



Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson: I Will Not Sit Still

By Ilene Evans

In fighting a just cause, in resisting oppression, there is dignity. We look at those who have enslaved us, and find them decadent. Injustice and greed and conscious inhumanity are terribly destructive. Yes, I am glad and proud I am Negro.

Robeson, Eslanda. *African Journey*. John Day Company: New York. 1945. P. 152



Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson, (1895- 1965), led her generation in progressive thinking about the value of all human kind, speaking out against all forms of oppression and discrimination. She advocated for women, children and people of color all over the world. She challenged the United States to live up to its promise for all to be treated as first class citizens. Though she was over-shadowed by Paul Robeson, her famous and fabulous husband, Eslanda developed her own avenues of influence and a singular voice. She was a fearless warrior her people and she came by that personality honestly.

Eslanda, known as Essie to her friends, was the granddaughter of Francis Lewis Cardozo, the first African American elected South Carolina Secretary of State, (1868 – 1872) and later State Treasurer then U.S.

Senator of South Carolina (1872 - 1878). “All we ask is Equal Rights,” declared Francis Cardozo.¹ Essie’s mother, Eslanda Elbert Cardozo, was also an outspoken opponent of injustice. Ma Goode, as they called her, supported women’s rights, birth control, Black Socialism, Marcus Garvey and friendly relations between the U.S. and the Russia.

The Cardozo family was a part of Washington D.C.’s Black elite and navigated the color line with great aplomb. Essie came from a family of highly educated, entrepreneurial people. When Eslanda was about six years old the family’s fortune changed when her father died suddenly. It was 1901. Her father’s death left her mother alone to raise three children. But Ma Goode was assertive, ambitious, pragmatic and wasted no time engaging in self-pity.

Eslanda was encouraged to pursue higher education, as were her two older brothers, John and Francis Jr. (Frank). As children, they found that if one of them got poor grades, then they would all have to stay longer at their studies until the grades were corrected. They might have to forego their regular Friday “party” of games, candy and cards. Essie was fond of saying that “We rose or fell together.” Excellence was the only acceptable grade. Barbara Ransby remarked in her biography, *Eslanda*, that Mother Goode “...instilled sense of collective responsibility and reciprocity in her children. They were not just responsible for themselves, she insisted, but for each other as well.”²

In 1920, Eslanda earned her degree in chemistry from Columbia University and prepared for medical school. Like her mother, Essie was determined to support herself. She had a curious, eager scientific mind and methodical ways. She was one of the first women of color in Presbyterian Hospital working as histological chemist. Essie continued to work and follow her

¹ http://law.sc.edu/equal_rights/5e-cardozo.shtml

² Ransby, Barbara. *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson*. Yale University Press. New Haven, CN. 2013. P. 22

own career even in her whirlwind romance with law student, Paul Robeson when they eloped in 1921. Essie's work at the hospital supported them while Paul completed his law degree at Columbia University.

In 1923, Paul was hired to practice with a prestigious firm in New York. But it was not long before he saw that the racism would keep him from attaining the excellence he desired. Both their lives changed course in 1924 when he joined the cast of *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill and the Provincetown Playhouse. It was then Paul's acting and singing became more than a pleasant pastime.

Once Essie saw the magnitude of her husband's artistic talents she took on the task of making him a success and set aside her own career for a time. She was dedicated to her husband's growth and excellence. Essie was Paul's manager, coach, and partner. As his influence grew to audiences around the world, she encouraged him to use his career to give voice to the people and express their fierce stance for human rights. Both Paul and Essie saw the importance of African Americans knowing and learning about Africa.

The Robesons moved to London for Paul to pursue theater. In 1937, while Paul was performing, Essie enrolled in classes at the London School of Economics in Anthropology. Learning about Africa was central to her awakening to the plight of the common people and the people of color all over the world. Essie met students from Ghana, Ivory Coast, Congo, Kenya, and Uganda who helped them realize how little most Americans knew about the indigenous cultures and the global devastation of colonialism.



In 1936, with Paul's support, Essie and their eight-year-old son, Pauli, arranged a trip to Africa. The purpose would be to build an ethnographic study of the Toro people of Uganda.



Essie was an avid photographer and could document her travels and ethnographic studies with anthropological accuracy. Her book, *African Journey*, recounts that trip and was published in 1946. Eslanda earned her Ph.D. in anthropology at the Hartford Seminary in 1946.³

Essie retained her scientific mind and applied it throughout her life and works to understand the connections between peoples all around the world; whether in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Bandung, Indonesia, Vietnam, Beijing, China, or London, England. There was no artist more loved around the world than Paul Robeson and no one more feared by his or her own government. Africa, South America and Australia, the whole world had embraced the sound of his voice.

Eslanda and Paul's travels allowed them to witness the brutal scars of Colonial rule in Africa, Asia and Australia. There was a drive to eradicate everything considered primitive and to use indigenous resources for their own benefit. Eslanda and Paul saw first-hand how indigenous and native peoples around the world were ruthlessly oppressed to gain wealth and cheap labor for Colonial Powers. The dominating and superior attitudes underlying colonial acquisition of native lands and resources stripped ancient cultures of their priceless traditions, customs and wealth.

Emerging anthropological practices challenged entrenched theories and practices of White Supremacy, eugenics and race classification, and Essie embraced them. She spoke out about the value of indigenous African societies as no one had before. She was an eyewitness of the extreme intelligence and beauty of a people who were simply dismissed and vilified as primitive. The Robesons' resistance took many forms. Paul became an activist through his music and concerts. Essie fought through her writing. She sent articles to newspapers, journals and magazines all over the world. Eslanda wrote articles for the *Challenge*, the *Pittsburg Courier*, the *California Dispatch*, the *Amsterdam News*, the *Sun Reporter*, *New World Review*, *The Afro-American*, and the *Associate Negro Press*.

As members of the Council on African Affairs (CAA), the couple was brought to the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee. When Essie was not allowed to travel outside the United States she took advantage of the chance to become a correspondent covering the United Nations, one of her great passions. "I am not going to sit quiet... They'll have to put me in jail, or kill me before I'll permit it."⁴

The FBI, the CIA, and MI5 followed her and kept a file on her since her 1936 trip to Africa, just as they had on Paul. Between 1950 and 1960, the government took action to limit their influence to "make trouble and rabble-rouse" lest they stir up the masses. President Truman tried to silence the Robesons, but even he could not, even though both Paul and Essie were denied the use of their passports. Through the efforts of supporters around the world their passports were returned in 1958. Paul said, "Artists are the gatekeepers of truth. We are civilizations radical voice."⁵

Essie's marriage to Paul was unconventional, but their partnership endured all the affairs and differences. They were a strength to each other in their work and throughout their lives. Her

³ Ransby, Barbara. *Robeson, Eslanda Goode*. Black Women in America, Second Edition. 21 March 2015.

⁴ Robeson, Eslanda. "A Call to the Negro People: Begging Should End Now Says Eslanda Robeson," *California Eagle*. April 12, 1951 (microfilm), Paul Robeson Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁵ Jackson, Sarah. *Black Celebrity, Radical Politics, and the Press: Framing Dissent*. "The 44th NAACP Image Awards NAACP Hollywood Bureau and NBC Studios, Feb. 1, 2013.



devotion to their family can be seen in the photos Essie took of their grandchildren, Susan and David. She carried her photos of the family on their trips abroad and showed them to family and friends building bridges of understanding between people all over the world.



Africans are entitled to the “four freedoms” that President Roosevelt had spoken about so eloquently in 1941: freedom of speech, freedom from want, freedom of worship, and freedom from fear. Until the African people, along with all the peoples of the earth, achieve these simple, reasonable, dignified, human minimum essentials, this war – which includes the peace – will not be won. It will not be finished.

Council on African Affairs. Pamphlet: “What Do Africans Want?” . 1945. p. 23



Ilene Evans Portraying Eslanda Robeson and Bessie Coleman

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