

Two Play

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

— ISAAC NEWTON

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

— MARIE SETON

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

— SUSAN ROBESON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"For Human Dignity, for Brotherhood, for Fair Play"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RICKEY: Fine. Now . . .

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

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

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

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

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

RICKEY: We must slowly ease our way into this.

JACKIE: If we ease any slower, we'll be standing still.²⁹

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

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

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

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

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

SINGING AND SMILING.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE CHAIRMAN: The answer is yes?

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

THE CHAIRMAN: That answers the question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE CHAIRMAN: They will take the pictures.

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

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

MR. ROBESON: I invoke the Fifth Amendment. This is really ridiculous.⁴⁷

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I salute my friends of all nations.

I want you to know that I'm the same Paul, dedicated as ever to the world-wide cause of humanity for freedom, peace, and brotherhood. As Joe Hill says in the song, "I'm still with you."⁶⁰

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

(MUSIC OUT.)

MUSIC: “THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER.”

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

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

(TO THE STATUE OF LIBERTY.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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