



Katherine Ajibade

June 4th, 2025

Eslanda Robeson's early years

*Eslanda Robeson was a remarkable figure in the 20th century, known for her contributions to fields including anthropology, activism, and journalism. **Katherine Ajibade** provides an introduction to Eslanda's early life in Washington DC and New York, a possible career in medicine, and her marriage to Paul Robeson.*

Eslanda Robeson, often referred to as Essie, was born on 15 December 1895 in Washington, DC to John Goode and Eslanda Cardoza Goode. Essie was their youngest surviving daughter, with close ties to her two older brothers, John and Francis Goode.

Their close-knit family was led by Eslanda's mother, "Ma Goode", as she was known. Ma Goode had many community connections and immersed herself in Black civic life. She volunteered in support of the war effort and worked for the newspaper *The Voice* run by Huber Harrison, a "Black socialist internationalist" in the 1910s (Ransby, 2013).

Ma Goode's work within the local community had a significant impact on Essie's worldviews, in ways that would become apparent in Essie's later life, and showcased the value the Goode's placed on community engagement, perseverance and education.

The emphasis on education within Eslanda's family can be traced back to her maternal ties to the Cardozo family. Eslanda's grandfather, Francis Lewis Cardozo (Mendez, 2019), was a renowned politician, Presbyterian minister, and educator who pioneered the creation of public education for Black children in America (Reese Smith, 2021).

Eslanda went on to excel in education in her own right, pursuing studies at the University of Illinois and Columbia University, where she received a degree in Chemistry. This led Eslanda to become the first histological chemist of surgical pathology at New York Presbyterian hospital, where she worked until 1925 (Taylor, 2016).

It was during this time that Eslanda considered a career in medicine, driven by her desire to help others. However, her diverse interests and ambitions, ranging from acting to postgraduate studies, ultimately led her to work as a journalist, writer, and public scholar.

Eslanda would later move to New York City, establishing a home in Harlem where she would form life-long political, social, and personal connections. This would be the beginning of a new path, one that began with her eloping with Paul Robeson in August 1921.

It was also during this time that the couple circulated broadly among Harlem's elites. Essie sustained friendships with Minnie Summer Patterson (the first wife of Communist Party leader William Patterson) and formed new bonds with figures such as Prince Kojo Touvalou Houenou, "a descendent Dahomey and a Marcus Garvey supporter" (Ransby, 2013). The Robeson's also established lasting friendships with writer and patron Carl Van Vetchen and his wife Fania Marinoff.

During the early years of their marriage, Eslanda and Paul focused their attention and efforts on furthering Paul's artistic career and starting a family. Eslanda was officially managing Paul's career by 1924, which included securing numerous European tours and film projects. Many of these films included roles for both Eslanda and Paul Robeson and entailed lengthy stays in London – and a stint as a **student at LSE** – and opportunities to travel throughout Europe between 1925 and the late 1930s.

Her experiences of travelling, including visits to the Soviet Union, and involvement in political causes, such as supporting Spanish Loyalists, enriched Eslanda's understanding of global issues, and her engagement with the African Diaspora (Gore, 2015). Despite facing challenges within her marriage, Eslanda's resilience and commitment to her own pursuits, as well as her continued engagement in political and social causes, demonstrate the lasting impact of her upbringing and early influences.

Read more

Gore, D (2015). Eslanda Robeson's Journey. *Against the Current*, 170-175. Retrieved from Against the Current: <https://againstthecurrent.org/dayo-f-gore/>

Mendez, K (2019). *Not Just a Wife: The Remarkable Life of Eslanda Good Robeson*. Retrieved from Black Women Radicals: <https://www.blackwomenradicals.com/blog-feed/eslanda-goode-robesson>

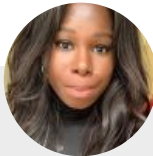
Ransby, B (2013). *Eslanda: the large and unconventional life of Mrs. Paul Robeson*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Reese Smith, P (2021). *Francis Lewis Cardozo: An Unsung Hero of Reconstruction, The Untold Story of the First African American Elected to Statewide Office in United States History 1865-1877*. New York: CR Media.

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/>

Please read our comments policy before commenting

About the author



Katherine Ajibade

Katherine Ajibade is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at LSE. Katherine's research explores religious practice and urban identities in Senegal, West Africa.

Posted In: Anthropology | Black History Month | LSE and the USA | LSE people | LSE student life | Women and LSE



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

© LSE 2025