

Three Installation

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

— PAUL ROBESON

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

— *Paul Robeson* (1978)

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

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

The life-size sculpture positions Robeson in extension, arms raised, chin angled at forty-five degrees, legs soft-kneed but strong and sturdy (fig. 3.1). He uses his body to praise the sonic form that he had only one year earlier revolutionized. He was then a budding celebrity in the Greenwich Village circle of white benefactors and liberals and the Harlem Black literati, and everyone wanted their piece. According to literary theorist Michelle Stephens, “Salemme’s life-size sculpture reflects the sculptor’s desire to capture Robeson with a certain degree of intimacy—that is, to imagine that the artist can re-create, in Robeson’s bodily likeness, as close an approximation to the real-life actor that one can get in artistic form. The statue becomes a kind of surrogate for the immediacy of the actor’s presence in the world.” The demand for Robeson required that he be duplicated, and so Salemme used his own passion for the giant to create that possibility. The intimacy that Stephens notes began between subject and artist as they spent a number of long days together in (re)creation—Robeson naked, singing, and posed; Salemme in various positions of viewing and etching, smoothing and contouring. Engaging Naomi Segal’s “consensuality,” Stephens argues that his “‘circling round the sculpture,’ is driven by something that moves between the scopic and the haptic, ‘part of a sense of experience midway between touching and seeing.’”² The blur of sensibility and sensation drew the two men together through an arts practice that ultimately marked the career of the sculptor. His 1995 obituary in the *New York Times* begins, “Antonio Salemme, a sculptor and painter who won renown in the 1930’s with his life-size nude sculpture of the singer and actor Paul Robeson, died on Tuesday at his home in Williams Township, Pa. He was 102.”³

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



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

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

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

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

Croeso

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

V-I,	V-ii,	V-iii
["O I-	sis and	O- si . . ."]

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

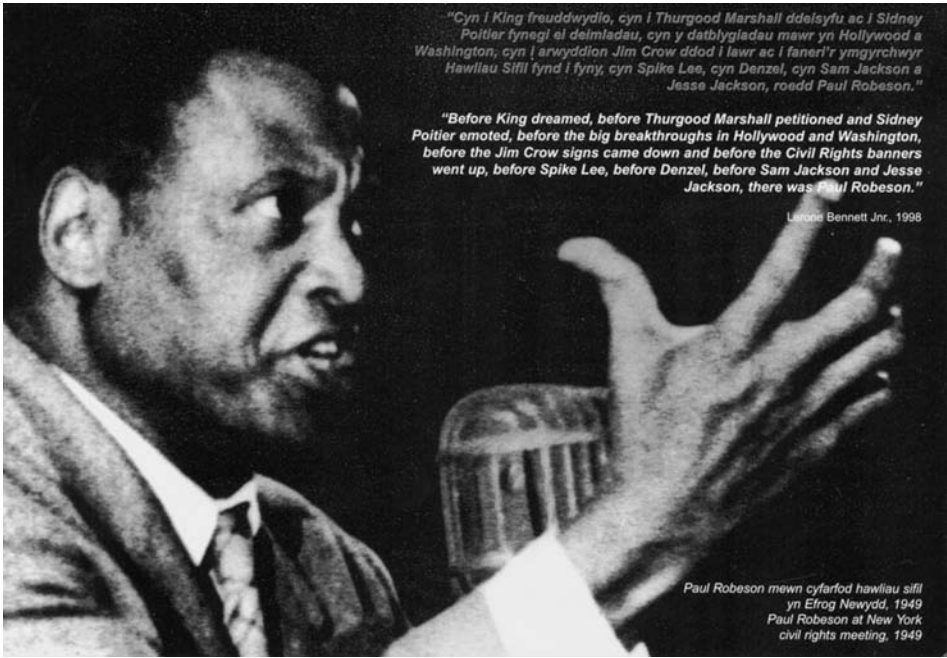
*A voice, so pure
A vision, so clear
I’ve got to learn to live like you
Learn to sing like you.*²⁵

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

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

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

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




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

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


LeRoi Bennett Jr., 1998

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



COMMISSION FOR RACIAL EQUALITY
COMITWR CYDRADDOLDEB RASOL

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




Paul Robeson
wales trust
touring exhibition

Pwy yw Paul Robeson?

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

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MANY VOICES, ONE WELCOME
SAWL LLAIS, UN CROESO

Who is Paul Robeson?

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

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

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

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

Disembark

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

The Sound of Mail

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



Downloaded from <http://eod.oxfordjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1093/ajph/92.N05.2022>

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



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

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

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

real. At the height of his early fame as a concert singer, he insists, upon hearing the orchestra play “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” that, though he doesn’t know how he knows his song, “I know what that means to those people out there. Somehow that song I was singing means as much to me.”⁵⁸ There is something of that song that he knows intimately, not through the formality or didacticism of nationalism but through a complicated intergenerational listening practice. And while the film spends a lot of time collapsing what that element of his knowing/past is—it is always just Africa—the tales of those stolen by slavery rarely have more precision. The song is Zinga’s bloodline and his tie to a place that he has always known as his mystery. The film’s plot is a mirror image to a story Paul told about a song. In the 1930s he heard an African dockworker in England singing a song that he recalled from his childhood. Upon further conversation with the man and investigation on his own, Paul realized that this Nigerian song was evidence of his own Igbo heritage. That song is how he began to know his place in the world beyond the tragedies of slavery and his father’s fateful escape from it. Though Paul would later lament the imperial propaganda included in the film, *Song of Freedom* did have a life on the continent thanks in large part to his good friend, the first independent premier of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, who selected it for screening at the second anniversary celebration of his Convention People’s Party in 1950.⁵⁹ In combination with the riverboat that signals his iconic role as Joe in *Show Boat*, his representation as Zinga fills the Malian stamp with the complicated, always imperfect sounds of Robeson’s singing, laboring diaspora.

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

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