Detuning Biography

Shana Redmond and Gustavus Stadler in Conversation

Two important books published this year by scholars of popular music take new approaches to the lives and legacies of key musicians associated with twentieth-century Left politics in the United States: Shana Redmond’s *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson* (Duke UP) and Gustavus Stadler’s *Woody Guthrie: An Intimate Life* (Beacon). Both of these books combine archival research, narrative accounts, readings of multiple media, and expansive theoretical frameworks to open up new ways of understanding the performances and receptions—the lives and afterlives—of these two iconic musician-activists.

In late June 2020, amid the ongoing pandemic and nationwide actions against racism and state violence, Redmond and Stadler held a public conversation about their books over Zoom. This was the inaugural event of the online Popular Music Books in Process series, a collaboration between the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, the Pop Conference, and IASPM-US organized to let writers and scholars with new books on popular music connect with readers and interlocutors. Redmond and Stadler’s lively, erudite conversation touched on government repression, voice, race, globalization, recording technologies, disability, illness, stigma, and the myriad ways the archives left behind by artists—both of their own work, as with Guthrie’s notebooks and song lyrics, and of others’ interactions with them, as with the wide range of responses to Robeson’s career—can both tune and detune ongoing engagements with the meaning of their music and their lives.

ERIC WEISBARD: Hi everybody, welcome to the Popular Music Books in Process series. So happy we have a nice robust attendance at our inaugural event, and two great speakers. The idea here was that authors can’t do in-stores, we’re all desperate to see our friends at conferences, and people writing books need to be reassured that people want to read them. For all those reasons, it seemed like a good thing to do this.

Let me just thank, once again, Shana Redmond, author of the book *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson*, out earlier this year on Duke
University Press, professor of musicology and African American studies at UCLA, in conversation with Gus Stadler, author of *Woody Guthrie: An Intimate Life*, out on Beacon Press, professor of English at Haverford College. Why don’t the two of you take it away, please?

**GUSTAVUS STADLER:** First of all, I just want to say thank you to Eric and Carl and Kimberly for organizing this. And you know, I think also just even a broader thanks in the spirit of this event to so many audiences at Pop Con. I think I gave maybe three papers based on this material over the last seven years. Then I started to get worried I’d be just known as that Woody Guthrie guy and I stopped. But it’s been an incredibly nurturing space, and I think that’s true for a lot of people here, so it’s really good to be back virtually with you all.

We’re going to introduce each other’s books and read a little bit of each other’s books to get things started.

So, I’m honored to share this virtual space with Professor Shana Redmond, whose book *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson* is truly remarkable, a work of aesthetic and conceptual experimentation as much as scholarly criticism or biography. Accordingly, *Everything Man* strays much farther from the conventions of biography than my book. It’s really more of its own genre, deftly organized around a series of concepts or epistemological figures: vibration, hologram, play, installation, environment, and frequency. And these figures in turn organize a depiction of Robeson, not so much the man as the effect. Guiding us on a journey that leads from the mining communities of Wales to the sonic reverberations of the ceibo tree and many places in between, *Everything Man* is a book less of narrative than of lush immersion, of enchantment. Or at least that was the way I felt while reading it, and I am curious to hear more about how it felt to write. Shana turns again and again to the capital-V Voice as the crucial figure for Robeson’s black presence, whether his body was present or not. And throughout, I heard the book’s prose not so much as accompaniment as loving, unifying harmony. Shall I go ahead and read a little bit?

**SHANA REDMOND:** Yeah, let’s start by giving folks a sense of what it might sound like, each of our projects.

**GS:** “To understand Paul Robeson one must begin with sound. Described in the 1940s as ‘democracy’s greatest voice,’ his was a method of great intrigue and capacity. He was the ‘only man in the world who could turn a concert into a rally for the rights of minority groups’ and it was in recognition of this power that he perfected his vocal technology.” And this is a quote from Robeson: “‘God gave me the voice that people want to hear, whether in song or in speech. I shall take my voice wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom or the words that might inspire hope and courage in the face of despair and fear.’ The travels of his Voice, through concerts, rallies, and recordings alike, spoke to communities in all reaches of the globe but started in dramatic fashion at home.”

And then Shana includes a really lovely poem by Beah Richards, which I’m going to maybe pass over.

“His singing on concert stages and wax was public, but its ability to perforate the divisions between performer and listener made it exceptionally intimate; as Richards argues, he spoke for them, through them, as they labored for poverty wages or sought their own tones and beliefs. His songs became their tune and light, namely
those spirituals of sustenance and faith, and in the process, those who sang imagined their own justice in situated locales of intense vulnerability. Sometimes he inhabited them, forcing their voices out with his words. At other times, their voices were perfectly pitched to his and delivered on his breath. By that transference Robeson was multiply present, embodied, and accessible well beyond his immediate time and space; he was sought, conjured, and enlivened through sound and thought by poets, singers, and communities near and far.

“As independence and civil rights movements spread throughout the colonial and African world, Robeson developed a repertoire of sonic methods in order to be present there too, even in the absence of his right to travel. He understood that social movements are about feeling as much as cognition—sensing that others are with you even when you can’t see them (due to distance, incarceration, or even death). Robeson’s sound migrations—the performances that allowed his detained or silenced voice to take flight—are indicative of a rising wind of Black internationalism and compel an investigation of the relationship between sound and sight, fixity and enclosure, geography and citizenship. Through his practices of music making, Robeson’s Black voice became what Alexander Weheliye elsewhere theorizes as ‘a series of strategies and/or techniques of corporeality’ that allowed him to transcend and transgress physical and geopolitical borders as well as racial boundaries. The tortured and circuitous transfer of his voice through technologies of mobility, the body, amplification, and recording during the period of his US detention made anthems out of ballads and bodies out of aural fragments. In the process, Robeson was made manifest globally without travel, without consent, and without reservation.”

I’ll stop there.

SR: Okay. So, the process that Gus and I have discussed is introducing one another, reading a selection that we have chosen from each other’s projects, and then we’ll return to reading selections that we want to share from our own projects a little bit farther along in the conversation.

But I’m really pleased to be here, I want to echo all of Gus’s thanks and congratulations for launching a project such as this. Thank you to everyone. And I was really pleased to be in conversation with Gus and thankful to you, Gus, for being willing to discuss this project in advance of folks being able to hold it in their hands. So, hopefully I will do it some justice.

Gus Stadler’s *Woody Guthrie: An Intimate Life* is a re-introduction to a hero who we’ve met but do not yet fully know. Recasting this iconic troubadour of the Left is no easy task, as you might imagine. Biographies and think-pieces of his life and legacy abound, his songs lionized on both sides of the Atlantic, his machine enshrined in a glorious curation of twentieth-century struggle. Yet, for all its accolades and altars, Guthrie’s life as it is known publicly and discursively is bound by a critical absence that Stadler proves threatens to undo our knowledges of this person. Stadler accomplishes his intervention not by leveraging a shocking new discovery—“breaking news, Communist idol is gay”—as so many others have done, but by drawing our attention to the understudied and rich creations that illuminate a reckoning with his first instrument, the one that caused him so much pleasure and pain: his body. This is the new terrain of knowledge that opens us to Guthrie’s love of dance and dancers, his paintings and poems that are as lush as his songs, as well as his
political rage against the capitalist institutionalization of care. For Stadler, Guthrie’s periods of institutionalization are not salacious tales with which to bring a folk god down to human size—although there is, in this task, something helpful—rather he understands them as intensive periods of listening and experimentation by an artist who, in being disarticulated from his complicated body, has also been separated from the other art forms that reveal the deeply expressive and intimate forms of his political ideology. In lingering beautifully in those things unspoken and unpublished, Stadler reveals how Guthrie learned to live and imagine in and beyond a world in need of revolution on every scale.

So, I’m going to read a portion that I found particularly interesting: it’s from the “Look Away” chapter towards the end of the book, which is situating his southern white notebook, as Gus calls it, which is a series of drawings and sketches and notes in which he really struggles with race in a very kind of visceral and poignant way.

“The material between the covers of the ‘Southern White’ notebook plays with nudity and spectacle, too. But what is perhaps finally most startling about this strange, troubled document is that it won’t, or can’t, expunge the matter of whiteness. As noted, the phrases ‘Southern White’ and ‘White Only’ appear on nearly every page, often scrawled in pencil, presumably after the production of the painted image—even when that image’s relationship to racism is far from clear. The iterations of these phrases across the book leave the impression of someone compulsively speaking of and from whiteness, as if trapped inside it. The words appear, in a way, like stigmata, puncture wounds riddled with shame. Once again, there seems to be no pure space, no escape offered either viewer or artist. Several of these images embody the overall feeling of inextricability; the nude bodies are trapped, enmeshed, tangled within and behind the knotted branches of (Southern) whiteness. They provide a visual echo of the way Guthrie described his own feelings of being wrapped up in shame, and the shame that surrounds nakedness, whether literal nudity or that of a person openly airing their psychic wounds.

As with so much of the material in this book, these images reflect an unfamiliar Woody Guthrie. There is no simple message here, no pat slogans indicating Southern white racism. The images are not ‘topical’ or ‘protest’ art in any familiar form. They look nothing like the art shown at the two major exhibitions of anti-lynching art mounted in New York City in 1935, one of them organized by Black communists. They don’t uplift; they don’t exhort. They don’t even mourn, precisely. Indeed, unlike so much of the art with which Guthrie is famously associated, the response they seek from their audience is, especially by ‘Old Left’ standards, opaque. The protest genre typically positions artist (or singer) and audience as outside the problem they address, not part of it. In contrast, Guthrie’s images are not only unruly, they flirt with arousing a salacious response in their own viewers, implicating them in the very type of looking they are depicting. Like the Look Away image, this work is about looking, about the allure of sensational images. Rather than addressing the scourge of racial violence directly, the images focus on how it is mediated, on how representations of racial violence operate culturally. The images track these phenomena, not racism, as a matter of individual conscience. It is likely less valuable to translate these works into a clear message than to understand them as documents
of experience—in this case, the experience of a middle-aged, southern white man sitting with the implications of his past.”

So, I think the framing for this discussion today is a really interesting one. I don’t know, Eric, if it ever became “Detuning Biography”—

EW: It is now “Detuning.”

SR: I think the detuning element of it is a really interesting way to approach the conversation because I didn’t set out to write a biography. I think, Gus, you had some sense of a biography in mind perhaps, but what of that form and your book in relationship to it?

GS: Well, my book looks a lot more like a conventional biography than yours, Shana. And the whole time I was working on the book, I was wavering between whether this was going to be a more scholarly book or a trade book. I ended up deciding I wanted to go for it with the trade press. And that in itself kind of moved me more in the direction of a familiar form of biography with a narrative. But I also wanted to bring forth this really different Woody Guthrie that I encountered when I got into the archive. Almost immediately, I saw this other person there, and to me that meant focusing on a series of events that in the other biographies are not major events. So, like his wife who was a Martha Graham dancer and his involvement with the New York dance world, or his writing about sex, and then his arrests on obscenity charges, and his time in a sex deviants clinic, and then his first extended period of hospitalization having to do with his Huntington’s disease. And a big part of what I was trying to do was to counter this tendency in the biographies that are out there—there are two or three—to see the part of his career in which he was starting to get sick as inevitably a kind of decline. And, you know, it had an impact on him. Huntington’s is a very—the onset is very slow, and you start to notice these little symptoms in your body of little tremors and sometimes violent outbursts and things, but it takes years to really fully develop. So, he was manifesting symptoms for a while, but it took a while to manifest itself fully. Anyway, I was trying to do the book in a way that honored that period when he was still working but he was also sick. Because that’s one of the things that the archive taught me, was that he was still working a lot, he was writing a lot of songs, doing a lot of painting, writing plays, all kinds of things. He had a lot of trouble getting published, getting recorded, and a lot of that has to do with his illness too. But he wasn’t completely under the control of his illness, and I think in some ways the illness was something that was providing him with certain kinds of insight, actually, potentially even into something like race relations. And just being in this position of—more and more in this position of like a disabled man I think made him think about politics in a different way too, a different way from his Old Left investments in labor and, you know, the common man.

SR: Yeah, and you draw that out really nicely. I think that’s part of what I really enjoyed about the chapter that I just read from, was this being kind of a full onset period for his Huntington’s. And him using this notebook as an opportunity to expand upon his thinking about racial power, but through himself. And then also carrying through this line that’s throughout the book around stigma and his railing against stigma in various types of forms and scales, but the intimacy with which he felt it at that moment through his uncontrollable, at times, body, I thought was really compelling.
I also liked how you start the book. So, the opening scene where he’s meeting his second wife, Marjorie, and is not able to keep proper time for the dancers, only really hit me as a profound moment as I read the rest of the book, in recognition of its relationship to the disease. But I also was just really struck by it, even in that very moment of reading it in the early pages, because he was a musician, right? And he would often perform alone and acoustically, and time is not as strict perhaps in those scenes. But I thought it was a really interesting way to open the book, this musician who was off-time.

GS: Thanks. I think as far as my version of an alternate biography, I’d been thinking about some of his writing about sexuality and this preoccupation with the body, and then I tried to figure out what is the origin moment for that, you know? Where can I locate him coming into this critical consciousness of the body? And it seemed to me that it was that moment when he meets Marjorie Mazia, the Martha Graham dancer, and a number of other avant-garde dancers in Greenwich Village. And at the same time he was writing about his mother’s decline from Huntington’s in his memoir, and just that image of him being around these really strong, powerful women and writing about the decline of his mother’s body at the same time just seemed like such a chilling but also generative moment from which to start this discussion of a different Guthrie than we know.

But I’d like to ask you, too, as you were thinking about the book, did it become clear at some point that the biography was just going to leave certain things unspeakable? I mean, I’m not actually sure that you ever thought about writing a biography, but you must have been thinking about—I mean, because you knew people would read this in some way in relationship to that genre. And I am just curious to hear what you felt was too constricting or limiting about the genre.

SR: I never intended to write a biography. In fact, I was telling Gus the other day that I didn’t expect that I would ever return to Robeson after having included him in Anthem. He was my favorite troubadour of that project. And so, I knew he would forever be with me in a very material way, but I didn’t intend ever to write about him over any significant scale. But I was doing work for other projects and out doing interdisciplinary work, as we do when going to exhibits and listening promiscuously, and he kept coming up in these weird forms and odd places. And one artist would lead me to another artist who was also referencing him. So Gus mentioned in the excerpt he read a poem in the book from Gwendolyn Brooks—there are a lot of poems in the book, actually, because that became a really foundational element of my archive. There are so many poets, June Jordan, Pablo Neruda, all of these individuals who wrote poems specifically dedicated to and about Robeson, as a means of connecting him to the broader cosmos of which he was part and had so richly influenced. So, the poets were some of the thinkers who most insisted that I take him seriously. After some number of encounters with him where I was just noting his presence, at a certain point I had to fully stop and say, “There is something here, there is something that needs to be said. Why is he coming back? Why does he keep coming back in these ways?” And especially for someone who’s been so vilified, so erased, particularly at the hands of the federal government, it was a really unique opportunity for me to think about how the state fails. And I’m really into that [laughs]. I want to talk about how the state fails, and they failed to contain this person, who has not only
recurred in a number of artists' treatments, a number of poetry writings, but also in the lore and archives of the Welsh nation, as you mentioned, Gus.

So I went to Wales, and Wales has the best preservation of his legacy and memory. And it's for that long-standing relationship that he had with the miners. So, at a certain point the evidence was just overwhelming, something had to be done, but I knew I wasn't interested in a biography. I think part of what I'm less interested in with that form, as much as I rely on it, as many of them as I adore, what I'm less interested in is both the linearity of it—I don't want to tell a linear story, that's not how my mind works, but that's also not how I understand the world to work. Particularly, in thinking about Black radicalism, there is always this back and forth that's happening, especially as the music demonstrates, right? It's not a procedural type of practice. So, both the linearity of the biographical form, or at least as it's traditionally understood, and also in kind of the minutiae that I think the discipline itself has insisted upon: minutiae that, while developing certain curiosities and interests, may actually be less important than the way they accumulate on a large scale and tell stories about power and intrigue and the futures of the world. And I think the best biographies actually do both of those things, they focus on the granular level and the canopy level. But I wanted to be able to tell the story as I wanted to tell it. And I don't think the biographical form always offers itself in that way. So, having workshoped the book at a couple of places, it was clear to me that I needed to make some comment about biography in the introduction, and I explicitly say it's not a biography. If I were writing that sentence today, I think I would say something different. I think I'd say that it's a non-biography, which is slightly different to me, because it is telling the story of this person in ways that I think are really necessary and urgent and compelling. I don't think he can be contained by the biographical form, while at the same time it's important that we learn some of these pieces of his life in order to tell these grander stories about the Left, about radical internationalism, about our understanding of Black musical forms. So, I would change that line if I were writing it today, but what I do say in the introduction that is still true is that Robeson is less subject than opportunity. He allows me to tell certain types of stories, not as a singular individual but as a collective, that there are many, many people who actually shape his form and carry him well into the twenty-first century. And so, that's what I am curious about and interested in.

GS: The reason I read the passage of yours that I read is that I was really intrigued by the way you talk about recording. The chapter's about three locations of reception in which Robeson had an impact.

SR: Right. It's Wales, Bandung, and then New York City.

GS: In each of these, he was not at any of these locations in a bodily present way. And it made me think a lot about recording and how we talk about that word and how narrowly we use that word just to refer to records or essentially music as commodities. And there are other ways of conceiving of that process, that technology. I just wondered if you had any more thoughts about Robeson's detuning of recording too, a sort of re-shifting of how we can think about that in relation to a musician.

SR: That passage is from the first chapter in which I'm trying to argue his holographic presence. So, as Gus mentioned, the three scenes that I examined, he is not physically present in any of them, and so he's relying on various recording technologies, various
communications technologies, and in the final instance he’s relying, in death, on his memory and his lingering vocal trace as a means of revivification. The language of hologram came to me in part through the descriptions of his voice. It’s so singularly recognizable to anyone who’s heard it, it could be no one else. And so, in the instance in which you’re hearing this voice that you know singularly to be this individual, what other types of affective ties are being developed in that moment? Because yes, it’s about a history or a memory of that person, but it’s also about the experience of sitting alongside that sound. And in hearing that sound—of course, vocalists are unlike other instrumentalists in many respects, one of which being that the instrument is the body. So, if we’re hearing this singular voice that we recognize as his, it means that we’re hearing his body, and the holographic then is kind of a play on thinking about proximity and presence, even with such radical absence. So, both of the first two scenes are set in the 1950s when his passport was revoked by the federal government, which meant that he could not travel beyond the contiguous United States—but was desperate to be next to the Welsh miners in one case, and be present at the Bandung conference in the other scene. And so it was a really interesting opportunity to think about what technology was capable of, but what certain instruments are also capable of and what kinds of animation were being developed on the other side of hearing. Because part of the scene with the Welsh miners is made possible due to a recording that was made, this was a transatlantic phone call that was made that allowed for a conference between the miners’ Eisteddfod and Robeson in New York City, as he was in his do-it-yourself studio. And so, to have this recording of that exchange, those long pauses that—you know, they feel long as we’re listening to them but are really only a few seconds long—but those pauses between the end of his voice and the applause from the miners and vice versa, gave me a lot to think about in trying to understand what the technology produces, what it does not, but also what difference embodiment makes in mediating those gaps. Because there was already a filler there, already a connectivity, and having the president of the miner’s union write him back after that conference and said it was as if you were here with us, said everything to me about what that intimacy—what intimacy is possible through those technologies and how he best took advantage of it, even as he was so violently detained in the United States.

It’s interesting to me in your work with Woody Guthrie, Gus, there is quite a catalog of songs that you mention in the project, some number of which were not recorded, as you mentioned, due to his physical condition, due also to the content of some of those songs in response or in production during the second red scare they just would have never seen the light of day in that way. But I’m interested in how you—because you’ve written about recording technology quite a bit—how you think about this project in relationship to that work. Because now we’re looking at these unpublished, unaired moments, right? So, how do you situate that performance? Because it is a type of performance, inside of your thinking, your previous thinking on recording technologies.

GS: Yeah, that’s really interesting. When I was first working on the project, I was struck by how relatively few recording sessions he had: really only three or four major ones, and one where he recorded over 100 songs that provide some huge percentage of the Guthrie songs that we have on CD and vinyl now. It was a really different model
from what we’re used to now, the regular routine recording. There are all these songs
in the archive, like thousands of songs—and these are just songs from which Nora
Guthrie, Woody’s daughter, drew to give to Wilco and Billy Bragg and a lot of other
musicians now, to write music for. Because Guthrie didn’t write down any music.
And when I was first thinking about that and looking at some of that material I was
like, “These aren’t really songs, they’re just poems.” There’s no chord chart or
anything like that. And I came around on that, and, you know, I think there’s a line
in your book where you say something like “the song—” I’m going to twist this, but
it’s like “the song is the form—the song was the form of—his form and his mind’s
form” or something like that—do you know what I’m talking about?
SR: Yeah, yeah. I can’t recite it—
GS: It’s more poetically delivered than that. But I think that was true for him, too. Like,
he saw things in terms of song. So, when he wrote a song, he was probably hearing
a melody. And then I started noticing how in a lot of the prose that you would
suddenly start noticing rhyme and metric patterns. The first song on the first
Mermaid Avenue Wilco/Billy Bragg album, “Walt Whitman’s Niece,” that’s actually
written out as prose, like there are no line breaks, and it’s a totally metrical, rhyming
song. Part of the reason that he wasn’t recording much was because of the red
scare and the other part was that he was ill. And that lack of opportunity meant that
songwriting itself was the form of recording that he was doing. He didn’t have
a four-track or whatever.
SR: And didn’t even have his guitar so often, right?
GS: When he was in the hospital, they wouldn’t let him have his guitar. So I guess
I would think about that as another alternate form of recording, and not just think
about them as half-finished songs. Even though we can’t hear what he was hearing—
I mean, it would be amazing if we could hear what he was hearing, but... yeah.
SR: Yeah, it’s amazing to consider what transitions with these people. And I think
that that’s part of what both of our books are kind of subtly addressing as well is, are
the many layers of loss that the people who remain are experiencing around the
passing of this person and because they’re such public figures, because they’re artists,
that there are these long reaches that begin to actually then materialize affinities,
familiarities, intimacies, that the artists themselves have never accounted for. Or
would have likely not encouraged, but because we take them up in all of these really
personal ways, they become something else. And I think that was part of my
investment in thinking through form rather than time, as I talked about him in the
book. Because time was almost irrelevant, it was really about what shape he was
taking: How was he being conjured? How was he being revived? Because that told
me a lot, not only about him but more than that, how he was being kept alive,
how people were willing to remember and imagine themselves in the present
through his shape, through his sound. So again, that’s another reason why the
biography just didn’t work, because I wasn’t telling his story alone. I was trying to
tell a story about a political present, actually. And a biography of a political present
would be a really interesting project, you know, had I conceived of it that way.
But I think that the types of relations that these types of figures were able to
manifest, and over so many generations—that they are literally developing
disciples—Harry Belafonte identifies himself as a disciple of Paul Robeson, right?
You think about Dylan and Guthrie, that there are all of these ways that we see these people coming back, subtly and not so subtly.

GS: Of course Guthrie never really got to experience his rise to this state of an icon. And sometimes when I was reading things, he would be in a despondent mood and I would just feel so sad that he would have no idea what would happen, after Dylan and that era’s folk revival would really lift his profile. Another thing that’s interesting, and maybe obvious to people about our projects, is that both of these figures come from the same time and in fact from the same circle of people, of Popular Front Leftists. And, you know, I think within that time he wasn’t—Robeson was much better known than Woody Guthrie was, you know? He had a level of celebrity that was—well, he’d been in Hollywood and all of that. He was in everything, he did everything, right? So that’s interesting too, the legacy question and how their legacies ended up, the shapes they ended up taking, and—

SR: And how they ended their lives. I mean, you know, him struggling so valiantly with his disease, Robeson living the last ten years of his life in obscurity basically, right? I can’t imagine living through that moment and reckoning with that moment in the ways that both of them would have had to.

GS: Yeah, definitely. I saw you give a talk or you were in a conversation with my colleague Asali Solomon at the Robeson House in Philadelphia a few months ago, right before the pandemic, it was like the last thing—

SR: Like a week before, yeah.

GS: And it was interesting because it was a different kind of crowd—there were some academics there, but it was largely not academics—this was in West Philly. And a lot of people were asking questions like, “What is his relevance now?” or I think I heard somebody even ask, “What is his relevance to 32nd and Walnut or whatever?” and, “What would be useful to tell kids about him?” And you answered in incredibly eloquent ways that I was in awe of, but I was wondering also, how do you feel when you are getting those questions, and is that something that your book has been kind of generating in other places for other less academic audiences?

SR: Yeah, I’ve gotten that question a couple of times. I mean, I really only was able to touch down with the book in conversation a few times before the pandemic. I did a daytime event before the Robeson House at Uncle Bobbie’s and was asked a similar question, actually, by an educator who works in a school named for Paul Robeson, and the children walk by his image in the hallway every day and don’t know who the hell he is. And there’s no effort on the part of the school to actually display this person in anything more than that two-dimensional format hanging on the wall. So, this question about how do we make him relevant for these newer generations, it is a tricky one, on the one hand because I don’t want to be prescriptive around such things. I mean, I think part of the investment for me has to be about what he does for the person who will ultimately speak, and if he means something to you, then to share that with people will resonate on some form. But on the other hand, of course, it’s also my belief that he will appear at some point, that people will cross paths with him, it’s just about attuning folks to listen for those moments. So, when you hear that song on a television program, or playing in the background of a film scene, or hear somebody in dialogue drop the name “Robeson,” have you done the work to understand what that is, what it might mean, how to
situate it? So, on the one hand, I think there's just a very practical need to teach about this person, you know? He matters in so many different kinds of ways even if it is just to document for people how Black folks are treated in this country. And I think the present is illuminating that opportunity every single day, and there are many different ways of telling that story. But because he was able to impact so many different parts of popular culture, of US and global culture, there's no dearth of opportunities to tell his story. When [Colin] Kaepernick happened, I wrote a short piece about [Robeson's] being an early NFL player and the legacy that Kaepernick is inheriting, of Robeson's relationship to athleticism and what it meant for his political career. There are all of these opportunities for him to be present and I think the goal is really to attune people to the fact that he was here and hope that they'll be curious enough to seek him out, or to hear him when he comes.

GS: Somewhat similarly, I'm really skeptical of Leftists who say things like, “Oh, we really need a new Woody Guthrie now.” That's misguided. But there is some way, I think, at this moment when the words socialism and anti-fascism are back in currency that there is some—he's worth having out there, you know? And in fact, somebody chalked the lyrics to “All You Fascists Bound to Lose” on the steps of the PMA during the protest, the first wave of protests. And so, it is interesting how these reputations change, and I think he—well, I have a couple of different ideas about what might have happened if he had lived. I think he would have not appreciated a certain defanging of his music into a campfire-type music, and censorship of the private property verse in “This Land Is Your Land,” and all of that. But—

SR: Or the adoption of the song as the campaign song of Bush I.

GS: I mean, yeah [laughs]. I gave a talk about that chapter that you were reading from, Shana—that's about his reckoning with his whiteness, and his past, and his father having been likely involved with a really notorious lynching—at the Guthrie Center one year, and Joe Klein, who wrote the first big biography of Guthrie, was in the audience. And he's a pretty well-known journalist, he wrote that novel Primary Colors about the Clinton campaign, and he's kind of, like, a middle-of-the-road type guy. When he got up to do his talk he said—directly addressing my talk—his talk was called “Woody's People,” and basically the argument was that Woody's people are now Trump's voters. And then he directly said, “I think talking about whiteness, white privilege, is a bad idea. You're only going to lose those voters if you keep broadcasting terms like that.” And I didn’t get a chance in the talk to respond to him but then afterwards he did come up to me and I think he was going to sort of apologize. But I did say to him, “You know, Woody Guthrie or Woody Guthrie people would never have blamed their woes on affirmative action. They would always blame it on capitalism.” They wouldn’t blame it on transgender people in the bathroom, they would blame it on capitalism. They are not Woody's people if they are not thinking like that. He was kind of like, “Yeah, maybe [laugh].”

SR: I mean, if he's blaming Huntington's on capitalism I don't think it's a stretch [laughs] to believe that he would feel similarly about these more structural evidences of harm.

GS: Right. I hope that there is some way that he represents some kind of possible wedge in the politics of contemporary whiteness and the cultural wars and the ways those affect politics. And I hope my book’s reminding people about some of that.
SR: I think that’s what I found so interesting about that entire chapter, was seeing him be so self-referential in his understanding and documentation of racial hierarchies. In ways that I think we kind of assume about that generation of the Left but don’t necessarily have as much material evidence of, at least in common circulation, so I think that language of it actually makes a big difference. Gus and I were talking about the fact that as he mentioned these two overlapped significantly in time, right? Certainly in the similar political circles. But we don’t know that they ever actually met, which is an interesting kind of question mark between these two formidable figures of the Old Left. We know that they were both at Peekskill in ’47, Robeson performing and Woody witnessing in terror what was happening at that site, but I’m really curious. Maybe some more digging will produce that link where they one day shook hands. I can’t imagine that that didn’t happen.

GS: Yeah, many, many people in common between them. And I really think that that event was a major event in his thinking about race and whiteness in particular, the terror of being attacked by a white mob.

SR: Yeah, it’ll do it.

GS: Do we want to move to questions?

EW: I think Carl’s been monitoring some discussion in the chat room. Carl, do you want to steer the ship here for a little?

CARL WILSON: Sure. So, the first question I have up then is from Ann [Powers], so maybe she can speak.

ANN POWERS: Oh, hi. Gee, I was hoping you would read the question, Carl [laughs]. I don’t know what it was anymore. So, first I’ll just say thank you. That was amazing, and really helpful for me as someone who is working on a not-biography, Shana as you said, or an anti-biography or whatever it is. I really appreciate your words on that. I have a question for both of you. Which is, thinking about something you said, Gus, about how Woody Guthrie didn’t have a four-track, so we don’t know if those were songs. And thinking about the ubiquity of the screen image of Paul Robeson and his connections to Hollywood, but at the same time, Shana, as you mentioned, the obscurity of his final years and his long exile, are those realities—the kind of journey into privacy, whether for reasons that were welcome, or in both cases, I think unwelcome—is that even possible in the current age? And was it possible after the wider availability of recording technology, even before our current ubiquitous recording technology? In other words, is there something about technology that makes these two artists as figures unique? And maybe not unique, but bound to that historical moment which we will never experience again, their silence in those moments or their privacy or their relative inaccessibility while they are also ubiquitous through resonance as you say?

GS: A lot of what I’m talking about in terms of Guthrie seeing everything through song and maybe hearing melodies that don’t show up, I mean I think that’s part of the folk tradition. And there aren’t that many melodies anyway, like, you know—I mean, his songs only have like five melodies and they’re mostly ripped off from the Carter Family. Which is again an interesting kind of reproduction and recording. And I’m wondering if this was kind of like a hybrid moment, where that older tradition of recording, that’s private in a way, but it’s also collective, is coming up against or with, is sort of building a web with these new electronic technologies that are—
been around for a while, but they’re becoming much more advanced in their fidelity, and the market’s getting much bigger. You’re sort of asking me, do we lose some access to something private?

AP: Not so much that we lose access to something, but the way we think about artists who left us before they could have possibly made home recordings. You know what I mean? Versus those who, say, from the ’60s onward, really from the moment of Woody Guthrie’s death onward almost, things change, you know? And then, Shana, I think that the shocking absence of Robeson that you were talking about, in knowledge of him—I mean, I don’t know [if] this is a weird way to say it, but if there were a Robeson-like figure now, could he have had a vlog in exile and spoken to us? And then never truly been in exile in the same way. I don’t know. It’s just playful thoughts.

SR: I mean, he did record throughout the 1950s from a makeshift studio in New York after all contracts were canceled with Columbia and all the major labels. I think for him it’s less about the influence of technology than it is about the influence of the industry. There are many, many recordings that actually have come out in the ’70s and even into the ’80s, so even the Porthcawl, the Welsh transatlantic concert that I write about and mentioned, that recording came out in 2007, right? So his voice continues to be produced in ways that are more accessible to people, but it has a lot more to do with what the industry has decided upon than what he was agentive in having recorded or conceived of himself. Right, so those 1950 recordings under the imprint of Othello Records, there are some amazing recordings that he was able to put out himself, but then you have this kind of abundance in some cases of compilations that these industry labels, which had blacklisted him, cut his contracts, then produce after he dies because they recognize, of course, that there’s currency and value in that. So, I think the industry for him has played a bigger role, perhaps, in the silence or presence of his voice than the technology itself. But I think were there to be someone of this generation who was somewhat similarly positioned politically and had gone into exile, I think just the lure of social media would complicate that relationship to exile, right? You think about someone like, you know, not at all a one-to-one, but a Dave Chapelle or even a Mos Def, these people who go into short-term, longer-term exile on the continent, and are, you know, sending up remote kind of signals of “I’m still here,” dropping a single here, there. There is a different type of control that they are able to manifest over their own timeline and relationship to the public that was not at all the same for him. But of course, they have an entire kind of apparatus around them, right? Even if it is one of their singular creation in this moment of infamy. So, I do think the technology then plays a significant role in making them available to us, but the industry does too.

AP: Thank you.

FRANKLIN BRUNO: So both of these are fascinating projects, you know, obviously rich figures to write about who were both at the center of many complicated things and I would love to be able to ask both of you a bunch of things. But just for Shana—I’ve noticed this thing you say about there’s so many compilations, I have, you know, probably six or seven different Robeson CDs that have a lot of overlap and I’ll see something, and I think “Do I need that one?” So, I was wondering just for, you know, sort of research purposes, is there anything like
a good discography or sessionography of Robeson at this point, like a place to look to figure out when different things are from and where you can find them? But the more substantial question is, Paul Robeson, sort of famously a polymath, but not largely a composer or songwriter, he depended on others for material, including found and arranged—I don’t know to what degree the arrangements sort of issue from him—global folk songs, but [he] also worked with a range of songwriters both commercially and less commercially from Earl Robinson and John Latouche on “Ballad for Americans” to, you know, there’s the kind of famous relationship with “Old Man River” and how he changed it, and Mark Blitzstein and, you know, figures of the Left, figures not so much of the Left, et cetera. So, since you are writing a book that is not about him but about a community around him, I wonder how you figure Robeson as a collaborator, like what role he took in finding the material, shaping the material, choosing, rejecting, all of that.

SR: I talk a little more about some of the music that was being sent to him by lesser-known musicians, particularly folks from Eastern Europe, from Russia. I talk a little bit about that in the chapter in *Anthem*. I talk less about that in this book. But obviously the whole project is thinking about collaboration, whether he was agentive in that collaboration or not. But you know, the longest durational collaboration of his musical life was with his accompanist Lawrence Brown, who was a fantastic ethnographer and arranger of Black folk song, and obviously he also had a relationship to the musics of Harry T. Burleigh, whom he also knew and worked with. So, I do some of that situational work around his catalog in the *Anthem* chapter. But one of the things that I draw out in the chapter that I titled “Play” is thinking about rehearsal and its significance in his longevity, the longevity of his voice, right, having literally sung for forty years, but also the endurance that he was able to build over his lifetime as a figure, as a champion of certain communities. So, there’s a theoretical element of rehearsal that I’m bringing to bear on what I might call that collaborative practice as well. But I think the kind of fine details between various people is a really interesting one, particularly composers. I do some of that with some of the poetry that I use in the book. So, as I mention, that becomes a big archival source for me is the poetry, and some number of them that I quote in the book are not by authors who are published or widely recognized. So there’s definitely that relationship, but again he may not have lived to see that collaboration; he’s now being spoken to by this whole other generation of artists and activists. But as far as kind of a black-and-white documentary-type document of his discography, there is actually a really interesting, helpful one that is on the University of Chicago website, buried somewhere in their Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race. If you email me, I’ll send you the link for it. It was helpful for me and it shows the number of times certain songs were recorded and gives some comprehensivity to his discography.

FB: Great, thanks. That’s really helpful.

SARA MARCUS: I was really struck, Shana, in your book by the way that you’re theorizing absence, shape-shifting, waiting, and specifically voice and capital-V Voice as a resource or a presence that lingers and that can wait for people to take it up in various forms. The question for Shana is just if you want to expand a little bit more on the figure of the capital-V Voice. And then my question for Gus would be
whether you think that Guthrie’s persistence as an icon has a similar or different relationship to blackness than Robeson. Like is it similarly through voice, small or big V, through which Guthrie survives, or is there another figure that seems apt for you in talking about Guthrie’s ongoing cultural presence?

SR: My investment in thinking through the Voice, capital V, is trying to actually bring a different analytic to our studies of vocal performances. That they are actually about the form and the function—which is the subtitle of the book. You know, so often we have folks who place emphasis on one or the other, and my argument in the book is that by looking at a figure like Robeson we are able to actually examine both really robustly and understand their inter-reliance. That the form and shape of his voice, these compositions, the close analytical readings that we’re able to bring to tone and timbre and all these other evidences of his skill as a performer do not exist outside of the function to which his voice was put. The whole reason that he was singing was in order to actually commune with, struggle alongside, encourage people around him. And so, for a figure like him you can’t absent one or the other. My experience, in reading the historiography, has been that it’s mostly the form that’s been sacrificed. His work as a vocalist has been under-theorized in the historiography of his life. He’s been taken up significantly by a labor Left, for rightful reason. But in the process, they have forgotten or withheld an opportunity for audiences to actually know how he made himself present, and it was first and foremost through his voice. So, I wanted to really insist on the fact that he was a singer, and to take that very, very seriously, as seriously as he took it. Which was not kind of a passing fancy, it was not the edutainment portion of the rally or the march or the protest. It was actually the reason for being there, it was the point, it was the conversation for him. Because it carried with it so many genealogies, so many means and methods of thought and performance, and its impact was something that was felt locally, nationally, and internationally. So, the capital V, as awkward as it sometimes may seem in the sentence structure, in the syntax, is actually just a way to insist on the fact that all of these things are collaborating through his body and through his thinking at the same time.

GS: In Guthrie’s case—his singing influenced Dylan’s singing, at least for a time. And there is something seductive enough in his voice that, like, this kid from Minnesota wanted to copy him and use that as a springboard to become the biggest folk music musician in the world. And the family was actually kind of freaked out by that, by Dylan’s imitation, what they considered sort of stealing from Guthrie. And even they thought that he was stealing from, in particular, some of the gestures that had emerged with the Huntington’s, some of the jerky stuff and vocal patterns of little eruptions or interruptions or shakiness. So, for a time they were actually kind of angry about that. But I’m trying to think about more in a more contemporary way—I mean, Shana’s book actually helps me think about this. I think Shana does this great job of depicting how the capital-V Voice involves the conjuring of this complete sense of presence and that you can’t sort of distribute the senses into their normally kind of Balkanized separate zones. You know, his body’s there when you hear him. And I don’t think Guthrie’s voice leads in the same way that Robeson’s does, but at the same time, the most iconic image of him is
the “This Machine Kills Fascists” image. And there is something about that image that sings. I feel like it’s an example of a kind of multi-sensory image—there are words, it’s a striking kind of guerilla pose, there’s a guitar there, there’s these signifiers of sound, of language, and the body there in a very dramatic position. So, I don’t think it’s just the voice so much as the voice within this kind of constellation of things, for his legacy. I mean, other people might think differently. I have a feeling many more people would recognize Paul Robeson’s voice today than would recognize Woody Guthrie’s voice, to be honest.

SR: I think that has something to do with the catalog too. I think there’s a different repetition for spirituals and things than some of the more traditionally favored and hallowed Left folk songs, right? Even if we think about choral arrangements that are taking up the spirituals and keeping them in circulation.

GS: Yeah, that makes sense.

SCOTT SAUL: My mind’s kind of reeling over what Gus just said about the Woody Guthrie family, you know, being so freaked out about Dylan’s inheriting of his late voice. My question was about how this makes us rethink the culture of the Left—or particularly the Old Left from, like, you know, the ’30s to the ’50s. It seems like both of them are really about amplifying aspects of their lives or their work. You know, Gus, Guthrie’s wrestling with disability or what Shana was just saying about really listening to his voice and not just thinking about the kind of labor Left coalition he brought forward—that haven’t really been part of these previous accounts. Is this because the culture of the Left had a blind spot on these scores, i.e., either they didn’t appreciate the importance of voice or they didn’t think as much about disability because they were always putting images of burly white factory workers in their iconography? Or is it that critics and biographers have left this stuff out because they weren’t attuned to what was really going on? And so, for the question with Woody Guthrie and disability, was there in other parts of the Left an appreciation that people who are most likely to be on the outs of capitalism are people with disabilities, the people who have been maimed in the course of working in a factory or otherwise, had some issues with our kind of healthcare system and so on and so forth?

SR: I think just blankly, culture is still undervalued in these histories, unfortunately. And part of my investment and basically what I’ve staked my career on is the fact that music is an organizing tool. It’s a strategy. And I think it’s been underdeveloped as such in the literatures, particularly of these broader-scale internationalist Leftist collectives. There has been some really valiant and amazing and necessary work done towards that, but it’s still under-utilized, under-recognized. I think with someone like Robeson, because he was also doing the tandem work of public speaking, of killing HUAC in his two appearances before the committee, I think it’s easy for them to kind of take that more straightforward route toward rhetorics and political positionality rather than actually doing the close listening that his catalog requires, right, to think about the consistency of his beliefs as being documented in the song, not in his public speaking necessarily. Because he was a student, he was constantly in study. The rhetorics that you find there, while pretty consistent, are not going to be as consistent as what his catalog reveals. So, I think because he was doing both of those things at the same time,
because he was also working in kind of sequestered cells of the CP and things like
dhat, people are willing to focus on that rather than on the talent that actually
brought him to the attention of these organizations and communities in the first
place, even as they very much relied on that popularity for the message they knew he
was able to bring. So, it’s this interesting avowal/disavowal, “We want you as
a popular entertainer, but we’re going to dismiss the song. We only want to actually
talk about the message as you present it in a traditional sense.” So again, I think
because he could do everything, it kind of allows people to ignore those moments
where you have to retool and retrain your practices for political investment and
your understanding of political ideology.

GS: I have a somewhat different response in a different vein. My ideas were really
impacted by Michael Denning’s work on the cultural front and his emphasis on
the role of culture in the Popular Front. But then beyond that, I was really
impacted by a book called Bohemian Los Angeles by Daniel Hurewitz, a historian
I think from CUNY. And, you know, he makes this argument, it’s centered on
this neighborhood in LA called Edendale, which I think is now partly Silverlake
and partly something else, but it was this bohemian neighborhood where a lot of
communists lived, a lot of queers lived, a lot of artists and kinds of bohemians
lived in the ’30s. And he uses it as this example of a little lab dish or whatever, in
which an Old Left that’s not as strictly masculine, as strictly labor-oriented, that
values cultural expression, self-expression, was developing. And Guthrie lived in
Los Angeles in the late ’30s and he also met his best friend Will Geer there, who
was gay. And that kind of primed me to look for evidences of similar phenomena
in other places, and I think the Village was something like that. But I read a novel
by a Popular Front novelist named Jo Sinclair, a female novelist, which is a really
weird novel about a guy, this really depressed Jewish man whose name has been
changed to something less Jewish—who is in psychotherapy and he spends a lot of
time talking to his sister who’s a lesbian after his sessions. And he learns from his
sister this whole kind of theory of what she calls “social wounds,” and she uses that
term to cover, like, racial harassment, homophobia, disability, like she talks about
identifying with somebody who is crippled. And, you know, it’s this kind of—
when I read that I was sort of like, “This seems like the first—the emergence of
something different,” like a politics that’s about stigma that sees this currency of
stigma that crosses these different identities, and they’re not necessarily the same,
but there’s something that allows them to be talked about in the same way. And
I think Guthrie was part of that too. Like, I think he was one of the early instances
of that, and he was just really obsessed with shame and being shamed from all
these different ways that intensified with his illness. And you can see in that very
early seeds of his, like, Pride politics or something like that. But also, I think of
this more just kind of liberal, like, prejudice as a general category, you know? So,
I found that really interesting, and it also made me think there’s a richer story to
be told here. I don’t know how to periodize it. I don’t know if you want to say it
starts in the mid-’40s or something and it wasn’t true before that. But there’s
definitely more to be done. I think Richard Wright’s The Outsider is also a novel
that’s useful for this. There’s a conversation between a disabled man and the Black
protagonist in that that’s really interesting. I’m actually interested in exploring that
a lot more, those years ’45 to ’50 and the emergence of this kind of discourse around stigma.

EW: Hey folks, I think we have to stop there, although this has been fantastic and an amazing start to the series. I want to thank everyone, and can we all just, like, put our hands together, muted or unmuted, for Gus and Shana. It was all incredibly rich, and I feel like we are all ready to write the new history of the Left in popular culture in a fashion that hasn’t been done yet. So, thanks to everybody.