

Tionne Alliyah Parris

PhD History Candidate

University of Hertfordshire

My current PhD research concerns the ideological connections between Black Radical Women of the early 20th Century and the Black Power Movement of the latter half of the 20th Century. I am interested primarily in the transfer of tactics and ideology, as well as the interpersonal and intergenerational exchanges between Black activists. My study explores the lives and activism of Black radical women like Louise Thompson Patterson, Eslanda Robeson, Claudia Jones and Vicki Garvin who were all a part of a Black Left network of radicals, but also crucially explores their transnational, anticolonial work, with particular emphasis on the ways their activism manifested. My study analyses their public writings and speeches, but also looks at their personal papers (and the letters therein) that highlight a network of Black radical activists who were frequently in contact during crucial periods of social and political upheaval in the United States. My work posits that despite the necessary retreat many of these women made from public life, as a direct result of rabid anti-communism in the 1950s, the lasting influence of their activism can be seen in the emergence of the US Black Power Movement in the late 1960s. My thesis lays out the extent to which these radical women had a significant record of activism that intersected with major US Black Power figures like Malcolm X, Kwame Ture, and later members of the Black Panther Party.

With the grant awarded by EAAS, I was able to book a trip to New York and visit the New York Public Library archives, including the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. At various NYPL locations I was able to use their online materials to access FBI records of surveillance of Paul and Eslanda Robeson, which illuminated when and how the FBI began to monitor these radical activists in the 1940s. I made multiple trips to the Schomburg Center to view their archival collection of the Civil Rights Congress, who had attempted to defend themselves and others against anti-Black and anti-communist crusades during the 1940s and 1950s.

I also spent time going through the papers of the radical Black activist Vicki Garvin, who features heavily in my work. I have been receiving digital scans of her papers since my PhD started, but nothing compared to holding her letters in my hands and seeing the full scope of the materials catalogued in her archive. There was significant crossover between all of the archives I accessed, with congratulatory letters from the Civil Rights Congress found in Vicki Garvin's papers, and Vicki Garvin reminiscing about her friendship with Paul Robeson in her own letters. This underscored how intertwined these activists were in their time and was a real moment of excitement as it really validated my project and the networks I am analysing.

I also accessed the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University. There I viewed the collection of Esther Cooper Jackson and James Jackson – a married couple who were heavily involved in Communist Party USA and communist affiliated activism throughout their lives. In this collection I found a great deal of Communist Party materials that have enriched my understanding of the Communist Party's influence through the 1920s to the 1960s, and beyond. This was a breakthrough for my project as I was interested in seeing how the Party line shifted when the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement emerged, and this archive provided some answers. I also delved into the personal letters of Esther Cooper Jackson, and there I found many of the women in my project conversing with her through the years. These

too were very validating and important documents to have come across as it emphasised the enduring networks that the women I study maintained.

Finally, not only was this grant useful for me to access institutional archives, it gave me the opportunity to experience New York City's rich history first-hand. I conducted a self-imposed scavenger hunt of Harlem, where I walked many of the streets that feature heavily in parts of my work. This acclimated me to the geography of local neighbourhoods that would have been the stomping grounds of the many women I write about. Additionally, I visited an exhibition at Poster House, titled 'Black Power to Black People'. This featured original Black Panther Party documents, including their early newspapers, posters, and photographs. It was a defining moment of the trip for me because, interspersed with archival work, it helped me draw together my thoughts about the two very distinct periods of Black radical activism I study.

All in all, the EAAS grant allowed me to fully immerse myself in the location and archives of New York City. The materials I was able to access will be incredibly valuable for my work going forward. I returned from my trip only a few days ago and yet I am already excited to get back to writing my thesis.