



KNOWledge PRHoP Lesson

Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson

Ransby, B. (2022). *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson*. Haymarket Books.

I believe knowledge should be shared. And I believe that all knowledge can be reduced to clear words of one syllable, which can be understood by simple people.

—Eslanda Robeson

Pre-reading activity: Think about family traditions and habits you might recall as 20th century traditions.

1. Create a list of things you did/might have done with your family members that served as foundational elements of your daily experience.
2. Create a list of ideas or concepts that family members and friends have shared with you that you could not have gotten from anywhere else.

Chapter Titles: Themes and Reading Questions

*Underlined terms represent themes and ideas that can be linked to larger concepts explored in the [NJ Student Learning Standards Core Ideas](#), most notably *Understanding Perspectives*.

Chapter 1: Growing Up Along the Color Line, 1895 - 1918

1. W.E.B. DuBois was a prominent figure in the world of sociology crafted by 19th and 20th century social systems. Why was the color line significant for this time period?
2. The matrilineal heritage of Eslanda leads to Francis Cardozo. Who was he? What were his contributions to Reconstruction era politics in the United States?
3. What was the significance of socialism to debates about capitalism at the turn of the century?

Chapter 2: A Harlem Love Story, 1919 - 1927

1. What was the New Negro Movement? What was its connection to the concept of labor in the U.S.?
2. Geographic knowledge is personally and socially useful. Explore Harlem using this [digital map of "radical women"](#). What do you think attracted the Robesons (Paul and Eslanda) to that space?
3. What is meant by the term Diaspora?
4. Why are associations and friendships a mark of social progress?

Chapter 3: Onto the World Stage, 1920s

1. Who was Carl Van Vechten?
2. What was Eslanda's early view of marriage?

Chapter 4: Remapping a Marriage, Career, and Worldview, 1927 - 1933

1. What do you understand 'open marriage' to mean?
2. How has the status of interracial relationships changed from the 1920s to now?
3. Watch [Borderline](#) (1930), a silent film featuring Eslanda and Paul. Was the film ahead of its time or a sign of the time?

Chapter 5: Becoming a Writer and Anthropologist, 1930s

1. What is anthropology?

2. “[Zora Neale] Hurston stressed the importance of a kind of authenticity and complexity when dealing with Black subjects” (p. 91). What is the critical role of authorship in telling authentic stories?

Chapter 6: Africa at Last, 1936

1. Review the maps of Eslanda’s travels (pp. 82 – 83). Visit the pages frequently as you read this chapter.
2. What is meant by the term colonial Africa?

Chapter 7: Madrid to Moscow, Political Commitments Deepen, 1936 – 1939

1. Why was the connection between the Spanish Civil War and American literary traditions of the mid-20th century so important to the telling of Eslanda’s story?
2. On p. 129, we learn about wartime concerts in Spain. How does transnational solidarity of the 1930s compare to what we are experiencing today?

Chapter 8: Returning Home and Finding a New Voice, 1939 – 1945

1. “Building her own social, political and professional community” (p. 143), Eslanda Robeson formed and re-established strong ties with other forward-thinking people of historic significance. Who do you know? Who do you wonder about?
2. What are the “four freedoms” embedded in American political messaging of the time?
3. Who was Ralph Bunche?

Chapter 9: Into the Congo, 1946

1. The epigraph to the chapter opens with a simple statement from Eslanda Robeson: “Africa is in revolution”. What does that mean?
2. Read Langston Hughes’ 1921 poem [“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”](#). How might this poem have influenced Eslanda’s writings about the Congo River in this chapter?

Chapter 10: American Arguments, 1946 – 1950

1. Think about yourself at your current age and imagine who you were or hope to be by writing a letter to your younger or older self. What would you say?
2. Describe this period in American history—what were the most pressing issues?
3. How was the Progressive Party initiative reflective of Eslanda’s larger “argument” about freedom?

Chapter 11: The United Nations and a World Political Family, 1950 – 1956

1. Explore the concept of ghetto in the chapter. How has it changed over time?
2. Eslanda had many friend circles. Why might her friendships with Shirley Graham DuBois, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Janet Jagan be considered important parts of her development?

Chapter 12: Standing Tall: The Cold War and Politics of Repression, 1950s

1. “On July 7, 1953 Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson walked confidently into Room 357 of the Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C., to provide testimony...” (p. 223). She used the 5th and 15th Amendments as part of her reply to questions. Why were these important references?
2. Anacostia is a historic neighborhood outside of Washington, DC. What might be the significance of Anacostia to this period in the Robesons’ story and timeline?
3. Formerly classified [FBI Records](#) on Paul and Eslanda Robeson are now available. What is surprising about the 1950s-era “politics of repression” from the Eslanda biography or this documentation?
4. In her 1952 Mother’s Day speech (p. 232), Eslanda Robeson made an appeal for peace and justice. What makes this speech a potentially foundational text for global activism by mothers? How well does it capture contemporary causes like the sustainable development goals ([SDGs](#))?

Chapter 13: A Failing Body and a Hopeful Heart, 1958 – 1961

1. (**Personal Reflection**) Family and friends were prominent in Eslanda’s life. What role do they play in your own hope-casting?
2. Eslanda applied her messages of equality universally to be a clear example of intersectional analysis of gender, class and race dynamics. What is your understanding of intersectionality today?

Chapter 14: Always the Fighter: A Pen as Her Weapon, 1961 – 1965

“To look at a sweep of twentieth-century world history through the eyes of a radical African American female subject is to turn many common assumptions upside down” (p. 280).

1. What assumptions did you have (before reading this biography) have been turned upside down for you now?

2. What made Eslanda Robeson's life so "large and unconventional" for you as a reader of this biography?

Additional Big Ideas to Consider

- Colorism (contemporary [video](#))
- DuBoisian thought (Talented Tenth by Morehouse, [1896](#)) and Plato's Philosopher Rulers ([commentary](#))
- 20th c. Schools of thought (Columbia University, London School of Economics, University of Chicago School of Sociology)
 - [Blog](#) about the possibilities
 - Beyond anthropology ([exhibit](#))
- World travel and global citizenship ([Fulbright](#))

Additional online sources/references

15th Amendment of the United States Constitution (1869/1870)

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/15th-amendment>

DuBois, W. E. B. (2015). *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century. The Essential Early Essays* (N. D. Chandler, Ed.). Fordham University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1287g49>

Robeson, E. (2017/1946). *African Journey*. Internet Archive.

<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.79694>

Zora Neale Hurston documentary <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2oAxnfbZvc>

Classic radio: Author Meets the Critics ([American Argument, 1949](#))

KNOWledge Notes Page

Use this graphic organizer as a notes page when reading, viewing or researching information asynchronously, independently using a “flipped” learning tool or as part of guided media interaction. This will allow you to have ideas prepared for discussion as it relates to previewed content screenings for more active and potentially engaging participation.

Processing Question	Details
What do you think is KOOL ? <i>KALEIDOSCOPIC perspectives</i>	
What is NEW ? <i>NOVEL approaches</i>	
What was OBVIOUS (You knew this already) before the learning started? <i>OBVIOUS connections</i>	
What do you still WONDER about? What is making you want to WANDER in your social media/timeline or database/research library? <i>WONDERING disposition</i>	

Additional Thoughts/Notes/Points of Reflection: