plauded Cheddi Jagan's reprinted speeches that called for an end to the arms race and an end to Cold War intimidation of smaller countries. Essie had echoed the very same points in many of her own speeches and articles. Both Jagans were so fond of Paul and Essie—Cheddi was in the crowd that welcomed them back to England in 1958—that the FBI speculated that if the Robesons ever chose to relocate again outside of the United States, the Jagans would have eagerly welcomed them to Guiana. In this assessment, at least, the FBI was quite right.

With their ties to the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa, Essie's friends Janet, Nan, and Shirley represented her connections to disparate parts of the Third World and the global anti-colonial movement. Each woman, like Essie, had a close relationship with a larger-than-life male persona, but nevertheless staked her own political and intellectual claims and made her own mark. The four women forged their own paths, took controversial positions, and refused to take the easy road of silence and conformity. Each woman paid a price. Still they persevered, sustained no doubt by their friendship and sisterhood.

All I ever feared were cats.

Eslanda Robeson

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 before the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, which was headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, the notorious and unrelenting anti-communist crusader. Essie wore a dark suit and black hat with a thin half-veil that was accented with velvet dots. She looked a bit like a stylish mourner, but her demeanor was more gutsy than grief-stricken. She was angry, annoyed, insulted, and wholly unapologetic. Even though people she knew were being threatened and jailed for their politics, Essie was undaunted. “All I ever feared were cats,” she once declared. Still, the stakes were high. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a communist couple convicted of spying for the Soviet Union, had been executed just two weeks earlier, despite their insistence that they were innocent and a loud international outcry. Others were being jailed, blacklisted, and deported. In this climate of fear and persecution, it is impressive that Essie stood up to Joe McCarthy as forcefully as she did, refusing to be rattled or intimidated. I was "working very hard on an article about Mau Mau, when the McCarthy Senate Investigating Committee ordered me to appear before it in Washington, D.C.,” she said in a statement reprinted by the Associated Negro Press. Her bold and favorable reference to the militant anti-colonial resistance movement in Kenya underscored her refusal to be cowed.
a witch hunt against anyone suspected of communist sympathies. In McCarthy’s view, these sympathies were fundamentally un-American, and their adherents had to be rooted out. His definition of communist sympathizer grew to include basically anyone who disagreed with him politically, or dared to criticize the U.S. government: peace activists, civil rights leaders, dissenting artists, and progressive labor organizers of all types. Both committees carried out an extensive intimidation campaign against dissidents in not only the film industry and academia, but also professional and civic organizations. Essie had ostensibly been summoned because her books, copies of which appeared on bookshelves in U.S. government libraries around the world (in embassies or U.S. government-funded programs), were alleged to be un-American. Her familial connection to Paul Robeson also was a source of concern.

As the Cold War heated up and domestic red-baiting became more ominous and widespread, those who were targeted generally either distanced themselves from any affiliations or individuals that might sully their reputations or damage their careers, or stood defiant and rightly accused the government of violating their basic civil liberties. Some “named names” to save themselves, accusing colleagues, friends, and neighbors of communist loyalties. Essie and Paul refused to cave in to such pressures, or to betray the trust of friends. By 1953, Essie had embraced a highly politicized public persona. She knew her role was not to lead organizations or run for office (she had given up on that after the Progressive Party experience), but she was determined to speak loudly and clearly about her idea of justice in the most public way possible, and to support others who did the same. To back down from this stance would undo all she had built and become. On some level, Essie relished the opportunity to confront McCarthy directly.


Essie refused to answer direct questions about whether or not she was a member of the Communist Party, claiming protection under both the Fifth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. While the Fifth Amendment protects citizens against compelled self-incrimination, Essie was making an additional statement about racism regardless of race. When the committee told her she could not invoke the Fifteenth Amendment, Essie gave the committee a history lesson. “As a Negro and as a second-class citizen,” Essie lectured, “I have been fighting racial discrimination all my life.” She cited the longstanding practices of racism, racial violence, and Black disenfranchisement. “As a Negro, I know a lot about the force and violence used against my people in this country,” she added.\(^1\) When told her race had nothing to do with the hearings and that the Senate committee was all white as a result of voters’ choices, not racism, Essie snapped, “Most Negroes are in the South, sir, and they don’t have much right to elect senators.”\(^4\)

The committee grilled Essie: Why had she sent her son to a Soviet school? Did she know any communists? Had she been to a communist cell meeting and, if she had, were those in attendance plotting to overthrow the government by force? What did she think of the conflict in Korea? What did her husband think about communism and the Soviet Union? The questions went on and on, but Essie did not waiver. She insisted she knew very little about communism, “except what I read in the papers and hear say.” She answered questions with questions: “Why don’t you ask [Paul]?” she quipped, in response to questions about his political views. “I don’t know what, what or where,” she said to questions about her meetings and friends. By the end of the exchange, the senators were stumped. They had gotten neither information nor deference and had been unable to intimidate her. McCarthy glared down at Essie as he brought the hearing to a close and said he had let her get away with too much. He said that she might have been cited for contempt if she were a man, rather than a woman, and warned future witnesses to be more compliant.\(^5\)

The Black press applauded Essie’s performance before the committee, and she was proud of herself. Veteran Black reporter Alice Dunnigan described Essie as “cool, intelligent and confident.” Others praised her feisty courage and “clear-sighted” stance against the committee’s intimidation tactics.\(^6\) Months before Essie’s testimony, her journalist friend P. L. Prattis lamented the onerous climate that existed throughout the country, where many people, paralyzed by fear, felt they could “no longer speak” their minds. “The future is terrible to contemplate. I wish you and Paul were not mixed up in it,” he confessed in a letter to Essie, “but maybe that is a cowardly wish.” Essie rejected fear and embraced a bolder and more optimistic stance, even in difficult times and situations.\(^7\)

In addition to her lawyer, Milton Friedman, Essie’s friend and politi-
cal associate Thelma Dale Perkins had come down from New York to accompany her to the hearing. “I went to the hearing with much apprehension,” Perkins recalled. Essie was a strongly independent woman who often spoke her mind regardless of the consequences. The consequences for being too blunt or candid with this committee could have meant, Perkins pointed out, “legal entrapment... [and] perhaps jail.”

But Essie was pointed, candid, and careful. She did not take the bait when McCarthy sought to lead her down a particular path of inquiry, and the outcome of the testimony was as good as could be expected: there were no charges, no indictments, and no incriminating comments. Perkins felt relieved. To congratulate Essie on her successful testimony, Perkins invited her to spend the evening at her parent’s home in Anacostia, a predominately Black neighborhood in Washington. “On this day of triumph, I could not conceive of her going back home without some kind of celebration,” Perkins recounted. “That afternoon, Essie relaxed and enjoyed the visit with my parents and their neighbors as if she had known them all her life.” The two women then visited the Frederick Douglass historic home site nearby and stood on the front porch of the house, “looking across the river at the Capitol where Essie had begun this eventful day.” It was symbolically appropriate given that Douglass himself had been such an outspoken fighter against injustice and oppression roughly a hundred years earlier.

In newspaper articles, public speeches, and personal correspondence after her appearance, Essie spoke out vehemently against the tactics of McCarthy and his allies. She said that she was indeed a critic of the U.S. government, but that this did not make her a communist or any less of an American. As a self-aware Black woman, she argued, how could she not criticize the persistent racism she saw all around her? Radical activists and intellectuals from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr. to Ella Baker have framed their criticism of America in precisely the same way: as a demand for America to realize its promise. Essie claimed she was a loyal citizen, a loyal Negro citizen, whose loyalty was “somewhat battered” but still intact. Still, it’s important to note that while Essie herself denied having a Communist Party affiliation, she did not condemn communism or those who were in fact party members. Her gripe with HUAC and McCarthy was not simply that they were making false accusations, but also that they were censoring political beliefs and punishing political dissidents.

In 1953, Essie accepted an invitation by the editors of the Daily Worker to write a response to President Eisenhower’s State of the Union address. Her lengthy essay, entitled “A Citizen’s State of the Union,” called for friendly relations with the Soviet Union based on a policy of “live and let live in this one world.” She pointed out the duplicity of advocating democracy and freedom abroad while suppressing oppositional views and tolerating racial inequality at home. For Essie, racial injustice and the anticommmunist crusades were intimately bound together because as long as people were afraid to speak out, injustice would continue. “Our citizens are no longer free nor brave,” she wrote, warning that “fear is spreading like a plague among our citizens. Fear of losing one’s job, home, education, fear of non-conforming, or even being accused of non-conforming.”

The real obstacles to racial progress, Essie argued, were not communists or so-called subversives; “the enemy are the powerful, lawless, ruthless, greedy, selfish, arrogant, un-Americans.”

Essie was also quick to praise other public figures who refused to be censored or intimidated. One of those people was the colorful Paris-based Black American performer Josephine Baker. When they first crossed paths in the 1920s, Essie had not been favorably impressed with Baker. But that changed when Baker became an outspoken critic of racism and repression and suffered government harassment as a result.

“I feel Josephine Baker is a modern Negro heroine,” Essie wrote to James Hicks, a reporter for the Afro-American. “All that talent, all that glamour, all those gorgeous clothes—and courage too. I’ll bet her knees are beautiful, especially so because she does not live on them... Since Jo has opened up her gorgeous mouth and spoken her piece, [perhaps now] other heretofore timid and reluctant Negro artists will find their voices and also insist upon Negro rights.”

Even more significant and defiant than Essie’s comments about Baker were her words of praise and support for jailed Communist Party leader Ben Davis, a personal friend of both Essie and Paul. In 1949 Davis, a Black Harvard-trained lawyer and onetime New York City councilman, was jailed for five years under the Smith Act, a 1940 federal law that prohibited participation in any group that advocated the overthrow of the government (with the implicit assumption that all communists advocated violent actions). Paul Robeson Jr. described Davis as his father’s closest friend in the American Communist Party. He is also described as “a popular Harlem figure. Almost as big as Paul.” A “jovial” and good-humored man, Davis loved tennis and the violin almost as much as he loved politics. Paul was unwavering in his support and unswerving in his praise of Davis, and Essie shared his sentiments. They had both
In 1952 Essie wrote an article for Freedom entitled "I Know a Communist," in which she defended her friendship with Ben Davis. In 1964 Essie agreed to write the foreword to a booklet by Claudia Jones, published as a tribute to Davis, entitled Ben Davis, Fighter for Freedom. In her opening passage, Essie wrote: "Ben Davis is in prison now because he has the courage of his convictions, I can't imagine a better reason to go to prison." And Essie "admitted" in Freedom that she not only knew "a real live Communist" but he "was a wonderful guy," referring to Davis. This statement was in contrast to the thrust of her testimony before the Senate Committee in which she professed ignorance of communism. Of course she knew other communists as well, but she was especially fond of Davis. "He is an old valued friend of ours... We love the man." In the 1940s when she and Paul were having some marital difficulties, Essie apparently confided in Ben, and he in turn praised her for being "such a strong and realistic mate" to such a great man. The subtle veiled meanings here are not readily apparent. Perhaps it was Ben's way of thanking Essie for not making a big fuss about Paul's affairs, the publicizing of which would undoubtedly have tarnished Paul's image and made him less effective as a political figure. Or perhaps it was based on Ben's understanding of how demanding Paul's schedule was and how so many of those who claimed chunks of Paul's time and attention did not always recognize or appreciate Essie's contributions to their collective work. It is clear that Ben understood Essie had made sacrifices for Paul, sacrifices that had in part enabled Paul to play an important role in national and global politics.

As American public officials focused on the Cold War, racial violence continued throughout the South and parts of the North. Essie accused politicians from Jim Crow states of hypocrisy for claiming to make the country safe from communism while leaving it quite unsafe for Negroes. In an essay for the Afro-American in the spring of 1955, Essie condemned the brutal murder of Reverend George Lee—a local grocer, printer, and NAACP activist in Belzoni, Mississippi. For his act of registering nearly one hundred Black voters in his small town, he was targeted and shot down in broad daylight as he drove home on May 7, 1955. The white local coroner ruled the death an accident, and Lee's killers were more concerned with rooting out alleged communists than tracking down the kind of thugs who had assassinated George Lee.

Echoing concerns expressed by other Black radicals and some liberals at the time, Essie spoke and wrote about how red-baiting and anti-communism was dividing and weakening the Black Freedom struggle in the United States, and how it was convincing activists to turn away from the rest of the world and each other. "Our fight for civil rights is part of a worldwide civil rights fight," Essie reminded a crowd at a picnic and rally held by the American Committee for Protection of the Foreign Born in Wanaque, New Jersey. In her opinion, the government's indictment of the venerable African American intellectual and political spokesperson W. E. B. Du Bois, at the age of eighty-three, alleging that he was a "foreign agent" because he dared to speak out critically on U.S. foreign policy and colonialism, was a particularly low blow.

The charges against Du Bois were eventually dropped, and after his acquittal in November 1951, Essie wrote an eloquent essay in defense of him and submitted it to the Afro-American newspaper for publication. In the essay, she argued that the government, "in its arrogance, made the mistake of picking on the wrong Negro." She applauded how Blacks and progressive whites had rallied to Du Bois's defense, but added that the very fact that the attack had occurred was evidence that "the bulk of the Negro people have been asleep at the switch too long." She also linked Du Bois's unjust treatment at the hands of the FBI to the treatment that many Black people had received for being "uppity." The nature of racism was to "cut down" those who tried to stand up, Essie insisted, recalling the words of the Congolesse facilities manager she had met in 1946. "The Negro people have long experience with this kind of thing. We have seen Negro after Negro cut down, not because he had disobeyed any law, but because he had tried to vote, had moved into an illegally restricted neighborhood, was not meek enough, insisted upon his rights and his personal dignity, was too successful, too militant, did not know 'his place.'"

In the spring of 1954, a few short weeks before the historic Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision declaring racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, Essie wrote about the housing desegregation struggle in Chicago. A light-skinned Black family, the Howards, had moved into a previously all-white public housing complex in Chicago. Their neighbors, who had initially mistaken them for white, turned against them when the family's race was revealed—but the
Howards refused to leave. Surrounded by angry white mobs and chaotic protests, the family remained absolutely defiant. Their stance paved the way for other Black families to move into the area, though they too came under attack. “A great deal is being said and written about the war in Indochina and our responsibility for the security of southeast Asia, but very little is being said and written about the war in South Chicago and responsibility for the security of these United States,” Essie wrote. “The resistance of the French in the fortress of Dien Bien Phu has been dramatized for weeks by all the news media, but very little has been said about the really heroic resistance of the 10 Negro families in the fortress of Trumbull Park in South Chicago (where they, as citizens, have every right to be),” she added.

Essie visited Chicago personally in April 1954 and attended meetings of local activists who were mobilizing around the Trumbull Park standoff. She went to a mass meeting at the Metropolitan Community Church one Sunday afternoon to listen to testimony from one of the Trumbull residents, a Black veteran named Frank London Brown. He stood up and pledged to defend his home. “Appeals to the Law have not protected us,” he told the crowd in an emotional voice. “We have decided to protect ourselves. We have decided that from now, we will return fist for fist, brick for brick, pistol for pistol, period.” Brown would go on to build a successful career as a writer. In 1956 he penned a widely acclaimed novel about his experiences with Chicago’s fight for integrated housing called simply Trumbull Park.

Essie herself did not rule out militant forms of resistance to achieve racial justice in the United States, or minimally to protect vulnerable populations against violence, and she at times deployed militaristic language and symbols quite powerfully to make her point. In fact, the perspective she advanced—that Blacks were very much under attack from their own countrymen and that they had the right of self-defense—presaged the radical civil rights and Black Power struggles of the late 1960s:

All of us, every Negro man, woman and child, are soldiers at war; not an aggressive war against our Government and fellow-citizens, but fighting a defensive war for survival and progress. This war has been going on for a long time. Usually it is a cold war, waged against us by organized political, economic and social pressures; sometimes it waxes very hot indeed—in riots and street battles, bombings and dynamiting of our homes, lynchings, brutal and murderous attacks. In

...
Some of Boudin’s services were provided gratis since he and his law partners felt politically supportive of Paul. There were, however, court fees to pay, researchers to compensate, and travel expenses to cover. Fundraisers paid some of the fees and the Robesons eventually covered the rest.

If government officials had hoped that the loss of their passports would silence Essie or Paul, they were sorely mistaken. The more that Cold War paranoia informed American foreign and domestic policy, the more Essie had to say. The more that the government tried to quiet her down, the more she turned up the volume. For example, Essie gave a number of speeches calling for peace and an end to U.S. militarism in Asia, most notably its involvement in Korea. On Mother’s Day in 1944, in a church in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Essie appealed to the mothers in the audience to accept their obligation to stand and fight for peace and economic justice. She was articulating a kind of mainstream maternalism that belied her more progressive views on gender roles, but in this case she deployed the words she thought would work to get more women involved in the peace movement:

On this Mother’s Day, I think it would be well if we all give a thought to the Negro Mothers and the Poor White mothers, especially in our Deep South, where no matter how hard they work, they cannot give their children the proper food, education and medical care in our rich and powerful country. This does not have to be. We mothers must get together and change this. On this Mother’s Day it would be well for us to give a thought to the mothers in Africa and Asia—mothers who, with their children, have never had enough to eat in all their lives; in this rich world, this does not have to be . . . There is enough food for everybody. It is wicked for some to feed like hogs, while others starve. . . . I think Mother’s Day is a proper time, not just to buy flowers and presents; it is a proper time for mothers, and all women, to think about these things, and to make a solemn vow to defend our children by putting a stop to war.”

Paul Robeson had been one of the most highly sought-after and highest paid Black artists in the world. Now, blacklisted at home and unable to travel abroad, he found it difficult to book his more lucrative performance engagements and the family income plummeted. In July of 1953, Essie finally had to sell the beeches, the rambling white house in Connecticut that she so loved, because they simply could not afford it any longer.

In one sense Essie felt more grounded than ever. She knew what she believed, who her friends were, and she had settled on a career that suited her. But in other ways, financially and physically, much of the security she had relied on for years was starting to diminish. After the house in Connecticut was gone, Essie moved in temporarily with Paul Jr. and Marilyn until she could get her bearings. Paul was living here and there: sometimes at the parsonage of his brother Ben’s church in Harlem, sometimes with friends in Manhattan. Essie was unsure of where Paul was going to ultimately settle down, so she next moved herself to another temporary residence: the historic Hotel Dauphin on Broadway and 67th, which offered closer proximity to her desk at the United Nations as well as a bit more privacy. Within a year she had found a more permanent residence and persuaded Paul that they should purchase a modest townhouse on 86th Terrace in Washington Heights on the edge of Harlem. After that, in the fall of 1955, they settled back into a domestic life together.

Even though Paul and Essie’s lives had been in flux during this time, they were still a family. It was an unconventional family, to be sure, and not without tensions, but their connectedness to one another was clear to those who knew them well. As their mutual friend Freda Diamond insisted long after Paul and Essie had passed on, there was never a question about their marriage being threatened, despite Paul’s affairs with other women, including Freda herself. There were only a few years in their four-decades-long marriage that Paul and Essie did not share a home together—not always a bed, but always a home. And Freda, herself married, was a devoted friend to both of them.

Still the early 1950s had been difficult years for Essie. In the spring of 1953, her elderly mother had died after a prolonged illness. Even though it was not wholly unexpected, Ma Goode’s death was yet another blow for Essie. Ma Goode, a single mother, had lived with Essie, her only daughter, a good part of her adult life, and had stood by her through many of life’s ups and downs. Moreover, Ma Goode had not aged gracefully. Sharp-witted until well into her seventies, she had become slightly demented in her final years. Out of concern for her safety and the realization that Ma Goode needed fulltime care, Essie had placed her mother in a nursing home in Connecticut. Mrs. Goode was not at all happy there, and she wrote numerous letters to Essie begging to be
allowed to come home, but Essie could not change the difficult situation. It did not help that her mother’s death came at a time when she and Paul were having more difficulties in their relationship. Ma Goode was quietly cremated and there was no service to mark her passing.

Throughout the 1950s, despite personal, emotional, and financial losses, the Robesons continued to speak their minds and to fight political persecution, albeit sometimes on different stages. In many respects the difficulties of the 1950s brought the couple closer. After nearly two years of living mostly apart, their new townhouse on Jumel Terrace provided a fresh common ground. At a banquet in their honor hosted by Essie’s colleagues at the New World Review, Paul stood up and publicly praised Essie extensively for her many accomplishments, for her “contributions to his own development as a man and an artist,” and for her political efforts in the interest of “Negro people” and the larger cause of peace and justice in the world. His affection and admiration were sincere.

As the decade wore on, Essie became increasingly active in the campaign to restore Paul’s passport, and by extension her own. She worked mostly on the international front, keeping in close communication with friends in England who were trying to bring pressure to bear from the other side of the Atlantic. Sometime in the mid-1950s the London Paul Robeson Committee was formed. At the helm were activist councilors (local representative) Peggy Middleton and National Guardian editor Cedric Belfrage, who had been deported from the United States to his native England for refusing to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee. Essie wrote, cabled, and phoned them both regularly, urging them to keep up the outside pressure and brainstorming with them about tactics and strategy. Progress was indeed made on that front. The committee was able to garner considerable visibility in the British press. In April 1958, as a result of the committee’s agitation, the British Actors’ Equity passed a statement of support for Paul. It also organized a “virtual” concert where Paul sang “live” over the radio to a sizeable British audience in symbolic defiance of his enforced confinement to the United States. For Paul’s sixtieth birthday on April 1, 1958, an illustrious crowd of diplomats, artists and writers, and leftist labor leaders were on hand for various celebrations. Peggy Middleton, in consultation with Essie, encouraged and kept track of tributes to Paul that occurred in more than twenty cities from Tokyo to Mexico City to Delhi.

Essie was especially touched that her Indian friends, notably Nehru, India’s head of state, refused to succumb to U.S. State Department pressures to shun Paul. Under the direction of Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi, the country’s future prime minister, India organized several Robeson celebrations in multiple cities, topped off by an eloquent statement from Nehru himself, who praised Paul as “one of the greatest artists of our generation.” Essie followed up with a personal thank-you note indicating her gratitude that the friendship between the Robeson and Nehru families had endured. Months later she met with Indira at the airport in London to thank her personally for her and her father’s support.

The support that Paul and Essie felt from their Indian friends was not always matched at home. The couple had retained close ties to the Black American community throughout the Cold War, but fear and suspicion were rampant, and some leaders of the mainstream civil rights organizations bought into red-baiting as a way to protect themselves from harassment and mark their image as patriotic and respectable. Some bought into Cold War ideas because they genuinely believed them. Whatever the motivation, the NAACP, major labor unions, and even some newer civil rights groups went out of their way to exclude those they believed to be communists or so-called “fellow travelers” who were associated and sympathetic to communism. For instance, when the NAACP and other civil rights leaders sponsored the Prayer Pilgrimage—a massive civil rights rally held in Washington, D.C., on the anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision—Paul was not invited to be a speaker. The Robesons attended the 1957 rally anyway, situating themselves among the thousands of people in the crowd. Surprised that he was in the audience and not on the stage, many fans approached Paul for autographs, which did not assuage Essie’s annoyance at the snubs Paul received from those she had deemed “professional Negro leaders.”

It is important to note that while Essie and Paul stood on the sidelines at the 1957 Pilgrimage, they by no means stood on the sidelines in general. Essie in particular remained very much engaged. Not only did she write about Black American and global events for the foreign and domestic press; she reached out directly to grassroots civil rights leaders, and urged friends to support the growing mass-based struggles (even as she criticized some of the top leadership). After a rare Robeson family visit to Paul’s brother Ben’s church in 1957, for example, Essie relayed that churchgoers were not being urged to attend the Pilgrimage. This was not a personal criticism of Ben but a comment on
the Black religious establishment in general. In 1958 Essie also got in touch directly with Daisy Bates, NAACP leader of the Central High School desegregation struggle in Little Rock, Arkansas, to express her support and offer herself as an ally if she could help. Bates responded graciously to Essie’s letter. Despite the Robesons’ history and persistent efforts, there were those who sought to push them to the margins of mainstream Cold War Black politics, but they in turn pushed back, carving out a new political, cultural, and intellectual space from which to continue to do the work they had done for years. Fortunately, they had friends who stood by them during their ordeal, and they in turn, stood by others who were facing even greater persecution and harassment. For instance, both Essie and Paul were so galled at the treatment that had been meted out to the aging and venerable W. E. B. Du Bois that when his ninetieth birthday rolled around in 1958, Essie agreed to head up a committee to organize an elaborate celebratory event.

The gala was attended by a thousand guests and held at the Roosevelt Hotel in Manhattan on March 2, 1958. Tributes and good wishes poured in from around the world: Russia, Guyana, Nigeria, London, and India. The event was a resounding success and an important statement of support for Du Bois, who like the Robesons was being denied his right to travel because of alleged communist affiliations. In a letter to her friend George Murphy, Essie remarked somewhat jokingly that she had been asked to co-chair the committee because it was a lot of work and no one else wanted to shoulder the burden. Still, she was pleased to do it, and even more “thrilled” with the outcome.

In the spring of 1958, after Du Bois’s birthday bash and Paul’s own sixtieth birthday celebration, Essie looked to test the waters and travel outside of the country for the first time in seven years. In August of 1957 the government had partially lifted some of its travel restrictions on the Robesons, indicating that they could travel to places in the Western Hemisphere that at the time did not require a passport. Essie was invited to participate in the celebration surrounding the formation of the West Indies Federation, a precursor to the regional Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Many at the time, including the radical thinker C. L. R. James, viewed the new group as both a step toward independence as well as a Pan-Africanist effort to unify the disparate islands of the region and give them a stronger voice in world politics. The federation lasted only five years but in 1958 there was much excitement about its potential and promise. In April people from dozens of islands across the region, and many from the United States and Latin America, converged on the small city of Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, for the first meet-
sugar plantation workers. After attending college in the United States, he had returned to British Guiana with his U.S.-born wife, Janet, to work with labor and left forces.

Another important landmark for Essie and Paul, and another example of their refusal to be silenced or intimidated, was the publication in 1938 of Paul’s book Here I Stand, in which he countered the negative and narrow depictions of him in mainstream media, outlined his political views in his own words, and indicted the U.S. government for harassment, repression, and racism. Paul worked with his friend Lloyd Brown to complete and edit the book. In a move that underscored the Robeson family’s determination to speak freely, unfettered by either the government or timid publishers, it was published by the Robesons’ own Othello Associates, a company run by Paul Jr. to facilitate Paul’s career and indirectly to advance the views and causes the family believed in. Here I Stand was part memoir and part manifesto for Black America. In it Paul described the “warm feeling of friendship” he felt toward the Soviet people, and reiterated his belief in “scientific socialism” as a more egalitarian and just way to organize society. He went on to outline his analysis and aspirations for the growing civil rights movement, eschewing “gradualism,” and like Essie had done on numerous occasions and in multiple publications, linking the fate and aspirations of Black Americans to “the world beyond our borders.”

Essie had offered her input while the book was in development and she was pleased with the results. In spite of her fragile and fluctuating health, she leapt into action to help with publicity, sending out a plethora of letters urging friends, colleagues, and strangers to buy the book and encouraging media allies to review it. Her efforts helped ensure that the book reached a wide audience. It was befuddling then, that after all they had been through together—the muck and the mire on all levels—that Paul, in all sincerity, and with characteristic eloquence and grace, dedicated Here I Stand as follows: “To Eslanda Goode Robeson, Distinguished writer and anthropologist. Thanks for many things—For your unflagging labors in the interest of the African peoples. For your devotion to the struggle of our folk here in America for full freedom. For your constructive analyses of the momentous events at the United Nations, which affect all manner of human societies. For the deeply shared belief in and labors for the attainment of a lasting peace for all peoples of the earth. And deepest gratitude for your help and guidance over many years of struggle, aspirations, achievements, and the constant awareness of a better future for our children and grandchildren.”

In June of 1958, after a long, hard, eight-year fight, Essie and Paul finally won the return of their passports. In two historic decisions, Kent v. Dulles and Briebl v. Dulles, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that the State Department could not revoke or withhold the passport of a U.S. citizen because of his or her political views, recognizing the right to travel as a basic liberty. When Shirley Graham Du Bois heard the good news, she wrote to Essie from Paris to congratulate her, exclaiming that this proved “the people” can win when their cause is righteous. Paul performed before a full house at Carnegie Hall in New York City in that same month, and just a month later, in July 1958, he and Essie had packed their belongings and set sail for London. The Robesons left the United States both to protest the treatment they had received by their own government and also with the hope that Paul’s career would flourish again in Europe. A rented flat on Connaught Square in London would be their home base for the next five years, but they kept their apartment on Junel Terrace in Harlem and continued to travel widely. They had other tempting options during this period. For example, their old friend, President Nkrumah, offered to make Paul, and presumably Essie as well, citizens of Ghana. There they could have had a permanent solution to their troubles with the U.S. government, he reasoned. They graciously declined. The Du Boises would accept a similar offer a few years later.
Eslanda

BARBARA RANSBY

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