

A Continuation ... Frequency

We will to bring back the person, alive and sacrosanct; we mean
to rescue the person from the amorality of time and science.

— JUNE JORDAN

And the ancients before them knew the science of name
Call on the ancestor and the spirit also came
So we call on the doctor
“Dr. Du Bois, come back! Come on back.”

We call on mighty Robeson
“Hey Paul! Hey Paul Robeson!”

— AMIRI BARAKA

Now he belongs to the future.

— LLOYD BROWN

My instructor says that playing the theremin is like “singing with your hands.” As a once and sometime singer, I like the metaphor quite a lot even if its application is far from straightforward. I am only two lessons in and can’t help but be frustrated by my awkwardness. I haven’t attempted a new instrument in almost twenty years, and progress is excruciatingly

slow; my last assignment was to practice major seconds and fifths. While I don't find myself yet singing, I can see that possibility in the movements of the instrument's virtuoso, Clara Rockmore, whose technique was described in her heyday in precisely those terms: "By moving her hands and fingers in the air, she achieved tonal agility comparable to that of [a] singer, and a living tone quality."¹ A petite woman, she brought the furniture of the early theremin to life—to living—in graceful strokes of her left and right hands and used its frequencies to sing with a differently tuned, but no less complementary, living instrument named Paul Robeson.

Paul and Rockmore toured North America together on three different occasions between 1940 and 1943. He would perform his spirituals and folk songs, while she was his "unique adjunct," playing Western classical pieces. Carnegie Hall was their first venue in October 1940. The two structured their performances the same way with each engagement: Paul would perform the first and third sections with Rockmore in between. After intermission, she would begin and he would conclude the concert.² His sets included spirituals like "Deep River," European and Russian folk songs, the recent sensation "Ballad for Americans," and the ever-popular "Ol' Man River." It was on this tour that the last of these drew significant public attention for its lyric changes, which included his refusal of the ol' man caricature ("That's the old man I *don't* like to be") as well as antiwar lyrics. Rockmore played Brahms, Bach, and Ravel.³ Paul was lauded for his voice—"his greatest single asset"—by a standing room-only crowd that "went wildest over the Negro spirituals." Rockmore was described as contributing "some skilled solos on the theremin until her machine broke down."⁴ In this instance, there was no disjuncture for Paul between man and machine. Perhaps it was his long relationship to organized labor or simply his promiscuous musical ear that allowed him to hear himself with a pitch-emitting device that some saw as eerie contrivance while others heard it as instrument.

The theremin's transition from the former to the latter was swift. Originally designed for the Bolsheviks by Russian scientist and inventor Lev (later Leon) Theremin in 1920, the "radio watchman" was a motion sensor that announced the approach of objects within the machine's electromagnetic field. With a request to next measure gases under various levels of pressure and temperature, Theremin tuned the apparatus to better gauge fluctuation.

This arrangement—employed in his radio watchman, and in radio transmitters in general—filtered out harmonics generated by the oscillator to capture a single frequency, which in this case he made audible through a pair of earphones. Lev added a condenser dial similar to those used by radios to tune in a given frequency. When he “tuned in” the density of a particular gas, the constant pitch of the oscillator’s tone whistled in the earphones. The slightest drift in the properties of the gas altered the capacity of the circuit and changed the pitch of the whistling note.⁵

After playing with the movement of his hands near the circuitry, Theremin recognized how the electromagnetic field “could detect extremely small capacitances in the human hand (less than one-trillionth of a farad),” producing notes and subtle vibrato. “This was electricity singing to him,” according to his biographer Albert Glinsky.⁶ He no longer had a simple machine; it was now an instrument as the radio watchman became the etherphone.

And then the *termenvox* and, eventually, the theremin. Over the course of the 1920s and ’30s, Theremin toured the instrument throughout Europe and the U.S., trained students (including Rockmore), and invented more machines—musical and otherwise.⁷ But it is the instrument that began as surveillance that endures. It remains a marvel how one plays an instrument without touch. Yet this element is, perhaps, precisely what drew Robeson into its orbit, allowing him to “invent electronica” in the process.⁸ Skill and precision mark its successful performance. Like the hologram, the theremin works in large part through stillness, as the slightest movement can throw the pitch or detune the instrument. Without the grounding of a bow or mallet or mouthpiece, the musician must “master the air” with knowledge of all that it contains—the obstacles, the movements, the weather.⁹ With a career increasingly built via proximity without presence and with maturing knowledges of its perils, Robeson is the theremin method personified.

Frequency is the science that both instruments share. Paul’s is the repetition of meticulous vibration as soundwaves—his Voice, the eternal. Dozens of records bear his name, with 78 RPM singles abundant; he recorded “Mah Curly Headed Baby” sixteen times, “Ol’ Man River” twenty.¹⁰ He returned for encore after encore—five after a performance of *The Emperor Jones* in 1924, twenty after a 1930 performance of *Othello*

in London, thirteen after a Carnegie Hall concert in 1943—hundreds if not thousands over his lifetime. Frequency is also his return as presence. Chilean poet and political icon Pablo Neruda theorized his arrival in “Ode to Paul Robeson,” which tells an origin story of Robeson as Element as well as shaping him as Frequency. His Voice opened the sky yet “darkness struggled to hold on,” prompting Neruda to repeat the word “again” in order to signal Robeson’s undeterred and indomitable vocal presence.

*Again
the cities grieved
and silence was great,
hard
as a tombstone
upon a living heart,
as a dead hand
on a child’s voice.*

*Then
Paul Robeson,
you sang.*

*Again
over the earth was heard
the potent voice
of the water
over the fire;
the solemn, unhurried, raw, pure
voice of the earth
reminding us that we were still men,
that we shared the sorrow and the hope.
Your voice
set us apart from the crime.
Once more the light
parted
from the darkness.*

*Then
silence fell on Hiroshima.
Total silence.*

Nothing
was left:
not one mistaken bird
to sing on an empty window,
not one mother with a wailing child,
not a single echo of a factory,
not a cry from a dying violin.
Nothing.
The silence of death fell from the sky.

And again,
father,
brother,
voice of man
in his resurrection,
in hope
resounding
from the depths,
Paul,
you sang.

Again,
your river of a heart
was deeper,
was wider
than the silence.¹¹

The regularity of Robeson's intervention was a sort of clockwork that made possible and organized movement time. His frequency was the evidence of connection, of will that traces the wavelength of his pitch in creation of pyramids and holograms. In moments of doubt and fear, he showed us that he was there and proved that we would be whole; that we would someday win. This he did believe (fig. C.1).

His time changed the calendar. Rutgers University, New Brunswick, annually hosts I Am Robeson Week. In 2004, California representative Barbara Lee exclaimed in front of her Alameda County constituents, "Paul Robeson lives and his day is here," while Los Angeles; Washington, DC; Cardiff, Wales; Philadelphia; Seattle; Newark and Princeton, New Jersey; Delhi under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi; Edinburgh; Houston; To-



FIG. C.1 (Left to right) Paul Robeson, Eslanda Goode Robeson, and unidentified woman singing “We Shall Overcome” at Paul’s Welcome Home Birthday Salute in New York City, sponsored by *Freedomways* magazine (April 1965). From the photo collection held at the Tamiment Library, New York University, by permission of the Communist Party USA.

ronto; New York City; and Jamaica have also hosted days in his honor.¹² In 1976, the World Peace Council to the United Nations declared April 9 International Paul Robeson Day, an event honored throughout the world.¹³ He continues to mark the seasons, not as an athlete but through his form as seed, specifically a Russian heirloom tomato, which has “developed almost a cult following among seed savers” (fig. C.2).¹⁴ Paul, perennial.

Both below and above ground, he ventures into spaces where no one would ever expect to find him. Nelson Mandela told of playing his record at Robben Island so frequently that the album warped.¹⁵ He would come to those forbidden and forgotten spaces often; as his good friend, Communist Ben Davis, wrote to Paul from his jail cell, “There are legendary stories of you in every prison in America. The Negro prisoners, in their own way, speak your name in hallowed tones.”¹⁶ Bil Brown-El was

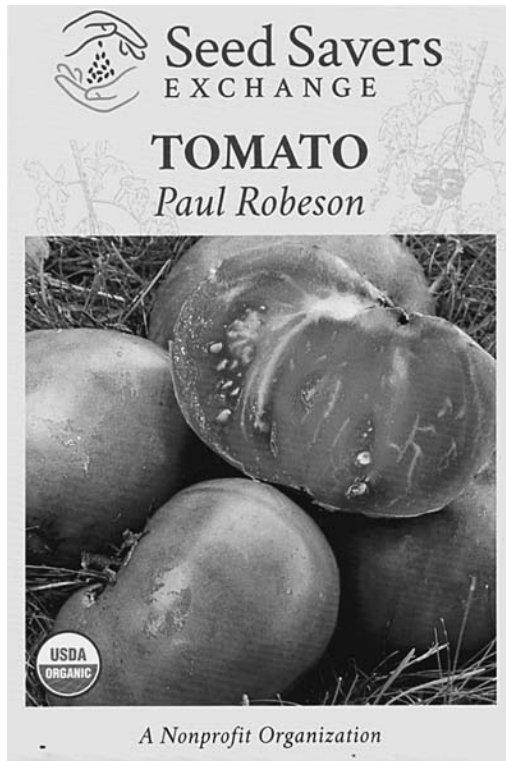


FIG. C.2 Seed Savers Exchange, “Paul Robeson” tomato seeds. Photo: author. Courtesy of Seed Savers Exchange.

among them. “I have begun to undertake the task of trying to establish a Paul Robeson month here at Marion Federal Penitentiary,” he wrote. An incarcerated person in the medium-security prison in rural Illinois and self-described “Robeson-ist,” Brown-El addressed his June 1977 letter to Tony Gittens, director of the Electric Playhouse at the University of the District of Columbia. Brown-El was aware of the film festivals held by Gittens in his hometown of Washington, DC, and hoped that, with the proper explanation of his conditions, his humble request would be met favorably. “From the very outset I would like to say that this have never been accomplished before here at the institution. There are very limited programs dealing with our people here at Marion, as well as very few films dealing with our people, black people, very few—education[a] or other. It would be [a] joy to see this project; a Paul Robeson month get off

to a good start.” Beyond the prison’s clear deficiency of cultural and curatorial opportunities, Brown-El argues that the answer to the question of why they should pursue this course is “very simple”: “Paul Robeson is one of America’s greatest men.” The present verb tense here, alongside his earlier frustration with those who “are ignorant to just who Paul Robeson is/was,” highlights that Paul had not left the world nor these precarious men, even a year and a half after his death.¹⁷

He is called as instruction and example. In September 1977, the Young Workers Liberation League of New York released *To Live Like Paul Robeson*. Included in the pamphlet was an introduction by longtime Robeson comrade and the co-organizer of the 1951 *We Charge Genocide* petition, William L. Patterson, commemorative essays and notes, and the “Paul Robeson Pledge.” Read aloud at the Youth Salute to Paul Robeson in April of that year and adopted by all in attendance, the pledge pays tribute to the “People’s Champion” through the speaker’s dedication to five commitments:

to do all that is within our power to struggle for a world of peace,
and an end to all forms of exploitation of mankind,
an end to racism and male supremacy,
an end to all discrimination,
for all our democratic and human rights, in a united struggle of all
working and oppressed peoples.

These commitments they pledged to hold for at least one year.¹⁸ This recurrent event, which in 1978 was staged at Madison Square Garden and starred folk singer Odetta, reminded all not only who he was but who they were called to be in his absence (fig. C.3).

He inspires unending song. Twenty-two of us gathered on a rainy Tuesday night at the All Health Centre in Birmingham. Formed in 1940 and self-described as the oldest continuous “Lefty” choir in England, the Birmingham Clarion Singers pride themselves on carrying the tradition of their second president, Paul Robeson. Serving almost exclusively in absentia, he became honorary president of the choir in 1959 after a chance encounter with members in his dressing room during his last run of *Othello* at Stratford-upon-Avon. His term ended when he passed in 1976, but the choir continues to honor him as a foundational figure of their practice,



FIG. C.3 Singer Odetta (center) and musicians during the Youth Salute to Paul Robeson, December 1978. From the photo collection held at the Tamiment Library, New York University, by permission of the Communist Party USA.

even singing an amended version of his 1939 “Ballad for Americans” in concert in 2016. On the night of my visit the following year, we prepared for their upcoming concert by rehearsing a selection of SATB compositions drawn from the movements and cultures that he championed, including “Song of Peace (Finlandia)” by Jean Sibelius (arr. Gary Fry) and “Funeral March,” dated to the Bolsheviks of 1905:

*Yet we will not mourn them as lost to the fight,
Nor death shall defeat them whom none shall defeat.
Our dead shall live on in the fight we maintain,
Their impulse still drive us, their tradition still sustain.*

Our performance that night allowed us to “take the dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names,” as José Muñoz wrote.¹⁹ Paul is here, continuous and sustaining, singing with and being sung to by a new generation of people who have not forgotten his name, his beliefs, or his method.

We made him all of these things and more, based on a deep and abiding sense of absence and loss—for him and for all those gone—and for the futures that may never be because they are no longer with us. We bring them back in order to make those better days imaginable, to make them possible. We rescue them, as June Jordan told, refusing death even as we respect it, choosing instead to understand it not as finality but as yet another state of being, an amended continuation, a porous boundary of ellipses over which some may leap or dance and across which others triumphantly sing. At our best, we honor him. Sometimes we’re selfish and take liberties with our reconstruction; we project where we could simply document. “Is it possible,” Ossie Davis asked in 1971, “that we defined Paul not so much out of knowledge but out of need?”²⁰ I believe that it is, and it’s the continual need that makes his reply and its duration that much more spectacular.

Shelter, transit, wonder; he continued to sing. The Voice that inspired and fortified these forms, the Voice compelled from the shadows of slavery, remains as a permanent marker and constant reminder of the stakes and scales of struggle and the resilience that makes it not only possible but inevitable. He had already invented the possibility of his political assemblage through his performances of “Joe Hill.” An Industrial Workers of the World radical and composer, Hill was wherever the workers and fighters gathered, making him as “alive as you and me.” The dreams of justice and freedom that spirited Hill back to us after his execution in 1915 were extended in symphonic form to Paul as well. In his “Ode to Paul Robeson,” which uses Neruda’s text for its narration, composer Earl Robinson reworked “Joe Hill” in order to place Paul within that labor genealogy, allowing us to speak with him again.

I dreamed I saw Big Paul last night,

alive as you and me.

“Big Paul, it’s yesterday you died.”

“I’m staying on,” says he.

“I’m never gone,” says he.²¹

This piece premiered in 1977 under the codirection of Black actress and activist Frances Williams, who founded the Paul Robeson Community Center in Los Angeles and organized there in his name into the early 1990s. She kept him and shared him, allowing many more imagined than known to believe that their calls would be answered.

In the interstices between what's known and what's dreamt of is Black antiphonal life: a method of engagement with and challenge to the brutalities of the "afterlife of slavery," which Saidiya Hartman argues is not "an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of too-long memory" but rather the incontrovertible fact that "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago."²² Black antiphonal life arrives as a vibrational practice shared openly and freely, across space and time. It's a will to question, to shapeshift, to rescue; to seek out radical intimacy; and, if necessary, to wait. Deterrents and violence are expected, for we know we aren't meant to feel and act together. Some will be taken too soon, but they never truly leave. We sing, think, and live differently because of them, and when summoned, they return. *Dal segno*. And this Paul does.

*Because you sing,
they know that the sea exists
and that the sea sings.*

*They know that the sea is free, wide and full of flowers
as your voice, my brother.*

*The sun is ours. The earth will be ours.
Tower of the sea, you will go on singing.²³*