

## A Preface Element

What man can look upon this state of things without resolving to cast his influence with the elements which are to come down in ten-fold thunder and dash this state of things to atoms.

— FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Thinkers of all religious and philosophical traditions have long sought the world's irreducible elements—those building blocks from which all material, all life derives. Greek philosophers produced a dominant cosmology composed of four elements: erupting from the core and reconstituting it again is the earth; blue-hot at its center, fire both sustains existence and exacts damages unimaginable; air is a ubiquitous (though far from neutral) life force; while water lives and moves en masse beyond continental borders but is, inside of them, often a prized commodity. Centuries of scientists and believers understood these elements as organic, fundamental, indivisible. These are the pieces that, when combined, produce the new world, its environment and atmosphere. We stand on it, breathe it, feel and taste it, engaging in a wide variety of encounters and hopes cosmically designed and, perhaps, destined. These elements compose the past that we compel ourselves to recall and the futures that we do not yet know.

A fugitive intellectual, elocutionist, writer, and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass too imagined the foundations and essential character(istics) of the world in front of him. His world, however, was not a serene portrait of wading pools and an incontrovertible democracy like the Greek civilization before him; his was replete with unfreedoms organized by the failed, yet persistent, calculus of racial logics (“the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving,” as Katherine McKittrick names them).<sup>1</sup> An alchemist working with the unfinished, sentient materials of blackness, democracy, and revolution, Douglass thought of and through the world’s elements, yet his reckoning, cited above, was organized not by chemical equations or hypotheticals but instead by animate subjects and the trials of lived experience. His call to those living in a moment of danger, precarity, and radical harm anticipated that “the elements” would coalesce, becoming greater than their individual selves, and, with the velocity of their numbers, perfectly deconstruct “this state of things” to the atom—the most essential and universal form of ordinary matter. He predicted that all who were alive to the voice of personkind would combine to face corruption and racism in order to, as was later theorized, “break it down so that it can always and forever be broken.”<sup>2</sup> From this eruption and consequent brokenness, our liberated future would emerge, led by those who “most faithfully rebuke” their oppressors.

Douglass’s projection of the new world was studied and mobilized in the twentieth century by a man who coalesced the elements in such force that nations trembled at the sound of his Voice. His power—the “thunder” of his convictions—was unwavering, his beliefs entrenched and immobile even to “one-thousandth of an inch.”<sup>3</sup> This man was the indomitable Paul Robeson, a shape-shifting scientist possessed of innumerable talents and visions. Douglass did not yet see Paul Robeson as he spoke of the new world atom, but it is possible that he conjured him, for surely Douglass’s breath enlivened Robeson’s song and activated the four elements that composed this world giant. Just as any given organism or object is decided by its properties and ingredients, so too was Robeson, a man (re)produced by and of a movement formula. Proximity to enslavement and other unfree labor, the gospel that permeated his childhood home, the speech and muscle that defined his youth, and the prohibitions of his race in law, film, recording, and stage produced his radical dimen-

sionality that could be heard over great distances and with great impact. Robeson's continued vibration within global political imaginaries is the impetus and guide for the adventure undertaken in these pages.

It was Robeson's musicianship that made for the complex matter(s) of his life and legacy. His study of the vocal instrument and the global folk music form, which is evidenced in part by his extensive library of scholarship on vocal technique, language, and composition, announced his unique contributions and talents in the making of new political worlds. He was a scientist, and the stage was his laboratory.

"The musician combines sounds in the same way the chemist combines substances. The note is the musical element as the simple body is the chemical element. . . . It is true that musician and chemist reason in their respective fields in the same way, despite the profound difference of the materials they use."<sup>4</sup> Chemist Santiago Alvarez offers a reference for a thick reading of Robeson, who not only used the raw materials of the note, with the piano forming his periodic table, but also changed his form and shape in order to become the material by which other equations of liberation were made possible.

Robeson's scientific rationale or reason for his musicianship was inspired by both form and function. He harbored a profound respect for what he called "people's songs"—those inspired by and composed from the cultures of everyday communities. Folk songs arranged his repertoire throughout his forty-year career and led him into communion with the ethnolinguistic traditions of many nations. By the 1930s, his science spoke to a global audience of untold numbers, and it was Negro spirituals that made the introduction. This music, lovingly anthologized by writer-activist James Weldon Johnson and his pianist-composer brother J. Rosamond Johnson, was described as the penultimate representation of the Black condition.

In many of the Spirituals the Negro gave wide play to his imagination; in them he told his stories and drew his morals therefrom; he dreamed his dreams and declared his visions; he uttered his despair and prophesized his victories; he also spoke the group wisdom and expressed the group philosophy of life. Indeed, the Spirituals taken as a whole contain a record and a revelation of the deeper thoughts and experiences of the Negro in this country for a period beginning three hundred years ago and covering two and a half centuries. If you wish to know

what they are you will find them written more plainly in these songs than in any pages of history.<sup>5</sup>

The Negro spirituals are both documentary evidence of those who have lived and the process by which their descendants continue doing so, having been left an archive of detailed and painful histories as well as a method of encounter and imagination that sustains and builds new possibilities. The spirituals, therefore, are fundamental to the sonic lifeworlds of the continent and its diasporas, and in Robeson they found their most astute, committed, and precocious cantor.

Beyond the aesthetic and sonic qualities of the form, Robeson was invested in the histories of this music as well as the futures that might be enlivened by its performance. These songs were compellingly functional; in Robeson's care, they had a role to play in the unfolding world in which they were sung. Attached to his iconic body and delivered by his impressive Voice, these songs—including “Go Down, Moses,” “There's a Man Going Round Takin' Names,” and “Water Boy”—were fundamental to the transnational Black and working-class political cultures that by midcentury galvanized the rebellion of entire nations. Robeson's sound-labor, which he launched from stages all over the world, was formative in the thought of progressive, radical, and Third World liberationist actors and organizations, the workers and the lovers, the thinkers as well as the musicians. He was called, drawn upon, requested, followed, mimicked, used, invoked, challenged by, and subservient to “The People,” whom he described as “the real guardians of our hopes and dreams.”<sup>6</sup>

To those generations who survived war and depression and learned to love and organize in a world crying for decolonization and an end to racism, Robeson was an essential element of their living in the present. He was selfless, offering too much of himself in order to sustain others; according to mentee and actor-activist Ossie Davis, “Paul confirmed us in our impudent wasting by never denying that he was air, or water to our every need.”<sup>7</sup> Numerous creators—especially the poets—believed as Davis believed, arranging Paul during and after his lifetime as the four classical elements, being compared to, measured by, and constitutive of them. Chilean poet-philosopher Pablo Neruda's “Ode to Paul Robeson” is an expansive excavation of his indefatigable presence as guide and method in people's struggles throughout the African and working world. He is described as source and his Voice is the movement science that broke the

enforced quietude, motivating creation, narrative, and possibility. Neruda organizes recurrent scenes of Robeson as and in relation to earth, fire, water, and air, stimulating our reception of Robeson as organic and fundamental. He is portrayed as “the song of germinating earth, the river and the movement of nature,” “the potent voice of the water over the fire,” and the “voice of the earth” whose “river of a heart was deeper, was wider than the silence.” Allusions to water—“you were a subterranean river”—reflect and extend his proximity and relationship to the *Show Boat* role that made him a star as well as to the laboring peoples on the Mississippi and Niger who taught him his history through the languages and cultures of African peoples.<sup>8</sup>

Narrative and lyrical representations of Robeson frequently document sound as the authentic revelation of his beliefs, materiality, and transit across and beneath the oceans. Through music, his character and contributions are uniquely congealed, forming a spectacular and complex substance of body, meaning, and air: the Voice.

*Once he did not exist  
But his voice was there, waiting.*

*Light parted from darkness,  
day from night,  
earth from the primal waters.*

*And the voice of Paul Robeson was divided from the silence.<sup>9</sup>*

“Once he did not exist but his voice was there, waiting” is as illustrative, as fundamental as “in the beginning was the word.” Paul Robeson’s Voice—powerful in its mastery and message—carried its own time; co-eval with the earth and water, it existed well before he entered the earthly realm and would continue well beyond his departure.

The origin story that Neruda tells begins with sound, rather than body, suggesting that Robeson’s gift is unique and eternal, unbound by the anxieties of the earth that crumbles and the water that inevitably runs dry. Even as it announces its form, sound dislocates the fixation with the body, freeing us from a focus on the ocular and instead demanding a new vocabulary and experience of blackness and liberation. Neruda orchestrates that extension by listening closely to the vibrations of a quotidian and revolutionary diaspora. As his “Ode” also demonstrates elsewhere, he

stretches the narrative of Robeson's vocal power to various moments of deafness and silence broken only by his song. From the devastation of Hiroshima, darkness and trembling sun, "all people lifted their blood to the light in your voice, and earth and sky, fire and darkness and water rose up with your song." Robeson's Voice—an otherworldly phenomenon—was that which coalesced all else: the speculated fifth element, ether.

With roots in Greek lore, this form of extraterrestrial clear sky was mythologized as the air of the gods. Known also as quintessence, ether is beyond our tangible reach but nonetheless is used to explain natural phenomena that we experience daily, such as light and gravity. Yet ether is that which fills spaces that we cannot account for, between definable bodies and ideas. Robeson's Voice is indicative of both that which we experience and that which we struggle to know. His musicology, which listened closely to the interned, imprisoned, dead and dying, was studied and experiential, producing a program of songs that became his signature intervention in a world that called out for new methods, new texts.

Neruda provides the language for Robeson's algorithmic song, which was so dense, so compelling, and so powerful in its problem solving that it was capable of organizing collectives beyond his immediate reach. His studied attention to and investment in the style and use of his musics signal his stature as the most important singer of the twentieth century. Yet it is not by his works alone that this claim is true. It is his return to public conversation, representation, and debate during periods of isolation and many decades after his death that assists in proving his stature as global troubadour. Though less iconic than the younger Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or Nelson Mandela, Robeson is nonetheless a featured player in our political times, even if his reappearance is as sound rather than image. In the contemporary moment of coordinated Black eruption in the U.S., South Africa, Palestine, England, Canada, and elsewhere, one must believe that Robeson's presence among us is intentional, purposeful. The question then is why. Why is he back? What are the conditions and stakes that make for his reappearance? What are his forms, and what function does he serve? This is the work that I undertake in the chapters that follow. Through engaging the work and labors of artists, musicians, politicians, and activists his role as a world freedom fighter is heard, seen, and felt.

Thinking of Robeson as indicative of the five elements is one foundation for the ways in which *Everything Man* calls him back, again, into

the present through his constant (re)iteration not as the classical elements (solely) but as a series of alternative states of being, time, and motion. I trail Robeson as ghostly muse around the world in order to document his continued role as executor of Douglass's demand. This pursuit, which unfolds over multiple continents, additionally maps contemporary movement collectives who are unconvinced by linear progress narratives and undeterred by death. They understand that "we are coeval with the dead."<sup>10</sup> In this way, this book is less about memory than it is about deliberative, present action. Robeson still stands among those elements, projecting the "state of things" that yet might be. And so, we follow.

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This path has its share of discomfort and obstacles—both intentional and subconscious—that prohibit our engagements with this person (in particular) and others like him (in general). "The Epic Hero is not very fashionable at the moment," wrote Benny Green in a 1960-era souvenir Robeson program booklet, and these words remain true today. "A certain current sickness of the human spirit tends to make most of us uncomfortable at the mere thought of moral greatness, so we shuffle uncomfortably and feel unaccountably ashamed in some obscure way. *And most exasperating of all, we cannot wholly explain any kind of greatness, not with all our scientific sorcery, our statistics and our psychology.* That is why the figure of Paul Robeson, as it towers over us, enigmatic and strangely moving, baffles so many of us."<sup>11</sup> We who are "weary of the ways of the world" remain skeptical of both the need for and the presence of (charismatic) leadership; within the academy, we necessarily trouble narratives of great (and not so great) men.<sup>12</sup> I write this book in light of these shared positions and in hopes of providing another vantage. The story that unfolds over these chapters is more than a praise song for a singular man. As Ossie Davis argued, "the question of Paul's identity is not facetious or academic to black people, rather it is urgent and fundamental—a matter of life and death."<sup>13</sup> My search for him was, in fact, a matter of life. He compelled me back into his care and study after thinking that I had learned all that I need know of him for *Anthem*.<sup>14</sup> This could not have been further from the truth, and yet even with this book there is so much more to be revealed. Paul Robeson Jr. suggested to a friend that once his father gripped you, he would never let you go. In my case, this has proven absolutely true. The conversations into which I was swept made me not simply interested

but invested, completely. And while the academy trains its participants to deal in cold calculation, the task of knowing this person required new approaches and a willingness to be vulnerable. The intimacy that I've organized here is grown from an investment in knowing this subject in as complicated and as varied a series of ways as I can manage in book form.

I make no pretense to objectivity in the sense of Western epistemes, which curate the writer outside of and without relation to the peoples being discussed and the stories being told. Paul Robeson Sr. is not a stranger. In order to know him, I had to forgo my own comfort with distance and come close, in the process awakening muscles and methods that I had hitherto reserved for those persons personal and animate. I embraced the rigorous intellectualisms and “powerful social force” of love as a means of telling a story that is ongoing and multifold, for it is of Paul Robeson but attended to and created by many others.<sup>15</sup> And while the story at times may seem fantastical or even bordering on hagiography, the imperfect work of tracing his ongoing presence is grounded not by myth or sainthood but imagination, which is, as so many other wise people have argued, the most important political tool at our disposal.<sup>16</sup> *Everything Man* is, therefore, the curation of a political present and future tuned to the frequencies of a manifold individual. While this project is in conversation with, informed by, and organized by archives, performance texts, and existing scholarship, I have additionally taken interpretive cues from those curious and committed enough to dream. They carry some of the characteristics that they announce as his; in order to know him and them, we will work our way from the inside out.