremarkable even in our contemporary moment of high production values. But the only instruments in the studio were Paul and the piano. In less than one second, that piercing pitch announced itself as the telephone, the cables, the waves of the stations and ocean, and reminded us that they too were playing in this concert. They were part of the orchestra that accompanied Robeson, and he must respond to them as any instrument does when sharing a composition with another. Booth proceeded in D minor as answer to the ocean with Robeson’s Voice, delivered in a full-body baritone, coasting atop the rumbling, dark accompaniment with a haunting and defiant lyric: “The moon runs down in a purple stream. / The sun refused to shine. / Every star did disappear. / Yes, freedom shall be mine.”

This song was the strongest of his performances that day. It revealed his comfort with spirituals as well as his ability to perform through deprivation when called by communities in struggle. The songs sung by Robeson in the transatlantic performance, including an emotional “This Little Light of Mine” and the Welsh hymn “All through the Night” (“Ar Hyd y Nos”), are beautiful and penetrating, but their lushness makes the silences that much more pronounced. At the very beginning and end of each track, there is a deep silence where one would otherwise hear applause during a live performance. It’s a stark juxtaposition; Paul’s rich and steady Voice surrounds the listener and fills space like his body would if it were present. When he performs, we receive him as someone near to us, sharing in the experience, but when his Voice is no longer, we suddenly

recognize that our imagined musical community is a fiction. We are not as close, not as intimate as his hologram allows us to believe. We can hear and see him when he sings, but when he stops, we're faced with the possibility that his time with us is limited and transient—that hearing/seeing him again is not inevitable.

Not all silences, nor all voices, in the cable belonged to Paul; this event allowed him to be both giver of song and recipient. The festival was intended as an exchange and included a performance by the Cor Meibion Treorchy Male Voice Choir. Their selection, “Y Delyn Aur” (“The Golden Harp”), was a four-part chorale with swelling crescendos and dramatic decrescendos. Eighth-note flourishes moved the choir as a unified mass and mimicked the choral scenes in Robeson’s famous film *The Proud Valley*. Filmed in South Wales in 1939, the film was a precursor to the eisteddfod in that it perfectly modeled the merger of labor and arts. Just as the festival celebrated the talents of its union membership, so too did *Valley* celebrate both the brains and the brawn of its characters (also miners). Robeson appears in the film as an outsider but one with special vocal talents who quickly finds a place for himself in their community, first in the choir and then in the mines. Named David Goliath, Robeson goes on to lead the choir as soloist and the union as an organizer in their petition to reopen a closed mine. Ultimately, he sacrifices his life for the well-being of the workers and town, becoming a hero for the ranks of labor.

It’s not difficult to understand why *Valley* was Robeson’s most prized film. He created recognition and intimacy with that community through sharing the most fundamental element of his being—his Voice—and was rewarded for his honesty, vulnerability, and camaraderie by regular invitations to return. The scene in Porthcawl was a continuation of what the film had inscribed in celluloid, and his telephone call with NUM almost twenty years later further reinvented his relationship to their struggle and to their choral histories. A 1940 reviewer of the film argued that Robeson’s “impressive presence, glorious voice (whether speaking or singing) and sympathetic approach make David vividly alive.”<sup>49</sup> His “impressive presence” revealed itself again, this time as hologram at the eisteddfod, making him “vividly alive” for the listeners in the Grand Pavillion. As NUM president W. Paynter wrote to Paul afterward, “If you could only have seen this great body of people clinging to every note and word, you would have known the extent of the feeling that exists in Wales for you and for your release from the bondage now forced upon you.”<sup>50</sup> The five-

thousand-member audience, held in rapt attention by “every note and word,” now were primed for their next opportunity to critique and participate in the disruption of the U.S. surveillance state.

As the Treorchy Male Voice Choir sang “Our song will never cease,” Robeson must have imagined himself there singing with them and promising to remain vigilant, present, even when facing the expanse of the Atlantic. His response to the singers — “And I can’t tell you what it means to hear you like this. It seems as though I am really standing there right with you and I can see many of my old friends” — is the bridge between the sonic and the optic and the language of reciprocity that made their bond real.<sup>51</sup> He was, of course, among them, being imagined just as he imagined them. Robeson would see and be seen in Wales again after the reinstatement of his passport the following year, but this concert, made possible by sending his voluminous Voice under the ocean, disclosed that, like the spirituals enlivened by his performance, Paul “possess[ed] the germ of immortality.”<sup>52</sup>

### **An Antipartheid Birthday**

The continued desire for political recognition and collective advance revealed itself in the numerous rigorous receptions that Robeson received later in life as well as his passage into the next. In 1978, two years after his death, the UN Special Committee against Apartheid celebrated his eightieth birthday with a symposium attended by friends, artists, activists, scholars, and dignitaries from around the world. Convening in New York City, the event highlighted his birthday as an occasion on which to focus on the ongoing struggles against apartheid in South Africa, a country long on Robeson’s mind. He singled that nation out in his Bandung speech, announcing, “South Africa feels the lash of the redoubled racist fury of her white ruling class,” which by 1955 was installed through the election of the apartheid-platform National Party.<sup>53</sup> Regular coverage of the anti-apartheid struggle in *Spotlight on Africa* — the publication of the Council on African Affairs (CAA), of which Robeson was chairman — as well as his outspokenness on the brutal laboring conditions and disfranchisement of South African workers, positioned Robeson as a kind of emissary for the indigenous populations of the embattled nation. His conjuring by the UN was also a bridge back to the awakening of a revolutionary Third World

in Bandung—an event whose role in fashioning a global consciousness was not forgotten by the attendees more than twenty years later. President of the UN event, Leslie O. Harriman of Nigeria, noted that Robeson “accepted the ten principles of Bandung as the principles of his future foreign policy and the principles of his future standards.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, that event guided and set the tone for his political work for the rest of his life.

The global community that assembled for the UN tribute and program in support of apartheid resistance was keenly aware of Robeson’s dimensionality, and his hologram in their presence materialized it perfectly. The original theorist of holography, Dennis Gabor, wrote in 1947 that “each crest of the [holographic] wave pattern contains the whole information of its original source, and that this information could be stored on film and reproduced. This is why it is called a hologram,” a term derived from the ancient Greek *hólos* (“whole”) and *gramma* (“letter,” “line,” or some other record).<sup>55</sup> Any given portion of a hologram “is itself a hologram of the whole object, but from a different orientation.”<sup>56</sup> A similar truth is evident with Robeson. His long career, taken from different angles or positions, will similarly demonstrate the full perspective of his convictions. From his years as a segregated student, to his films representing African cultures, to his musical repertoire, one sees a long development and fortification of his ideas and principles. Any subsection of it will yield results, even if it also exposes contradictions. His work in Bandung and the broader antiapartheid struggle is but part of the evidence of his whole.

With the Bandung platform as his guide in solidarity with a global majority, Robeson mobilized his vocal power to advance the cause of South African antiapartheid struggle from stage to stage, recording booth to recording booth. He was, in fact, described by Harriman as “one of the founders of the modern anti-apartheid movement,” and he took his rightful place among “those early heroes who dedicated their lives to the struggle against racial discrimination and colonial oppression.”<sup>57</sup> Robeson was the second person to be so honored by the Special Committee, with the first being his mentor and guide, radical scholar-activist W. E. B. Du Bois. Robeson’s commendation, however, was auspicious because the year of his honor was designated International Anti-Apartheid Year by the UN. The spectacular nature and escalation of violence in South Africa had by this time reached international attention, thanks in large part to the politico-cultural ground work of the Pan Africanist Congress as well as the embattled—and increasingly diasporic—African National Congress

(ANC) and other exiled nationals.<sup>58</sup> The Soweto uprising of striking students in June 1976 was but the most recent explosion to rouse the UN and the organized world toward deeper refusals of the apartheid nation. Robeson advanced this work during his lifetime by drawing attention to their struggles as well as using the CAA to facilitate meetings of consequence for South African delegates to the UN who used that platform for a number of campaigns, including efforts to stop the apartheid government's annexation of South West Africa (current-day Namibia). That Robeson never addressed the UN himself suggests that he saw himself not as a spokesperson but as a conduit able to assist in raising the voices of those who were otherwise silenced or ignored.

The celebration and citation of Robeson by the UN—a man who had been persecuted and, later, erased—was described as “a sign of the new world [they were] building” through various African organizations as apartheid moved into its final decade. While he was recognizable for his film and music work in South Africa, he was also described by participants as an organizer. Yusuf Dadoo of the South African Indian Congress and national chairman of the Communist Party sent a telegram to New York that lauded Robeson’s “pioneering work in mobilizing world public opinion against racism and colonialism and for peace,” while Alfred Nzo of the ANC-Lusaka remarked, “Paul Robeson, Chairman of the International CAA drew public attention to the total suppression of the African mine labour strike of 1946 and discrimination legislation in South Africa. The African National Congress of South Africa salutes him. His involvement in the struggle of our people in South Africa earned him his household name in South Africa. His dedication to liberation of Africa was an inspiration to all oppressed people of South Africa.”<sup>59</sup>

Robeson’s ubiquity within communities of struggle in South Africa drew the attention and ire of the settler colonial minority in the capital of Pretoria, who added his name to a diverse and ever-growing list of banned people in 1949, one year after apartheid was codified through national election. The criminalization of his Voice and those ears that would receive it was not a unique tactic but was devastatingly comprehensive in South Africa and manifested itself in other media platforms around the world. Ten years before singer Miriam Makeba was exiled from South Africa for her role in the 1960 film *Come Back, Africa*, before the ANC was driven underground and moved its headquarters out of the nation, Robeson became the first American banned on U.S. television.

Famed Black documentarian and television producer Gil Noble noted, “Paul Robeson, I found, never appeared on American television in any capacity—neither to sing nor to act; as a panelist, lecturer or linguist or any other capacity.”<sup>60</sup> Robeson instead made his relationships in real time, intimately connecting to and with people on stages and in workplaces around the globe. The efforts to censor musicians highlight the instructive and organizing functions of their art as well as the strategies of containment shared between colonial and imperialist nations. It also provides important evidence of the reception of blackness globally; the relationship between Black sound and Black image on television again documents how each was seen as a challenge, as resistance, and therefore required radical isolation or evisceration. Whether presented corporeally or sonically, transgressive Black people were contemptible. Paul’s ability to transcend his body through sound was one of his greatest rebuttals to the state, and the lasting echo of his music was so pervasive that he was reanimated well after his death.

Robeson’s holographic effect among those in New York City was a production combining knowledge of his fantastic Voice and vibration with other physics of the body. Holography is a science requiring precise conditions, and its primary environmental requirement is stillness: “Stability is absolutely essential because movement as small as a quarter wave-length of light during exposures of a few minutes or even seconds can completely spoil a hologram.”<sup>61</sup> Robeson’s melodic stillness through his breath support was demonstrated repeatedly, as he often performed with little or no accompaniment and/or no amplification, as he did for the Loyalists on the battlefield of the Spanish Civil War in 1938 or workers on the Moore Dry Dock in Oakland in 1942. His stillness in Bandung and Wales was also due to his captivity in the U.S. after the revocation of his passport, during which his ability to physically practice his global citizenship was withdrawn. Of course, in 1978 he had reached his final rest, yet it was not only his body but also his politics that remained perfectly still. He was steadfast, unmovable even inside movement(s). As he argued at the 1952 Peace Arch concert at the U.S.-Canadian border, “I shall continue to fight as I see the truth . . . and I want everybody in the range of my voice to hear, official or otherwise, that there is no force on earth that will make me go backward one thousandth part of one little inch.”<sup>62</sup> His precision as artist and citizen made for the respect and reception that welcomed him everywhere he went. While the mechanics of a classic hologram (lasers,

mirrors, etc.) were absent in Bandung, Wales, and New York City, the fundamental elements of its construction were similar, allowing him to remain with those alongside whom he struggled. The requisite 2-D surface image—in this case Robeson’s picture on the UN event’s program—was part of his recording alongside his Voice, thereby creating a living image of Robeson in the minds of participants. From this equation he again developed a successful hologram.

The recognition of Robeson’s living presence was forcefully articulated by actor and then-chairman of the South African Freedom Committee, Ossie Davis, and his partner, actor-activist Ruby Dee: “Paul Robeson fully recognized, as did Dr. W. E. B. DuBois and many others, that blacks in America and blacks in Africa are interconnected in many ways: not only are we one culturally and historically, but also because we two peoples are still joined as common victims of racism and economic exploitation. Paul taught us that neither Africans nor Afro-Americans would ever become free until we joined in common struggle together with all those who fight the common fight against war, against poverty and ignorance, against colonialism, and most especially against apartheid. Robeson lives because struggle lives!”<sup>63</sup> Here Davis and Dee animated Robeson through his Pan-Africanism, which demonstrated, through sound and action, the ways in which African-descended peoples all around the world were one. Robeson recognized that the relationship between these populations existed not just in what they survived but also in what that survival was composed of: sonic traditions of struggle and triumph that united their histories of dispossession and violence.

Listening with his “pentatonic ears,” Paul understood that the black keys of the piano used by world musics formed a second center of the piano—F-sharp as well as middle C—proving that “Afro-American music is based primarily upon our African heritage and has been influenced not only by European but by many other musics of East and West; this is true also of Afro-Cuban, Afro-Haitian, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Brazilian music; and our music has also influenced other music.”<sup>64</sup> Here Paul announced the formation of an F-sharp epistemology: a new world center, a way of being and knowing organized by the black keys of the piano and composed by the sounds of a mobile, insurgent global South. The pentatonic (five-tone) scale, on which so much of world folk music is based, was his grounding and his orbit—all of it was in and at play in his repertoire and was the gravity of his vibration that brought him (back) into commu-

nion. Learned in concert with other friends and musicians, namely the ethnomusicologist-arranger-accompanist Lawrence Brown, this knowledge and technique of hearing and composing (re: organizing) was, again, a means of translation and freedom, an acquaintance with and greeting to strangers around the world who adopted and adored him because he listened as they listened. Here is the substance of his hologram: the sounds carried by millions who also join him in every recording, every performance. He was not one but many and formed by each collaboration, each dream. It is the dialectical relationship between these world majority traditions of sonic resistance and the racism, colonialism, and labor suppression in South Africa and elsewhere that Robeson theorized, making his interventions the feedback loop that gave him life after death.

Early in his comments, Alexandre Verret, Haitian representative to the UN, echoed the sentiments of Dee and Davis, saying, “[Robeson] is immortal because of his outstanding achievements which have had a tremendous impact on everyone everywhere.” Everyone. Everywhere. Not because he was physically present but because he was never far; because these impactful yet unexceptional circumstances of his appearance in Bandung, Wales, and New York City revealed that he would hear them and he would respond. Verret concluded by acknowledging that “the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, still vibrant to the chant of Paul Robeson, will always remember this great artist and leader who has given so much of himself to the cause of man’s emancipation.”<sup>65</sup> Through the calls from his people, Paul, two years deceased, might be read in terms of political theorist Jane Bennett’s “vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans” but is not necessarily of them, though nonetheless producing new forces, new political outcomes.<sup>66</sup> The kinetic energy and vibrancy described by Verret is produced in at least two distinct ways: one is Robeson’s repertoire, the songs of which circulated far and wide, even if under cloak of secrecy during the second Red Scare. Yet the “chant of Paul Robeson” is also the sound of his audiences, the communities who called his name, again and again, to conjure his energy, spirit, and resolve as they traversed the treacherous grounds of war and difference. This is his body in Haiti, in England, in Nigeria. The call-and-response technique developed here, as Robeson sings to the world and they affirmatively reply in kind, is the antiphonal method that produces his durable and lasting hologram.

## Two Play

Every object persists in its state of rest or uniform motion  
in a straight line unless it is compelled to change that state  
by forces impressed upon it.

— ISAAC NEWTON

He seemed to belong to an entirely different world. I wondered  
how he could possibly have found his way into theatre.

— MARIE SETON

Grandpa was a gentle giant. And children loved him  
because he always had time to play.

— SUSAN ROBESON

Located in the folds of a Depression-era concert program is an ad selling a star back to us: “The ‘Genial Giant’ Paul Robeson will sing anything from one song to a complete recital for you—whenever you wish—through the medium of ‘His Master’s Voice’ records, which reproduce his voice with life-like fidelity. Choose your own ROBESON RECITAL from this extensive repertoire.” This provocative two-page ad claims to bring Robeson to your home or assembly with “life-like fidelity” by delivering his most critical

faculty: his Voice. The quality of it would be so authentic, so real that you might imagine him there singing for you alone. Perhaps he would manifest as a hologram, but if you did not yet know his shape, you surely would by the end of this sampling. These “True-To-Life Records” would reveal him through wax and place him at your service.

It’s an unsurprising pitch for a record company. Indeed, the goal of the voice in recorded form is to approximate, as closely as possible, that of the live singer. Yet the promise from the Gramophone Co. Ltd. is premised on a form of authenticity that only minimally registers the quality and unique characteristics of Paul’s Voice. Though the side caption under his image offers a flattering quote from the *Toronto Evening Telegram* (“an art like his comes once in a generation”), the rest of the pitch registers not sound but the superior technology of the company and the obedience of the singer. Paul will cater completely to the listener; he “will sing anything” that you desire “whenever you wish.”<sup>1</sup> Even in his capacity as a world-class singer, he is accessible and can be made to sing, to play, to serve for a minimal fee. Having been a busboy and waiter in a hotel as a young man and recently portraying a Pullman porter in the 1933 film *The Emperor Jones*, Robeson was abundantly familiar with service work—especially that performed by Black people for a wealthier white class—and may have received the record company’s suggestion of his easy manipulation as an extension of it. Who, precisely, the “master” is in “His Master’s Voice” was a question too close and discomfiting to his own familial history to be entirely innocuous, and it would follow his relationship to recording technologies and their access for the rest of his career.

At the very moment of this ad, his understanding of his talents and its currency was growing abundantly. He was living in London and opening his eyes and ears to the cultures of a multiplicity of laboring and African worlds. According to literary historian Jeffrey Stewart, “Robeson realized that he had something that no other Black artist of his time had—an inimitable voice that could not be stolen or copied, as Black jazz compositions were being copied and redirected by white swing arrangers of the 1930s. His voice he controlled, unlike his image on film.”<sup>2</sup> Paul’s knowledge and self-awareness encouraged him to make of his Voice something other than what the labels could imagine: he made it free. Unfettered and often impromptu, it was a gift that he would share without hesitation. “If you asked him to sing,” recalled Philadelphia resident Arlethia Overton, “he would sing.”<sup>3</sup> From the great edifices of Egypt to airport landings in

Berlin to picket lines in St. Louis, his singing was not constrained nor dictated by the market. He refused coerced, commercial play, instead showing himself through a variety of other means come rain, shine, victory, or loss.

A huge sea of black folk silently filling Seventh Avenue as far as the eye could see. It was Ben Davis' last campaign for a seat on the [New York] City Council and it was night, drizzling. Ben had lost, with the help of the cops who somehow managed an epidemic of polling booth breakdowns that day. But the crowds waited patiently outside Ben's election headquarters in the Theresa Hotel. One of those thoroughly reliable Harlem rumors had it that Paul would sing. "Naw," said someone, "his man lost so what he gon' sing for?" An old church sister just smiled and said, "'Cause he said he would." And then there was Robeson and the heart-filling voice singing *WHAT IS AMERICA TO ME*.<sup>4</sup>

Artist and activist Ollie Harrington's description of this scene in which Robeson sings for those believed to be defeated—those Black, Communist (sympathizing), and otherwise—is indicative of a prolonged and consistent politico-narrative strategy found throughout his catalog. His work as a theorist, actor, and subject of play—which includes study, rehearsal, and performance—is revealed in his musicianship, athleticism, and stagecraft as well as his multiple reanimations as a one-man show. All of these forms he marshals as opportunities for alternative political articulations and protections that model the critical, though contested, role of the theatrical within Black cultures. Let's play.

### **“For Human Dignity, for Brotherhood, for Fair Play”**

For an action variously described in lay communities as “usually pleasant and voluntary,” “not serious,” and “nonproductive,” play has a relatively robust literature, full of internal debate and nuance.<sup>5</sup> In its efforts to define this phenomenon, the field can be rigid in its approaches, and its theories can rely too easily on dichotomies, lose sight of the subjective and material importance of the act, and fail to model that of which it speaks. Simply said, play theory does not, itself, play enough. This in spite of a number of compelling classifications that assist in expanding how that play is made possible. Play is a multitudinous form; like “religion, art, war,

politics, and culture, . . . the word *play* stands for a category of very diverse happenings.” Indeed, “almost anything can allow play to occur within its boundaries.”<sup>6</sup> This expansiveness is an invitation to exploration, allowing pursuit of muses such as Robeson through which the delicate tonalities and eager complexities of play can be heard.

Brian Sutton-Smith identifies a series of play types that are suggestive, if not definitive, of Robeson’s interventions and some of those that would be made in his name. On the common end of the spectrum is “playful behavior,” which includes “playing around . . . playing for time, playing up to someone, *playing a part*, playing down to someone . . . making a play for someone . . . putting something into play, bringing it into play, holding it in play, playing fair.”<sup>7</sup> A wildly inclusive category, playful behavior relies on inflection, gesture, subtlety, and intimacy between participants. Much of this form escapes perception because of its details, which require witnesses to pay close and prolonged attention, especially to adult behavior. The subjects of play theory tend to be children or animals, leaving to adults the role of those who primarily work. Something fundamental is lost in that formulation. As Michael Ellis argues, “To the extent that we unfetter individuals from the demands of work or duty, we allow them leisure or opportunities to play and we commit those individuals to be themselves. Thus, ideologically a human is most human, as defined by our culture, when at play.”<sup>8</sup>

Black people’s humanity is a profoundly insistent expression discernible throughout the cartographies of the new world, which took shape as stomped earth through dance as well as melodies of resistant song. Yet there are no easy divisions or pure forms in these cultures and certainly, as capoeira and spirituals document, no clear division between play and work. One of the most spectacular and prized performances of this combination is in sports. This is contest play, which includes organized and pickup sports, physical skill, and the chance and strategy that often separate good athletes from great ones. The mental element marks sport as a prime example of what Sutton-Smith identifies as the rhetoric of “play as power,” which is “about the use of play as the representation of conflict and as a way to fortify the status of those who control the play or are its heroes.” Societal concerns and orders are played out on the field and court as well as the street and workplace, making for a continuation of the hierarchies that organize all sociopolitical spaces. Indeed, “there are legitimate power interests intrinsic to the contest. The application of

force, skill, and leadership in actions and strategies within the game are intrinsic power concerns.”<sup>9</sup>

The characteristic control embedded within sports was meant to manage more than the escalating profit developed from its commoditization. There was the control over images and ideologies as well, particularly images and ideologies of race. As sociologist Ben Carrington argues, “Sport, as the structured pursuit of useless play, simultaneously serves to dramatize and accentuate the very conditions of racial subordination and freedom from constraint that race itself also inscribes onto black bodies.” The “global sporting racial project” that Carrington theorizes, which is constitutive of both structures of difference and their responses, has, as the language of that project documents, a long genealogy that he traces to a filmed 1908 prizefight in Sydney, Australia, between Texas-born Black heavyweight Jack Johnson and white Canadian Tommy Burns. Johnson won. “Historically, the black athlete developed out of and from a white masculinist colonial fear of loss and impotence, revealing the commingling of sex, class, race, and power. The black athlete was created at a moment of impending imperial crisis; the concern that the assumed superiority of colonial whiteness over all Others could not, after all, be sustained.”<sup>10</sup> This is the early twentieth-century life of Jane and Jim Crow, the pervasiveness of war, apartheid, and the inheritance of a young, athletic Paul Robeson: defensive end.

Even as a child, Robeson understood that his life was intended for . . . something. “I wondered at times,” he wrote, “about this notion that I was some kind of child of destiny and that my future would be linked with the longed-for better days to come.” Yet he didn’t worry. Like most children, he believed that he had all of the time in the world to decide; “Being grown up was a million years ahead. Now was the time for play.”<sup>11</sup> Though unrecognizable to him at the time, his play assisted him in accomplishing what his formerly enslaved father and the wider Negro community asked of him. The playing, running, leaping Robeson exposed “an irreconcilable dilemma permeating the whole of American life,” according to Harry Edwards: “To wit, how could white America continue its professed commitment to democracy through the competitive process while simultaneously holding fast to its racist presumptions of innate black spiritual, intellectual and physical inferiority in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary?”<sup>12</sup> He was “conspicuous in athletics”: a four-letter high school athlete who marked the seasons by the motion of his feet and hands.<sup>13</sup>

His football talents blossomed in the fall, while the winter was hardwood hoops, and in the spring he hurled shot put in track and field and rotated by the velocity of baseball bats. Of them all, it was football that most captured Robeson's attention and documented his skill. His exceptional abilities evidenced the impossible contradiction that Edwards notes, and he understood how it manifested itself on the field as well as within the halls of power. "The better I did, the worse his scorn. The cheers of my fellow students as I played fullback on the football team—'Let Paul carry the ball! Yay—Paul!'—seemed to curdle the very soul of Dr. Ackerman[, the high school principal]. . . . He never spoke to me except to administer a reprimand . . . and his sharp words were meant to make me feel as miserably inferior as he thought a Negro was."<sup>14</sup> Rutgers University was more of the same, even if it was with a higher profile. Though eventually described as "super-man of the game" and a "football genius," his career as "Robey of Rutgers" began with assault: "On my first day of scrimmage, they set about making sure that I would not get on their team," and he continued to be reminded of this wrong even after his career as an athlete was a fading memory. "One boy slugged me in the face and smashed my nose—an injury that has been a trouble to me as a singer ever since."<sup>15</sup> With every note he was reminded of this attack as well as his power in having transformed racial and physical injury into music.

That Robeson continued to play football after college, even after that sport compromised his ability to sing, documents a long-term investment in what remained to be gained from Black folks at play, for certainly it was not only for himself. According to Ellis, "Play is commonly considered to be the behavior emitted by an individual not motivated by the end product of the behavior. It is assumed to be free."<sup>16</sup> While an understandable assumption, freedom itself is not defined in or definable by this equation; it is not static, nor is it universal. As free as Robeson was at play, he also knew its limits intimately as he switched sport from season to season. This pursuit of freedom was learned at home. The youngest of five, Paul watched as his favorite brother, Ben, excelled in athletics. Paul described him as "a remarkable baseball player, fleet of foot and a power at bat; and had Negroes then been permitted to play in the major leagues, I think Ben was one of those who could have made the grade."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it was Ben who lit a fire in Paul for play—as an athlete and as a champion for the rights of others to be that as well. "As early as 1943, Robeson had led a delegation to the office of baseball commissioner Kenesaw Landis

and demanded the removal of the color ban from baseball.”<sup>18</sup> Though too late for Ben, Paul’s efforts made possible another Black man’s career: the iconic Jackie Robinson.

Known as the Black man who integrated the major leagues, Robinson had a circuitous route to athletic stardom that took him from the sharecropping fields of Georgia to Los Angeles to the U.S. military. He was, like Robeson, a four-letter athlete in high school and college who only settled on baseball when an acquaintance encouraged him to try out for the Negro league. It was his performance for the Kansas City Monarchs that drew the attention of Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, whom Robinson described as a “tough, shrewd, courageous man.” Rickey’s “noble experiment,” which began in earnest two years after Robeson’s intervention with Landis, endeavored to locate the Black player fit for inclusion in the majors. According to Robinson, Rickey sought the player

who could take abuse, name-calling, rejection by fans and sportswriters and by fellow players not only on opposing teams but on his own. He had to be able to stand up in the face of merciless persecution and not retaliate. On the other hand, he had to be a contradiction in human terms; he still had to have spirit. He could not be an “Uncle Tom.” His ability to turn the other cheek had to be predicated on his determination to gain acceptance. Once having proven his ability as player, teammate, and man, he had to be able to cast off humbleness and stand up as a full-fledged participant whose triumph did not carry the poison of bitterness.<sup>19</sup>

This is what Robinson was told and assumed as a road map for his role in the majors. That the humility and willingness to eat (Jim) crow described here is paired with the request that said person still possess “spirit” provides the necessary balance for an incorporable subject—he is not a sell-out, nor is he a radical. This was the spectrum of blackness that Robinson ran, jumped, and slid through with every swing of his bat or defensive turn on first, second, or third base. “So there’s more than just playing,” Rickey said to Robinson; or, perhaps more accurately, there was more than one field on which he was being asked to play.<sup>20</sup>

With his 1947 nomination and election to the position of “ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back,” Robinson ascended to the level of race man, even if he sometimes was ambivalent about the responsibil-

ity.<sup>21</sup> In this role, he collided with others of this orbit, including Robeson. Their acquaintance was marked dramatically by two events, first through an almost assuredly fictitious, closed-door meeting before the announcement that Robinson would join the Dodgers. An “imagined recreation” of that event by playwright Edward T. Schmidt, *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting* (written in 1989), takes as inspiration a brief passage in the autobiography of military veteran and heavyweight fighter Joe Louis: “March [of 1947] and I had nothing scheduled until the beginning of June. Then Branch Rickey asked me to come to New York and talk with Jackie Robinson. Paul Robeson and Bill Robinson were there too. Rickey wanted us to tell Jackie what to expect because he was set to leave the [minor league] Montreal Royals and join the big boys—the Brooklyn Dodgers.”<sup>22</sup> This summoning by Rickey included an eclectic group of men; at the time, all of them were superstars, all known for playing on stage and in the ring, though each would face incredible career struggle. After years of bad deals and donations to the war effort, Louis would never recover financially, Robeson would be publicly decried as a traitor and Communist in 1949, and in that same year entertainer Bill “Mr. Bojangles” Robinson passed away. They were imagined, however, by someone(s) as fitting together—the boxer, the singer/actor, and the dancer—and what each brought to the conversation had as much to do with what they might recognize or incite in each other as their individual talents or public acclaim.

Thinking them together along with Robinson is a creative act with powers beyond what official documents might tell. “There is no other record of this meeting,” according to Schmidt; it “almost certainly did not take place.”<sup>23</sup> Yet to be undocumented is not to be unreal. Beyond exemplary dispatches and ledgers, the archive also produces evidence through implication, proxy, and ephemera. From those evidences we might find a way to entertain Louis’s recollection. The nature of Black celebrity and social movements in the late 1940s, in which Harlem (in particular) remained an incubator of artistic and political exchange, strongly suggests that these men could have been called upon as influential guides in Rickey’s maneuver. Whether true or not, their encounter is significant for the possibilities that it reveals. The story that unfolds from Louis’s brief, isolated mention is not fantastical, even if it is, perhaps, magical realism, for certainly Robeson alone is large enough to warrant and fulfill that genre. The experiment of integrated play reproduces another type of play in kind, one staked in the history and urgent present of four dexterous

Black men whose limbo under, hurdling of, or balancing on the color line demonstrates their true athleticism. Schmidt's play ultimately reveals the process by which stereotypes collapse and are built again as well as the ideological overtones that hold each man in distress. From this momentous meeting forward, the futures of both Robeson and Bill Robinson in particular would be marked by their relation to Jackie Robinson and to the sport that he represented.

Routinely described as "America's favorite pastime," baseball is thick with signification, in part due to its complicated relationship with time. Within the pantheon of professional sports, baseball is unique in that it refuses dependency on a regulatory clock, making for the labored, high intensity of its nine innings. The tit-for-tat, hand-to-hand play of baseball is reflected in the contests that arise between the individual characters of *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*. Here, the sport is more a marker of process than progress, eliding linearity by virtue of its muscular blackness, which, when at play, produces a type of vertigo. "The physical experience provides risks with elements of thrill that arise through the media of speed, acceleration, sudden change in direction, and exposure to dangerous situations, with the participant usually remaining in control."<sup>24</sup> The participants in this play are keenly aware of these elements, having mastered them in a variety of sporting arenas and subsequently applying their strategies in other ventures, from the arts to business to war. Rickey's meeting also displays vertigo's juxtaposition of risk and thrill, which was palpable for all involved in this decision. The success or failure of this experiment would mean either an insistent and pervasive racism in professional sports or a revolution that would ask difficult questions of and demand new ways of being from owners, managers, players, and fans alike.

*Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting* extends the "dynamic form of storytelling" in baseball, in which "we invest meaning in what happens on the field, creating characters out of athletes and narratives out of their games."<sup>25</sup> Taking place over one rainy afternoon at the Hotel Roosevelt in Manhattan and told decades later from the perspective of former hotel bellhop Clancy Hope, the story sets up the fateful preannouncement discussion among the two Robinsons, Rickey, Robeson, and Louis. Each man has his role: Rickey is the corporate visionary desperate for approval so that he can close the deal; Louis is the hot-tempered heavyweight anxious to hurry the meeting along; Bojangles is affable and appeasing as he cracks jokes and tries to lighten the mood; while the other Robinson is nervous

but resolute in his decision to integrate the major league. Robeson is depicted as a wise but intransigent man; he is fixed in his beliefs, tough on others, and critical of both segregation and the corporatized integration proposed by Rickey. Over the course of the conversation, we learn that all is not black and white in the debate over integration and, of those involved, Robeson was the most astute and careful philosopher of those grays.

Before the entrance of the three Black superstars, Rickey primes Robinson for the conversation. He repeats in detail the necessity of playing the game of respectability: no pictures with white women, “hold your tongue and turn your cheek” to racism and discrimination, and keep in mind that there’s “only one color that matters: Dodger blue.”<sup>26</sup> Robinson, exhausted from training in Cuba and negotiating a minor stomach ailment, mounts a noticeable defense but never strays far from Rickey’s vision. As they prepare for the arrival of the three senior athletes, Rickey narrates each man’s expected position on the issue but singles Robeson out as a key figure who needs to be approached and managed with caution.

RICKEY: Then you must trust me. Now we haven’t much time before they arrive, so eyes up. Let me do the talking with these fellows. Your old friend Joe Louis will back us a hundred percent, and Bojangles should be fine if we steer clear of money matters. Robeson, however, is as easy to handle as a fistful of fishhooks. He’s a very bright man, Robinson, and I don’t know what he’ll have up his sleeve. But you can bet there’ll be something. He would like nothing better than to drive a wedge between the two of us, so don’t retaliate, and don’t egg him on. He loves a good fight.

JACKIE: Anything you say, Mr. Rickey. I won’t say a word.

RICKEY: Fine. Now . . .

JACKIE: But if he starts preaching that nonsense . . .

RICKEY: You don’t know this man, son. If you charge the mound on Robeson, you will jeopardize everything we’ve done, everything I’ve worked for. How on earth can I rest assured that you will keep your end of the bargain, that you will hold your temper and turn the other cheek in the bigs for three years—as you promised—if you cannot do it in a hotel room for three minutes!<sup>27</sup>

Rickey's narration of blackness is telling. He controls and sets the future scene of interpretation, positioning Robinson as more of an object than subject or agent in relation to these three men who he expects will deliver the anticipated rubber stamp to his machinations—all, that is, but Robeson. His backhanded compliment to Robeson's intelligence, which, Rickey suggests, is wielded as a tool of manipulation and division, and the description of him as akin to a "fistful of fishhooks" are the terms of his participation, highlighting his always already dangerous positionality in circumstances that are otherwise uncomplicated and genial. This portrait, in addition to the request that Robinson allow Rickey to "do the talking," collapses the possibility of meaningful banter and play between these men who are not treated as equals or even coconspirators, but rather as the paper-thin race men required for the mass appeal of Rickey's game.

Robeson complicates the terms of engagement before he enters the room, drawing out not only the disjunctures that will develop between himself, Louis, and Bill Robinson, but also the tensions that simmer beneath the serene surface of Rickey and Jackie Robinson's relationship. The admiration that Robinson felt for Rickey, whom he described as his "partner in a great experiment," begins to wear thin at Rickey's chastisement.<sup>28</sup> By questioning Robinson's capacity for patience, Rickey taps a raw nerve in Black communities who, by 1947, were weary of the liberal belief that demands for immediate reprieve from racist violence and disfranchisement were misplaced. Rather than present justice, advocates of incremental gains instead requested that Black people "go slow," a request that Nina Simone and many others later flatly rejected.

JACKIE: Dammit, Mr. Rickey, I'm twenty-eight years old already. I'm not a boy and I don't play games. I have a wife and kid, and a man reaches a point where it's just too damn much to sit around and be patient.

RICKEY: We must slowly ease our way into this.

JACKIE: If we ease any slower, we'll be standing still.<sup>29</sup>

Robinson's response to Rickey works against neat typologies of progress, again revealing the significance of pushes for integration within baseball—the game with no time. Robinson's clapback, however, was drawn out not

only by Rickey but also by the as-yet-unseen Robeson, whom Robinson already considers an adversary. Robinson's demand that he be treated as a man right now is a response to Rickey's patronizing suggestion of "all deliberate speed" but is filtered through his desire to respond to Robeson's "nonsense." By displacing his frustration from Rickey to Robeson, Robinson maintained the present calm even as he foretold the coming storm.

Each man arrives alone, one by one: Louis, Robeson, Bill Robinson. The highly secretive nature of the meeting was marked by the men's inauspicious entrance to the hotel; Robeson apologizes for his tardiness by saying, "I wasn't familiar with the service entrance to this hotel."<sup>30</sup> In addition to reflecting their confidential meeting, his comments hint at the extension of the color line to the urban north, which exposed radical class divisions as Afrodiasporic immigrants and migrants flocked to New York City after World War II. Though recognized most anywhere they went, Rickey's three advisors were treated on this evening as anonymous service workers, entering the building for shifts that were as demanding emotionally as they were physically. The selection of Louis, Robinson, and Robeson among these women and men is one indication of the coming affective labors that they will perform in the discussion. Like entertainers, hotel bellhops, waiters, and housekeepers live and die by their ability to perfect the smiles and nods that keep patrons (re: whites) happy and returning. The sexualized nature of service labor, in which attraction and intrigue are key factors in one's reception and capacity for earnings, documents the ways in which the play of interpersonal sensibilities, or affect, is often transactional. Recognizing "labor as an embodied and intimate practice that produce[s] both pleasure and pain . . . oppression and resistance . . . [and] opportunities for joy and personal expression" leads to a complicated reading of this meeting and its result.<sup>31</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Robeson is situated as the character least invested in the service work of white congratulation and interpersonal conciliation. To be fair, this characterization is not a complete fiction. He was self-possessed in ways that would often rub others raw, telling hard truths and pulling few punches when justice was at stake. Yet his talents as an organizer flip the typical script. He was compelling and charismatic in ways that drew people to him—hundreds of thousands of people or more internationally—and the magnetism that he displayed was grown from hours of conversation and study with some of the world's most influential artists and thinkers who similarly were captivated by his grace and wit.

The otherworldliness that Marie Seton noted in this chapter's epigraph is a reflection of his unique appeal and capacity, both of which were best exhibited in his music. His entrance to the play indicates as much through his character's stage notes:

SINGING AND SMILING.

*God sent Noah  
A rainbow sign,  
Says, "No more water,  
But fire next time."*

*Now, didn't it rain, children,  
God's gonna 'stroy this world with water,  
Now didn't it rain, Joe Louis,  
Now didn't it rain, rain, rain.*<sup>32</sup>

This song is a hybrid of the gospel folk songs "God Gave Noah a Rainbow Sign" and "Didn't It Rain," made famous by the powerhouse Mahalia Jackson. Delivered in Robeson's "deep, warm, powerful voice," the two songs signal the coming "fire" or dissent in the conversation while also drawing Louis close through the inclusion of his name ("Now didn't it rain, *Joe Louis*").<sup>33</sup> This connection is characteristic of the spirituals that Robeson made famous, which rely on antiphony: the call-and-response that kept him in constant communication and negotiation with new publics all over the world. This (inter)play as well as Paul's play in other forums was the antiphonal life that made him vibrate over a forty-year career.

Beyond this moment, Robeson's interpersonal talents are evacuated in *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*; the dialogue positions him as a bitter, indignant old man in spite of the fact that by this point in his career he was commanding huge audiences and fees for his performances. The year of baseball integration, however, was a pivotal moment of departure; in 1947, Robeson announced that he would leave the concert stage to join fully in support of political movements for civil rights, labor, and anti-colonialism. From this moment forward, his singing and speaking would service an explicit agenda, and this commitment undoubtedly influenced the interactions that those seeking a favor would have with him. His departure from the Carnegie Hall stage and onto the picket lines of those protesting Jim Crow, for example, likely also adjusted how young people

would know him, if they recognized him at all. Robeson is the only one of Rickey's three who is not recognized by Clancy, the bellhop servicing the room and the narrator of the day's events. When Rickey introduces him as "Paul Robeson. One of the finest actors and singers in the world," Clancy responds, "You're a Communist, ain't you?"<sup>34</sup>

In spite of his fantastic athleticism, Robeson would never outrun this association. Interactions such as this one with Clancy were prominent in his life—so much so that by 1947 they developed scripts, both fiction and nonfiction, in which confrontation with the crime of Communist affiliation or sympathy and indignant refusal to acknowledge the terms of the accusation combined to spectacular result. The second incident of play between Robeson and Robinson was one such explosive moment designed and mediated by the U.S. federal government through the infamous trials of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Far from objective, fact-finding missions, these hearings were "intricately contrived theatrical affairs, a theatricality all the more complex due to its identification of 'acting' as a key practice of Communists and their sympathizers."<sup>35</sup> In April 1949, Jackie Robinson was called before the committee as a "friendly" witness to comment on their ongoing investigation of Communist infiltration of "minority organizations." Their prime target at this time was Paul Robeson, who earlier that year argued at the Paris Peace Conference that Negro Americans, full to the brim with indignities in their own democracy, would not wage war against Russia. Robinson's remarks were far from the damning portrait hoped for by committee members. While he called Robeson's Paris quote "silly," Robinson spent the greater part of his time before them criticizing Jim Crow and dispelling any belief that a Communist plot was behind such critique.

The white public should start toward real understanding by appreciating that every single Negro who is worth his salt is going to resent any kind of slurs and discrimination because of his race, and he is going to use every bit of intelligence such as he has to stop it. This has got absolutely nothing to do with what Communists may or may not be trying to do. . . . Talk about "Communists stirring up Negroes to protest" only makes present misunderstanding worse than ever. Negroes were stirred up long before there was a Communist Party, and they'll stay stirred up long after the party has disappeared—unless Jim Crow has disappeared by then as well.<sup>36</sup>

Drafted with the assistance and approval of Rickey, Robinson's full statement graced the front page of the *New York Times* on the day after his testimony. While he appeared clear in his choice to sit before HUAC and confident in the comments that he offered, he later changed his mind. In his autobiography, he reflected on that moment, writing, "in those days I had much more faith in the ultimate justice of the American white man than I have today. I would reject such an invitation if offered now. . . . I have grown wiser and closer to the painful truths about America's destructiveness. And I do have increased respect for Paul Robeson who, over the span of twenty years, sacrificed himself, his career, and the wealth and comfort he once enjoyed because, I believe, he was sincerely trying to help his people."<sup>37</sup> Robeson, the man that Robinson described to HUAC as a "famous ex-athlete and a great singer and actor," was not fond of Robinson's capitulation to the committee but nonetheless understood his decision. "I am not going to permit the issue to boil down to a personal feud between me and Jackie," he said. "To do that, would be to do exactly what the other group wants us to do."<sup>38</sup>

Racial solidarity, even with some of those who were assembled against him, was Robeson's political default position and principle during the decade (1946–56) that saw him twice appear before the committee. In his infamous performances before HUAC, he beautifully and skillfully plays with the knowledges of the committee and the listening public, rupturing the committee's efforts to isolate him. Just as he never publicly responded to Robinson, he refused to respond to queries about people—real and imagined—they suspected of Communism, unless it was to protect them through affectionate claims. For example, an exchange over Harlem lawyer, politician, and open Communist Ben Davis proceeded in this way:

MR. ARENS: Now I would invite your attention, if you please, to the *Daily Worker* of June 29, 1949, with reference to a get-together with you and Ben Davis. Do you know Ben Davis?

MR. ROBESON: One of my dearest friends, one of the finest Americans you can imagine, born of a fine family, who went to Amherst and was a great man.

THE CHAIRMAN: The answer is yes?

MR. ROBESON: Nothing could make me prouder than to know him.

THE CHAIRMAN: That answers the question.

MR. ARENS: Did I understand you to laud his patriotism?

MR. ROBESON: I say that he is as patriotic an American as there can be, and you gentlemen belong with the Alien and Sedition Acts, and you are the nonpatriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.<sup>39</sup>

Robeson uses the language of the committee against them in his description of Davis as a “fine American” and patriot, thereby upending the racist and xenophobic algorithms used by HUAC to decide upon those witches who required hunting. “Within Cold War culture, discourses of difference were articulated with those of treason” and Black, immigrant, and working-class people faced constant assault from the committee that, through “anxious repetition,” worked diligently to reinforce the common-sense belief that these people were deficient or defunct citizens.<sup>40</sup> The debate champion and elocutionist who had in 1939 argued that all of these people—the “nobodies” described in his “Ballad for Americans”—were America, used his “tonal qualities,” “volume[,] and the utterance of the Fifth Amendment” to confound the committee’s rhetorical strategies, which, according to performance scholar Tony Perucci, relied on “interpretation of the exteriority of the performed act as a means of producing an authentic interiority of truth in the accused Communist.” These evaluations of authenticity were highly musical: “a ‘tone of innocence’ affirmed one’s patriotism and ‘shrieks of outraged innocence’ indicated treason.” Robeson performed neither, “challenging the romance of interiority” through his vocal technique and refusal to inform on others.<sup>41</sup> The committee was so indignant at his last statement that they adjourned for the day. Much like his imagined exchange with Rickey, Robeson had not yet won the series, but he had won the game.

### “He’s a One-Man Band. He’s Your Everything Man”

In a 1924 review of Robeson’s performance in Eugene O’Neill’s play *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, Lawrence Stallings argues his perfection of the role as “something that is just over the borderland of acting, and just this side of the borderland of life and reality.”<sup>42</sup> This interstitial space

beyond creative mechanics and before our inability to dream is the location of play. This is where Robeson lived and perfected his craft, playing a spectrum of individuals, real and imagined: heroes so powerful that they, like he, became myth (Toussaint Louverture and John Henry); the downtrodden and tragic (Emperor Jones in the play and film of the same name and Bosambo in *Sanders of the River*); the downtrodden and triumphant (Banjo in *Big Fella* and David Goliath in *The Proud Valley*). Included in this uneven list of representations are his historic performances as Shakespeare's Othello, a role that he pioneered in London and later took to new heights on the Broadway stage in the longest run in its history. "Robeson's performance of the role was so profound, particularly in the 1943 Broadway production, that critics often proclaimed that no white man could ever play the role again."<sup>43</sup> He had effectively broken the role in the imaginary of the Great White Way, confounding its representation and making it impossible to not think of him when casting the Moor of Venice.

Even as he radically reinvented the portrayal of figures new and old, there were those who eluded him—those he desired to play but who never materialized. Having had the honor of representing iconic and revolutionary men of the African diaspora, he similarly wanted to expand that tradition, seeking roles that would add to the catalog of heroism throughout diaspora. While tasked early in his acting career with advancing the masculine black global imaginary of Michelle Stephens's description, Paul, like revered diasporic leader and philosopher Marcus Garvey, "imagined a different sense of political community, a race united not by territory but by its own history making, its movement as a hybrid diasporic civilization crisscrossing multiple territories, with the special qualities of the peoples of continental Africa as its point of origin."<sup>44</sup> In that effort, he named two people of particular interest: carpenter and visionary Denmark Vesey and Afro-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Less than a decade before the more canonic uprising of Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, the literate and multilingual Vesey was a key player in a local plan for liberation in Charleston. Having purchased his freedom, Vesey held the mobility and education unavailable to so many around him and used those freedoms to organize the rebellion of 1822. Exposed by other members of the community, the rebellion was preemptively put down when Vesey and five other men were publicly hanged, yet it is not difficult to imagine why he appealed to Robeson. His internationalism—figured

by his birth in St. Thomas as well as stays in multiple Caribbean nations and the U.S.—his trade, his ability to literally and figuratively translate across cultures, and his dreams for liberation spoke to the elements of Robeson’s repertoire that he labored valiantly to develop through and beyond his music.

Assisting him in the ever-expanding cultivation of his musical core was Coleridge-Taylor, the classically trained composer of *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast*, which was completed in 1898, the year of Robeson’s birth. Described as the “black [Gustav] Mahler,” he was a revered musical icon throughout Europe and the U.S. who generated significant buzz when he toured the States. Looking for his Sierra Leonean father’s U.S. ancestry, he met members of the Black literati and arts community, including Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose words he set to music in his “Over the Hills” (1902), which Lawrence Brown held in his personal files (likely for performance by Paul).<sup>45</sup> It was through Coleridge-Taylor’s political commitments and attendance at the first Pan-African Congress of 1900 that he was introduced to the writings of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. Influenced by these giants and others, he tuned his ears to the wider diaspora, composing art songs that took up the poetry of writers including Dunbar, setting the concert stage ablaze with the subtle and not-so-subtle tones and stories of a silenced global majority.<sup>46</sup>

There were also those roles that Robeson refused, including, originally, Joe in *Show Boat*, which caused major revisions to the musical in its U.S. debut. He also famously and publicly declined the role of “John Thomas, Communist,” a fantasy menace of a character created for Robeson by HUAC.

MR. ARENS: Have you ever been known under the name of “John Thomas”?

MR. ROBESON: Oh, please, does somebody here want—are you suggesting—do you want me to be put up for perjury some place? “John Thomas!” My name is Paul Robeson, and anything I have to say, or stand for, I have said in public all over the world, and that is why I am here today.

MR. SCHERER: I ask that you direct the witness to answer the question. He is making a speech.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Excuse me, Mr. Arens, may we have the photographers take their pictures, and then desist, because it is rather nerve-racking for them to be there.

THE CHAIRMAN: They will take the pictures.

MR. ROBESON: I am used to it and I have been in moving pictures. Do you want me to pose for it good? Do you want me to smile? I cannot smile when I am talking to him.

MR. ARENS: I put it to you as a fact, and ask you to affirm or deny the fact, that your Communist Party name was "John Thomas."

MR. ROBESON: I invoke the Fifth Amendment. This is really ridiculous.<sup>47</sup>

Asking whether or not he should smile and "pose for [the pictures] good," Robeson challenged the committee to own the caricatures that he and other Black people were measured by, knowing well what those flashing lights could do to a person and to a career. He arrived prepared; he knew his lines by heart, especially the final, as his repeated invocation of silence spoke volumes in response to the din of the committee and the wider U.S. hysteria facilitated by their assaults. By insisting on silence, Robeson modeled the latitude always available within the synergies of blackness and resistance. As literary scholar Kevin Quashie argues, quiet "is neither motionless nor without sound. . . . Quiet, instead, is a metaphor for the full range of one's interior life—one's desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior—dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty. It is hard to see, even harder to describe, but no less potent in its ineffability. Quiet."<sup>48</sup> Robeson, the athlete and musical scientist, was in motion and possessed of sound for nearly the entirety of his life, and remained vigilant about the application of both talents. He used this moment of dangerous publicness to slow the pace of the inquisition through disorienting the committee and retreating into a voluptuous interiority. Quiet. Instead of confession or bombastic argumentation, he set the stage for athletes like Muhammad Ali, whose mark as hero was made through a similar combination of outspokenness and negation (of the Vietnam War draft, in his case), or former National Basketball Association star Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf who, like NFL star Colin

Kaepernick twenty years later, refused to stand for the national anthem. Robeson's quick-witted banter, which revealed itself with reporters, hecklers, and elected officials alike, was the result of a life of improvised play on impromptu and institutionalized stages around the world.

Robeson's entrance onto the theatrical stage saw him taking up Jesus's cross in a YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) production of Ridgeley Torrence's *Simon the Cyrenean* (1920). While this formidable beginning foreshadowed his political career as he took on others' burdens, his role as Simon was initially the product of his stunning physical attributes and charm. It was again the play of his body in combination with a growing recognition of his vocal talents that continued to bring audiences to his shows. An early reviewer mused, "What other player on the American stage has his great, taut body—the swinging grace and litheness of the man who, with a football under his arm, side-stepped half the broken fields of the east? And who has a better voice for tragedy than this actor, whose tone and resonance suggest nothing so much as the dusky, poetic quality of a Negro spiritual, certainly the most tragic utterances in American life?"<sup>49</sup> From this combination materialized his athletic voice, which here is not simply about vocal dexterity but is, additionally, a sonic performance conspicuously aware of and crafted by the conditions of a muscular, moving body. His musicianship relied on his fit body for its sonority and control. The inertia produced by sports, labor, and travel created an experience of the Voice that, for audiences, was impossibly inseparable. As his hologram documents, there was no essence, no sound that did not always already account for and attend to the shape and form of his healthy body.<sup>50</sup> From his time as Simon forward, he played both roles (athlete and singer) simultaneously and always through race.

This combination was conspicuously trafficked in the publicity images for the 1936 film version of his musical *Show Boat*. Set at the turn of the twentieth century along the Mississippi River, the film produced two iconic stills of Robeson that suggest the materiality and dream states of Black play in the Jim Crow imaginary. Both are drawn from the precious few minutes in which he recited his famous anthem, "Ol' Man River."<sup>51</sup> In the first image (fig. 2.1), he (as laborer Joe) is highlighted enacting the song's demand to "Tote that barge! Lift that bale!" Freezing Robeson in this frame demonstrates that his position as a despised Black man is realized not simply through language (in his use of dialect) but also through bodily gesture and form—half-clothed and sweating in the sun, hips and



FIG. 2.1 Film still from *Show Boat* (1936). Courtesy of John Kisch and the Separate Cinema Archive.

chest hinged at a forty-five-degree angle as he manages the heft of a cotton bale better tasked to mules. He sings this scene in flashback, using memory as a way to narrate and manage the hauling, to recall a possible association with the strain of manual labor that will somehow reconcile it with a musical that otherwise centers white love and leisure. It was both his “great, taut body” as laborer on land and river as well as his Voice as coach to the aspiring white starlet Magnolia Hawks that made their joys possible, reflecting the affective service work that is part and parcel of Black manual labor and entertainment.

In distinction to how we will know him throughout the film, the original scene in which we encounter the singing Joe shows him relaxing on the docks and beginning his recitation of *Old Man River* who, at the time, he “would like to be” (fig. 2.2). He is whittling a stick of wood on the dock with a short-bladed knife, a seemingly innocent effort that in other circumstances would be considered an invitation to unbridled violence. Even as he seems relaxed and disaffected, he’s recalling a history of exploitation that the Black domestics and dockworkers who surround him



FIG. 2.2 Film still from *Show Boat* (1936). Courtesy of John Kisch and the Separate Cinema Archive.

cosign as they build its detail and depth through harmonies that take the listener from the original C major key signature to a minor-key reprise. Over the course of the song we see him in various poses, including that with the cotton bale, and accompanied by a number of Black workers who, by providing his harmony, find a bit of respite in their otherwise laboring life of lifting and toting, scrubbing and ironing. The luxury of remembering the laboring act rather than enacting it while singing, juxtaposes his work life of lifting and hauling with his play life in which he sings. Yet Robeson understood that this was a false dichotomy (even if Joe did not). Singing was his labor while labor could also be play, as the workers created their own cultures through shared stories and games. Joe's whittling and location on the docks suggest that he is either currently engaging in or proximate to the possibility of more labor, even as the still image casts his gaze away from the drudgery around him and up across the sky. It's a mystery how or why Joe ends the song smiling: What is happening behind his eyes as he looks away from the camera? What is he dreaming of or for? With all that Robeson and Joe have seen and experienced, it is the force of play that conceals from witnesses, and in this case listeners, the reality of their song that forever encases within it the truth that only the artist can detail with certainty.

While the memories portrayed by Robeson and fondly held by his audiences are alive with music, the portrayals of him since his death often struggle to find meaningful space for the musical forces that animate his life and legacy. Stage portrayals have often taken form as a number of one-man shows that attempt to contain his large life in performative isolation in spite of the fact that he never thought himself uncharacteristic of or separate from the communities of his raising and organizing. In fact, he despaired over that separation and argued that “there can be no greater tragedy than to forget one’s origin and finish despised and hated by the people among whom one grew up. To have that happen would be the sort of thing to make me rise from my grave.”<sup>52</sup> His belief in radical collectivity, or “communism” as Joshua Chambers-Letson describes it, would not allow him to be too far from his people, yet this is precisely how he is often depicted on the stage: exceptional and alone.<sup>53</sup>

Nigerian writer and performer Tayo Aluko’s *Call Mr. Robeson* (2013) is a one-act play named for the transitional language used by HUAC as they moved from witness to witness. This calling was but one literal example of the many that propelled Robeson to higher heights but is juxtaposed in the stage play with the play that made him a recognizable name as a young adult. His days as an athlete are reinvented in the course of (the) play, providing an analogy to his political life. In response to a reporter’s announcement that Walter White of the NAACP vigorously disagreed with his 1949 comments at the Paris Peace Conference and called them “unpatriotic,” Robeson responds to the audience, “Now I wasn’t expecting that one and I really have to think quick. It’s like I’m back on the football field. You see, despite my size, I was very quick, and I could do these amazing sidesteps. Some fellows would be coming for me, and next moment (*Does a sidestep*), I’d be someplace else.”<sup>54</sup> Aluko’s language here suggests avoidance when Robeson’s technique is more accurately described as a type of torque in which he reverses the politico-rhetorical spin of the accuser and turns their logic in on itself. With the history of HUAC haunting the production, it is not surprising that Aluko’s play descends into madness in the final lines, alluding to Robeson’s suicidal thoughts as he’s plagued by “Too many voices!”<sup>55</sup> While Robeson as character laments the noise in his head, the play itself is otherwise absent a robust musical presence, making for a peculiar silence for all but the man on stage.

Though described as “a life with songs,” *Call Mr. Robeson* errs in its sin-

gular attention to monologue as the exemplary means of narrative meaning making. In this focus it is not alone. Often fronted by nonmusicians, the one-man shows designed to tell Robeson's story primarily employ music as a momentary departure or backdrop, trapping it in the set design. As such it is the hidden environment of these productions; it adds dimension, but we are rarely encouraged to hear complexly as we watch the life of a singer who rarely sings. In these productions, music is a marker of a historical period or emotional sentiment, rather than the method by which Robeson makes sense of his world—one that traverses time and reinvents itself with each new epiphany or encounter. The cultures, geographies, and voices that compose Robeson's repertoire and antiphonal effect are evacuated in order to make him stay put—to be here, with us. Without songs, he can't travel and so we, as the audience, have limited knowledge of where he's been or, more importantly, where he's going. These plays are uninterested in what and how Robeson will be known next. He's frozen in time and in space, without any of the lateral movement or vision that defined his athleticism and musicianship. Like the Gramophone ad that began this chapter, one-man shows ensure that Robeson (as historical agent) is made to play himself as a relic, straitjacketed as a once-powerful public political figure who happened to sing.

The standard for this approach was dramatically staged in 1978 in Black playwright Phillip Hayes Dean's play *Paul Robeson* at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre in New York City, a space originally named the Globe after William Shakespeare's theater in England.<sup>56</sup> Opening two years after Robeson's death and led by famed actor (not musician) James Earl Jones, the play in two acts again seeks to establish Robeson as a storyteller first, leaving the musical interludes (as such) primarily to musician Burt Wallace, who made his theatrical debut in the play as Robeson's accompanist and collaborator Lawrence Brown. From the very start, music is only minimally animated in the performance, even if it is momentarily highlighted. Like *Call Mr. Robeson*, the play begins with a song—in this case the spiritual "This Little Light of Mine" instead of Aluko's "Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen"—yet we hear it not from Robeson but from Jones, and we do not see its singing as a living effort.

An ebony grand piano stands in Center Stage. A leather piano bench sits before the keyboard. On Downstage Right and Left sit six chairs, three on one side and three on the other. These suggest the overflow

seating for a concert. Upstage Center of piano, the sculptured bust of Paul Robeson sits on a pedestal. It is lighted dramatically.

The concert light comes up, and the ACCOMPANIST enters from Stage Right with music under his arm. He sits at the piano and prepares his music on the rack. Then, he plays a stately introduction, and the recorded version of “This Little Light of Mine” begins, the ACCOMPANIST blending with it.<sup>57</sup>

Our experience of *Paul Robeson*/Paul Robeson begins with three appendages: a piano, a nonspeaking actor, and a bust of the man about whom we’ve gathered to hear. In spite of their location at center stage, all three only nominally assist in the telling of the story. The piano speaks when Brown is animated and vice versa; they appear as interlocutors for Robeson on dozens of occasions in the play, yet the extent of the interaction rarely lasts beyond a snippet of a duet or a brief few lines of solo. Brown, not Robeson, is music in the play. He knows and carries the tunes for Robeson’s memories of trains, auditions, and rallies. Brown is Robeson’s musical muscle flexed through Wallace because James Earl Jones is, at best, a tolerable vocalist, offering what one reviewer named “unsuccessful singing.”<sup>58</sup> The play hides this casting error by building a composite Brown character; he is sounding board, witness, and, most importantly, instrument. We know Brown because of the piano and it because of him—the piano would not sound were it not for his presence there, as Robeson never touches its keys. The collapse of Brown into a prop in the “memorably discouraging environment” of the set evacuates the profound possibilities revealed by his relationship with Robeson.<sup>59</sup> Their more than thirty-year relationship produced a fantastic repertoire but also an intellectual; Robeson credits Brown with having taught him the importance of Black American folk music and training him in its study. None of this deep affection or study are documented in the play. Neither Brown nor the piano are developed enough to advance Robeson’s character, instead becoming two-dimensional props that are, in the opening scene, so unremarkable that Brown is hailed not as a named intimate and comrade but rather via his purely functional role as accompanist.

The third prop on stage is a bust of the namesake—a facsimile of Robeson’s head and neck and a replica of one of the sculptures conceived of and executed by Italian American artist Antonio Salemme (discussed in more detail in chapter 3). This bust is our visual introduction to the voice of a man recorded on tape.

( . . . THE PIANIST CONTINUES PLAYING, AS WE HEAR THE VOICE OF  
PAUL ON TAPE.)

Ladies and gentlemen—this is Paul Robeson. I’m sorry I can’t be with you tonight in Carnegie Hall. That’s why I prepared this tape. I am deeply honored that my likeness by my friend, Antonio Salemme, will be dedicated tonight in this great hall. I can think of no finer birthday present for my seventy-fifth year than this gathering of my friends—and I thank you.

I salute my friends of all nations.

I want you to know that I’m the same Paul, dedicated as ever to the world-wide cause of humanity for freedom, peace, and brotherhood. As Joe Hill says in the song, “I’m still with you.”<sup>60</sup>

As chapter 1 argued, Robeson’s recordings were the primary technology by which audiences imagined him as hologram, and one might expect the same here were it not for Dean’s poor staging. Instead of activating his passage via the music that he used to teleport his ideas and beliefs, Dean composes a straightforward monologue disrupted only by the mention of a song: Alfred Hayes and Earl Robinson’s “Joe Hill” (1936), which was a staple of Robeson’s repertoire from the late 1930s onward. This song provides the ellipses of the opening monologue, recorded not by Robeson but by Jones as Robeson. It is our invitation to (a) play that, as the bust suggests, might be built in the image of Robeson, but, without its sonic animation, we ultimately are betrayed by that still clay.

The nonvocal bust of 1926 (fig. 2.3) casts Robeson’s eyes straight ahead, fixating on someone or something in his sight line. His facial muscles are relaxed, lips pressed together, forehead calm. None of this would be possible were he engaged in song. Salemme captured Robeson in a rare moment of coerced immobility, and this is Dean’s introduction to a man whose face was continuously poised with a tune or thought or puzzle. Eventually singing was a reflex of which he did not think any more than most think of blinking. “He forgot his voice,” wrote anthropologist, journalist, and Paul’s wife, Eslanda. “He had no idea how he sang; he just opened up his throat and his heart, and, if all was well, he sang divinely.”<sup>61</sup> Yet we hear nothing from this sculpture, in spite of the fact that it was in the Greenwich Village world of early twentieth-century arts and letters that Salemme and Robeson met. The bust is, in some respects, already infused with the sounds of its environment, for surely it was in part Robe-



FIG. 2.3 Antonio Salemme, *Paul Robeson*, 1926. Bronze, 14 inches. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Portrait Gallery.

son's Voice that made him appealing to Salemme. Within the context of the play, however, Brown's presence in the scene with Robeson's bust is not a birthday celebration, as it is meant to be, but rather a eulogy, though for whom is unclear. Certainly, Brown singing and playing for his inanimate partner suggests that the performance is in Paul's honor, yet the occasion that they celebrated—Paul's seventy-fifth birthday—occurred on April 9, 1973, nearly four months after Brown's death. This disjuncture in a play that otherwise strives for uncomplicated linearity is produced by the uneasy tension between song and bust, between living, breathing art and the cold calcification of the same.

Were it not for the presence of Brown—the character who plays the interludes and softly sings many of the songs under Robeson's lines—we would not know music in *Paul Robeson* until almost halfway through act 1. He is a freshman at Rutgers University and the only Negro student on campus when we learn of his hazing by the Glee Club, who practices "Old Black Joe" beneath his dormitory window "forty-six times! In the

middle of the night” (15). He joins their singing when he recognizes that the basses are “so-so” (15). This experience is not unlike Robeson’s introduction to the Welsh chorus of mine workers in the film of which he was most pleased, *The Proud Valley* (1940), in which his character David Goliath joins in the rehearsal of the chorus by singing from the street outside their practice room’s open second-story window. While the Welsh singers are stunned and overjoyed, welcoming Goliath into their chorus and union with open arms, the Rutgers singers respond to Robeson’s voice by conceding defeat: “Since we can’t beat you, why don’t you join us?” (15). He proceeds to audition, singing “Jacob’s Ladder” for the director of the Glee Club, who summarily rejects him on the grounds that he has a “pitch problem” (16). This is the first scene in the play to centralize Robeson’s relationship to singing, which he argues he’s done “all my life, sir!” (16). That he would continue to sing for the rest of his life is not fully revealed in the play, even as music reappears regularly as the evidence of him having been somewhere or spoken with someone.

The music chosen to advance the narrative is sometimes peculiar; in addition to the Negro spirituals that he sang for his entire life and the European folk songs that he added to his repertoire in the 1930s and ’40s, in act 2 there is the perplexing addition of the U.S. national anthem.

I knew that I had to use that voice wherever there were those who want to hear the melody of freedom or hear the words that might inspire hope and courage in the face of despair and fear.

(MUSIC OUT.)

MUSIC: “THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER.”

PAUL POINTS TO STAGE RIGHT INDICATING THE STATUE OF LIBERTY.)

There she is . . . Desdemona. Ah yes . . . I’ve always thought of that Lady with the Torch as Desdemona. Lady of Light!

(TO THE STATUE OF LIBERTY.)

Will you let me play Othello to you, Desdemona? (67)

This passage appears between two important moments in Robeson’s life: his first trip to Africa in 1936 and his 1943–44 performance as Othello on Broadway, hence the mention of Desdemona.<sup>62</sup> As a representative of his place of birth, the Statue of Liberty is positioned here as a bridge between

his chosen identity as an African (which he publicized as early as 1935) and his insistent, but always vulnerable, position as an American. “The Star-Spangled Banner” enters to reinforce this fictive national kinship, replacing the lead-in music of the American folk song “Shenandoah” over which Robeson meditates on his relationship to and uses of his political voice. Rather than a disruption to his thoughts, the national anthem is used here as the “melody of freedom” through which Robeson can affirm and continue his agenda for social justice.

A very subtle and insidious sleight of musical hand occurs here that both moves the play’s audience swiftly across the globe (from Africa to the U.S.)—as music is meant to do in *Paul Robeson*—but also sets in our minds an uncomplicated relationship between Paul’s activism and his love for the U.S., the country that had finally allowed him to play the role that he perfected in Europe almost fifteen years earlier. While he famously argued before HUAC that he would never be driven from the land that his father, his family, and his people built, there was no romanticism involved in Paul’s relationship to the United States. He returned there in 1939, after a decade in Europe, under a certain amount of political duress as fascism continued to spread. He found that he needed to be back, not because the country wooed him but because he was requested by communities who continued to struggle for the rights that the statue was meant to signify. According to historian and Robeson friend Sterling Stuckey, he early on “introduced a consideration which could not easily be ignored, arguing that a *consciousness* of the conditions and attributes which made black people a unique people was required before nationality or nationhood could be brought into being.” This position was not only philosophical; it was grounded and rigorously rehearsed within his repertoire, which for forty years privileged the spirituals that he described as “the finest expression and the loftiest [Negro Americans] have to offer.” His songs were both his transit and his location, placing him in particular scenes and communities even as a self-described “Negro wandering through the world.”<sup>63</sup> With offers of citizenship from Ghana, Scandinavian countries, and many other nations around the world during and after the period of his passport revocation, Robeson did not need or subscribe to U.S. nationalism, nor did he sing its praises.<sup>64</sup> While the national anthems of China and Russia appear within his voluminous record catalog, “The Star-Spangled Banner” does not.<sup>65</sup> It was not the sound of freedom, hope, or courage for Robeson. To have it appear in the play here, as he

comes to fully acknowledge the power of his Voice, is a disturbing musical turn in a story that should, at this very moment, have opened his voice with the sounds of the songs that he sang repeatedly for his audiences, including the divine “Water Boy” and the anthem of the Popular Front, “Ballad for Americans.”

It is both the constrained approach to music in *Paul Robeson* and Dean’s limited attention to the uses of Paul’s music (what, where, to whom, and why) that condemns the artistic and political possibilities of the play. Dean failed to recognize that the impact and meaning of Paul’s life was in the music; it was that which represented his beliefs, his communities, and his deep solidarities with them. The form of the songs was the form of his mind. In response to the question of why he never sang opera, Robeson responded, “I do not enjoy opera because I cannot sing a song which has no meaning for me and I cannot sing a song I cannot talk. To me, song is speech.”<sup>66</sup> Music, as speech, is where Paul lives and intervenes. There is no need for prolonged bombast or soliloquy in the play; all that was needed to reveal him was his Voice in song, yet within *Paul Robeson* he is not allowed to sing over any length of time; he is not situated in character as a concert musician, nor is he shown in deep study of the languages and musics that created his connection to thousands, millions of people around the world. Sacrificing musical sophistication for cast acclaim and narrative accessibility, playwright Dean undermined the single most important method within Robeson’s lifetime of struggle. In so doing, his attempt to honor Paul and activate his memory instead further entombed him inside a publicly curated, revisionist history that would seek to either whitewash Robeson or erase him altogether.

As a Broadway play, not a musical, very few reviewers of the play explicitly mentioned music or its role in the production, but their concerns were nonetheless telling. Many theater critics were kind to Jones, even when unimpressed with the play. “The problems do not lie with the performer,” according to David Richards of the *Washington Star*. “They lie with a script that tends to fragment and belittle a life . . . the banality of the language . . . the thinness of the writing.” Black newspapers delivered more informed readings of the particular failures of the play to showcase Robeson’s large life. The *Baltimore Afro-American* noted, “Robeson was both a genius and a man; and because his life—accurately understood—teaches manhood, this society has conspired mightily against both the man and his life correctly portrayed.”<sup>67</sup> Sam Washington,

of the Black news service Trans-Urban, wrote an investigative piece in late January 1978 arguing that Robeson, though he died of natural causes, nonetheless was assassinated by the efforts of the state. After outlining, in broad strokes, the Accra Directive—a strategic plan by the U.S. State Department to spread false propaganda about and discredit Robeson in newly independent African nations—Washington continued, “Now, the Robeson assassination has moved to still another level—the Broadway stage. . . . The play, ‘Paul Robeson,’ may provide the most effective pro-propaganda medium the Accra Directive could have called for.” The play portrays Robeson as “‘tragic’ and disillusioned,” effectively bringing Robeson “down to ‘ordinary size.’”<sup>68</sup>

This author was far from alone in his beliefs on the play. In advance of its Broadway opening, a committee of fifty-six “prominent Black Americans” launched a campaign that included a full-page ad in a January issue of *Variety* magazine. “A Statement of Conscience” argued that, however unintentional, the play was “a pernicious perversion of the essence of Paul Robeson” that “reduced [him] from REVOLUTIONARY heroic dimensions to manageable, sentimentalized size. If [he] cannot be co-opted in life, it is simple enough to tailor [his image] in death.” This damning statement accused the playwright and producers of not only radically misrepresenting Robeson’s life but also of using his death as an opportunity to alter U.S. history. “Paul Robeson sustained the single greatest effort in the history of this nation to silence a single artist,” only to “restore him, now that he is safely dead, to the pantheon of ‘respectability’ *on the terms of those who sought to destroy him!*”<sup>69</sup> This destruction, according to some observers, was near complete. A Philadelphia theater critic wrote a devastating review of *Paul Robeson*, summed up by the words, “I cannot recognize a real human being in it.”<sup>70</sup> Nearly twenty-five years after the juridical death of Jim Crow with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the “Statement” announced the artifice of Dean’s imagination while also refusing the national progress narratives embedded within his imitation of Robeson’s life: “For the nation to confront [Robeson] honestly would mean that it confronts itself,” a call taken straight from the mouth of the play’s namesake.<sup>71</sup>

Signed by fifty-six influential thinkers and artists, including Paul Jr., James Baldwin, “Author, Actress, Director” Maya Angelou, Georgia senator and former Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee leader Julian Bond, Coretta Scott King, novelist Paule Marshall, playwright and

writer Alice Childress, university professors John Henrik Clarke and Ewart Guinier, Pulitzer prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks, choreographer and dancer Alvin Ailey, and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church Board of Bishops, this document was the launch for a wider offensive to preserve the integrity of Robeson's life. Calling themselves the National Ad Hoc Committee (in formation) to End the Crimes against Paul Robeson, the group, led by scholar and archivist Jewell Handy Gresham and activist Grace Killens (wife of novelist John Oliver Killens), remained vigilant in their efforts, sending information about Robeson far and wide. Included among their circulars was "Some Facts about Paul Robeson, the Man, Vis-à-Vis the Stage Play," which recorded in detail their concerns with Dean's depictions. From taking umbrage at the formality of a tuxedo with tails worn by Jones when Robeson refused to wear such attire for most of his career, to Dean's portrayals of Eslanda, to the actual text of his speeches (which are bastardized in the play), they painstakingly supported the decision to boycott *Paul Robeson* and called for others to do the same.

Taking a cue from Robeson, their concerns exceeded the play's relation to this one man, instead taking time to expose Dean's limited knowledge of the communities of whom he wrote. In response to a moment in the play in which Robeson is mistaken for another Black athlete, the authors note with disdain, "[Robeson] was the outstanding football player in the country in 1917 and 1918. No one in Harlem would mistake him for [boxer] Jack Johnson."<sup>72</sup> As a rigorous performance of citizenship for Black peoples, play—in sports and otherwise—was serious business, and both Robeson and Johnson were stars. Their conflation, while possible in Greenwich Village, was almost laughable in Harlem, which Eslanda argued was "not a community of strangers."<sup>73</sup> By returning Robeson to a multidimensional community, the committee not only improved on this representation but also implicitly damned the form of the production in turn.

Notably, the committee corrected the one scene of singing in the play; in fact, "Paul was not told he had a pitch problem when he went to join the [Rutgers] Glee Club." While it may seem a relatively minor issue, a "pitch problem" was an indictment of the art that he took very seriously and also suggested that he, even as a college student, was politically out of tune with his peers or environment. They also corrected the skewed characterization of Lawrence Brown. "Musically, the play does great violence to

Lawrence Brown's classic arrangement of Negro spirituals. Brown was not only Robeson's accompanist and arranger, but also joined his tenor voice in duets with Robeson's bass-baritone when they sang some of the more lively spirituals."<sup>74</sup> Calling them a "musical team," the committee gave back to Brown, Robeson, and the spirituals the dignity and respect evacuated in the play. It is, in large part, an examination of the music—not the acting—that provides the ultimate correction to the miscarriages within the play because it is the art form that first captivated Robeson's imagination and to which he remained steadfast throughout his life. This is how we lose him—through the musical silences that never existed. Expressing agreement with the committee's concerns, an international boycott of *Paul Robeson* touched down in major cities, including New York, Washington, DC, and London, showing, among other things, Paul's ability to still activate and stir his communities to action.

The circumstances that make these one-man shows unsatisfying, if not offensive, in their inaccuracies and parochialism are multiple and exist beyond any individual failure.<sup>75</sup> As theater scholar Patricia Caple wrote in her April 1978 review of Dean's play, "Obviously, no playwright can portray or recreate the full life of any character, for the very nature of a play is limited in latitude by the conventions in the art of playwriting." While these productions certainly reflect the limits of the playwrights' imaginations, the narrow frame of the one-man show is also to blame, especially in the case of someone as voluminous as Robeson. By focusing on a singular individual, these shows overdetermine play as discrete action and artifact (theater); the production lives and dies based on a single individual rather than recognizing the scale at which they labor. Limited musical play and the erasure of dynamic relationships further diminishes the creative potential of the work. Indeed, "the play makes no attempt to speculate on how far a man of Robeson's superior intellect could plausibly go."<sup>76</sup> This is where the play as form stunts representation and play as function, as process, must take over, ushering forward "the imagining of possibilities of collective organization and resistance rather than the hope of the individual achievements of an admittedly remarkable person."<sup>77</sup> Paul "was always in training," as Eslanda wrote, which requires that all those who attempt to keep step do the same with a man who, having fundamentally disrupted rankings, roles, and rigor mortis as an athlete and singer, was and is larger than his body and always in motion, eluding even the most ardent efforts to make him still.<sup>78</sup>

# Three Installation

Art is creation or rather re-creation of beauty. Artists see what others omit.

— PAUL ROBESON

If you see the statue, you'll know what it's singing!

— *Paul Robeson* (1978)

The statue is missing. After a tour that included Brooklyn, San Francisco, and Paris, it's gone, lost to the sea or perhaps the artillery of World War II. Finished in 1926, *Negro Spiritual* lived a brief but illustrious life. It was a quiet prize winner, receiving “exuberant praise” at the same time as it was kept under wraps due to its “sensitive content.” Accepted for a show in Philadelphia’s Rittenhouse Square, it was pulled “as the colored problem seems to be unusually great” in that city, even though the statue of a nude white woman, which was sent as an ironic replacement, fared just fine in exhibition. “Racial problems” in Chicago prohibited the sculpture from winning first place, while a venue in New York City placed it in the basement on opening night.<sup>1</sup> While the exact story of the sculpture’s disappearance is not known, we do know that the two casts—one sent

to Palm Beach and another to a French foundry—vanished. How unfortunate for all involved, including its maker Antonio Salemme and muse Paul Robeson.

The life-size sculpture positions Robeson in extension, arms raised, chin angled at forty-five degrees, legs soft-kneed but strong and sturdy (fig. 3.1). He uses his body to praise the sonic form that he had only one year earlier revolutionized. He was then a budding celebrity in the Greenwich Village circle of white benefactors and liberals and the Harlem Black literati, and everyone wanted their piece. According to literary theorist Michelle Stephens, “Salemme’s life-size sculpture reflects the sculptor’s desire to capture Robeson with a certain degree of intimacy—that is, to imagine that the artist can re-create, in Robeson’s bodily likeness, as close an approximation to the real-life actor that one can get in artistic form. The statue becomes a kind of surrogate for the immediacy of the actor’s presence in the world.” The demand for Robeson required that he be duplicated, and so Salemme used his own passion for the giant to create that possibility. The intimacy that Stephens notes began between subject and artist as they spent a number of long days together in (re)creation—Robeson naked, singing, and posed; Salemme in various positions of viewing and etching, smoothing and contouring. Engaging Naomi Segal’s “consensuality,” Stephens argues that his “‘circling round the sculpture,’ is driven by something that moves between the scopic and the haptic, ‘part of a sense of experience midway between touching and seeing.’”<sup>22</sup> The blur of sensibility and sensation drew the two men together through an arts practice that ultimately marked the career of the sculptor. His 1995 obituary in the *New York Times* begins, “Antonio Salemme, a sculptor and painter who won renown in the 1930’s with his life-size nude sculpture of the singer and actor Paul Robeson, died on Tuesday at his home in Williams Township, Pa. He was 102.”<sup>23</sup>

Here is Paul again, even when his approximation—the sculpture—was many decades disappeared. In its fateful and incomplete transition to bronze, *Negro Spiritual* reveals Robeson too as in process, in progress, as he sings a sorrow song even while posed. Unlike other models who are meant to remain immobile, he was intentionally active, always vibrating with lungs full of air, pulsing in and out as he brought the plaster to life. This exercise is perfect evidence that “in the medium of sculpture something of the body always remains,” and his are the throat and chest

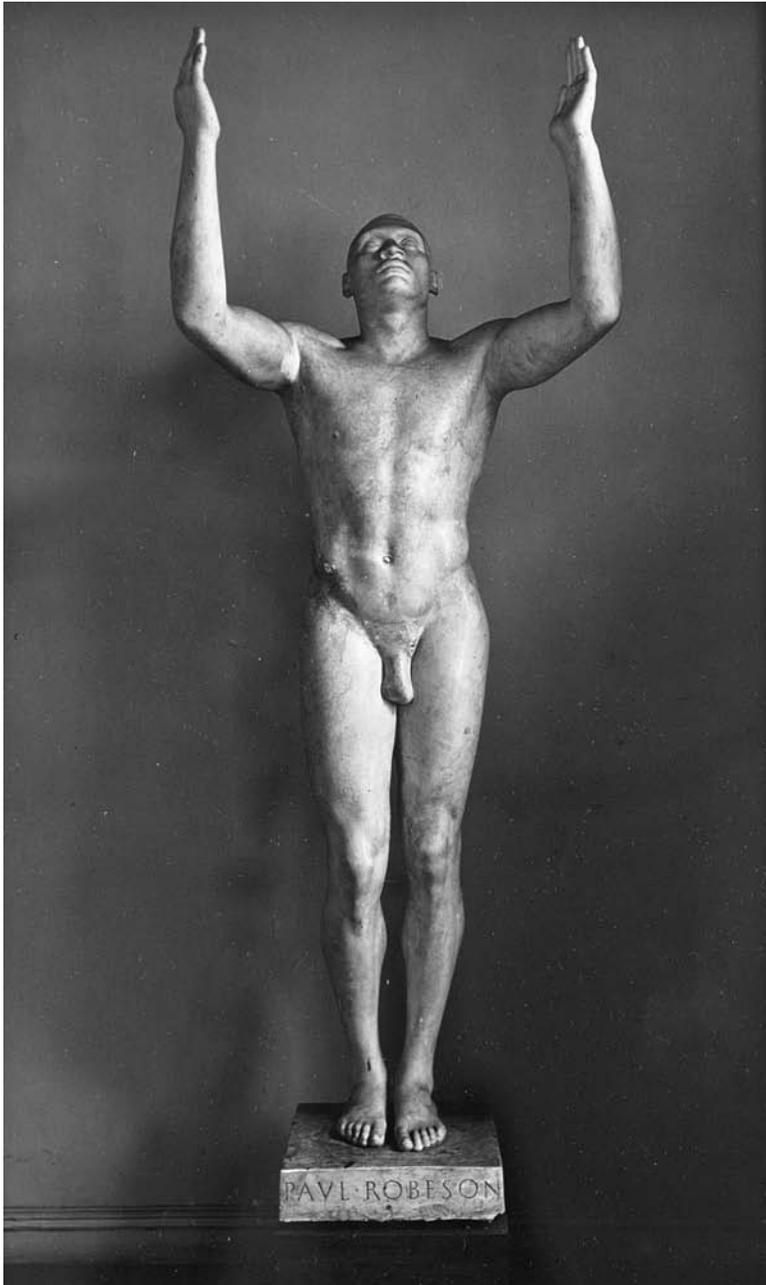


FIG. 3.1 Antonio Salemme, *Negro Spiritual* (1926). Plaster. Life-size. Presumed destroyed. Courtesy of Antonio Salemme Foundation.

leading to a condition in which one must not simply look at the sculpture while “circling” but also listen intensely.<sup>4</sup> Though the mouth is closed, the vibration remains—it is trapped in the very material of the sculpture made of a man who was, at the moment of capture, buzzing with “Deep River.” He’s a singing sculpture, an inanimate yet sonic installation, and a means of sending other people’s voices around the world.

More than memorialization, or even preservation, the creation of his image and body in wax, clay, and celluloid served as catalysts for new forms that continued to layer upon one another, revealing, like African American quilting traditions, their musicality through “off-beat patterning” and other forms of improvisation.<sup>5</sup> Each unique piece or collection resounds with the noise, harmonics, or silences of its making and context.

A feat and force of imagination, he comes alive in poetry and in other art/works drawn from a simple glance or smile and returns in order to reveal the continued urgency his claims.<sup>6</sup> He’s in boxes and redacted files, listening stations and paint, parcels and stamps. Through exhibit and the complexities of installation, which is a reading and organizing practice meant to signal how individual pieces become a whole, he labors as representation for imperiled ideas and communities, condensing and being curated as art in order to (re)create anew the possibility for influence, movement, and liberation.

## Croeso

In the fall of 1928, Paul was in the West End of London breaking records in his turn as Joe in the Drury Lane production of *Show Boat*. This was his opening, both to this role (which he had passed on in the U.S.) and to the wider world that would expand his intellectual, musical, and political horizons. It all happened very quickly. Something in him was already sensitive and attuned to his connection to other peoples, regardless of location or language. He didn’t acquire—or at least never fully developed—the mechanism by which so many are suspicious and guarded. It may have resulted from his father’s example based in the Christian gospel, or perhaps it was his experiences of Harlem where he saw the same people—his people—blooming with talent and shuttered by impoverishment, on the same day, on the same block, in the same establishment. He understood

that one did not disqualify the possibility of the other. So when he was approached by striking Welsh miners who had marched from mining country over the border into England in protest of working longer hours for less pay, he was receptive to their request. He sang for them in Trafalgar Square, fed them, and paid for their passage back to Wales by train along with donations for their families and union. Or so we're told. This story, which is so often repeated in Wales, is very possibly a myth; as such, its "main concern is with origins."<sup>7</sup> This is its value. The story places an empathetic Robeson in communion with the most iconized citizens of the Welsh nation: the miners. Regardless of its beginning, the relationship between Paul and the miners of South Wales would last his entire life and, as chapter 1 and this chapter demonstrate, produced a bond that took shape in a variety of forms.

Paul first traveled to Wales in 1929 and began to tour quickly thereafter. He was fascinated by the ways in which minoritized cultures define themselves in song and spent a good deal of his time in Wales attempting the language, studying the music, and praising its labor. His long association with the National Union of Mineworkers of South Wales provided him ample opportunity to know all three of these in combination, as it was a singing union. Their *eisteddfods* (singing festivals and competitions) were, at one time, larger in size than the national *eisteddfods*, drawing the workers and their families as well as politicians and visitors in fantastic numbers. Paul's constant invitation to perform during the 1950s led to the formation of the National Paul Robeson Committee in 1956, which then organized for his holographic presence at the 1957 Porthcawl *eisteddfod* (discussed in chapter 1) and his attendance at the 1958 miners' and national *eisteddfods*.<sup>8</sup> These events secured his intimate connection to the cultural history of Wales and established a number of racial and linguistic firsts. On Sunday, August 3, 1958, the national *eisteddfod* at Ebbw Vale opened in South Wales. Tradition held that the first day of each year's event would include only Welsh language speaking and singing; according to Daniel Williams, Paul's presence on the dais beside the revered Welsh Labour Party politician Aneurin Bevan (who did not speak Welsh) presented "a crossroads at which the cultural narratives of 'y Gymru Gymraeg' (Welsh speaking Wales) and 'South Wales' meet," and ultimately the rule would not hold.<sup>9</sup> Not only was Paul the first non-Welsh person permitted to speak English on the *ilwyfan* (*eisteddfod* stage)

but his impromptu contribution to the *gymanfa ganu* (Welsh hymn recital) placed the spirituals “We Are Climbin’ Jacob’s Ladder” and “Water Boy” alongside their national tradition.<sup>10</sup> This opening event drew nine thousand people, with many others turned away.

He was back in Wales in 1958 and would remain a part of their national culture for many decades to come. His title as an honorary Welshman endured, and was the title for a popular pamphlet in the 1990s in which it was claimed that he introduced spirituals to Wales. Though the Fisk Jubilee Singers had done that heavy lifting more than fifty years before him, Paul’s endurance in Wales is due in large part to his mastery of the form that he heard in the tones of Welsh choral singing. Not only did their four-part singing sound like the folk songs that he loved, but their collective performance, often in the language that the colonizing English at one time prohibited, was the evidence of hard-won cultural retentions. He knew these struggles, having sung with them via cable, on stage, and in film over many years. It is no surprise then that Paul’s memorialization and repetition in Wales takes shape in and through his Voice. While his body is always already present as the very materiality and source of his Voice, it is the sound produced by it—in all of its dense and glorious political melopoeia—that drives his commemoration in Wales. Tribute concerts appear semiregularly, marking the anniversaries of his death, his birth, the release of the 1940 film *The Proud Valley* (which was filmed in Wales and much beloved by him), appearances at eisteddfods, and so on. These events are how he returns to Wales: through dedications “to a man who had one of the world’s greatest singing voices and whose personality was bound to dominate even when he is dead.”<sup>11</sup>

Paul’s dominance grew as the new century dawned. In the late 1990s, Welsh historian and Labour Party politician Hywel Francis, along with photographer and curator Phil Cope, journeyed separately to the U.S. with funding from the Welsh National Assembly to extend initial research on Robeson. The goal was to build on other exhibitions through the unique relationship shared between himself and Wales. Two weeks before his birthday in 2001, *Let Paul Robeson Sing! (Gadewch i Paul Robeson Ganu!)* opened at the National Museum in Cardiff. Named after the British campaign waged during his passport revocation, this exhibit “aimed to reflect the life of Paul Robeson both through its content and its form.”<sup>12</sup> It was intertextual and participatory even as it took familiar shape in its display of

images and material culture with photographs, sculpture, and costumes. The frontispiece to the exhibit and the campaign that developed from it was an image of Paul from 1940 by Yousuf Karsh. In it, Paul is captured from his mid-chest up (fig. 3.2). He is positioned like a quarterback waiting for the snap; he looks away from the lens with a smile as he extends his arms and hands in front of him, palms open, fingers extended. The size of his hands was an often-remarked-upon element of his physicality, and they are here shown to be as large as described. He was loved in this moment of his fame domestically and abroad, having recently delivered the classic “Ballad for Americans” (1939) which was widely adopted during the Popular Front, and starring on stages and screens throughout Europe.<sup>13</sup> Freezing him here, before the other McCarthyite shoe dropped, presents an opportunity for an optimistic beginning in exploration of a man who, by the time of this photo, was amply wise to the ways of the world.

While marking a high note in his career, this opening is not without a forecast of the danger into which Paul was born and which he would face throughout his life. Paired with this image in the Cardiff exhibition was a pair of rusted manacles, blown up to many times their original size. Made of Styrofoam and spray painted to simulate age, they rested on the platform in the foreground of the Karsh image. It’s a strange juxtaposition if one expects a straightforward biographical take on Robeson’s life. What one encounters instead is a story that begins with enslavement. “Between 1500 and 1900, Europeans forcibly uprooted as many as 20 million people from West Africa and shipped them across the Atlantic in conditions of great cruelty. The slaves—farmers, merchants, priests, soldiers, goldsmiths, musicians, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters—were dispersed across the Americas to lead lives of degradation and brutality. Millions died in this African Diaspora.”<sup>14</sup> Following a note on Reverend William Drew Robeson—Paul’s father, who seized his freedom by escaping a North Carolina plantation—this description of the trade in Africans attempts to set the historical scene for Robeson’s emergence. Indeed, he is the son of a formerly enslaved person; beyond this deeply personal violation, however, he is a Black man and, as such, this history is not abstraction or long gone—it is ever present and painfully enduring. He lived in the afterlife of slavery.

The early context provided by the curators of the Robeson Wales Trust is used as evidence for at least two revelations. One was an effort to



FIG. 3.2 Promotional flyer for *Let Paul Robeson Sing!* exhibit at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff (2001). Courtesy of the South Wales Miners' Library, Swansea University.

concretize and remind the viewing public of Europe's role in the enslaving regime. As I discuss below, this exhibition was intended to launch a new program by the Welsh National Assembly and, as such, it aimed to promote "a powerful role model for tolerance, multiculturalism and anti-racism throughout Wales." The foreground of slavery was, to their minds, a way of beginning to reckon with their complicity in the history that made for this extraordinary man. Paul's unique contribution to Welsh and world culture was the second revelation that was highlighted by his close proximity to enslavement. He was the star of the story and the individual by which all other insights are gleaned. "*Let Paul Robeson Sing!* celebrated a life which was rich and full; it revealed the fateful restrictions imposed upon him throughout his life by laws, institutions and attitudes that attempted to chain his freedoms and abilities; it explored his attempts to forge links of peace and solidarity with struggling people throughout the world and his celebration of others' cultures; and it sug-

gested ways in which Robeson’s experiences and ideas could be useful to us all today.”<sup>15</sup> In this description by Cope, Paul is a means and method by which ideas and power are disclosed. Not unlike his once enslaved father, he takes shape as an escapee as well as a diplomat and organizer, sage, griot, and folklorist. From these multiple perspectives and positions, he is uniquely capable of rendering an assessment today, from the grave. All of this, the exhibit suggests, will be revealed if we allow him to sing.

Though not as sonically interactive as the title declares, his Voice was nonetheless present in the exhibit and added to the dimensionality of the museum space. A listening station parted the Cardiff exhibit walkway (fig. 3.3). Designed to roughly mimic Egypt’s Great Pyramid at Giza, the station’s appearance is inspired by a luscious story told of Paul’s first trip to Africa. During a break in shooting his 1937 film *Jericho*, Paul and costars Henry Wilcoxon and Wallace Ford ventured to the pyramid located across the road from the studio lot. With the guidance of a local dragoman, their exploration eventually led them to the King’s Chamber at the center of the pyramid, where they quickly realized its acoustical wonder. After some encouragement, Paul began to vocalize; the first note “almost crumbled the place,” and his delivery of a triad sent back to the men “the most gigantic organ chord you have ever heard in your life.”<sup>16</sup> This was “Paul Robeson plus” according to Wilcoxon, who was stunned to silent tears by the next offering, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s “O Isis und Osiris.” An aria from *The Magic Flute* (1791), “O Isis” is performed by Sarastro, a priest and wise man who requests fortification and guidance for two young lovers. He is a protector whose prayerful appeal to the gods Isis and Osiris to “Lead them to find the path of right” allows the couple to vanquish the forces of night in order to live the future, together, in the sun.

Paul’s “O Isis und Osiris” is regal. Recorded later in his career, when his voice had dropped even lower into a rich bass, it required that he transpose the original F major composition to E-flat major. The three introductory leaps of

V–I,	V–ii,	V–iii
[“O I-	sis and	O- si . . .”]

are his steps toward the gods he calls; each powerful on its own, the intervals grow in intensity as his chest opens and his plea unfolds, with



FIG. 3.3 The pyramid listening station in *Let Paul Robeson Sing!* at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff (2001). Courtesy of the South Wales Miners' Library, Swansea University.

“Osiris” developing into a cascade of whole steps gesturing the listener toward, but not to, the tonic. The *largo* of an iconic Kurt Moll performance in *Die Zauberflöte*, which includes a choir of priests who echo Sarastro’s vocal line (“Lead them in the path of right”), is, in Paul’s solo recital, closer to *andante moderato*. As a musician who often performed outside the concert hall and without orchestral backing, he would quicken the pace of his songs as a means of making them more conversational with his audiences. In Paul’s care, “O Isis” is no longer formal, no longer fanciful, but familiar and material. True to form, he is a petitioner for his communities, expanding the “unusually diversified audience” originally

drawn to *The Magic Flute* by singing their blessings in English instead of Mozart's German.<sup>17</sup> Even as he acknowledges the possibility of failure by the young, mortal lovers, he implores the gods to protect them ("Do not their virtue need deny"). While the chordal piano accompaniment here maintains its staccato punctuation, his vocal line—with an active series of quarter and eighth notes—is smooth, lithe, and beautiful even as he brings to it the conviction that one elsewhere hears in his demands to "let my people go." He has made the song his, ours, necessary. Paul's tremendous vocal lows (E-flat), which pierce through and then settle at the bottom of Alan Booth's accompaniment, resound as the final word from a man built for the tasks required of both singers and guardians.

With a Voice that via audio cords and cables is enough to draw tears, his "O Isis und Osiris" in the Pyramid of Giza is nearly inconceivable. Imagine. Khufu (the Great Pyramid) is "the grandest, the most complex" of the pyramids on the Giza Plateau that "over the centuries, . . . has been thought to be an astronomical observatory, an almanac, or a telescope." Engineer Chris Dunn believes that it was "a power plant" where "its 'crystal edifice created a harmonic resonance with the Earth and converted Earth's vibrational energies to microwave radiation.' He believes that every part of its precise design was intended to enhance its acoustics."<sup>18</sup> Paul's vibrations augmented a centuries-old equilibrium, connecting him intimately to ancient practices, musical and otherwise. Add to its acoustical and scientific qualities the pyramid's ties to Egyptian beliefs about death and rebirth—which feature the goddess Isis and her brother/husband Osiris—and the impact of Paul's song on that day becomes denser, more spectacular, as he manipulates the energy of his body and space in order to re-create the tomb as a place of life as well as death.

Duplication of this event is impossible, yet its simulation was the ambitious aim of the curators of *Let Paul Robeson Sing!* Described in promotional materials as "an opportunity to experience Paul Robeson singing in the Great Pyramid of Giza," the exhibit included a modern listening station in which participants could get one step closer to the experience that Wilcoxon described.<sup>19</sup> With a U-shaped bench and three glass panels that met at a triangular peak, the installation provided attendees with the opportunity to consider acoustical depth through their own voices as well as that of Paul, which they heard in partial isolation. Featuring his recording of "O Isis and Osiris," this space may have been the most fantastic intervention of the entire exhibit. Audiences were able to sit inside the

dense juxtaposition produced by Robeson's knowledges and political commitments—from the African world to vocal traditions, linguistics to ideas of liberation, deepening for the listeners his virtuosity and interpretive skill.

With his palimpsestic Voice present, the rest of the exhibit could do other kinds of work, including bringing him into the present moment. Visual art produced for the occasion, comments from exhibition visitors, and interviews with contemporary Welsh musicians documented his resonance in the new millennium. The curators designed the space to include “participatory memorialization,” which encouraged visitors to share in the efforts to continue making meaning from his life.<sup>20</sup> “Such was the interest generated by the relevance of the man and his ideas that the large wall spaces in the gallery initially allocated for immediate comments had to be regularly extended, to the point where, when the walls were completely full, white boards were placed on the floors, and then when these were full to overflowing two further comments books had to be provided.”<sup>21</sup> Attendees, many of whom were children, inscribed their thoughts into the very scaffolding of the exhibition, with poetry often recorded. Joseph Attard, age nine, wrote,

*It may take many people  
To build or make a plan,  
But to show strength and bravery  
Only takes one man.*

T. Thompson argued, “We need someone like Paul Robeson today to teach us how the world should be run.” An unnamed author launched him into the stratosphere: “Some personalities still shine long after they pass away. Robeson is a star (mawr seren [great star]), maybe a whole galaxy.”<sup>22</sup> He is present and continuous in these estimations, even if this knowledge is documented through a medium—exhibition—meant to be temporary.

Nicky Wire (nee Nicholas Jones)—lyricist, bassist, and sometime vocalist for the popular Welsh alternative band Manic Street Preachers—gives him a longer life than the comments found in the gallery. In his introduction to the exhibition book from Swansea, he writes, “For me, Paul Robeson is still a universal voice. His struggle is still our struggle. . . . His fight is still our fight, his art, his politics, his voice still captivate and mesmerize.”<sup>23</sup> Paul was, in fact, so present for Wire that he appears in the

Manic Street Preachers' repertoire through samples of his recording of the Welsh national anthem from the 1957 transatlantic concert as well as the band's cover of his standard, "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel."<sup>24</sup> He is additionally the muse for "Let Robeson Sing," a track on the band's 2001 album, appropriately titled *Know Your Enemy*, which was released one week prior to the Cardiff exhibition. Opening with an acoustic-electric guitar and limited drum set, the folk-rock ballad provides a gloss on Robeson's global travels for justice, noting stops in Moscow and attempts to meet Castro in Cuba. The first few lines return Paul to the present through a series of questions:

*Where are you now?  
Broken up or still around?  
The CIA says you're a guilty man  
Will we see the likes of you again?*

Recognizing that even death hasn't stopped him from moving, the first stanza attempts to locate him "now," knowing that the languages of the state ("CIA") remain in circulation, forcing him to leave, go quiet, disassemble. The coming chorus is one answer to the final question of whether or not we'll see him again:

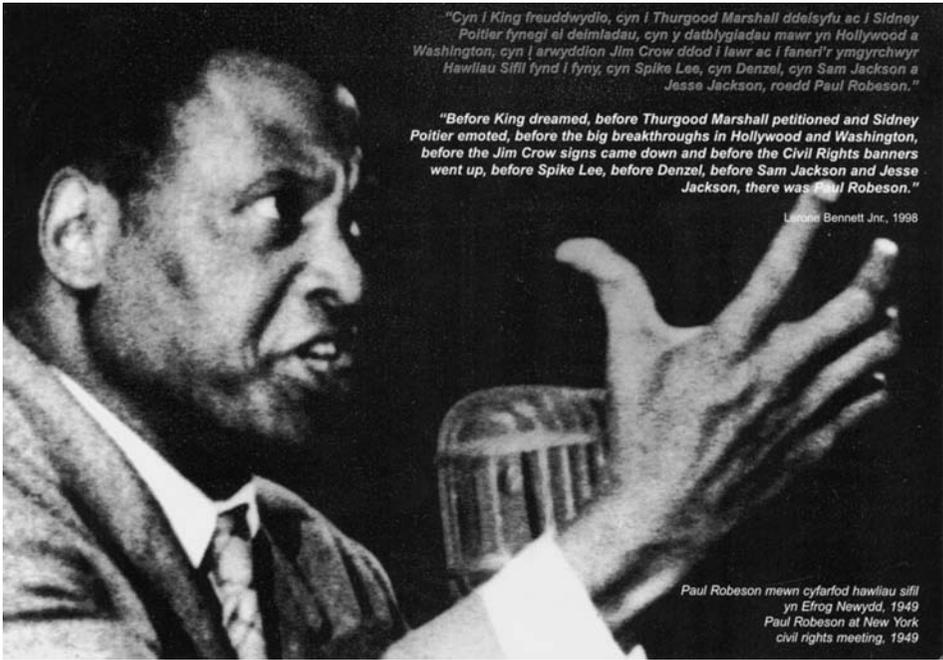
*A voice, so pure  
A vision, so clear  
I've got to learn to live like you  
Learn to sing like you.<sup>25</sup>*

The mechanisms that would allow for living like or singing like Paul Robeson—study and performance, for example—are what allow him to come back, to be seen, to endure even if on the lips of strangers.

The impact of *Let Paul Robeson Sing!* in the self-narration of Wales at the turn of the new century cannot be overstated. It toured to half a dozen major cities as a full exhibit with a less elaborate program designed for smaller markets. A travel-ready, collapsible pop-up version has been loaned to dozens of Welsh schools as well as British and U.S. institutions. Paul Robeson Jr. announced it as "THE Paul Robeson exhibition for the world."<sup>26</sup> While the reach of the exhibit internationally is noteworthy,

the impact is best seen in Wales, a country whose population, as of the 2011 census, was 73 percent native born and 96 percent white. The exhibit initiated new national programs and practices, including those explicitly aimed at diversifying Welsh museums. Shortly before the opening of the exhibit, the newly formed National Assembly of Wales, under the leadership of the Labour Party, eliminated museum admission fees. The organizers of the exhibit then made an unprecedented request that Afro-Welsh guides and docents be hired to staff the exhibition at the Cardiff museum.<sup>27</sup> Many of those hired, like father and son Henry and Ian Ernest, had limited prior knowledge of or relationship to museums but were so captivated by Robeson that they would later travel to the U.S. to discuss the exhibit.

This Robeson creation was the nation's best foot put forward, even if it was not entirely their story to tell. The life of honorary Welshman Paul Robeson as told through *Let Paul Robeson Sing!* was quickly translated into Croeso (welcome), a national project aimed at a strategic retelling of who the Welsh imagined themselves to be. The Croeso Project, formed by the Commission for Racial Equality in Wales, occurred alongside planning for the Cardiff exhibit and became the brand for a National Assembly-sponsored campaign in which Robeson's name and likeness would repeatedly appear. In effect, he became a noncitizen ambassador from beyond the grave for a renewed, millennial Wales. Framed by the question "Who is Paul Robeson?" a circular (figs. 3.4 and 3.5) sponsored by the Croeso Project reads, "Robeson's affection for Wales and his affinity with the working class made him a hero in the hearts and minds of Welsh people, who have a long history of welcoming diversity and embracing equality." This passage is exceptional for its nimble storytelling, which connects the known fact of Robeson's humanitarianism with the state's contested history of inclusion. Working-class racism—what David Roediger has named the "wages of whiteness"—anti-immigrant sentiment and policy, and the harm that befell and continues to impact African-descended peoples in Wales are here disappeared.<sup>28</sup> Even as there is a small but prominent movement to harbor Syrian refugees, recent studies show that Muslim communities are the least employed faith tradition in Wales, while Black people face disproportionate levels of police surveillance and encounter, and there is a growing presence of far-right extremists.<sup>29</sup> Beyond the pressing realities of racism, Islamophobia, and terrorism that



*"Cyn i King freuddwydio, cyn i Thurgood Marshall ddelsyfu ac i Sidney Poitier fynegi ei deimladau, cyn y datblygiadau mawr yn Hollywood a Washington, cyn i arwyddion Jim Crow ddod i lawr ac i fanerl'r ymgyrchwyr Hawliau Sifil fynd i fyny, cyn Spike Lee, cyn Denzel, cyn Sam Jackson a Jesse Jackson, roedd Paul Robeson."*

*"Before King dreamed, before Thurgood Marshall petitioned and Sidney Poitier emoted, before the big breakthroughs in Hollywood and Washington, before the Jim Crow signs came down and before the Civil Rights banners went up, before Spike Lee, before Denzel, before Sam Jackson and Jesse Jackson, there was Paul Robeson."*

Leona Bennett Jnr., 1998

*Paul Robeson mewn cyfarfod hawliau sifil yn Efrog Newydd, 1949  
Paul Robeson at New York civil rights meeting, 1949*



**COMMISSION FOR RACIAL EQUALITY**  
COMITWR CYDRADDOLDEB RASOL

*Gadewch i Paul Robeson Ganu!  
Let Paul Robeson Sing!*



**Paul Robeson**  
wales trust  
touring exhibition

*Pwy yw Paul Robeson?*

Yn fab i gyn-gaethwas, ganwyd Paul Robeson yn UDA yn 1898. Yn enwog fel actor, cantor a gweithredwr dros hawliau sifil, fe ysbrydolodd bobl fel Martin Luther King a Malcolm X. Gwnaeth hoffter Robeson am Gymru a'i agosatwydd at y dosbarth gweithiol ef yn arwr ym meddyliau a chalonnau'r Cymry, oedd â hanes hir o groesawu amrywiaeth a chofleidio cydraddoldeb. Dogfennwyd ei frwydr yn erbyn rhagfarnau ac anoddefgarwch yn yr arddangosfa wfreiddiol ac ysbrydoledig *Gadewch i Paul Robeson Ganu*. Mae'r arddangosfa yn teithio o amgylch Cymru - cysylltwch â Chriw Croeso am fanylion digwyddiadau yn eich ardal chi.

*Who is Paul Robeson?*

Son of a former slave, Paul Robeson was born in the USA in 1898. Famous as an actor, singer and civil rights activist, he inspired people such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Robeson's affection for Wales and his affinity with the working class made him a hero in the hearts and minds of Welsh people, who have a long history of welcoming diversity and embracing equality. His struggle against prejudice and intolerance is documented in a moving and inspirational exhibition *Let Paul Robeson Sing*. The exhibition is touring Wales - contact the Croeso Team for details of events near you.

www.prosiectcroeso.org  
croeso@cre.gov.uk  
029 2072 9200



**Croeso**  
MANY VOICES, ONE WELCOME  
SAWL LLAIS, UN CROESO

www.croeso-project.org  
croeso@cre.gov.uk  
029 2072 9200

FIGS. 3.4 AND 3.5 Front and back of a promotional postcard for the Welsh Croeso Project, sponsored by the Commission for Racial Equality. Courtesy of the South Wales Miners' Library, Swansea University.

this branding elides, there is also the violence of Paul's forced assimilation. The wide sociopolitical cleavage between his political virtues and those of the nation are made seamless here in an effort to so intimately tie them together that one might lose sight of the fact that, as much as he loved Wales, as much as he loved any number of the imagined communities of which he'd become a fixture, Paul was a steward of no nation. He dreamed of "autonomy rather than nationhood" and forged his allegiance in struggle with people and ideas, not states.<sup>30</sup> The quintessential "motherless child," he was many times adopted though never deputized, making for an incredible agility that is here stalled.<sup>31</sup>

## Disembark

"There is an understandable awareness that emanates from a resistance that dies too soon," wrote poet and scholar Herbert Martin in 1981. Indeed, this moment of Ronald Reagan's international ascendance could not have felt farther from the midcentury radicalisms that forged a new Black world. Reagan's pioneering work in California counterintelligence in the 1970s criminalized Black activism and thought, propelling into the future a domino effect of "those who have fallen, who are falling and who will fall." Accounting for these people, these dreams, was the labor of Gwendolyn Brooks in her poetry collection *To Disembark*. Replying to the energies of the 1960s, she, according to Martin, "survive[d]." "A sure and durable poetic treasure," Brooks uses a sculptor's precision to contour our understanding of the fall—the gap of the Black present in which they found themselves that was neither revolutionary nor lost.<sup>32</sup> *To Disembark* is a critical narrative of evaluation and celebration in the break, with moments of joy in praise of "those individuals she admires in the public and creative life, those who are known and unknown," including South African freedom fighter Steve Biko, author-poet Haki Madhubuti and his daughter Laini, and the Voice, Paul Robeson.

*That time  
we all heard it  
cool and clear,  
cutting across the hot grit of the day.  
The major Voice.*

*The adult Voice*  
forgoing Rolling River,  
forgoing tearful tale of bale and barge  
and other symptoms of an old despond.  
Warning, in music-words  
devout and large,  
that we are each other's  
harvest;  
we are each other's  
business;  
we are each other's  
magnitude and bond.<sup>33</sup>

That Voice is accountable, marking a time “that was not ripe,” the weather, our relations. The repetitive use of “we” is a call to collective livingness, right now: “we are . . . we are.” He makes possible our passage from the what was and could have been of the 1960s and ’70s and accompanies us into the what is and will be of the 1980s. He is still here—“we all heard it”—and Brooks tasks him with an adventure in which she too takes part: “It is as if Miss Brooks, in this collection, has taken off on a new journey.”<sup>34</sup>

Brooks’s disembarkation inspired another, and it too featured Paul. In 1993, conceptual artist Glenn Ligon premiered *To Disembark*. The four-part installation premiered in Washington, DC, and includes lithographs representing runaway slave ads, stencil quotes from Zora Neale Hurston’s 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” etchings with *chine collé* (“a process in which a fine sheet of paper is affixed to a cheaper backing material”) depicting frontispieces from nineteenth-century abolitionist narratives, and a series of wooden shipping crates marked with the signs of their unique passage by mail (fig. 3.6). It is a striking conceptual feat in a career that “has consistently mined the archive, engaging the postures, fates, and visual technologies that produce African diasporic folk as runaways who define the limits of belonging and productively figure the aporias of representation.”<sup>35</sup> Ligon’s approach to the iconography of enslavement and its fugitive, speaking property takes forms assumed to reveal and exposes them for the opaque artifice that they truly are. The concise, dispassionate renderings of the physical traits of runaways and authenticating narratives by white abolitionists that precede the stories



FIG. 3.6 Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark* (1993–94), Smithsonian Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Courtesy of the artist.

told by the escaped are ruses in *To Disembark*. Each form is a fraud, telling nothing of the unintelligible bodies that they seek to detail.

This truth is perhaps best witnessed in the form that provides the least visible detail: the wooden boxes. This was Ligon's first foray into three dimensions, and he uses it to show how flat blackness can be made to be. The crates are yet another physical artifact of the dark, mutinous class of U.S. society, those who would rather be permanently disfigured by their own hand than be made in someone else's image. Inspired by the story of Henry "Box" Brown, a once-enslaved man who escaped to freedom in 1849 by sending himself in a box (dimensions: three feet one inch long by two feet six inches deep by two feet wide) from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia, the multicrate series is the interior space of the exhibit hall. While the runaway ads, frontispieces, and Hurston quotes line the walls, the boxes float in the center, contouring the pathways of all onlookers. Each element of the installation works in detailed synchronicity by suggesting bodies that are not present even as the period of their disappearance very well may be. As art historian Huey Copeland notes, "in *To Disembark*, the peculiar institution and its various aftermaths are not simply agencies of oppression or marks of foreclosure, but expansive openings through which we might begin to see the modern, the aesthetic, and ourselves differently both despite and because of the obstacles thrown up by representation and its remains in the archive."<sup>36</sup> These openings into the con-

tinuous present of slavery—the afterlife theorized by Saidiya Hartman—are multisensory. While the images do so primarily through text, the boxes perform this work through sound.

Inside each of the ten crates are recording devices that replay animate materials, from a heartbeat to voices. In their variety, they chart an ongoing conversation across and between time, space, and idiom, even as each are bound by the descendency that makes them vulnerable to being taken too soon. The McIntosh County Singers—a Georgia a capella group formed in the early 1980s who have retained the original forms of the ring shout—and Bob Marley’s “Freedom Song” are heard, as is Nina Simone’s damning portrait of gendered captivity in “Four Women” and hip-hop intellectual KRS-One’s “Sound of da Police,” during which he plays with the tempo and phonetic emphasis of “overseer” until it is indistinguishable from “officer.” Its alarms lit the sky in the year of *To Disembark*’s release and have echoed ever since. While some of these examples more closely resemble the time of enslavement than others, each is indelibly tethered to that reality. Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” bespeaks plainly the terror that accompanied freedom during Reconstruction while Royal House’s “Can You Party” is a house classic that uses beats per minute instead of words to remind you that you’re alive.<sup>37</sup> Together they prove that even in the context of mutual capture, every freedom sounds different.

Paul joins the list of Ligon’s fugitive subjects through his iconic “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel.” As a spiritual, it holds within it the seeds of deliverance on a timeline indeterminate, revealing precisely the tension that Ligon’s installation represents. The previously discussed final lines of the song predict and assert that “freedom shall be mine,” leading to no ambiguity of intent, even when inside a sealed container. These crates are a material metonym for the world of enslavement that made the lives of the captives very small while also providing the possibility of escape. The cohort curated within *To Disembark* understood “the difficulty of keeping that dream alive and the wily disposition needed to do so” even as they demonstrated “an ability to adapt and abandon and abscond, always alert to the losses such fugitivity entails and the liberation it promises.”<sup>38</sup> This was and remains the reality of blackness as fugitivity: it is the assurance of perpetual animation in and toward a project of freedom.

In the task of this animation, sound and music play a unique role. In Ligon’s evaluation, he is interested in what it proposes, rather than what is actually revealed or made tangible. Of *To Disembark* he asks, “What does

it mean that that container suggests the body but does not contain it?”<sup>39</sup> This is an especially poignant consideration for a person such as Robeson, whose travels and circulation (as sculpture, sound, and image) were heavily policed. His ability to throw off detection, to disassemble, to elude was a survival technique, even as he was painfully present and honest about who and what he was/is. His placement as parcel in the installation continues to position him in transit, in progress. And while Ligon queries whence the body, it is already there, even if it remains submerged or out of sight. As I’ve argued throughout, his body is there because his Voice is. It could be no one else in that box; we know that Voice—“we all heard it.”

This in distinction to other recent curations. British filmmaker and artist Steve McQueen used FBI files as the basis for his film *End Credits* (2012–16), which has been shown in art museums in Chicago, New York, and Miami (fig. 3.7). Unlike Ligon’s parodic runaway ads, McQueen does not adjust the original documents. They stream on the screen as a continuous feed, one after another, and are meant to mimic the quick clip of film end credits. Their origin as federal records does not make them any more authentic than anything else produced for the big screen, however. The thirteen-hour film takes scans of Robeson’s heavily redacted files, which accumulated over the thirty years of his surveillance, and adds to them the voices of men and women who read them aloud.<sup>40</sup> The narrative is at times multivocal as one reads the print while another announces the unknowable words under the marker smudges as “redacted.” “[voice one:] It is to be noted, that the Hawaii Civil Liberties Committee has been described by confidential informant [voice two:] redacted [voice one:] as a Communist-front organization, which was formed to agitate on behalf of Dr. and Mrs. John Ernest Reinecke, Honolulu schoolteachers recently suspended for Communist activity. [voice two:] Redacted [voice one:] District Intelligence Office, 14th Naval District.”<sup>41</sup> Along with Black annotation, Black redaction is, for Christina Sharpe, a means of “wake work,” which is an analytic and “mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme [of slavery’s afterlives] with our known lived and un/imaginable lives.” These “new modes of making-sensible” Black life are experiments in intelligibility, especially when the original document that we amend or rewrite is not of the subject’s creation.<sup>42</sup> While Paul is the subject, he is only minimally in these files to begin with; what then are we left? To play on Ligon’s question of the crates in *To Disembark*, what does it mean that the file suggests knowledge but does not contain it?



FIG. 3.7 Steve McQueen, *End Credits*, installation 2012/2016, sequence of digitally scanned files, sound; continuous projection exhibition copy for *Open Plan*: Steve McQueen, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, April 29–May 14, 2016. Courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris; and Thomas Dane Gallery, London. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

There is no otherwise evidence to bring Paul into these federal stories. The agent may have (over)seen or overheard him, but he is not present here, and though the form of surveillance portrays itself as scientific, it's an imaginative effort based in the interpretive logics of an anti-Black, imperialist state department. Ligon is uninterested in the state's languages, except insofar as he is able to mobilize them in service of its own undoing. *To Disembark* therefore exposes the lie of safe passage from the time or space of slavery to the time or space of emancipation. "Slavery was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity—a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances. Emancipation did not make free Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. The brutality was not singular; it was the singularity of antiblackness."<sup>43</sup> This Paul knew, and he used the spirituals to announce both the endurance of the violence and the resolve of those violated. He is the living, breathing evidence of the fugitivity that Ligon stencils on paper or packs into boxes.

As such, Paul is a proxy for Box Brown, whose story Copeland describes as the "structuring conceit of *To Disembark*."<sup>44</sup> The crates serve as a three-dimensional representation for Black being, which "seems lodged between cargo and being," between "persons and things."<sup>45</sup> Brown's travel as package intended to exploit and upset this conflation, and, while successful in escaping the slavery that he knew, he found its echo elsewhere and moved again to England, where he spent more than twenty years. "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" speaks nothing of when and where Black liberation yet asserts the power and certainty of it for all ("and why not every man?"). Cleverly and incompletely concealed by Ligon, the deliverance of which Paul sings plays on both the freedom that Brown sought and the mail that he used to make it possible. Postal transit was a new technology in the war against slavery, and one recognized as an advantageous tactical intervention by abolition's most eloquent thinkers. "Cheap postage, Frederick Douglass observed in *The North Star*, had an 'immense moral bearing.' As long as federal and state governments respected the privacy of the mails, everyone and anyone could mail letters and packages; almost anything could be inside. In short, the power of prepaid postage delighted the increasingly middle-class and commercial-minded North and increasingly worried the slave-holding South." Though the strategic Douglass feared that Brown's public announcement of his escape would prohibit the mail from becoming a tool to free others, Hollis

Robbins notes that antislavery audiences overwhelmingly “celebrated his delivery as a modern postal miracle” that brought with it a new frontier in Black fugitivity.<sup>46</sup> The ever-growing imagination of Black grace now took shape as embodied correspondence, proving poet-scholar Nathaniel Mackey’s contention that “*other* is something people do, more importantly a verb than an adjective or noun.”<sup>47</sup> Brown’s spectacular and willful transition into property forecasts and, through Ligon, interpolates Paul’s transition not into parcel (à la *To Disembark*) but into the currency of its movement: postage.

### The Sound of Mail

In 2004, Paul became a stamp. His commemorative brand is a part of the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) Black Heritage series that began in 1978, two years after his death. The first in the series bore the image of a great freedom fighter of whom Paul regularly spoke in his concerts: Harriett Tubman. He believed that she must have sung the spirituals as he also did and used that knowledge to link his performance to a long genealogy of Black freedom struggles. Following in her footsteps one year later was Martin Luther King Jr., whose stamp set a unique tone for the series. His portrait is “surrounded by symbolic vignettes of the subject’s primary achievements,” namely the people he set to marching throughout his brief but stunning career as a public intellectual and leader. From these giants emerged postage reflecting the likeness of Robeson mentor W. E. B. Du Bois, friend Marian Anderson, and fan Malcolm X. Robeson, in fact, is formally acquainted with or in some degree connected to the grand majority of Black men and women who appear on U.S. postage, from his lionized Frederick Douglass, to composer W. C. Handy whose blues he recorded, to Hattie McDaniel with whom he starred in the 1936 film *Show Boat*. The music series that froze his peers Count Basie and Mahalia Jackson, the Folk Heroes collection that represented the tale of John Henry of whom he often sang, and the multiple iterations of his one-time friend Jackie Robinson all mark a century of Black memorial, commoditization, and exchange mediated by the federal government.<sup>48</sup>

Within this trajectory Paul is a contested subject, second only, perhaps, to the great Dr. Du Bois, who at ninety-three years old accepted Ghanaian citizenship and joined the Communist Party. Robeson lived

similar ideals of radical internationalism for the majority of his adult life; he was a friend to the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, a proponent of scientific socialism, and a defender of Black and immigrant communities and colonized nations around the world. The grand, federally curated story of his traitorous Communism, which was used powerfully to thwart his work during his lifetime, remained a hindrance in considerations for public memorial. Yet as so many before them had done, his admirers found a way to bring him back. As the centennial of his birthday approached, a group based in Chicago launched a petition for a federal Paul Robeson commemorative stamp. It was addressed to the deciding body in such matters, the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC), a collective formed in 1957 and chosen by the postmaster general, which is activated in order to "provide expertise on history, science and technology, art, education, sports, and other subjects of public interest."<sup>49</sup> After having met some number of the twelve established criteria for inclusion, twenty-five to thirty subjects are forwarded by the committee for consideration each year. In spite of support from ninety thousand signatories, as well as a proposed House resolution from Illinois representative Bobby Rush, CSAC declined the request. They were not the first empowered collective to deny such public petitions; as chapter 4 discusses, Robeson was denied a posthumous Hollywood Walk of Fame honor almost two decades earlier. The Chicago-based campaign continued for years and gathered, by one organizer's estimate, nearly a quarter of a million signatures. After bimonthly check-ins with CSAC and continued demonstrations of support at the local level, the committee "bow[ed] to [the] six-year grassroots campaign" in 2003 and announced that the Robeson stamp was on its way.<sup>50</sup>

The initial dedication of the stamp was held in late September 2003 at Columbia University, where the vice dean of the law school praised Robeson as "one of our greatest graduates," and historian Manning Marable argued that he was "one of the greatest and most extraordinary Americans of the 20th or any other century."<sup>51</sup> New York City's first Black mayor, David Dinkins, told the press, "We thought this day would never come. For years we got stamps for Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse and no Paul Robeson."<sup>52</sup> As chapter 4 also reveals, the intentional neglect that Dinkins marks here is one that would continue to haunt the efforts of Robeson fans and followers. The bestowal of honorifics on him well after fictitious characters like Disney's mice added another layer of malice to the assault on his legacy yet made the consequences of his continued

silence all the more grave. As the president of his alma mater Rutgers University announced at the stamp's dedication there, "A Paul Robeson stamp costs 37 cents. A university that lives up to the ideals of Paul Robeson is priceless."<sup>53</sup>

In spite of Paul Jr.'s laudatory view that "this stamp is a symbol of our nation's recognition of Paul Robeson's service not only to America but the world," there is a deep irony and concern in Paul's transformation into postage.<sup>54</sup> Yes, in this form he would continue to facilitate communication, and maybe even escape, around the world, making it entirely appropriate in its functional nature. Yet Paul never wanted to be a symbol—he, in fact, raged against that ever-present possibility, refusing to be exalted by those in power and made into something other than his design. As early as the 1930s he understood the trick of exceptionality, saying, "Even though I had won honors in university years, somehow these honors, instead of proving that color of skin made no difference, emphasized the difference all the more, since I was marked as an exception to the rule."<sup>55</sup> He was not an exception to his race, nor was he a model American subject. Instead of retreating into an uncomplicated nationalism, he instead claimed to be a citizen of the world who identified first as an African, regularly sparred with the State Department, and fought for the right of all in the U.S. to vote their conscience beyond a two-party system (Communist Party, Progressive Party, or otherwise). He changed the lyrics to U.S. standards and sang in the languages of the nation's enemies. His appearance as an imprint of and currency for the very government that stole his right to travel, then, is at best a contradiction made all the more discomfiting due to its composition.

Very little seems awry with the stamp at first glance. A portrait in black and white, it shows Robeson in three-quarter profile, positioned on the left side of the frame but facing the camera with eyes on the viewer (fig. 3.8). He's wearing a characteristic suit and tie and smiles widely, perhaps too widely. This image is likely from the period of the late 1930s or early '40s when his star was high. As an international darling and one of the highest-paid performers in the world, he had a lot to smile about. The girth of the smile, however, is uncharacteristic of his posed photographs. While he surely smiled, they were rarely captured with such volume. The size and detail of his bottom teeth are exaggerated and stark in the black-and-white photography. A comparison image from 1942 (fig. 3.9) shows Paul wearing a near-identical tie and suit combination and sitting in a



FIG. 3.8 “Black Heritage: Paul Robeson,” United States Postal Service stamp (2004). Courtesy of the author.

similar position, though facing more toward the camera. In this image, his bottom teeth are barely visible, his smile more relaxed. This is a far more recognizable portrait of the singer whose smile came easily and earnestly. Of the ten Black Heritage stamps that preceded his, seven of which were men, only two—education advocate Allison Davis and poet-essayist Langston Hughes—are shown smiling with visible teeth, and neither are as wide as Paul’s. At the very bottom of the stamp is his name in red ink. As someone who, for much of his life and afterlife, was and is considered “Black and red,” this is a striking and telling choice of color; again, of the ten stamps that preceded his, all of which are presented in some hue of gray or sepia tone, none of the names on the stamps were in colored ink.<sup>56</sup> These minor-key elements of the stamp suggest that he has been tamed, pacified, even if his redness remains.

In spite of the fact that “music has influenced the designs of a fairly large number of stamps,” the USPS stamp is inaudible.<sup>57</sup> It refuses his invitation to another sonority, bypassing the chance for a singing telegram dense with vibration. The generic pose and closed jaw disclose very little about the quality of the “spirituals and folk songs” briefly mentioned as caption on the back of the stamp. Another Robeson stamp from the former French colony of Mali, however, offers an alternative (fig. 3.10). In it, he is shown with a slight turn toward his right side but with a full and



FIG. 3.9 *Paul Robeson, 1942.* Photo: Gordon Parks. Courtesy of FSA/OWI Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



FIG. 3.10 Republique du Mali commemorative stamp, “Paul Robeson” (1986). Art by E. Lacaque. Image from colnect.com. Courtesy of the author.

knowing gaze set upon the viewer. He is in color, wearing a coat with square, tasseled shoulders in gold and a red collar. In the bottom quarter of the stamp is an expanse of water foregrounded with a large casino boat. Marking the tenth anniversary of Robeson’s death, the stamp suggests homage to two Robeson portrayals; the first is his role in the film *Song of Freedom* (1936), which tells the story of the talented Afro-British dockworker John Zinga, who is discovered by an opera impresario and begins to tour. Through the performance of a childhood song, he realizes that he is royalty and returns to the fictitious West African island of Casanga to lead. After a series of challenges to his claim on the throne, he wins over the island’s inhabitants with a beautiful performance of “Song of Freedom,” the song of his childhood passed down by kings.

The original composition is unimpressive on its own; what makes the film compelling is how knowledge of the song and its utilization occur. Zinga retains the song through a kind of muscle memory, the origins of which he cannot pinpoint but which he nonetheless reveres as wholly

real. At the height of his early fame as a concert singer, he insists, upon hearing the orchestra play “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” that, though he doesn’t know how he knows his song, “I know what that means to those people out there. Somehow that song I was singing means as much to me.”<sup>58</sup> There is something of that song that he knows intimately, not through the formality or didacticism of nationalism but through a complicated intergenerational listening practice. And while the film spends a lot of time collapsing what that element of his knowing/past is—it is always just Africa—the tales of those stolen by slavery rarely have more precision. The song is Zinga’s bloodline and his tie to a place that he has always known as his mystery. The film’s plot is a mirror image to a story Paul told about a song. In the 1930s he heard an African dockworker in England singing a song that he recalled from his childhood. Upon further conversation with the man and investigation on his own, Paul realized that this Nigerian song was evidence of his own Igbo heritage. That song is how he began to know his place in the world beyond the tragedies of slavery and his father’s fateful escape from it. Though Paul would later lament the imperial propaganda included in the film, *Song of Freedom* did have a life on the continent thanks in large part to his good friend, the first independent premier of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, who selected it for screening at the second anniversary celebration of his Convention People’s Party in 1950.<sup>59</sup> In combination with the riverboat that signals his iconic role as Joe in *Show Boat*, his representation as Zinga fills the Malian stamp with the complicated, always imperfect sounds of Robeson’s singing, laboring diaspora.

How Robeson ended up as a representative of the Republic of Mali is unclear. Unlike the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), to which he was a visitor and from whom he received a commemorative stamp, he had no known links to Mali though he was surely a known figure in that country. Robeson friend and novelist Oliver Killens told of a trip there in the late 1940s or early 1950s in which, after a long period of being stranded on an isolated road, a good Samaritan asked him, “Where do you stand on Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois?” Upon hearing Killens speak favorably of both, the Tuareg man responded, “Then you are truly my American brother!”<sup>60</sup> Robeson’s intimate relationship to various other African nations and his repeated insistence on the significant knowledges and cultures of the wider continent suggests why he is in Mali and, perhaps, why he took shape as a stamp. Kofu Antubam, the

artist responsible for the images on Ghana's postindependence stamps, believed that stamps are an art and a "marvelous means of transmitting ideas to vast numbers of people, educating them." Nkrumah understood that he had to make a significant mark on the minds of Ghanaians in the early independence moment—the citizens needed to see that they were no longer the subjects of the British Crown. As such, he removed the stamps bearing the image of Queen Elizabeth and instead placed his own image there. This, he argued, is how Ghanaians would know that they were free.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this too is why Paul is there—on stamps and in art—to let people know that, even in his physical absence, he continues to sing their freedom songs. He is with them and they are free.

## Four Environment

In 1919 Paul strolled the “Avenue,” and soon became one of its landmarks.

—ESLANDA GOODE ROBESON

What can one say to a mountain?

—OLLIE HARRINGTON

For many Angelenos, Hollywood is a location to avoid. Once the fabled terrain of a glamorous lifestyle, its main strip is now a densely policed tourist trap. Congested with foot and car traffic, protruding restaurant seating areas and shops packed with knickknacks, the area is a horizontal monument to excess. Neither the talented street workers nor the odd curiosity is enough to warm what otherwise feels chillingly inauthentic. With so much happening, it's a hazard to walk with your eyes cast downward, yet the environment encourages precisely that. Terrazzo and bronze stars dot the sidewalks for more than a mile on Hollywood Boulevard and three additional blocks at the north-south intersection of Vine. Documenting achievement in five industries—motion pictures, broadcast television, theater/live performance, broadcast radio, and audio record-



FIG. 4.1 Paul Robeson star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The Hollywood Walk of Fame is a trademark and intellectual property of the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce. All rights reserved. Photo: Danielle Stein. Courtesy of the author.

ing or music—the stars form a constellation of divisible artists, each of whom is associated with one style of performance. The choreography of the stars is uncoordinated, with radically different performers abutting one another, each being tasked with standing on their own without support from their surroundings. On the south side of the 6600 block of Hollywood Boulevard is the star for Paul Robeson. It is marked only with a classic film camera, representing excellence in motion pictures (fig. 4.1).

Save for the light bustle of a couple of late night clubs and friends passing time, the block was quiet as I walked in search of his star. Located in front of a typical hybrid shop with gifts, T-shirts, and cellular services, and across the street from the iconic old-Hollywood steakhouse Musso and Frank Grill, the star was strewn with tissue and litter. So too was that of Paul's neighbor to the east, actor and chanteuse Eartha Kitt. Each star bordered its respective business; his, the shop of knickknacks and communications and hers, the Hologram USA theater in which “live” shows

are staged via 3-D (re)animation. With a roster of Black talent that includes Billie Holiday, Nat “King” Cole, and Whitney Houston, Hologram USA is doing their part to advance the science of recurrence by which I earlier argued that we know Robeson.<sup>1</sup> Even when compelling, these “images of the beloved dead can only ever be illusory, and the same technology that lets us feel the dead’s presence in our lives also marks them as irretrievably past, lost by their absorption into the archive, and forever marked in a time-space behind us.” Here is the “problem of tense”—the past not quite passed—that Katherine Fusco marks and the tension that Paul both reveals and defers.<sup>2</sup> It was striking to see his long relationship to the holographic affirmed in Hollywood’s built environment; in this location, his illusory repetition invented permanence. Some number of the pedestrians who tread upon his star travel in swift anticipation of a look at the dead, perhaps never knowing that he too appears in that form in other places. The collusion of embodiment and sound that Paul perfected and the popular hologram seeks to capture was here, too, embedded in the sidewalk.

His eventual presence as Hollywood star number 1,704 was, like so much of his life, a struggle, this one organized posthumously by family and friends. Though nominated for the honor in 1978 by Actors Equity and the Screen Actors Guild, Robeson was denied access to the club, which in that year included local LA drive-time disc jockey Dick Wittingham, falsetto disco kings the Bee Gees, and animated rodent Mickey Mouse. “I don’t think Mr. Robeson met the criteria, probably,” said William Hertz, theater executive and chairman of the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce Walk of Fame Selection Committee. The standards that he and the committee devised were entirely different than those imagined by his peers and communities. Beyond his nomination by major artist organizations, individuals such as child star Jackie Cooper and stage and television actor Ben Vereen requested that their stars be given to Robeson.<sup>3</sup> Star and activist Lena Horne queried, “If my name can be on the walk, why not Mr. Robeson’s?” Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley joined in the public outcry of his snubbing as well, arguing that Robeson was due the “star that he sought to grasp during his lifetime, one which we believed he earned over and over again.” By the time that Paul Jr. entered the conversation, the tone was changing, thanks to organized labor. Head of the County Department of Public Works, a Black man named Warren

Hollier “threatened not to approve the placement of any additional stars until he [was] provided with the chamber’s complete selection criteria.”<sup>4</sup> Recognizing that they were on the losing end of the debate, the Chamber conceded that, upon receipt of more information on his film career, Robeson was now worthy to lie on the boulevard. On his birthday, April 9, 1979, Paul Jr., Stevie Wonder, Sidney Poitier, and others gathered to dedicate his star, and though it fails to announce his profound talents and impact on the recording industry and theater, its appearance is also his.<sup>5</sup> He is the sediment and consolidation of sounds and acts, trials and victories that then make way for others to march and move. He is not in the ground; he is the ground. From there we proceed.

He is also sky—a bright, dimensional star held together by his own gravity—and was announced as such before he appeared underfoot. Star of stage and screen is no comparison to his tribute and recognition, published a week after his passing, in the *Washington Afro-American*: “Be it known to all inhabitants of this planet known as the earth, henceforth from this date January 23, 1976—The constellation in the heavens called the Big Dipper and containing the star commonly called The North Star or the Polar Star shall be called and known as Paul’s Star.” Robeson appeared to author Evelyn O. Chisley as nature’s compass: a means by which the African-descended would continue to pursue and achieve freedom. With this title and role came a set of instructions: “To all ships at sea—planes in the air—all land vehicles, observatories, all sailors at sea, inland waterways, observation stations, land expeditions, when you make your fix with your sextant, refer to Paul’s Star. Paul’s Star will be there forever to guide the peoples of the earth towards the brotherhood of mankind.”<sup>6</sup> Robeson’s vocal and political magnitude was compressed into the dense earth of sidewalks and streets, community centers and houses, stars, rock cliffs and mountains, that demonstrated his indefatigable character and stability within the sight lines and travels of Black and working people. From these appearances, he would remain an active part of how people might differently live and love. Though he continued to circulate as installation and ephemera, he also became, through repetition and urgency, permanent in the natural and built environment before and after his death. What began as a vibrational presence detected on the skin or in the ear amassed architectonics alive with sound; in and as location and landscape, he resisted disappearance and erasure, consolidating his vo-

cal trace into (infra)structure. Whether looking up at him or down, Paul recurs solid and at scale.

### **“A Home in That Rock”**

It was late August, and the stoops were mostly bare as I walked west on Walnut Street. Silence dominated, save for the blocks nearest the University of Pennsylvania, which sounded of heavy traffic and frat boys. The neighborhood itself was quiet. This is a neighborhood of working people who, at 1:30 in the afternoon, were most certainly occupied. This, though, is also an aging neighborhood, making possible the gathering that I passed on the 4900 block of the street, a few houses away from Paul’s final home. Gathered there were four or five elderly Black women and men chatting and listening to Bill Withers’s “Lovely Day.” The day was precisely that, and its announcement was a promising sign as I walked briskly to the brick side-by-side row house on the corner. I soon learned that the porch of his home at 4951 was one of Paul’s favorite spots. He would sit outside, his large hands sometimes covering the banister as he leaned over to look and speak greetings to passersby. It was 1966, shortly after the death of his life partner Eslanda and eight years after his infamy as an enemy of the state, when he lived here. In this last decade of his life, he was relatively anonymous. If you knew him intimately he was Uncle Paul, but most knew him as the nice man down the street.

The home sustained a lot of changes over the years after he and his sister Marian Robeson Forsythe resided there. Without a steward and in serious disrepair, the building was occupied by squatters for some years before successful petitions made it the Paul Robeson House and Museum, a historic site. After a number of fund-raising efforts, the home renovation was finished in 2015, and this is the form in which I saw it; minty green walls and shiny floors, fresh white trim, china cabinets and display cases procured from antique shows and estate sales. Aside from a framed 4 × 3-foot swatch of the original dining room wallpaper, there isn’t much of anything on the walls; Robeson family friend and current museum director Vernoca Michael is waiting for the appropriate resources to push ahead with new displays. Until then, the cabinets house a small collection of photographs and reproductions of his family and performances, recordings of song and film, and books of and by the famed namesake. It is a

quiet space; no videos or recordings played during my visit, making for an odd encounter with a home that was, I'm told, regularly alive with music. Paul was built of it and continued to sing for himself and small groups of others in the home, while friends Charlotte Turner Bell and Elizabeth Michael would visit to play and sing with and to him. It was difficult to feel him there without this most essential part, even as I heard of him coming down the staircase in the late morning in a full suit or saw photographic evidence of him sitting at the dining table that was no longer where I expected it to be. Yet, like so many before me, I knew that even in the stillness "something great [was] being said, and so [I] listened."<sup>7</sup>

The most striking and intimate display within the home is also quiet but, unlike every other room, it refuses to show his likeness. His bedroom is located at the back of the house on the second floor. Staged with a four-poster bed and simple crocheted white duvet, rocking chair, vanity and mirror, and dresser with a small television, the room is simple but complete, not unlike its occupant, whose brilliance in speech and song was accessible thanks to his calculated choice of delivery and genre. The upholstered armchair that sits in front of a north-facing window is only a minor obstruction to a view of the train—one that may have, in passing moments, reminded him of his many travels or the prevailing injustices that he announced in the singing of "John Henry," arranged by his accompanist Lawrence Brown. Away from the visitors and solicitors who trafficked at the front of the house and with additional west-facing views of a small, unmarked lot now unofficially known as the Paul Robeson Memorial Garden, this room was an oasis for him and is a reminder for viewers of his quiet humility. Like the "quiet pride" that he noted of his father, Paul recognized that "the terms of quiet—surrender, interiority, and especially vulnerability—can be meaningful to collectivity," and so he chose withdrawal from public life in order to care for himself and facilitate the voices of another cohort of fighters, saying in 1974, "It has been most gratifying to me in retirement to observe that the new generation that has come along is vigorously outspoken for peace and liberation."<sup>8</sup> Refusing the public platform that he had powerfully commanded for decades, he withdrew to his sister's care where, though quiet, he was "neither motionless nor without sound."<sup>9</sup> His vibration continued to coalesce in other forms.

Paul is not only documented in the home; he is built into it. In a room adjoining his, one formerly belonging to his adopted niece Pauline, there

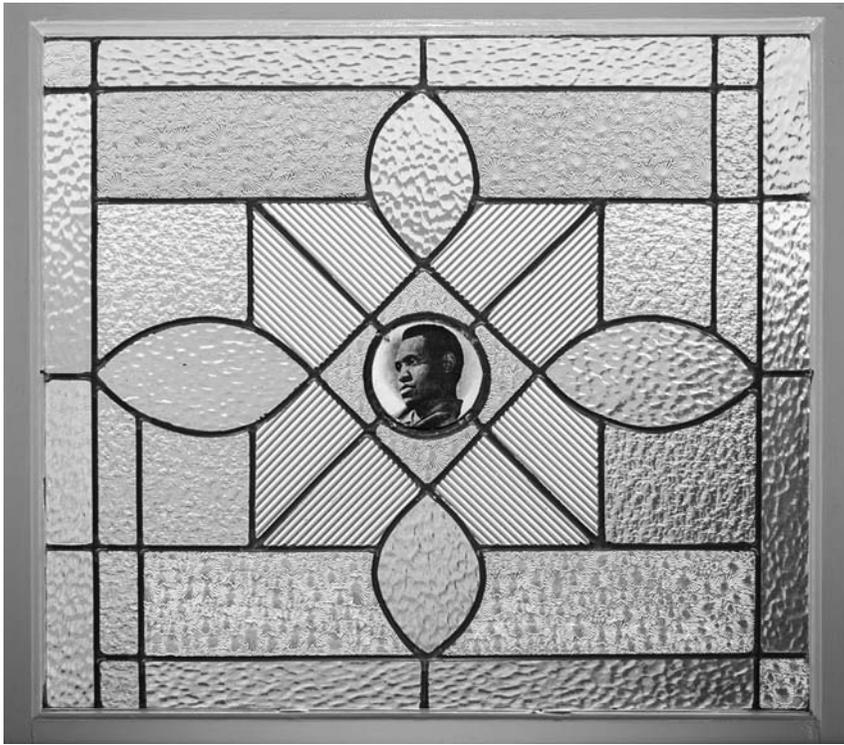


FIG. 4.2 Image of the stained-glass window in the Paul Robeson House and Museum, Philadelphia. Photo: Charles Raboteau. Used with permission of the Paul Robeson House and Museum.

is a modest stained-glass window. It is relatively plain upon sight from the doorway; without color but with distinct and different textures, it is marked by the lead threads that articulate its craftwork. It might go unremarked if not witnessed at close range. In the very center is a green-hued circle that, when approached, reveals the iconic image made popular in the promotional flyers from the 1936 film version of *Show Boat* (fig. 4.2). This image of Robeson as Joe reveals the sound behind the glass as that of his anthem “Ol’ Man River.” His voice is part of the fractured and leaden pieces of the window that reflect both his image and the one gazing upon it. Like the metal scaffolding at the opera house in Sydney, Paul’s voice strengthens the stained glass on Walnut St., much as it did those of the famous St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, which he visited in 1958 to sing in

support of antiapartheid forces. He was the first Black man to sing there. Shirley Graham Du Bois, scholar and wife of Dr. Du Bois, was there for the occasion in which he sang the sorrow songs, including “Climbin’ Jacob’s Ladder,” from the pulpit that no other layperson hitherto had occupied. She recalled “his magnificent voice rising to the vaulted dome, reflected in the stained-glass windows and resting upon the hushed crowd like a benediction.”<sup>10</sup> Though less ornate, the window in his home is as revealing as any in the cathedral and rings with his songs and convictions. The position of the medallion in the window frame is suggestive of his lifelong commitment to the liberation of the global South and efforts on behalf of working and oppressed peoples everywhere: Paul is in three-quarter profile, facing south and casting his eyes away and slightly downward from the camera. He was not in it for fame then, nor is he now. No eye contact with the witness encourages us to look in the direction of his gaze, away from his starlight and toward others. There is no plaque and no memory of its installation—in fact, the House website lists it as one of three mysteries they’d like to solve—but it is in some ways the most telling piece of the home. He is there—transparent and available—watching, listening, and still providing instruction on its interpretation.

His appearance as stained glass is an extension of his enslaved paternal grandmother, who was cast in the same form. The Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, where Paul and Marian’s father, Rev. William Drew Robeson, was pastor, honors her memory through a glowing window that reads “In Loving Remembrance of Sabra Robeson.”<sup>11</sup> Located in the church sanctuary and stretching well above six feet in height, the stained glass scales the southwest wall of the church, which is two blocks north of another Robeson imprint: Paul Robeson Place, a street dedicated after his passing. Awash in tiled colors of purple, red, yellow, green, and blue, the stained glass is adjacent to the altar and stage where the preachers preach and the choir sings, making the window the closest static receptor for the vibrations emitted by both. Tina Campt argues this vibration as an inherent possibility in images, which reveal “the sonic frequencies of the quotidian practices of black communities.”<sup>12</sup> Many denominations of the Black church produced these practices in abundance, though Presbyterianism was not one of them. As historian and Presbyterian minister Randal Jelks notes, “the overriding belief of many Presbyterians was that to be Christian meant being as

Anglo-American as one could. On a grand scale, African Americans denied their African heritage in their worship.” This is not to say, however, that the church was the end of their life’s play: “in the shadowy recesses hidden from the white, northern, Presbyterian churchgoer—[African Americans] enjoyed their cultural creations—sadly, a culture we viewed as common or uncouth.”<sup>13</sup>

The collision of these traditions is suggested by the unique history of the Witherspoon Church, which was founded for colored Presbyterians. Its members publicly denounced slavery, participated in the Underground Railroad, and were responsible for Princeton’s first integrated housing unit in the 1950s. Rev. Robeson was the church’s longest-serving preacher, and it was during his term, 1880–1901, that the window for his mother was installed. His final years at the church were Paul’s first years of life, during which he experienced both his father’s voice—“the greatest speaking voice I have ever heard. It was a deep, sonorous basso, richly melodic and refined, vibrant with the love and compassion which filled him”—and music, which was shared “in this little hemmed-in world where home must be theatre and concert hall and social center.” These were, according to Robeson, the “songs of love and longing, songs of trials 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.”<sup>14</sup> The stained-glass windows that connected the church, the home, and the outside world, those that connected Paul to his grandmother Sabra, are made of and sound like the songs led by Rev. Robeson and sung by Paul; songs that, as he later argued, “must have been sung” by the great Black freedom fighters Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman.

Beyond being a home, he is also a home for others in Philadelphia. Due east of his house and museum is a large mural painted on the side of an apartment complex on the corner of Forty-Fifth and Chestnut Streets. Murals like Paul’s are intended to acknowledge the ways in which discourse and space are always connected and disrupt those that fail to represent life as it really is. As Lina Khatib argued of public imagery in the Middle East, “Through street art, the previously disenfranchised are waging a war of presence.”<sup>15</sup> While the Robeson building mural is more formal than graffiti or impromptu street art, it is nonetheless participating in this war, fighting to hold space for the ideas and performances otherwise

erased from books, walls, and other (surface) areas. Originally created one century and one year from his date of birth by Peter Pagast, the mural was refreshed in 2012 after its brightness began to diminish. “When we saw the mural starting to fade, we knew we had to fix it,” said Jane Golden, executive director of the city’s Mural Arts Program. “Because he meant so much to the world, we knew his image shouldn’t fade. By redoing this mural, by preserving it, it lives on for another 20 years as a beacon of inspiration.”<sup>16</sup>

Cast in two-dimensional form, he stands facing the viewer but slightly favoring his right side (fig. 4.3). His left hand is in the pants pocket of his dark three-piece suit, a pocket watch in his waistcoat, his right elbow tucked at his side with his right hand gesturing away from his body. He is a gentleman and a scholar, flanked on either side by the categories that begin to define his talent and reach: attorney, bibliophile, linguist, humanitarian, singer. At the very bottom of the mural, he is described as “Citizen of the world.” He is all of these things and more; he is “a man so physically and historically massive that the five stories that [the mural] takes up don’t seem like enough.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, he seems squat in the portrait reenvisioned by noted Philly muralist Ernel Martínez—neither his torso nor legs look quite long enough—even as he scales the Satterlee complex, built in 1908. Surrounded by housing that today caters to students at the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University, Paul remains close to and constitutive of the environment that first made him a household name.

Rutgers University, New Brunswick, was Paul’s home for four years. It’s where he played football, basketball, and baseball, and ran track; where he was a speech and debate champion; where he was class valedictorian. Yet those talents and honors could be and were swept aside by the university in service of political convenience. A short think piece in England succinctly identified this phenomenon. Titled “The Man Who Never Was,” the article noted the extent of Robeson’s disappearance, which included his purge from the 1918 All-American Football roster. “Even the Nazis never pretended that the people they liquidated had never existed,” the author notes, but when faced with a four-letter athlete and university valedictorian, the U.S. remained committed to their mission: refusal of the “dangerous idea that a coloured man can be as good as a white man at *everything*.”<sup>18</sup> Yes, everything. And despite having demonstrated most



FIG. 4.3 Paul Robeson mural on the corner of Forty-Fifth and Chestnut Streets, Philadelphia. Restored by Ernel Martínez in 2012. Photo: Steve Weinik. Courtesy of the photographer.

all of his talents while in college, Rutgers played its part in the maintenance of the government's twin fiction of Paul's irrelevance and threat. He was, as one observer recalled, "sandblasted" out of photos and rosters on campus—actively, deliberately removed from concrete, stone, and paper. Yet even as the environment and archive failed to announce him, students continued to call the question: Rutgers, where is your most famous graduate? He was not on the All-American roster, nor did his name grace any public image, monument, or building. According to Rutgers alum Eugene Robinson, students asked, "Paul who?" in astonishing numbers in the last decade of his life, including "at least 75 percent of the black students at Rutgers [who] don't know who Paul Robeson is."<sup>19</sup> In spite of this, a small but growing number of students made his presence a priority. In April 1968, students planned a tribute to Robeson that included a two-and-a-half-hour broadcast on the college station, WRSU, of a program of his songs and concerts compiled by New York City's WBAI. Beyond entertainment, this program became part of an educational program in anticipation of a bigger push on the part of the student body.<sup>20</sup>

Later that same year, students gathered to vote on a referendum seeking to name the new Rutgers student center after Robeson. Grown in large part by Black student demands after the April assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and sponsored by a coalition of student organizations including Students for a Democratic Society, the initial proposal was supported by a petition of 3,500 student signatories. As the November vote date approached, the propaganda machines for both sides took aim. On the day of the election, the Rutgers student newspaper, the *Daily Targum*, argued against the naming and printed a letter claiming that Robeson was "a known Communist," which still held political suasion.<sup>21</sup> The final tally for the day's vote was 963 for to 1,156 against.<sup>22</sup> A second vote called a month later fell farther short, at 478 for to 753 against.<sup>23</sup> Frustrations with limited Black voter turnout and students' failure to motivate their peers toward a rigorous understanding of a man rather than an image led to division and fatigue. By 1969, "the high point of student interest in Robeson had passed," according to Robinson. That spring saw a compromise move when the Paul Robeson Arts and Music Lounge was dedicated.<sup>24</sup> It would be many more years before a substantial effort to document Robeson in New Brunswick would develop.<sup>25</sup> While the main campus struggled to find the fortitude and courage to name his form, another made him a decisive part of their built environment.

Upon entrance from Martin Luther King Boulevard, all was relatively peaceful in the Robeson Campus Center at Rutgers University, Newark. It was summer, after all; students were few in number, and it was late enough in the afternoon that most staff had likely wrapped up their workday. The surprisingly small foyer of the student center was silent but for his Voice. The song playing as I entered was all too familiar, as it is his hallmark, even still. Ringing from the television encased in glass was the star attraction from *Show Boat* that, through multiple ingenious revisions, announced his Voice as a weapon.

*There's an old man called the Mississippi.  
That's the old man I don't like to be.*

Situated among ephemera, including his Phi Beta Kappa affiliation, a replica of his 1945 Spingarn Medal, and photographs of his football and film career, his Voice told far more than the script that surrounded it. Though the brick and mortar announced his name—the first academic building to do so in the United States—his Voice is how we know that he is there and has lingered for some time.

On Paul's birthday in 1972, Rutgers University, Newark, dedicated its student hub, the Paul Robeson Campus Center. Though supported by campus president Edward Bloustein, the center, then located on High Street, was made possible by the work of Black students from the organization Harambe Chama, who used culture to facilitate the wave of Black revolutions happening on college and university campuses.<sup>26</sup> Their “mass communications program” of flyers, student meetings, and newsletters moved their student senate, Newark community organizations, and, ultimately, the board of governors to embrace their plan. In their note of dedication, Harambe Chama argued that “Paul Robeson's exemplary record as a student at Rutgers stands as a monument of achievement for Black studies, and his continuing development and accomplishments in life also stand as monuments of the achievement possible by exercising dedication, discipline and sacrifice.”<sup>27</sup> The repeated term “monument” is more than suggestive of his fitness for building form; it is also an early reckoning with the scale of his intervention and impact. Four years before his death, these students argued that he was due a permanent presence that served as more than memorialization; they held that it was also necessary

to inaugurate him as a model for continued living. This space would be, as the president announced in his closing, a “Campus Center to stand for all time in honor of a man for all time.”<sup>28</sup>

Though led by students, the evening that launched the center included others who, like Robeson, took up the task of public arts intellectualism. “Poet, playwright, politician” Imamu Amiri Baraka joined the chorus of support, leading that evening’s roster of speakers, which included the university’s president and Paul Jr. Baraka was, also like Robeson, a native New Jerseyan, having been born and raised in Newark (“New Ark”). He met with his fair share of public scrutiny over his lifetime due to his radical politics and investment in speaking the realities of Black life in the U.S. and abroad. Baraka was a pioneering blues griot who took seriously the form, critique, and wisdom therein and used it as a method of continuous creation, applying it to conditions both mundane and fantastic. Beyond the night of dedication at Rutgers, Baraka conjured and welcomed Robeson in 2006 at the “Here I Stand” Award Gala, which in that year mobilized Robeson’s memory and achievements in order to honor another Black liberation giant, comedian Dick Gregory, who decades earlier described Robeson as “both prototype and an inspiration.”<sup>29</sup> Announcing Robeson again as an All-American, member of Phi Beta Kappa, and Rutgers valedictorian, Baraka reminded the audience: “That’s why we call him the tallest tree.” Paul was “waging the war of ideas, actually getting into people’s minds,” argued Baraka, an effort facilitated by his spectacular study and exceptional ability to communicate: “Black people recognized Paul Robeson all over the planet because Paul could speak how many languages? Eighteen languages? And Paul actually was an aesthetic kind of analyst,” breaking down the global pentatonic scale—the F-sharp epistemology of chapter 1—as a means of articulating the common sonic origins of our global majority as well as our common oppressions.<sup>30</sup>

To signal these interventions and innovations, Baraka performed a blues poem, composed for Paul’s birthday some years prior, that highlighted not only the giant’s talent and return but also the space that he shared with “the doctor,” W. E. B. Du Bois. The comrades who initially “bonded because of their common interest in advancing Negro art and culture” would, over the course of their forty-year friendship, come to believe that “a militant approach that embraced Socialism and black pride

(or nationalism of the oppressed) was an issue of morality.”<sup>31</sup> The efforts for radical internationalism forged by the professor and the pupil of Murali Balaji’s description led to both men being stripped of their passports in the 1950s and pursuing exile. As a result, they’ve been planted in and among the world’s landscape: Paul as a street in Berlin, for example, and Dr. Du Bois as museum and Memorial Center for Pan-African Culture in Accra, Ghana. In “Revolutionary Legacy, Revolutionary Tradition,” Baraka brings them together again, decades after each has passed, rallying them in an effort to enliven the motionless among us. He begins by singing the bluesman, B. B. King:

*When it all comes down, look for me. I’ll still be around.*

*When it all comes down, look for me. I’ll still be around.*

*When it all comes down, look for me.*

A flurry of facts and tales, known and intuited, sets the stage for the reunion between the “huge, Black, and red” Robeson and the “good doctor” Du Bois—the two men whom the “paper tigers” and “circus crew[s]” feared and hunted.

*From Du Bois and Paul*

*We got the world and all*

*History and Africa*

*The South and struggle*

*Politics and art*

*Militancy and creativity*

*Scholarship and revolution*

*The only solution*

*They were heroes to the world’s people of all nationalities*

*But they were red*

*And they were Black*

*I still live*

*I STILL LIVE, said the doctor*

*Even under the beast’s attack*

*The artist must fight for freedom or slavery Paul chorused*

*At the coal mines*

*The docks*

*The factories*  
*The international conference on peace*  
*And I have made my choice to fight for freedom*

*And that's why these revolutionaries still give us strength every day*  
*That's why the fools and racists can't make them fade away*  
*Two great beings of fire and light*  
*Two great figures who can make day out of night*  
*And the huge constellation called Paul Robeson has returned once again*  
*His century of revolutionary struggle will guide without end*  
*Paul the artist*  
*Paul the actor*  
*Paul the scholar*  
*Paul the fighter*  
*All combined so he was the tallest of men*<sup>32</sup>

Baraka shapes Robeson here as the “constellation” that Evelyn Chisley decades earlier suggested with Paul’s Star. And from there he continued to grow, eclipsing the darkness, rising high above the mobs and agencies in order to be where he was called. “I still live,” he repeats as he takes root on new planes and in new environments: forests and ranges alike.

**“Burst into Song, You Mountains,  
You Forests and All Your Trees”**

Tree marker number 2003-015 is a *Magnolia virginiana*. Set amid engineering and security buildings, it’s the sweet, delicate counterpart to the rigidity of science and one that might, if touched by the wind or rain in the right way, sing. The Paul Robeson Memorial Tree at Rutgers, New Brunswick is a sweetbay magnolia indigenous to the southeastern U.S. and eastern seaboard that can grow to a height of one hundred feet. The vanilla scent emitted from the off-white flowers is one of its trademarks that, historically, masked the otherwise horrid odor of its neighboring poplar trees.

*Pastoral scene of the gallant south*  
*The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth*

*Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh*<sup>33</sup>

The Princeton of Paul's childhood "was for all the world like any small town in the deep South" and the fates of its Black women and men all too precarious.<sup>34</sup> The penetrating violence of which Billie Holiday sang in "Strange Fruit" that disclosed the ways in which the environment was weaponized against Black people was a tangible reality for Robeson and his communities, and so he responded accordingly. In 1951, he, along with William Patterson and the Civil Rights Congress, authored and delivered to the United Nations a historic petition titled "We Charge Genocide," in which they documented the "mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted by the willful creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty, and disease."<sup>35</sup> The ongoing present of lynching and white mob violence was the motivation for the document as well as Paul's tireless lobbying and public requests for a federal anti-lynching bill. The U.S. federal government never saw fit to pass such legislation and so Paul became a magnolia tree to crowd out the poplar and, perhaps, to provide a bit of comfort to those whose knowledge of trees is always paired with knowledge of the rope.

There were other trees too. When educator-activist Mary McLeod Bethune named Paul "the tallest tree in our forest," she revealed the signature metaphor of his life. Suggesting stature and steadfastness as well as physical properties such as strength and height, the tree was Paul's proxy in public discourse among loved ones and admirers. British critic Alexander Woolcott described him as fundamental, foundational, and original: "Paul Robeson strikes me as having been made out of the original stuff of the world. In this sense he is coeval with Adam and the Redwood trees of California. He is a fresh act, a fresh gesture, a fresh effort of creation."<sup>36</sup> Still fresh like the magnolia, Paul ascends even higher to the status of redwood, a tree that, according to biologist David George Haskell, sings. He argues that trees "have *amazing* sounds coming from them" and so one must listen and "touch a stethoscope to the skin of a landscape, to hear what stirs below."<sup>37</sup> The use of trees as a metaphor for Robeson is an apt one considering Haskell's documentation of trees as "nature's great connectors" and their songs as a reflection of those relationships that work in intense harmony with other elements

of their environment. Paul too was and did this as he sang in languages and modes that, at one time, were not his own. He made them his, ours, by virtue of a rigorous linguistic and ethnomusicological practice as well as his commitment to the radical political praxis of antiphony by which he would always respond.

Grown over millennia, redwoods are received as timeless giants within their environment. Witnesses primarily encounter them as already formed, without the advantage of having seen or heard growth or progression over time. Paul gives us unique insight into that process—we can see and hear him evolve and change, physically and politically. Philly resident Thomas Deloach described the first of these in narration of their only encounter:

He smiled and he stood up, and as he stood up, he kept growin' and growin' and growin', you know—and I said, “Whoa”—and he extended his hand out, shook my hand. He got a real big hand, you know.

He was so large. To me. I mean, sitting on the sofa in the living room, he didn't seem that big, but when he stood up, he was like a tree growing, you know what I mean? He just kept gettin' taller, and once he reached his limit, he was still stooped over. It was really something to see, yeah. I'll never forget it.<sup>38</sup>

He was and is formidable, generating awe from onlookers and audiences and dread from those who saw his growth as their undoing and demise. Willie J. Magruder Jr. told of him being “too tall” for some. The structural repetition of the poem mirrors the insistent insecurity and panicked rhetoric of the state while highlighting the fact that his song remained its counternarrative—he is unmoved, undeterred, unconvinced by the stories that sought to separate him from his communities and those who continue to sing with him.

*Too tall, Paul; too tall, that's all  
Standing against the best of them,  
You made them feel too small.*

*You showed your strength  
You sang the Song  
You lived your principles  
You stood your ground*

*Too tall, Paul; too tall, that's all  
Standing against the best of them,  
You made them feel too small.*<sup>39</sup>

In the Americas, the modern redwood species grow only along the Pacific Coast.<sup>40</sup> Paul, of course, defied the boundaries and borders erected by states and nations, seeing each first as part of a radical whole rather than singular and sovereign. He was present continuously, in sound and body, and able to find fertile soil in locations that were otherwise inhospitable or remote. Indeed, Du Bois argued that in the 1950s and '60s Robeson was “the best-known American on earth, to the largest number of human beings. His voice [was] known in Europe, Asia and Africa, in the West Indies and South America and in the islands of the seas. . . . Only in his native land [was] he without honor and rights.”<sup>41</sup> Because he has already taken root elsewhere as a tree, it is possible to imagine him similarly throughout the diaspora of his influence; for example, in South America as a ceibo, an Amazonian giant that achieves its height not with age but through sheer determination: “Young ceibo lance upward by two meters every year, sacrificing wood strength and chemical defenses for speed of growth. The ceibo’s crown, its uppermost branches, form a wide dome that rises ten meters higher than the surrounding trees, themselves forty meters high, the equivalent of about ten stories in a human building.”<sup>42</sup> The selflessness of the tree in favor of sheltering and protecting others is characteristic of Paul, who as a young man committed to a life of service and sacrifice and whose career, income, and health were at various times forfeited for those vulnerable around him.

Paul, to all the old gang of us who hung around him, was a reservoir, the sum of the black man’s capacities, a great national, black phenomenon that all of us flocked to behold. A hero to all, gigantic and available. And as with all heroes the gift was one way. His vast bulk, warm and reassuring like a mother’s breast, was more than adequate to all our infinite needs and hungers: Paul gave and gave; we took, and took, and took. All of us: Black folks, white folks, communists, liberals, artists, politicians, race leaders, labor leaders—we raided him. To us he was an inexhaustible bounty from heaven, and we went to him as beggars go, never bothering to put anything back—only to take, and take again, and never say thanks, fighting the world and each other

for our inalienable right to consume Paul Robeson, and consume him we did.<sup>43</sup>

These insights from his mentee, actor and activist Ossie Davis, are angry with regret and frustration but nonetheless adoringly reveal the intensity of Paul's love and generosity, whether it was returned or not. There is a beauty here that the tree foretells; as the great networkers, they show us how "to hear what is coherent, what is broken, what is beautiful, what is good." With that better understanding of our world, "we unself into birds, trees, parasitic worms, and sooner or later, soil; beyond species and individuals, we open to the community from which we are made."<sup>44</sup>

Paul's selflessness is related to this intermaterial, interspecies connection that Haskell notes of trees. The ceibo works in intimate connection with its surrounding environment and community, and from this, various sonic practices arise. From its heights comes its natural sound, with rain and other elements coalescing to reveal that "botanical diversity is sonified." For the ceibo, the sounds are produced in large part by those that it shelters—the understory plants that "root themselves under the spreading branches and amid the duffy soil around the trunk." The various shapes, sizes, and thickness of the leaves that precede it develop the contour of the rain that then drops to develop the "clack and tick of thousands of spring wound clocks, each releasing its tension with a *tschak* unique to the woody muddle of the decomposing surface."<sup>45</sup> The base of the tree is also its bass, which acts as a location device for the indigenous Waorani people of western Ecuador who, when "lost . . . find a ceibo tree and turn it into a subwoofer. . . . Pounding on the buttress roots of the tree vibrates the whole trunk, a botanical basso profundo call to friends and family, a cry to reknit the bonds that keep you alive. The tree's great height lets it bellow in a way that shouting could never achieve. Hearing the pulsing air, your people will come."<sup>46</sup> Here is the Paul that Davis described, the "basso profundo" vibrating at request in order to gather "your people," our people to the scene, the issue, the cause. The Waorani speak of ceibo trees as people—animate and alive. Indeed, "compared to humans the difference between life and death seems a lot less clear to me for a tree," Haskell notes.<sup>47</sup> Paul extends his life in this form and as appearances as many things.

As "masters of integration," trees are active in their knowledge of the world, "connecting and unselfing their cells into the soil, the sky, and

thousands of other species.”<sup>48</sup> Cohabitation means that they are not always the giants that they appear to be from the forest floor. Sometimes they are not the top of the skyline but its filler, holding together the soil at the base of eruptions that extend not hundreds but thousands of feet into the air. This is the case in the Tien Shan mountains.<sup>49</sup> Primarily forming the border between China and current-day Kyrgyzstan, the so-called celestial mountains produce deserts, permafrost areas of limited life, and dense, rich forests. Stretching approximately 1,500 miles and reaching an elevation of 24,406 feet, they are populated by numerous displaced and immigrant communities who fled war, political persecution, and economic collapse. With resources including natural gas, petroleum, and coal, the area’s economy is steady and has encouraged contiguous production in textiles and food processing, which bring many to the area in search of better futures.<sup>50</sup> With so many immigrants and workers present, it’s no wonder that Paul Robeson would be among them as well. He was installed there in 1948 by a troop of military mountaineers seeking to announce their support for the world figure who was quickly losing ground in a public relations battle with those in the U.S. government intent on marking him as deviant and outside of civil society. These climbers carried with them yet another sculpture of the many-times-reproduced Robeson—a bust—created by Russian artist Olga Manuylova, which they placed at the 13,517-foot summit of the Alator range, now known as Mount Paul Robeson.

Three years before Paul’s death, a delegation of Afro-Americans visited this site. Awed by him and wanting to build a relationship with local communities, the group made the pilgrimage through Frunze (now the Kyrgyzstan capital of Bishkek) and fifteen miles beyond it into the foothills of the Tien Shan, where they began to climb. Accompanied by the octogenarian Manuylova and other local dignitaries, the delegation included Robeson friend George B. Murphy Jr., secretary of the Kirghis Friendship Society Mary Ellen Bell, and artist/professor Bertrand Phillips, whose painted portrait of Robeson was presented to the society. Standing at the summit of the mountain and inspired by his greatness, attendee Madeline Murphy described the experience with graceful detail. “Surrounded by the untouched terrain, the rock cliffs and surging mountain streams, exhilarated by the astringent intoxicating freshness of the clean, clear air, we were warmed not only by the brightness of the sun, but by the love that

surrounded us for this ‘Giant of Our Age.’”<sup>51</sup> That this giant also became a mountain is an appropriate transition for a man who remains sought after. A formidable thinker, talent, and fighter, he too was formed through collision—not of tectonic plates but rather the quotidian forms of impact faced by Black people in a racist world, by workers in a capitalist order, by radical humanitarians contending with the myth of individualism. Instead of running from confrontation, he accepted it as his lot and grew steadfast: “I saw no reason why my convictions should change with the weather,” he argued; “I was not raised that way, and neither the promise of gain nor the threat of loss has ever moved me from my firm convictions.”<sup>52</sup> He was the giant, the mountain, who stood resolute among humankind and environments assessing, working, singing.

For more than fifty years, the Western world has popularly believed—or has welcomed and embraced the fantasy—that “the hills are alive with the sound of music.”<sup>53</sup> In fact, musical soundings are indelibly tied to that landscape that howls and swells with wind or trickles, babbles, and rushes with water. Paul, of course, is a known water cantor in possession of what J. Martin Daughtry elsewhere names an “atmospheric voice,” which transgresses borders with impact across micro- and macroenvironments.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, he sang to life not only the Mississippi in “Ol’ Man River” but also “The Four Rivers,” in which it joined the rivers Yangtze (China), Thames (England), and Don (Russia). This fluid beauty and lyricism exists alongside the mountain’s extremities in temperature and topography, producing a place where forces—natural and (geo)political—collide. (Mt.) Paul Robeson was the terrain of contestation and projection on many different scales, each working to tear him down or to build him up. In either case, music was there.

A few short months after his passing, Columbia University hosted a memorial program in his honor at McMillan Academic Theater. Founded in 1924, the theater had in the 1940s and ’50s hosted composers Charles Ives and Aaron Copland as well as dancer-choreographer Martha Graham. On that May evening in 1976, soprano Beatrice Rippy compressed time/space through a performance of songs from the program of Robeson’s original 1925 Greenwich Village concert, where he revolutionized art music through a program of Negro spirituals. Joining her voice on the night’s program was his in recorded form; his ample voice filled that space as only he could with rich, concentrated vibration that grew in

its largess in anticipation of his next shapeshifting appearance in poetry. Noted Harlem poet Antar Sudan Katara Mberi graced the stage to perform his dedication to the giant. Titled “Suite of the Singing Mountain (Paul Robeson),” Mberi’s extended lyrical poem was described as “A Blues/Jazz Cantata.” Composed of ten movements, each announces a series of forms by which we may know him, from lodestar to river to volcano. The natural world is the setting for Robeson’s appearance as each of these irruptions/eruptions and wonders, allowing for him to be positioned above and beyond the failures and complications of humanity even as he is deeply responsive to them. This in defense against and in spite of persecution by “the anti-communists[,] lynch law-makers, Klansmen, the dream-breakers, Birchites, last penny-takers, McCarthyites, Nixonites, Neo-Hitlerites, and Black backstabbers: (who sold their spineless souls for three pitiful dimes).”<sup>55</sup> Add to this list those of the Black middle class who cowered behind Langston Hughes’s “racial mountain,” which exposed an “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”<sup>56</sup> In addition to beating back this mountain with his “Water Boy,” Paul ascended toward an alternative mount: a natural and pure form, neither made nor controlled by mortals.

Like Baraka, Mberi approaches Paul’s legacy and livingness through the blues, a form tied to the working poor and working class for whom Paul labored and whose origins and deepest ambitions he shared. The blues are a low-down music. Historically tied to the geographies of the U.S. South, the deltas, and the valleys, their lore exceeds them as the vapor or mist through which we imagine the iconic bluesman (always a man) emerging. The crossroads, the rivers, the plots where sharecroppers harvest and haul from “can’t see in the morning until can’t see at night” as well as the juke joints, pool halls, and hybrid storefront churches all compose the topography of the blues; those natural and artificial elements that mark its location on an ever-changing sonic map of displacements and migrations. Even after moving North (via railroads and Paul’s Star) and its subsequent electrification, the blues is still known as the music of the darker (hued), submerged spaces. These are the communities possessed of other sensibilities and visions of “social, economic, and cultural affirmation and justice” that became “the mother of several global lan-

guages and philosophical systems commonly known as the blues, jazz, rock and roll, and soul.” Geographer and listener Clyde Woods argued that these performers and communities developed a “blues epistemology,” a way of historicizing ongoing white supremacist plantation blocs and theorizing the realities of and escape from life in enclosure. In telling these stories, the mechanism of reveal became its own methodology by which a uniquely Black working-class “ethic of survival, subsistence, resistance, and affirmation” formed and laid the foundation on which new ideas, performances, people, communities, and landscapes were built.<sup>57</sup>

What can an arid, isolated mountain peak contribute to a blues geography? Experience and experimentalism, at least. Paul took his (albeit brief) turn as a bluesman. His 1934 European recording of “Father of the Blues” W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” displays his voice atop the galloping orchestration that defined the song’s early urban sound. His voice is what you’d expect to hear from a technical wizard: it is beautiful and exact. He knows his music well, singing in perfect sync with the gaps in the composition made for his singular voice. Yet he is somewhat out of place. He perhaps follows too closely his script, is perhaps too attentive to the form in which he was training. He knows the musical stage, he knows the spirituals, but they are not and never should be the blues. By the last minute of the three-and-a-half-minute tune, however, he comes back to us—not as the professional on the Broadway stage but as the mischievous confidante by our side. “Gypsy done told me / said, ‘Don’t you wear no black.’”<sup>58</sup> It’s in the echo of this line—in the repetitive AA of the AAB form that he’ll sing again ‘cause you ain’t heard him the first time—that he shows us how close we are. Instead of holding the vocal cavity open to round the “a” in “black” in order to simulate a slight “ah” as he would be trained to do, he flattens it, brightening it to the cusp of nasal where he pulls back on his volume, softening the vowel’s edges and easing the listener into the return of his lower register. He begins to swing for his friend Handy, his audiences, his community. Here he is, projecting a new blues topography: mountain.

This is what Mberi had already heard from Paul and what facilitates his continued evolution to summit. As Mberi announced to Paul Jr. in 1976, his cantata was a “vow to live like your father, to climb the mountain that he was, is.”<sup>59</sup> Robeson’s willingness to step outside of what he had already mastered was improvisation—his jazz—being and becoming.

ing something else, and the evidence of his belief: “I have no end to my artistic horizon.”<sup>60</sup>

*Like a lodestar you rise your head, your hands  
above the horizon, forever shining,  
forever mining the coral ores and the searose of song,  
forever casting your net of mortal light,  
into the dark face of eternity,  
your song drops its fish, even in death  
you bristle brightly in our heaven.*<sup>61</sup>

Mberi’s cues direct the listener’s gaze away from the speaker, away from the stage and out into the greater beyond—the spaces in which we remember and re-call Paul for the purposes of surviving this day, this night. The landscape of Paul’s design—from the sky to fish—is the result of steadfast refusal, which, in its repetition, is an approach to living.

When his name and body were erased, Paul became something else, something permanent. Mberi’s cantata exposes these shifts and transformations, events and proximities in his attempt to correct historical error and keep pace with the continued movements of a man that the world claimed was gone. “As If You Had Never Loved” revisits this voice as the technique by which these lies are exposed.

*they made it seem as if  
you had never lived,  
had never loved  
with your majesty  
clefing the clouds.*

*But your voice,  
like the sun’s  
lion dignity,  
smashes a rugged fist  
upon their chains  
upon their walls  
till they shudder,  
crack,  
and begin to crumble.*

*O Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,  
and the walls,  
them walls, them walls  
came agrumblin, tumblin down.<sup>62</sup>*

The closing lines pay tribute to his form in song, namely the spirituals that found their way to rallies and conferences well before “We Shall Overcome” paced a new wave of insurgency. The songs that he made iconic forever tied him to the individuals therein, from Joshua to John Henry to Joe Hill and he, like they, lived on:

*In the name of Joe Hill  
and in your bronze-hearted name, Robeson,  
and we count you both forever among the living<sup>63</sup>*

The final piece of Mberi’s cantata returned him to his grandest form. Unfolding over three pages dense with juxtaposition and movement, through rivers, world wonders, and celestial creatures, he is placed again at the scale at which he belongs.

*Sun and mountain, ray and stone:  
your name forever dances  
on the Pyramids pinnacles  
with the precision of mountain goats,*

*Erect as the sun at high noon,  
you rise like a mountain,  
through the smog crouched in executive quarters.*

*You can never fall,  
from the seasons grace,  
not one thousandth part of an inch,  
you can never fall  
from us.*

*Your name is the guttural chant  
of the chanter chanting in the dawn,  
the guttural hymn spun out  
in the autumn’s threadlike whispering.*

*Your name is Mount Robeson,  
the spring's nuptial rain,  
the rivers vast blood:  
the Mississippi and the Don,  
the Missouri and the river Niger,  
the Shenandoah and the Volga,  
the Hudson and the Yantze [sic],  
the Ohio and the Thames,*

*You are the Blue and White Nile,  
the Red and Black Seas, the Hocking  
and the Zambesi,  
flowing in song and strength  
like the Gulf of Mejico [sic],  
through the rugged proletarian veins  
of the earth.*

*. . . Go on Mount Robeson, go on  
Killimanjaro [sic], go on  
Rockies, Andes, Alps, go on  
Urals, go on  
singing Deep River  
I want to cross over  
into camp ground.*

*for we've saved the highest place for you,  
we've saved the lunar bird's solar lineage,  
the planets turning eternally  
beneath the universe's plow*

*for you*

*we've saved the molten metal,  
the carnation and the ruby's red eye,  
the emerald syllables of spring  
that nature tutors the planet with*

*for you*

*we've saved the highest place  
for you, for you*

*to go stepping like the rising sun  
across mesa, mountain and plain, city and cave,  
for you to go climbing the ancient stairs  
of blood and stars.*<sup>64</sup>

His peers—Kilimanjaro, the Andes, Urals, Rockies—are his forever cohort. As they live and sing mineral tones accumulated over years, decades, centuries, so does he, catching wind and revisiting the pitches shared between the peak and the giant, the land and the body.<sup>65</sup>

## A Continuation ... Frequency

We will to bring back the person, alive and sacrosanct; we mean  
to rescue the person from the amorality of time and science.

— JUNE JORDAN

And the ancients before them knew the science of name  
Call on the ancestor and the spirit also came  
So we call on the doctor  
“Dr. Du Bois, come back! Come on back.”

We call on mighty Robeson  
“Hey Paul! Hey Paul Robeson!”

— AMIRI BARAKA

Now he belongs to the future.

— LLOYD BROWN

My instructor says that playing the theremin is like “singing with your hands.” As a once and sometime singer, I like the metaphor quite a lot even if its application is far from straightforward. I am only two lessons in and can’t help but be frustrated by my awkwardness. I haven’t attempted a new instrument in almost twenty years, and progress is excruciatingly

slow; my last assignment was to practice major seconds and fifths. While I don't find myself yet singing, I can see that possibility in the movements of the instrument's virtuoso, Clara Rockmore, whose technique was described in her heyday in precisely those terms: "By moving her hands and fingers in the air, she achieved tonal agility comparable to that of [a] singer, and a living tone quality."<sup>1</sup> A petite woman, she brought the furniture of the early theremin to life—to living—in graceful strokes of her left and right hands and used its frequencies to sing with a differently tuned, but no less complementary, living instrument named Paul Robeson.

Paul and Rockmore toured North America together on three different occasions between 1940 and 1943. He would perform his spirituals and folk songs, while she was his "unique adjunct," playing Western classical pieces. Carnegie Hall was their first venue in October 1940. The two structured their performances the same way with each engagement: Paul would perform the first and third sections with Rockmore in between. After intermission, she would begin and he would conclude the concert.<sup>2</sup> His sets included spirituals like "Deep River," European and Russian folk songs, the recent sensation "Ballad for Americans," and the ever-popular "Ol' Man River." It was on this tour that the last of these drew significant public attention for its lyric changes, which included his refusal of the ol' man caricature ("That's the old man I *don't* like to be") as well as antiwar lyrics. Rockmore played Brahms, Bach, and Ravel.<sup>3</sup> Paul was lauded for his voice—"his greatest single asset"—by a standing room-only crowd that "went wildest over the Negro spirituals." Rockmore was described as contributing "some skilled solos on the theremin until her machine broke down."<sup>4</sup> In this instance, there was no disjuncture for Paul between man and machine. Perhaps it was his long relationship to organized labor or simply his promiscuous musical ear that allowed him to hear himself with a pitch-emitting device that some saw as eerie contrivance while others heard it as instrument.

The theremin's transition from the former to the latter was swift. Originally designed for the Bolsheviks by Russian scientist and inventor Lev (later Leon) Theremin in 1920, the "radio watchman" was a motion sensor that announced the approach of objects within the machine's electromagnetic field. With a request to next measure gases under various levels of pressure and temperature, Theremin tuned the apparatus to better gauge fluctuation.

This arrangement—employed in his radio watchman, and in radio transmitters in general—filtered out harmonics generated by the oscillator to capture a single frequency, which in this case he made audible through a pair of earphones. Lev added a condenser dial similar to those used by radios to tune in a given frequency. When he “tuned in” the density of a particular gas, the constant pitch of the oscillator’s tone whistled in the earphones. The slightest drift in the properties of the gas altered the capacity of the circuit and changed the pitch of the whistling note.<sup>5</sup>

After playing with the movement of his hands near the circuitry, Theremin recognized how the electromagnetic field “could detect extremely small capacitances in the human hand (less than one-trillionth of a farad),” producing notes and subtle vibrato. “This was electricity singing to him,” according to his biographer Albert Glinsky.<sup>6</sup> He no longer had a simple machine; it was now an instrument as the radio watchman became the etherphone.

And then the *termenvox* and, eventually, the theremin. Over the course of the 1920s and ’30s, Theremin toured the instrument throughout Europe and the U.S., trained students (including Rockmore), and invented more machines—musical and otherwise.<sup>7</sup> But it is the instrument that began as surveillance that endures. It remains a marvel how one plays an instrument without touch. Yet this element is, perhaps, precisely what drew Robeson into its orbit, allowing him to “invent electronica” in the process.<sup>8</sup> Skill and precision mark its successful performance. Like the hologram, the theremin works in large part through stillness, as the slightest movement can throw the pitch or detune the instrument. Without the grounding of a bow or mallet or mouthpiece, the musician must “master the air” with knowledge of all that it contains—the obstacles, the movements, the weather.<sup>9</sup> With a career increasingly built via proximity without presence and with maturing knowledges of its perils, Robeson is the theremin method personified.

Frequency is the science that both instruments share. Paul’s is the repetition of meticulous vibration as soundwaves—his Voice, the eternal. Dozens of records bear his name, with 78 RPM singles abundant; he recorded “Mah Curly Headed Baby” sixteen times, “Ol’ Man River” twenty.<sup>10</sup> He returned for encore after encore—five after a performance of *The Emperor Jones* in 1924, twenty after a 1930 performance of *Othello*

in London, thirteen after a Carnegie Hall concert in 1943—hundreds if not thousands over his lifetime. Frequency is also his return as presence. Chilean poet and political icon Pablo Neruda theorized his arrival in “Ode to Paul Robeson,” which tells an origin story of Robeson as Element as well as shaping him as Frequency. His Voice opened the sky yet “darkness struggled to hold on,” prompting Neruda to repeat the word “again” in order to signal Robeson’s undeterred and indomitable vocal presence.

*Again  
the cities grieved  
and silence was great,  
hard  
as a tombstone  
upon a living heart,  
as a dead hand  
on a child’s voice.*

*Then  
Paul Robeson,  
you sang.*

*Again  
over the earth was heard  
the potent voice  
of the water  
over the fire;  
the solemn, unhurried, raw, pure  
voice of the earth  
reminding us that we were still men,  
that we shared the sorrow and the hope.  
Your voice  
set us apart from the crime.  
Once more the light  
parted  
from the darkness.*

*Then  
silence fell on Hiroshima.  
Total silence.*

*Nothing  
was left:  
not one mistaken bird  
to sing on an empty window,  
not one mother with a wailing child,  
not a single echo of a factory,  
not a cry from a dying violin.  
Nothing.  
The silence of death fell from the sky.*

*And again,  
father,  
brother,  
voice of man  
in his resurrection,  
in hope  
resounding  
from the depths,  
Paul,  
you sang.*

*Again,  
your river of a heart  
was deeper,  
was wider  
than the silence.<sup>11</sup>*

The regularity of Robeson's intervention was a sort of clockwork that made possible and organized movement time. His frequency was the evidence of connection, of will that traces the wavelength of his pitch in creation of pyramids and holograms. In moments of doubt and fear, he showed us that he was there and proved that we would be whole; that we would someday win. This he did believe (fig. C.1).

His time changed the calendar. Rutgers University, New Brunswick, annually hosts I Am Robeson Week. In 2004, California representative Barbara Lee exclaimed in front of her Alameda County constituents, "Paul Robeson lives and his day is here," while Los Angeles; Washington, DC; Cardiff, Wales; Philadelphia; Seattle; Newark and Princeton, New Jersey; Delhi under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi; Edinburgh; Houston; To-



FIG. C.1 (Left to right) Paul Robeson, Eslanda Goode Robeson, and unidentified woman singing “We Shall Overcome” at Paul’s Welcome Home Birthday Salute in New York City, sponsored by *Freedomways* magazine (April 1965). From the photo collection held at the Tamiment Library, New York University, by permission of the Communist Party USA.

ronto; New York City; and Jamaica have also hosted days in his honor.<sup>12</sup> In 1976, the World Peace Council to the United Nations declared April 9 International Paul Robeson Day, an event honored throughout the world.<sup>13</sup> He continues to mark the seasons, not as an athlete but through his form as seed, specifically a Russian heirloom tomato, which has “developed almost a cult following among seed savers” (fig. C.2).<sup>14</sup> Paul, perennial.

Both below and above ground, he ventures into spaces where no one would ever expect to find him. Nelson Mandela told of playing his record at Robben Island so frequently that the album warped.<sup>15</sup> He would come to those forbidden and forgotten spaces often; as his good friend, Communist Ben Davis, wrote to Paul from his jail cell, “There are legendary stories of you in every prison in America. The Negro prisoners, in their own way, speak your name in hallowed tones.”<sup>16</sup> Bil Brown-El was

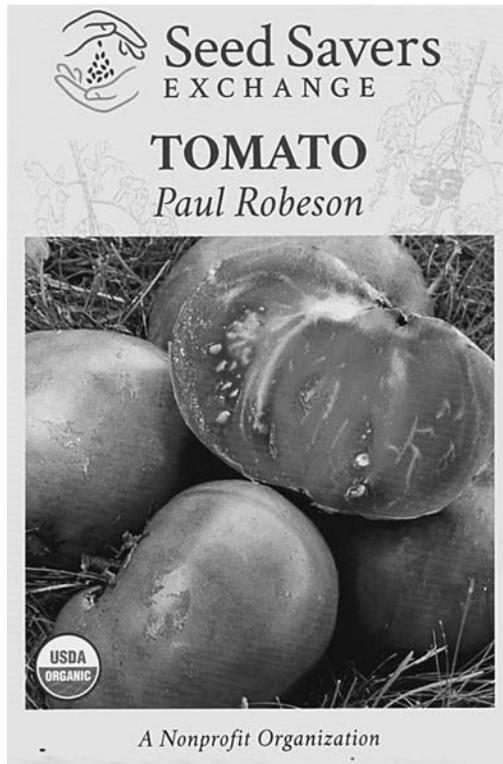


FIG. C.2 Seed Savers Exchange, “Paul Robeson” tomato seeds. Photo: author. Courtesy of Seed Savers Exchange.

among them. “I have begun to undertake the task of trying to establish a Paul Robeson month here at Marion Federal Penitentiary,” he wrote. An incarcerated person in the medium-security prison in rural Illinois and self-described “Robeson-ist,” Brown-El addressed his June 1977 letter to Tony Gittens, director of the Electric Playhouse at the University of the District of Columbia. Brown-El was aware of the film festivals held by Gittens in his hometown of Washington, DC, and hoped that, with the proper explanation of his conditions, his humble request would be met favorably. “From the very outset I would like to say that this have never been accomplished before here at the institution. There are very limited programs dealing with our people here at Marion, as well as very few films dealing with our people, black people, very few—education[a]l or other. It would be [a] joy to see this project; a Paul Robeson month get off

to a good start.” Beyond the prison’s clear deficiency of cultural and curatorial opportunities, Brown-El argues that the answer to the question of why they should pursue this course is “very simple”: “Paul Robeson is one of America’s greatest men.” The present verb tense here, alongside his earlier frustration with those who “are ignorant to just who Paul Robeson is/was,” highlights that Paul had not left the world nor these precarious men, even a year and a half after his death.<sup>17</sup>

He is called as instruction and example. In September 1977, the Young Workers Liberation League of New York released *To Live Like Paul Robeson*. Included in the pamphlet was an introduction by longtime Robeson comrade and the co-organizer of the 1951 *We Charge Genocide* petition, William L. Patterson, commemorative essays and notes, and the “Paul Robeson Pledge.” Read aloud at the Youth Salute to Paul Robeson in April of that year and adopted by all in attendance, the pledge pays tribute to the “People’s Champion” through the speaker’s dedication to five commitments:

to do all that is within our power to struggle for a world of peace,  
and an end to all forms of exploitation of mankind,  
an end to racism and male supremacy,  
an end to all discrimination,  
for all our democratic and human rights, in a united struggle of all  
working and oppressed peoples.

These commitments they pledged to hold for at least one year.<sup>18</sup> This recurrent event, which in 1978 was staged at Madison Square Garden and starred folk singer Odetta, reminded all not only who he was but who they were called to be in his absence (fig. C.3).

He inspires unending song. Twenty-two of us gathered on a rainy Tuesday night at the All Health Centre in Birmingham. Formed in 1940 and self-described as the oldest continuous “Lefty” choir in England, the Birmingham Clarion Singers pride themselves on carrying the tradition of their second president, Paul Robeson. Serving almost exclusively in absentia, he became honorary president of the choir in 1959 after a chance encounter with members in his dressing room during his last run of *Othello* at Stratford-upon-Avon. His term ended when he passed in 1976, but the choir continues to honor him as a foundational figure of their practice,



FIG. C.3 Singer Odetta (center) and musicians during the Youth Salute to Paul Robeson, December 1978. From the photo collection held at the Tamiment Library, New York University, by permission of the Communist Party USA.

even singing an amended version of his 1939 “Ballad for Americans” in concert in 2016. On the night of my visit the following year, we prepared for their upcoming concert by rehearsing a selection of SATB compositions drawn from the movements and cultures that he championed, including “Song of Peace (Finlandia)” by Jean Sibelius (arr. Gary Fry) and “Funeral March,” dated to the Bolsheviks of 1905:

*Yet we will not mourn them as lost to the fight,  
Nor death shall defeat them whom none shall defeat.  
Our dead shall live on in the fight we maintain,  
Their impulse still drive us, their tradition still sustain.*

Our performance that night allowed us to “take the dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names,” as José Muñoz wrote.<sup>19</sup> Paul is here, continuous and sustaining, singing with and being sung to by a new generation of people who have not forgotten his name, his beliefs, or his method.

We made him all of these things and more, based on a deep and abiding sense of absence and loss—for him and for all those gone—and for the futures that may never be because they are no longer with us. We bring them back in order to make those better days imaginable, to make them possible. We rescue them, as June Jordan told, refusing death even as we respect it, choosing instead to understand it not as finality but as yet another state of being, an amended continuation, a porous boundary of ellipses over which some may leap or dance and across which others triumphantly sing. At our best, we honor him. Sometimes we’re selfish and take liberties with our reconstruction; we project where we could simply document. “Is it possible,” Ossie Davis asked in 1971, “that we defined Paul not so much out of knowledge but out of need?”<sup>20</sup> I believe that it is, and it’s the continual need that makes his reply and its duration that much more spectacular.

Shelter, transit, wonder; he continued to sing. The Voice that inspired and fortified these forms, the Voice compelled from the shadows of slavery, remains as a permanent marker and constant reminder of the stakes and scales of struggle and the resilience that makes it not only possible but inevitable. He had already invented the possibility of his political assemblage through his performances of “Joe Hill.” An Industrial Workers of the World radical and composer, Hill was wherever the workers and fighters gathered, making him as “alive as you and me.” The dreams of justice and freedom that spirited Hill back to us after his execution in 1915 were extended in symphonic form to Paul as well. In his “Ode to Paul Robeson,” which uses Neruda’s text for its narration, composer Earl Robinson reworked “Joe Hill” in order to place Paul within that labor genealogy, allowing us to speak with him again.

*I dreamed I saw Big Paul last night,  
alive as you and me.  
“Big Paul, it’s yesterday you died.”  
“I’m staying on,” says he.  
“I’m never gone,” says he.<sup>21</sup>*

This piece premiered in 1977 under the codirection of Black actress and activist Frances Williams, who founded the Paul Robeson Community Center in Los Angeles and organized there in his name into the early 1990s. She kept him and shared him, allowing many more imagined than known to believe that their calls would be answered.

In the interstices between what's known and what's dreamt of is Black antiphonal life: a method of engagement with and challenge to the brutalities of the "afterlife of slavery," which Saidiya Hartman argues is not "an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of too-long memory" but rather the incontrovertible fact that "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago."<sup>22</sup> Black antiphonal life arrives as a vibrational practice shared openly and freely, across space and time. It's a will to question, to shapeshift, to rescue; to seek out radical intimacy; and, if necessary, to wait. Deterrents and violence are expected, for we know we aren't meant to feel and act together. Some will be taken too soon, but they never truly leave. We sing, think, and live differently because of them, and when summoned, they return. *Dal segno*. And this Paul does.

*Because you sing,  
they know that the sea exists  
and that the sea sings.*

*They know that the sea is free, wide and full of flowers  
as your voice, my brother.*

*The sun is ours. The earth will be ours.  
Tower of the sea, you will go on singing.<sup>23</sup>*

# Notes

## A Preface: Element

- 1 Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (summer 2014): 17.
- 2 Theodore Witcher, dir., *Love Jones* (New Line Cinema, 1997).
- 3 Quoted in Lindsey R. Swindall, *The Politics of Paul Robeson's Othello* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 158.
- 4 Santiago Alvarez, "Music of the Elements," *New Journal of Chemistry* 32, no. 4 (April 2008): 579.
- 5 James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, eds., *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking, 1926), 12–13.
- 6 Quoted in Freedomways, ed., *Paul Robeson: The Great Forerunner* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1978), 224.
- 7 Ossie Davis, "To Paul Robeson, Pt. 1," *Freedomways* 11, no. 1 (1st qtr., 1971), 101.
- 8 Freedomways, *Paul Robeson*, 244, 246, 247.
- 9 Pablo Neruda, "Oda a Paul Robeson," from *Nurevas odas elementales* (Buenos Aires: Pablo Neruda and Fundación Pablo Neruda, 1956); Pablo Neruda, "Ode to Paul Robeson," trans. Jill Booty, in *Paul Robeson: The Great Forerunner*, ed. Freedomways (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1978), 244.
- 10 Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 759.

- 11 Benny Green, "Paul Robeson," Harold Holt Ltd. Souvenir Programme, ca. 1960, emphasis added, Hywel Francis Papers, South Wales Miners' Library, Swansea University.
- 12 Solange Knowles, "Weary," *A Seat at the Table* (Saint/Columbia, BO1LXDJFG1, 2016), track 2. Critiques of charismatic leadership have proven fundamental to the field of Black studies; two formative examples include Cedric Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (1980; reprint, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); and Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). Feminist critiques of great-man histories abound, but I am particularly attuned to the Black feminist intervention of Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) as well as the work of Black women historians, including Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Ula Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
- 13 Davis, "To Paul Robeson, Pt. I," 100.
- 14 Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
- 15 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 4.
- 16 My effort to announce Robeson's almost unbelievable presence and ability is not the only one of recent. In 2019 his granddaughter Susan Robeson published a children's book, which begins, "Daddy always said it takes a man of peace to stop a war. And that's just what my Grandpa Paul did. He stopped a war." Susan Robeson, *Grandpa Stops a War: A Paul Robeson Story* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2019), 5. Her statement sounds fantastic, and may be interpreted as hyperbolic, but her claim is not untrue; the hostilities of which she writes—the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)—paused at the moment of his singing in 1938 as soldiers laid down arms to listen.

### **An Introduction: Vibration**

- 1 This request is theorized by Avery Gordon as part of the work of haunting. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.
- 2 Peter Dreier, "We Are Long Overdue for a Paul Robeson Revival," *Los An-*

- ges *Times Review of Books*, May 8, 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/long-overdue-paul-robeson-revival-talented-person-20th-century/>.
- 3 J. P. Den Hartog, *Mechanical Vibrations* (1934; reprint, New York: Dover, 2013), 1, emphasis added.
  - 4 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 8.
  - 5 Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 25.
  - 6 Joseph Dorinson and William Pencack, eds., *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 192.
  - 7 Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 3.
  - 8 Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, Vol. II* (1944; reprint, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2009), 734.
  - 9 Roland Hayes, *My Favorite Spirituals: 30 Songs for Voice and Piano* (1948; reprint, New York: Dover, 2012), 10.
  - 10 “Paul Robeson and ‘March of the Volunteers,’” CriEnglish.com, April 21, 2008, <http://english.cri.cn/4406/2008/04/18/1441@347656.htm>.
  - 11 Quoted in Jordan Goodman, *Paul Robeson: A Watched Man* (London: Verso, 2013), 6; for more detail on the dedication and role, see chapter 3 of Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
  - 12 Quoted in Frances Peters-Little, Ann Curthoys, and John Docker, eds., *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia* (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2010), 171.
  - 13 The song “Joe Hill,” from which these lyrics derive, was a standard within Robeson’s repertoire. Earl Robinson and Alfred Hayes, “Joe Hill” (1936).
  - 14 Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 2.
  - 15 Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), xxxii.
  - 16 Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 2.
  - 17 Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, “‘No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean,’” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2007), 4.
  - 18 For example, radical Trinidadian intellectual and author C. L. R. James described Robeson in 1970 as “an unusual man.” He said, “I’ve met a lot of people you know, a lot of people in many parts of the world and he remains, in my life, the most distinguished and remarkable of them all.” C. L. R. James, interview with Sterling Stuckey, summer 1970, quoted in Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (1987; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 465n119.
  - 19 Walter White, “Paul Robeson: Right or Wrong,” *Negro Digest* (March 1950):

- 18, 15, 14. In his 1967 volume *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Cruse argued that Robeson “turned out to be neither very independent nor much of a leader, in terms of political astuteness and imagination. This may sound paradoxical to many in view of Robeson’s great personal magnetism. But a close examination of his views shows that he was not at all an original thinker.” Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From Its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 227. (The views of the U.S. State Department are detailed throughout this project.)
- 20 Nikki Giovanni, *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni, 1968–1998* (2003; reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 115. Used by permission of the author.
- 21 Katherine Meizel, “A Powerful Voice: Investigating Vocality and Identity,” *Voice and Speech Review* 7, no. 1 (2011): 267, emphasis in original.
- 22 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 13.

### One. Hologram

- 1 Don Roy King, dir., *Saturday Night Live*, “Dead Bopz,” aired May 7, 2016, on NBC.
- 2 Critics and listeners alike often make note of the generational gap/difference between Black musics/musicians and those of another era by arguing that prior forms and performers were better—more political, creative, or even talented—than those of the present, making for a continued and irresolvable cleavage within Black music’s long genealogy. I offer no solution to this time-worn debate but suggest it here as a contributing factor in the ridiculous ventriloquism of the *Saturday Night Live* “Dead Bopz” sketch. This issue was raised thanks to and in conversation with Anthony Jerry.
- 3 King, *Saturday Night Live*, “Dead Bopz,” emphasis added.
- 4 Elliott Pearson, “Sonic Reducer,” *Weekly Alibi* 24, no. 13 (2015), <http://alibi.com/music/48728/Sonic-Reducer-Micro-reviews-of-Drake-and-Chief-Ke.html>.
- 5 “Final Draft Script,” Carnegie Hall Concert, November 21, 1998, Hywel Francis Papers, box 1, South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea University.
- 6 Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, “Deadness: Technologies of the Inter-mundane,” *TDR* 54, no. 1 (spring 2010): 14.
- 7 Stanyek and Piekut, “Deadness,” 18.
- 8 Philip S. Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918–1974* (New York: Citadel, 1978), 143, 230.
- 9 Beah Richards, excerpt from “Paul Robeson Speaks for Me” (1951), Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, 1907–1988, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC. Used by permission of Sherry Green Fisher, director of the Beah Richards Estate.

- 10 See Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- 11 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 38.
- 12 *New York Evening Post*, January 26, 1926, Lawrence Brown Papers, reel 8, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
- 13 For a thorough reading of this practice, see Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 14 Arnold H. Lubasch, *Robeson: An American Ballad* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2012), 32.
- 15 Lubasch, *Robeson*, 34, emphasis added.
- 16 Fritz Winckel, *Music, Sound and Sensation: A Modern Exposition*, trans. Thomas Binkley (New York: Dover, 1967), 4–5.
- 17 Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon, 1993), 42.
- 18 Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 9, 24.
- 19 Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 43.
- 20 Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland: World, 1956), 12.
- 21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, ed., *Asia-Africa Speak from Bandung* (Djakarta, 1955), 168, [http://franke.uchicago.edu/Final\\_Communique\\_Bandung\\_1955.pdf](http://franke.uchicago.edu/Final_Communique_Bandung_1955.pdf).
- 22 Paul Robeson, untitled speech to Bandung Conference (1955), p. 2, Paul Robeson Papers, reel 7, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, emphasis in original.
- 23 See Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
- 24 Tony Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex: Race, Madness, Activism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 2.
- 25 Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 7, 13.
- 26 Mark D. Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 14.
- 27 Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 11.
- 28 Leppert, *The Sight of Sound*, xxvi.
- 29 Pamela L. Caughie, "Audible Identities: Passing and Sound Technologies," *Humanities Research* 16, no. 1 (2010): 94; Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 20.
- 30 Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2008), xv.
- 31 Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 177.
- 32 Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex*, 55.
- 33 It is worth noting that the type of objecthood brilliantly argued for by perfor-

mance scholar Uri McMillan is, again, a different enterprise than that pursued by Robeson, who did not adopt a persona and was vigilant in detailing the consistent character of his ideas and beliefs. See Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

- 34 In his canonical text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Martinican intellectual Fanon discusses his objectification as a Black colonial body, saying, “The Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye. I lose my temper. . . . Nothing doing. I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me.” Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952; reprint, New York: Grove, 2008), 89.
- 35 Far East Reporter, *Bandung: Texts of Selected Speeches and Final Communique of the Asian-African Conference* (New York: Far East Reporter, 1955), 7.
- 36 Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 21.
- 37 Paul Robeson, “Greetings to Bandung” (1955), *ChickenBones*, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.nathanielturner.com/paulrobesonandbandung.htm>.
- 38 Sean F. Johnston, *Holographic Visions: A History of New Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), viii.
- 39 Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 41, emphasis in original.
- 40 Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 49.
- 41 Telecommunications History Group, “Calling a Country Far Far Away: How Long Distance Calls Work,” *Virtual Museum*, accessed October 16, 2016, <http://www.telcomhistory.org/vm/scienceLongDistance.shtml>.
- 42 Telecommunications History Group, “How Phones Work: The Basic Science Behind Telephony,” *Virtual Museum*, accessed October 16, 2016, <http://www.telcomhistory.org/vm/sciencePhonesWork.shtml>.
- 43 Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (1958; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1988), 65–66.
- 44 There is a common story in Britain about Robeson’s encounter with Welsh miners on the streets of London in 1928. After being locked out of their mine, the workers walked in protest to the metropole to air their grievances and cause. There they found Paul outside of the Drury Lane Theatre, where he was staging *Show Boat*. As the story goes, he was so moved by their stories that he staged an impromptu concert for them, right then and there, and sent them back to Wales via train at his expense. Upon their arrival, they received clothing and food donated by Paul and the other artists and intellectuals that he had rallied on their behalf. While it is told by Paul Robeson Jr. and other historians of the NUM, Mark Exton notes in his thesis that there is no document to support this event, as fantastic (and possible) a story as it is. Mark A. Exton, “Paul Robeson and South Wales: A Partial Guide to a Man’s Beliefs” (MA thesis, University of Exeter, 1984), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea University.

- 45 Due to the decline and swift end of the Welsh mining industry in the late 1980s, the miners' eisteddfod no longer takes place.
- 46 Bill Moyers, "The Songs Are Free with Bernice Johnson Reagon," *Moyers and Company*, February 6, 1991, <http://billmoyers.com/content/songs-free/>.
- 47 Paul Robeson, "Greetings from New York," in *Paul Robeson Sings 20 of His Favourite Songs and the TransAtlantic Exchange Concert (1954/1957; Sain SCD 2574, Wales, 2007)*, track 23.
- 48 James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, eds., *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking, 1926), 18.
- 49 British Film Institute, "The Proud Valley (1940)," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 7, no. 73 (January 1940), <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/media/mfb/974551/index.html>.
- 50 Quoted in Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 56.
- 51 Robeson, *Paul Robeson Sings 20 of His Favourite Songs*, track 31.
- 52 Johnson and Johnson, *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals*, 18.
- 53 Robeson, untitled speech to Bandung Conference, 3.
- 54 John Henrik Clarke, ed., *Dimensions of the Struggle against Apartheid: A Tribute to Paul Robeson* (New York: African Heritage Studies Association, 1978), 12.
- 55 Henglei Hologram, "History of Hologram," accessed September 19, 2014, [http://hlhologram.com/History\\_of\\_hologram.html](http://hlhologram.com/History_of_hologram.html).
- 56 Gary Gautier, "Slavery and the Fashioning of Race in 'Oroonoko,' 'Robinson Crusoe,' and 'Equiano's Life,'" *Eighteenth Century* 42, no. 2 (summer 2001): 162.
- 57 Clarke, *Dimensions of the Struggle against Apartheid*, vii.
- 58 See, for example, Redmond, *Anthem*, chapter 6.
- 59 Clarke, *Dimensions of the Struggle against Apartheid*, x, 1, 3.
- 60 Clarke, *Dimensions of the Struggle against Apartheid*, 33.
- 61 "History of Holography," Holography Virtual Gallery, accessed September 19, 2014, <http://www.holography.ru/histeng.htm>.
- 62 Quoted in Lindsey R. Swindall, *The Politics of Paul Robeson's Othello* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 158.
- 63 Clarke, *Dimensions of the Struggle against Apartheid*, 4.
- 64 Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 438, 439.
- 65 Clarke, *Dimensions of the Struggle against Apartheid*, 48, 51.
- 66 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

## Two. Play

- 1 The Gramophone Co., Ltd., "His Master's Voice: Paul Robeson," ca. 1934, Hywel Francis Papers, South Wales Miners' Library, Swansea University.
- 2 Jeffrey Stewart, "Paul Robeson's Homecoming: An Historical Perspective,"

- in *Stories from the Paul Robeson House: Lives Touched by a Renaissance Man*, ed. Paul Robeson House (Philadelphia: West Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009), 30–31.
- 3 Paul Robeson House, ed., *Stories from the Paul Robeson House: Lives Touched by a Renaissance Man* (Philadelphia: West Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009), 39.
  - 4 Ollie Harrington, “Our Beloved Pauli,” *Freedomways* 11, no. 1 (1st qtr., 1971): 63, emphasis in original.
  - 5 M. J. Ellis, *Why People Play* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 9.
  - 6 Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3.
  - 7 Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 4, emphasis added.
  - 8 Ellis, *Why People Play*, 1.
  - 9 Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 10, 90.
  - 10 Ben Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (London: Sage, 2010), 65, 2, 3.
  - 11 Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (1958; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1988), 16.
  - 12 Harry Edwards, “Paul Robeson: His Political Legacy to the Twentieth-Century Gladiator,” in *Paul Robeson: The Great Forerunner*, ed. Freedomways (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1978), 18.
  - 13 Eslanda Goode Robeson, *Paul Robeson, Negro* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), 24.
  - 14 Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 20.
  - 15 Goode Robeson, *Paul Robeson, Negro*, 177, 176; quoted in Edwards, “Paul Robeson,” 19.
  - 16 Ellis, *Why People Play*, 2.
  - 17 Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 22.
  - 18 Edwards, “Paul Robeson,” 22.
  - 19 Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1995), 25, 28.
  - 20 Robinson, *I Never Had It Made*, 33.
  - 21 Robinson, *I Never Had It Made*, 34.
  - 22 Quoted in Ed Schmidt, *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting* (New York: Samuel French, 1994), v.
  - 23 Schmidt, *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, 5.
  - 24 Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 89.
  - 25 Daniel A. Gilbert, *Expanding the Strike Zone: Baseball in the Age of Free Agency* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 2.
  - 26 *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, by Ed Schmidt, dir. Sheldon Epps, New Brunswick, NJ: George Street Playhouse, 1994, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Theatre on Film and Tape archive, New York Public Library.
  - 27 Schmidt, *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, 14.
  - 28 Robinson, *I Never Had It Made*, 33.

- 29 Schmidt, *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, 14.
- 30 *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, dir. Epps.
- 31 Prudence Cumberbatch, Dayo Gore, and Sarah Haley, "Guest Editor's Note," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (January–March 2016): 2.
- 32 Schmidt, *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, 27.
- 33 Schmidt, *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, 27.
- 34 Schmidt, *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, 39.
- 35 Tony Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex: Race, Madness, Activism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 12.
- 36 David M. Durant, "Jackie Robinson Testifies before HUAC," Cold War and Internal Security (CWIS) Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, April 21, 2013, <http://blog.ecu.edu/sites/cwis/2013/04/jackie-robinson-testifies-before-huac/>.
- 37 Robinson, *I Never Had It Made*, 85–86.
- 38 "Let's Not Be Divided," in *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, and Interviews*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel, 2002), 219.
- 39 American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning, "'You Are the Un-Americans and You Ought to Be Ashamed of Yourself': Paul Robeson Appears before HUAC," History Matters online course, George Mason University, accessed July 2, 2017, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440/>.
- 40 Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex*, 2, 18.
- 41 Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex*, 20.
- 42 Quoted in Goode Robeson, *Paul Robeson, Negro*, 83.
- 43 Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex*, 11.
- 44 Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 83.
- 45 Sheet music, Lawrence Brown Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
- 46 For more on Coleridge-Taylor and Dunbar, see Tsitsi Jaji, "Art Song Poetics: Performing Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's Setting of Paul L. Dunbar's 'A Corn Song,'" *J19: A Journal of Nineteenth Century Americanists* 1, no. 1 (spring 2013): 201–6.
- 47 American Social History Project, "You Are the Un-Americans."
- 48 Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 6.
- 49 Quoted in Goode Robeson, *Paul Robeson, Negro*, 85.
- 50 It is worth noting that his career did not end with a lesser version of himself behind the microphone. He retired before his aging and ill body betrayed his voice, making for a lasting public memory of him as always healthy and robustly defiant.
- 51 For more on the song and its history, see Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social*

- Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); and Todd Decker, *Who Should Sing “Ol’ Man River”?* *The Lives of an American Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 52 Quoted in Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (1987; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 393.
- 53 See Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
- 54 Tayo Aluko, *Call Mr. Robeson: A Life, with Songs* (Portsmouth, UK: Playdead Press, 2013), 50.
- 55 Aluko, *Call Mr. Robeson*, 62.
- 56 The world premiere of the play was staged at Macauley Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky, in September 1977 and continued to tour in the Midwest and northeastern U.S. until February 1978.
- 57 Phillip Hayes Dean, *Paul Robeson* (Garden City, NY: Nelson Doubleday, 1978), 3.
- 58 Ewart Guinier, “The Paul Robeson That I Knew,” *Bay State Banner*, October 18, 1977, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC (hereafter the Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection is cited as Robeson-HU).
- 59 Patricia Caple, “Dean’s Play *Paul Robeson* Betrays a Man: Review,” *Encore: The Magazine of the Theatre*, April 1978, 18, Robeson-HU.
- 60 Dean, *Paul Robeson*, 4. Further citations are given by page number in the text.
- 61 Goode Robeson, *Paul Robeson, Negro*, 123, 129.
- 62 This mention of Desdemona may serve as a synecdoche for white women. Robeson was known to have extramarital affairs, sometimes with white women, including his *Othello* costars Peggy Ashcroft and Uta Hagen, both of whom played Desdemona. If true, this would also be a tie to other famous Black (ex)athletes, such as Jack Johnson, who were often vilified (even criminally convicted) for their intimate relationships with white women. The representational collapse of the U.S. (through the Statue of Liberty) into white women, however, would have been entirely objectionable to Robeson, and this is part of the confusion and trouble of this passage in the play.
- 63 Sterling Stuckey, “‘I Want to Be African’: Paul Robeson and the Ends of Nationalist Theory and Practice, 1914–1945,” *Massachusetts Review* 17, no. 1 (spring 1976): 92–93, 87, 119.
- 64 Gerald Horne, *Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London: Pluto, 2016), 148, 189.
- 65 Shana L. Redmond, “‘And You Know Who I Am’: Paul Robeson Sings America,” *Massachusetts Review* 57, no. 4 (winter 2016): 615–19.
- 66 Quoted in Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 183.

- 67 Quoted in National Ad Hoc Committee (in Formation) to End the Crimes against Paul Robeson, “Open Letter to the Entertainment Industry: A Statement of Conscience,” *Variety*, January 11, 1978, Robeson-HU.
- 68 Sam Washington, “The Assassination of Paul Robeson,” *News from Trans-Urban* (Brooklyn, NY), January 23, 1978, 3, Robeson-HU.
- 69 National Ad Hoc Committee, “Open Letter to the Entertainment Industry,” emphasis in original.
- 70 National Ad Hoc Committee, “Open Letter to the Entertainment Industry.”
- 71 National Ad Hoc Committee, “Open Letter to the Entertainment Industry.”
- 72 National Ad Hoc Committee to End the Crimes against Paul Robeson, “Some Facts about Paul Robeson, the Man, Vis-à-Vis the Stage Play,” pamphlet, n.d., 6, Robeson-HU.
- 73 Goode Robeson, *Paul Robeson, Negro*, 42.
- 74 National Ad Hoc Committee, “Some Facts,” 2, 7.
- 75 It is worth noting that my request for a staged Robeson who sings is a bit of a trap; his Voice is impossible to duplicate and would open the performer up to different, but equally stringent, standards. Having said that, the investment in the form—regardless of proximity to his style, tone, timbre—is the primary concern. The musical elision in these plays reveals a devastating indolence that forecloses the possibility of accuracy or invention.
- 76 Caple, “Dean’s Play,” 19.
- 77 Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex*, 7.
- 78 Goode Robeson, *Paul Robeson, Negro*, 33.

### Three. Installation

- 1 B. A. Bergman, “Mystery of the Robeson Statue,” *Philadelphia (Sunday) Bulletin*, February 1976, Robeson-HU.
- 2 Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 74.
- 3 Roberta Smith, “Antonio Salemme, 102, Painter and Sculptor of Robeson Nude,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/05/06/obituaries/antonio-salemme-102-painter-and-sculptor-of-robesson-nude.html>.
- 4 Stephens, *Skin Acts*, 74.
- 5 Quoted in Elsa Barkley Brown, “African American Women’s Quilting,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 923.
- 6 Gesture and affect are often referenced in the productions by and for Robeson, detailing how his reception generated intensive study by other artists who were captivated not simply by what he said but by how he said it.
- 7 Mark A. Exton, “Paul Robeson and South Wales: A Partial Guide to a Man’s Beliefs” (MA thesis, University of Exeter, 1984), South Wales Miners’ Library,

- Swansea University, Wales (hereafter the South Wales Miners' Library is cited as swML); Roberto González Echevarría, "Cien Años de Soledad: The Novel as Myth and Archive," *MLN* 99, no. 2 (March 1984): 359.
- 8 Exton, "Paul Robeson and South Wales," 83.
  - 9 Daniel Williams, *Wales Unchained: Literature, Politics and Identity in the American Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press for University of Wales Press, 2015), 76.
  - 10 Neil Prior, "Paul Robeson's Granddaughter at Ebbw Vale Eisteddfod," *BBC News*, August 3, 2010, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-10853209>; Exton, "Paul Robeson and South Wales," 91.
  - 11 Paul Robeson, *Paul Robeson: Tributes and Selected Writings* (New York: Paul Robeson Archives, 1976), 99.
  - 12 Phil Cope, ed., *Breaking Chains, Making Links: Responses to the Life of Paul Robeson* (Cardiff: Paul Robeson Wales Trust, 2001), 5.
  - 13 For more on the progressive World War II coalitions that formed the Popular Front and the role of "Ballad for Americans," see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997).
  - 14 Phil Cope, ed., *Let Paul Robeson Sing!* (Cardiff: Paul Robeson Wales Trust, 2001), 10.
  - 15 Cope, *Breaking Chains*, 6, 5.
  - 16 Quoted in Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (1989; reprint, New York: New Press, 2014), 209.
  - 17 Rose Rosengard Subotnik, "Whose 'Magic Flute'? Imitations of Reality at the Gates of Enlightenment," *19th-Century Music* 15, no. 2 (autumn 1991): 132.
  - 18 Susan Elizabeth Hale, *Sacred Space, Sacred Sound: The Acoustic Mysteries of Holy Places* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 2007), 85.
  - 19 Croeso Project promotional postcard, 2000, swML.
  - 20 Mark Alan Rhodes II, "'They Feel Me a Part of That Land': Welsh Memorial Landscapes of Paul Robeson" (MA thesis, Kent State University, 2015), 72.
  - 21 Cope, *Breaking Chains*, 6.
  - 22 Cope, *Breaking Chains*, 158, 11, 18.
  - 23 Nicky Wire, Introduction to *A Voice So Pure, A Vision So Clear*, ed. Phil Cope (Cardiff: Paul Robeson Wales Trust, 2001), 3.
  - 24 "Nicky Wire, Hero: Paul Robeson," *Mojo*, no. 100 (March 2002), swML.
  - 25 Manic Street Preachers, "Let Robeson Sing," *Know Your Enemy*, Virgin Records (2001), B00005AWNW.
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### A Continuation . . . : Frequency

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