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'My Name is Pauli Murray'

Editor's note: Dr. Andrew Roth is traveling this week to Redlands, California with Jefferson President Ferki Ferati and Vice President Ben Speggen as the JES helps the University of Redlands and others prepare for the first Redlands Global Summit speaker series in cooperation with the Our Towns Civic Foundation and Esri geographic information system company. Below is a Dr. Roth "Classic Booknotes" article (#77) about the life, poetry, and documentary based on Pauli Murray. It was first published by the Jefferson in October 2021. Dr. Roth will return with a new article on October 6.



Maybe there is such a thing as a *zeitgeist* – the temper, the spirit or spirit of the times. If there is, one spirit who has finally found her time is Pauli Murray. Vaguely aware of her name and even less aware of her accomplishments, I happened upon her collection of poems, ***Dark Testament***, this summer while prowling in a bookstore in South Carolina. Struck by its epigraph, I read the collection in one sitting. And then I read it again. Its epigraph announces:

Friends and countrymen!
I speak for my race and my people –
The human race and just people. [1]

Which is what Pauli Murray devoted her life to doing. She spoke out for minority rights, worker rights, women’s rights, and, now, posthumously, by the force of the example of her own life, the rights of nonbinary, transgender people. As I began to read not only her own works but other accounts of her life, I asked myself, as did the commentator in ***The Guardian*** reviewing the recent documentary film ***My Name Is Pauli Murray***, “How is Pauli Murray not a household name?” [2]

Although directed by the same team of Betsy West and Julie Cohen who did ***RBG***, unfortunately, the Amazon Prime Video documentary ***My Name Is Pauli Murray*** [3] provides a strangely lethargic telling of Murray’s incredible life. A life so varied in its trials, tribulations, and accomplishments, it caused one critic to remark, “If this were a dramatic feature, I’m not sure my suspension of disbelief would be elastic enough to withstand the achievements presented here. Truth is indeed stranger, and more amazing, than fiction.” [4]

Part of the documentary’s problem is that in speaking to a 21st century audience, it focuses on Murray’s struggle – she suffered from depression and frequent

nervous breakdowns – as a non-binary person in a world in which neither Murray herself, nor those from whom she sought help, nor those whom she loved and loved her had either the understanding or the vocabulary to comprehend her plight. As The Poetry Foundation notes, “Murray was gender nonconforming, describing herself as ‘a girl who should have been a boy’ and trying without success to obtain hormone therapy. Though she didn’t like to characterize herself as a lesbian, she nevertheless had serious relationships with women, including a decades long partnership with a woman named Irene Barlow.” [5] While inarguably a central – (*the* central?) – facet of Murray’s character, such a focus obscures Murray’s many contributions to African Americans’ (Murray would have preferred the term “Negro”) and women’s civil rights progress. The documentary, for example, does not mention Murray’s authorship of the book ***State’s Laws on Race and Color***, which she wrote in 1948 at the request of the women’s division of the Methodist Church. As Kathryn Schulz notes in her superb biographical essay about Murray in ***The New Yorker***, “What the Methodist Church had in mind was basically a pamphlet. What Murray wrote was a seven-hundred-and-forty-six-page book ...” [6] A book Thurgood Marshall later called “the bible of *Brown v. Board of Education*.” [7]

Similarly, although the film does depict Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s acknowledging Murray’s contributions to women’s rights, it does not sufficiently explain why Ginsberg added Murray’s name as a coauthor of her brief for *Reed v. Reed*, the 1971 Supreme Court case that extended the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause to women. Ginsberg did that in recognition of Murray’s work for the National Women’s Party’s success in getting sex added as a protected category to the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Murray and coauthor Mary Eastwood’s seminal 1965 article “Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII”; Murray’s role as a cofounder of the National Organization of Women (NOW); and 1966’s *White v. Crook*, in which Murray and Dorothy Kenyon convinced a U.S. Court of Appeals to rule that women had an equal right to serve on juries. [8]

If some night you are restless and channel surfing, ***My Name Is Pauli Murray*** is worth the 90 or so minutes it will take you to screen it. A far better introduction to Pauli Murray and her incredible life, however, is Kathryn Schulz’s biographical essay in ***The New Yorker***, which can be accessed [here](#). Born in 1910, Murray died in 1985. In the intervening 75 years, she was a writer, a poet, a lawyer, a civil rights activist for African Americans, a leading figure in the women’s rights movement, and an Episcopal priest. She was orphaned when her mother died of a stroke and her father was tragically beaten to death by a white attendant while confined in a mental hospital. Raised by her aunt, Pauline Fitzgerald, in her maternal grandparents’ home in Durham, North Carolina, Murray taught herself to read by age five, graduated from high school at 15, and, looking north, sought admission to Columbia University only to

discover it did not admit women. Her segregated southern education did not prepare her for admission to Hunter College, which did admit women, so Murray, living with a cousin, went to high school in Queens before enrolling in Hunter from which she graduated in 1933 – the depths of the Great Depression.

Limited by being both Black and a woman and unable to find work commensurate with her abilities, Murray, after some time in a Works Project Administration (WPA) camp, hoboed across country with her first love, Peg Holmes. Deciding to attend graduate school at the University of North Carolina, she was rejected because of her race. In 1940, 16 years before Rosa Parks, Murray refused to move to the back of the bus in Petersburg, Virginia. Defended by the NAACP, Murray and her companion were thwarted in their effort to challenge Jim Crow laws when a southern judge shrewdly ducked the issue by only charging them with disorderly conduct. Thus stymied, Murray decided to study law. She entered Howard University Law School in Washington, D.C. in 1940. She was the only woman. She graduated in 1944 first in her class.

During law school, in 1942, she organized student sit-ins at local restaurants almost 20 years before the more famous civil rights sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina and elsewhere. After graduating from Howard, she sought admission to Harvard Law School to earn a master's degree but was denied entrance because of her sex. She later earned graduate degrees in law from both the University of California Berkeley and Yale University. It was at Howard that she bet one of her professors that *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the legal justification for “separate but equal,” would be overturned in 25 years. She was wrong. It was overturned 10 years after she made the wager when the professor in question supplied Thurgood Marshall and others working on *Brown v. Board of Education* with a paper Murray had written in law school attacking the “separate” notion as violating the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause. Marshall and his legal team used it as the keystone of their argument.

Although she did coin the term “Jane Crow,” Murray did not create “intersectionality,” but she was among the first to recognize the intertwined relationship of Black rights, the rights of Black women, and the rights of women of all colors. She was a prime mover in the women's movement of the 1960s and as mentioned earlier a co-founder of the National Organization for Women. The one thing she did not do was work for gay rights or defend individual rights on the basis of sexual orientation. She was always extremely private about her personal life. However, as the documentary ***My Name Is Pauli Murray*** demonstrates, she is now belatedly being adopted as a champion of nonbinary individuals. Late in life, she retired from the practice of law and entered an Episcopal seminary. In 1977, she became the first African American woman ordained as an Episcopal priest. In 2012, the General Convention of the

Episcopal Church honored Murray as one of its *Holy Women, Holy Men*, and, in 2018, she was made a permanent part of the Episcopal Church's calendar of saints. In 2016, Yale University named one of its two new residential colleges after her (the other was named after Benjamin Franklin) – *Pauli Murray College*. [9]

It was Murray's fate in the great issues of the 20th century to almost always be both ahead of her time and to work in the background. Now, it seems, the times have finally caught up with her and she is belatedly being recognized.

Similarly, her poetry, which she wrote throughout her life, was, while not a private affair, not widely distributed or known. She published her first autobiographical book, *Proud Shoes*, in 1956 and her memoir, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage*, in 1987. A collection of poetry, *Dark Testament and Other Poems*, was published in 1970. The latter was re-published by Liveright in 2018. It was a copy of *Dark Testament* that I picked up in 2021 in South Carolina.

As her poetry illuminates, Murray sheds light on duality – intersectionality – as she explores the challenge of multiple identities: African American, mulatto, African-American woman, man occupying a woman's body, born woman but identifying as male, and Christian in a Christian world surrounded by non-believers. Occupying all of these spaces, Murray was consumed by uncertainty. Poetry, as Elizabeth Alexander writes in her "Introduction" to *Dark Testament*, enabled Murray to face and explore "the interior space between certainty and uncertainty, and poetry allowed her to be in those spaces without contradiction." [10] Growing up Roman Catholic in a midwestern sea of Protestantism, although I would never compare my experience to being Black in America, I have just a tinge of the awareness of what it means to be "different," of being on the outside looking in, of always being suspect as Murray describes in the "Mulatto's Dilemma":

from Mulatto's Dilemma

I curse the summer sun
That burned me thus to fate recognition.
Should such a thought strike terror to my frame
More than another?
... Were I but paler
By a single tone they would not see me tremble;
Or if in shackles here, they'd buy my strength
And let another starve ...
... they stare
At me; they note the curl below my hat;

They trace the darker line below my chin. [11]

In my recent **Book Notes** on [turning 75](#), we brushed up against the sentiment Murray, who, like all great artists, unflinchingly confronted reality and asked the hard questions, asked of herself in “Youth to Age”:

from Youth to Age

Aged one and wise,
Were you twenty-two again
Would you risk all for fame?
Conform?
Or go your way alone? [12]

Although Murray did not live to experience the age of total communications in which we are now drowning and, obviously, had no experience of social media, in 1939 she had the prescience to ask:

Tongues

It is quite possible, I think,
That tongues, not money,
Are taproots of evil.
If men were mutes and could not babble
There'd be less need for conferences,
Caucuses, rallies, meetings, speeches –
The tongue dragging the body around. [13]

Although her ambition and drive were different from that of the conqueror or ego strutting entrepreneur like Elon Musk, she was ambitious and tireless in her quest to make the world a better place for those excluded – African Americans, women, workers, and those whom society scorns. But she was wise enough to know that in her ambition resided a small kernel of vanity shadowing her virtue, and unlike Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and perished when the sun's heat melted his waxen wings, she was wise enough to know when to dial down, return to Earth, recharge and gather herself.

Icarus

Now that I have climbed
The steep battlements of the universe,
Joined in heavenly discourse
And gazed daylong upon the sun,
I am weary of the stout heart's solitude,

Bewildered by the mutterings of the spheres,
I would creep once more beneath a friendly stone,
My dust contained in earth's embrace. [14]

Her poetic masterpiece, however, is *Dark Testament* in which, in 12 cantos, she tells the emotional and moral history of Africans in America becoming African Americans. No, becoming Americans. Murray reminds us, as I have said in my *The American Tapestry Project's* "The Immigrant's Tale," unless you are descended from the Indigenous People, everyone reading this is descended from someone who came from somewhere else. Some earlier, some later; some willing, some unwilling; but everyone is descended from someone who came from somewhere else.

from Dark Testament,

from Canto 1.

Freedom is a dream
Haunting as amber wine
Or worlds remembered out of time ...

I was an Israelite walking a sea bottom,
I was a Negro slave following the North Star,
I was an immigrant huddled in a ship's belly,
I was a Mormon searching for a temple ... [15]

from Canto 2.

America was a new dream and a new world for dreaming.
America was the vast sleeping Gulliver of the globe.
America was the dream of freedom.
But the dream was lost when the campfires grew ... [16]

from Canto 3.

The men of Africa were stalwart men,
Tough as hickory deep in their primal forests,
Their skins the color of tree-bark ...
Storytellers all refusing to be hurried,
Who nightly by the village fires
Recalled the tribal history ... [17]

from Canto 5.

Black men were safe when tom-toms slumbered
'Til traders came with beads and rum ... [18]

from Canto 6.

We have not forgotten the market square –
Malignant commerce in our flesh –
Huddled like desolate sheep –
Tumult of boisterous haggling –
We waited the dreadful moment of dispersal ... [19]

After all of that, Murray reminds us the dream of freedom still persists, although it has become:

from Canto 8.

Hope is a song in a weary throat ... [20]

Murray even sheds a light on current politics, the politics of divide and conquer reminding us that the rich pitting the poor against the poor is a very old game played by southern planters and now billionaire populists stoking resentment:

from Canto 9.

Pity the poor who hate –
Wild brood of earth's lean seasons –
Pity the poor, the land-robbed whites,
Driven by the planters to marshy back lands ... [21]

from Canto 10.

The drivers are dead now
But the drivers have sons.
The slaves are dead too
But the slaves have sons ... [22]

It's as if she anticipated our current spats about critical race theory, which I wager not two in 10 bemoaning it can define it, it having become shorthand for not wanting to learn the history of how we Americans got to now.

from Canto 11.

Tear it out of history books!
Bury it in conspiracies of silence!

Fight many wars to suppress it!
But it is written in our faces
Twenty million times over! [23]

And without any pedantry about dates and other historical trivia, Murray reminds us that African Americans are as American as cherry pie and any other bleached out cliché one might care to use, for like all immigrants of very, very long standing, like, say the English, the French, the German, the Dutch, et. al., they have been here so long they have no “back” to go back to.

from Canto 12.

We have no other dream, no land but this;
With slow deliberate hands these years
Have set her image on our brows.
We are her seed, have borne a fruit
Native and pure as unblemished cotton. [24]

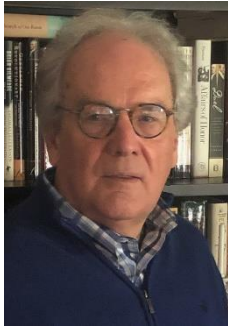
What the story of the person whose name is Pauli Murray tells us is that we are all in this together. The burden of whether that story ends in triumph or tragedy is upon us. For Murray’s part, although she’s been dead these past 36 years, her life magnificently proves, as I have said in ***The American Tapestry Project’s*** “Freedom’s Faultlines: Tales of Race and Gender” that the greatness of America and the American ideal is demonstrated by those who were at first excluded from “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal” fighting for inclusion by appealing to those very ideals, one of which is the rule of law.

Murray as an African American, an African-American woman, as a woman, as a nonbinary person did not seek to tear down or destroy or refute those ideals. She sought, she fought, to make them real and to make them apply to all Americans. She didn’t burn anything down, she didn’t shoot up a church prayer group, or invade the U.S. Capitol; she just called Americans to be true to the better angels of their nature, or, as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “to just be true to what you said on paper.”

Pauli Murray had a prophetic vision of what America could be – a vision she shared with Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., Emma Lazarus, Toni Morrison, and countless millions of immigrants who saw in America a dream of pure possibility. As Murray sang in 1969:

Prophecy

I sing of a new American
Separate from all others,
Yet enlarged and diminished by all others.
I am the child of kings and serfs, freemen and slaves,
Having neither superiors nor inferiors,
Progeny of all colors, all cultures, all systems, all beliefs.
I have been enslaved, yet my spirit is unbound.
I have been cast aside, but I sparkle in the darkness.
I have been slain but I live on in the rivers of history.
I seek no conquest, no wealth, no power, no revenge;
I seek only discovery
Of the illimitable heights and depths of my own being. [25]



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End Notes

1. [Murray, Pauli. "Epigraph." *Dark Testament*. \(New York: Liveright, 2018\), p. Unnumbered prefatory pages.](#)
2. Rose, Steve. "How is Pauli Murray not a household name? The extraordinary life of the US's most radical activist" in **The Guardian** (September 17, 2021) available at <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/sep/17/how-is-pauli-murray-not-a-household-name-the-extraordinary-life-of-the-uss-most-radical-activist> accessed October 17, 2021.
3. Cf. "My Name is Pauli Murray" at [IMDB.com](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11092594/) available at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11092594/> accessed October 17, 2021 and other sites streaming Amazon Prime videos.
4. Henderson, Odie. "Reviews: 'My Name is Pauli Murray,'" at [RogerEbert.com](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/my-name-is-pauli-murray-movie-review-2021) available at <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/my-name-is-pauli-murray-movie-review-2021> accessed October 17, 2021.
5. "Pauli Murray," at **The Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/pauli-murray> accessed October 17, 2021.
6. Schulz, Kathryn. "The Many Lives of Pauli Murray," in **The New Yorker** (April 17, 2017) available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/17/the-many-lives-of-pauli-murray> accessed October 17, 2021.
7. Ibid.
8. "Pauli Murray," in **Wikipedia**, the free encyclopedia, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pauli_Murray accessed October 17, 2021.

9. Details for this brief summary of Murray’s life come from Schulz above, the **Wikipedia** article “Pauli Murray” previously cited, paulimurray.yalecollege.yale.edu, now.org and paulimurraycenter.com
10. Alexander, Elizabeth, “Introduction” to Pauli Murray, **Dark Testament and Other Poems**. (New York: Liveright, 2018), p. xii.
11. Murray, Pauli. “*Mulatto’s Dilemma*,” **Dark Testament**. (New York: Liveright, 2018), p. 25.
12. Ibid., “*Youth to Age*,” p. 45.
13. Ibid., “*Tongues*,” p. 56.
14. Ibid., “*Icarus*,” p. 75.
15. Ibid., “*Dark Testament*,” p. 3.
16. Ibid., p. 4.
17. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
18. Ibid., p. 9.
19. Ibid., p. 11.
20. Ibid., p. 13.
21. Ibid., p. 14.
22. Ibid., p. 15.
23. Ibid., p. 17.
24. Ibid., p. 19
25. Ibid., “*Prophecy*,” p. 66.

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