

## Introduction

“Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*’”<sup>1</sup> With these forceful words, Anna Julia Cooper started a revolution. Born in Raleigh, North Carolina, the daughter of an enslaved black woman and her white master, Cooper rose to become an educator, orator, and author. Her prominent proclamation appeared in *A Voice from the South* (1892), a collection of essays and speeches that is recognized as one of the earliest expressions of a “race woman.” Emerging after the Reconstruction period and coinciding with the Woman’s Era, *race woman* was the term used to describe public women of African descent who aimed to “uplift the race.”<sup>2</sup> Race women saw it as their duty to play a leading role in solving both the “race problem” and the “woman question.” While the term could be pejorative, it also denoted a sense of high status and most race women claimed its positive overtones.<sup>3</sup> In her time and ours, Cooper was and is hailed as a leading race woman who understood the entangled relationship between race, gender, and class. As such, *A Voice from the South* is recognized as *the* black feminist bible.

But what is sometimes overlooked in Cooper’s most quoted phrase is her audience. She spoke not only to black Americans but to the “whole *Negro race*” scattered in every corner of the globe.<sup>4</sup> She was speaking from experience. Through *A Voice from the South* and her involvement with the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and Pan-African congresses, she challenged multiple forms of oppression across the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe by debating publicly and travelling frequently. Cooper was one of many such activist-intellectuals. Her contemporaries included clubwomen Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, and

Mary McLeod Bethune; Pan-African black nationalists such as the Jamaicans Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey and Panamanian-born but US-raised Maida Springer; leftists and communists Shirley Graham Du Bois, Thyra Edwards, Louise Thompson Patterson, and Trinidadian Claudia Jones; and African-born activists like Adelaide Casely Hayford, Constance Cummings-John, and Funmi-layo Ransome-Kuti, to name just a few.<sup>5</sup>

When we listen carefully to Cooper, then, we hear not only the voice of an American race woman; we hear the voice of what I term a “race woman internationalist.” Sharing a Pan-African sensibility, race women internationalists including Cooper and some of her contemporaries listed above were public figures who helped to solve racial, gendered, and other forms of inequality facing black people across the African diaspora. While the term is not uniform or static, many race women internationalists regularly travelled and were part of black diasporic networks and organizations in the United States, Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean that emerged in the wake of large-scale black migration from the late nineteenth century. The technological revolution in transportation following the opening of the Suez and Panama Canals in 1869 and 1914 facilitated the rise of travel and migration as shipping companies made voyages more accessible with new routes emerging and the cost of travel decreasing for the working and middle classes.<sup>6</sup>

Race women internationalists were part of the wider movements of Africans, Afro-Caribbeans from the British, French, and Spanish West Indies around the “circum-Caribbean migratory sphere,” and African Americans during the Great Migration.<sup>7</sup> Their sojourns enabled them to create and participate in the transnational black public sphere and civil society, a figurative and physical global community beyond the imperial or nation state that engendered the growth of international organizations, associations, institutions, charities, and print culture.<sup>8</sup>

Race women internationalists self-identified as members of the “darker races of the world” and voiced what historian Nico Slate has called “colored cosmopolitanism.”<sup>9</sup> According to Slate, the term describes men and women of color who forged “a united front against racism, imperialism, and other forms of oppression” and who “fought for the freedom of the ‘colored world’ even while calling into question the meaning of both color and freedom.”<sup>10</sup> Becoming visible from the late nineteenth century, race women internationalists were part of New Negro womanhood, which scholar Treva B. Lindsey defines as “a mosaic, authorial, and constitutive individual and collective identity inhabited by African American women seeking to transform themselves and their communities through demanding autonomy and equality.”<sup>11</sup> Yet New Negro womanhood was not confined just to black American women; it also included Afro-Caribbean and African women.

While none used the term *race women internationalist* to describe themselves, many black women activist-intellectuals practiced black, black feminist, Christian, liberal, conservative, radical, socialist, communist, and imperial internationalisms

by establishing or contributing to internationalist organizations or newspapers; writing prose, poetry, short stories, plays, or songs; and forging friendships with white, black, and other people of color, who served as their allies. Race women internationalists came from different parts of the global and overlapping African diaspora, articulated varied political views, and practiced deeply connected internationalisms that enabled them to play key roles in what historian Michelle Mitchell has labelled “the politics of racial destiny,” a concept based on the “wide-ranging yet singular notion that black people shared a common fate . . . [and that] enabled activists to propose a number of strategies—political, social, cultural, moral, physical, religious—to ensure the collective’s basic human rights, progress, prosperity, health, and reproduction.”<sup>12</sup>

Although the majority were middle class, working-class women, many of whom did not have access to domestic or international travel, could also practice race women’s internationalism. They could do this in quotidian ways such as reading and writing responses to newspaper articles in the transnational black press. Alternatively, they could be involved in global black organizations, such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) cofounded by Jamaicans Amy Ashwood Garvey and Marcus Garvey. Race women’s internationalism could further be practiced by working-class women through dancing to or creating the latest fusions of African American, African, and Afro-Caribbean music.<sup>13</sup>

Following in Cooper’s footsteps and sometimes travelling and collaborating alongside the aforementioned women, this book centers attention on three individuals from the Anglophone and Francophone African diaspora—Eslanda Robeson, Paulette Nardal, and Una Marson—and forwards two arguments. First, the travels of Robeson, Nardal, and Marson usually, but certainly not always, enabled them to create and participate in the transnational black public sphere through their involvement in manifold political, cultural, and social networks. Second, their travels facilitated their practices as race women internationalists as they engaged with interconnected internationalisms—namely, black, feminist, Christian, anti-fascist, conservative, radical, and liberal—through their sojourns, writings, direct activism, and friendships, which enabled them to play a part in global freedom struggles against racism, sexism, fascism, and colonialism.

Raised in a middle-class family in 1895 in Washington, DC, Eslanda Robeson had mixed black and Spanish ancestry. The Goode family, including Eslanda, her mother (also called Eslanda), and her two older brothers, moved to Harlem after the death of Eslanda’s alcoholic father in 1901. Neither a “slum or a fringe,” wrote activist and writer James Weldon Johnson, Harlem is “located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthful sections of the city.”<sup>14</sup> Harlem’s ideal geography and affordable brownstones attracted African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. Black migration meant that the “city within a city” contained “more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth.”<sup>15</sup> Harlem

was filled not just with blacks; it also enticed whites eager to slum as well as Chinese, Latinos, and Italian Americans.<sup>16</sup> Although racial mixing certainly took place, it existed alongside racial and ethnic antagonism. In the late 1910s, Robeson transferred from the University of Illinois to Columbia University to study chemistry. It was in Harlem where she first met the aspiring lawyer Paul Robeson.<sup>17</sup> Their relationship developed when they attended Columbia University's summer school in 1920, and they wed the following year.<sup>18</sup> As Paul Robeson's career as an actor and singer took off, Eslanda Robeson became his manager, securing him larger roles that propelled his fame.

Born in the Martiniquan town of Le François, Paulette Nardal was the eldest of seven sisters from an elite Catholic family. The Nardals were French subject-citizens who "elected their own deputies to the national assembly, lived under the National *code civil*, enjoyed the protection of French metropolitan laws, and largely ran their own municipal governments," but they also "lived in a racially organized colonial society with restrictive labor regulations and diminished social legislation under the authoritarian-administrative rule of non-elected French governors."<sup>19</sup> Paulette Nardal's father, Paul Nardal, was one of the first black Martiniquan men to receive a scholarship to study in France.<sup>20</sup> Later, he became one of the few black men to hold an engineering post at the Department of Public Works.<sup>21</sup> But his dark pigmentation stopped him from securing a senior position.<sup>22</sup> The color and racial prejudice that Paul Nardal faced proved that despite the lauded Republican rhetoric of *les droits de l'homme*, racism ruled the French empire. Paulette Nardal's mother, Louise Achille, worked as a schoolteacher and was a gifted musician.<sup>23</sup>

Nardal attended the prestigious Colonial College for Girls in Fort-de-France. Here she learned about the glories of the French Republic and its *mission de civilisatrice* in a capital city that attracted workers, traders, and tourists from Europe, the United States, and the French-speaking world, which made her curious about other parts of the Caribbean. In the late 1910s, after she had completed her secondary school education, she seized the opportunity to expand her horizons and learn English by moving to the capital of Jamaica. Nardal's time in Kingston enabled her to improve on her English-language skills and instilled a passion for English literature. After returning from Jamaica, she applied for and won a competitive scholarship to study for an advanced English literature degree known as the *diplôme d'études supérieures* at the Sorbonne and journeyed to Paris.

The youngest child of a middle-class Baptist pastor and mixed-raced mother, Una Marson grew up in the parish of St. Elizabeth in Jamaica. She attended Hampton High School modelled on British public schools, where she was one of a few dark-skinned girls.<sup>24</sup> Her complexion and scholarship status meant that she faced the prejudices of some of her white teachers and fellow peers. After leaving Hampton with a modest lower Cambridge certificate, Marson ventured to the capital in the early 1920s, following the death of her father and the family's relocation, which

was undergoing rapid modernization.<sup>25</sup> A burgeoning civic culture existed in Kingston and within a few months of her arrival in the city, Marson immersed herself in it. She served as a volunteer in the Salvation Army; it appealed to Afro-Jamaicans, some of whom felt excluded by Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Wesleyan churches because of their class and color.<sup>26</sup> She also gained employment as assistant editor of the *Jamaica Critic* a “socio-political monthly journal” and later took up a position as a stenographer.<sup>27</sup>

In 1928, Marson made history when she became Jamaica’s first woman editor-publisher of the magazine *The Cosmopolitan* (1928–1931).<sup>28</sup> She aimed to make *The Cosmopolitan* “an indispensable publication, and one that will be read by every man and woman truly interested in their own and the welfare of Jamaica at large,” but it also included stories about the United States, such as the growing popularity of Jamaican-born writer Claude McKay, the UNIA, and black intellectuals.<sup>29</sup> An aspiring writer, Marson used *The Cosmopolitan* to showcase her poetry and short stories. In 1932, Marson migrated again, this time to Britain, where she lived for the next four years.

The lives of Robeson, Nardal, and Marson shed insight into how respectability, travel, politics, and faith differently shaped black womanhood. All three figures adhered to but also challenged the politics of respectability.<sup>30</sup> As high school and college-educated women, they were seen to typify intelligence, refinement, and modernity. But the single status for the majority of Nardal and Marson’s lives (the latter married briefly in her fifties) reflected their choice not to follow the path of matrimony expected of women from their backgrounds. In particular, Marson was skeptical of marriage. In her debut 1932 play *At What a Price?*, staged at the Ward Theatre in Kingston, she subtly critiqued the pressure placed on young women to marry and penned satirical poems in *The Cosmopolitan* such as “To Wed or Not to Wed” that poked fun at the miseries of marriage. Yet as she aged, her views on marriage changed, and by the 1950s she argued that married women should give up work and fully immerse themselves as mothers in the home, leaving employment open only for single women.<sup>31</sup> That neither Marson nor Nardal had children undermined the imperative of motherhood for black women. But it was a topic they rarely spoke about either in public or private, which indicates that it was perhaps not a deliberate choice. Although married, Eslanda Robeson and Paul Robeson shared an open marriage from the 1930s onward that allowed both of them the chance to engage in extramarital affairs.<sup>32</sup> In order to pursue her career, Eslanda Robeson had her mother take responsibility for her son when he was a child.<sup>33</sup>

In their attitude towards working- and lower-class women, Nardal and Marson both held up middle-class behaviors and morals as the norm that should be aspired to. However, Robeson was far less concerned with working-class women’s behavior. At times, all of the women tried to help less privileged women by raising

awareness of the challenges they faced. But at other times they harbored paternalistic attitudes towards the poor.

The relative autonomy the women held in their personal lives provided them with opportunities to explore the world. When asked why she pulled up “roots every five years or so and (went) after a new experience of life,” Marson confessed, “I am an odd one.”<sup>34</sup> But she was far from exceptional. The deep desire for adventure, career advancement, search for self, or an expensive European education explains the hours, days, and weeks that Marson, Nardal, and Robeson spent on steamships and, later, planes. They journeyed for professional, political, and personal purposes and did so using their own financial savings and organizational funds. Yet although they could all afford to travel, economic insecurities plagued Marson in particular; her many volunteering roles meant that she did not always have a regular salary.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, Europe was the continent that Nardal, Robeson, and Marson gravitated to. In later years they ventured further to the United States and countries in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. At times, their voyages to known and unknown destinations were considered dangerous. For instance, colonial authorities, police, and intelligence services monitored Robeson’s and Nardal’s travels and were especially wary of any potential dissent they could spread among colonial subjects.<sup>36</sup> At other times, they enjoyed the comfort of travel.

As the women sojourned across the seas, their movements chime with literary scholar Carole Boyce Davies’s concept of “migratory subjectivity,” which she identifies as being part of black women’s literature and lived experiences.<sup>37</sup> According to Davies, “it is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that re-negotiates the terms of Black women’s experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities.”<sup>38</sup> In many ways, travelling illuminated Nardal’s, Marson’s, and Robeson’s multiple identities based on their national, regional, racial, colonial, class, color, and gendered identifications, enabling them to live “between races, cultures, languages, and nations.”<sup>39</sup> Yet these interactions were shaped by conflict and hierarchy, especially visible when the women lived in the contact zones of global cities defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”<sup>40</sup> The trio’s travels also embodied Gloria Anzaldúa’s idea of borderlands where “two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races, sexualities, classes, genders occupy the same territory.”<sup>41</sup> The politics of the locations they lived in support arguments made by historical geographer Katherine McKittrick, who states that “the category of black woman is intimately connected with past and present spatial organization.”<sup>42</sup>

Most importantly, crossing multiple national borders influenced the politics of Nardal, Marson, and Robeson. In the early 1920s, Robeson was not overtly politi-

cal but she had been “brought up in a household wide awake to every phase of the Negro problem in America.”<sup>43</sup> When she moved to Europe, she became more involved in the “Negro problem” beyond America’s shores through her work with leftist black diasporic political groups that fuelled her radicalism. Nardal’s initial conservatism had been shaped by her privileged position within French colonial hierarchies. Yet in the 1930s she came to collaborate with a range of figures whose political views she did not fully support. In her twenties and thirties, Marson had been a progressive, but as she aged, her politics changed and by the late 1950s, reactionary rhetoric replaced some of her left-leaning views. The varied political views expressed by the women reveal that labels like radical, conservative, progressive, and reactionary are too limiting when describing them. Such terms fail to take into account the flexible nature of the women’s political thought. This fluidity serves as a reminder of arguments made by historian Kate Dossett that black women tended to share overlapping ideological positions, not oppositional ones.<sup>44</sup>

Of the three women, only Marson self-identified as a feminist. First-wave feminism in Jamaica emerged from late nineteenth-century middle-class nationalism and was influenced by British and American women’s movements, which resulted in it reproducing colonial class and race hierarchies.<sup>45</sup> *The Cosmopolitan* specifically targeted upwardly mobile and aspirational single, middle-class black and brown working women and became a space for Marson to write about feminism. Its feminist focus was displayed in the bold editorial statement “this is the age of woman: what man has done, women may do.”<sup>46</sup> Scholar Rhoda Reddock defines this as a type of liberal feminism “which sought integration of black women (and men) into the established system rather than a more radical politics” such as calling for the extension of the franchise for all.<sup>47</sup>

While Robeson certainly held what today would be described as feminist politics, she eschewed this term mainly because of its associations with middle-class white women.<sup>48</sup> Yet from the 1940s onwards, Robeson would come to voice what historian Erik S. McDuffie calls “black left feminism.”<sup>49</sup> Nardal understood the importance of women’s involvement in the public and political sphere and belonged to feminist-affiliated organizations but did not use the moniker. Although Marson, Robeson, and Nardal did not label themselves as black feminists, they were aware of the matrix of race, gender, class, and other intersectional identities facing black women and belonged to its long tradition.<sup>50</sup> To disqualify them because they did not use the term fails to take into account the complexity and the changing nature of black feminism as an intellectual and activist project.<sup>51</sup>

Alongside impacting their identities and politics, sojourning also influenced the religious views of Marson and Nardal in particular. Marson’s Christian faith increased when she struggled to adjust to living in Britain in the 1930s and in the United States in the 1950s. A committed Catholic, Nardal’s faith drove her anti-fascist and pacifist activism in the interwar years and post–World War II

Martinique. Robeson was neither an atheist nor regular churchgoer, but she recognized the important power of black churches in civil rights protest in the 1950s and 1960s.

Numerous biographical works by scholars including Delia Jarrett-Macauley, Alison Donnell, Emily Musil Church, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Barbara Ransby have greatly helped to reveal the three figures' importance to struggles against racism, fascism, sexism, and colonialism; this book is significantly indebted to all those scholars.<sup>52</sup> It builds on these previous studies but focuses on particular periods in Robeson's, Nardal's, and Marson's lives, looking at them in light of each other to highlight comparisons and connections that shine new perspectives on their identities, politics, and travel.

By examining the differences and similarities between the three women, this book contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on black women's internationalism.<sup>53</sup> Existing and forthcoming work attest to the vibrancy of the field. Scholars such as Sharpley-Whiting, Carole Boyce Davies, Cheryl Higashida, Erik S. McDuffie, Dayo Gore, Tanisha Ford, Keisha N. Blain, Tiffany Gill, and Nicholas Grant and journals such as *Palimpsest: A Journal of Women, Gender, and the Black International*, established in 2012, evidence the rise in research.<sup>54</sup> This scholarship demonstrates how middle- and working-class black women from a variety of geographical locations and ideological positions expressed internationalisms through fashion, activism, literature, leisure, music, and travel. Within this research, there remains a tendency to center attention on groups of women united by their country of origin, political affiliation, or organizational membership—namely, in club, black nationalist, Harlem Renaissance, communist, or radical leftist groups. This focus is important but it can sometimes overlook women who were not explicitly part of these networks or who moved in and out of different networks. It can also obscure the links between black women of different political ideologies and from varied parts of the African diaspora. By focusing on Nardal, Marson, and Robeson in unison, this study adopts a comparative approach to elucidate the breadth of race women internationalists.

Furthermore, by considering the trio beyond the interwar years, this book interrogates the impact of the Cold War, international organizations like the United Nations, departmentalization, and decolonization. This broader chronological perspective, from the 1920s to the 1960s, also allows for a closer look at the continuities and changes that occurred in the women's activism and thought and adds to increasing scholarship of black women's intellectual traditions.

In 2007, scholars Carol B. Conaway and Kristin Waters observed that “when black women speak, if they are heard at all, their thoughtful assertions often are viewed as issuing from nowhere, lacking theoretical substance, disconnected from long-standing systems of classic Western thought.”<sup>55</sup> In recent years, many scholars have redressed this trend, especially those mentioned above. In 2015, another edited collec-



tion delved deeper into black women's intellectual history with its editors identifying what they call "intellectual history 'black woman-style'" 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."<sup>56</sup> Black women's ideas are found in an array of arenas "from political podiums, church pulpits, and the streets into intimate sites of writing: the letter, the short story, the poem, and the novel."<sup>57</sup>

This study reveals how as organic intellectuals, Robeson's, Nardal's, and Marson's ideas and actions regarding feminism, fascism, race, colonialism, Pan-Africanism, and civil rights derived from their everyday experiences. It focuses on how they were practiced through writings in newspapers, plays, poetry, short stories, speeches, anthropology, and interviews.<sup>58</sup> They were also practiced through travelling. By centering their sojourns, this research demonstrates how travel was critical to developing the women's intellectual thought and challenges travel scholarship that privileges the travelogue because their experiences were not always found in travel texts.<sup>59</sup> Alongside writing and travelling, the women were able to develop affective bonds of friendship that also facilitated their practices as race women internationalists.<sup>60</sup>

In order to tell the story of Nardal, Marson, and Robeson, this book explores a broad range of sources including published and unpublished newspaper articles, poems, short stories, and plays written in English and French. Despite these sources, tracing these women's lives has proved difficult. Robeson's, Nardal's, and Marson's mobility has meant that records of their lives are scattered across sundry locations, while other records have vanished or are classified as missing. Only Robeson and Marson have named archives in Washington, DC, and Jamaica respectively, while records of Nardal's life are located in Paris, Aix-en-Provence, and Fort-de-France. But the majority of her personal papers were destroyed, first at sea in 1939 and then in the 1950s following a fire at her home, meaning that questions continue to remain unanswered, especially regarding her personal life.<sup>61</sup> From the existing sources, it is clear that all the women did not want their activism or ideas to be forgotten. Marson and Robeson in particular, kept records of their speeches and published their own writings when publishers refused, sometimes at considerable expense.

While this book aims to explore both the political and personal elements of the women's lives, the fragmented nature of their archives and Nardal's and Marson's choice not to publicly discuss aspects of their personal lives means that this goal is limited. Yet by paying attention to the interiority of the women's lives, this book shows the ways in which the women challenged the "culture of dissemblance." According to historian Darlene Clark Hine, "because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives."<sup>62</sup> Robeson, Nardal, and Marson sometimes followed, but sometimes disrupted dissemblance

by making explicit references to the way in which their emotions and feelings, especially loneliness, shame, and optimism, shaped their activism and thought.

This book takes a thematic and chronological approach. Each chapter opens by setting the different contextual scenes before moving on to discuss the women. The first two chapters center on Nardal's, Marson's, and Robeson's experiences in London, Paris, Geneva, Madrid, and their travels farther afield to show how the differing contexts laid the groundwork for their practices as race women internationalists through their engagement in overlapping networks that enabled them to engage in black, feminist, and Christian internationalism. The third chapter explores how the Second World War and departmentalization in Martinique posed challenges and opportunities for the women to expand their involvement in black, feminist, imperial, and liberal internationalism. The final chapter considers the impact of the Cold War and decolonization in shaping Robeson's and Marson's investment in black, radical, and feminist internationalism. The sparse nature of some sources and the group biographical approach explains the uneven coverage in some of the chapters, where one or two women take priority. For instance, in the latter part of Nardal's life, she retreated from the activist terrain, so the final chapter focuses on Robeson and Marson. Ultimately, *Race Women Internationalists* is a piece of recovery history that simultaneously reinterprets our understanding of the role that black women activist-intellectuals played in global freedom struggles.

*A Voice from the South* spoke to the immediate historical moment of the Woman's Era and appeared just before *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) enshrined Jim Crow as law of the land in the United States. But it had roots in one century and consequences in the next. In a later passage, Cooper urged all women to take up leadership positions. Why? Because "woman's strongest vindication for speaking [is] that *the world needs to hear her voice*."<sup>63</sup> *A Voice from the South* acted as a call to arms for a generation of black women activist-intellectuals. Robeson, Nardal, and Marson took up Cooper's call. The following pages trace their trajectories.