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## Eslanda Robeson and the Black Radical Tradition: advocacy and activism after LSE

*Eslanda Robeson's work on anti-fascism, decolonisation, race liberation struggles, global south solidarity, and gender politics made her a threat to racist and colonial governments in her time, writes **Ikenna Acholonu**. It is a meaningful moment to revisit the contributions of Eslanda Robeson in the years after her time as an LSE student.*

After completing her anthropology studies at LSE in the 1930s, Eslanda Robeson transformed her academic training into powerful global activism, becoming what LSE Professor Imabong Umoren, calls a “race woman internationalist” who advocated for anti-fascism, decolonisation, and racial liberation.

She also worked toward gender equity across continents until her death in 1965. Her time after LSE was an era where the knowledge and networks she gained in the UK were put into action to progress a Black radical agenda.

With the resurfacing of works about Black Marxism and the Black Radical Tradition (Robinson, 2000) and Decolonial Marxism (Rodney, 2022), it is a meaningful moment to revisit the contributions of Eslanda Robeson.

This post answers questions posed by Robin D G Kelly (2000) on how we can honestly and effectively tell the stories about Black radical intellectuals, and how gender and sexuality shaped “Black revolt”. By telling parts of Eslanda’s story I hope to illuminate her contribution to elements of “Black revolt” globally. Her activism and gender coalition building demonstrate the unique struggles and opportunities that existed for Black women navigating the global racial politics of her time.

# Eslanda Robeson and the Black Radical Tradition

Eslanda Robeson was a Black radical scholar and activist engaged in Black revolt. Black revolt is seen as a significant aspect of the Black radical tradition, which can be defined as “an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle.” (Robinson, 2000).

It challenges the different “racialisms” formed throughout history and the racial capitalist systems and practices that violently marginalised Black people. It is important to acknowledge that African “authenticity” has been historically debated as a concept. And there are problems with essentialising the global Black experience, and the impact of racial capitalist systems on Black people. Regardless, Black people around the world have consistently contributed to a Black Radical Tradition.

Following her time at LSE, Eslanda participated in this tradition often through a Marxist lens. Eslanda Robeson for a significant period of her life embodied the socialist thought and revolutionary values apparent in Marxist movements, demonstrated through her friendship with multiple communist activists. But ultimately, when acknowledging the lack of inclusion of racial politics in Marxism, her commitment became more in alignment with the liberation of Black, African and oppressed peoples globally, outside of the mainstream socialist agenda. Below, I highlight some of her anti-fascist, antiracist, and gender empowerment work that demonstrate her contribution to the Black radical tradition.

## Eslanda Robeson: an anti-fascist advocate

As a “race woman internationalist” (Umoren, 2018), Robeson was a prolific scholar and writer that captured the violent impacts of fascism. In her activism, Eslanda expressed all aspects of her identity, which inspired much of her international work.

One example was her support of the anti-fascism movement in Spain in the 1930s and 1940s. Eslanda, in her narrative, *We Go to Spain*, discussed her family heritage and the Spanish blood she had from her ancestors, the Cardozas, who came from Spain to America. From this point of view, she wrote an account of her thirty-day trip to Spain in 1938, exploring the impact of the fascist movement and the plight of soldiers fighting for democracy.

In this account, she acknowledged the complexity of the battle, witnessing that civilians on the ground had family relations on either side of the conflict (Umoren, 2018, pp 56-57). This experience expanded her understanding of the ambivalence apparent and difficulty of committing to pacifism in movements. She would grapple with this further throughout her career and life.

# Eslanda Robeson: an anti-racist activist and threat to colonial states

Related to her anti-fascist work, Robeson advocated for the autonomy of newly independent countries in Asia and Africa, fighting against racism and colonialism globally. This work connects to the rising Pan-Africanism and “Third World Ideology” of the time that is also explored in Walter Rodney’s book *Decolonial Marxism* (2022).

Rodney fervently suggests in his work that neither capitalism nor Marxism fully addressed the plight of the colonial subject in Asia and Africa. These were the arguments Robeson engaged with and explored while consistently participating in talks and conferences. She was not afraid to speak her piece and find connections between individuals and ideas to ultimately advocate for oppressed people globally.

Due to Robeson’s involvement in anti-colonial struggles, along with her public views on communism, she was added to the list of individuals monitored by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) in 1943. At this time, Eslanda continued to give talks at universities across the US and wrote fervently about anti-racism.

In the opening of her book, *African Journey* (1945) she states that racism did not only impact Black people and Africans, but it also affected “the 390 million Indians in India, the problem of the 450 million Chinese in China as well as the problem of all minorities everywhere” (Robeson cited in Umoren, 2018, pp 75). In this writing, it was clear that her commitment to anti-racism and anti-colonialism was a value guiding her international work, and her activism, while being a threat to the US and colonial states.

Her impassioned global advocacy remained deeply connected to her experiences of racial injustice in the United States . A clear example was when she interrupted the UN postwar conference on genocide stating that



*The lynching and other forms of assault on the lives and livelihoods of African Americans from 1945 to 1951, especially*

*the frenzied attacks on returning black American veterans, amounted to genocide. (Robeson cited in Taylor, 2016).*



After seven years of being monitored by the FBI, the Robesons had their passports revoked in 1950. Following this, Eslanda wrote for the leftist and radical publication, the *New World Review*, until their passports were returned in 1958. She wrote on topics such as the Algerian War and Francophone colonialism; the potentials and limitations of the UN; the work of key figures in Asia and Africa; as well as the South African Apartheid.

## Eslanda Robeson: a builder of gender coalitions

Gender also played a significant role in Robeson's liberatory work. A notable marker of Robeson's advocacy was her attempt to build a network of leaders, especially women, around the world, to join the fight. This included the forging of relations between women in both Western and Communist countries.

Her third book, *American Argument* (1949), was a collaboration with Pearl Buck, who wrote *The Good Earth* (1931) an account of rural family life in China before the world war. In the book they discussed several issues including American identity, gender politics, freedom, international relations, and communism.

Robeson's writing challenged American perceptions of communism, comparing the communist plight to struggles faced by Black Americans. Robeson argued in her book:



*Americans have already had their minds made up for them about the Russians and about the Soviet system... White Americans have already had their minds made up for them about the Negro, and no matter what evidence we offer—scientific, statistical, factual—they turn a deaf and prejudiced*

*ear, and refuse to listen and to be convinced by facts. (Robeson cited in Umoren, 2018, pp 99).*



In 1958, Robeson's first trip following her ban on travel was to the Caribbean. Robeson thought of the Caribbean as "a site for transnational and diasporic black-nation building efforts beyond Africa" and this was reflected in her time in Trinidad (Robeson cited in Umoren, 2018, pp 105).

While there, Robeson connected with many women's organisations, expanding her feminist organising and activist work. In speeches to the Women's League of the People's National Movement and at an all-day rally for female welfare and social workers, she spoke of the potential that existed in the inter-racial, inter-island women's groups as well as the potential of children (Umoren, 2018, pp 106).

## Eslanda Robeson: a lifelong leader and race-woman internationalist

Eslanda Robeson's life is a meaningful example of a Black woman engaging with Black radical thought and gender politics to fight for the freedom of oppressed peoples. When Robeson's passport was returned in 1958, she and her husband moved back to London as their base.

She continued her travels, attending the All African Conference in Ghana in 1958 as one of the few female presenters. In post-independence Accra, she was able to meet many African leaders she had written about such as Patrice Lumumba, Tom Mboya, and Hastings Banda. About this gathering, she wrote "for the first time in modern history, Africans from North, East, Central, South, and West Africa met in conference on African soil to discuss African issues" (Robeson cited in Umoren, 2018, pp111).

Back in London, she participated in protests, activist organising, and spoke at events organised by Black feminist leaders such as Caribbean advocate Claudia Jones, founder of the UK Carnival. Together they formed the women-centered group the All-African Women's Freedom Movement (AAWM). In 1962, she spoke for the Committee of African Organisations on "The Role of Women in the Emancipation of Africa" about how women can help Africa attain autonomy and prosperity.

In 1963, she fell ill in Germany and was hospitalised but still watched the historic March on Washington from her hospital bed in Berlin (Umoren, 2018, pp113). She was able to leave Germany and return to the United States at the end of 1963, where she continued her work writing about the civil rights movement for the remaining years of her life.

# Read more

Ajibade, K. (2024) Eslanda Robeson and her remarkable journey to LSE. History Blog

Bazambanza, C. (2024) Eslanda Robeson at LSE. LSE History Blog.

Robeson, E. (1945). *African Journey*. New York: The John Day Company.

Robinson, C. J. (2000). *Black Marxism: The making of the Black Radical Tradition*. London: Zed Press.

Rodney, W. (2022). *Decolonial Marxism: Essays from the Pan-African Revolution*. London: Verso Books.

Taylor, S. (2016). *Eslanda Robeson – acting, activism, Africa and LSE*. Retrieved from LSE Blogs: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory/2016/10/04/eslanda-robeson-acting-activism-africa-and-lse/>

Umoren, I. (2018). *Race Women Internationalists: Activist Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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## About the author



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