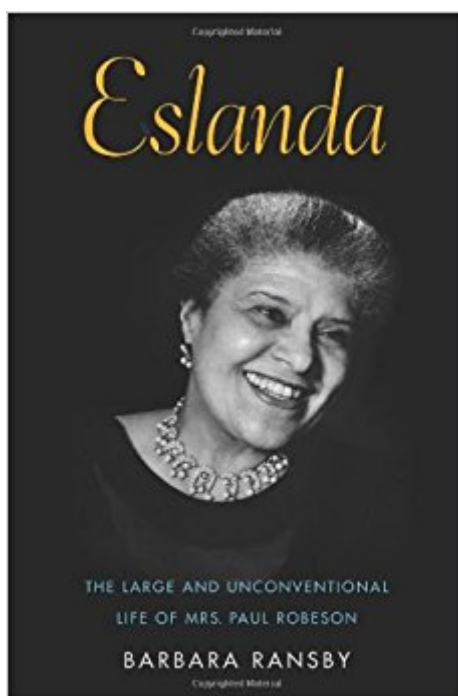


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# Eslanda: The Large And Unconventional Life Of Mrs. Paul Robeson



## Synopsis

Eslanda "Essie" Cardozo Goode Robeson lived a colorful and amazing life. Her career and commitments took her many places: colonial Africa in 1936, the front lines of the Spanish Civil War, the founding meeting of the United Nations, Nazi-occupied Berlin, Stalin's Russia, and China two months after Mao's revolution. She was a woman of unusual accomplishment— an anthropologist, a prolific journalist, a tireless advocate of women's rights, an outspoken anti-colonial and antiracist activist, and an internationally sought-after speaker. Yet historians for the most part have confined Essie to the role of Mrs. Paul Robeson, a wife hidden in the large shadow cast by her famous husband. In this masterful book, biographer Barbara Ransby refocuses attention on Essie, one of the most important and fascinating black women of the twentieth century. Chronicling Essie's eventful life, the book explores her influence on her husband's early career and how she later achieved her own unique political voice. Essie's friendships with a host of literary icons and world leaders, her renown as a fierce defender of justice, her defiant testimony before Senator Joseph McCarthy's infamous anti-communist committee, and her unconventional open marriage that endured for over 40 years—all are brought to light in the pages of this inspiring biography. Essie's indomitable personality shines through, as do her contributions to United States and twentieth-century world history.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 424 pages

Publisher: Yale University Press (January 8, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0300124341

ISBN-13: 978-0300124347

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.1 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 15 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #511,888 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #216 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Social Scientists & Psychologists](#) #435 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Social Activists](#) #1286 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > African-American & Black](#)

## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** By virtue of her marriage to artist and activist Paul Robeson, Eslanda Cardozo

Goode Robeson lived a life far beyond the restrictions placed on black women of her era. But she was much more than Mrs. Paul Robeson; she was an accomplished, independent woman with a drive and personality that complemented her husband's and added to the complexities of their marriage. Black-history scholar Ransby draws on the Robeson family archives to present a portrait of a woman who grew to exercise her hunger for global travel and understanding. Essie served as her husband's business manager and shared his controversial political beliefs, for which both paid an enormous price during the Cold War. Their turbulent 44-year marriage moved beyond infidelities to settle into an open arrangement. Ransby chronicles Essie's life as wife, manager, and mother but puts rightful emphasis on Essie's own career and accomplishments. She was an anthropologist and author (coauthoring one book with Pearl Buck), a women's rights and anticolonialism activist, and, for 20 years, a freelance journalist and UN correspondent, traveling to more than 40 countries on 5 continents. This is an astonishing biography of a woman until now best known for her marriage to her famous husband. --Vanessa Bush

"In this incredibly powerful, vital work, Ransby has rescued Eslanda Robeson from the shadows of her famous husband and establishes her as one of the most important activists, scholars, critics and theorists to connect anticolonialism with the black freedom movement in the U.S." •Robin Kelley, author of *The Thelionious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (Robin Kelley) "This is an enormously rich book by a masterful biographer, full of novel insights and surprises." •Penny Von Eschen, University of Michigan (Penny Von Eschen) "Barbara Ransby has produced an insightful, fascinating, and significant biography. Eslanda Robeson has too long stood in the shadow of her remarkable husband, but as Ransby shows she was an important writer and political activist in her own right, whose life illuminates the international dimensions of the 20th-century black freedom movement." •Eric Foner, Columbia University (Eric Foner) "From a master biographer and historian of African American women, this mesmerizing story of an extraordinary woman's life and struggles offers a global view of black radical history. After this book no one will be able to think of Eslanda merely as Mrs. Paul Robeson." •Linda Gordon, author of *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (Linda Gordon) "Scholar and activist Ransby deftly details the accomplishments, struggles and impact of Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson... A well-researched, informative, readable biography." •Kirkus Reviews (Kirkus Reviews) "This long overdue biography of a bold scholar-activist emerging from the shadow of her famous husband is a gift, and

such are Ransby's narrative skills that I wept when, in her final pages, the vibrant Essie died, two days shy of 70. Ransby has a history of rescuing historically overlooked black female leaders; a prior biography was of the venerable civil rights activist Ella Baker. This new work is a major contribution to her glorious reclamation project." — Joan Steinau Lester, Ms. Magazine (Joan Steinau Lester Ms. Magazine)"What Barbara Ransby achieved in her biography of Ella Baker is repeated with verve and astonishing insight in *Eslanda: The Labor and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson*." — Herb Boyd, New York Amsterdam News (Herb Boyd New York Amsterdam News)"Fascinating. . . A poignant portrait of a peripatetic, human rights activist willing to challenge oppression of any form wherever she could find it." — Kam Williams, Insight (Kam Williams Insight)"Compelling." — Eleanor J. Bader, In These Times (Eleanor J. Bader In These Times)"*Eslanda* Goode Robeson deserves this fine biography that frees her from her role as Mrs. Paul Robeson and uncovers a life that defies summary, so varied, wide-ranging, and intense it was . . . Ransby skillfully organizes the details into a fascinating, well-researched account . . . A breathtaking biography. Highly recommended, all libraries." — Choice (Choice) Won Honorable Mention for the 2013 Southern California Book Festival, in the Biography/Autobiography category, sponsored by JM Northern Media LLC. (Southern California Book Festival JM Northern Media LLC 2013-10-22) Won an Honorable Mention for the 2013 New England Book Festival given by the JM Northern Media Family of Festivals, in the Biography/Autobiography Category. (New England Book Festival JM Northern Media 2013-12-27) Selected as a Choice Outstanding Academic Title for 2013 in the North America Category. (Outstanding Academic Title Choice 2014-01-21) Won a Honorable Mention for the 2014 Los Angeles Book Festival in the Biography/Autobiography Category. (Los Angeles Book Festival JM Northern Media LLC 2014-03-13)"Through the vast intellect and devoted political commitments of Barbara Ransby, Essie's ferocious clarity about global solidarity in thought and action, her defiance of the forces of racism and reaction, and her remarkable resilience and intellectual curiosity which led her to teach and write, to engage and then to wholeheartedly embrace the struggles of her time — tell us much about ourselves and the challenges to buck up." — Bernadine Dohrn, Monthly Review (Bernadine Dohrn Monthly Review)

Whew! On occasion, I felt as though I needed to catch my breath while reading the autobiography of *Eslanda (Essie) Cardozo Goode Robeson*, by Barbara Ransby. I often imagined myself traveling with Essie during her journeys throughout Africa, Europe, South America, Asia, New Zealand, and the Caribbean. Born in Washington, D. C., in 1895, Essie's ancestral history

included freed and unfree African slaves and Sephardic Jews. Her maternal great-grandfather was a Sephardic Jew from Spain. During Reconstruction, her grandfather, Francis Lewis Cardozo, was the first African American to hold a statewide office in South Carolina. Francis Cardozo High School in Washington, D. C., still bears his name. The Cardozos were a distant relative to Supreme Court Justice, Benjamin Nathan Cardozo. Essie met handsome, six-four, Paul Robeson in 1919. They both attended Columbia University; she was a pre-med student (graduated with a B.S. in chemistry), and Paul attended Columbia Law School. The two often exchanged ideas concerning politics and the world. In 1920, Essie fell in love with Paul, and in 1921, they were married. Paul graduated from law school in 1922. While employed at a New York City law firm, he experienced undue bias from office staff and quit. Essie supported Paul in her job as the first, Black, chief histological chemist at New York-Presbyterian Hospital. Paul had a rich, baritone-bass voice, so she encouraged him to sing. Paul became a renowned concert singer and actor in New York, London and Paris. Essie managed his career and traveled throughout Europe with him. At five-three, some considered Essie abrasive and verbally aggressive. But Essie with Paul's interest in mind, was cautious in her dealings concerning his career. She was also a devoted wife who was very much in love with Paul. In 1927, they had a son, Paul, Jr. It is not discussed whether their frequent traveling affected their son. Essie's mother was their son's caregiver during their travels abroad. However, the family lived in London for several years. Early on in the marriage, Essie discovered Paul's non-monogamous desires. Yet Paul's short-term dalliances had not overshadowed his career. Conscientious about his profession, he used constraint in his interracial affairs, but Essie always knew, even when he betrayed her with her friends. However, his long-term relationship with a wealthy English woman almost led to him divorcing Essie. Essie almost caved in when he requested a divorce, but she believed in their eternal commitment, and stood her ground. Paul returned to Essie; he wanted a solidly knit relationship with her and their son. Yet without qualm, he had continual involvements with other women. Paul's emotional unfaithfulness exacted a serious toll on their marriage. Paul was Essie's first love and the father of their only child. She performed a variety of important tasks, not only as his wife, confidante, and defender when necessary, but she inspired, encouraged, supported and provided an honest evaluation of his talent. She worked hard to help develop Paul's career, and in the early years, was his manager, publicist, and agent. Later, they reached a compromise in their marriage. They would stay together, but maintain an open marriage. Essie and Paul traveled to the Soviet Union in 1934 at the request of Soviet Movie Director, Sergei Eisenstein. Afterwards, there would be a series of

traveling to and from the Soviet Union by Essie and Paul for over 20 years. In fact, their son would attend public school there for over a year. They were branded un-American during the early 1950s and appeared before the Senate Committee on Un-American Activities. Essie and Paul denied being Communists. Yet they would lose their passports, finances, and some of their friends. In addition, they were watched by American and British Intelligence. In 1936, Essie traveled to South and West Africa with her nine-year-old son. At that time, Africa was still colonized by the British, Dutch, and French. Essie became a strong advocate for decolonization not only in Africa but also in Asia. Two years later, she became a proponent against fascism after witnessing, along with Paul Sr., the ravages of war torn Spain during the Spanish Civil War. Essie became a world traveler, trekking across continents, writing, and lecturing about colonization, and American Civil Rights, and writing a book, *African Journey*. Sometimes in her speeches, she paralleled racism and colonization. The British, French and the Boers weren't happy with her visiting their African colonies. Twice she became very ill during her travels overseas. I believe her food might have been tampered with. During the later years of her life, no longer seen or addressed as Mrs. Paul Robeson, in her own right, Essie was known as an anthropologist, activist, prolific writer, lecturer, and author. Eslanda (Essie) Cardozo Robeson, was a good wife, mother, daughter, and loyal friend, strong, willful, resourceful, and assertive. As an activist, she fought a good fight. She stood up for the poor, the colonized and disenfranchised throughout the world during the 1930s and 1960s. This book is chock-full of world history covering the 1920s to the early 1960s. Essie was also involved in the U.N. during its inception. She was friends or acquainted with renowned men and women such as Jomo Kenyatta, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vijaya (Nan) Pandit, Lumumba, Writer and Socialist, Shirley and W.E. B. DuBois, Harlem Renaissance's Langston Hughes and Lorraine Hansberry, and Newspaper owner, Charlotta Bass, etc. Essie had diaries and journals, but the autobiographer did not address her emotions concerning Paul. I believe Essie's constant continual traveling somewhat lessened the intensity of pain by Paul's affairs. I gave this book five stars.

Eslanda was obviously a talented and important person who deserves a good biography. Unfortunately, this one doesn't do her justice. Ransby leaves no detail out and is so intent on making Eslanda look like a saint that it is hard to locate the real person behind the biography. All that said, Eslanda was obviously a woman ahead of her time.

While historical material covered was interesting, writing style was plodding.. This fact in my opinion

detracted from the book and made reading it a matter of "forcing" oneself.

An incredible summary of a fantastic life, taking the reader in and out of the Renaissance in Harlem, to the United Nations, to the Congo, to Madrid and Moscow revealing a period of progressive history almost forgotten - certainly ignored - in the United States. A fascinating life mingles the details of personal life with the challenges of progressive political positions inside a conservative and repressive USA during the 1950's. Well written, fascinating and delightful.

Exceptionally well-researched and well-written story focused on the life of an important woman; significant apart from her shared celebrity with a famous man.

I was riveted to the pages. Was astounded by the depth of her intellectual curiosity and her independence. Her life independent of Paul Robeson was amazing!

Mediocre book

Great book! I knew nothing about Paul Robeson's wife so kudos to Barbara Ransby for giving us this hidden treasure.

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