Everything Man

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In 1919 Paul strolled the “Avenue,” and soon became one of its landmarks.
— ESOLANDA GOODE ROBESON

What can one say to a mountain?
— OLLIE HARRINGTON

For many Angelenos, Hollywood is a location to avoid. Once the fabled terrain of a glamorous lifestyle, its main strip is now a densely policed tourist trap. Congested with foot and car traffic, protruding restaurant seating areas and shops packed with knickknacks, the area is a horizontal monument to excess. Neither the talented street workers nor the odd curiosity is enough to warm what otherwise feels chillingly inauthentic. With so much happening, it’s a hazard to walk with your eyes cast downward, yet the environment encourages precisely that. Terrazzo and bronze stars dot the sidewalks for more than a mile on Hollywood Boulevard and three additional blocks at the north-south intersection of Vine. Documenting achievement in five industries—motion pictures, broadcast television, theater/live performance, broadcast radio, and audio record-
ing or music—the stars form a constellation of divisible artists, each of whom is associated with one style of performance. The choreography of the stars is uncoordinated, with radically different performers abutting one another, each being tasked with standing on their own without support from their surroundings. On the south side of the 6600 block of Hollywood Boulevard is the star for Paul Robeson. It is marked only with a classic film camera, representing excellence in motion pictures (fig. 4.1).

Save for the light bustle of a couple of late night clubs and friends passing time, the block was quiet as I walked in search of his star. Located in front of a typical hybrid shop with gifts, T-shirts, and cellular services, and across the street from the iconic old-Hollywood steakhouse Musso and Frank Grill, the star was strewn with tissue and litter. So too was that of Paul’s neighbor to the east, actor and chanteuse Eartha Kitt. Each star bordered its respective business; his, the shop of knickknacks and communications and hers, the Hologram USA theater in which “live” shows
are staged via 3-D (re)animation. With a roster of Black talent that includes Billie Holiday, Nat “King” Cole, and Whitney Houston, Hologram USA is doing their part to advance the science of recurrence by which I earlier argued that we know Robeson. Even when compelling, these “images of the beloved dead can only ever be illusory, and the same technology that lets us feel the dead’s presence in our lives also marks them as irretrievably past, lost by their absorption into the archive, and forever marked in a time-space behind us.” Here is the “problem of tense”—the past not quite passed—that Katherine Fusco marks and the tension that Paul both reveals and defers. It was striking to see his long relationship to the holographic affirmed in Hollywood’s built environment; in this location, his illusory repetition invented permanence. Some number of the pedestrians who tread upon his star travel in swift anticipation of a look at the dead, perhaps never knowing that he too appears in that form in other places. The collusion of embodiment and sound that Paul perfected and the popular hologram seeks to capture was here, too, embedded in the sidewalk.

His eventual presence as Hollywood star number 1,704 was, like so much of his life, a struggle, this one organized posthumously by family and friends. Though nominated for the honor in 1978 by Actors Equity and the Screen Actors Guild, Robeson was denied access to the club, which in that year included local LA drive-time disc jockey Dick Wittingham, falsetto disco kings the Bee Gees, and animated rodent Mickey Mouse. “I don’t think Mr. Robeson met the criteria, probably,” said William Hertz, theater executive and chairman of the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce Walk of Fame Selection Committee. The standards that he and the committee devised were entirely different than those imagined by his peers and communities. Beyond his nomination by major artist organizations, individuals such as child star Jackie Cooper and stage and television actor Ben Vereen requested that their stars be given to Robeson. Star and activist Lena Horne queried, “If my name can be on the walk, why not Mr. Robeson’s?” Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley joined in the public outcry of his snubbing as well, arguing that Robeson was due the “star that he sought to grasp during his lifetime, one which we believed he earned over and over again.” By the time that Paul Jr. entered the conversation, the tone was changing, thanks to organized labor. Head of the County Department of Public Works, a Black man named Warren
Hollier “threatened not to approve the placement of any additional stars until he [was] provided with the chamber’s complete selection criteria.” Recognizing that they were on the losing end of the debate, the Chamber conceded that, upon receipt of more information on his film career, Robeson was now worthy to lie on the boulevard. On his birthday, April 9, 1979, Paul Jr., Stevie Wonder, Sidney Poitier, and others gathered to dedicate his star, and though it fails to announce his profound talents and impact on the recording industry and theater, its appearance is also his. He is the sediment and consolidation of sounds and acts, trials and victories that then make way for others to march and move. He is not in the ground; he is the ground. From there we proceed.

He is also sky—a bright, dimensional star held together by his own gravity—and was announced as such before he appeared underfoot. Star of stage and screen is no comparison to his tribute and recognition, published a week after his passing, in the Washington Afro-American: “Be it known to all inhabitants of this planet known as the earth, henceforth from this date January 23, 1976—The constellation in the heavens called the Big Dipper and containing the star commonly called The North Star or the Polar Star shall be called and known as Paul’s Star.” Robeson appeared to author Evelyn O. Chisley as nature’s compass: a means by which the African-descended would continue to pursue and achieve freedom. With this title and role came a set of instructions: “To all ships at sea—planes in the air—all land vehicles, observatories, all sailors at sea, inland waterways, observation stations, land expeditions, when you make your fix with your sextant, refer to Paul’s Star. Paul’s Star will be there forever to guide the peoples of the earth towards the brotherhood of mankind.” Robeson’s vocal and political magnitude was compressed into the dense earth of sidewalks and streets, community centers and houses, stars, rock cliffs and mountains, that demonstrated his indefatigable character and stability within the sight lines and travels of Black and working people. From these appearances, he would remain an active part of how people might differently live and love. Though he continued to circulate as installation and ephemera, he also became, through repetition and urgency, permanent in the natural and built environment before and after his death. What began as a vibrational presence detected on the skin or in the ear amassed architectonics alive with sound; in and as location and landscape, he resisted disappearance and erasure, consolidating his vo-
cal trace into (infra)structure. Whether looking up at him or down, Paul recurs solid and at scale.

“A Home in That Rock”

It was late August, and the stoops were mostly bare as I walked west on Walnut Street. Silence dominated, save for the blocks nearest the University of Pennsylvania, which sounded of heavy traffic and frat boys. The neighborhood itself was quiet. This is a neighborhood of working people who, at 1:30 in the afternoon, were most certainly occupied. This, though, is also an aging neighborhood, making possible the gathering that I passed on the 4900 block of the street, a few houses away from Paul’s final home. Gathered there were four or five elderly Black women and men chatting and listening to Bill Withers’s “Lovely Day.” The day was precisely that, and its announcement was a promising sign as I walked briskly to the brick side-by-side row house on the corner. I soon learned that the porch of his home at 4951 was one of Paul’s favorite spots. He would sit outside, his large hands sometimes covering the banister as he leaned over to look and speak greetings to passersby. It was 1966, shortly after the death of his life partner Eslanda and eight years after his infamy as an enemy of the state, when he lived here. In this last decade of his life, he was relatively anonymous. If you knew him intimately he was Uncle Paul, but most knew him as the nice man down the street.

The home sustained a lot of changes over the years after he and his sister Marian Robeson Forsythe resided there. Without a steward and in serious disrepair, the building was occupied by squatters for some years before successful petitions made it the Paul Robeson House and Museum, a historic site. After a number of fund-raising efforts, the home renovation was finished in 2015, and this is the form in which I saw it; minty green walls and shiny floors, fresh white trim, china cabinets and display cases procured from antique shows and estate sales. Aside from a framed 4 × 3-foot swatch of the original dining room wallpaper, there isn’t much of anything on the walls; Robeson family friend and current museum director Vernoca Michael is waiting for the appropriate resources to push ahead with new displays. Until then, the cabinets house a small collection of photographs and reproductions of his family and performances, recordings of song and film, and books of and by the famed namesake. It is a
quiet space; no videos or recordings played during my visit, making for an odd encounter with a home that was, I’m told, regularly alive with music. Paul was built of it and continued to sing for himself and small groups of others in the home, while friends Charlotte Turner Bell and Elizabeth Michael would visit to play and sing with and to him. It was difficult to feel him there without this most essential part, even as I heard of him coming down the staircase in the late morning in a full suit or saw photographic evidence of him sitting at the dining table that was no longer where I expected it to be. Yet, like so many before me, I knew that even in the stillness “something great [was] being said, and so [I] listened.”

The most striking and intimate display within the home is also quiet but, unlike every other room, it refuses to show his likeness. His bedroom is located at the back of the house on the second floor. Staged with a four-poster bed and simple crocheted white duvet, rocking chair, vanity and mirror, and dresser with a small television, the room is simple but complete, not unlike its occupant, whose brilliance in speech and song was accessible thanks to his calculated choice of delivery and genre. The upholstered armchair that sits in front of a north-facing window is only a minor obstruction to a view of the train—one that may have, in passing moments, reminded him of his many travels or the prevailing injustices that he announced in the singing of “John Henry,” arranged by his accompanist Lawrence Brown. Away from the visitors and solicitors who trafficked at the front of the house and with additional west-facing views of a small, unmarked lot now unofficially known as the Paul Robeson Memorial Garden, this room was an oasis for him and is a reminder for viewers of his quiet humility. Like the “quiet pride” that he noted of his father, Paul recognized that “the terms of quiet—surrender, interiority, and especially vulnerability—can be meaningful to collectivity,” and so he chose withdrawal from public life in order to care for himself and facilitate the voices of another cohort of fighters, saying in 1974, “It has been most gratifying to me in retirement to observe that the new generation that has come along is vigorously outspoken for peace and liberation.”

Refusing the public platform that he had powerfully commanded for decades, he withdrew to his sister’s care where, though quiet, he was “neither motionless nor without sound.” His vibration continued to coalesce in other forms.

Paul is not only documented in the home; he is built into it. In a room adjoining his, one formerly belonging to his adopted niece Pauline, there
is a modest stained-glass window. It is relatively plain upon sight from the doorway; without color but with distinct and different textures, it is marked by the lead threads that articulate its craftwork. It might go unremarked if not witnessed at close range. In the very center is a green-hued circle that, when approached, reveals the iconic image made popular in the promotional flyers from the 1936 film version of *Show Boat* (fig. 4.2). This image of Robeson as Joe reveals the sound behind the glass as that of his anthem “Ol’ Man River.” His voice is part of the fractured and leaden pieces of the window that reflect both his image and the one gazing upon it. Like the metal scaffolding at the opera house in Sydney, Paul’s voice strengthens the stained glass on Walnut St., much as it did those of the famous St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, which he visited in 1958 to sing in

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**FIG. 4.2** Image of the stained-glass window in the Paul Robeson House and Museum, Philadelphia. Photo: Charles Raboteau. Used with permission of the Paul Robeson House and Museum.
support of antiapartheid forces. He was the first Black man to sing there. Shirley Graham Du Bois, scholar and wife of Dr. Du Bois, was there for the occasion in which he sang the sorrow songs, including “Climbin’ Jacob’s Ladder,” from the pulpit that no other layperson hitherto had occupied. She recalled “his magnificent voice rising to the vaulted dome, reflected in the stained-glass windows and resting upon the hushed crowd like a benediction.”

Though less ornate, the window in his home is as revealing as any in the cathedral and rings with his songs and convictions. The position of the medallion in the window frame is suggestive of his lifelong commitment to the liberation of the global South and efforts on behalf of working and oppressed peoples everywhere: Paul is in three-quarter profile, facing south and casting his eyes away and slightly downward from the camera. He was not in it for fame then, nor is he now. No eye contact with the witness encourages us to look in the direction of his gaze, away from his starlight and toward others. There is no plaque and no memory of its installation—in fact, the House website lists it as one of three mysteries they’d like to solve—but it is in some ways the most telling piece of the home. He is there—transparent and available—watching, listening, and still providing instruction on its interpretation.

His appearance as stained glass is an extension of his enslaved paternal grandmother, who was cast in the same form. The Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, where Paul and Marian’s father, Rev. William Drew Robeson, was pastor, honors her memory through a glowing window that reads “In Loving Remembrance of Sabra Robeson.” Located in the church sanctuary and stretching well above six feet in height, the stained glass scales the southwest wall of the church, which is two blocks north of another Robeson imprint: Paul Robeson Place, a street dedicated after his passing. Awash in tiled colors of purple, red, yellow, green, and blue, the stained glass is adjacent to the altar and stage where the preachers preach and the choir sings, making the window the closest static receptor for the vibrations emitted by both. Tina Campt argues this vibration as an inherent possibility in images, which reveal “the sonic frequencies of the quotidian practices of black communities.” Many denominations of the Black church produced these practices in abundance, though Presbyterianism was not one of them. As historian and Presbyterian minister Randal Jelks notes, “the overriding belief of many Presbyterians was that to be Christian meant being as
Anglo-American as one could. On a grand scale, African Americans denied their African heritage in their worship.” This is not to say, however, that the church was the end of their life’s play: “in the shadowy recesses hidden from the white, northern, Presbyterian churchgoer—[African Americans] enjoyed their cultural creations—sadly, a culture we viewed as common or uncouth.”

The collision of these traditions is suggested by the unique history of the Witherspoon Church, which was founded for colored Presbyterians. Its members publicly denounced slavery, participated in the Underground Railroad, and were responsible for Princeton’s first integrated housing unit in the 1950s. Rev. Robeson was the church’s longest-serving preacher, and it was during his term, 1880–1901, that the window for his mother was installed. His final years at the church were Paul’s first years of life, during which he experienced both his father’s voice—“the greatest speaking voice I have ever heard. It was a deep, sonorous basso, richly melodic and refined, vibrant with the love and compassion which filled him”—and music, which was shared “in this little hemmed-in world where home must be theatre and concert hall and social center.” These were, according to Robeson, the “songs of love and longing, songs of trials and triumphs, deep-flowing rivers and rollicking brooks, hymn-song and ragtime ballad, gospels and blues, and the healing comfort to be found in the illimitable sorrow of the spirituals.”

The stained-glass windows that connected the church, the home, and the outside world, those that connected Paul to his grandmother Sabra, are made of and sound like the songs led by Rev. Robeson and sung by Paul; songs that, as he later argued, “must have been sung” by the great Black freedom fighters Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman.

Beyond being a home, he is also a home for others in Philadelphia. Due east of his house and museum is a large mural painted on the side of an apartment complex on the corner of Forty-Fifth and Chestnut Streets. Murals like Paul’s are intended to acknowledge the ways in which discourse and space are always connected and disrupt those that fail to represent life as it really is. As Lina Khatib argued of public imagery in the Middle East, “Through street art, the previously disenfranchised are waging a war of presence.” While the Robeson building mural is more formal than graffiti or impromptu street art, it is nonetheless participating in this war, fighting to hold space for the ideas and performances otherwise
erased from books, walls, and other (surface) areas. Originally created one century and one year from his date of birth by Peter Pagast, the mural was refreshed in 2012 after its brightness began to diminish. “When we saw the mural starting to fade, we knew we had to fix it,” said Jane Golden, executive director of the city’s Mural Arts Program. “Because he meant so much to the world, we knew his image shouldn’t fade. By redoing this mural, by preserving it, it lives on for another 20 years as a beacon of inspiration.”

Cast in two-dimensional form, he stands facing the viewer but slightly favoring his right side (fig. 4.3). His left hand is in the pants pocket of his dark three-piece suit, a pocket watch in his waistcoat, his right elbow tucked at his side with his right hand gesturing away from his body. He is a gentleman and a scholar, flanked on either side by the categories that begin to define his talent and reach: attorney, bibliophile, linguist, humanitarian, singer. At the very bottom of the mural, he is described as “Citizen of the world.” He is all of these things and more; he is “a man so physically and historically massive that the five stories that [the mural] takes up don’t seem like enough.” Indeed, he seems squat in the portrait reenvisioned by noted Philly muralist Ernel Martínez—neither his torso nor legs look quite long enough—even as he scales the Satterlee complex, built in 1908. Surrounded by housing that today caters to students at the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University, Paul remains close to and constitutive of the environment that first made him a household name.

Rutgers University, New Brunswick, was Paul’s home for four years. It’s where he played football, basketball, and baseball, and ran track; where he was a speech and debate champion; where he was class valedictorian. Yet those talents and honors could be and were swept aside by the university in service of political convenience. A short think piece in England succinctly identified this phenomenon. Titled “The Man Who Never Was,” the article noted the extent of Robeson’s disappearance, which included his purge from the 1918 All-American Football roster. “Even the Nazis never pretended that the people they liquidated had never existed,” the author notes, but when faced with a four-letter athlete and university valedictorian, the U.S. remained committed to their mission: refusal of the “dangerous idea that a coloured man can be as good as a white man at everything.” Yes, everything. And despite having demonstrated most
Fig. 4.3 Paul Robeson mural on the corner of Forty-Fifth and Chestnut Streets, Philadelphia. Restored by Ernel Martinez in 2012. Photo: Steve Weinik. Courtesy of the photographer.
all of his talents while in college, Rutgers played its part in the maintenance of the government’s twin fiction of Paul’s irrelevance and threat. He was, as one observer recalled, “sandblasted” out of photos and rosters on campus—actively, deliberately removed from concrete, stone, and paper. Yet even as the environment and archive failed to announce him, students continued to call the question: Rutgers, where is your most famous graduate? He was not on the All-American roster, nor did his name grace any public image, monument, or building. According to Rutgers alum Eugene Robinson, students asked, “Paul who?” in astonishing numbers in the last decade of his life, including “at least 75 percent of the black students at Rutgers [who] don’t know who Paul Robeson is.” In spite of this, a small but growing number of students made his presence a priority. In April 1968, students planned a tribute to Robeson that included a two-and-a-half-hour broadcast on the college station, WRSU, of a program of his songs and concerts compiled by New York City’s WBAI. Beyond entertainment, this program became part of an educational program in anticipation of a bigger push on the part of the student body.

Later that same year, students gathered to vote on a referendum seeking to name the new Rutgers student center after Robeson. Grown in large part by Black student demands after the April assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and sponsored by a coalition of student organizations including Students for a Democratic Society, the initial proposal was supported by a petition of 3,500 student signatories. As the November vote date approached, the propaganda machines for both sides took aim. On the day of the election, the Rutgers student newspaper, the Daily Targum, argued against the naming and printed a letter claiming that Robeson was “a known Communist,” which still held political suasion. The final tally for the day’s vote was 963 for to 1,156 against. A second vote called a month later fell farther short, at 478 for to 753 against. Frustrations with limited Black voter turnout and students’ failure to motivate their peers toward a rigorous understanding of a man rather than an image led to division and fatigue. By 1969, “the high point of student interest in Robeson had passed,” according to Robinson. That spring saw a compromise move when the Paul Robeson Arts and Music Lounge was dedicated. It would be many more years before a substantial effort to document Robeson in New Brunswick would develop. While the main campus struggled to find the fortitude and courage to name his form, another made him a decisive part of their built environment.
Upon entrance from Martin Luther King Boulevard, all was relatively peaceful in the Robeson Campus Center at Rutgers University, Newark. It was summer, after all; students were few in number, and it was late enough in the afternoon that most staff had likely wrapped up their workday. The surprisingly small foyer of the student center was silent but for his Voice. The song playing as I entered was all too familiar, as it is his hallmark, even still. Ringing from the television encased in glass was the star attraction from *Show Boat* that, through multiple ingenious revisions, announced his Voice as a weapon.

*There’s an old man called the Mississippi.*

*That’s the old man I don’t like to be.*

Situated among ephemera, including his Phi Beta Kappa affiliation, a replica of his 1945 Spingarn Medal, and photographs of his football and film career, his Voice told far more than the script that surrounded it. Though the brick and mortar announced his name—the first academic building to do so in the United States—his Voice is how we know that he is there and has lingered for some time.

On Paul’s birthday in 1972, Rutgers University, Newark, dedicated its student hub, the Paul Robeson Campus Center. Though supported by campus president Edward Bloustein, the center, then located on High Street, was made possible by the work of Black students from the organization Harambe Chama, who used culture to facilitate the wave of Black revolutions happening on college and university campuses. Their “mass communications program” of flyers, student meetings, and newsletters moved their student senate, Newark community organizations, and, ultimately, the board of governors to embrace their plan. In their note of dedication, Harambe Chama argued that “Paul Robeson’s exemplary record as a student at Rutgers stands as a monument of achievement for Black studies, and his continuing development and accomplishments in life also stand as monuments of the achievement possible by exercising dedication, discipline and sacrifice.” The repeated term “monument” is more than suggestive of his fitness for building form; it is also an early reckoning with the scale of his intervention and impact. Four years before his death, these students argued that he was due a permanent presence that served as more than memorialization; they held that it was also necessary
to inaugurate him as a model for continued living. This space would be, as the president announced in his closing, a “Campus Center to stand for all time in honor of a man for all time.”

Though led by students, the evening that launched the center included others who, like Robeson, took up the task of public arts intellectualism. “Poet, playwright, politician” Imamu Amiri Baraka joined the chorus of support, leading that evening’s roster of speakers, which included the university’s president and Paul Jr. Baraka was, also like Robeson, a native New Jersian, having been born and raised in Newark (“New Ark”). He met with his fair share of public scrutiny over his lifetime due to his radical politics and investment in speaking the realities of Black life in the U.S. and abroad. Baraka was a pioneering blues griot who took seriously the form, critique, and wisdom therein and used it as a method of continuous creation, applying it to conditions both mundane and fantastic. Beyond the night of dedication at Rutgers, Baraka conjured and welcomed Robeson in 2006 at the “Here I Stand” Award Gala, which in that year mobilized Robeson’s memory and achievements in order to honor another Black liberation giant, comedian Dick Gregory, who decades earlier described Robeson as “both prototype and an inspiration.”

Announcing Robeson again as an All-American, member of Phi Beta Kappa, and Rutgers valedictorian, Baraka reminded the audience: “That’s why we call him the tallest tree.” Paul was “waging the war of ideas, actually getting into people’s minds,” argued Baraka, an effort facilitated by his spectacular study and exceptional ability to communicate: “Black people recognized Paul Robeson all over the planet because Paul could speak how many languages? Eighteen languages? And Paul actually was an aesthetic kind of analyst,” breaking down the global pentatonic scale—the F-sharp epistemology of chapter 1—as a means of articulating the common sonic origins of our global majority as well as our common oppressions.

To signal these interventions and innovations, Baraka performed a blues poem, composed for Paul’s birthday some years prior, that highlighted not only the giant’s talent and return but also the space that he shared with “the doctor,” W. E. B. Du Bois. The comrades who initially “bonded because of their common interest in advancing Negro art and culture” would, over the course of their forty-year friendship, come to believe that “a militant approach that embraced Socialism and black pride
(or nationalism of the oppressed) was an issue of morality.”

The efforts for radical internationalism forged by the professor and the pupil of Murali Balaji’s description led to both men being stripped of their passports in the 1950s and pursuing exile. As a result, they’ve been planted in and among the world’s landscape: Paul as a street in Berlin, for example, and Dr. Du Bois as museum and Memorial Center for Pan-African Culture in Accra, Ghana. In “Revolutionary Legacy, Revolutionary Tradition,” Baraka brings them together again, decades after each has passed, rallying them in an effort to enliven the motionless among us. He begins by singing the bluesman, B. B. King:

When it all comes down, look for me. I’ll still be around.
When it all comes down, look for me. I’ll still be around.
When it all comes down, look for me.

A flurry of facts and tales, known and intuited, sets the stage for the reunion between the “huge, Black, and red” Robeson and the “good doctor” Du Bois—the two men whom the “paper tigers” and “circus crew[s]” feared and hunted.

From Du Bois and Paul
We got the world and all
History and Africa
The South and struggle
Politics and art
Militancy and creativity
Scholarship and revolution
The only solution
They were heroes to the world’s people of all nationalities
But they were red
And they were Black
I still live
I still live, said the doctor
Even under the beast’s attack
The artist must fight for freedom or slavery Paul chorused
At the coal mines
The docks
The factories
The international conference on peace
And I have made my choice to fight for freedom

And that’s why these revolutionaries still give us strength every day
That’s why the fools and racists can’t make them fade away
Two great beings of fire and light
Two great figures who can make day out of night
And the huge constellation called Paul Robeson has returned once again
His century of revolutionary struggle will guide without end
Paul the artist
Paul the actor
Paul the scholar
Paul the fighter
All combined so he was the tallest of men

Baraka shapes Robeson here as the “constellation” that Evelyn Chisley decades earlier suggested with Paul’s Star. And from there he continued to grow, eclipsing the darkness, rising high above the mobs and agencies in order to be where he was called. “I still live,” he repeats as he takes root on new planes and in new environments: forests and ranges alike.

“Burst into Song, You Mountains,
You Forests and All Your Trees”

Tree marker number 2003-015 is a Magnolia virginiana. Set amid engineering and security buildings, it’s the sweet, delicate counterpart to the rigidity of science and one that might, if touched by the wind or rain in the right way, sing. The Paul Robeson Memorial Tree at Rutgers, New Brunswick is a sweetbay magnolia indigenous to the southeastern U.S. and eastern seaboard that can grow to a height of one hundred feet. The vanilla scent emitted from the off-white flowers is one of its trademarks that, historically, masked the otherwise horrid odor of its neighboring poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

The Princeton of Paul’s childhood “was for all the world like any small town in the deep South” and the fates of its Black women and men all too precarious. The penetrating violence of which Billie Holiday sang in “Strange Fruit” that disclosed the ways in which the environment was weaponized against Black people was a tangible reality for Robeson and his communities, and so he responded accordingly. In 1951, he, along with William Patterson and the Civil Rights Congress, authored and delivered to the United Nations a historic petition titled “We Charge Genocide,” in which they documented the “mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted by the willful creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty, and disease.”

The ongoing present of lynching and white mob violence was the motivation for the document as well as Paul’s tireless lobbying and public requests for a federal anti-lynching bill. The U.S. federal government never saw fit to pass such legislation and so Paul became a magnolia tree to crowd out the poplar and, perhaps, to provide a bit of comfort to those whose knowledge of trees is always paired with knowledge of the rope.

There were other trees too. When educator-activist Mary McLeod Bethune named Paul “the tallest tree in our forest,” she revealed the signature metaphor of his life. Suggesting stature and steadfastness as well as physical properties such as strength and height, the tree was Paul’s proxy in public discourse among loved ones and admirers. British critic Alexander Woolcott described him as fundamental, foundational, and original: “Paul Robeson strikes me as having been made out of the original stuff of the world. In this sense he is coeval with Adam and the Redwood trees of California. He is a fresh act, a fresh gesture, a fresh effort of creation.”

Still fresh like the magnolia, Paul ascends even higher to the status of redwood, a tree that, according to biologist David George Haskell, sings. He argues that trees “have amazing sounds coming from them” and so one must listen and “touch a stethoscope to the skin of a landscape, to hear what stirs below.” The use of trees as a metaphor for Robeson is an apt one considering Haskell’s documentation of trees as “nature’s great connectors” and their songs as a reflection of those relationships that work in intense harmony with other elements.
of their environment. Paul too was and did this as he sang in languages and modes that, at one time, were not his own. He made them his, ours, by virtue of a rigorous linguistic and ethnomusicological practice as well as his commitment to the radical political praxis of antiphony by which he would always respond.

Grown over millennia, redwoods are received as timeless giants within their environment. Witnesses primarily encounter them as already formed, without the advantage of having seen or heard growth or progression over time. Paul gives us unique insight into that process—we can see and hear him evolve and change, physically and politically. Philly resident Thomas Deloach described the first of these in narration of their only encounter:

He smiled and he stood up, and as he stood up, he kept growin’ and growin’ and growin’, you know—and I said, “Whoo”—and he extended his hand out, shook my hand. He got a real big hand, you know.

He was so large. To me. I mean, sitting on the sofa in the living room, he didn’t seem that big, but when he stood up, he was like a tree growing, you know what I mean? He just kept gettin’ taller, and once he reached his limit, he was still stooped over. It was really something to see, yeah. I’ll never forget it. 38

He was and is formidable, generating awe from onlookers and audiences and dread from those who saw his growth as their undoing and demise. Willie J. Magruder Jr. told of him being “too tall” for some. The structural repetition of the poem mirrors the insistent insecurity and panicked rhetoric of the state while highlighting the fact that his song remained its counternarrative—he is unmoved, undeterred, unconvinced by the stories that sought to separate him from his communities and those who continue to sing with him.

Too tall, Paul; too tall, that’s all
Standing against the best of them,
You made them feel too small.

You showed your strength
You sang the Song
You lived your principles
You stood your ground
In the Americas, the modern redwood species grow only along the Pacific Coast. Paul, of course, defied the boundaries and borders erected by states and nations, seeing each first as part of a radical whole rather than singular and sovereign. He was present continuously, in sound and body, and able to find fertile soil in locations that were otherwise inhospitable or remote. Indeed, Du Bois argued that in the 1950s and ’60s Robeson was “the best-known American on earth, to the largest number of human beings. His voice [was] known in Europe, Asia and Africa, in the West Indies and South America and in the islands of the seas. . . . Only in his native land [was] he without honor and rights.” Because he has already taken root elsewhere as a tree, it is possible to imagine him similarly throughout the diaspora of his influence; for example, in South America as a ceibo, an Amazonian giant that achieves its height not with age but through sheer determination: “Young ceibo lance upward by two meters every year, sacrificing wood strength and chemical defenses for speed of growth. The ceibo’s crown, its uppermost branches, form a wide dome that rises ten meters higher than the surrounding trees, themselves forty meters high, the equivalent of about ten stories in a human building.” The selflessness of the tree in favor of sheltering and protecting others is characteristic of Paul, who as a young man committed to a life of service and sacrifice and whose career, income, and health were at various times forfeited for those vulnerable around him.

Paul, to all the old gang of us who hung around him, was a reservoir, the sum of the black man’s capacities, a great national, black phenomenon that all of us flocked to behold. A hero to all, gigantic and available. And as with all heroes the gift was one way. His vast bulk, warm and reassuring like a mother’s breast, was more than adequate to all our infinite needs and hungers: Paul gave and gave; we took, and took, and took. All of us: Black folks, white folks, communists, liberals, artists, politicians, race leaders, labor leaders—we raided him. To us he was an inexhaustible bounty from heaven, and we went to him as beggars go, never bothering to put anything back—only to take, and take again, and never say thanks, fighting the world and each other.
for our inalienable right to consume Paul Robeson, and consume him we did.43

These insights from his mentee, actor and activist Ossie Davis, are angry with regret and frustration but nonetheless adoringly reveal the intensity of Paul’s love and generosity, whether it was returned or not. There is a beauty here that the tree foretells; as the great networkers, they show us how “to hear what is coherent, what is broken, what is beautiful, what is good.” With that better understanding of our world, “we unself into birds, trees, parasitic worms, and sooner or later, soil; beyond species and individuals, we open to the community from which we are made.”44

Paul’s selflessness is related to this intermaterial, interspecies connection that Haskell notes of trees. The ceibo works in intimate connection with its surrounding environment and community, and from this, various sonic practices arise. From its heights comes its natural sound, with rain and other elements coalescing to reveal that “botanical diversity is sonified.” For the ceibo, the sounds are produced in large part by those that it shelters—the understory plants that “root themselves under the spreading branches and amid the duffy soil around the trunk.” The various shapes, sizes, and thickness of the leaves that precede it develop the contour of the rain that then drops to develop the “clack and tick of thousands of spring wound clocks, each releasing its tension with a tschak unique to the woody muddle of the decomposing surface.”45 The base of the tree is also its bass, which acts as a location device for the indigenous Waorani people of western Ecuador who, when “lost . . . find a ceibo tree and turn it into a subwoofer. . . . Pounding on the buttress roots of the tree vibrates the whole trunk, a botanical basso profundo call to friends and family, a cry to reknit the bonds that keep you alive. The tree’s great height lets it bellow in a way that shouting could never achieve. Hearing the pulsing air, your people will come.”46 Here is the Paul that Davis described, the “basso profundo” vibrating at request in order to gather “your people,” our people to the scene, the issue, the cause. The Waorani speak of ceibo trees as people—animate and alive. Indeed, “compared to humans the difference between life and death seems a lot less clear to me for a tree,” Haskell notes.47 Paul extends his life in this form and as appearances as many things.

As “masters of integration,” trees are active in their knowledge of the world, “connecting and unselfing their cells into the soil, the sky, and
thousands of other species.” Cohabitation means that they are not always the giants that they appear to be from the forest floor. Sometimes they are not the top of the skyline but its filler, holding together the soil at the base of eruptions that extend not hundreds but thousands of feet into the air. This is the case in the Tien Shan mountains. Primarily forming the border between China and current-day Kyrgyzstan, the so-called celestial mountains produce deserts, permafrost areas of limited life, and dense, rich forests. Stretching approximately 1,500 miles and reaching an elevation of 24,406 feet, they are populated by numerous displaced and immigrant communities who fled war, political persecution, and economic collapse. With resources including natural gas, petroleum, and coal, the area’s economy is steady and has encouraged contiguous production in textiles and food processing, which bring many to the area in search of better futures. With so many immigrants and workers present, it’s no wonder that Paul Robeson would be among them as well. He was installed there in 1948 by a troop of military mountaineers seeking to announce their support for the world figure who was quickly losing ground in a public relations battle with those in the U.S. government intent on marking him as deviant and outside of civil society. These climbers carried with them yet another sculpture of the many-times-reproduced Robeson—a bust—created by Russian artist Olga Manuylova, which they placed at the 13,517-foot summit of the Alator range, now known as Mount Paul Robeson.

Three years before Paul’s death, a delegation of Afro-Americans visited this site. Awed by him and wanting to build a relationship with local communities, the group made the pilgrimage through Frunze (now the Kyrgyzstan capital of Bishkek) and fifteen miles beyond it into the foothills of the Tien Shan, where they began to climb. Accompanied by the octogenarian Manuylova and other local dignitaries, the delegation included Robeson friend George B. Murphy Jr., secretary of the Kirghis Friendship Society Mary Ellen Bell, and artist/professor Bertrand Phillips, whose painted portrait of Robeson was presented to the society. Standing at the summit of the mountain and inspired by his greatness, attendee Madeline Murphy described the experience with graceful detail. “Surrounded by the untouched terrain, the rock cliffs and surging mountain streams, exhilarated by the astringent intoxicating freshness of the clean, clear air, we were warmed not only by the brightness of the sun, but by the love that
surrounded us for this ‘Giant of Our Age.’

That this giant also became a mountain is an appropriate transition for a man who remains sought after. A formidable thinker, talent, and fighter, he too was formed through collision—not of tectonic plates but rather the quotidian forms of impact faced by Black people in a racist world, by workers in a capitalist order, by radical humanitarians contending with the myth of individualism. Instead of running from confrontation, he accepted it as his lot and grew steadfast: “I saw no reason why my convictions should change with the weather,” he argued; “I was not raised that way, and neither the promise of gain nor the threat of loss has ever moved me from my firm convictions.” He was the giant, the mountain, who stood resolute among humankind and environments assessing, working, singing.

For more than fifty years, the Western world has popularly believed—or has welcomed and embraced the fantasy—that “the hills are alive with the sound of music.” In fact, musical soundings are indelibly tied to that landscape that howls and swells with wind or trickles, babbles, and rushes with water. Paul, of course, is a known water cantor in possession of what J. Martin Daughtry elsewhere names an “atmospheric voice,” which transgresses borders with impact across micro- and macroenvironments. Indeed, he sang to life not only the Mississippi in “Ol’ Man River” but also “The Four Rivers,” in which it joined the rivers Yangtze (China), Thames (England), and Don (Russia). This fluid beauty and lyricism exists alongside the mountain’s extremities in temperature and topography, producing a place where forces—natural and (geo)political—collide. (Mt.) Paul Robeson was the terrain of contestation and projection on many different scales, each working to tear him down or to build him up. In either case, music was there.

A few short months after his passing, Columbia University hosted a memorial program in his honor at McMillan Academic Theater. Founded in 1924, the theater had in the 1940s and ‘50s hosted composers Charles Ives and Aaron Copland as well as dancer-choreographer Martha Graham. On that May evening in 1976, soprano Beatrice Rippy compressed time/space through a performance of songs from the program of Robeson’s original 1925 Greenwich Village concert, where he revolutionized art music through a program of Negro spirituals. Joining her voice on the night’s program was his in recorded form; his ample voice filled that space as only he could with rich, concentrated vibration that grew in
its largess in anticipation of his next shapeshifting appearance in poetry. Noted Harlem poet Antar Sudan Katara Mberi graced the stage to perform his dedication to the giant. Titled “Suite of the Singing Mountain (Paul Robeson),” Mberi’s extended lyrical poem was described as “A Blues/Jass Cantata.” Composed of ten movements, each announces a series of forms by which we may know him, from lodestar to river to volcano. The natural world is the setting for Robeson’s appearance as each of these irruptions/eruptions and wonders, allowing for him to be positioned above and beyond the failures and complications of humanity even as he is deeply responsive to them. This in defense against and in spite of persecution by “the anti-communists[,] lynch law-makers, Klansmen, the dream-breakers, Birchites, last penny-takers, McCarthyites, Nixonites, Neo-Hitlerites, and Black backstabbers: (who sold their spineless souls for three pitiful dimes).”

Add to this list those of the Black middle class who cowered behind Langston Hughes’s “racial mountain,” which exposed an “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.” In addition to beating back this mountain with his “Water Boy,” Paul ascended toward an alternative mount: a natural and pure form, neither made nor controlled by mortals.

Like Baraka, Mberi approaches Paul’s legacy and livingness through the blues, a form tied to the working poor and working class for whom Paul labored and whose origins and deepest ambitions he shared. The blues are a low-down music. Historically tied to the geographies of the U.S. South, the deltas, and the valleys, their lore exceeds them as the vapor or mist through which we imagine the iconic bluesman (always a man) emerging. The crossroads, the rivers, the plots where sharecroppers harvest and haul from “can’t see in the morning until can’t see at night” as well as the juke joints, pool halls, and hybrid storefront churches all compose the topography of the blues; those natural and artificial elements that mark its location on an ever-changing sonic map of displacements and migrations. Even after moving North (via railroads and Paul’s Star) and its subsequent electrification, the blues is still known as the music of the darker (hued), submerged spaces. These are the communities possessed of other sensibilities and visions of “social, economic, and cultural affirmation and justice” that became “the mother of several global lan-
guages and philosophical systems commonly known as the blues, jazz, rock and roll, and soul.” Geographer and listener Clyde Woods argued that these performers and communities developed a “blues epistemology,” a way of historicizing ongoing white supremacist plantation blocs and theorizing the realities of and escape from life in enclosure. In telling these stories, the mechanism of reveal became its own methodology by which a uniquely Black working-class “ethic of survival, subsistence, resistance, and affirmation” formed and laid the foundation on which new ideas, performances, people, communities, and landscapes were built.57

What can an arid, isolated mountain peak contribute to a blues geography? Experience and experimentalism, at least. Paul took his (albeit brief) turn as a bluesman. His 1934 European recording of “Father of the Blues” W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” displays his voice atop the galloping orchestration that defined the song’s early urban sound. His voice is what you’d expect to hear from a technical wizard: it is beautiful and exact. He knows his music well, singing in perfect sync with the gaps in the composition made for his singular voice. Yet he is somewhat out of place. He perhaps follows too closely his script, is perhaps too attentive to the form in which he was training. He knows the musical stage, he knows the spirituals, but they are not and never should be the blues. By the last minute of the three-and-a-half-minute tune, however, he comes back to us—not as the professional on the Broadway stage but as the mischievous confidante by our side. “Gypsy done told me / said, ‘Don’t you wear no black.’”58 It’s in the echo of this line—in the repetitive AA of the AAB form that he’ll sing again ‘cause you ain’t heard him the first time—that he shows us how close we are. Instead of holding the vocal cavity open to round the “a” in “black” in order to simulate a slight “ah” as he would be trained to do, he flattens it, brightening it to the cusp of nasal where he pulls back on his volume, softening the vowel’s edges and easing the listener into the return of his lower register. He begins to swing for his friend Handy, his audiences, his community. Here he is, projecting a new blues topography: mountain.

This is what Mberi had already heard from Paul and what facilitates his continued evolution to summit. As Mberi announced to Paul Jr. in 1976, his cantata was a “vow to live like your father, to climb the mountain that he was, is.”59 Robeson’s willingness to step outside of what he had already mastered was improvisation—his jazz—being and becom-
ing something else, and the evidence of his belief: “I have no end to my artistic horizon.”

Like a lodestar you rise your head, your hands above the horizon, forever shining, forever mining the coral ores and the searose of song, forever casting your net of mortal light, into the dark face of eternity, your song drops its fish, even in death you bristle brightly in our heaven.

Mberi’s cues direct the listener’s gaze away from the speaker, away from the stage and out into the greater beyond—the spaces in which we remember and re-call Paul for the purposes of surviving this day, this night. The landscape of Paul’s design—from the sky to fish—is the result of steadfast refusal, which, in its repetition, is an approach to living.

When his name and body were erased, Paul became something else, something permanent. Mberi’s cantata exposes these shifts and transformations, events and proximities in his attempt to correct historical error and keep pace with the continued movements of a man that the world claimed was gone. “As If You Had Never Loved” revisits this voice as the technique by which these lies are exposed.

they made it seem as if you had never lived, had never loved with your majesty clefting the clouds.

But your voice, like the sun’s lion dignity, smashes a rugged fist upon their chains upon their walls till they shudder, crack, and begin to crumble.
O Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,
and the walls,
them walls, them walls
came agrumblin, tumblin down.⁶²

The closing lines pay tribute to his form in song, namely the spirituals that found their way to rallies and conferences well before “We Shall Overcome” paced a new wave of insurgency. The songs that he made iconic forever tied him to the individuals therein, from Joshua to John Henry to Joe Hill and he, like they, lived on:

In the name of Joe Hill
and in your bronze-hearted name, Robeson,
and we count you both forever among the living⁶³

The final piece of Mberi’s cantata returned him to his grandest form. Unfolding over three pages dense with juxtaposition and movement, through rivers, world wonders, and celestial creatures, he is placed again at the scale at which he belongs.

Sun and mountain, ray and stone:
your name forever dances
on the Pyramids pinnacles
with the precision of mountain goats,

Erect as the sun at high noon,
you rise like a mountain,
through the smog crouched in executive quarters.

You can never fall,
from the seasons grace,
not one thousandth part of an inch,
you can never fall
from us.

Your name is the guttural chant
of the chanter chanting in the dawn,
the guttural hymn spun out
in the autumn’s threadlike whispering.
Your name is Mount Robeson,
the spring’s nuptial rain,
the rivers vast blood:
the Mississippi and the Don,
the Missouri and the river Niger,
the Shenandoah and the Volga,
the Hudson and the Yantze [sic],
the Ohio and the Thames,

You are the Blue and White Nile,
the Red and Black Seas, the Hocking
and the Zambesi,
flowing in song and strength
like the Gulf of Mexico [sic],
through the rugged proletarian veins
of the earth.

. . . Go on Mount Robeson, go on
Killimanjaro [sic], go on
Rockies, Andes, Alps, go on
Urals, go on
singing Deep River
I want to cross over
into camp ground.

for we’ve saved the highest place for you,
we’ve saved the lunar bird’s solar lineage,
the planets turning eternally
beneath the universe’s plow

for you

we’ve saved the molten metal,
the carnation and the ruby’s red eye,
the emerald syllables of spring
that nature tutors the planet with

for you

we’ve saved the highest place
for you, for you
to go stepping like the rising sun
across mesa, mountain and plain, city and cave,
for you to go climbing the ancient stairs
of blood and stars.⁶⁴

His peers—Kilimanjaro, the Andes, Urals, Rockies—are his forever cohort. As they live and sing mineral tones accumulated over years, decades, centuries, so does he, catching wind and revisiting the pitches shared between the peak and the giant, the land and the body.⁶⁵