

Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs Robeson

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Author:

Barbara Ransby

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Imaobong D. Umoren

Eslanda Goode Robeson has lived under the shadow of her superstar singer, actor, and political pioneer husband, Paul Robeson for decades. However, Eslanda, known as Essie, was a dedicated activist intellectual, prolific writer, powerful orator, and world traveller. Eslanda Robeson's life (1895–65), was deeply entangled with some of the landmark movements and events of the 20th century including the New Negro Movement in Harlem, London and Paris; anti-fascism in inter-war Europe; African, Caribbean and South Asian decolonization; the struggle to end Jim Crow and racism in the US; the founding of the United Nations and the Cold War. Historian and scholar-activist Barbara Ransby's compelling, expansive and lively biography, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs Paul Robeson*, is the first to see Eslanda Robeson as an important figure in her own right and advances our knowledge of numerous fields such as the black radical left, black internationalism, black women's intellectual history, Cold War politics, the long African American freedom struggle and human rights. Ransby's exceptional talent as biographer was first displayed in her 2003 multi award-winning *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. In her second biography Ransby's stylish skills chronicling the life, times and ideas of Robeson are again revealed.

The biography is arranged into 14 chapters with an introduction and epilogue. The chapters are smartly organised in chronological order, but also utilize a thematic approach, helping to elucidate the entwined connections between Eslanda's life and major turning points throughout the century. Key issues featured in the first seven chapters include Eslanda and Paul's marriage, the couples' transnational travels and her career as chemist, writer and anthropologist. The remaining chapters deal with Eslanda's continual travels, her

published works in the 1940s and her involvement in leftist, internationalist and anti-colonial activism through electoral politics, the United Nations and the Council on African Affairs. They also detail the impact of the Cold War on Eslanda and Paul's life, their return to Europe in the late 1950s and their declining health. In each chapter, Ransby not only details Eslanda's life, she deftly provides important insight into the broader social, political, economic and cultural context that shaped her experiences. The biography includes a useful timeline and evocative photographs of Eslanda, her family and global circle of friends like Eugene O'Neill, Pearl Buck, Louise Thompson Patterson, Claudia Jones, Nikita Khrushchev, W. E. B. and Shirley DuBois, and Kwame Nkrumah to name a few.

A notable strength of the biography is Ransby's command of an impressive range of sources comprising of Eslanda's written correspondence, diaries, speeches, unpublished and published novels, plays and articles, and pamphlets, most of which are located at the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center at Howard University. Other sources are taken from various archives in the United States and from locations abroad including Amsterdam, Berlin, India, South Africa and the United Kingdom. Online FBI and MI5 surveillance records complement these sources, which provide the biography with sophisticated depth.

In the introduction, Ransby presents a valuable background to the biography, its main themes and arguments. She states that Eslanda's voice is privileged throughout the text, which exposes her unpublished writings and journalism in publications like *New World Review*, *Afro-American*, *Amsterdam News*, and *Freedom* to a larger audience, giving readers a sense of her progressive political views and personality. Ransby discusses her role as biographer and admits that what she presents is not a definite account of Eslanda's life, but rather a 'narrated and annotated chronicle punctuated with observations and analyses' (p. 9). This is a crucial asset of the biography as Ransby includes insightful vignettes about figures close to Eslanda and significant issues in her life that present the reader with a nuanced understanding of a complex and fascinating woman.

The central themes of the Robesons' complicated yet enduring marriage and Eslanda's travels are foregrounded as essential elements of her life and worldview. Between 1925 and 1965 Eslanda visited over 40 countries and five continents and the map of her journeys provided in the biography visually helps to show her varied peregrinations. Ransby illuminates the importance of Eslanda's first trip to the Soviet Union in 1934, her three visits to Sub-Saharan Africa in 1936, 1946 and 1958 and the years she spent living in London and Europe between 1928 and 1939 as critical to the connections she made between the struggle to end colonialism and racism across Africa, the African diaspora and South Asia. This links with Ransby's cogent historiographical intervention, that by looking at Eslanda's writings, speeches and activism discussion of the Robesons' global politics in the post 1945 era is allowed to move away from the politics of East versus West to the 'growing sense of community and solidarity that was being forged in the global South' (p. 7). Ransby's emphasis on the importance of the global South builds on the research of other historians including Gerald Horne, Vijay Prashad and Nico Slate who have brought more attention to the connections between South Asian, Caribbean, African, and African-American freedom struggles.⁽¹⁾ By placing an African-American woman within this tradition, Ransby adds a helpful gendered element to this research.

In the opening chapter, 'Growing up along the color line 1895–1918', the privileged but precarious nature of Eslanda's middle-class family upbringing and college years in Washington DC, New York and Chicago are thoroughly explored. Ransby identifies Eslanda's grandfather and mother also named Eslanda, as influential figures in Eslanda's early life and later political positions. Eslanda's grandfather Francis Lewis Cardozo, a prominent South Carolina politician during Reconstruction and later a respected educator in Washington DC who advocated for blacks, was a significant symbol of race pride for Eslanda. Eslanda Sr shared left-leaning views and in the 1910s volunteered with black socialist internationalist Hubert Harrison's newspaper *The Voice* and supported female suffrage groups. By detailing Francis Cardozo and Eslanda Goode's political pasts Ransby helps to demonstrate that the ideological commitments Eslanda took up later in life built on a family tradition of leftist activism.

The early years of Eslanda and Paul's marriage and the context of the New Negro Movement are topics

under discussion in the following chapter. Ransby effectively underscores the crucial role Eslanda played in Paul's early career through the friendships and networks she made with Harlem renaissance figures like Carl Van Vechten and his wife Fania Marinoff and Walter and Gladys White. Eslanda's influence in Paul's career, their numerous travels across Europe and the United States and marital problems in the 1920s are documented further in chapter three. This chapter is most fascinating for the information Ransby gives about Eslanda's fictional writings. In 1925, while on holiday in France with Paul, Eslanda wrote her first play, entitled *Aunt Hagar's Children*, which centred on the migration of an African-American from Georgia to Harlem. Although the play was not performed it provides a glimpse into issues like racism and migration that would become paramount to Eslanda's global politics.

The recurring themes of Eslanda's travels, marriage, worldview and career between 1927 and 1933 are addressed in chapter four. Ransby focuses attention on a number of Eslanda's journeys, which she interprets as heightening her political consciousness. These include Eslanda's voyage to London in 1928 with Naomi Bercovici, a Romanian sculptor who informed her about the Russian pogroms, and her journeys in 1930 with Paul and his performing partner Larry Brown throughout Central and Eastern Europe and Scotland, where they met African and Afro-Caribbean workers and students, which increased their interest in Africa.

Marital difficulties continued to affect the Robeson's following the birth of their son Paul Jr in 1927 and Ransby adeptly details the couples' two-year separation in 1930, which resulted from Paul's extra-marital affairs. Ransby stresses that this period was critical for the development of Eslanda's writing and politics. In 1930, for instance, Eslanda started to write *The Three Eslandas*, a fictionalised account of her mother and grandmother's lives in South Carolina. In June 1932, she journeyed to Paris with her friend the Dahomean anti-colonialist Prince Kojo Touvalou Houénou and interviewed black artists and intellectuals including Guadeloupean Gratien Candace, the Martinican Paulette Nardal, African American Ada Bricktop Smith and Sudanese Habib Benglia. She later published narratives about these individuals in Dorothy West's journal *Challenge*. Ransby convincingly argues that Eslanda's encounters with these figures were formative as they contributed 'to her growing sense of a diverse and complex African Diaspora, of which American Blacks were only one part' (p. 73). At this time, Eslanda started new and rekindled old relationships with different men, before reuniting with Paul into an open marriage in late 1932. In this chapter, Ransby also highlights Eslanda's cinematic debut in the film *Borderline* alongside Paul.

Eslanda's anthropology studies at the London School of Economics and her writings are explored in further detail in the following chapter. Ransby regards the 1930s as a crucial decade when Eslanda forged a serious Pan-African political identity that was shaped by her academic research, engagement with London's diverse African diasporic and South Asian communities and friendships with figures like Jawaharlal Nehru and Jomo Kenyatta. This era saw Eslanda publish her first biography *Paul Robeson: Negro* (1930) and Ransby provides critical insight into the text and her other unpublished novels (*Black Progress*, a semi autobiographical story about the problems of middle class African Americans, and *Color*, which dealt with the issue of passing in the United States). Ransby also expounds upon two plays that Eslanda wrote, entitled *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Leave Them Alone*, and her biographical sketches of black figures like Oliver Golden and Félix Éboué. Additionally, chapter five explores the Robeson's first visit to the Soviet Union. Ransby notes how Eslanda and Paul were very enthused about the country due to the Soviets' attitude to racial prejudice, but rightly states that their experience was heavily subjective.

Eslanda and Paul Jr's three-month sojourn in Southern and Eastern Africa in 1936 is the focal point of chapter six. Ransby draws heavily on Eslanda's landmark travel narrative *African Journey* (1945), which constituted a strong critique of colonialism and racism. In the text, Eslanda wrote about numerous issues, including the similarities between racism in South Africa and the Deep South, poverty, education, women's roles and anthropological research on the Toro people in Uganda. This chapter is most useful for the light Ransby sheds on the topics Eslanda did not write about. Ransby points out that although Robeson was conscious of African resistance movements and attended the All-African National Convention in Bloemfontein, she did not encounter anti-colonial movements in Uganda like the women-centred Nyabingi movement. According to Ransby, Eslanda's trip to Uganda 'occurred under controlled circumstances and under the watchful eye of British colonial authorities and British intelligence' (p. 114).

The following chapter focuses on Eslanda and Paul's journeys, made between 1936 and 1939, to the Soviet Union, Egypt, and Spain. Ransby argues that it is not known how much of Stalin's Moscow trials and purges Eslanda and Paul knew of. But she does cite an intriguing letter Eslanda sent to Communist friend and leader William Patterson about her personal concerns relating to her brother Frank Goode, who was living there, and a friend implicated in the trials. Although the Robeson's support of Loyalist forces and trip to Spain amid the civil war is well known, Ransby usefully analyses Eslanda's unpublished writing about the Spanish visit and fleshes out valuable information about her and Paul's interactions with African-American and Spanish soldiers. Ransby asserts that Eslanda's African and Spanish journeys were vital to strengthening her anti-colonial and anti-fascist politics and informed the role she and Paul would play in helping to establish the International Committee on African Affairs, which transformed into the Council on African Affairs in the United States.

By the end of the 1930s, Ransby claims that Eslanda was a 'nascent feminist' (p. 136). Ransby's decision to describe Eslanda as a feminist even though she did not use the term to identify herself is important. It takes account of Eslanda's challenge of overlapping systems of oppression in her critique of colonialism, racism and the limited roles for women, and places her in a black feminist tradition of intersectionality. This chapter is also fascinating for the fruitful information Ransby provides on Eslanda's second film role, alongside Paul in *Big Fella*.

Eslanda's return to the United States, involvement with the United Nations and the Council on African Affairs and continued travels during the Second World War are documented in chapter eight. Following the success of *African Journey* Eslanda began to be viewed, not just as Mrs Paul Robeson, but also as a public intellectual and expert on Africa. Yet her radical views led her to come under FBI surveillance, which Ransby comprehensively details. Furthermore, Ransby discusses Eslanda's academic work at Hartford Seminary. Chapter nine is set in French Equatorial Africa and the Belgian Congo where Eslanda visited for five months in 1946. Ransby ably explores her travel diaries and discloses the interviews Eslanda conducted with ordinary and elite Africans including Gabriel d'Arboussier. Ransby reveals how Eslanda's travels were considered dangerous by the British colonial administration by referencing a thought-provoking MI5 report.

The different political and social organisations Eslanda was active in (including the Progressive Party, Council on African Affairs and black feminist group The Sojourners For Truth and Justice amongst others) between the years 1946 and 1950 are the focus of the next chapter. Ransby also describes Eslanda's travels to the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the People's Republic of China months after Mao's Revolution, and records how this period saw her defend herself and Paul against anti-communist attacks. The publication of Eslanda's third book, *American Argument* (1949), with Nobel Prize-winning novelist Pearl Buck is analysed, as are her ideas about race, the role of women and the Soviet Union as expressed in the study.

The following chapter records the years between 1950 and 1956 and Eslanda's involvement with the United Nations through her affiliation with the leftist journal *New World Review*. Ransby details how she used her position to connect with diplomats, writers and scholars from around the world and surveys the articles she wrote about Guatemala, China, Algeria, Cameroon and the representation of women in the UN. A significant aspect of this chapter is Ransby's pinpointing of three 'political sisters' who shaped Eslanda's transnational

identity including writer Shirley Graham Du Bois, UN diplomat Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and the American wife of British Guiana's Prime Minister, Janet Jagan. She argues that Eslanda's friendships with these figures represent 'her connections to the Third World and global anti-colonial movement' (p. 222). It further demonstrates how Eslanda was one among a wider group of women who built coalitions with other women leaders across racial, class, and national boundaries. Ransby also discusses Eslanda's battle with cancer.

The impact of Cold War repression on the Robesons' career, life and politics is detailed in chapter 12. Eslanda refused to cave in to anti-communist hysteria and Ransby closely examines her 1953 testimony before the US Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations and the effect of the five-year confiscation of the Robeson's passports. Additionally, Ransby records Eslanda's visit to Trinidad in 1958 during the formation of the West Indies Federation.

The penultimate chapter, 'A failing body and a hopeful heart 1958–1961' documents the years of Eslanda and Paul's return to London. Ransby explores their travels to the Soviet Union, Australia and New Zealand, and Eslanda's visit without Paul to the All-African Peoples' Conference in Ghana, and later Nigeria and Spain in late 1958. This period saw a further decline in Eslanda and Paul's health and Ransby writes about their medical treatments.

The final chapter is concerned with the last five years of Eslanda's life. Ransby provides numerous examples to show that despite her ill health Eslanda continued to support African independence struggles, the American black freedom movement and helped to form a Pan-African women's group with Claudia Jones in London. It was during this period when Eslanda began to receive more recognition as an activist. In 1963, she received Germany's Clara Zetkin medal for her anti-racist and human rights activism and attended a number of events in her honour in the United States before she died in December 1965. In the epilogue, Ransby skilfully summaries the overlapping themes and pivotal moments of Eslanda's life. She underlines the important relationship between Eslanda and Paul, arguing that although their marriage was difficult it had a firm foundation in respect, loyalty and friendship, which was fortified by their political convictions. Moreover, she usefully situates Eslanda as part of the Black Atlantic World, and places her in the tradition of what Robin Kelley has called 'race rebels' and Vijay Prashad's 'Third World Project'.⁽²⁾

Thanks to Ransby's rich and engaging biography, historians can no longer overlook Eslanda Robeson. This timely biography contributes to the growing number of studies that bridge several historiographical divides, bringing together black womens' involvement in the black radical left, feminism, and anti-communist activism.⁽³⁾ It provides inspiration for others to explore Robeson's connections with different South Asian, African-American, African and Caribbean women activist intellectuals like Maida Springer and Vicki Garvin, others who travelled widely and who saw themselves as global citizens. *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs Paul Robeson* should appeal to the general and specialist reader and is an excellent example of the benefits and beauty of biography at its best.

Notes

1. See Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008); Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York, NY, 2008), and Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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2. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, NY, 1996) and Prashad, *The Darker Nations*. [Back to \(12\)](#)
3. For a selection of these works see Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC, 2008); Erik S McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC, 2011) and

Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York, NY, 2011).[Back to \(13\)](#)

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