BOOK REVIEW

January 31, 2013 | Filed under METRO | Posted by admin

New book tells how Paul Robeson’s wife made her voice heard

BY DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHLER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

“We Negroes have now passed The Point of No Return,” Eslanda Robeson wrote in 1964. “We are determined, determined to claim our full citizenship and human rights, now, period.”

A year later she advocated resistance and self-defense for Blacks, supporting a range of tactics, including taking formal complaints to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, massive street demonstrations and strikes in the United States.

Coming at the end of her life, these positions were in character for Mrs. Robeson. For decades, according to Barbara Ransby, she had used her status as the wife of singer, actor, and political radical Paul Robeson to speak out about against injustice, wherever she saw it.

Full-length biography

In “Eslanda,” the first-full length biography of this remarkable woman, Ransby, a professor of African American Studies, Gender and Women’s Studies, and History at the University of Illinois, Chicago, examines her career as an anthropologist, journalist, public speaker, and political activist.

A product of her times and on occasion, ahead of them, Ransby argues, Eslanda Robeson fought against the anti-communist witch hunts of Senator Joseph McCarthy, “compared class exploitation and racial subjugation to gender oppression,” and connected the struggle against colonialism in Africa with the civil rights movement in the United States.

Definite impact

Ransby is not a gifted writer. More importantly, she approaches the biography as an ardent admirer, rather than as a judicious critic. She claims, without evidence, for example, that as a Progressive Party candidate for Secretary of State of Connecticut in 1948, Eslanda Robeson “made her voice heard” and that her “postwar black left feminist” group, Sojourners for Truth and Justice, “made a definite impact.”

She describes Eslanda’s “behind the scenes intervention” with Kwame Nkrumah, the leader of Ghana, then indicates that her harsh criticism of an American peace activist may have been based on inaccurate information and that, in any event, Nkrumah may well have ignored her.

And Ransby asserts that FBI surveillance was a measure of Eslanda’s “influence and success,” only to acknowledge that J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the agency, could not decide whether she was “a threat or just an annoyance.”

Blasted Blacks for begging

Nonetheless, Ransby brings Eslanda Robeson to life, as an affluent, aggressive, if sometimes naïve, class and race conscious radical. Eslanda was so taken with the Soviet Union, Ransby reveals, reluctantly, that she made a “chilling” defense of Joseph Stalin’s purges of intellectuals in the 1930s.

Expressing regret, Eslanda declared, “I like dogs, but I certainly wouldn’t hesitate on moment to liquidate a mad dog.”

Fortunately, according to Ransby, Eslanda was on the right side of most issues. She urged American Blacks to “stop thinking of ourselves in terms of inferiority – asking, pleading, begging for a crust or two of the bread of citizenship… and demand the whole loaf.”

She chided them for their ignorance about the colored people in Asia, Africa, and the West Indies who were “fighting their way up and out of Colonial domination.” And, Ransby emphasizes, Eslanda insisted on inserting a gender perspective into her internationalist critique. “It isn’t a man’s world any longer,” she told her audiences. “It never was – men just said it was, and took over.”

‘Worth knowing about’

In the end, Ransby makes a compelling case that Eslanda “is worth knowing about.”

After all, as Ransby concludes, the story of her life, devoted as it was to “our struggle,” provides a window into the world of Black radicals in the middle-third of the 20th century, when it took an abundance of courage to
speak out, “to entertain a different set of truths and sensibilities” about power and patriotism, capitalism and communism, race and gender, individual and collective identity.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

Related stories
- The world went to hell and the Black man didn’t go free
- Belafonte tells his story in HBO film
- ‘Passage of Power’ explores LBJ’s presidential journey
- ‘Red Summer’ details time of intense violence against…
- Novel about president overflowing with robbery, murder and…

You must be logged in to post a comment Login

About admin
View all posts by admin →