

An Introduction **Vibration**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

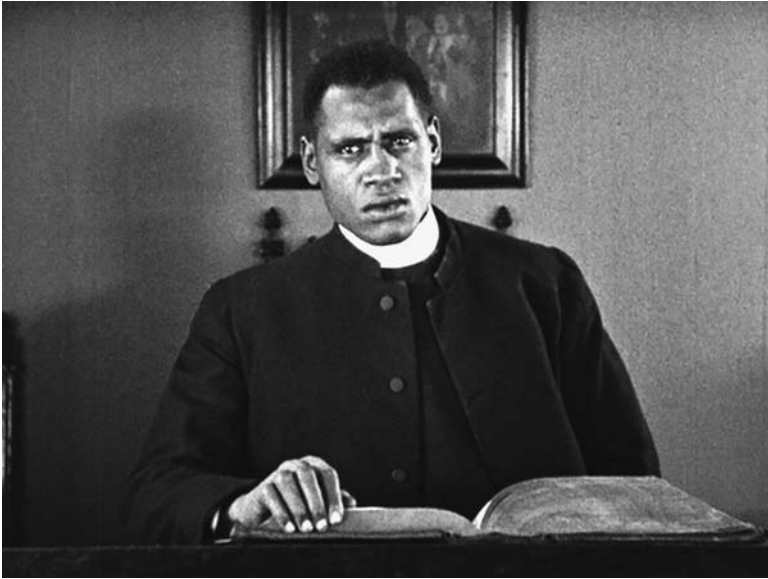


FIG. 1.1 Paul Robeson standing at the pulpit in character as Rev. Isaiah T. Jenkins in Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1925). Courtesy of Kino Lorber, Inc.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*and was blinded by that light
 and looked into the Darkness
 and embraced that Darkness
 and saul arose from the great white way
 saying "I Am Paul
 who would slay you
 but I saw the Darkness
 and I am that Darkness"
 then he raised his voice
 singing red black and green songs
 saying "I am the lion
 in daniel's den
 I am the lion thrown to slaughter"*

*do not fear the lion
 for he is us
 and we are all
 in daniel's den*²⁰

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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