

# More-than-human heritage: The political ecologies of the Paul Robeson tomato

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## Abstract

Paul Robeson's global memorialization poorly represents the extent to which the famous African American activist, actor, athlete, singer, and scholar impacted international culture and politics. Robeson's memorials, while few and far between, particularly in the United States, reside primarily within college campuses and theatrical and musical productions, alongside a few more traditional plaques, works of public art, and his own work. While there has been some interest in these various memorials, commemorations, and works of Robeson, no one has yet explored one of the most widespread and historically loaded aspects of his commemoration: the Paul Robeson Tomato. This heirloom tomato, developed in the Soviet Union, has, as one seed website states, "a cult following." Reading through various gardening and seed websites, we find that the tomato has a special place among heirlooms. At the same time, the digital and print networks conveying information about the tomato and Paul Robeson silence and twist Robeson's memorialization given political, cultural, and ecological contexts. This leads us to ask a number of questions, particularly how we might understand this tomato within the broader memory and memorialization of Paul Robeson? How does this human-environment interaction of more-than-human memory impact Robeson's legacy? And how can we further think of living memory beyond human experience to the remainder of the natural landscape around us and the power it has? This project explores these notions of living memory, more-than-human, and memorialization in the context of the histories which envelop Paul Robeson and the tomato.

**Key words:** Paul Robeson; tomato; memorialization; seeds; foodways; heritage

## Résumé

La commémoration globale du célèbre activiste, acteur, athlète, chanteur et érudit afro-américain Paul Robeson ne rend pas justice à son influence sur la culture et la politique internationales. Les monuments commémoratifs de Robeson se trouvent principalement dans les campus universitaires et les productions théâtrales et musicales, avec quelques plaques plus traditionnelles, des œuvres d'art public et des exemples de son propre travail. Nous explorons ici l'importance de la tomate Paul Robeson. Cette tomate ancestrale, développée en Union soviétique, a, comme l'indique un site web consacré aux semences, "une cote d'amour". Les sites web consacrés au jardinage et aux semences montrent qu'elle occupe une place particulière parmi les tomates anciennes. Les réseaux numériques et imprimés qui donnent des informations sur la tomate et sur Paul Robeson lui-même, taisent et déforment l'héritage de Robeson. Nous nous demandons comment comprendre cette tomate dans le cadre plus large de la commémoration de Paul Robeson? Comment l'interaction homme-environnement d'une mémoire 'plus qu'humaine' influe-t-elle sur l'héritage de Robeson? Nous explorons le pouvoir du paysage naturel, de la mémoire vivante et de la commémoration dans le contexte des histoires qui enveloppent Paul Robeson et la tomate.

**Mots clés:** Paul Robeson; tomate; commémoration; écologie politique

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## Resumen

La conmemoración mundial del famoso activista, actor, atleta, cantante y académico afroamericano Paul Robeson no hace justicia a su influencia en la cultura y la política internacionales. Los monumentos conmemorativos a Robeson se encuentran principalmente en los campus universitarios y en producciones teatrales y musicales, con algunos ejemplos más tradicionales en las artes. Aquí exploramos la importancia del tomate Paul Robeson. Esta variedad autóctona, desarrollada en la Unión Soviética, tiene "seguidores de culto", como afirma un sitio web de semillas, y ocupa un lugar especial entre las variedades autóctonas. Los medios digitales e impresos silencian y tergiversan el legado de Paul Robeson, y nos preguntamos cómo influyen el paisaje natural, la memoria viva y la memorialización en las historias que envuelven a Paul Robeson y al tomate.

**Palabras clave:** Paul Robeson; tomate; memorialización; ecología política

## 1. Introduction

Growing up, one of my [Rhodes] best memories includes our large garden – flax, mint, snow peas, and rows of sweet corn – but our strawberry garden stands out among the rest. Several twenty-foot rows of June-bearing strawberries my mother had meticulously cultivated produced gallons of berries every summer, with each row peaking in a different year. Hours of my childhood were spent weeding, picking, cleaning, and, of course, eating strawberries. When it came time to move as a teenager, I felt as though a living part of me was being left behind in that land, and not just the strawberry garden, but some peach trees I had planted for Father's Day one year or the flax my mother cultivated to remind her of her own childhood growing up in western Minnesota.

In response, I transplanted ten of those strawberry plants to my parents' new house. However, while I had deep emotional attachments to those strawberries, my parents never really felt the same. Every time I returned home it would be a new series of heartbreaks as I witnessed the strawberries barely hanging on. As I began writing this, only two plants remained. Over the course of writing (perhaps speaking more to my procrastination than anything else) I have transplanted those strawberries to my current home and have helped those two plants spread into several, with an additional few grown from their seeds. These living elements of my childhood home now fill my own home, my garden, even my office, but as they grow, they take on additional meaning and memories — from their careful cultivation to the uniqueness of the place they now dwell. Never-the-less, to me, these plants are embedded with the memory of home; their power of recollection reciprocates, fuels, and sparks my own ability to remember the minutia of my childhood; they are more-than-human living memory.

Together, we write this after several years of research on the memorialization of the famous Black activist and artist Paul Robeson (Rhodes, 2016, 2021). Robeson's memory, while mentioned only occasionally, particularly in the United States, resides within college campuses, theatrical and musical productions, a few more traditional plaques and works of public art, and through his own work. One aspect of Robeson's memory that has yet to be discussed by scholars, or the Robeson heritage community more broadly, is the Paul Robeson tomato (Figure 1).

Born in 1898 in Princeton, NJ, Paul Robeson excelled across sports, music, theatre, film, language, and activism for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Having been named an All-American Footballer twice at Rutgers University in New Jersey, he went on to play professionally and coach at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania to help pay for his law degree from Columbia University in New York. At the same time, he also began acting professionally, and after graduating from Columbia and facing racist legal systems, he began touring, holding theatre and musical concerts, and eventually acting in Hollywood and British-produced films. Politically, Robeson involved himself in fundraising concerts for the Spanish Civil War, spoke many times in the UK Houses of Parliament against the activities of the British Empire, and he was an ardent voice against lynching and segregation in the United States. He became a global voice for the labor movement, also supporting communist and socialist movements. For many of these actions, the US House Un-American Activities Committee illegally seized Robeson's passport, the Department of State barred him from traveling to Canada and Mexico, and he was blacklisted. He was in some cases literally written out of the history books where his

records, such as in the longest running Shakespearian performance on Broadway, still stand (Robeson, 1978; Duberman, 1989; Redmond, 2020).



Figure 1: A Paul Robeson tomato with marked scarring, splitting, and disfigurement. Photo by Mark Rhodes.

The Paul Robeson heirloom tomato, developed by a Soviet botanist, has, as one seed website states, "a cult following." Indeed, our farmer friends are very familiar with the stardom of the Robeson tomato, and we've found at least two examples of the seeds being sold in stores. Reading through various gardening and seed websites, we will illustrate how this tomato has a special place among heirloom varieties. At the same time exaggeration and post-truths are found across many of these forums, placing Robeson as an opera star who was also perhaps a "Russian Equal Rights Advocate for Blacks." This leads us to ask several questions about how memory embeds itself in a plant disassociated from its namesake, and when those memories – at least in their original form – lack a deeply interpersonal more-than-human relationship. How might scholars of food, memory, and political ecology understand this tomato within the broader collective memory and memorialization of Paul Robeson? How does this more-than-human, or human-environmental memory, impact Robeson's legacy? And how can we think about living memory beyond the human experience?

The article first explores notions of living memory, the more-than-human, and memorialization before contextualizing the Paul Robeson tomato. The tomato is a case study of more-than-human living memory and illustrates the possible political ecologies and memorial geographies found within more than 250 other varieties

of fruit, vegetable, or grain named in honor of someone other than the individuals who discovered or developed them. Using content and narrative analyses across websites offering or discussing the Robeson tomato, these coded web scrapings, and their broader narratives, begin to address memorial discourses of the tomato. Finally, we step back to not only analyze the web-based data but to specifically address ways in which memoryways parallel and are shaped by foodways and the theoretical questions raised by a more-than-human understanding of memory.

## 2. Geographies of living memory

The Paul Robeson tomato, and its seed, plant, food, and memory networks and histories, presents a generative contribution to the more-than-human, and specifically vegetal, turn in political ecology. Pursuing Lawrence's focus on "plant temporality, agency, care and the everyday" (2022, p. 631), emergent scholarship around relations with seeds and plants pushes towards articulating vegetal politics, vegetal geographies, or a "vegetal political ecology." As "an analysis that shows the impact of plantiness on human-plant encounters...that further links this impact to resource politics and other broader environmental contestations" (Fleming 2017, p. 27), we add broader cultural contestations into these "vegetal political ecologies." This turn to the other-than-human has hinged on decentering the human from ecological life and academic critique, and moving beyond human/nature dualisms (Jasarevic, 2015; Margulies & Bersaglio, 2018). There is a fraught relationship with power in this scholarship and there remains a privileging of colonial parameters of what constitutes the human (Jasarevic, 2015; Sundberg, 2014), thus we also draw upon critical interrogations of embodiment, subjection, and racialization that allow for alternative approaches to the human, through critical analyses of power and difference (Weheliye, 2014; Frazier, 2016).

Scholarship has bloomed as this theoretical work has taken up questions of human-plant relations, nonhuman agency, performance, and the political subjectivity of nonhuman life (Doody *et al.*, 2014; Head *et al.*, 2014; Ernwein, Ginn & Palmer, 2021), from microbial and fungal worlds (Jasarevic, 2015; Slocum, 2011; Tsing, 2015) to weedy landscapes. Argüelles and March (2022), in their discussion of weeds, reiterate the necessity of a political ecology framework for understanding how nature pushes back against its exchange value and perceived uselessness within capitalist systems. Similar writing on the enactments of weediness has sat with *kahikatea* plants in intimate homegardens (Doody *et al.*, 2014), and the transgressive infrastructural and ecological actions of Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) in the face of gentrification and disturbance (patrick, 2014). More-than-human, nonhuman, and inhuman narratives of care, interdependence, and entanglement have been generative for scholarship on planty relations, shifting the human from a discrete body to an ecological "process, an unfolding" (Luciano & Chen, 2015, p. 196). These narratives have also led to reconsiderations of life and death through literatures around sexuality, race, environment, affect, and power (Chen, 2012; Povinelli, 2016). Betz (2020, p. 225), while not clearly tying in the structural foci from political ecology, nonetheless makes a compelling argument for the further integration of multispecies perspectives into a vegetal political ecology where attention turns away from human-nature dichotomies and towards "myriad interdependencies...where bodies come together or influence each other." Betz studies a community orchard to deconstruct which bodies (tree and human) belong to, influence, and are impacted by the community.

We push forward these discourses on planty relations with an attention to the ways in which the nonhuman comes to light through seeds: including relations of care, selection, keeping, and breeding at different parts of plants' life cycles and across temporal scales, from quotidian to seasonal to generational. The physical differences and trait characteristics of plant varieties don't always map onto genotypes (Thomas *et al.*, 2012). The different forms of variation within and between varieties, and potentially the mobilities of seeds themselves, result from on the ground decision-making by farmers and gardeners and structural power formations in agriculture. The multispecies reproductive politics of seedy relations articulate as everyday care and violence—from "opportunities to care for non-humans" to "dispatching slugs or removing weeds" (Pottinger, 2017, p. 215)—with biopolitical resonances (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014).

Critical scholarship around seeds often focuses upon their conservation, categorization, and relationality, but seeds also warrant political exploration into their materialities. Indigenous seed work, for example, has stressed the political importance of community-based conservation through the reciprocal

relations between "the human who plants the seed, the seed, the soil itself, the harvester, and those who use and/or consume the plant" (Breen, 2015, p. 46-47). We present our contribution to an expanding understanding of vegetal political ecology, where questions of political ecology, economy, and cultural practice intersect in a more-than-human engagement with the networks that fuel both the material relations of the Robeson tomato and the concurrent memorialization of Paul Robeson.

### *Critical seed geographies*

Most of the narratives we explore focus on the networks and markets for seed exchange. We situate this vein of seed work among discourses of *in situ* agrobiodiversity conservation, specifically the saving, sharing, and periodic growing-out of open-pollinated crop varieties (Enjalbert *et al.*, 2011). This is at least a ten-thousand-year-old technology, yet today seeds are increasingly important for building and maintaining locally and regionally sustainable food systems, as well as individual practices of ecological and historical meaning-making through reconnection with ancestral food. There are many ways in which people tap in: from survival, to adaptation, to play (Graddy-Lovelace, 2013; Montenegro de Wit, 2016). Critical scholars of agrobiodiversity offer useful frameworks for patchy geographies of exchange and keeping.<sup>2</sup> We tie the mobilities of seeds and plants into cultural ecologies of memory and community, as well as the political ecologies of land and food systems.

This "alternative geography of agricultural biodiversity: an *in situ* critical geography of seeds, space, place, and power" (Graddy-Lovelace, 2013, p. 2-3), has been shown to manifest across a variety of landscapes from small farms to homegardens to urban lots (Campbell & Veteto, 2015; Nazarea, 2005; Pottinger, 2017; Veteto, 2014). Further, the social reproduction of place and the political ecologies of seeds, knowledge, networks, and memory are set into motion through political-ecological mobilizations through processes of exchange and solidarity across fragmented geographies (Campbell & Veteto, 2015; Montenegro de Wit, 2016). Montenegro de Wit (2016), through a critique of biodiversity in patchy agroecological landscapes, has suggested a metapopulation analytic that sheds light on processes of local losses and gains through seed exchange and crop breeding. This "shifting mosaic of occupied patches" informs a set of heterogeneous geographies of agrobiodiversity that shift with the movements of humans and nonhumans and can be "understood in political, agroecological terms: not just as something that 'exists' but that is created and sustained; and not just as something that is lost (or that persists) globally but as something that is bred, experimented with, and used at multiple scales" (Montenegro de Wit 2016, p. 638).

The Robeson tomato, as a crop variety, is spatially present and reproduced across fragmented sets of agricultural geographies—small farms, home gardens, vacant lots, institutional breeding sites—consisting of subpopulations that are conserved and bred alongside other tomato varieties, and other crop species. Season by season these populations are maintained as a mostly stable and identifiable crop variety through networks of seed exchange as well as by acquisition through seed companies. We find this grounding in the often-fragmented spatial relations of seed work to be useful to understand the dispersal, migration, and mobilities of this single tomato variety, which threads through the work of major seed operations as well as small farms, gardens, and radical food organizing. In this article, we follow the Paul Robeson tomato through these networks of exchange and varied political economies, holding the movement and evolution of seeds in tension with the movement and evolution of their stories.

### *More-than-human memories*

The Paul Robeson Tomato lives at, yet beyond, the intersection of many memorial geographies. The tomato's historical, cultural, and environmental geographies reach beyond core toponymic work — the politics of naming. The tomato is not a building or a bridge or a street, but a plant with its fruit: from seed to garden to plate and with the possibility of being marketed, bought, and sold. Of course, the use of plants for

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<sup>2</sup> Patchiness here refers to fragmentation, biodiversity and biogeography literatures, as well as poststructuralist geographies of distributed networks. The patches are individual growing sites (farms, gardens, etc.) that are unconnected geographically but looped together through the flows of seed exchange.

commemoration is not new. It is present from the elaborate flowers adorning the Lincoln Memorial Train which Doss (2012) describes in *Memorial Mania* to the use of, and relationships with, trees and groves to commemorate loss, trauma, and violence (Biermann, 2014; Cloke & Jones, 2004; Arnold, Atchison, & McKnight, 2021). Scholars have recently turned towards these intersectional relationships to better study and produce memory. The USDA's Living Memorial Project commemorating 9/11 through urban forests demonstrates the 'memory work' scholars do within these processes of living commemoration and memorials. In addition to these examples, there are also many varieties of fruit, vegetables, and other flora and fauna connected to someone who found, cultivated, or developed a specific species or variety.

The importance of memory in gardening practices, particularly of heirloom or heritage foods<sup>3</sup>, ground much of the previous and surrounding work of this project. Jennifer Jordan's *Edible Memory* focuses particularly on the embodied memories of people and place rooted into the seeds grown and shared among families and communities. In conceptualizing edible memory, Jordan explores how the concept of the heirloom became popular and politically salient in response to the rise of modernist agronomy and the industrialization of the food system, leading many seed savers to articulate their work as a form of genetic and cultural stewardship against collective forgetting (Jordan, 2015, 2007). As we argue, it is also a unique example of industrial heritage (i.e. a process of communicating the ongoing legacies of our industrial past, present, and future; such as capitalist-driven industrial agriculture and its impacts). Jordan's engagement with memory reveals the ways in which heirloom varieties, as cultural constructs with biological referents, come to be sedimented and re-formed season by season through growing, cooking, eating, and keeping. If "cultural memories can run parallel to the genetic codes contained in cultivated plants", as Veteto & Skarbø (2009, p. 75) propose, then the collection and preservation of botanic life is simply a facet of a larger set of stories around human and nonhuman connections and cyclical, seasonal temporalities.

Through the example of the Paul Robeson tomato, we build on an edible memory framework to interrogate the human and more-than-human politics of memorialization. In a departure from the histories of many heirloom varieties, the Robeson tomato is a living memorial to an individual removed from the process of its creation. Likewise, there is no specific place linked to the Paul Robeson tomato, because there is no single grove, or site, or place commemorated by the plant or fruit nor any singular anchoring of it. Yet, every food has a geography. In this case, it is a memorial of the most mobile. The spatialities of living memory in this context emerge on two fronts. First, the tomato itself is transnational. Robeson, an African American, traveled to and had significant impacts upon, the Soviet Union. A Soviet botanist developed the variety and a Russian seedswoman collected and brought that variety to the United States, where it has further popularized itself and is once again traveling the globe. Second, these specific spatialities of the Robeson tomato echo the highlighted, complex and contested food webs that seeds propagate.

While this is a unique case, there are many connections between work on 'more-than-human memorial geographies' and the 'more-than-human political ecologies' of the Paul Robeson Tomato. Heath-Kelly's (2018) "vegetal geographies" or Cloke & Pawson's (2008) "treescape memories" both lay the groundwork. Pitt (2018) uses an extensive typology to understand the more-than-human ethics of community gardening. There are other voices engaging more-than-humanness, or relevance to our focus on the Robeson tomato (Jones & Cloke, 2008; Ginn, 2014; Pitt, 2015).

We (perhaps erroneously) consider the Robeson tomato in a relatively isolated context, to better understand the true human-non-human relationship between this plant and people. Pitt's typology ranges from plants as 'enemy' to 'interdependent.' While the Robeson plant could be considered by some as a neighbor, companion, or community member because of the kind of 'memory work' that it produces and consumes, we need to consider how it navigates fluid spatial relationships and landscapes. Even in its 'memory work', place and audience significantly shape what is remembered. Cultural-geographic context doesn't just shape memory, but it also sparks a conversation on the dialectics of authenticity and tradition against the population-level genetic and phenotypic shifts of the tomato itself. The season-by-season practice of seed saving and plant breeding curates a selection of traits deemed positive or desirable for a particular plant variety (and avoidance of those that are undesirable).

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<sup>3</sup> In the United Kingdom, heirloom varieties are referred to as heritage varieties.

Cloke & Pawson (2008, p. 107) take discussions of cultural geographic contexts in a different direction when they discuss memorial trees: they say, "these original significances can disperse in the face both of changing cultural practices and of the shifting performance of nature-culture relationships in particular places." However, they also point out the performative and transformational potential of memorial treescapes through the everyday encounter with the trees and their changing embodied memories. Something as simple as a shift in wind, or in the case of the tomato, a change in taste, adds additional layers to any memorial landscape.<sup>4</sup> Some of these layers will shift away from the original memorial intent as the plants are left to grow, propagate, and use their human and non-human caretakers to survive through further propagation, seed saving, exchange, and cultivation. In this way, the memory work truly lies in the hands of the plants themselves and their more-than-human agency to shape the living memories of not only their intended commemorations, but their compounded planty embodiment (c.f. Jones & Cloke, 2008).

The Robeson tomato's geographies also reach beyond those of other biologically living memories. Unlike a grove or single tree, the tomato is instantly more mobile, ephemeral, and immortal. Living on through its seeds, sprouting and bearing fruit over the course of a single summer, or being quickly bought and consumed from a market or a restaurant provides a unique memorial and scalar situation. Within the context of sustainable memory – particularly sustainable memorial landscapes – *living* memorials offer an alternative to the displacement, gentrification, and intense environmental impact of other memorial and heritage spaces. The living memorial can be, and regularly is, transferred and remade via postal services, culinary recipes, and informal and formal exchanges of goods.

Physical geographers have explored the interactions of environmentally embedded processes of memory. They caution that without considering broader contexts which illustrate memorial processes as tightly intertwined into human-environment relationships, this perceived absence of complexity "can thus be controlled by those in power...of the prevailing cultural discourse" (Griffiths, 2014, p. 466). Griffiths illustrates these relationships through the politicization of the flooding of the Tryweryn Valley in Wales, and Colucci *et al.* (2021) address missing discourses of landscape transformation and material relations from the memorialization of the Cambodian Genocide. In both cases, deconstructing the physical environment and memory work as isolated — rather than integrated — processes risks political manipulation. Politics enters to fill the void of a false dichotomy, often with lasting more-than-human impacts. As we consider the Paul Robeson tomato reaching beyond our traditional geographies of memory and commemoration, it is important to ask similar questions: how does the Paul Robeson Tomato function as "more-than-food" and can we consider the memory work of the tomato resilient to more powerful broader cultural discourses?

#### *More-than-food: commodification*

The Paul Robeson Tomato's historical context sets up an additional important disjunction. It was created not under a capitalist system in which foods are designed, produced, exchanged, and consumed as commodities, but under the communist structure of the Soviet Union where food – at least for the purposes of this argument – was to be considered as a human right. To be designed, produced, consumed, and then commemorated in the absence of explicit capitalist structures, the Robeson tomato, its more-than-human nature, and its living memory, take on several new meanings.

In historical and cultural geographies of memory, the memorial entrepreneur is often a significant participant in memory work (Alderman & Inwood, 2013; Muzaini, 2013; Rhodes, 2021). This entrepreneurial spirit has a financial stake, greater than a social or political motive. Politics, culture, and society within capitalist societies cannot escape economic tendrils. So, if we accept the Soviet Union as a communist state—rather than the state-run capitalism it practiced—can we assign a difference between socialist and capitalist living memory or what it means to be more-than-human, if that humanity is not being quantified, commodified, and economically exploited in everyday experience? Further, how does a 'product' designed outside the capitalist system navigate contemporary attempts at market-driven flows of (particularly American) industrial

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that heirloom tomatoes are most often pollinated by insects (and sometimes humans), and if grown in the landscape, should be kept at least fifty feet (15m) apart to prevent cross-pollination. A shift in wind could produce a generation of tomatoes with a significantly different look, taste, and smell, let alone a different set of memoryways.

agriculture, as heirloom tomatoes increasingly climb scales of capitalist production (see Jordan, 2015)? The Paul Robeson tomato today, regardless of its development, flows both through these (violent) capitalist streams and more equitable seed exchange networks.

Likewise, if we turn to living memorials developed explicitly within and for industrial agriculture, how does the impact, legacy, or meaning of those memories change? Or does it? As Glover and Stone (2018) discuss in the Philippines, Ifugao Native rice was similarly produced as an anti-commodity, but through social entrepreneurship and its inclusion as part of the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras UNESCO World Heritage Site, tourism, and broader demand, it has become commodified as an "heirloom rice." While complicated by socially and economically unsustainable practices and pressure to modify the rice for better preservation and commodification, we begin to see the layers of living heritage when produced in anti-capitalist contexts now navigating late-capitalism as cultural heritage. In our broader research on living memory, we have found over 250 examples of food varieties which fall under the same criteria as the Paul Robeson tomato, but many of those are Protected Plant Varieties – a form of short-term plant patent from the USDA in the United States. Unlike the Robeson tomato or Ifugao rice, these examples of living memory were probably developed with commodification as an aim. When faced with an Obama potato (*Solanum tuberosum* L. cv. *Obama*) or Messi bean (*Phaseolus vulgaris* cv. *Messi*), how might those differences ripple through the memory work and memorial webs of the seed and plant networks?

Goodman's discussions of more-than-food compliment the more-than-human nature of the tomato plants themselves, without removing the material realism of the tomato (2016). Goodman stresses the political ecology of access to food and its effects on health, but also alludes to the importance of memory work:

...much like the rationale embedded in more-than-human and posthuman debates. Here, modernist and other dualisms get chucked onto the dustbin of history to be replaced with agent-like, food(y) things, assemblages, networks and 'radical relationalities' that do this vitalist work on foodscapes and bodies. (2016)

Paul Robeson tomatoes are certainly 'foody things' capable of carrying both a more-than- and post-human memorialization of Paul Robeson.

Food studies and Black geographies are another important intersection. Reese (2019, p. 3) places the garden amongst the much broader landscapes of *Black Food Geographies* by isolating the significance of memory, nostalgia, and resiliency of Black foodways "within and in spite of" anti-Black racism. While Reese's work stretches well beyond either gardening or simply food, particular attention is paid to a community garden in the Deanwood neighborhood of Washington, DC where instead of typical 'owned' plots, communal understandings of foodways were developed. Important not only for supplanting the unreliable access of healthy foods in the area, Reese (2019, p. 115; c.f. Carrera 2022) argues that the garden represents the community's attachment to home in the face of gentrification and other forces: "[t]he garden represented their determination and desire to remain where they had planted roots."

Ramírez (2015, p. 749) asks "how black food geographies enact a decolonial politics, and how black food spaces can serve as transformative spaces to excavate historical traumas." A core discourse of Robeson was his anti-colonialism (Rhodes, 2016), and we cannot separate the physical and mental violence Robeson endured during his life from his embodiment in a Soviet-originating tomato. Is the Paul Robeson tomato offering a Black geographic analysis with a mechanism for anti-colonial and radical change? If so, it would fall within McCutcheon's (2015) definition of a 'Black counterpublic' as a human-environment interaction capable of negotiating political ideologies. The evidence for this is limited, however. Future work should delve into the Robeson tomato's political lives in subaltern spaces and radical food organizing, along with the potential it has to negotiate Robeson's values in community settings. But if so, does the tomato "embody" labor rights or civil rights? How do Robeson's philosophical underpinnings translate into the memorial landscapes of this broader 'living memorial web'?

*The past, present, and future of the Paul Robeson tomato*

The Robeson tomato was produced not as a good but in state service, and it does not feature strongly in global markets or agricultural trade networks. But the tomato does memorialize Robeson, the person. It is one additional small strand stretching across past, present, and future to inform and shape future Robesons. As (more-than-)food, the tomato further delves into Robeson's racialized, colonial, and labored pasts, to inform and shape alternative presents and futures. While the tomato may have a relatively small reach, it holds significance to those who interact with it, from those growing the plant to companies who have commissioned artists to highlight the connection to Paul Robeson. These actions lead to the alternative past, presents, and futures of gardening itself, as well as the more-than-human impacts of the tomato.

Our specific experiences as gardeners further informs these temporal and spatial processes of memory, food, and the more-than-human. While I [Rhodes] was aware of the elusive Paul Robeson Tomato through my research on Robeson, my first direct interaction with the plant did not occur until a friend sent a packet of seeds one year as a gift. Over the last few summers I have propagated the seedlings indoors, typically in my office, and then transplanted them into my garden or given them to colleagues. Further, I have shared seeds with other avid gardeners. For myself, the attention drawn by the rapidly growing plants, their significant size, and their very large harvest brings an everyday recollection back to Paul Robeson. Individuals were aware of my interest in Paul Robeson and while they primarily spoke of these same plant-food happenings, discussions often touched on Robeson. The plants themselves directed conversation, fueling many individuals (including a geographer, a primatologist, a musicologist, and the musician who first gave me the seeds) to at least explore his Wikipedia page, or Robeson topics in podcasts, books, and other instances. Perhaps having these daily Paul Robeson reminders heightened their stimuli to Robeson references, despite their work being in other areas. At the very personal level, I saw these tomatoes function as a memorial device, and often (to this day) will receive texts or emails whenever individuals encounter Paul Robeson in their everyday or professional lives. Again, more-than-human everyday encounters empowered these individuals to pull Robeson out of a relatively obscured past and present and into a decolonial and radical present and future.

My [Keeve] own encounter with Paul came about several summers ago, while working as a garden educator in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Although I was familiar with much of the landscape of heirloom tomatoes, I, along with my co-worker, were captivated by the stories of these seeds and their geopolitical stakes, along with the creative labor of imparting those stories to several dozen children as part of a curriculum of horticultural and culinary education. I was introduced to Paul through the stories given to me by this co-worker in the midst of working the land; imparted to them by a friend and mentor, who just so happened to be the partner of my own mentor in seed work. Starting my Masters in Geography soon afterwards, the Paul Robeson tomato quickly became the impetus for much of my work around the political ecologies of seeds (Keeve 2020). I had initially been bouncing around some strategies for archival research to triangulate these word-of-mouth stories, but as I realized my own lack of access to the historical data behind the breeding and mobilities of the tomato, I became caught up in a larger set of questions around the often-complex knowledge politics that become imbricated in the mobilities of open-pollinated seeds.

### **3. Paul Robeson as tomato?**

How exactly is Paul Robeson represented through the narratives and discourses of the tomato? Reflecting philosophically and on some of Robeson's biography, what can we understand of his living memories and representation through the online presence of the Paul Robeson tomato? Digital and intangible heritage have increasingly become core to work on memory and heritage. There are now fully immersive historical environments, traditional online forums, and simple digital communications. There are in a constant state of change like any memorial landscape, but scholars can consult them as part of holistic and network-wide assessments and gather data in an efficient and accessible manner (Caldwell, 2012). The goal is to step back and try to see the broadest picture possible of how Robeson is represented across the largest networks and to the widest audiences.

Using a simple Google search for the Boolean phrase "'Paul Robeson' and 'tomato,'" we extracted descriptions from the top 32 websites, stopping once we no longer recognized reputable seed or plant websites or databases, and when the results began to repeat (Table 1). We also searched for anyone offering Paul Robeson tomatoes on the large platforms Etsy, Amazon, eBay, and Seed Savers Exchange. Overall, we found 63 offerings or mentions of the Robeson tomato. Content analysis allowed direct tracing of linked food and memory networks in specific word and phrase linkages. We searched for these using words and phrases and direct word-by-word and phrase-by-phrase networks across different sources. We also utilized narrative analysis (blending sociolinguistic and hermeneutic investigations) to reveal insights into the data and to inform our coding, for example how Robeson was framed as Russian or not, or the tone in which a website presented certain social movements connected to the tomato. We stepped back to assess broader themes emerging from those intertwined networks (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2016).

	<b>Total Robeson Tomato Sites</b>	<b>No mention of Paul Robeson</b>
Stand-alone Websites	32	10
Etsy Listings	14	3
Amazon Listings	3	1
eBay Listings	5	3
Seed Savers Exchange	9	5
Overall	63	22

Table 1: Webpages offering or specifically describing the Paul Robeson tomato, and those who do not reference Paul Robeson the human. Data from 2022.

Connections quickly surfaced between seed sellers, bloggers, and non-profits. After removing duplicate organizations, of the 63 sites, 22 did not mention Robeson, and within the remaining 41 descriptions, thirty biographies followed one or more of four dominant scripts (Table 2). Some were direct duplicates, while others borrowed phrasings or wordings, but it was very clear that within the tomato world, there are little more than *four* dominant biographies of Robeson that point us toward two initial outcomes. First, we find memory following the same webs as the foodways themselves. Many companies, organizations, and individual growers are interconnected. For example, while one listing was from the Seed Savers Exchange (SSE), the seeds themselves originally came from a different company, Fedco, in 2012. The World Tomato Society also listed many partner organizations, such as Fruition Seeds, who appeared elsewhere in our findings. The highly mobile story of Robeson follows these same flows. In the case of the SSE grower and Fedco, both coded Robeson's biography as *Actor*, *Singer*, *Activist*, *Athlete*, and *Scholar*. The World Tomato and the Fruition seed company both presented Robeson as a *Singer* and *Activist*.

Secondly, despite the significance of memorialization, the narratives which have become standard in describing Robeson and his life are far from complete or historically accurate. Below, we explore these patterns in more detail, but from an overall assessment, 26 (more than half) describe Robeson as an opera star rather than mentioning the political and Black folk music he championed. Robeson himself even disavowed singing opera in his later life (Robeson, 1933, p. 20). As he stated – referring to "not becoming an opera star:"

I am not an artist in the sense in which they want me to be an artist and of which they could approve...I have a far more important task to perform. (1978, p. 86)

<b>Overarching Biography Narrative Codes:</b>	<b>Frequency of Codes</b>
No mention of Robeson	21
A unique biography	12
This variety is an old Russian variety named after the African-American actor, singer and civil rights activist, Paul Robeson (1898-1976)...	6
This Russian heirloom was named in honor of Paul Robeson (1898-1976) who befriended the Soviet Union...	7
This favorite heirloom tomato was named after the operatic artist who won acclaim as an advocate of equal rights for Blacks. His artistry was admired world-wide, especially in the Soviet Union.	5
Named in honor of the famous opera singer star of King Solomon's Mines, 1937. Paul Robeson was an Equal Rights Advocate for Blacks in Russia as well as all around the world. This Russian heirloom was lovingly named in his honor.	13
<b>Summative Biographical Codes:</b>	
Singer	2
Singer and Activist	19
Singer, Scholar, Athlete, Activist	1
Actor, Singer, Activist	9
Actor, Singer, Activist, Athlete	1
Actor, Singer, Activist, Athlete, Scholar	9
None of the Above	2
<b>Specific Artistic Product Codes:</b>	
Othello	6
Old Man River	2
King Solomon's Mines	9
<b>Specific Identifying Codes:</b>	
Robeson as Russian	3
Robeson as Black or African American	13
Robeson as American (no mention of African American or Black)	2
Robeson as American or African American	12
Robeson and the Soviet Union	23
Robeson and the Civil Rights Movement	3
Robeson and Activism in the Soviet Union	9
Labor Rights and Socialism	2
Civil Rights and Racial Justice	34
Anti-Colonialism	3
McCarthy	14
Robeson as Opera Star	26

Table 2: Coded language found within the "Total Robeson Tomato Sites" column of Table 1.  
Source: 2022.

More than half of the biographies also associate Robeson prominently or solely with the Soviet Union. In the most grievous examples, three biographies describe Robeson as Russian. Only 12 specifically identify Robeson as American, and only 13 specifically identify him as Black. Two other significant points we look for in any Paul Robeson biography are the description of his professions and activism. A more well-rounded presentation of Robeson would describe him as a singer, scholar, athlete, actor, and activist for civil and human rights, labor rights and socialism, and against colonialism and imperialism. Across his 42 biographies, while 34 mention his civil rights efforts, only 3 mention anti-colonialism or labor rights (and rarely in a positive tone but rather commenting upon his Communist sympathies). Finally, only 9 list Robeson as an actor, singer, athlete, activist, and scholar, whereas 19 describe him as only a singer and activist. In the following paragraphs, we attempt to deconstruct some of these biographies and possible impacts while also identifying the memory webs at play in the flows of foodways that carrying living memories of Robeson.

#### *An advocate for equal rights*

The most prevalent theme amongst all of Robeson's biographies is the recognition of him as an activist. But describing him only in this way does very little to illustrate his geographies, philosophies, and lived experiences (Rhodes, 2016, 2020, 2021). The phrase, "advocate of equal rights" or "equal rights advocate," in particular, obfuscates the who, where, and why of Robeson's activism while disregarding his insistence on social, political, and economic *equity*. Robeson was a prominent figure before the Civil Rights Movement, opposing "separate but equal" Jim Crow legislation. Another accompanying phrase regularly found is "advocate for equal rights," often followed by "for Blacks in Russia." Robeson's activism is bounded in this way in thirteen biographical narratives and nine specific identifying codes discursively curtailing his efforts, binding him even closer to the Soviet history of the tomato itself. A clear pattern emerges; despite the individual being memorialized in the food, the food itself—and its Soviet history—becomes memorialized in Robeson and his biography.

There are, of course, exceptions to this geographical and racial bounding. The Hudson Valley Seed Company, for instance, began an art initiative in 2009 where each year 14 individuals were hired to design an Art Pack to celebrate the legacy and history of a variety. The Robeson tomato featured in a 2021 redesign of a pack released in 2018. In Figure 2, co-founder K Greene and artist Cbabi Bayoc discuss the power of living memory, connecting art into that memory, and the cycles of artistry and memory which Bayoc's renditions of the Paul Robeson tomato can present (Hudson Valley Seed Company, 2021):

With heirloom varieties, like Hank's X-Tra Special Baking Bean, the name reflects a family member who is most associated with the variety, someone who handed it down to future generations and is being honored. The naming of this variety was really about someone wanting to honor Paul Robeson's name as a legacy, something where each time a seed was planted his fame and accomplishments would be remembered...Cbabi's art invites us to reconsider the power and meaning of handing down seeds and medicine, attitudes and beliefs, and ways of being in the world generation to generation.

Bayoc describes his art invoking "the African-American contribution to the story of farming in this country and around the world...We contributed much to this land that people live on these days, and little is known about that" (Hudson Valley Seed Company, 2021).



Figure 2: The Hudson Valley Seed Company's unfolded art pack designed by Chabi Bayoc. Photo by Rhodes, 2022.

In this case, an additional memorial layer—one-part marketing strategy (Figure 3) and one-part strategic public art campaign—further complicates the narrative. In this case, the artwork, combined with these publicized interviews with the company founder and the artist provide a significant amount of additional context beyond the online store pages. Robeson jumps from being an African-American opera singer, linguist, athlete, and civil rights champion...something not too distantly removed from the networks of biographies we see across other sites (i.e. opera singer)...to a "20th century Renaissance man and Black cultural figurehead on stage and screen...[whose] activism for workers worldwide speaks to the importance of maintaining intergenerational connections to the land." *This* is a unique biography, only further heightened by the artistry of a Black farmer handing a large deep-red tomato to a Black child with the word "legacy" scrawled in the background.



Figure 3: A Hudson Valley Seed Company display case with the Robeson tomato for sale on the fourth row down at Kula County Farms on the island of Maui. Photo by Rhodes, 2022.

In a similar move, Truelove Seeds, based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, features Robeson as part of their African Diaspora Collection Seed Packets and Postcards (Figure 4). Included among Black diasporic varieties like the Mississippi Silver Hull Crowder Pea, the Plate de Haiti Tomato, and the Buena Mulata Pepper, is a postcard featuring a painted illustration of Robeson standing behind three microphones, hands splayed out, mouth open, eyes gazing determinedly to the left. Pictured in the background are tomatoes of various positions, suspended in air, some sliced in half. Designed by Philadelphia-based visual artist Jasmine Hamilton, and sold through Truelove's catalog, these postcards – and their complementary illustrated seed packets – present a further material layer of the mobilities of these seeds and their shifting stories. Mobilities that are reflected through the movements of both human and nonhuman, exemplified in Truelove's description of Robeson as not only a "crusader for racial equality and social justice for African Americans and all colonized peoples," but also as one who "spent his final years in our very own West Philadelphia!" Here, flows of digital knowledge and online presences become tied a little closer to urban political geographies. For both Truelove and Hudson Valley, these additional memorial layers visually foreground Robeson as a human whose social movement work and political solidarities are juxtaposed with and against his more-than-human namesake in Philadelphia and the Hudson Valley.

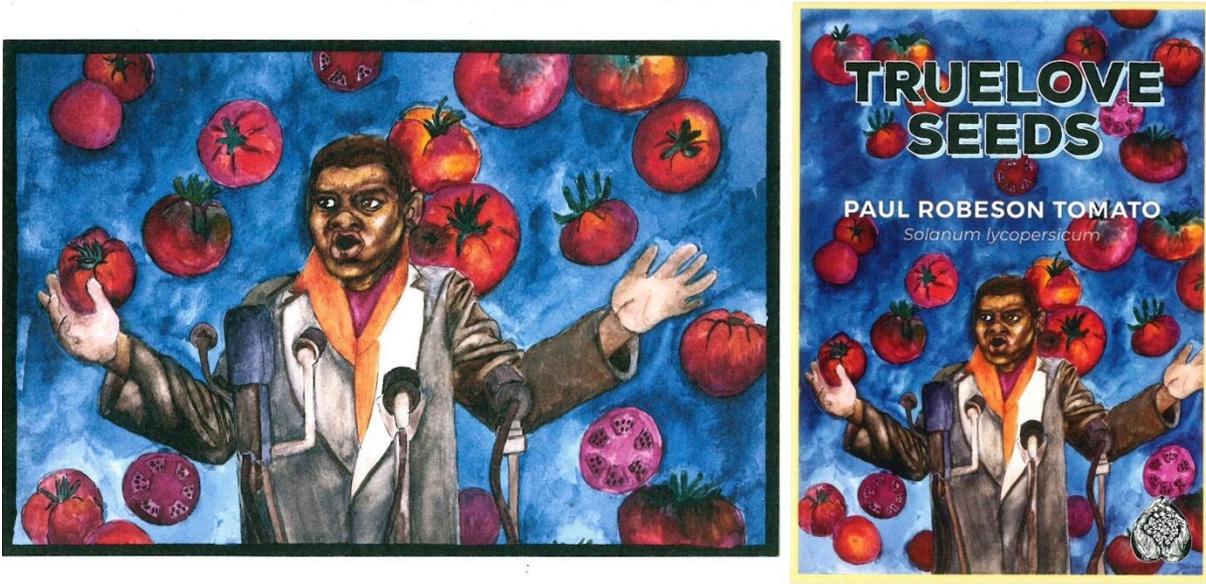


Figure 4. Truelove Seeds's Paul Robeson tomato postcard and seed packet back with artwork designed by Jasmine Hamilton. Photos by Rhodes, 2022

#### *The Famous Opera Singer*

Second only to the presentation of Robeson as an activist is the rather odd insistence of labeling him as an opera singer. Of course, as a vocalist, Robeson was incredibly talented – I [Rhodes] initially learned of him during a university music course – but that fame did not come from operatic performance. In fact, he never performed a full opera, but occasionally chose operatic numbers to include in his concerts which more commonly included a combination of Black spirituals, folk music, and musical theatre numbers from the plays, musicals, and films he was much more known for. In fact, while erroneous, this fixation on Robeson the singer follows similar patterns found in other memorials. In the National Waterfront Museum in Wales, most visitors approach Robeson as a musician first and foremost, perhaps due to a less-than-robust bio, describing him as an "actor and singer who became a role model for oppressed people across the world," but also due to their prior knowledge of him (Rhodes, 2021, p. 772). Likewise, Paul Robeson's presence on YouTube similarly skews—at nearly a 2:1 ratio—towards music, with "Ol' Man River" and the Soviet National Anthem being the two most viewed videos at time of publication (Rhodes, 2019).

Living memory presents unique challenges and opportunities that are not present in these two memorial landscapes. In a museum, the top-down biography of Robeson is static until the curators decide to change it. On social media, Robeson's biography is shaped by the content and context of a wider network. In the case of the Robeson tomato, both conditions apply. These sites' portrayals of Robeson are relatively static, yet as the tomato enters the foodways, the possibility of compounding information abounds. While this is the subject of our future research—actively growing, sharing, and speaking to those involved in a localized living memory network—certain aspects of compounding narratives have already been occurring, evidenced through the Hudson Valley and Truelove seed companies.

For the time being, however, Paul Robeson's artistic contributions are somewhat limited within the constraints of his biography. Of the dozens of films and plays and hundreds of songs Robeson performed, only three are specifically mentioned across the 64 sites. Nine mention the 1937 British imperial film which Robeson later denounced, *King Solomon's Mines* (1937). Six mention his performance of Shakespeare's *Othello*, and only two mention Robeson's perhaps most famous artistic work, the song "Ol' Man River" from the musical and film (1936) *Show Boat* – of course without discussing the historical significance of Robeson rewriting the

lyrics to better fulfill the transition towards his activist-fueled art. An irony here, is that the area which most connected Robeson with the Soviet Union – his admiration and verse in Marxism and efforts globally for labor rights – do not translate through the biographies of the Robeson tomato.

#### *Who befriended the Soviet Union?*

Returning to the codes, Robeson's connection with the Soviet Union was certainly strong as presented in the biographies. Some 23 sites specifically mention the Soviet Union or Russia, three claiming Robeson as Russian himself. Some nuance emerges from the mention of Communism (3 times) and McCarthy (14 times), but beyond generally being "reviled by the right" for being "revered by the left" for his support for equality, few sites make clear connections between how Robeson saw all oppression as connected and socialism as a solution. Only one site approaches this level of nuance, Gardening Know How (Baessler 2018): "He was drawn to Communism for its claims of equality and became very popular in the USSR. Unfortunately, this was during the height of the Red Scare and McCarthyism."

This association between Robeson and the Soviet Union – which was certainly strong as a frequent visitor, recipient of the Stalin Peace Prize, and sending his son there for schooling – adds an additional geographical consideration to the living memory of the tomato. As we consider the embedded nature of memory in these varieties of food plants, how might biographies and geographies interact within these memorial flows? As English speakers based in the United States (while finding a handful of Canadian and European sites) our search was focused upon a spatial network unique from the former Soviet Union where the tomato was bred. Again, a question beyond the scope of this article asks how local or national memory ways of these foods shape the biographies themselves? Essentially, how does place impact these spatial more-than-food narratives?

#### **4. Foodways as 'Memoryways'**

The concept of the foodway informs our understanding of memory in tightly interwoven biographical narratives. Collective memory grounds the agency of individual narratives and memories within the broader social constructs of the past, and of our experiences (Jordan, 2010; Weedon & Jordan, 2011). Spatial and place-based contexts inform the formation and interpretation of memory within them (Schein, 2006; Jones & Garde-Hansen, 2012; Lewis, 2018). However, our memories, whether individually contextualized in place or collectively formed, are not uniformly constructed or spatially impacted.

Collective memory does not occur as a blanket or cloud which envelops someone's experience or knowledge. Their agency and lived experience followed a specific lifepath (Daniels & Nash, 2004; McGeachan, Forsyth & Hasty, 2012; Rhodes 2021). These experiences vary in scale and impact. In the case of the Robeson tomato, scale and place significantly shape how narratives shift. Ginn roots history as a "co-mingled myth, nostalgia and memory" in the context of the garden:

As a fundamental dynamic, gardening means channelling one possible future over another; a garden excludes certain beings, denies others the chance for life, even as it extends hospitality to some. (2016, p. 7)

Radical forms of understanding emerge from a focus upon both dwelling and the future and inform how something may develop as living memory:

The garden hums with its multiple pasts, and here lies the domestic wild: an old tree, planted by a grandfather; a garden fork, bought as a Christmas present; a dead plant, once loved but now decomposing. Such memories have real force... The garden is animated by the traces of the past... The gardener's relationship is less with a completed, tangible, material plant and much more with the virtual time-space that denotes what Goethe called the 'possibility of a plant.' (Ginn, 2016, p. 8)

Ginn and others clearly identify gardening and plant agency in the more-than-representational arena of historical and memory consumption, production, and envelopment beyond the scope of food production (see also Brice, 2014; Betz, 2019; Jordan, 2010; Lawrence, 2022; Arnold, Atchison & McKnight, 2021).

The immediate step preceding the act of gardening is to procure seeds. While many people collect, save, and cultivate their own seeds, many more purchase them or acquire them through some form of non-commercial seed exchange. Both systems involve the production and exchange of knowledge alongside the seeds themselves, and thus the 'memoryways' of the Paul Robeson tomato follows its foodways. The commodification of the Robeson seeds (both the profit motives of the companies selling the seeds and the marketing of Robeson, his image, and his narrative for that purpose) stands in opposition to Robeson's principles, and the seed's origins in the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Given the unmarketability of the Paul Robeson tomato's physical inconsistencies (i.e. a nonhuman refusal to conform to industrial standards of uniformity), however, commodification of the tomato beyond the seed is significantly limited. During the height of planting season in March and April more sellers and opportunities to purchase the seed appear. We instead aimed our data collection at the relatively consistent off-season "market" for Robeson seeds in February and found 42 biographies from seed selling, sharing, and blogging webpages. While we expected to find key differences in Robeson's biography between for-profit and non-profit webpages, no clear patterns emerged. We did, however, uncover clear points of contact or direction in the memory paths and critical seed geographies of Robeson's biographies across the tomato's online presence.

The most prevalent of the coded biographies in Table 2 contains 13 similar narratives in addition to 9 which follow a more simplified version. These include the first English description of the Paul Robeson tomato from the Southern Exposure Seed Exchange (2021), who first offered the seed in the United States in 1995:

Original seed sent to SESE by Marina Danilenko, a Moscow seedswoman. Named after Paul Robeson, performer of "Old Man River" and operatic vocal artist who was an advocate of equal rights for Blacks. His artistry was appreciated world-wide, especially in the Soviet Union, and hence this tomato bearing his name.

From this original description, and with only the smallest of edits, changes in word choice have significant impacts upon the presentation of Paul Robeson. "Operatic"—an adjective for vocal quality rather than a noun describing a profession—is only used in 4 of these 22 descriptions, in another ten "operatic vocal artist" changes to a famous "opera-singer" or "opera great." Likewise, "Old Man River" has been replaced in nine instances with the film *King Solomon's Mines*. And the statement which hinted at his artistry being appreciated world-wide in most cases has been slightly altered. Statements are that Robeson was "idolized in Russia," that he focused his activism in the Soviet Union (which he controversially made a clear point not to do), or even the extreme of Robeson being Russian himself.

Soon after SESE released the Paul Robeson tomato, Seed Savers Exchange (Figure 5), who were the other US-based organization to receive Robeson seeds from Danilenko, began offering Robeson seeds and included their own description:

Named in honor of Paul Robeson (1898-1976), famous [or "legendary" on their in-store seed racks] African-American actor, singer, and civil rights advocate.

In this case, there were only five additional codes which copied SSE's biography, and one significant shift from Robeson being portrayed as a "civil rights advocate" to a political activist for the [capitalized] Civil Rights Movement.

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<sup>5</sup> Meriting further study are the complex relationships between the seeds, discourse, history, and politics. Different seed companies, and different seed projects, carry their own political orientations to seed and food systems, and may consequently have different approaches to the political economies of memory work.

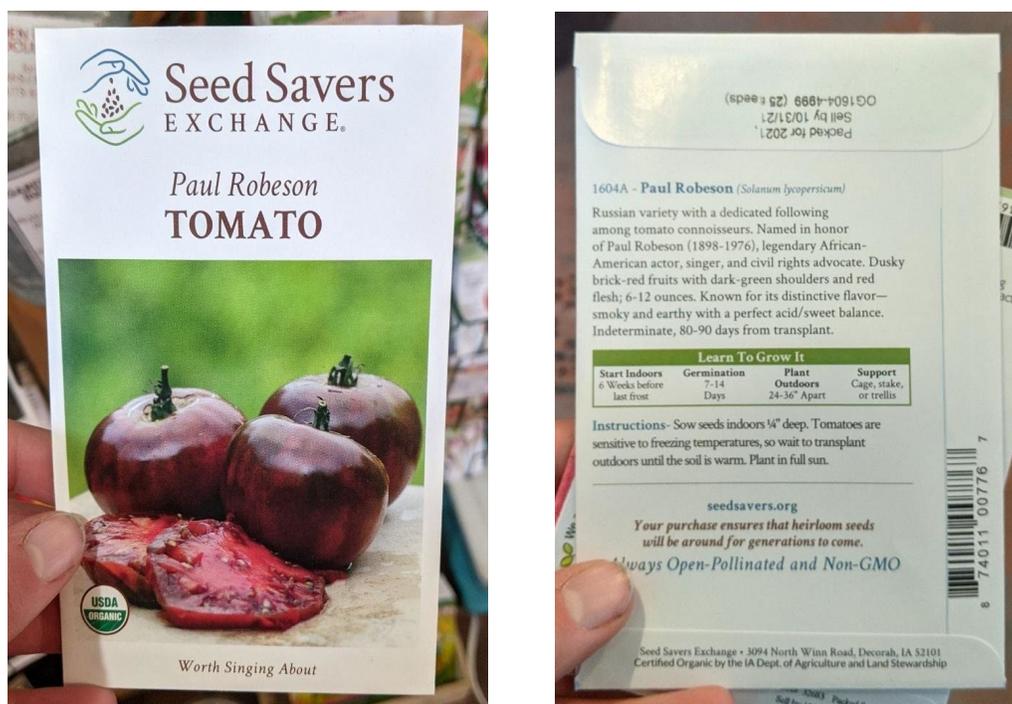


Figure 5: A packet of Paul Robeson tomato seeds from one of Seed Savers Exchange's Seed Racks. Photo courtesy of Carolyn Ritter. Used with permission, 2021.

Even for the seven biographies which did not clearly align with one of our four dominant codes, none particularly stood out as different in a major way, and most presented more or less the same information, just in an order that didn't make it immediately obvious that the text had been copied and pasted from a different site. While we were expecting some type of pattern, either in the added context of the bios or in the demographics and the situation of those who wrote them, neither emerged. In fact, the two which stood out more than any others occupied opposite ends of the memorializing spectrum. On the one, the bio from *plantswithstories.com* (Kouchnareva, 2021) offers a very clearly myopic understanding of Robeson's history:

Because of his affiliation with Communism and anti-US beliefs, Paul Robeson was very popular with the Communist government in the former Soviet Union during the Cold War.

On the other hand, more individuality can also lead to a richer engagement with Robeson's broader story:

Russian heirloom named for the great African-American singer, actor, athlete, and human-rights activist, who was blacklisted in the US during the McCarthy era because of his Communist affiliation and anti-imperialist politics. Toward the end of his life he lived a few blocks from where I now live in West Philadelphia. 3-1/2" [8.9cm] diameter brownish-red fruit with intense rich flavor. Like its namesake, this variety perhaps flourishes better in the Russian climate than here; some years it produces well, other years the plants hang on and produce very little, but I keep growing it because the flavor is wonderful and to honor an American hero. Whether or not you grow this tomato, go read something of his biography!

In this case, Nancy Wygant (2021), a heritage gardener, presents the Communist-affiliating Robeson as an American hero, and most importantly and uniquely across all 64 sites, encourages those reading the description of the tomato to explore more of Robeson's life.

The political ecologies here—just as they would at any living memorial—emerge as political and cultural contexts shape the institutionalization of Robeson's memorialization. Ironically, however, each of these four specific examples provided above—SESE, SSE, Plants with Stories, and Nancy Wygant—are organizations (or people) devoted to providing historical context and the broader stories of the seeds themselves. Wygant is a heritage professional, SESE's motto is "saving the past for the future," SSE was founded as an explicit response to industrial agriculture as their website highlights, and even the narrative on Plants with Stories, which comes from Tatiana Kouchnareva and her private heritage seed company, is within the broader mission of "researching and sharing historical information." In each of these cases there is a clear agenda to resuscitate not only the seeds themselves, but to contextualize them within broader historical narratives.

While this exercise did not explore the specific political leanings of each organization offering these seeds, it quickly becomes clear which organizations may be more willing to engage with histories that rightfully engage in questions of racial violence, settler colonialism, and labor exploitation, and which avoid or refute such notions. Even the switch between "Old Man River" and *King Solomon's Mines* illustrates a shift in politics. One at least offers the potential of reflection upon Robeson's use of "Old Man River" as a political weapon – changing the lyrics, singing it at protests, and injecting Black agency of "struggle and resistance" back into what was more-or-less a Dixieland lament (Robeson 1978, 487). *King Solomon's Mines* was instead quickly disavowed by Robeson himself because of the colonial nature of the British film and how Robeson, as a Black man, was used stereotypically "by singing his way to glory (Robeson, 1978, p. 142; Duberman, 1989, p. 207; p. 637).

These divergent paths illustrate Wincott's (2020) discussion of heritage binaries within heritage varieties. We see evidence of both the networks of conservative nostalgia "under the custodianship of a class of selfless whitecoated curators and scholars" and an understanding that no network is closed and that activist discourse pushes these networks to a point where "difference of interest is highlighted not evaded." Given these complexities, however, we are inspired by the work of Lawrence (2022, p. 637) when they state:

...learning to be affected by plants in not a linear process; at different times and in different spaces it involves the differential recognition of plant-otherness or similarity as the situation invites. Interrogating the challenges involved in 'knowing' plants does not lessen the imperative to make the attempt.

Returning to the concept of not just seeds or plants, but food itself, we must reflect again upon the memory work of food network cycles. Carolan's (2011) work on food politics and heritage seed-saving re-emphasizes that the process of memory-making surrounding these seeds is not just biographical but agroecological. And to return to Graddy-Lovelace (2013), place grounds these memories through human and nonhuman *in situ* geographies, making certain agroecological politics possible. Where is the seed conditioned for and what conditions does it need to thrive? Further down these foodways, Abarca & Colby (2016) reiterate the power of more-than-food memories which lie within the very banality of food. The everyday processes of procuring, preparing, sharing, and consuming food places it as a key "mnemonic mechanism" for embodied lived experience. As they state, "food is central to defining the manner by which people's emotional, psychological, social, economic, political, historical, and cultural realities are embodied as a lived and living history" (p. 4).

We have proposed that the Paul Robeson tomato may provide a useful site for thinking through the more-than-human relations that bring together the productive—and reproductive—politics of food systems with the flows of memory through which political figures, and political fruits, are memorialized. Thinking through memory-making as a set of agroecological processes, we emphasize that the material, ecological, social, and historical relations of this tomato illustrate ways in which the political ecologies of memorialization

take shape and flow across digital, as well as physical, spaces. Further, the Robeson tomato provides a useful case study for thinking through the politics of a wider landscape of crop varieties whose names and stories also serve as memorializations of historic and ongoing political struggles. Attention to this tomato, we propose, pushes forward a conversation in and around vegetal politics that connects the daily and seasonal more-than-human relations of foodways with the concurrent, and sometimes parallel flows of memoryways.

## 5. Conclusion

Clearly, throughout this process we raise more questions than we answer, but we do believe these preliminary windows into the memoryways of the Paul Robeson Tomato illuminate several emergent aspects of memory work, the geographies of memory, and political ecology. First, memory is not just spatial or rooted in place, but is significantly shaped through human-environment interaction. Second, human-environment interaction is more than just representational of Anthropocentric memory work, and is truly reflective of the more-than-human and more-than-food geographies at work at multiple scales. These foods, through their development, cultivation, and movement, shape their own memory work. One third of all Paul Robeson tomato narratives reached beyond the man himself so that Robeson is not even mentioned, and focus solely on the cult following of the heirloom tomato. Third, these changes reflect the shifting nature of memorial narratives, as mobile memoryways follow foodways. Through this process, the biography of Robeson evolves in different ways and in different contexts season by season, managing to hold together across patchy geographies comprised of stories, as well as seeds. The absence, obfuscation, and commercialization of certain narratives over others emerge as clear impacts of a living memorial rooted into the foodways of an heirloom tomato.

Specific to Paul Robeson, while the living memorial shifts with changes and transferences throughout the food/memoryways, patterns emerge. These resemble standard memorials to Robeson, or structures of memorialization in general. In painting the public face of a living memory, Robeson is white-washed, red-baited, disempowered, and in some cases completely rewritten. In general, just as we pay attention to the diversity and equity of race and gender in processes (historic and contemporary) of memorialization when it comes to statues, street signs, museums, buildings, plaques, and other commemorative landscapes, we need to be just as critical of forms of living memory. Not only should we ask who is being commemorated, how they are being commemorated, or should they be commemorated, but why these living memoryways and their many assemblages have formed as they do.

Future work should dig much further both into the Paul Robeson tomato and ways in which Robeson's memory specifically follows particular foodways through online stores, farmers markets or further non-commercial exchange, such as the seed-savers exchange or more localized interactions such as seed libraries or educational gardens. We should be asking ourselves what potential these foods have for influencing historical understanding and how different living memorials might actually come from other forms of memory work in the production and consumption of life ways. Given the work of artists and activists such as Cbabi Bayoc and Jasmine Hamilton, we could also delve into the possibilities of the Robeson tomato for reparative memory work – an emerging theme within geographies of memorialization (Alderman 2020; Sheehan 2020).

Certainly, at a personal level, the Paul Robeson tomato has driven us to explore both Robeson and the processes of cultivation and foodways more deeply (i.e. Keeve 2020). Rhodes's strawberries indeed frame his home both psychologically and ecologically, but now too does the Paul Robeson tomato.

We understand the potential for the radical Black geographies of the Paul Robeson tomato to continue the work of its namesake by spurring those it affects to learn more, share, and more critically assess the activism of Robeson. The keyword, however, is potential. There is the potential for the tomato to be an agent of industrial heritage, or to push further decolonization efforts or to indeed adopt the principles of the Pan-African movement. That is not evident from this preliminary study.

A final question is how rooted in these broader systems are the memoryways describe in the article? For instance, should the systems through which the tomato navigates be based on industrial heritage, and if so, would Robeson's labor rights activism become more pronounced? If our food systems were oriented more towards Black geographies would we remember to acknowledge the power and the challenges of Robeson's Blackness as an early 20<sup>th</sup> century American? And outside of the context of a settler colonial state, would Paul

Robeson's anticolonial activism play a larger role in these living memories? While these intense questions require substantial further analysis, from what we do know of the Robeson tomato and the patterns of its living memoryways, an active more-than-human memory is at work. It follows the foodways of the tomato, and Robeson's memorialization shifts in response to these broader cultural geographies and political ecologies.

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