

4 Ideas in Action: Eslanda Robeson's International Thought after 1945

Imaobong D. Umoren

“International affairs are merely an extension of domestic affairs, which in turn are merely an extension of community affairs, family affairs and relations with the neighbors.”¹ So said Eslanda Robeson in a 1957 interview for the Women’s International Democratic Federation’s (WIDF) magazine. By the 1950s, this anthropologist, activist, and journalist began to link race relations with “Human Relations, and International Relations.”² In common with the work of predominantly male US-based international relations scholars in the early twentieth century, Robeson made race central to her international thinking.³ Her assertions reflect her understanding of the significance of race and global politics as an extension of what has often been conceived as the “private sphere.” Like the African American scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois, Robeson was deeply interested in understanding and challenging the twentieth-century global color line.⁴ The importance that Robeson placed on race within an international sphere was grounded in and drew on a range of Black internationalist intellectual and activist movements that coalesced and thrived during the interwar period.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Washington, DC born Robeson resided in London with her husband, the renowned artist-activist Paul Robeson and their son, Paul Jr.⁵ Her experiences of interacting with Black Caribbean and West African activists in groups such as the West African Students Union (WASU) and of traveling to Paris where she met influential members of the city’s Black population, such as the Martiniquan Paulette Nardal, influenced Robeson’s thinking on Pan-Africanism,

¹ Eslanda Robeson, Interview: Women of the Whole World, December 1957, 3. Box 19 Eslanda G. Robeson Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, hereafter EGR Papers.

² Robeson, Women of the Whole World, 3.

³ Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁴ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg, 1903).

⁵ Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (London: Bodley Head, 1989).

Negritude, and Garveyism.⁶ While Robeson did not explicitly detail her thoughts on the latter two, she saw herself as a Black internationalist and Pan-Africanist, believing strongly in the shared cultural and historic links that tied African Americans to Africans and Black West Indians. In particular, Robeson worked hard to challenge negative notions of Africa and Blackness by stressing how much Blacks in the West had to learn from those on the continent, inverting what literary scholar Ifeoma Nwankwo has termed binaristic blackness, which was prevalent in Black diasporic politics.⁷

During her time in interwar London, Robeson befriended influential African activists like the Nigerian Ladipo Solanke who helped establish WASU. Through her studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Robeson developed close links with the Kenyan Jomo Kenyatta.⁸ She and Paul Robeson also interacted with future Indian leaders like Krishna Menon and Jawaharlal Nehru. Robeson's experiences with WASU, at the LSE, and the inter-racial friendships she developed deepened her anti-colonial politics and interest in African cultures, which were further explored in her 1936 journey to the continent. This resulted in the 1945 publication of *African Journey*, based on the time she spent in Southern, Eastern, and Central Africa. It became a landmark text, described by her biographer as the result of "arduous research and fieldwork ... a richly detailed, insightful narrative that combined ethnography and travel memoir," later "recognized as an important early anthropological text on Africa ... and a treatise against colonialism."⁹ It allowed her ideas about African politics and international affairs to reach a wider audience.¹⁰

Between 1945 and 1965, the United States and later the United Kingdom remained the couple's base, but Eslanda Robeson continuously traveled to countries in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Robeson was involved in international organizations such as the Council on African Affairs (CAA) and the Sojourners for Truth and Justice (STJ).

⁶ Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

⁷ Ifeoma Nwankwo, "Insider and Outsider, Black and American: Rethinking Zora Neale Hurston's Caribbean Ethnography," *Radical History Review* 87 (2003): 49–77.

⁸ Hakim Adi, *West Africans in Britain: Nationalism, Pan-Africanism and Communism 1900–1960* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998).

⁹ Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 153–54.

¹⁰ Maureen Mahon, "Eslanda Goode Robeson's African Journey: The Politics of Identification and Representation in the African Diaspora," in Manning Marable and Vanessa Agard-Jones (eds.), *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 115–33.

In addition, she wrote for Black newspapers like the *Afro-American*, the radical *Freedom*, and the left-leaning *New World Review* where she was responsible for reporting on colonial issues and the United Nations (UN). These became critical spaces where she voiced her ideas on international politics, the UN, gender, race, freedom struggles, and peace.¹¹ In terms of religion, while Christianity did not explicitly shape Robeson's thought nor was it a theme in her writings, she recognized the importance of Black churches in the civil rights movement in 1950s America. Robeson's writings demonstrate her interest in reaching wide audiences, both White and Black, and her commitment to being a leading voice within leftist circles.

Robeson was one among a number of traveling Black women intellectuals in the early and mid-twentieth century.¹² These include Amy Ashwood Garvey, discussed elsewhere in this volume. It is likely that Robeson and Garvey interacted with each other in London and through the CAA. They shared similar views on Pan-Africanism but differed on the "Back to Africa" plank of the United Negro Improvement Association. Other women among Robeson's acquaintances were Una Marson and Constance Cummings-John, who were active in interwar London.¹³ Other African American women involved in activism across borders that challenged racism, colonialism, and sexism included Esther Cooper-Jackson, Thyra Edwards, and Louise Thompson Patterson.¹⁴ What made Robeson distinct, however, was the ways in which she used her frequent travels, friendships with notable African, African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Asian leaders and activists, and most importantly her journalism to carve out her ideas about not only the centrality of race but also the significance of the so-called Third World for fundamentally reshaping the dynamics of international relations, especially in the post-war era. In Robeson's opinion, "one of the most important issues in the future world is the quick progress of the colonial peoples."¹⁵

¹¹ Imaobong D. Umoren, "'We Americans Are Not Just American Citizens Anymore – We Are Also World Citizens': Eslanda Robeson, World Citizenship, and the *New World Review* in the 1950s," *Journal of Women's History* 34.4 (2018): 134–58.

¹² Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

¹³ Tony Martin, *Amy Ashwood Garvey: Pan-Africanist, Feminist, and Mrs. Marcus Garvey No. 1 or a Tale of Two Amies* (Dover, MA: Majority Press, 2007); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Eslanda Robeson, "Congo Diary," 1946, 6. Box 11 EGR Papers.

After 1945, Robeson's participation in international conferences and journalism enabled her to focus on "some aspect of an issue, event, or discussion which has been (deliberately) overlooked by the organized press and radio."¹⁶ This conscious choice enabled her to discuss "important and interesting facts about the new nations, the newly independent peoples, the peoples struggling to become independent."¹⁷ Robeson's analysis of independence movements in former colonies intended to help equivalent movements in America gain a better understanding of changes within global politics. In her words, it would enable

the American people to recognize, understand, appreciate and respect these profound changes, and to learn how to adapt ourselves and our way-of-life to these changes as rapidly and as gracefully as possible, lest we become and remain isolated from the mainstream of world progress.¹⁸

Independence movements in former colonies would fundamentally upend Western hegemony. Those living in the global North would have to adjust to their new position in the world alongside those from the global South.

Robeson practiced what the co-editors of *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* call "intellectual history 'Black woman-style'" defined as "an approach that understands ideas as necessarily produced in dialogue with lived experience and always inflected by the social facts of race, class, and gender."¹⁹ Although she did not refer to herself as a Black feminist, Robeson's ideas about race and gender were very much a part of a long tradition of Black feminist internationalism.²⁰ This chapter argues that two overlapping planks of Robeson's international thought consisted of an analysis of women's political participation and the connections between Third World and African American freedom struggles. Within these two areas, Robeson's thought centered on the links between US domestic racial and foreign policy, the impact of the Cold War on the civil rights movement, and the role of the United Nations. These features were shaped by Robeson's position as both an

¹⁶ Eslanda Robeson, "Work for Peace in the United States," December 1954, 3. Box 13 EGR Papers.

¹⁷ Robeson, "Work for Peace in the United States," 3.

¹⁸ Robeson, "Work for Peace in the United States," 3.

¹⁹ Mia E. Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara Dianne Savage, "Introduction: Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women," in Bay et al. (eds.), *Toward An Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 4.

²⁰ Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945–1995* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

insider and an outsider.²¹ She was an insider in the sense that she was part of formal networks through her accreditation as a journalist and her friendships with key political and activist figures. But Robeson was also an outsider who did not fit within one organization or ideology. This allowed her the flexibility to travel, write, and attend conferences where she was able to thread together different aspects of her analysis of race and gender. Robeson's insider-outsider position further enabled her to put many of her ideas into practice. In this way, Robeson's international thought was inextricably tied to her activism, demonstrating the significance of her identity as an activist-intellectual and highlighting how "ideas-in-action" were a distinct and robust mode of her political thought.

Women's Political Engagement

Women's engagement with international politics was a central category in Robeson's thought. Robeson was firm in her belief that women's efficiency as mothers and workers within the home gave them valuable skills with which to engage with politics in public. Robeson was influenced by maternalist thinking, which is evident in the remarks she made about the position of women in the UN.

While female politicians and diplomats from across the world were involved in the UN from its inception, the power they had and the issues they were concerned with were not always front and center in the attention of Western media. Robeson noted that, "our general press pays too little attention to the activities, and important contributions, of the women at the United Nations."²² Robeson used her position at *New World Review* to rectify this and informed her readers about the key role that women played in policy making. In 1954, she reported on the UN's eighth annual session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The commission consisted of women from the Dominican Republic, Byelorussia (Belorussia), Haiti, France, Cuba, USSR, UK, Poland, Iran, Venezuela, China/Formosa, Lebanon, Pakistan, Burma, and USA.²³ These delegates, Robeson wrote, represented "women throughout the world and they deal with vital matters."²⁴ At the UN, Robeson contacted a number of influential women and developed a particularly close

²¹ For more on the insider-outsider perspective see Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

²² Eslanda Robeson, "Women in the United Nations," *New World Review*, July 1954, 7.

²³ Robeson, "Women in the United Nations," 7.

²⁴ Robeson, "Women in the United Nations," 7.

friendship with Indian diplomat Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Jawaharlal Nehru's sister. She also reached out to other women at the UN, including a delegate from Czechoslovakia, Helena Lefflerova.²⁵ Yet, although women held influential positions at the UN, men still tended to dominate. Robeson reported that during discussions Britain's Patrick Atlee and Yugoslavia's Aleksander Bozovic "sometimes took the seat of the women delegates and expressed their views,"²⁶ although women did try to prevent them from interrupting debates. Overall, Robeson's stress on the critical role that women played at the UN as well as her emphasis on the importance of women from different nationalities working together, points to her vision for a strongly gendered international solidarity. Gender difference played a significant role in Robeson's thought. While she did not explicitly say so, Robeson subscribed to the view that there were innate differences between men and women, which is why collaboration between women was politically significant for her. The emphasis on women working in unison was a type of political act she herself engaged in through the group Sojourners for Truth and Justice.

In 1952, Robeson co-founded STJ, a Black women's organization that supported civil rights, anti-colonialism, and feminism.²⁷ The group sprang out of an event held in September 1951, when around a hundred African American women, as part of a STJ protest, traveled to Washington, DC to demand justice for victims of racial abuse.²⁸ Other radical Black women involved in STJ included the actress Beulah Richardson (Beah Richards), and activists Thompson Patterson, Yvonne Gregory, Claudia Jones, and Alice Childress.²⁹ The STJ were concerned with building transnational links which they did with South African women in the African National Congress Women's League.³⁰ Although the short-lived group was comprised of little over one hundred members, it influenced later groups like the Third World Women's Alliance.³¹

Working alongside Black women from across the African diaspora was a political practice Robeson continued in the late 1950s, upon her return to London. Alongside Trinidadian-born communist Claudia Jones, who had been active in the Communist Party in the United States in Harlem in the 1930s and who was editor of the influential *West Indian Gazette*,

²⁵ Robeson, "Women in the United Nations," 7.

²⁶ Robeson, "Women in the United Nations," 8.

²⁷ Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York University Press, 2011).

²⁸ Jacqueline Castledine, *Cold War Progressives: Women's Interracial Organizing for Peace and Freedom* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

²⁹ McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*.

³⁰ Castledine, *Cold War Progressives*. ³¹ McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*.

and Ashwood Garvey, Robeson worked with the Afro-Women's Centre that supported the rights of women of African descent and had a meeting space in London.

The 1949 All-Asian women's meeting in Beijing also illustrates the importance Robeson placed on women's involvement in politics.³² Robeson attended the meeting "as a reporter to gather first hand news from behind the Iron Curtain" and as a representative of the CAA, Congress of American Women (CAW), and the Progressive Party, the United States' third largest political party.³³ In China, Robeson "met, talked with, listened to, travelled with, and briefly lived with 165 delegates representing 14 Asian countries, and 33 observers representing Africa, Europe and the Americas – women delegates officially representing, in all, 500 million women."³⁴ The international make-up of the conference served as "an experience of a lifetime" for Robeson because it "gave us a new feeling about women, about the importance of the role we women have to play in this new and changing world."³⁵ It reinforced the maternalist strand in her thinking as she stressed that "We must, all of us, work and fight with our men first to preserve our lives, then for homes to live in, and then to preserve those homes so we can have a proper place in which to bring up our children."³⁶ Furthermore, Robeson emphasized essentialized notions of women and pacifism urging that "it is every woman's job to prevent war, and to work for peace. When they tell us that woman's place is in the home, we must answer: women dead in the war find their place in the grave; if women survive they must have a home before they can find a place in it."³⁷

Yet, it was the friendship that Robeson developed with Madame Sun Yat-sen, also known as Soong Ching-ling, Vice President of the People's Republic of China, President of the Chinese People's Relief Administration that reflected her overriding belief in the significance of women working together on national and international issues at the highest levels of politics. The two women bonded during the conference. Robeson admired Soong Ching-ling, calling her "World Woman Number One" because of "her deep sense of being not only one of the 250 million

³² Marc Gallichio, *The African American Encounter with China and Japan: Black Internationalism in Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001); Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen (eds.), *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

³³ Eslanda Robeson, "Trip to China," 1950, 1. Box 12 EGR Papers.

³⁴ Eslanda Robeson, "China I," 1951, 1. Box 17 EGR Papers.

³⁵ Robeson, "China I," 1. ³⁶ Robeson, "China I," 1. ³⁷ Robeson, "China I," 2.

women of China, one of the 500 million people of China, but also one of and one with the billions of women and people of the world.”³⁸ Robeson observed that Ching-ling “had much to tell, but much to ask, because her deep concern for her own people is bound up with a deep concern for the people of the world.”³⁹ Soong Ching-ling’s internationalist vision, incorporating international friendship and female solidarity, overlapped with Robeson’s and the two women discussed world politics, gender relations, and civil rights in America.

Robeson, however, refrained from making (justified) criticisms of Soong Ching-ling and the state of women’s rights in China. Robeson informed her audience that Soong Ching-ling “along with many other women of New China – helped to write ... equality into the Common Law, Article 6 which reads: The people’s Republic of China abolishes the feudal system which holds women in bondage; woman shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational life.”⁴⁰ Rather than grappling with persistent disparities between middle- and working-class women, Robeson presented to the readers of her newspaper reports a prettified and utopian vision of women’s rights in China. This was part of her repeated political efforts to craft a positive portrayal of Third World freedom fighters and struggles, a politics that she deployed to demand more rights for women, and specifically Black women, in the United States.

Practicing Colored Cosmopolitanism

Alongside advocating for the engagement of women within international politics and participating in transnational organizations, Robeson stressed the importance of Afro-Asian unity and promoting what historian Nico Slate has termed colored cosmopolitanism. According to Slate, the concept defines those Black activists such as Du Bois and Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as Asian activists who attempted to “forge a united front against racism, imperialism, and other forms of oppression” with White and non-White people across the world.⁴¹ In common with Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, also discussed in this volume, Robeson practiced colored cosmopolitanism by stressing the similarities between African American, African, and Asian freedom struggles.

³⁸ Eslanda Robeson, “World Woman Number One,” *New World Review*, July 1951, 1. Box 13 EGR Papers.

³⁹ Robeson, “World Woman Number One,” 1.

⁴⁰ Robeson, “World Woman Number One,” 2.

⁴¹ Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitans: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in India and the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 2.

In China, for instance, Robeson drew connections between Chinese and Black US freedom struggles. She argued that the changes in China had consequences for Black Americans. "Every Negro will be able to understand and appreciate what is going on in New China ... Every Negro who had faced discrimination that is."⁴² Like the centuries-old Black American freedom struggle, Robeson wrote about the long Chinese freedom struggle and how Chinese men and women had won the fight to repossess their land and drive "the foreigners and the feudal lords off the mainland of China to Formosa, and set up their own Central Peoples Government."⁴³ According to Robeson:

in the New China the old familiar signs "Chinese AND DOGS NOT ALLOWED" have been torn down; the Chinese people now live in International Settlements and Concessions in their cities, which areas were formerly reserved for whites only, for the foreign government officials and businessmen.⁴⁴

Robeson optimistically reported that these changes now meant that:

the Chinese people now walk freely everywhere in their land with dignity and confidence and with heads held high; they no longer say, in fear, Yes Sir and Yes Ma'am to the white colonial foreigners who ruled them and issued the orders.⁴⁵

These descriptions highlight the positive changes taking place in the country, but their celebratory tone masks the ongoing tensions between different groups in China. In similarity with her views about the newly achieved rights of Chinese women, Robeson offered a sanguine representation of the political changes in China, in the hope that it would buoy African American freedom struggles. Yet she overlooked and minimized the persistent problems facing China in order to present a simplistic comparison.

Later that year, Robeson's interest in Asia shifted to US military action in Korea, where, again, she highlighted Afro-Asian connections. During the Korean War, the US Army remained segregated, despite President Truman's executive order 9811 demanding the desegregation of the army. Yet many African Americans enlisted for numerous reasons, including an escape from unemployment, with some choosing military service as a way to mitigate the economic challenges they experienced.⁴⁶ Historian Kimberly Phillips has stated that, "During the Korean War,

⁴² Robeson, "China I," 2. ⁴³ Robeson, "China I," 2. ⁴⁴ Robeson, "China I," 4.

⁴⁵ Robeson, "China I," 4.

⁴⁶ Kimberly L. Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the US Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 124–27.

1.5 million men were inducted; nearly one-quarter of these new troops were African American (13.5% inducted; 13.4% enlisted).⁴⁷ The irony of fighting against another foreign country made up of non-Whites who were the target of racist myths and propaganda spread by the army and the press while experiencing staunch resistance to ending Jim Crow was not lost on African American soldiers or activists. Robeson noticed that “A lot of Americans, especially Negro Americans, are very anxious to learn exactly what it is that Koreans have done to Americans and America, which makes us send our army all the way over there to make war against them.”⁴⁸

Robeson was one of many prominent African Americans to protest against the Korean War along with Du Bois, journalist Charlotta Bass, and Claudia Jones, amongst others.⁴⁹ Yet other activists such as Walter White argued that the Korean War was not a “race war” and was more about conflicting political ideologies between the communist Koreans and the democratic United States. White’s stance should be read in the context of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s attempt to not be the target of a Cold War backlash against the civil rights movement.⁵⁰ For Robeson, her response to the conflict was based on her pacifism as well as the fact that the participation of Black American troops in conflict with non-White Third World peoples undermined Afro-Asian solidarity.

Robeson extrapolated her anti-war stance to a wider concern with the relationship between US political parties and Black voters. In trying to understand why Black Americans were caught up in a war against non-White people, she surmised that “It may be that the failure of our Government’s Bi-Partisan Foreign Policy in Asia is, in the last analysis, partly the fault of Negro-American citizens.”⁵¹ She went on to stress that “We Colored Americans have not done our proper duty by the two major political parties which constitute our present government. We have not taught them RESPECT FOR THE RIGHTS OF COLORED PEOPLE. We have not taught them a basic fact of life – that people, no matter what their color, religion, background, all people are human beings, and cannot be denied their human rights indefinitely, if we are to have peace in the world.”⁵² Robeson argued that because both the Republican and Democratic parties still received votes from African Americans this led to the parties feeling confident of continued support

⁴⁷ Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For?*, 124.

⁴⁸ Eslanda Robeson, “Korea,” July 26, 1950, 2. Box 12 EGR Papers.

⁴⁹ Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For?*, 133. ⁵⁰ Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For?*, 132.

⁵¹ Robeson, “Korea,” 2. ⁵² Robeson, “Korea,” 7–8.

“no matter how they treat us, no matter how long they deny us citizenship rights and our humanity.”⁵³

Although she reasoned that “We have made some protest here and there, we have resisted now and again” she argued that it was “not enough. They have come to feel that if fifteen million Colored People here in the United States cannot or will not insist upon their rights, cannot or will not resist denial of these rights, – then probably billions of Colored People in Asia and Africa also cannot or will not insist or resist. It turns out that in this they are mistaken.”⁵⁴ She called upon African Americans to insist upon civil rights legislation immediately. Robeson's views about the racial politics informing the Korean War were based on her understanding of the entangled connections between US domestic racial and foreign policy. However, her criticism of African Americans and their relationship with the Democratic and Republican parties was also rooted in party-political motivations. Robeson was active in the Progressive Party, which she believed would present an alternative option for African American voters. With its broad left-wing policies, commitment to pacifism, support of civil rights, and its inclusion of a cadre of African American candidates, including Robeson, the Progressive Party's role as a third party was intended to not only challenge the two larger political parties but also re-align domestic and foreign policy away from the dominance of Cold War politics. The party, however, became mired in accusations of communism.⁵⁵

While Robeson generally supported the UN, praising its efforts to represent the “world family” she levied some of her strongest criticism at the organization due to its role in the US–Korea War. “The United Nations has not only supported our intervention in the internal domestic affairs of Korea,” she stated, “but has also sent its sacred flag of peace to sanctify this war, and has called upon other members of the UN to send troops to help the US Army ... In this matter of Korea, the United Nations has become an instrument for war, not for peace.”⁵⁶ The UN's sanctioning of the war threatened the very core of its principles and demonstrated to Robeson the way in which the organization could become complicit in the victimization of peoples they sought to protect. Robeson was not the only activist to realize the limits of the UN. As scholar Carol Anderson has shown, initially many African American activists and groups like the NAACP hoped the UN would be an organization they could work with to demand human rights.⁵⁷ Yet, in the Cold

⁵³ Robeson, “Korea,” 8. ⁵⁴ Robeson, “Korea,” 8.

⁵⁵ Castledine, *Cold War Progressives*. ⁵⁶ Robeson, “Korea,” 5.

⁵⁷ Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

War climate, the overwhelming power of the American state curbed its influence which meant that the NAACP had to narrow its equality aims and focus on domestic civil rights. Robeson's criticism demonstrates her cautious optimism in the UN's ability to live up to its ideals, and but also her analysis of the shortcomings of liberal international organizations when it came to furthering Afro-Asian unity.

Documenting changing developments in emerging independent countries in Africa and Asia featured in Robeson's journalism, highlighting the salience of the Third World. In the spring of 1955 Robeson discussed the historic Bandung Conference. The host of the conference, the first president of Indonesia, Ahmed Sukarno, called the meeting "the first international conference of colored peoples in the history of mankind."⁵⁸ Robeson saw the conference as marking "a turning point in world affairs."⁵⁹ Bringing together representatives from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, delegates met "to promote cooperation among the non-aligned nations of the Third World; to deliberate about such common problems as colonialism and racism; and to advocate world peace."⁶⁰

For Robeson, the most important result of the Bandung Conference was the confidence participating countries had in the UN. She observed that "Seventeen of the twenty-nine nations represented there are members of the UN. In the resolution unanimously adopted, the seventeen pledged to reconstitute themselves as a consultative group to initiate and support all measures for peace, disarmament, self-determination, non-interference, human rights, friendly international relations and economic cooperation in the UN."⁶¹ She believed that member states of the Bandung Conference could undermine the dominance of Western countries in the UN.

Robeson was also hopeful that African and Asian countries' presence at the UN could help to undermine racism. Seven months after Ghana gained independence from Britain, the Minister of Justice and chairman of Ghana's Delegation to the UN, Ako Adjei, gave a speech at the UN that Robeson believed would "be as sweet music to the ears of 16 million Negroes."⁶² Robeson quoted parts of Adjei's speech in which he

⁵⁸ Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (Cleveland, 1956), 117.

⁵⁹ Eslanda Robeson, "UN + Bandung = Peace," *New World Review*, June 1955, 10. Box 14 EGR Papers.

⁶⁰ Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 95.

⁶¹ Eslanda Robeson, "Before and After Bandung," *New World Review*, July 1955, 29. Box 14 EGR Papers.

⁶² Eslanda Robeson, "UN Assembly Rings with roar of Africa resurgent," 1957, 7. Box 14 EGR Papers.

underlined Ghana's commitment to Pan-Africanism calling upon "all Members of the United Nations to take note that the new State of Ghana is concerned with the freedom of all African peoples and also with the treatment that is meted out to all peoples of African descent, wherever they may be in any part of the world."⁶³ Adjei went on to talk about Ghana's relationship with the continent stating, "it is the hope of the Government of Ghana, that, by co-operation with the other independent States of Africa, an African personality in international affairs can be evolved."⁶⁴ According to historian Kevin Gaines, the African personality was "an ideology of African liberation reminiscent of Negritude but emphasizing the quest for political unity rather than Negritude's assertion, as formulated by Léopold Senghor, of the unity of African cultures."⁶⁵ Robeson praised Adjei's speech for its bold assertion of forging alliances with those of African descent within and outside of Africa, commenting that "we American Negroes can be very proud of our African descent on this day."⁶⁶ Her words reflect how after 1957, Ghana served as a symbol of hope for African Americans and West Indians, hundreds of whom were attracted by President Kwame Nkrumah's charismatic Pan-Africanism and moved to the country to offer their skills to the building of the new nation.⁶⁷

While Robeson was forging new links in China and documenting the crisis in Korea, Paul Robeson came under attack from anti-communists in the United States. After giving a misquoted speech about African American and Soviet relations at the Congress of the World Partisans of Peace, a government investigation was launched. The State Department subsequently seized Paul and Eslanda Robeson's passports because they refused to sign an affidavit stating they were not communists.⁶⁸ It was in fact true that the Robesons were not communists but given their trips to the Soviet Union and their stable friendships with communists and communist sympathizers, they certainly supported communist values, believing that they helped to diminish inequality. For eight years, between 1950 and 1958, Paul and Eslanda Robeson could not leave the United States. Yet in 1958, when restrictions on Robeson's travels were lifted, she resumed advocating for and practicing "colored cosmopolitanism" through her travels to the multi-racial Caribbean.

⁶³ Robeson, "UN Assembly Rings," 7. ⁶⁴ Robeson, "UN Assembly Rings," 7.

⁶⁵ Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 78.

⁶⁶ Robeson, "UN Assembly Rings," 7. ⁶⁷ Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana*.

⁶⁸ Ransby, *Eslanda*, 231.

In January 1958, Robeson attended the founding of the West Indies Federation (WIF) and made her first two-week trip to Port-of-Spain in Trinidad. Inaugurated on January 3, 1958, the short-lived WIF comprised a union of Caribbean colonies including Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua, Dominica, St Christopher-Nevis-Anguilla, St Vincent, St Lucia, Montserrat, and Grenada, all of which intended to unify and ascend into an independent nation from Britain. Discussions about federation had been ongoing since the late nineteenth century but became more concrete from the interwar period and were shaped not only by those in the Caribbean but also inextricably informed by Black diasporic politics and the actions of West Indian intellectuals in the United States and Europe.⁶⁹

In writings about her trip, published on her return to the United States, Robeson saw the WIF membership as “historically significant” because it was “overwhelmingly Negro in composition” with an Indian minority.⁷⁰ Foreseeing some of the future ethnic, racial, and religious divisions that would hamper the WIF Robeson hoped that “the diverse elements of this very interesting and attractive multi-racial society ... will continue to submerge their widely different interests, traditions and customs, and join together to build a healthy, happy, prosperous nation, unified in its diversity.”⁷¹ Robeson recognized that the unique WIF could help set a precedent for multi-racial political unions that could potentially be copied in areas of the non-White world.

In Robeson’s writings she also remarked on the participation of women in the WIF. “There are four women in the Legislature – 2 in a total of 19 in the Senate, and 2 in total of 45 in the House of Representatives.”⁷² These women, Robeson argued, “seem eager and determined to participate in and contribute to the building of their new Nation” and she was confident that their voices would be heard.⁷³ In Trinidad, Robeson met leading Caribbean political figures, such as Grenadian journalist Theophilus Albert Marryshow, and delivered speeches to packed audiences at the Public Library in Port-of-Spain, the Communication Services and General Workers Union, a trade union for women, and the Women’s League of the People’s National Movement.⁷⁴ In addition, she spoke to a group of female welfare and social workers at an “all-day Rally” that “is just now crystallizing, and is called THE CARIBBEAN

⁶⁹ Eric D. Duke, *Building a Nation: Caribbean Federation in the Black Diaspora* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016).

⁷⁰ Eslanda Robeson, “History Is Made,” April 25, 1958, 4. Box 24 EGR Papers.

⁷¹ Robeson, “History Is Made,” 4.

⁷² Eslanda Robeson, “Women in a New Nation,” April 28, 1958, 1. Box 24 EGR Papers.

⁷³ Robeson, “Women in a New Nation,” 1. ⁷⁴ Ransby, *Eslanda*, 237.

WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION IN THE MAKING."⁷⁵ This group was "inter-racial, inter-Island, and represents all aspects of welfare and social work."⁷⁶ Although happy to see politically engaged women, Robeson noticed the sexism that still existed within Caribbean politics. "Perhaps the most important single result of the Federation Women's Rally, beside the new unity and consolidation achieved," Robeson commented, "was the decision of the women to protest the new Constitution now being considered for the Bahamas in which women are not granted suffrage."⁷⁷ She hoped this protest would change the constitution but regional hierarchies, personality clashes, and racial tensions led to its end in 1962, initiating the beginning of island-wide independence. Nonetheless, Robeson's travels to the Caribbean highlight her colored cosmopolitanism, her repeated emphasis on women's political involvement, and her challenge of sexism.

Later that year, Robeson ventured to independent Ghana where she attended and reported on the All-African conference for the Associated Negro Press (ANP). To her, the conference was a laudable example of Pan-Africanism, a political force that was ignored or downplayed in a racialized international public sphere. She remarked on the uniqueness of the conference, commenting that "for the first time in modern history Africans from North, East, Central, South and West Africa met in conference on African soil to discuss African Affairs."⁷⁸ At the conference, Robeson met African leaders including Patrice Lumumba, Tom Mboya, and Hastings Banda. Despite attempts to disrupt the proceedings, a number of "significant Resolutions coming out of the Conference which the Western Press played down or buried" were passed.⁷⁹ For instance, "the Conference recommended that no African State should have diplomatic relations with any country which practices discrimination."⁸⁰ Another resolution called for the formation of "an African Legion consisting of volunteers who will be ready to protect the freedom of the African peoples."⁸¹

Robeson agreed with the resolutions but was aware of tensions and levied a harsh feminist critique "over the absence of women at the

⁷⁵ Robeson, "Women in a New Nation," 2.

⁷⁶ Robeson, "Women in a New Nation," 2.

⁷⁷ Robeson, "Women in a New Nation," 4.

⁷⁸ Eslanda Robeson, "The Accra Conference," *New World Review*, February 1959, 13 Box 14 EGR Papers.

⁷⁹ Eslanda Robeson, "Summary of the Accra Conference," December 1958, 3. Box 14 EGR Papers.

⁸⁰ Robeson, "Summary of the Accra Conference," 3.

⁸¹ Robeson, "Summary of the Accra Conference," 3.

Accra Conference.”⁸² In total, “there were only eight official women delegates, and only two women addressed the plenary sessions.”⁸³ The two women were Martha Ouandie who told “the terrible story of French colonialism now rampant in Cameroons, and Shirley Graham Du Bois [who] read the clear, forceful, constructive message to the conference from her husband.”⁸⁴ “A whole population cannot be properly mobilized if half of it is officially ignored,” Robeson stressed.⁸⁵ Her repeated insistence on asking the gender question showed her criticism of the masculinity inherent in the “big man” politics of African independence that weakened claims about postcolonial equality.⁸⁶ At the conference she reunited with Shirley Graham Du Bois and formed friendships with other women attendees, including Nigerian activist Mallama Gambo, Egyptian feminist Saiza Nabarawi, radical Indian activist Geeta Mukherjee, and Maida Springer. Robeson’s personal friendships and the political weight she put on the “woman question” reinforced each other.

US Civil Rights Abroad

Robeson interrogated the impact of civil rights campaigns abroad and the image of American democracy.⁸⁷ Writing in 1957, Robeson surmised that when Governor Faubus called out the National Guard of Arkansas to prevent nine Black pupils from entering Central High School of Little Rock, “delegates from every country to the United Nations watched and listened with amazement ... and their estimation of ‘democracy’ in the country ‘leading the Free World’ went down.”⁸⁸ Although she admitted that “many of them probably decided that the United States, however undemocratic, was nevertheless too powerful to ‘cross,’” this dramatically changed after Sputnik.⁸⁹ When Soviet scientists “captured the imagination and respect of the world by successfully launching the first earth satellite into outer space,” she argued that this put significant pressure on a United States whose deficient democratic values could no longer be embellished by technological superiority.⁹⁰

⁸² Robeson, “The Accra Conference,” 14.

⁸³ Robeson, “The Accra Conference,” 14.

⁸⁴ Robeson, “The Accra Conference,” 14.

⁸⁵ Robeson, “The Accra Conference,” 14.

⁸⁶ Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana*.

⁸⁷ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*.

⁸⁸ Eslanda Robeson, “American Woman Number One: Daisy Lee Bates,” 1957, 53. Box 14 EGR Papers.

⁸⁹ Robeson, “American Woman Number One: Daisy Lee Bates,” 53.

⁹⁰ Robeson, “American Woman Number One: Daisy Lee Bates,” 53.

Events at Little Rock and the launch of Sputnik marked a shift in the global perception of the United States. In an attempt to present a more appealing image of racial conditions at home, President Eisenhower promoted Black American artists such as Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong as cultural ambassadors on tours around the world. In an article Robeson wrote about the legendary musician Louis Armstrong, who had previously "deliberately evaded criticism and complaint about segregation of his audiences," leading Blacks to regard "him as something of an Uncle Tom."⁹¹ This image of Armstrong changed when he voiced disgust at the incident at Little Rock and "the continuing bombings and dynamitings of Negro homes, churches, businesses; the physical, economic and social persecution of the Negro people" that created "a slow fire of resentment in him."⁹² With Armstrong's public statements, Robeson opined that, "it will be extremely difficult for the State Department to persuade Negroes to go abroad to trumpet the cause of freedom and equality." Instead, the government would have to deal more squarely with the issue of racial discrimination.⁹³

At the same time that US government officials were trying to change the image of race relations for an international audience, Robeson wrote about the hypocrisy inherent in the way in which Hungarian refugees were treated compared to African Americans. In 1957, Eisenhower's administration offered support to Hungarian refugees which contrasted with, in Robeson's view, "its utter lack of concern for the victims of the invasion and bombing of Port Said, Alexandria and Cairo, and its even stranger continuing ignoring of the desperate situation of Negro citizens here in our own Deep South who are victims of dangerous and increasing White Terror."⁹⁴ Robeson went on to state that "As they continue to struggle for their constitutional rights here in their own country, Negro citizens wonder why thousands of Hungarians can come here and attain by decree, upon arrival, the rights for which Negroes have worked and fought and died, and have not yet achieved."⁹⁵ These words illustrate Robeson's persistent censure of the pretense that lay at the heart of Cold War US race relations.

⁹¹ Eslanda Robeson, "An Entertainer Speaks His Mind: World Famous Trumpet Player Louis Armstrong on the Negro Question," *Blitz Newsmagazine*, October 1957, 2. Box 14 EGR Papers.

⁹² Robeson, "An Entertainer Speaks His Mind," 2; Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 64.

⁹³ Robeson, "An Entertainer Speaks His Mind," 4.

⁹⁴ Eslanda Robeson, "The American Negro and the Hungarians," February 1957, 1. Box 14 EGR Papers.

⁹⁵ Robeson, "The American Negro and the Hungarians," 1.

In fact, she argued that there was much the United States could learn from Soviet Russia about how to treat minorities. What Robeson admired most about the Soviet Union was its ability to raise so-called “backward” people. “Women, Orientals, Jews, Moslems, peasants, national minority groups, traditionally despised and discriminated against in Old Russia, now live and work as equal Soviet citizens.”⁹⁶ This change and the success of socialism in Robeson’s view “are of profound and immediate practical interest to the Negro people and colored peoples everywhere.”⁹⁷ Robeson argued that if similar strategies were implemented in the United States and elsewhere where non-White people lived, this could raise their status and remove barriers to equality. She expressed more admiration for the Soviet Union when Joseph Stalin died in March 1953. She penned a tribute, saying that, “as a woman and a Negro – I am one of those billions of people who are infinitely better off, and therefore I salute Josef Stalin, his comrades, the soviet people, and the soviet system.”⁹⁸ It remains unknown to what extent either Eslanda or Paul Robeson knew of the purges that occurred during Stalin’s reign. They made no mention of knowing any criminal activities and remained supportive of the Soviet Union well into the 1960s. Yet her remarks about socialism and Stalin indicate the somewhat rose-tinted lens with which Robeson viewed the Soviet Union, which was far from a haven for minorities or women. As with her calls for Afro-Asian unity, Robeson disregarded and glossed over the complexity of politics within nation-states, and oftentimes her arguments were superficial. Even if the contradictions in her thought were also characteristic of many other left-wing activists and intellectuals who were not fully informed of all that was occurring in the Soviet Union, Robeson was too wedded in her arguments to an international politics of comparison to abandon her support for the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Eslanda Robeson’s post-1945 international thought focused on women’s engagement in international politics, Third World and African American freedom struggles. Through a variety of avenues – journalism, friendships, and international travels – and in her capacity as an

⁹⁶ Eslanda Robeson, “What the Soviet Union Means to the Negro People,” *New World Review*, November 1951, 32. Box 13 EGR Papers.

⁹⁷ Robeson, “What the Soviet Union Means,” 32.

⁹⁸ Eslanda Robeson, “On Stalin’s Death,” *New World Review*, March 31, 1953, 1. Box 13 EGR Papers.

“insider-outsider,” Robeson was able to put into practice many of the things that she advocated. Robeson's writings were not theoretical and conceptual in a narrow sense but rooted in experience and, given that she was a public figure and journalist writing for a very distinct audience, also highly performative. She was both an intellectual and prolific writer and an activist, and this drove the unique combination of concerns in her politics, thinking, and writing. Robeson's example highlights the importance of taking seriously “ideas-in-action,” rather than focusing merely on the prose of international thinkers.

The planks in her thought were a combination of varied but linked “isms”: Pan-Africanism, Black internationalism, maternalism, feminism, and anti-militarism. These were not abstract ideologies for Robeson, but very much based on her identity as an African American mother, writer, traveler, anthropologist, and activist. Moreover, they contributed to the contradictions in Robeson's thought which at times presented an uncomplicated essentialized vision of women, internationalism, and colored cosmopolitanism, without detailing the challenges of multiple gendered, racialized, religious, and class divisions and hierarchies that threatened solidarity politics.⁹⁹ Yet, Robeson was not completely blind to these divisions. Her criticism, for example, of the UN's role in the Korean War demonstrates that she was not reticent to find fault with an organization embodying internationalism. Nonetheless, Robeson's politics of optimism, so to speak, was grounded in her sense of a world in a flux. Rather than becoming mired in the negative and oftentimes destructive violent politics of her time, Robeson sought to focus on a positive, hopeful vision of a world united in peace and cooperation.

⁹⁹ For more on solidarity politics see David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

