Redmond, Shana. 2020. *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Reviewed by Aldwyn Hogg Jr.

Who was Paul Robeson? Several monographs published in the past decade have answered this question with varying degrees of success. Gerald Horne's *Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary* (2016), for example, follows the precedent of older texts like Martin Duberman's *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (1989) and hews from archival sources a detailed biography of the political artist. Tony Perucci's *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex: Race, Madness, Activism* (2012) employs a more critical approach, one that situates Robeson's leftist and internationalist politics within and alongside the theatricality that characterized the domestic front of American Cold War politics. But Shana Redmond's monograph—distinct in style, content, form, and methodology—asks a different question of Robeson: *what* was he and what has he become? In *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson,* Redmond writes not another history of Robeson the man, but of Robeson as a "holographic" presence, Robeson as engaged in play, Robeson as subject of exhibits and inspiration for art installations, and Robeson as a part of our physical environment.

Through the unusual yet compelling (re)configurations of Robeson that comprise the book's four, main, accessibly written chapters, Redmond asks questions that more traditional biographical or historiographical approaches rarely explore: namely, why does Robeson remain so significant and continually present today? In each of the book's chapters, Redmond demonstrates that the task of tracing Robeson's life demands a capacious approach—one that considers him "as collective rather than singular" (8), and one attuned to the transnational antiphonies that marked his political and musical life. She illuminates the symbolic and practical malleability Robeson possessed during his lifetime and continues to possess for liberatory figures and moments following his death in 1976. Redmond draws upon a diverse range of materials for her analysis, including, but not limited to, poetry, plays, pictures, paintings, sculptures, trees, stained-glass windows, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, postage-stamps, museum exhibits, and other artifacts of material culture. And because of this diverse range of materials, and the various disciplines she enlists in her analyses, *Everything Man* sits provocatively at the interstices of, and is sure to be of interest to,

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scholars of several disciplines including cultural studies, Black studies, American history, and musicology. The interdisciplinary and conceptual challenge this book presents us—to think of Robeson as not just a singular historical body in the past, but as multiply present in various forms of vibrant material and immaterial matter—replicates the polyvalence Robeson embraced throughout his own life. Indeed, as his wife, Eslanda Goode Robeson, once perceptively opined of him: "Everything, Everybody, asked him to be Everywhere" (14). At stake in Redmond's *Everything Man* is not only how we understand Robeson's life, nor his afterlife as hologram, play, installation, or environment, but the efficacy of biography in the twenty-first century as a means of understanding Black life.

Redmond begins her first chapter, "Hologram," by revealing the delicate threading of her theory of Paul Robeson's "Voice." Redmond capitalizes this word throughout the book to distinguish between Robeson's voice—the unique sonic product and profile of his vocal apparatus (lungs, mouth, voice box, etc.)—and her theory of his Voice. Through his Voice, Robeson was "multiply present, embodied, and accessible beyond his immediate time and space" (19), a potentiality that Beah Richard's poem, "Paul Robeson Speaks for Me" (1951), convincingly performs. His Voice (particularly from the 1930s onwards) also always-already contains the trace of Black internationalism, leftist politics, and resistance to fixed notions of nationality and geography. Furthermore, through Robeson's intimate relationship with technologies such as the microphone and transatlantic communication systems, his Voice was enmeshed in the currents of what Alexander Weheliye has theorized as "sonic afro-modernity" (Weheliye 2005). Finally, and perhaps most vital to Redmond's central argument, Robeson's Voice—like the voices Nina Eidsheim critically listens to in her writings on race, embodiment, and vocality (Eidsheim 2015)—is collective. It is generative of communal technologies and also of expressions of solidarity that are attuned to his audiences. This theory of vocal embodiment – which is specific to Paul Robeson – undergirds Redmond's analysis of each of the four configurations of the singer within the book.

The remainder of the chapter traces the conceptual activation of Robeson as a "hologram"—his body made virtually present through the sounding of his Voice—in three significant historical moments. They include the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, the 1957 *eisteddfod* (singing festival competition) of the National Union of Mineworkers of South Wales, and a 1978 event, organized by the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid on what would have been Robeson's eightieth birthday, celebrating his long-time commitment to anti-

apartheid struggle. Although these first two moments have been examined elsewhere—notably in Redmond's previous book, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (2014)—her diffraction of them through the idea of a "hologram" is fresh and provocative. For example, thinking of Robeson as a hologram in Wales forces us to contend with the Cold War politics that acted on his corporeal body to prevent him from occupying that space in that moment—politics fuming with the stench of McCarthyism and resistance to (Black) internationalism.

In the second chapter, "Play," Redmond guides us through Robeson's two arenas of play—competitive field sports and dramatic theater. Robeson's early athletic career, undertaken at Rutgers University from 1915 to 1919, tends to receive no more than a cursory gloss in critical studies of him as a political artist. But in her analysis of Edward T. Schmidt's 1989 play, *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, Redmond illuminates the links, both real and symbolic, between the former athlete Robeson and some of the key players behind Jackie Robinson's triumph as the first African American to play for a major-league baseball team in 1947. Notwithstanding Robeson, these players included Robinson himself; Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers; Joe Louis, the world boxing heavyweight champion from 1937 to 1949; and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, one of the pre-eminent tap dancers and entertainers of the first half of the twentieth century.

Although these men likely never actually met in 1947, a meeting between them is fictionalized in *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*. Schmidt's play, the first that Redmond focuses on in this chapter, imagines what might have transpired had these famous men met to play. The game?—successfully conditioning Robinson to endure the deluge of racism that would surely assault him for violating the sacrosanct color line. The players' positions on the field? Redmond delineates the men's roles in Schmidt's "magical realism" (46): Rickey is "the corporate visionary desperate for approval" (47); Louis is "the hot-tempered heavyweight anxious to hurry the meeting along" (47); Bojangles is "affable and appealing" (47); and Robinson is anxious but "resolute in his decision to integrate the major league" (47). Robeson's role in the play, that of a righteous contrarian opposed to white conciliation, serves as the point of departure for Redmond's critique of Schmidt's portrayal of Robeson, and for her broader analysis of his posthumous presence in stage works more generally. Her analysis is clarified and deftly honed in the second part of the chapter, in which she—with more than a hint of palpable frustration—takes to task Phillip Hayes Dean's 1978 play *Paul Robeson*, in which Robeson never sings. Robeson's Voice—that which "always already account[s]

for and attend[s] to the shape and form" of his body (58)—was integral to his politics. So, to render it inaudible, non-present, or otherwise inaccessible, as the works of Dean and Schmidt accomplish, is to entomb rather than celebrate the vibrancy of Robeson's musical politics.

In the book's third chapter, "Installation," we witness Redmond's alchemy as she transmutes Robeson from man to installation—something that is materially and aesthetically built. Redmond first takes us to Cardiff, Wales in 2001 to tour the exhibit at the National Museum, *Let Paul Robeson Sing! (Gadewich I Paul Robeson Ganu!)*. Robeson's leftist politics and Voice resounded for a long time amongst Welsh labor activists after his initial sojourn there in the late 1920s and his subsequent visits in the 1950s. His Voice sounded in consonance with theirs as they sung together a vision of an egalitarian and just future. And it is the echoes of this musical and political harmony on which *Let Paul Robeson Sing!* sought to capitalize.

The exhibit, "intertextual and participatory even as it took familiar shape in its display of images and material culture with photographs, sculpture, and costumes," fixed Robeson's Voice and politics in time to reflect his life "through its content and its form." As Redmond reveals, this was but one part of a larger effort by the Welsh National Assembly to provide and promote powerful role models "for tolerance, multiculturalism and anti-racism throughout Wales" (79). The main representational challenge that arose in the plays Redmond analyzed in the previous chapter—how to make space for Robeson's Voice alongside representations of the man—also reappears in her analysis of *Let Paul Robeson Sing!* However, Redmond's descriptive prose and careful selection of images gives us a sense of how the exhibit surmounted this challenge. For example, she highlights a listening station in the exhibit uniquely shaped in the form of a pyramid. None other than a recording of Robeson singing "O Isis und Osiris," an aria from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte,* floods the enclosed listening space. Through the presence of his Voice in the listening station, Robeson's body was made present again in Wales. And by linking his Voice to his relationship with Wales through other textual materials, the exhibit claimed Robeson's legacy for the nation. But Redmond rightly illuminates the "sociopolitical cleavage" between Robeson's politics (87) and that of the nation state. Robeson's politics were rarely focused solely on any particular nation but were, in fact, global in scope. Indeed, the final point of analysis in Redmond's chapter—a Malinese postage-stamp commemorating Robeson—redoubles this point of critique.

The "socio-political cleavage" which Redmond found in *Let Paul Robeson Sing!* is made even more apparent in her subsequent discussion of Glenn Ligon's

1993 installation *To Disembark*. Combining empty shipping crates, recorded media, and lithographs and etchings of slave-era ephemera, *To Disembark* is conceptually and aesthetically rooted in the same transnational routes, flows, and circulations that characterized Robeson's internationalist political and musical career, and that were the conditions, more generally, for the violent movements that have shaped the history of the African diaspora. Each shipping crate houses speakers that animates a variety of diasporic musics, including the Jamaican Bob Marley's "Freedom Song," songs by the Georgia McIntosh Country Singers, and Paul Robeson himself singing the spiritual "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel." All the material, sonic, and spatial elements of *To Disembark*—the empty shipping crates, the sounds therein, and the way they both configure visitors' experience of the space—act together to suggest the presence and transnational circulation of Black bodies, even if these routes of circulation are long gone.

In the fourth chapter, "Environment," Redmond invites us to commune with Robeson in the physical spaces which have been imbued with his presence—a fixture in the earth, a home-turned-museum, a space of student life, and a tall, living tree. By guiding us through these spaces—specifically the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the Paul Robeson House and Museum in Philadelphia, the Robeson Campus Center at Rutgers University, and the Paul Robeson Memorial Tree (also at Rutgers)—Redmond demonstrates several ways Robeson is still materially present in the world, and limns some of the political stakes of this physical presence. For example, she reads the Paul Robeson House as an intimate space in which Robeson is not only documented, but also—in the case of a small, stained-glass icon of the singer therein—literally built into. This house, this icon, and the mural of Robeson painted by Peter Pagast in 1999 (not far from the Paul Robeson House) all stand as tangible testimonies to Robeson's continued presence with us in the physical environment. Redmond argues that edifices like these fight "to hold space for the ideas and performances otherwise erased from books, walls, and other (surface) areas" (111). Robeson's supporters during the 1960s to 1970s actually did fight to imbue a space on the campus of Rutgers University with Robeson's presence "as a model for continued living" (115).

Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson is a challenging text that forces readers to contend with the challenges that arise when thinking about Black historical figures like Paul Robeson – figures whose thoughts and presence sounded across the globe through a variety of media forms. This is also a uniquely personal text. Redmond's prose is tinged with an intimacy that biographers tend to reject or hide. Yet *Everything Man* is also a provocative text, one that brushes against the limits of biography and implicitly questions its

efficacy. For example, it asks: how does one write a history of an individual whose life and politics found expression through so many different materials and media in so many different spaces and times throughout the world? Redmond elegantly addresses this concern with her metaphorical description of Robeson's political life as antiphonal, resembling a call-and-response musical texture in which two vocalists (or sets of vocalists) sing together in response to each other. This is a useful metaphor – worthy of emulating – to think about Robeson's internationalist politics and transnational networks like those discussed in the book's third chapter, not least because his musical networks and political networks were sometimes one in the same. However, here in *Everything Man,* I hear one side of this antiphony—Paul's side—as more exclusive and perhaps more geographically fixed than the book at first suggests. For example, the Voice of Eslanda Goode Robeson, Paul Robeson's wife, is largely silent in *Everything Man* (save a few sporadic quotes) despite the unison between her politics and his. Paul Robeson's longtime accompanist and musical collaborator, Lawrence Brown, is also largely silent in these pages, even though he frequently traveled around the world with Paul for performances and political engagements. Redmond's scoring of Robeson's antiphonal life in *Everything Man* is also almost always routed through the West: between America and Wales, between America and Bandung, even between states within the United States. Although Redmond does gloss non-Western activations and manifestations of Robeson as hologram, play, installation, and environment—notably in the book's third chapter, which she concludes with an analysis of a Malinese commemorative postage-stamp—an entire chapter devoted to Robeson's circulation outside of the West would have been deeply compelling, especially considering her repeated invocation of Robeson's internationalism.

One of the most significant challenges *Everything Man* poses both to the genre of biography and to us as readers of this genre is the relatively simple, yet profound question: how do we know a person? How do we know Paul Robeson? From primary sources, and the histories and biographies that they have generated, we know him as the tall, friendly, talented, yet deeply intellectual and perceptive African American political figure that used the music of Black America to aid worldwide struggles against oppression. But thanks to Redmond, we now have more ways of knowing him. We know him as a holographic entity capable or traversing space and time. We know him as someone who engaged in play and who has reappeared in various guises in dramatic works. We know him through state-sponsored exhibits and art installations. And we know him in and as the world around us.

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