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Reviews

Eslanda Robeson's Journey

- Reviews section -

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For a woman often described by men as “abrasive,” “formidable,” and “too ambitious,” Barbara Ransby’s incisive biography provides a more nuanced picture of Eslanda Robeson.

Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson offers a dynamic detailing of Eslanda and Paul Robeson’s shared political vision and the journeys that led them from the Black social and cultural milieu of Harlem in the 1920s, to 1930s left politics and an embrace of Soviet communism, anticolonial solidarity, and an unconventional marriage from the 1940s on.

Moreover, the biography constructs a rich context for tracing one woman’s journey across the vast and volatile landscape of 20th-century world politics and culture, how that landscape looked to her, and how it changed beneath her feet. (1)

In my reading, Eslanda’s first trip to Africa, detailed in the chapter “African at Last, 1936,” serves as the linchpin for the engaging and thoughtful 14-chapter biography. In this brief chapter Professor Ransby illuminates the ways Eslanda Robeson’s first visit to the continent, with her 11-year old son Paul Jr. as a traveling companion, marked a crucial turning point in her life;

The chapter presents an overview of ongoing world events and reveals the complexities and responsibilities Eslanda carried as a wife, mother, political activist and intellectual living within the spotlight of her husband’s celebrity, and as an independent Black woman unafraid to embrace her passions.

Ransby details Eslanda’s “transformative” three-month trip through South Africa and Uganda. This included spending time with South African dignitaries and leading African National Congress activists such as Dr. A.B. Xuma, American travelers such as radicalized former missionary Max Yergen, and local working people, as well as four weeks living among and researching the practices of the herdspeople in Toro.

Ransby also explores the ways in which Eslanda, throughout the trip, stood in as a representative for her “famous husband” and the political views of African Americans. She also navigated the difficulties of traveling as a Black woman in southern Africa with her young son, eagerly put to use her studies at the London School of Economics in Anthropology and African Societies, played the role of tourist taking in the beauty of the African landscape, and gained new knowledge and insights that would eventually reshape her political views and activism.

In 1945 Eslanda published a well-received memoir of her trip titled *African Journey*. The new book garnered Eslanda widespread attention and the reputation as a knowledgeable intellectual, reflecting a markedly better response than the lukewarm reviews she had received for her first book publication in 1930, *Paul Robeson, Negro*.

Ransby’s detailing of that trip, the first of many Eslanda would make to the continent, thus places her experiences in a broader historical context, and charts the ways it opened the door for her post-World War II emergence as a commentator on world politics, a scholar of Africa and the African Diaspora, and a clear advocate for Third World solidarities and the Soviet Union.

Eslanda's Roots

Ransby traces the roots of Eslanda's politics and personality to her early years, raised in a close-knit family headed by a single mother who faced economic struggles even as she sought to maintain the family's standing among the educated Black elite.

Born in Washington D.C. in December 1895 to John Goode and Eslanda Cardoza Goode, Eslanda, or Essie as Ransby refers to her throughout the book, was the youngest surviving daughter with close ties to her two older brothers John and Francis.

Ma Goode, as Eslanda's mother was known, worked diligently to maintain her economic independence and solidify her community connections. She immersed herself in Black civic life, volunteering in support of the war effort as well as for Black socialist internationalist Hubert Harrison's newspaper *The Voice*.

Essie relied on these family bonds as she moved through school, earning a scholarship to study chemistry at the University of Illinois and later transferring to Columbia University's Teachers College to complete her education, before taking up a medical job to move out on her own.

Although Eslanda would eventually put aside her plans to attend medical school, Ransby's biography reveals a woman of varied interests and ambitions who through the course of her life would try her hand at acting, writing fiction and plays, and post-graduate study before settling more fully into work as a journalist, writer and public scholar.

In Ransby's chapter allotted to Eslanda's early years in New York City, Eslanda would find a longterm home in Harlem, as she made lasting political, social and personal connections, and carved out a new path for herself tied to Paul Robeson.

Eslanda and Paul eloped in August 1921. Ransby notes the early years of marriage were quite productive for the Robesons as the couple circulated broadly among Harlem's notables. Essie sustained friendships with Minnie Summer Patterson (the first wife of Communist Party leader William Patterson) and formed new bonds with the figures such as Prince Kojo Touvalou Houenou, a descendant of Dhomey and a Marcus Garvey supporter.

The Robesons also established lasting friendships with white writer and patron Carl Van Vetchen and his wife Fania Marinoff. According to Ransby, neither Essie nor Paul articulated any explicitly political positions beyond their associations. Much of their attention as a couple was focused on Paul's career and starting a family.

Ransby recounts Eslanda's determination and skill in guiding Paul's artistic career, which she was doing officially by 1924, including securing numerous European concert tours and film projects. Many of these films included roles for both Robesons and entailed lengthy stays in London and much travel throughout Europe between 1925 and the late 1930s.

These years of travel would be crucial to Eslanda's political and professional development. She would join Paul in two trips to the Soviet Union in 1934 and again in 1936, a work visit to Egypt and a dangerous trip to Madrid to support Spanish Loyalists in their resistance to fascism during the civil war, while her time in London and Paris also contributed importantly to her growing sense of a diverse and complex African Diaspora and the world. (73)

Yet these years also revealed Eslanda's struggles with reoccurring periods of turmoil in her marriage, often sparked by Paul's affairs with other women. Chapters five and seven, which detail these events, bracket the previously discussed Africa at Last chapter.

Such a framing highlights another of the many strengths of Eslanda. Ransby neither subsumes Eslanda Robeson's life, political vision and intellect under that of her more famous husband, nor shies away from addressing the varied impact marriage and partnership that was fraught with complications had on Eslanda's life choices and productivity.

Intimate Portrait

In refusing to gloss over the real ruptures in their marriage, which by 1932 found them living in different countries and seriously discussing divorce, Ransby provides a richer picture of Eslanda beyond simply the wronged spouse or the permissive wife.

A more intimate portrait of Eslanda's efforts to negotiate this period emerges as Ransby untangles the multiple influences and emotions at play from Eslanda's fears over losing Paul's love and her financial security, to her determination to follow her own desires for a career and personal satisfaction, including affairs with other men as she indulged herself intellectually, socially and sensually. (75)

Eslanda dealt with the discord that would finally be resolved by 1933 as Essie and Paul reached an understanding about their relationship and their marriage! Essie would remain Mrs. Paul Robeson! she and Paul slept in separate beds and agreed not to probe too deeply into one another's sexual lives. (80)

This understanding, which as Ransby notes was probably not an ideal resolution for Eslanda, did seem to allow the couple to build upon the shared bonds of love and politics that sustained them during the early 1930s during which they shared a growing interest in the world and especially Africa. (87) Both were made honorary members of the London-based West African Students Union and in 1937 helped found the Inter-national Committee on African Affairs (ICAA), in London with Max Yergen, a precursor to the ICAA.

Eslanda would also begin to take courses at the prestigious London School of Economics (LSE), a line of study that would eventually lead her to pursue a Ph.D in anthropology after returning to the United States. In December 1934 Paul and Essie made their first trip to Russia on a film project and to visit Eslanda's brothers, who were both already living there.

The biography provides little information regarding the reasons for the Goode brothers' choices, but Ransby does highlight Russia as a place with a buzz among Black artists and intellectuals. Indeed, other scholars have underscored the Soviet Union as a key site of study and politicization for Black radicals throughout the African Diaspora during this period.*

In 1936, following her African Journey, Eslanda and Paul would return to Russia, even as signs of impending war and growing turmoil in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin were visible. Ransby argues that despite knowledge of Stalin's clampdown on political dissent, the Robesons remained invested in the promise of Soviet socialism, even enrolling their son, Paul Jr., in school for an extended stay under the care of Eslanda's mother. [1]

In this context of solidifying a shared politics and an unconventional marriage, Professor Ransby uncovers the full emergence of Eslanda Robeson as a scholar and activist. Even while she still maintained her role as Mrs. Paul Robeson, Eslanda would forge her own path as she traveled alone in 1940 to Central America and Mexico, attended the opening ceremony of the United Nations in 1945, and returned to central Africa and the Congo in 1946.

She also found a new political voice. In addition to speaking broadly on Africa and the Diaspora and publishing a second book *American Argument* with Eslanda Goode Robeson, co-authored with Pearl Buck, Eslanda ran for Connecticut secretary of state under the Progressive Party banner, served as a U.S. representative at the Women's International Democratic Federation meeting in Moscow in 1949, and also attended the Asian Women's Federation meeting in Peking, China.

Eslanda's Defiant Voice

As Cold War politics and anti-communist attacks painted both Paul and Eslanda Robeson as un-American and the government revoked their passports, both continued to articulate a defiant commitment to Black liberation, anti-colonial struggles and the Soviet Union.

In some ways, as Ransby suggests, Eslanda became even more prolific and defiant. Ransby highlights Eslanda's powerful testimony before Joseph McCarthy's senate sub-committee in 1953 as a clear example of this, but it is also visible in her numerous publications and speeches including as a regular contributor to the *New World Review* and *Freedom* newspaper.

Eslanda's activism would be slowed only by illness, as she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1956 and faced a more deadly recurrence of cancer in 1963, and as Paul struggled with debilitating depression throughout the 1960s.

In weaving together the personal and political and continuing to recognize Eslanda as both an independent thinker and Mrs. Paul Robeson, Ransby's biography provides an inviting overview of Essie's life while urging us to take her seriously, to question what does the world look like if we situate her at the center? and to entertain a different set of truths and sensibilities. (279-80)

Eslanda's independence and determination, as well as her deep connections to Paul Robeson, proved a core part of her personality till her death. By 1963 Eslanda faced an incurable form of cancer and struggled to care for Paul, yet she remained determined to live her final years on her own terms. Eslanda Robeson continued to write, travel and speak on a range of political topics until her death in New York City in the final month of 1965.

*See Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Colorline and the Iron Curtain*, Gary Holcomb, *Code Name Sasha*, Joy Carew, *Blacks Reds and Russians*.

[1] Editor's note: Paul Robeson, Jr. (1927-2014) was an important activist in his own right as well as the author of books on his father's legacy. Among other connections, he worked with the Campaign for Peace and Democracy East and West in the 1980s, in support of both the Nicaraguan revolution and Polish Solidarnosc. An obituary article can be found in the *New York Times* [Paul Robeson Jr., Activist and Author, Dies at 86](#).