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Eslanda Robeson: A Writer on the Move Against Global Anti-Blackness

1 Context, Motivation, and Methodology: Why Eslanda Robeson's Work Matters

Eslanda Goode Robeson (1895–1965) was an Afro-American anthropologist, writer, and activist who used travel as a means to learn from and with Black peoples, especially women, around the world to build transnational and transregional connections and to argue for racial and gender justice.[1] She was a persuasive public speaker and a passionate writer who devoted her life to using both the spoken and the written word to serve the many causes she believed in, from independence for all countries still under colonial rule to equal rights for women. In the words of her biographer, historian Barbara Ransby (2013), Eslanda Robeson had the "guts," "resilience," and "perspective" to "speak out with empathic eloquence and steel-willed resolve against so many of the injustices of her day: McCarthyism, colonialism, sexism, racism, fascism, imperialism, wars (cold and hot), and class exploitation" (xiii). In her advocacy, Eslanda Robeson, as we shall see, embraced political Blackness while, at the same time, she envisioned a nonracialist society, that is, a complete "dismantling of the idea of racial difference in governance and other institutional arrangements and practices" (Guadeloupe 2022, xxv).

As the wife of acclaimed singer and actor Paul Robeson, who pursued an international career spanning Western Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the United States, Eslanda Robeson was part of a "transnational, multilingual, highly connected, and mobile elite" (Roig-Sanz and Subirana 2020, 12) despite being a black woman living in the first half of the twentieth century. Barbara Ransby, too, notes that for Eslanda – or Essie, as she was called by family and friends – being Mrs. Robeson meant "access to otherwise unreachable people and places"

1 Following Francio Guadeloupe (2022), I understand that, on the one hand, "anti-Black racism refers to the way, since the horror of transatlantic slavery [. . .], that brown-skinned people of sub-Saharan African descent became known as Black people. In being given this name, they have been symbolically and materially disenfranchised on the basis of the idea of racial difference" (xxv). On the other hand, "political Blackness, a term borrowed from Stuart Hall, designates those people who resignify and transform Blackness into a political identity similar to that of the proletariat. In doing so, they seek to dismantle the racial and unjust economic order" (xxv).

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(Ransby 2013, 6).[2] This access enabled her to play a significant role in the cultural transfer of ideas about racial, gender, and social justice into many national and political contexts, becoming an important, albeit now overshadowed, figure within the Black, anticolonial, feminist, and leftist internationalist networks of her time.

So, in this chapter, I analyse Eslanda Robeson's wanderings and writings through the lenses of agency and connectivity, as these interconnected concepts provide an analytical framework to discuss the range and implications of her transnational movements and archipelagic cultural mediations and, thus, rethink space. As key concepts in global literary studies, agency, connectivity, and space also set the base for situating Eslanda Robeson within a worldwide Black and feminist intellectual history in the context of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) and beyond. Indeed, as Ransby (2013) suggests, a "careful look at Essie's writings, speeches, and activism forces us to shift our attention from the Soviet Union [and East-West relations] to the growing sense of community and solidarity that was being forged in the Global South" (7), a bond that grew out of her travels first and foremost to Africa, in 1936, 1946, and 1958, but also to Mexico and Central America (1940), China (1949), Trinidad (1958), and Australia and New Zealand (1960).

As I have previously argued (Grinberg Pla 2020b), twentieth century Afro-Caribbean literature challenges the very notion of the national literary canon due to its transnational and transcultural character, which goes beyond linguistic, cultural, national, and regional borders. Similarly, Eslanda Robeson's writings cannot be reduced to the Afro-American context (or the African, for that matter), as her lifework fosters a transnational, transatlantic, cross-cultural, and translingual cultural geography spanning India and China, the Caribbean and Latin America, Europe, and the U.S.

It is in this sense that a new measuring of space beyond the national is necessary to fully understand Eslanda Robeson's literary and political practice. What is more, as she displaces the centrality of the West – be it London, Paris or New York – to look at what's happening in Africa, China, or Latin America, she pushes us to review Western, and hence colonial dichotomies such as centre and periphery, dominant and dominated, global and local, and North and South, as already noted by Ransby. So, the notions of connectivity and agency serve as tools to study Eslanda Robeson's production, trespassing the limits of the nation-state. Through the connectivity lens, we will see the breadth of her transnational and translingual relations emerging from her movement through space. Here I

2 I will refer to her interchangeably as Eslanda Robeson, Eslanda, and Essie throughout the chapter, to acknowledge her multiple positionalities in the different ways she was called and she herself chose to sign her texts, sometimes as Essie and others as Eslanda Robeson.

understand movement in a multidimensional way that impacts peoples' lives and perceptions: as displacement in time and space in travel, migration and transit, as dislocation of time and space in dance and trance or through travel, as the motion of the body while performing manual work. As an analytical tool, movement captures how the embodied knowledge produced by migrating or travelling intellectuals such as Eslanda Robeson, interrupts the linear logic of place and time central to modern nations, against the grain of the phallogocentric split of body and mind.

I argue that is the very experience of movement, of a life on the move, that contributes to the creation of her antiracist, feminist agenda in defiance of colonial and patriarchal social impositions and expectations. In other words, her position as an activist against global anti-Blackness is informed by movement, and not defined as an ethnoracial category. In this context, Carole Boyce Davies' notion of "migratory subjectivity" (1994, Ch. 1) also plays a key role in understanding how her actual movement impacts her writing. Conversely, through the lens of agency I address the multiple roles she fulfilled as an international cultural mediator. Using Édouard Glissant's notion of the archipelago in *Treatise on the Whole-World* (2020 [1997]), I am able to more fully capture the transnationalism of Eslanda as well as her contribution to the international circulation of gendered, antiracist, anticolonial ideas.

Historian Imaobong Umoren (2018, 2) best describes Eslanda as a "race woman internationalist," that is, a public figure who "travelled and w[as] part of black diasporic networks and organisations in the United States, Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean [. . .]" because she was invested in solving "racial, gendered, and other forms of inequality facing black people across the African diaspora."[3] This definition is important as it underscores the link, or even better, the entanglement, between movement (i.e. travel) and internationalism (i.e. social movement). Indeed, Eslanda Robeson travelled extensively: to London, Paris, Madrid, Berlin, and Moscow in Europe; to South Africa, Basutoland, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, and Congo in Africa; to Trinidad in the Caribbean; and to Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Mexico in Latin America, to name some of the places that she connects in her

3 "Race women internationalists self-identified as members of the 'darker races of the world' and voiced what historian Nico Slate has called 'colored cosmopolitanism.' According to Slate, the term describes men and women of color who forged 'a united front against racism, imperialism, and other forms of oppression' and who 'fought for the freedom of the colored world' even while calling into question the meaning of both color and freedom" (Umoren 2018, 2). This is another way of saying that race women internationalists embraced political Blackness while contesting the racial colonial order that divided people between dominated (Black, Indigenous, usually female) and dominating (White, coloniser, usually male).

thinking about race and gender (in)equality, and which will be part of what I call her archipelagic cultural mediations, following Glissant (2020 [1997]).

As an international cultural mediator (see Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts 2018, 3), Eslanda's agency was geographically widespread as well as manifold in terms of her multiple roles: writer, editorialist, cultural ambassador, reporter, keynote speaker. In her many concomitant capacities, she produced a significant body of writing, some of which circulated publicly (in books and magazines) while many other pieces were destined for specific readers and, thus, circulated privately in the form of letters; in this way, she also mediated between the private and the public spheres. From her groundbreaking travelogue *African Journey* (1945) to her numerous journalistic pieces, letters, and public talks against Apartheid, segregation, and colonialism, all of Eslanda's publications and speeches purposely cross several national, cultural, and linguistic borders – as she did herself in her "large, unconventional life" (Ransby 2013). In this sense, both her work and her biography invite us to conceive space, culturally and otherwise, in a new way, one not defined through nation states or the geographies determined by colonial dominions past and present, but rather by the archipelago:

> Archipelagic thinking suits the pace of our worlds. It has their ambiguity, their fragility, their drifting. It accepts the practice of the detour, which is not the same as fleeing or giving up. It recognizes the range of the imaginations of the Trace, which it ratifies. Does this mean giving up on self-government? No, it means being in harmony with the world as it is diffracted in archipelagos, precisely, these sorts of diversities in spatial expanses, which nevertheless rally coastlines and marry horizons. We become aware of what was so continental, so thick, weighing us down, in the sumptuous systematic thought that up until now has governed the History of human communities, and which is no longer adequate to our eruptions, our histories and our no less sumptuous wanderings. The thinking of the archipelago, the archipelagos, opens these seas up to us. (Glissant 2020, 17)

Consequently, the framework developed by Diana Roig-Sanz and Jaume Subirana (2020) to study *Cultural Organizations, Networks and Mediators* seems more than appropriate to capture Eslanda Robeson's transnational and transregional archipelagic agency as a race woman internationalist. The framework also helps to describe her contributions to the many conversations about race and gender (in) equality that took place within the international informal networks and in the transnational institutions she was a member of, such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the International Committee on African Affairs (founded in London in 1937), and the United Nations. She attended the very first UN convention in San Francisco in 1945 and was from then on accredited with the *New World Review* as a reporter.

As both a cultural mediator and race internationalist, Eslanda Robeson impacted the transnational, transregional, and multilingual dissemination of ideas

against racism in literature and beyond (see Ransby 2013, 205–206; Umoren 2018; Joseph-Gabriel 2020, 173). She wrote essays, chronicles, travelogues, political speeches, testimonials, plays, and novels while also contributing to a redefinition of the literary field as not completely separated from the political. According to Ransby, "she sought to research, understand, and write about changing global realities not as a disinterested scholar or an ostensibly impartial reporter, but as a passionate and engaged historical actor, a scholar-activist, and a radical writer trying to both uncover the truth and influence the future" (2013, 205). What is more, her writing furthered the conversation on ethics, citizenship, and belonging on a global scale by shifting the focus away from the relationship with former colonial metropoles to look at transversal (Grinberg Pla 2020a) and translingual (Odertey-Wellington 2018) connections between Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas and their cultural capitals. By so doing, Eslanda Robeson's interventions disrupt both the prevalent male gaze as well as nationalist ideologies, or – to say it with Glissant – "the sumptuous systematic thought that up until now has governed the History of human communities," because it is not "adequate to our eruptions, our histories and our no less sumptuous wanderings" (2020, 17).

To reconstruct Eslanda Robeson's "sumptuous wanderings" beyond the limits of what's actually been published and is therefore available in print form, I delved into some of the archives that host her manuscripts and documents, which are kept in collections – as happened so often in her lifetime – devoted mainly to her husband, Paul Robeson, and whose material traces, like both their biographies, are scattered in a transatlantic manner but, alas, respond individually to the organising logics of their respective national and local sites.[4] Working

4 Despite the ongoing pandemic and the ensuing restrictions, I was able to conduct archival research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem in July 2021, where some of Eslanda Robeson's correspondence as well as some of her articles and speeches are kept in microfilm, and at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin during November 2021. Die Akademie der Künste has a significant collection of Eslanda Robeson's manuscripts, speeches, articles, and longer pieces, both published and unpublished, as well as personal letters and photographs. This is not surprising, due to the Robesons' deep connections to the Soviet Union, especially to the former German Democratic Republic, where they both spent long periods of time and where Eslanda Robeson was awarded the Clara Zetkin medal in 1963. I am grateful to the staff at the Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the Harlem Branch of The New York Public Library and the staff at the Akademie der Künste, from the *Lesesaal* to the *Reproduktionsauftrag* team, and most especially to the director of its *Musikarchiv* (that's the division that houses the collection, since Paul Robeson was first and foremost a singer), Peter Konopatsch, who was most helpful and patient with all my inquiries. As of today (April 2022), the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, that hosts the most important collection of Eslanda Robeson's papers, continues to limit on-site research to

with the Eslanda and Paul Robeson collections asks for an anarchival approach, that is, for a reading practice against the grain of an archival selection and organisational logic determined by the dominant discourses in academia (what Glissant calls the "sumptuous systematic"). In a sense, since Eslanda Robeson's activism exceeded national/ist frames, disrupting both gender and racial hierarchies, as a researcher one has to look for a cultural analysis methodology that is appropriate to the scale and scope of her lifework and that allows us to bring into focus her sumptuous wanderings and the archipelagic character of her cultural mediations.

As Diana Roig-Sanz and Neus Rotger argue in the first chapter of the present volume, it is necessary to "aim at decentralisation from both a geographical and a thematic standpoint, as well as with regards to the theories and practices we set in motion and the agents involved" (2022, 2) to uncover and recover the complex transnational and translingual dimension of cultural mediation. This is especially critical if we aim to bring into focus the work of a race woman internationalist such as Eslanda Robeson. Additionally, an intersectional angle (Crenshaw 1991) is needed to capture how antiracism and gender inclusion are the vectors that allowed her to transcend national and linguistic constraints and build cross-cultural solidarity on a global scale, while at the same time recognizing the specificity of each context and especially the situationality of Black women within those contexts.

Eslanda's husband's fame opened many doors for her, but it also cast a shadow over her accomplishments as a public intellectual and a cultural mediator in her own right, as happened to both Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey, as well as to Shirley Graham DuBois (see Boyce Davies 2015, 27). It goes without saying that Barbara Ransby's critical annotated biography as well as Imaobong Umoren and Annette Joseph-Gabriel's studies of Eslanda's internationalism are crucial steps towards ending the gendered and racialized bias that has skewed her reception until recently. This chapter also contributes to that effort.

2 Eslanda's Agency as a Black Female Internationalist

In "How I became a writer (if I am writer)," a speech Eslanda Robeson delivered at the Writers' Union in Moscow in January 1959, she explains that the decision to publish a biography about her husband (*Paul Robeson: Negro*) emerged from

Howard University faculty, staff and current students due to the ongoing pandemic and, therefore, I am still waiting for permission to study it.

a desire to provide a more accurate depiction of his sociopolitical views, which were also hers – that is, she sought to *correct* public opinion,

> Paul's amazing success in theatre and concert created many problems, not the least of which was inaccurate reporting about his personal beliefs, which have always been very important to him. [. . .] Anyway, things came to such a pass that an entirely wrong picture of Paul was being built up by inaccurate reporting; [. . .] So we decided that something must be done to correct this.
>
> Paul asked me to make a list of some of the significant facts about his life [. . .], to compile a sort of fact-sheet about his background which could be given to reporters during an interview, so that at least some accuracy could be guaranteed. This I did. Paul liked it so much, and it became so useful, that he asked me to expand it. I expanded and further expanded it, and eventually it grew into a book, PAUL ROBESON, NEGRO, and was published in England and the United States in 1930. Thus my first book sort of came into being as a weapon of defence, not because I was a writer. (Robeson 1959, 2)

This statement is emblematic of the way in which, for Eslanda Robeson, public writing served as a manifold mediation between the private and the public sphere, the political and the cultural realms, and between black and white audiences. And in the same sense that writing (about) *Paul Robeson, Negro* implied an editorial gesture, all her other writing endeavours were aimed at setting the record straight with regards to racial, gender, and social justice, according to her ideals of freedom and equality regardless of race, gender, class, and nationality. Following Eslanda's own rhetoric in "How I became a writer," one can see how writing will always be both an editorial intervention about the place of Black peoples, especially women, in the world. As a cultural mediator, she constantly worked to translate the plight of Black peoples and to argue for women's rights to diverse audiences with whom she sought solidarity or from whom she demanded respect in various different national, social, and political contexts. Her rhetorical strategies thus support the translations of ideas across different social, cultural, and national contexts, culminating in a poetics of commensurability around issues of racial and gender justice across borders.

If cultural mediation always implies an act of translation in an extended sense of the term – since racism, for instance, is coded differently in different contexts – the type of transnational and cultural mediation practised by Eslanda Robeson also relies on translation in a more literal sense, because translations are needed to establish conversations between anticolonial, antifascist, and antiracist activists who do not speak the same language. Indeed, as a transnational and transregional cultural mediator, Essie often depended on interpreters to facilitate communication with peoples who were not fluent in English, as well as on translators and interpreters who delivered her speeches in the target language when necessary. At the same time, it is my understanding, from her own observations

in her correspondence and diaries, that she made a conscious effort to learn several languages to facilitate her cross-cultural communication abilities. Especially in informal situations, she used her knowledge of Russian, French, and German, which was, as she writes in *African Journey*, the language she spoke best (see Robeson 1945a, 116).

As Brent Hayes Edwards (2003) points out, "Taking up questions of the travels of discourses of black internationalism requires investigating in particular the multiplicity of translation practices and transnational coverage more generally – that are so crucial to the fabric of [. . .] transatlantic print culture" (9) and – I would like to add – that are equally crucial to the fabric of transnational and transregional cultural mediation.

In her quest for racial equality with a focus on female leadership across multiple linguistic and national borders, Essie was in contact with and needed interpretation for many languages. During her stays in London and Paris, she was exposed to many varieties of English and French as she connected with numerous Afro-Caribbean and African intellectuals who were deeply involved in anticolonial struggles. Also, in the context of her anticolonial struggles she was immersed in many African languages, especially but not exclusively Rotoro (during her stay in Basutoland, present-day Lesotho), Zulu and Afrikaans, Luganda, Swahili, Ngala, Kongo, Kituba, Fante and Ewe. As committed antifascists, Eslanda and Paul Robeson travelled to Spain during the Civil War, coming in contact with Spanish, a language she continued to be in touch with during her visit to Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico, and as part of her involvement with antiimperialist causes in Latin America. Because of their leftist orientation, the Robesons had strong ties to the former Soviet Union and stayed there repeatedly, also for long periods of time, in Russland and Germany, and even travelled to China. As a result, Russian, German, various other Eeatern European languages and Mandarin are part of their multilingual landscape.[5]

Not surprisingly, many of her journalistic pieces were disseminated in either Russian or German in different outlets within the former Soviet Union. Her book *African Journey*, which appeared in English in 1945, was also published in Russian in 1957 as *Путешествие по Африке/Puteshestvie po Afrike*. This is an excellent example of the type of transnational, cultural mediation between Black anticolonial activists and Communist intellectuals that Eslanda Robeson practised. More research is needed to better understand how translations helped circulate Eslanda Robeson's ideas in different national contexts and within diverse collectives, but

5 Here it is also worth mentioning that, as a reporter for the United Nations, Eslanda was embedded in a highly multilingual political body.

for now I would like to focus on cultural mediation itself as a form of translation lubricating the many gears of Black and feminist internationalism which, thus, enabled Eslanda Robeson's agency in many different national, regional, political and cultural contexts worldwide.

Another type of cultural mediation practised by Eslanda Robeson had to do with her emphasis on the need to listen to women with regards to political matters and racial justice issues alike. Being a Black woman she belonged to "a subordinate group within the global racial and gender hierarchies" – see, for example, Keisha Blain (2015) on Black women nationalists – and, like them, she "asserted their political agency and demanded equal recognition and participation in global civic society" (196). She did so without calling herself a feminist, by challenging patriarchal norms and values both within and beyond Black intellectual and social circles and by always arguing for women's rights. It should not be surprising that she collaborated with the short-lived "Sojourners for Truth and Justice," a group of women activists that exercised "a postwar black left feminism" (Ransby 2013, 188).

A clear example of Essie Robeson's advocacy for women's rights can be seen in the speech she gave in East Berlin in 1963 under the title "Equality for Women? Men's Attitude Must Change." Of particular interest here is her intersectional awareness of Black women's embodied knowledge based on the racial and gender discrimination to which they are systemically exposed because they are black and female. Accordingly, she finishes the following quote by making a not so liminal side comment: "Again, Negro women, particularly understand this,"

> The reality of American (and Western) society – of the "Free Democratic World" is that although women constitute slightly more than half the population, the society is man-dominated: Men make the laws, men enforce – or deliberately do not enforce – the laws.
>
> It can be said that there are women in the Congress, in the Parliaments. But how many? There are only 2 women Senators and 11 women representatives in the present United States Congress. In the present British Parliament there are only 25 women in the 600-odd membership. There are no women in the Cabinet. All of which means that the representation of women is token only. There are no women making policy. (Again, Negro women, particularly understand this). (Robeson 1963, 1; underlined expressions in the original)

Another telling example of her feminist activism and of the way she understood gender inequality as a systemic issue, can be seen in her piece about "The Role of Women in the Emancipation of Africa," where she unequivocally asserts:

> I honestly believe the reason women do not take more active part in PUBLIC LIFE and especially in GOVERNMENT is because MEN – consciously or unconsciously – have been able to KEEP THEM IN THE HOME, COOKING THE FOOD, CARING FOR THE CHILDREN,

> KEEPING THE HOUSE TIDY, and they naturally want to keep the women doing all this, because it is a very comfortable arrangement for them. MEN. (3; capitals in the original)

It is also not a coincidence that Eslanda Robeson wrote about Paulette Nardal (see Brent Hayes Edwards 2003, 152), showing interest in the life and work of a fellow race woman internationalist she met during a long stay in Paris in 1932. In so doing, she exhibits an intersectional awareness of the position assigned to Black women in different national and regional contexts that goes hand in hand with Nardal's own "sense of the historical interrelations of race and class" as well as her "sense of the particular difficulties affecting Antillean women" (Hayes Edwards 2003, 153). During her many stays in Paris and London, Eslanda deepened her intersectional awareness of the discrimination faced especially by Black women, leading to her critique of sexism within Black internationalist circles. She also explored commonalities in the fight against racism in the African colonial, the Caribbean colonial and the U.S. American postcolonial landscape, leading to her archipelagic global connections.

Eslanda Robeson's relevance as a global cultural mediator is barely known to this day, despite the abundance and sharpness of her many publications in magazines and periodicals during her lifetime. This is the counterpart of the little recognition she has earned so far as an intellectual and a writer, although she did publish several books and numerous shorter journalistic pieces. In this respect, Ransby (2013) points out that while Essie's articles circulated among internationalist, feminist, panafricanist, and leftist circles worldwide at the time they were published, they failed to reach a wider audience, while her "correspondence alone deserves an edited volume" (9). She further notes that rejections of Eslanda Robeson's many literary pieces (both novels and plays that never saw publication) "tell yet another story" (9). I wonder how much of that story is one of convergence of oppressive systems of race and gender that have contributed to the historic invisibility of Black female writers, to say it with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional terminology.

Indeed, until not too long ago, literary criticism and cultural history were focused mainly on the role played by Black male intellectuals (see Boyce Davies 2015, 25; Boyce Davies 2009, 217–219; Bay, Griffin, et al. 2015, 1–2). This is partly so because several Black international organizations, such as Marcus Garvey's UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) underscored "strong male leadership as fundamental to universal black liberation" (Blain 2015, 199), advocating a paternalistic view of women. Louis Parascandola (2016) notes the historical neglect of Amy Jacques Garvey's contributions, despite her significant role as editor and as a prolific writer for the *Negro World*, focusing on "important and often controversial political and social issues rather than the stereotypical domestic matters

expected of most woman's pages. Collectively, her almost 200 editorials and other writings treat [. . .] women's struggles globally as well as the resistance of various ethnic groups against colonial oppression" (xv). Keisha Blain (2015) also contends that Garveyite newspapers such as the *Negro World* did offer a platform for Black women to get involved as writers and activists and even "exemplify the ways black nationalist women in the UNIA sought to resist male patriarchy within the male-dominated organization" (206).[6]

Unlike Black female intellectuals associated with the UNIA, Eslanda Robeson did not have to contend with such openly patriarchal views of women's roles within society and, yet she, too, was subject to a similar gender-shaded reception. This is obvious in the paratext accompanying the publication of "A Negro Looks at Africa," that appeared in *Asia and the Americas* in 1944. While Eslanda focuses on the political implications of her research on Africa, connecting the struggles of Black peoples in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Africa, the short biographical note at the foot of the article puts her marital relation to Paul Robeson first, before mentioning her professional qualifications to speak about such matters: "ESLANDA GOODE ROBESON, wife of the famous singer and actor Paul Robeson, holds a B.S. degree in chemistry from Columbia University and will receive her Ph.D. in anthropology [. . .] in January. For her fieldwork in anthropology, Mrs. Robeson visited South, Central and East Africa [. . .]" (501; capitals in the original).

On a final note, I would like to offer that this type of patriarchal framing of Eslanda Robeson's work may very well explain her hesitations to call herself a writer, "Two books, and still I'm not a Writer" (Robeson 1959, 3), "Two and one-half books, and still I'm not a Writer" (Robeson 1959, 4) – beyond rhetorical pathos. In other words, it is fair to assume that, while it opened many doors for her, being married also offset professional recognition: as long as she was Mrs. Paul Robeson, she was seen as such. Looking at this mixed reception with respect to her agency, there is a certain ambiguity in the way traditional gender roles and expectations for women affected her career, as she strategically used her position as the wife of an internationally recognized artist to her advantage.

6 In the same vein, Parascandola (2016) writes that "Amy Jacques Garvey negotiated a difficult combination of nationalism with a feminist agenda through what Ula Y. Taylor describes as 'community feminism,' which blends self-determination and feminism. [. . .] The community feminist construct posits that the traditional womanly role as helpmate does not contradict a position of leadership, although it challenges the patriarchal agenda, often putting the women in conflict with the men in the organization" (xx–xxi).

3 Establishing Connectivity Through Movement and Translingualism

There is a parallel between the neglect of Eslanda Robeson's work until recently due to sexist stereotypes associated with her race and gender, as discussed in the previous section, and the Eurocentric bias of her reception that emphasises her transatlantic connections to Europe and Africa (that is the vertical connection between former colony and colonial centre and between the African diaspora and its origin) as well as her bold East-West connections amidst the Cold War. While all these are without a doubt significant connections in the way Eslanda positions herself as a global activist, she also established a rather transversal link between anticolonial struggles in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and India, decentring both the European colonial capitals and Harlem, New York in the global antiracist struggle, as is apparent in Ransby, Umoren, and Joseph-Gabriel's chronicles of her life.

The transversal synergy between the many sites of former or present colonial oppression that emerges with such force in Essie's writing resonates with Glissant's conception of the Whole-World as a constant in-relation being that refuses to be limited to just one place or to be determined by one metropolitan centre (see 2020, 109–110). Eslanda Robeson's report on attending the first United Nations conference in San Francisco in 1945, titled "Unofficial America Goes to the Conference," is a clear example of "the rhizome of all places that make up the totality, and not a uniformity of place in which we would evaporate" (Glissant 2020, 109). Significantly, she opens up this piece by establishing the global urban corners of her Whole-World experience and desire. As you can see below, European, African, Asian, Latin, and U.S. American cities are named side-by-side and, thus, are placed in horizontal relation to one another, as archipelagic sites of transversal cultural exchange:

> I have been fortunate in that I have seen many of the most beautiful and interesting cities in the world, and I had thought I had used up most of my enthusiasm for physical places.
>
> Budapest and Prague, Moscow and Madrid, Stockholm and Paris, New Orleans and London, Cairo, Marseilles and New York are for me almost together at the top of a long list of wonderful cities, which list includes (again, for me) the more orthodox Vienna, Washington D.C., Helsingfors, Berlin, Boston, Capetown, Mexico City, Edinburgh, Leningrad, Johannesburg, Odessa, Guatemala City and Alexandria.
>
> Of course I still have a long list to check off; I haven't yet seen such fabulous cities as Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai, Calcutta, Yokahama, Buenos Aires, Tashkent, Bombay. To see these is something to live for. (Robeson 1945b, 1)

In this article it is noteworthy that movement, i.e. actually going to and experiencing global locations (together with the wish to continue to travel as a way to connect to even more places), foregrounds Essie's archipelagic sense of belonging to the world. Her storyline concludes its arc as she finishes the report by shifting American citizenship away from its territorial attachment to one fixed identitary location (that is from Being in a nationalistic sense), into being connected to issues of social justice on a global scale, as world citizens,

> We Americans are not just American citizens any longer,– we are also World Citizens, whether we like it or not. [. . .]
>
> In our former naive isolationism, we smugly thought that what went on in Ethiopia, Manchuria, Spain, Europe,– did not concern us. It was interesting, worrying, and perhaps even deplorable, but America was comfortably removed from these troublous parts of the world by the deep Atlantic and the wide Pacific Oceans. Why go to look for trouble? (Robeson 1945b, 11–12)

For this type of manifold cross-cultural global connectivity to work, transnational cultural mediators such as Eslanda Robeson are bound to cross the borders of different disciplinary fields while performing several overlapping roles and engaging in multiple activities, from public speaking to publishing to organising, as noted by Roig-Sanz and Subirana (2020, 3) with regards to cultural mediators in the Ibero-American context.

Eslanda Robeson most notably transgresses boundaries by practising anthropology in an unorthodox way that blends research with activism and rejects the white supremacist notions of a primitive Africa in opposition to a civilised West (see Ransby 2013, 154–155). Again, speaking with Glissant, Essie had a rhizomatic understanding of mutual learning, of "raising up the network, the rhizome of open identities, who talk and listen to one another" (Glissant 2020, 154), in all spheres of life, from politics to science to education, which in turn informs the transversality of her global activism against anti-Blackness. This is evident in the following rendering of a conversation she had with several Chiefs in Mbarara, Uganda, about the coloniality implied in anthropology as a Western discipline:

> I asked [. . .] what they thought of visiting anthropologists, and how they liked being "investigated." They smiled and said they were vastly amused, and would often take the searching and impertinent questions as a game, giving the most teasing, joking, and fantastic answers they could think of, so that the interpreter would have a most difficult time to translate the answers into something that would sound "serious and respectful." (Shades of scientific anthropological data!). (Robeson 1945a, 136)

Listening to peoples across cultural and national borders against the grain of racist, colonial assumptions requires actual linguistic competences. Without being a

polyglot, Essie was able to trespass language barriers and facilitate transnational cultural mediations through the practice of translingualism. Coined by Dorothy Odertey-Wellington (2018) in her introduction to *Trans-afrohispanismos*, translingualism implies "the notion of 'passing through' languages and cultures as much in a horizontal as in a vertical motion – and not so much the idea of arriving at them – resulting in culturally complex and ambiguous identities" (Odertey-Wellington 2018, 5; my translation). As a translatory movement, translingualism always means trespassing linguistic borders and disrupting fixed notions of national identity and cultural belonging to forge the type of alliance built by race and feminist internationalists alike, and especially the type of transversal, rhizomatic global connections established by Eslanda Robeson. Her unpublished writings about the Spanish Civil War, based on her travels to the front lines in 1938, display the use of translingualism, sometimes in the form of passing translations, like the one she gives in her travel diary "Journey to Spain," where she keeps the Spanish term "Cortes," which may be easily misunderstood as a Court of Law or Royal Court (and this is an excellent example of false friends), but immediately clarifies its meaning by offering the appropriate translation into English. In so doing, she not only displays deep cultural knowledge, but also shows that translatory movements themselves are an integral part of cross-cultural connections in which the local components are not erased, but remain present in the passage of knowledge:

> Monday, January 31 – Interviews and more interviews. The delegates for the Cortes are all arriving today and tomorrow. The opening of the Cortes, the Parliament, is tomorrow, February 1st. The coast is being heavily patrolled by planes for protection. (Robeson 1938)

In the following passage, in order to critique racism in the United States, she goes back and forth between Spanish and U.S. American racial standards in a translingual manner:

> K. tells of an incident when the battalion was visited by an old Colonel, southern, of the U.S. Army. He said to Law – "Er, I see you are in a Captain's uniform?" Law replied with dignity, "Yes, I am, because I <u>am</u> a Captain. In America, in <u>your</u> army, I could only rise as high as corporal, but here people ~~feel~~ are different~~ly~~ ~~about~~ race and I can rise according to my worth, not according to my color!" Whereupon the Colonel hemmed and hawed and finally came out with "I'm sure they are!" (Robeson 1938; underlined and crossed-out words in the original)

There, translingualism is at work in an extended sense, as Essie is using the Spanish Republican experience to contextualize and account for racism in the United States, while suggesting that the Spanish Republic fully embraces post-

racial equality.[7] This seemingly casual anecdote is central to Eslanda's focus on racial issues on a global scale. Again, this translingual strategy serves to situate U.S. racial policies within the whole-world of humanity (what she will call the human family, as we will see below). For Eslanda Robeson translingualism is a translatory process to bring about cross-cultural connections and, by doing so, to connect struggles for racial and social justice in different national and linguistic contexts (in the example I discuss here, Spain and the United States).

Above all, translingualism is a practice that articulates her own transgressions of linguistic, political, and cultural boundaries as an internationalist whose activism has taken her around the world. Here again I see a connection with Glissant's reflections on multilingualism as our "common condition," where multilingualism is not to be understood in a quantitative sense of how many languages one speaks, but rather as "one of the modes of the imagination" (Glissant 2020, 15). In other words, her translingual writing practice is rooted in a multilingual imagination of a world in-relation.[8]

As a transnational cultural mediator, Essie Robeson brought many spheres and places in touch with one another. Her ability to move between different positions and locations is central to her activism, because, as Imaobong Umoren points out, "[her] sojourns enabled [her] to create and participate in the transnational black public sphere and civil society, a figurative and physical global community beyond the imperial or nation state that engendered the growth of international organisations, associations, institutions, charities, and print culture" (Umoren 2018, 2). I would like to go further and propose that moving did not just enable Eslanda Robeson's activism – movement also shaped her relational understanding of race, gender, and class. From segregation in the United States to Apartheid in Africa to colonial rule everywhere, she contended that these were interconnected forms of racism affecting us all. Hence the need, especially for women, to fight collectively on a global scale. We all "belong to the human family," as she phrases it:

> **people are people, we belong to the human family, we are no different regardless of colour, race, background, religious beliefs, political ideas, we are members of**

7 Eslanda held the conviction that the Soviet Union had attained postracial equality and, so, (even after Stalin purges), she believed that the Soviet Union had abolished "state-sanctioned racism" (Umoren 2018, 131). As Umoren further explains, "The country was seen as an ally in struggles against racism due to its claim to practice nondiscrimination towards women and its religious and ethnic minorities" (130). The Spanish Republic occupied a similar role model in Eslanda's eyes.

8 As previously mentioned, Essie did speak Russian, German and French, and, as Ransby asserts, "she conversed in multiple languages" (2013, 1). But, most importantly, because of her passing through other languages, Essie's use of English was not monolingual. Therefore it is pertinent to link her global activism as an internationalist with a multilingual imagination in Glissant's terms.

> **the human family and until we behave as members of the human family we just won't have a proper human family or a proper universal home for all of us.** (Robeson 1960, 376; bold in the original)

It is assertions like this that demonstrate Eslanda Robeson's non-racialism as an ultimate goal for the future.[9] As Paul Gilroy points out, the word "human" was "a staple component of the Cold War liberalism of the mid twentieth century. [. . .] Then, the alienated humanity that was associated with racial divisions could be replaced by a non-racial alternative that suffers, loves, acts and exercises its will, in reshaping the broken world we have inherited" (Gilroy 2005, 243). While Gilroy is thinking how Rastafari poetics "blasted [the word 'human'] out of its UNESCO context and started to make it serve futuristic purposes" (243), most certainly "the idea of the human" had the same appeal to Eslanda Robeson because of her relational approach to antiracism and anti-imperialism.

Like the black nationalist women studied by Kaisha Blain and like Claudia Jones, within the Black radical intellectual tradition discussed by Carole Boyce Davies (2009),[10] Essie believed that "the global colour line [that she sought so hard to dismantle] described both European colonialism in Africa and Asia and U. S. expansionism in places like Haiti and the Dominican Republic [. . .]" (Blain 2015, 145).

Eslanda Robeson was able to connect the dots between different forms of oppression affecting her and the lives of many others at a personal and a collective level, because she developed a relational approach to the social and the political, grounded in her own lived experience of moving among peoples and between places in her extensive travels. This can be seen clearly in *Journey to Africa*, a book based on what she learned about the anticolonial and antiapartheid struggles by

9 It should be noted that Eslanda Robeson's appeal to our shared humanity is not colour blind, because it is a call for solidarity with the oppressed of the world that implies respecting different positionalities. Most importantly, it is part of her leftist Black internationalist agenda. As such, her non-racialism is linked to political Blackness in the terms proposed by Francio Guadeloupe (2022): "Only when we all become Black, in other words fully integrate into our psyches and institutional memory the reality that most have been racially dehumanised in the process of the Western imperial project, will the symbolic power of racism be no more. Then begins in earnest the work of dismantling racist institutional practices and racial structures whereby we need not refer to each other employing race-based identities. In the meantime, those labelled or implicitly designated Black, for instance blacks and browns, can do the work, as Stuart Hall reminds us to do, by becoming politically Black. What this entails is donning the signifier "Black" as a political identity that is nonracist, in order to combat racism and the economic structures that undergird it" (146–147).

10 It is not a coincidence that Eslanda Robeson wrote the introduction to *Ben Davis, Fighter For Freedom* (1954), a pamphlet written by Claudia Jones to demand his release from prison. Essie and Claudia were not just close friends, but also political allies as Black internationalists who advocated against race, gender and class oppression on a global scale.

actually going to South Africa, Basutoland, Kenya, Congo, and Uganda with her son Pauli in 1936 and engaging in dialogue with multiple African political leaders, educators, community organisers, and activists.

In this travelogue, she reflects on the knowledge she gained about the indignity of colonial rule and the cruelty of apartheid, not just from her own perspective, but also taking into account how Africans themselves viewed the situation. The insights she shares, which in her own words are nothing but "a protest against [the] inadequate reporting on Africa" (Robeson 1959, 3), result from the displacement in her thinking that occured as she moved from one space to many others, because she allowed for the movement in time and space to disrupt the anchor of her thought to just one fixed location of origin or identity. Her *Journey to Africa* is as much a journey of her body to and through different geopolitical places as it is a journey of her mind discovering different locations of thought. As such, it is an open invitation to her readers to do what she dared to do: embark on a journey to Africa, to learn from and with the African peoples.

This significant correlation between Eslanda's actual movement in time and space as in travel and her willingness to displace her own perspective lays the foundation for my use of movement as an analytical category to investigate Eslanda Robeson's heightened connectivity. As an archipelagic cultural mediator, she played a key role in the international network of activists against racism, sexism, and imperialism at a local and a global scale between the 1920s and the 1960s. She fought for race, gender, and class equality across borders, and deserves a place within Black left intellectual history. Moreover, movement not only triggers connectivity and supports the circulation of ideas – it is also at the core of the kind of transnational political thought Eslanda Robeson developed.

Only when we correlate movement with the development of a supranationalist, Black internationalist thought can we come to fully understand what Carole Boyce Davies meant when she claimed that "it is the convergence of multiple places and cultures [t]hat re-negotiates the terms of Black women's experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities [. . .] between races, cultures, languages, and nations" (quot. in Umoren 2018, 6). Indeed, Carole Boyce Davies' (1994) definition of "migratory subjectivity" aptly describes, as Umoren (2018) acknowledges, Eslanda Robeson's relational identity on the move.

The following diagram shows how Essie built her migratory subjectivity by moving between specific locations,[11] as well as through the languages and cultures related to them that, thus, inform her translingual experience (Fig.1).

11 For a map of most of the locations visited by Eslanda Robeson, see Ransby 2013, 82–83.

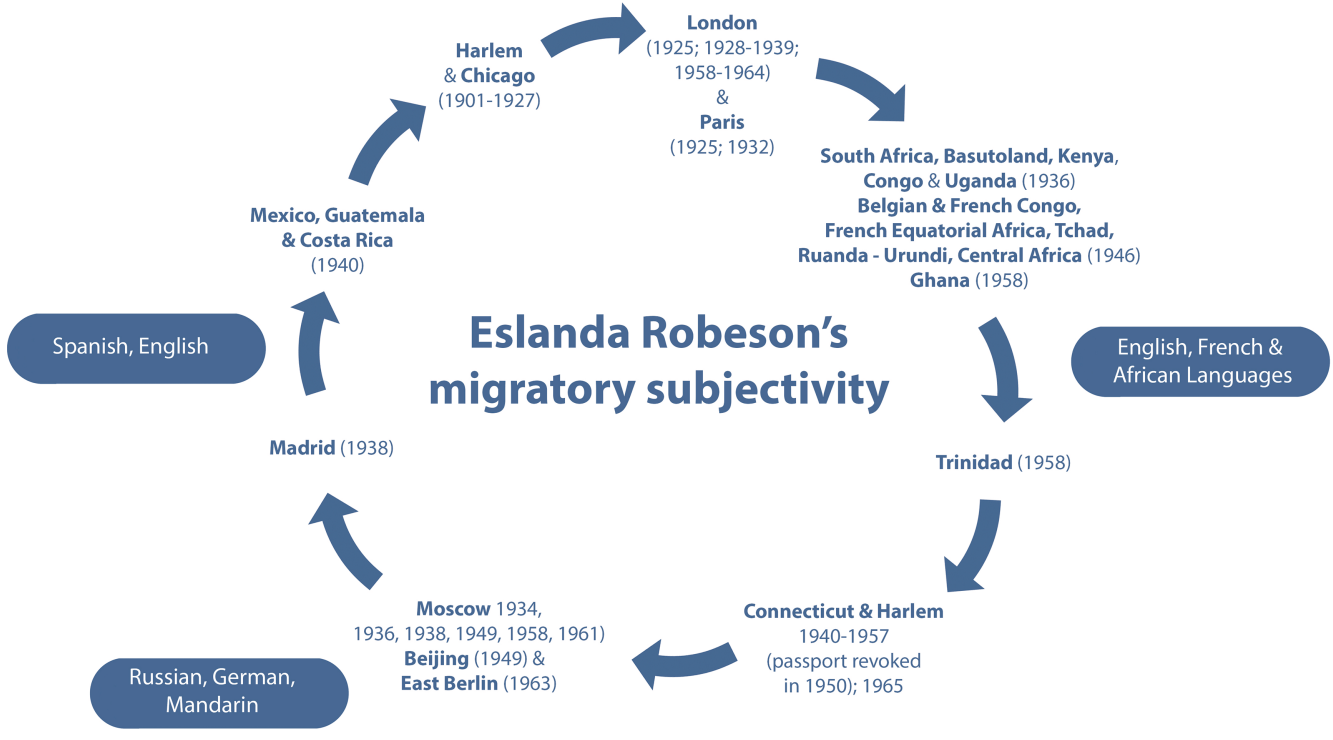

Fig. 1: This conceptual map displays the most significant locations upon which Eslanda Robeson builds her migratory subjectivity on the move.

The circularity of the above figure aims to highlight the flow of movement between places as connected to the flow of ideas. At the same time, it illustrates the transversality and horizontality of her cultural mediations. In Essie's experience as a Black internationalist, metropolitan sites such as London, Paris, and Madrid facilitated encounters with fellow migrants from India, Africa, and the Caribbean. They also served as stepping stones to the locations where the anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle was at its peak, such as South Africa, Ghana, and Trinidad. Accordingly, Annette Joseph-Gabriel concludes that Eslanda Robeson's work:

> demands a shift from the emphasis on European capitals as privileged sites to which colonised populations gravitated in building networks of anticolonial resistance. Ultimately, [her] expansive geography allows us to read decolonial citizenship as both acts of resistance and notions of belonging that troubled the metropole/colony binary by mapping a new Global South identity. (Joseph-Gabriel 2020, 173)

Moving through different locations allowed Eslanda to establish meaningful cross-cultural connections with regards to racism, sexism, and political oppression in different national and regional contexts. Conversely, she framed these issues in a manner pertinent both at a local and at global scale through translingual procedures that were central to her cultural mediations, as is apparent in this chart (Fig. 2).

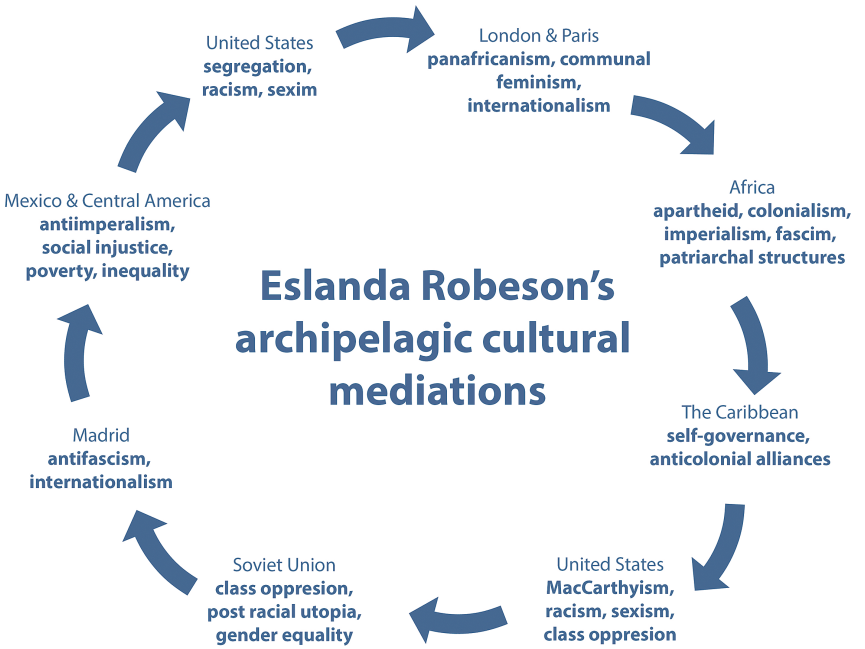

Fig. 2: Eslanda Robeson's archipelagic cultural mediations between different global locations.

Using Glissant's poetic-philosophical approach once more, I call Eslanda Robeson's cultural mediations not just relational, but also archipelagic, since each location or nation she passes through can be seen as an island she is connecting to through her moving. In that sense, local racial or gender issues were not isolated problems in her eyes, but part of the archipelago, Glissant's metaphor for Black diasporic relationality that is formed through rhizomatic connections:

> As much as ever, masses of Negroes are threatened and oppressed because they are Negroes, Arabs because they are Arabs, Jews because they are Jews, Muslims because they are Muslims, Indians because they are Indians, and so on through the infinite diversities of the world. This litany is indeed never-ending.
>
> The idea of identity as a single root provides the measure according to which these communities were enslaved by others, and in the name of which a number of them led their liberation struggles. But could we not propose, against the single root that kills everything around it, an extension of the root into a rhizome, which opens up Relation? [. . .]
>
> Against Being, which asserts itself, let us show being, which attaches itself.
>
> Let us challenge both the returns of the nationalist repressed and the sterile universal peace of the Powerful.
>
> In a world where so many communities find themselves mortally denied the right to any identity, it is paradoxical to propose the imagination of an identity-relation, an identity-rhizome. I believe however that this is indeed one of the passions of these oppressed communities, to believe in this moving beyond identity and to carry it along with their sufferings. (Glissant 2020, 11–12)

Eslanda Robeson's mobility was constrained by blatant racism (and subdued sexism). Yet, she moved beyond the constraints, expanding her agency in a rhizomatic manner and developing a transnational antiracist thought.[12] "Moving beyond" also implies living a life not determined by racism (and sexism), nationality, or religion. There is passion in that refusal, a passion informed by connectivity (i.e. an identity-relation on the move).

12 The following quote from *Journey to Africa* exemplifies how, for Eslanda, anti-Blackness was a fact of life she was determined to fight against, and, at the same time life was bigger than contesting racism: "At the hotel [in Mbnei, Belgian Congo], which was a very sad affair, we sat in the lounge while a great deal of conversation went on between the Belgian hotel owner and our D.C. [District Commissioner]. There was a lot of 'noir, noir' in very rapid French, and we tried to look blank as if we didn't understand the language. (I believe every Negro would understand and recognize the word 'black' in any language. He would certainly recognize the tone of voice which goes with the word!)" (Robeson 1945a, 119).

4 Not Exactly Final Words

This is my first attempt to critically engage with Eslanda Robeson's worldwide antiracist activism and her impact as a transnational cultural mediator. Building on research by Barbara Ransby, Imaobong Umoren, and Annete Joseph-Gabriel that provides valuable insights into the depth and scope of Essie's internationalism, I discussed how her lack of visibility is partially rooted in an intersectional bias that obfuscates the intellectual accomplishments of Black women in particular.

Furthermore, the very transnational character of Essie's agency as a race woman internationalist complicates acknowledging her work, because it surpasses the traditional national parameters that have historically framed literary and cultural production and its reception. Even transatlantic lenses seem at times too narrow to capture the whole breadth of Eslanda Robeson's commitment to fight all forms of colonialism, racial, and gender oppression even beyond the space encompassed by the Black Atlantic. The notions of transversality and translingualism, I suggest, provide a more comprehensive and accurate framework for understanding Eslanda Robeson's global literary engagements. As a procedure, translingualism articulates Eslanda's own passage through places, while transversality illuminates her refusal to reproduce a racist, hierarchical understanding of North-South, (post)colonial relations.

In this respect, Glissant's vocabulary offers a way to capture Eslanda Robeson's transversal, translingual relational approach as a Whole-World connectivity enabling her global agency. What is more, conceptualising her cultural mediations as archipelagic not only illustrates transversality and further disrupts the centre-periphery dichotomy as a critical lens to look at the world, but also links the global cultural landscape that emerges as a result from her transnational agency to the Black diasporic experience in their disseminated, i.e. rhizomatic, sites of cultural production.

Eslanda Robeson's positionality as political Black intellectual and internationalist was shaped by the many different encounters she had during her travels, and by the very experience of moving in time and space. The rhizomatic connectivity of her multiple travels is what informs her growing sense of being a world citizen, a member of the human family, with a moral commitment to contest all forms of racial and gender oppression. Her sense of being, rather than Being, fueled by a multilingual nonracist imagination, triggers her transnational advocacy on the move against global anti-Blackness. Indeed, the type of archipelagic connections between Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, Europe, and the Americas that emerge from Eslanda Robeson's migratory subjectivity as a political Black woman are an alternative to Western universalist notions of culture and, in this sense, of relevance for a new approach to global literary and cultural studies.

These last words are by no means final words, as much more is left to investigate about how Eslanda Robeson contributed to a global circulation of antiracist, feminist ideas through her involvement in multiple liberation and anticolonial movements throughout the world. In this chapter, I have made an effort to include as many extended quotes as possible of her unpublished speeches and articles, as well as some quotes from her less known print publications, to contribute to her visibility as a Black left intellectual and internationalist by recirculating her ideas in her own words. Materiality matters, especially in the context of a historical erasure of Black women as public intellectuals and activists in both global and national histories.

Acknowledging Eslanda Robeson's impact within the Black Atlantic and beyond, and raising her profile within Black intellectual history, changes how we think about cultural agency on a global scale, not just in the United States where she was born. Then, as a Black public intellectual and archipelagic cultural mediator, she is much more than a U.S. American author. Her work questions the notion of Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa as discrete cultural regions, like all the cultural production by Black diasporic artists, musicians, and writers. I am particularly interested in how Eslanda Robeson weaves Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica into a translingual, transversal relation with the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, which will be the focus of my next foray into Essie's work. The traces of Essie's sumptuous wanderings and meanderings give us a glimpse into the rich and complex anticolonial movements of the twentieth century from the vantage point of a political Black female intellectual and activist, whose voice relates the cultural, literary, and political spheres as she argues against global anti-Blackness.

Eslanda Robeson's emphasis on the relationality that connects us all and how we have a responsibility to contest racism, sexism, and colonialism at a global scale is relevant to this day in a world in which we still need to say Black Lives Matter. It is important to publish and reprint most of her texts, so that she can be widely read. Only then will she stop being a "sister outside" (Boyce Davies 2009, 218) and will be credited for her contributions to the history of global antiracist thought. As much as we can learn from her about past struggles for racial and gender justice, we can learn from her visions for a non-racialist future. Her invitation to be part of the Whole-World is still open.

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