

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.”¹

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.² 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.’”³ Robeson delivered the 2015 “egalitarian banger” reluctantly, by force, being made to perform for the pleasure and support of capital.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.”⁸ 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.*⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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."¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ As Nina Sun Eidsheim argues, “Voice is not singular; it is collective,” producing “communal technologies attuned to cultural values.”¹⁸ 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, bounded packages” by “destroy[ing] the division between her body and our own, for her sound enters our system.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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!*²²

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.”²³ 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.²⁴ 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."²⁵

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."²⁶ 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."²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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."²⁹ 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.³⁰

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.”³¹ Tony Perucci identifies this moment of disarticulation in Bandung as “Robeson’s voice’s body,” which he argues is a type of resistive objecthood.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.”³⁵ 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.”³⁶ 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!”³⁷

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.”³⁸ 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.”³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ 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).”⁴² 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.”⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.”⁴⁸ 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.”⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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.”⁵²

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.⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴ 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).⁵⁵ Any given portion of a hologram “is itself a hologram of the whole object, but from a different orientation.”⁵⁶ 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.”⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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.”⁵⁹

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.”⁶⁰ 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.”⁶¹ 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.”⁶² 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!”⁶³ 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.”⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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.