EVERYTHING MAN

THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF PAUL ROBESON

SHANA L. REDMOND

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REFIGURING AMERICAN MUSIC

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

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)

Contents

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).[1] 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."[2] 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."[3] 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."[4] 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.[5]

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 soundlabor, 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."[6]

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."[7] 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.[8]

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.[9]

"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."[10] 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.

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."[11] 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.[12] 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."[13] 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*.[14] 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.[15] 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.[16] *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."[1] It's a pesky notice but nonetheless indicative of our reliance on nonverbal communicative strategies, highlighting the form's everywhereness 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 analphabetic 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."[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] 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."[5] 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.[6]

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."[7] 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."[8] 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."[9] 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."[10] 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.[11] 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.

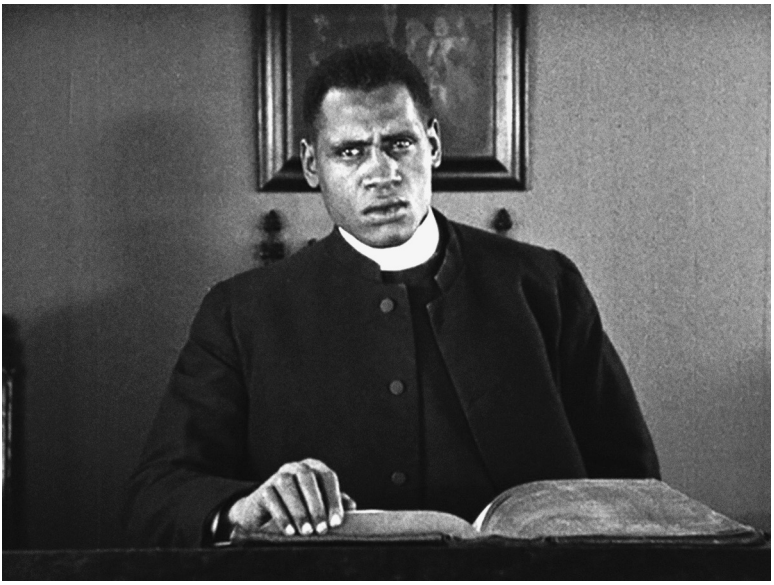

FIG. I.1 Paul Robeson standing at the pulpit in character as Rev. Isaiah T. Jenkins in Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1925). Courtesy of Kino Lorber, Inc.

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. I.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."[12] 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.

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."[13] 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."[14] 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."[15] 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 nonlinear 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]."[16] 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."[17] 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.[18] 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."[19] 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[20]

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."[21]

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 descendency 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.[22] 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.

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. I," *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, B01LXDJFGI, 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-*

geles 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 Intermundane," *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.