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# 7

## The Here and Now of Eslanda Robeson's *African Journey*

LEIGH RAIFORD

My African trip was one of those grand dreams come true. . . . I think every Negro who can, should go and look and listen and learn. We have a grand heritage from Africa, as a race, and it is shameful that we are not interested in it, and almost wholly ignorant of it.

Pauli is enthralled.

—Eslanda Robeson

In May 1936, Eslanda Goode Robeson set off on a three-month tour of South Africa, Uganda, and the Belgian Congo. Equipped with luggage, notebooks, a Cine-Kodak (sixteen millimeter) camera and a Rolleiflex twin-lens reflex camera (“You can’t take too many pictures,” her husband, Paul, had told her), she was also accompanied by her eight-year-old son, Paul Jr.<sup>1</sup> An African American woman born to a middle-class, erudite, Washington, DC, family at the turn of the twentieth century, Robeson is perhaps best known for her marriage to celebrated singer, actor and activist Paul Robeson, whose career she managed throughout her lifetime. However, Eslanda Robeson, or Essie, as she was called by friends and family, was also an anthropologist, the author of three nonfiction books, and a committed anticolonial and antiracist activist.<sup>2</sup> Robeson’s trip, the first of three she would make to the continent in her life, came as she was studying anthropology at the London School of Economics (LSE), and marked her effort to experience Africa firsthand at once outside of and through the framework of dominant anthropology. Emboldened by brewing anticolonial struggles, and inspired by her own growing diasporic consciousness, she undertook this journey as at once intellectual fieldwork, political reconnaissance, and family vacation.

From this trip, Robeson produced a travel memoir entitled *African*

*Journey*, published by the John Day Company in 1945. This work presented an affirming understanding of Africa and its people from the unique vantage point of an African American woman, while also fostering political and cultural connections among black diasporic subjects. *African Journey* accomplishes this work not only through writing that is at turns, elegant and assertive, droll and acerbic, but also through the proliferation of Robeson's own photographs. The book is further distinguished by the presence of her son, Paul Robeson Jr.—Pauli, as his parents affectionately called him—who plays a central role in the narrative and appears in nearly a quarter of *African Journey*'s sixty-six photographs. As one reviewer wrote, "Ostensibly the experiences of the wife of Paul Robeson on an African tour in 1936, this book develops a special interest far beyond that of the usual travel book because of the character of Pauli, the Robesons' small son. . . . Pauli is revealed as a perceptive, charming boy whose mature observations and reactions to the unknown are perpetually satisfying."<sup>3</sup> Essie's own research trip is filtered in part through Paul Jr.'s eyes and experiences. Essie records Paul's observations nearly as often as she records her own. This is their shared journey.

This essay explores the role photography played in elaborating Robeson's anthropological vision and political platform, as expressed in *African Journey*. I ask, how did Essie Robeson see Africa in and as image and text? What forms of diasporic identification and belonging might have been nurtured through the presence of her son, Paul Jr., as a photographic subject? How do different registers and genres of photography—anthropological field images, family and tourist snapshots—collide and collude to produce a distinct photographic archive of an African continent on the verge of decolonization?

Through its mix of anthropology, travel narrative, and family photography, *African Journey* disrupts what we might call the backward-looking impulses of each of these three genres. By "backward-looking," I mean here a fixation with finding primitives, with romanticizing the past, with feverishly documenting and recording; and with the racial projects—anthropology, diaspora, and photography in the early twentieth century—that bound these together. Robeson writes against a dominant strain of academic anthropology—and racial science more broadly—that understood racial hierarchies as the natural outcome of the arrested development of groups deemed culturally and biologically inferior. *African Journey* also does not fall prey to the expressions, burgeoning in the Harlem Renaissance, of "diaspora," and "homeland," which embraced Africa primarily as a site of cultural heritage and prelapsarian

glory rather than as a living, breathing place in struggle and in formation.

And in her experimentation with different registers of photography, ranging from individual and family portraiture to still lifes of everyday objects to landscape, Robeson calls on the medium to push beyond its ability to record what theorist of photography Roland Barthes has called the “that-has-been,” seeking instead to document a diasporic encounter in the present.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Robeson’s photographs in *African Journey* refuse an anthropological imperative to photograph primitives, in this case Africans, as biological subjects whose bodies function as “visible signs” of transhistorical racial essences. Her images wrestle as well with a tendency to photograph other cultures “in the past,” in a fixed timeless but not present place, that is, both within and against what visual anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards has called the “ethnographic picturesque.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, by focusing her camera on modern technology and Western dress as well as traditional tribal artifacts, and importantly by including herself and Paul Jr. within her African frames, Robeson resists African American ideas about their “eternal bond” to an unchanging Africa that “is always there.”<sup>6</sup> To follow literary scholar Kenneth W. Warren, rather than “mak[ing] coincident only an African past to an African American present,” Robeson’s photographs open space to consider “the relationship of Africans to black Americans” in 1936.<sup>7</sup>

### **A Grand Dream Sets Sail**

*African Journey* is structured as a day-by-day diary of Essie and Paul Jr.’s summer abroad. Over the course of three months, Robeson observed the suffering and resistance, dignity and degradation, of the people she encountered. *African Journey* is bookended by Robeson’s italicized assertions of African humanity. The book is dedicated to “the brothers and sisters, who will know whom I mean.” And the narrative’s concluding paragraph is a single, italicized sentence: “*Africans are people.*” In a global political and cultural climate that dismissed African peoples as primitive, and eminently exploitable, such a contention bordered on the revolutionary. What lies in between the opening dedication to a self-selected family and the closing affirmation of African humanity are Robeson’s descriptions of modern cities, ancient yet complex native lifestyles, and African locals who were either educated and worldly, or poor and dignified. Her hope for the book was that it would “take folks right out to Africa with me, talking all the way there and all the way back. So you could know the folks,



7.1. Map depicting route of entire trip, from Eslanda Robeson, *African Journey* (New York: John Day, 1945). Courtesy of Robeson Family Trust.

hear them talk, and see what I saw."<sup>8</sup> Essie did not want to shy away from what she saw. Nor did she want to embellish suffering. Rather, she chose to look and write with political commitment and human solidarity, always aware of her unique and privileged position.

This was an ambitious trip to be sure: via steamship and boat, car and train, seaplane and airplane, Essie and Paul Jr. traveled to seven different countries or territories (figure 7.1). They were hosted by numerous friends and acquaintances they had met in England, mostly through academic and activist circles, African and white alike. The Robesons visited mis-

sion schools and colleges, the mines of Johannesburg, the marketplaces of Madeira and Mombasa, and colonial metropolises, as well as various townships, reserves, provinces, and villages. While in South Africa, Essie attended the All-African National Convention in Bloemfontein, a gathering of four hundred delegates from all over South Africa organizing against new legislation aimed at further disenfranchising the native population. The last month was spent in the Uganda's Toro province, where Essie conducted her "anthropological field work on cattle culture in Uganda."<sup>9</sup> The journey home to London took nine days, "All a dream and a nightmare," writes Essie, "because I was ill."<sup>10</sup> When they arrived in London on August 25, Essie was taken off the airplane on a stretcher and removed immediately to the hospital but recovered quickly.<sup>11</sup>

The challenges of traveling through Africa during this time were made more difficult by the fact that these travelers were a black/American woman and her only child. Yet this was offset by the privilege they enjoyed as the wife and child of one of the most internationally recognized and beloved black men of the moment, and by the kinds of social and political connections such status afforded them. However, while these perks certainly eased Essie and Paul Jr.'s journey, they by no means prevented physical illness or racist encounters, nor did they ensure safe passage (through the dangers of air travel, for example). On their visit to Mbeni in the Belgian Congo, Essie, Paul Jr., and their traveling party were initially denied rooms at a Belgian-owned hotel. "After considerable pressure from our D.C. [District Commissioner], and a lot of '*distingué*' and 'important' on his part against the '*noir, noir,*' the owner" relented and escorted the group to what Essie described as rooms "scarcely fit for animals."<sup>12</sup> Paul Jr. recognized this as a pyrrhic victory and remarked, "This is what we get when we are black and important. Wonder what we'd get if we were unimportant."<sup>13</sup> We might understand Robeson as navigating the bounds of her own mobility: traveling as a free black person to South Africa where "natives" could not move without official papers, journeying as an American of means on roads traversed by desperately impoverished displaced Africans, or entering spaces designated for men-only as a woman, still often requiring the intervention of colonial officials or "big men."

### **Anthropology**

The field of anthropology provided Essie a route into the African continent. While this may seem strange, such an approach was born of Robeson's

own political disposition and “New Negro consciousness,” a movement with a vibrant and active wing in the social sciences. While the social sciences broadly offered African American intellectuals a framework for addressing social problems, anthropology in particular presented “a way of documenting and celebrating their African heritage.”<sup>14</sup> It also provided some critical distance and perspective while enabling its practitioners to travel to black communities near and far. In this way, black anthropologists like Zora Neale Hurston, Arthur Fauset, Katherine Dunham, Jomo Kenyatta, and Eslanda Robeson were able to study and experience themselves and their cultures, to forge diasporic connections in an “objective” manner, “validated” by academic sciences.

Robeson’s methodology was further nurtured by her training at LSE under Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski emphasized “cultural relativism,” the idea that “we” Westerners might learn from other peoples.<sup>15</sup> Further, the anthropology program at LSE offered a rigorous course of study in African languages, history, culture, and geography. For her part, Robeson embraced anthropology for the real-world encounters it enabled and relied upon. Understanding the field as a form of “dynamic interpretation,” Robeson described anthropology “as the study of man and his relation to his fellow man, and to his changing environment. Thus it includes the study of primitive man under primitive conditions, of modern man under modern conditions, of human relations, race relations, of education, of social institutions.”<sup>16</sup> She recognized it as a field that encouraged one to truly engage human existence both synchronically and diachronically.

Robeson, however, recognized the limits of anthropology, particularly as it had been practiced by her (white male) predecessors. In *Kabarole*, Essie asked her hosts directly “what they thought of visiting anthropologists, and how they liked being ‘investigated.’ They smiled and said they were vastly amused, and would often take the searching and impertinent questions as a game, giving the most teasing, joking, and fantastic answers they could think of.” As one chief declared, “White people are not interested in us. They only want to take away our land and our cattle, and make us pay taxes. Why should we tell them our sacred history, and the details of our social organization?”<sup>17</sup> Such an admission invites her readers to question some of anthropology’s truth claims and underscores the discipline’s work in building European empires and as a “handmaiden of colonialism.”<sup>18</sup> Simultaneously, Essie positions herself here as an “insider,” a foreigner but as a diasporic subject, one who might be trusted with “tribal knowledge.” She reveals the “hidden transcripts” of her Ugandan

interlocutors, who possess a very clear understanding and critical analysis of their colonial subjugation.

Her political identifications coupled with her firsthand experiences led Robeson to resist some of anthropology's claims. First, she flat out rejected popular notions, alive and prevalent among her teachers and peers at LSE, that fixed African peoples as outside history and tied to an eternal premodern past. Her own experiences within the rich black diasporic community of London, where she and Paul regularly hosted African students and expatriates at their home and were active in the West African Students' Union, a political, social and cultural organization, gave her firsthand knowledge to the contrary. Essie's formal and informal meetings with natives in their homelands reveal a critical understanding of the ways colonial ideology has fixed them as "primitives" unfit for self-governance. For example, in Kabarole, Uganda, a gathering of "young, eager, and intelligent" schoolteachers ask Essie a range of questions about educational policy and opportunities for black people in England and America, and they are excited to hear about successful integration efforts of nomad tribes in the Soviet Union. In the course of the conversation, the group challenges the label of "backwardness" levied against them by the colonial government. "What do they mean by this 'backward'? Before I could answer, or try to answer, a fellow teacher said: 'They mean people they have kept back, and continue to keep back.'"<sup>19</sup> "Backwardness" is a condition imposed by white colonizers rather than an organic state; "primitive" is a fiction Europeans tell themselves to assuage and justify hierarchy and inequity. Similarly, when meeting with a group of chiefs in Mbarara, the capital of the Nkole province of Uganda, Essie was "surprised and impressed" by their inquiries into the conditions of Native Americans alongside more expected questions about Negro life and politics in the United States. Such conversations reveal Robeson's interlocutors as actively seeking information on antiracist struggles against settler colonialism globally, as well as challenging the racial logics of such systems.

On a lighter note, *African Journey* highlights the "here and now" of her subjects by consistently noting their engagements with technology and the vitality of their cities. Essie gushes over host Dr. Alfred B. Xuma's "gorgeous new 1935 Buick, complete with balloon tires, shock absorbers, special springs, etc" that brought her and Paul Jr. from Sfiatown, Johannesburg to Bloemfontein.<sup>20</sup> The lights of Johannesburg were "like Detroit"; Kampala, Uganda is a "colorful town with good roads, shops, smart African police, markets, and handsome African women."<sup>21</sup> Orderly cities, flashy amenities, and up-to-date technologies offer evidence of



modernity, especially when peopled (and patrolled) by Africans. And even if black Africans are segregated and sequestered into certain parts of the city or country, they still traverse these spaces, working in homes and mines that constitute them as a modern proletariat.

Further, rather than taking the anthropological tack that the non-European Other was different from the (“Western”) researcher yet still worthy of scholarly interest, Robeson deemphasized difference and distance, highlighting instead similarity. Textually, she found commonality in the similar experiences of black peoples under global white domination, the analogous ways that, for example, colonialism and Jim Crow segregation defined the textures of black life in South Africa and the southern United States. Essie notes that the network of safe houses developed by black travelers on the roads of southern Africa echoes the informal systems throughout the Deep South: “You are passed from friend to friend, from car to car, from home to home, often covering thousands of miles without enduring the inconveniences and humiliations of the incredibly bad Jim Crow train accommodations and lack of hotel facilities for Negroes.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, she is able to identify the vibrancy of black townships, segregated spaces cast off as dangerous slums but made into communities by their residents. Friedasdoorp, also known as Ferreirascamp, was the oldest township in Johannesburg, developed from a mining camp, and was considered “to be the roughest section.” For Essie, “It reminded me very much of Lenox Avenue in Harlem on a summer Sunday afternoon,” full of people enjoying themselves and each other.<sup>23</sup> The promotion of likeness over difference also emerges in the form of *African Journey* as travelogue rather than formal anthropological study: where the latter purports the objectivity of the social scientist, the former situates the writer/traveler at the center of the narrative.<sup>24</sup> Through attention to African modernity by highlighting Africans’ engagement with colonial politics as well as emergent technology, *African Journey* makes a claim to Africa and Africans’ *presentness*, over and against anthropology’s tendency to place the continent and its peoples outside of history.

### **Photography**

Visually, Robeson’s photographs augment such a political project by refusing exoticism and racial hierarchization, hallmarks of visual anthropology of the time.<sup>25</sup> This was also characteristic of film of the period, and Essie was acutely aware of the ways such images circulated globally.

"I blush with shame," Robeson reflected after the Bloemfontein conference, "for the mental picture my fellow Negroes in America have of our African brothers: wild black savages in leopard skins, waving spears and eating raw meat. And we, with films like *Sanders of the River*, unwittingly helping to perpetuate this misconception. Well, there will be no sequel to *Sanders!*"<sup>26</sup> Essie was of course referring to the 1935 film that starred Paul Robeson as a leopard-print clad African chief who loyally serves the British colonial regime. Essie had negotiated a handsome contract for this film but could not secure rights to approve of the final cut. The film's degrading images and procolonial sentiment pained and embarrassed the Robesons (as well as opened them up to critique from black leaders), making them both sensitive to their roles in future depictions of African and African-descended peoples.<sup>27</sup>

This overlap between Hollywood film and scientific photography also alerts us to the ways in which the photography and visualization of "racial and cultural 'otherness'" across genres could be "absorbed into scientific anthropology itself."<sup>28</sup> That is, while formally trained anthropologists may not have made touristic, erotic, or caricatured images of African peoples, such images were "informed and legitimated" by scientific anthropology. Likewise, anthropological collectors enlisted quotidian photographs of this sort to expand their archives. Thus, as Elizabeth Edwards avers, "photographs *became* anthropological through patterns of consumption."<sup>29</sup>

Essie's cultural politics become evident in the photographic work and practices of *African Journey*. Though new to photography and filmmaking as a practitioner at the time of the trip, Essie took hundreds of photographs and made some twenty reels of film.<sup>30</sup> She took great pains in putting the book together to choose the most evocative images for final publication. The images cross genres: portraiture, ethnographic evidence, landscape, casual snapshot, family portrait. The trajectory of the photographs—not only from the beginning of the book to the end, but across the span of her stay within each location—suggests that Essie was learning her equipment and developing her eye as the trip progressed. The opening folios of *African Journey* (there are seven in all) feature many photographs taken from a distance and devoid of people. For example, photographs like "Typical Basuto village" or "Palace of Mukama of Toro at Kabarole" make an effort to take in as much of the scene as possible. Panoramas such as "Basutos and Basuto house at Matsieng, typical of Basutoland" aim to present "a context of situation," as her teacher Malinowski endeavored to do in his own anthropological photography.<sup>31</sup>

As *African Journey* progresses, and as Essie settles into a particular

place and establishes a rapport with the people she's met, her camera gets closer and closer to her subjects. Some of these photographs reflect the parameters of her fieldwork, a study of "cattle culture in Uganda," and present careful visual categorizations that aim to catalogue, at indexicality, but also reflect her very real enthusiasm for the beauty of everyday objects. A series of photographs detailing "the making of banana wine [in] Kabarole," for example, ends with a carefully framed image of a "wooden vessel for finished wine." Similarly, Robeson's images of people also start out in an ethnographic vein (e.g., "A Pondo miner having his hair 'wrapped' in the compound at Robinson Deep [South Africa]") but often produce insightful portraits in which her subjects smile back comfortably.

Robeson chose to photograph the majority of her African subjects in a manner that directly countered the visions of empire, which sought the primitive and the iconic, the authentic and the timeless.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Robeson's photographs feature weddings, schools, people in combinations of Western and traditional/local dress. In these images, especially through the affirming genre of portraiture, Africans emerge as modern *individuals*, navigating both precolonial histories and colonial exigencies.

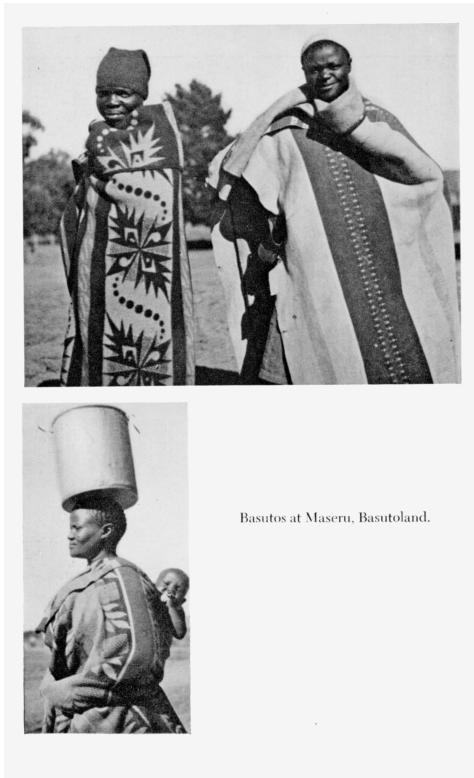
Through her camera, Essie also practices a modest gaze. Women almost always appear clothed in her photos, in contrast to the majority of photographs, postcards, films, and other visual ephemera that constructed native African women as savage and sexually available through visually equating nudity with primitivism (figures 7.2 and 7.3). Such framing might suggest a "politics of respectability," in which Essie imagines that a key way of elevating African women subjects in the eyes of American and European audiences is by visualizing them as modestly and chastely as possible. Indeed, an important goal of Robeson's trip was to seek out African women specifically. This was not always easy as Robeson's privilege placed her in a kind of liminal space as an honored guest under the protection of men and not relegated to designated "women's spaces." Her photographs, however, image women as often as she can: in marketplaces, in schools, in front of their homes. In Toro, Robeson spent the majority of her time with the herdswomen who handle the *bisahi*, the dairy. She describes this work as "women's business" and the women who conduct it as "delightful, intelligent, companionable."<sup>33</sup> She writes, "We enjoyed a lot of gossip while we worked, became very good friends, examined each other's hair, skin, clothes. We each found out how the other managed her husband, home, and children."<sup>34</sup> Thus we might also understand these photographs, like many others ("The schoolteachers of the district come to see us at our home in Kabarole"; "Some members

of the Nkole family who visited us at Kabarole to persuade us to come and see their country”) as reflecting relationality and exchange, the encounters that were at the heart of this trip.<sup>35</sup>

Robeson does not take camera work lightly. Throughout the text, she reveals that she is highly sensitive to the ways in which the camera as an anthropological tool can lay bare the unevenness in the relationship between the anthropologist and her subjects, as well as, more importantly for the political commitments of the project, between black American and black African. Robeson repeatedly asks permission to pull out her camera and make photographs—whether of people, of objects, or of workspaces—and waits until she has established a rapport: “I never bring [my camera] out unless I am sure no one will mind.”<sup>36</sup> She often offers something in return, whether photographs staged by the sitters themselves, as at the behest of the house staff in Kabarole; or money, as in the case of the Maseru, Basutoland, in South Africa where Robeson paid the hospital fees of those folks she photographed outside of the dispensary (clinic).<sup>37</sup>

In each of these ways, Robeson describes and practices photography as a kind of diasporic civil contract, photography as a tool that emphasizes mutual recognition between African diasporic subjects. Here, I borrow from Ariella Azoulay’s compelling concept of “the civil contract of photography,” in which Azoulay encourages us to envision the role of photographic spectatorship as one of “civic duty,” specifically in the case of images of the abused, the violated, the dispossessed:<sup>38</sup> “The nation-state (re)territorializes citizenship. . . . Photography, on the other hand, deterritorializes citizenship, reaching beyond its conventional borders and plotting out a political space in which the plurality of speech and action . . . is actualized permanently by the eventual participation of all the governed. These governed are *equally* not governed within this space of photography where no sovereign power exists.”<sup>39</sup> In Azoulay’s formulation, the civil contract of photography reinvigorates the radical political and liberatory potential of the medium of photography.

One aspect of this political relation is to recall that the photograph is not merely the product of a technology but also evidence of a set of relations. In the case of Robeson’s African images, the photographs record an encounter between two (differently) marginalized people, the photographer and the photographed, who have shared a space and a time. In the making of the image, the “partner-participants” enter a contract with one another and also with the users (later viewers) of the photograph, one in which we agree to speak to, of, and on behalf of the image and



7.2.  
“Basutos at Maseru, Basutoland,”  
photo by Eslanda Robeson, from  
*African Journey*.  
Courtesy of  
Robeson Family  
Trust.

7.3.  
Postcard of African  
woman, collected by  
Eslanda Robeson,  
circa 1936. Courtesy  
of Robeson Family  
Trust.

its subjects. The photograph then is never simply a record of the past, but in its ability to travel physical and temporal distances is persistently extending viewing communities and reminding us that the “effect” and “meaning” of any photograph is never “sealed off” or determined in the final analysis. Photography’s work is always in the present, in the here and now.<sup>40</sup>

### Diaspora

We might understand Robeson’s commitment to photography as announcing her as a “citizen in the citizenry of photography [which] entails seeking, by means of photography, to rehabilitate one’s citizenship or that of someone else who has been stripped of it.”<sup>41</sup> Put another way, photography reterritorializes belonging. This disposition is underscored by the presence throughout the photographs of Paul Jr., her young son whom, like Africa, she wants the world to see on his own terms. Robeson’s photographs in *African Journey* draw on, and blur the line between, ethnographic photography and family snapshots; a desire to note the familiar

unknowingly slips into recording the familial. If anthropological photography finds pleasure in difference, family snapshots locate joy in sameness, in the filial and the familiar. In her dedication to “the brothers and sisters,” Robeson is clearly hailing Africans as family, and locating her Pan-Africanist political vision in the space of kinship. Paul Jr.’s presence, in both text and image, brings this conjuncture into sharp relief.

It is the presence of Paul Jr., as traveling companion, interlocutor, photographic subject, and ward, that brings the genre-crossing or antidisciplinary work of *African Journey* into focus. Paul Jr. was born in Brooklyn in 1927, and for the first decade of his life lived primarily in England and Moscow, attending elite schools, and was largely isolated from other black children. For much of his life up to the moment of this trip, Paul Jr. was looked after primarily by Essie’s mother, Ma Goode, while Essie traveled with Paul and managed her husband’s business affairs. Essie often expressed enormous guilt about her extended absences as a mother. She did, however, have very clear ideas about how she wanted Paul Jr. to be raised and what kind of person she hoped he would become. She committed these ideas to paper in lengthy letters of instruction to her mother. In one letter, composed a little over a year before the Africa trip, Essie wrote that she wanted Paul Jr. to view himself the way Essie understood herself: “to feel perfectly at home and at ease in any company . . . to consider myself a pretty swell human being, and to look for human beings everywhere, in any walk of life . . . to open up my mind and to think with it . . . to do impossible things . . . to be as good as I could . . . never to think I am being looked down upon. I unconsciously feel I’m top dog. That’s the reason I am at home in any society. I want Paul to have that.”<sup>42</sup> Though originally not in the plan, it would seem that taking Paul Jr. along on this journey fit neatly into Essie’s broader vision for her son: “If some Africans on a film set open up a new world to the child, a trip to the heart of Africa itself will be a revelation. He will see millions of other brown and black people, he will see a black world, he will see a black continent.”<sup>43</sup> By intertwining her narrative of Africa with the experiences of her son, a dark male child, Essie alerts us to the fierce urgency of her vision for the African continent now and in the future.

Take for example the first image in which Paul Jr. appears, a group photograph of Zach Matthews, his wife Frieda, and their four children (figure 7.4). The Robesons visited with the Matthews at their home on the campus of the Fort Hare Missionary College in Alice, South Africa, almost 150 miles northeast of Port Elizabeth. Zach was a teacher there of “Bantu Studies.” In the photograph, Paul Jr. (at extreme left), stands in line with

7.4.  
"Pauli with Jack [Zach] Matthews and his wife, Frieda, and their children," photo by Eslanda Robeson, from *African Journey*. Courtesy of Robeson Family Trust.



the three oldest children. He wears a button-down, short-sleeved, white shirt and khaki shorts just like the two other boys. At the same height, Paul Jr. and the Matthews's older daughter stand side by side, with matching smiles and each with a half of a piece of fruit in their left hand. Their bodies squarely framed by Zach's shoulders, Paul Jr. and the girl twin each other. Similarly, Paul Jr.'s facial angle echoes that of Frieda's as they both smile for Essie's camera. Zach's right hand rests on Paul Jr.'s shoulder, his left hand appears on Frieda's shoulder. Frieda's hands rest on the shoulders of two of her children. Through a series of circles, of visual rhyming patterns, Paul Jr. is successfully enfolded into the Matthews family.

Photography scholar Marianne Hirsch asserts that the camera functions as "the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and self-representation . . . the primary means by which the family story is told."<sup>44</sup> In the photograph described above, as well as in the three other family portraits in which Paul Jr. is featured, we might consider Essie Robeson as attempt-

ing to tell a new “family story,” of “Africa, ‘my old country,’ my background, my people, and thus about myself.”<sup>45</sup> Paul Jr. serves as the link between Africa as anthropological research site and ancestral homeland. Paul Jr.’s presence also works to diminish the “intrinsic distance” between the Western observer occupying modernity and the “authentic African,” fixed in a “backward” past. In doing so, Robeson asserts the “here” and “now” of African peoples, the urgency and exigency of African struggles in real time, and a new “truth” and “authenticity” of African subjects.

But familial looking can be deceptive and divisive. The identifications such imagery engenders, as Hirsch reminds us, “can be too easy . . . and can also draw . . . lines of exclusion and disidentification.” These problematics become clear in Essie’s photos of Paul Jr. in Ngite, a “Pygmy” village and popular tourist site in the Ituri forest of the Belgian Congo (figure 7.5). (The term *Pygmy* refers to any group whose members are “unusually short,” generally under five feet tall. The specific group visited was likely the Twa.) In this image, Paul Jr. stands to the far right side of the group of village elders. They consider each other with curiosity. Paul Jr. and the village elders are all about the same height, probably around four feet, seven inches, and they occupy the same visual plane. This positioning certainly stands in contrast to popular safari photographs of full-grown white men and women who also visited Ngite, in which towering whiteness emphasized dissimilarity and worked to disparage and ridicule the Pygmies. However, it is Paul Jr.’s pith helmet, a hat commonly worn by British officials in the tropics, and his hands thrust into his khaki pants that mark him as foreign and highlight difference and distance. In the photograph with the Matthews family, Paul Jr.’s inclusion draws fictive though still heartfelt bonds of kinship between the African American Robesons and the Bantu Matthews, visually reconnecting the black family broken by and scattered in diaspora. As one woman proclaims of Paul Jr. on their trip, “That boy belongs to us—see his mouth, eyes, nose, and the shape of head—pure African. Oh yes, that boy belongs to Africa, to us.”<sup>46</sup>

But as Essie stresses, the Pygmies are from another time and another place. She quotes author Grace Flandrau’s description of the Pygmies as “not Negro” and Essie describes them as having “an oriental cast.” In the Ngite village photograph, Paul Jr.’s Western clothing and his place at the edge of the frame alert us to the challenges of a project that visualizes race, to quote Tina Campt, as “the link that presupposes diasporic membership and is simultaneously the site of its questioning.”<sup>47</sup> The juxtaposition of these two images of Paul Jr. in Africa underscores that the attempt to forge a politically viable diasporic relationship in the present is



7.5.  
"Pauli with the  
Elders of Ngite,"  
photo by Eslanda  
Robeson, from  
*African Journey*.  
Courtesy of  
Robeson Family  
Trust.



not uncomplicated or without challenge. For example, throughout *African Journey* Robeson identifies her kinship and connection to the people she encounters and articulates a privileged access to the hidden transcripts of African colonial subjects. What aided her in gaining this access: her blackness? That she traveled alone with a child? That she was wife to the famous Paul Robeson? Indeed, was Essie flattering herself by imagining a belonging that she didn't actually possess, a brutal revelation that Saidiya Hartman discovered she must make peace with when she was hailed as "obruni" or foreigner by Ghanaians in her own African journey, as she described in *Lose Your Mother* a half century later? In terms of Essie's camera work, did her fierce desire to counter Hollywood and other dominant misrepresentations of Africans lead her to own misrecognitions?

We might consider Robeson's photographic practice the projection of a "Pan-African gaze." On one hand, this gaze aims to produce a visual counternarrative that will reframe global blackness against dominant visual narratives of primitivity and abjection. Yet on the other hand, such a gaze highlights relations of power in looking that speak to the unevenness of relations between differently positioned diasporic subjects. In addition to offering a vital political intervention, *African Journey*, in text and in image, also reveals moments of *décalage* and disavowal.

## Notes

Epigraphs: Letter from Eslanda Goode Robeson to Harold Jackman, Monday, October 6, 1936, Robeson Correspondence, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven, CT. Eslanda Robeson, *African Journey* (New York: John Day, 1945), 84.

- 1 Robeson, *African Journey*, 18.
- 2 Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).
- 3 *The Literary Guild Review*, August 1945, 14–15. In Eslanda G. Robeson Papers, Series B: Personal Papers, Box 11: *African Journey* Book Reviews, Moorland-Spingarn Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.
- 4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).
- 5 Elizabeth Edwards, “Anthropology and Photography (1910–1940),” in *The Image of the Black in Western Art: The Twentieth Century: The Impact of Africa*, vol. V, part 1, eds. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). See also Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011); Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Typecasting: On the Arts and Sciences of Human Inequality* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009); Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- 6 Kenneth W. Warren, “Appeals for (Mis)Recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 394.
- 7 Warren, “Appeals,” 394.
- 8 Letter from Eslanda Goode Robeson to Carl and Fania Van Vechten, September 9, 1945, Robeson Correspondence, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven, CT.
- 9 Robeson, *African Journey*, 89.
- 10 Robeson, *African Journey*, 152.
- 11 Ransby, *Eslanda*, 121.
- 12 Robeson, *African Journey*, 119.
- 13 Robeson, *African Journey*, 119.
- 14 Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896–1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 143.
- 15 On Malinowski, see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Maureen McMahon, “Eslanda Goode Robeson’s *African Journey*”; and Henricka Kulick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also Malinowski’s introduction to his student (and Essie’s classmate) Jomo Kenyatta’s important ethnographic work, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965 [1938]).
- 16 Eslanda Goode Robeson, *What Do the People of Africa Want?* (New York: Council on African Affairs, 1945), 15, quoted in McMahon, “Eslanda Goode Robeson’s *African Journey*,” 126.
- 17 Robeson, *African Journey*, 136–37.

- 18 "Handmaiden of colonialism" is a phrase taken up and popularized by Talal Asad in his edited collection *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca Press, 1973). See also Kamari M. Clarke, "Toward a Critically Engaged Ethnographic Practice," *Current Anthropology* 51, no. S2 (Oct. 2010): S301–12.
- 19 Robeson, *African Journey*, 107.
- 20 Robeson, *African Journey*, 65. Dr. Alfred Bitini Xuma, one of Essie and Paul Jr.'s hosts in South Africa, would go on to be president of the African National Congress (ANC) from 1940 to 1949. See Ransby, *Eslanda*.
- 21 Robeson, *African Journey*, 128.
- 22 Robeson, *African Journey*, 65.
- 23 Robeson, *African Journey*, 73.
- 24 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish, eds., *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). Indeed, *African Journey* is based on and hews closely to the handwritten diary that Robeson kept during the trip. "Essie African Diary 1936," Eslanda G. Robeson Papers, Box 17: Diaries (1934–63), Moorland-Spangarn Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.
- 25 See Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 26 Robeson, *African Journey*, 48.
- 27 Ransby, *Eslanda*, 97–98.
- 28 Edwards, "Anthropology," 48.
- 29 Edwards, "Anthropology," 49.
- 30 These reels are held in the Eslanda G. Robeson Papers at the Moorland-Spangarn Center, Howard University, Washington, DC, but are currently unavailable for viewing.
- 31 Michael Young, discussing Malinowski's photographic practice, quoted in Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology*, 55.
- 32 See Paul S. Landau, "Empires of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa" in *Images and Empires*, eds. Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 141–71.
- 33 Robeson, *African Journey*, 108.
- 34 Robeson, *African Journey*, 109.
- 35 See Charles Musser, "Presenting 'A True Idea of the African Today': Two Documentary Forays by Paul and Eslanda Robeson," *Film History* 18 (2006): 412–39.
- 36 Robeson, *African Journey*, 96.
- 37 Robeson, *African Journey*, 134, 60–61.
- 38 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2008), 125.
- 39 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 25.
- 40 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 23. This "ontological-political understanding of photography" stands in opposition to colonial uses of photography; see Landau, "Empires of the Visual," 141–71.
- 41 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 117.
- 42 Letter from Eslanda Goode Robeson to Ma Goode (Eslanda Elbert Cardozo Goode), March 29, 1935. Quoted in Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: New Press, 1989), 194.
- 43 Robeson, *African Journey*, 17.

- 44 Marianne Hirsch, "Introduction: Familial Looking," in *The Familial Gaze*, ed. Marianne Hirsch (Hanover, PA: University Press of New England, 1999), xvi.
- 45 Robeson, *African Journey*, 14.
- 46 Robeson, *African Journey*, 133.
- 47 See Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 68.