Pauli Murray: Eleanor Roosevelt's Beloved Radical

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During her long and contentious life that spanned much of the twentieth century, Pauli Murray (1910–1985) involved herself in nearly every progressive cause she could find. Yet the contributions of this black woman writer, activist, civil rights lawyer, feminist theorist, and Episcopal priest have
largely escaped public attention. Murray earned a reputation as an idealist who saw the world differently from many of the activists who surrounded her. She also walked away from several important organizations and movements when they were at the height of their influence. At the same time, her actions have seemed prescient to those involved in many of the social movements that have subsequently claimed a piece of her legacy. Through her friendships and writings, Murray left a long list of people deeply influenced by her, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton, social activist Marian Wright Edelman, and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Murray’s life story deserves to be made available to the larger public, but how does one do so in a way that honors her own obdurate unwillingness to be reduced to any clear set of vectors—to be, in effect, agreeable?

I first encountered Murray’s posthumously published autobiography, *Song in a Weary Throat* (1987), tucked away in the basement of Princeton University’s Firestone Library, shelved with the books on black biography. One could immediately sense that there was something hidden among its pages. There were the photos of an unusually thin woman with short hair and a wry expression, the seemingly impossible life story, and the evident wanderlust that drove her from one form of activism to another. I was looking for books on black lawyers, but by the time I published my own account of Murray’s story I had discovered a multilayered life that reached far beyond the bounds of the legal field. To the modern reader—more attuned than previous generations to the complex intersectionality of identity politics—Murray seems to speak directly from the page. However, this presents a problem for biographers, who struggle against the temptation to reduce Murray to a type: she has been variously claimed as a Cold War conformist, a prophetic voice in the workplace discrimination movement, a representative of the Depression-era Southern left, an advocate of democratic theology, a crusader against sex discrimination in the legal profession, and even an early representative of the modern-day transgender movement. Each new wave of scholarship and activism has found its own history embedded in Murray’s life. Murray’s story fits into “two basic registers—the typical and the exceptional,” as the historian Kate Masur has formulated the problem of writing biography as history. Murray’s life is inevitably read as typical, the kind of story that historians are used to telling with individual lives representing something larger about that person’s own time, and perhaps our own. But the problem is that she was also so exceptional that such efforts inevitably do violence to Murray’s extraordinarily unique flesh-and-blood life experience.
Any attempt to briefly describe Murray quickly highlights the challenge of constructing a straightforward narrative of her life. Her biography seems to dramatize many of the most critical social and political struggles of the twentieth century: a gender-ambiguous pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance who wrote reams of poetry, prose, and letters, Murray rode the rails as a hobo during the Great Depression, nearly became an NAACP desegregation plaintiff (twice), struck up a long friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt, graduated first in her class at Howard Law School, earned a graduate law degree at the University of California, was influential in the creation of the National Organization of Women (NOW), penned a striking family history of her black and white ancestors called Proud Shoes, was the first black woman hired to practice law at the prestigious New York law firm Paul, Weiss, joined the African American exodus to the newly decolonized Ghana where she taught constitutional law, and played a decisive role in the creation of sex discrimination law during the 1960s (including lobbying to keep the word “sex” in the Civil Rights Act of 1964). To top it off, late in life she became the first black woman ordained as an Episcopal priest.

Patricia Bell-Scott, who corresponded with Murray in the early 1980s and spent decades writing The Firebrand and the First Lady, recognizes the challenge. Her biography addresses it in part with the choice to focus only on Murray’s long and influential friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt, which Bell-Scott largely chooses to present as a conventional narrative with only minimal interpretation. Although Murray narrated many of the details of the friendship in her autobiography, Bell-Scott notes that many facets of it still cry out for explanation. For instance, how did the patrician first lady and the poor, undernourished, and intermittently employed black woman initiate, preserve, and deepen a sometimes brutally frank relationship? Despite her efforts, a satisfying answer to this critical question remains elusive in Bell-Scott’s well-researched book.

Bell-Scott acknowledges that Murray was not entirely responsible for Roosevelt’s unusual solicitude for African Americans and civil rights. That was a product of her previous friendships with the educator and New Deal administrator Mary McLeod Bethune and NAACP head Walter White. But Murray was something different. She was impetuous and rebellious in a way that could get under Roosevelt’s skin. The first lady once called a letter from Murray “one of the most thoughtless I have ever read.” Murray was undeterred, responding, “You have been utterly frank with me, and I should like to be equally frank with you.” Yet the two women could quickly forgive one another, and shared concerns continued to bring them together. Murray, on behalf of the Workers’ Defense League and the March on Washington
Movement, was among those who lobbied Roosevelt hard on behalf of Odell Waller, a black sharecropper sentenced to death after killing a white farmer over a crop dispute in Virginia. Roosevelt, in turn, lobbied her husband as persistently as she dared to on Waller’s behalf. When Waller was executed, both women were shaken.

The most transgressive aspect of Murray and Roosevelt’s friendship, however, was not their letters—however frank they were—but their social interactions. Roosevelt purposely and publicly celebrated her friendships with black Americans as a means to attack racial inequality when, as first lady, she had no formal governmental power. After she arrived at the White House, Roosevelt made a point of interacting socially with African Americans, servants, sharecroppers, and miners in ways that scandalized traditionalists and dramatized inequality. Cross-racial social interactions were key, as well, to Murray’s own emerging civil rights theories. Her struggles with segregated public facilities and experiences with gender ambiguity would soon become the core of her groundbreaking idea of “Jane Crow”—that sex discrimination should be prohibited by law. The two women quickly found the means to push their respective agendas forward through their mutual social interaction. But it was more than mere instrumentalism: despite their significant difference in age—Roosevelt was twenty-five years older—the women shared a deep affection, even when they differed.

Murray and Roosevelt had nearly met early in the 1930s, when Roosevelt toured the New Deal women’s camp where Murray was recuperating from one of her many physical and emotional crises, and Murray refused to stand in her presence. Murray spent much of her early working life poor and malnourished, and tended to take on social causes that exhausted her. She also experienced a series of emotional breakdowns, partly over failed relationships with women and partly over her struggles with her gender identity; when she traveled, strangers sometimes mistook her for a boy. Why she refused to stand in Roosevelt’s presence is unclear; it may have been exhaustion, or it may have been a symbolic protest action.

The two began corresponding in 1938. Murray wrote to the president to criticize his failure to rebuke the University of North Carolina; he had recently accepted an honorary doctorate from the school despite its refusal to admit black students. She copied the first lady who, to her surprise, responded. Soon afterward, the two met in person at Roosevelt’s Manhattan apartment when Murray led a delegation for National Sharecroppers Week. Various social reform efforts would continue to bring them into contact with one another—sometimes on opposite sides, as Murray inevitably staked out a more radical
stance than Roosevelt. After one exchange of tense letters, the two met again in the first lady’s apartment to make peace in August of 1942. This time, Murray took the civil rights activist Anna Arnold Hedgeman along.

After this détente, Murray soon began calling Roosevelt by the familiar “Mrs. R.” Tea at the White House followed in 1943. None of this prevented Murray from sending Roosevelt her biting poem, published in *The Crisis*, entitled “Mr. Roosevelt Regrets,” which riffed on the president’s milquetoast response to the 1943 urban race riots. Murray’s searing lines could easily be claimed by the modern-day Black Lives Matter movement (and still may yet be):

What’d you get when the police shot you in the back,
And they chained you to the beds
While they wiped the blood off?
What’d you get when you cried out to the Top Man? . . .
What’d the Top Man say, black boy?
“Mr. Roosevelt regrets . . . . . . .”

“I am sorry but I understand,” read the first lady’s terse reply.

President Roosevelt’s death in 1945 presented a challenge for both women, as Eleanor Roosevelt dealt with both the loss of her husband and the end of the public role that she had carved out for herself as first lady. For her part, Murray, a committed socialist, thought that FDR was the one Democrat for whom she might have finally voted. The friendship between the two deepened when Roosevelt invited Murray to the first of many visits to Val-Kill, her country home in upstate New York.

When Roosevelt died in 1962, Murray was distraught. She attended the funeral and later made a pilgrimage to Roosevelt’s summer home to commemorate her memory. But Murray had more than two decades of life left, during which she continued to antagonize political allies (criticizing the leaders of the March on Washington, for instance, for excluding women) and to break new ground. She earned her doctorate in law from Yale, secured a tenured professorship at Brandeis University, then did something that left even friends aghast. Fueled by the spirituality that pervaded all of her activism, Murray gave up her tenured position in her sixties to train for the Episcopal priesthood, despite lacking assurance that the church would ordain women in her lifetime. Along the way, she often cited Roosevelt as a key inspiration.
Bell-Scott’s work succeeds in connecting Murray and Roosevelt to larger historical processes while focusing on the details of their individual lives. But her method does have its costs. The Firebrand and the First Lady is at times a too-straightforward narrative of what these women did, what they wrote to each other, and the factual circumstances that surrounded their many letters and meetings. On the subject of why Murray and Roosevelt formed and deepened their friendship, it offers less insight than one might hope. Bell-Scott notes that, genuine friendship aside, Murray served Roosevelt as a kind of ethical scourge, insisting that she not turn forget the many ways that the political climate—including her husband’s administration—failed to address some of the most urgent racist ills of the day. On the other hand, Roosevelt became a sort of surrogate mother after Murray’s two aunts (who were like parents to her) passed away. She also tempered Murray’s political radicalism, even leading her to support candidates such as Adlai Stevenson who strayed far from Murray’s civil rights vision.

Yet one senses many more layers to the relationship. For instance, Murray and Roosevelt’s friendship was hardly one of equals. Relationships across the color line rarely were in that era, and this is especially so given Roosevelt’s privilege and her status as first lady. Roosevelt had the power to further Murray’s career, to grant her surcease from her many struggles at Val-Kill when Roosevelt wished, and came to represent an island of maternal stability amidst Murray’s many material and emotional struggles. It is true that Murray—at least in her younger years—could criticize Roosevelt with a bluntness that sometimes shocked the first lady, but that criticism seems to have ebbed in time. Murray clashed repeatedly with allies, breaking decisively with her long-term mentor, A. Philip Randolph, over her criticism of the March on Washington, and splitting with feminist allies at the National Organization for Women soon after its creation. Progressive political causes could rarely contain her individual, confrontational, and deeply conflicted nature.

The exception to that trend, however, was her relationship with Roosevelt. One wishes that Bell-Scott had tried to do a bit less straight narrative and a bit more interpretation in a book whose mandate is to capture the nature of their friendship. Murray herself narrated most of the factual details of the long friendship in her autobiography. While The Firebrand and the First Lady adds many more details to that narrative, it does not fundamentally challenge the story as Murray herself told it. The conflicted bonds that linked black and white women within historical movements for equality have been the subject of scholarly debate for decades. Murray and Roosevelt were not the first, and certainly not the last, black and white public figures to maintain close friendships at a time when such relationships were difficult, rare, and
socially ostracized. Such friendships inevitably incorporated some combination of genuine affection, instrumental use, and paternalism (or more accurately maternalism), but *The Firebrand and the First Lady* leaves these evident questions for others to explore.

At times Bell-Scott gives into the temptation to make her story speak to our modern political agendas in a manner that undercuts Murray’s own deeply complex biography. Born Anna Pauline, Murray adopted the name “Pauli” by the early 1930s to reflect her preference for gender ambiguity. Bell-Scott knows that Murray firmly rejected the label “homosexual” when she came to grips with her complicated sexuality, and instead insisted that she was a man trapped in a woman’s body. Nonetheless, Bell-Scott consistently identifies Murray as a lesbian, arguing that she merely rejected the diagnoses of contemporary doctors who labeled homosexuality a mental disorder. In this regard, Bell-Scott may have been influenced by recent efforts to claim Roosevelt herself as a lesbian. But Murray rejected much more than this. She even stated that “homosexuals” “irritate me,” and refused the pleas of one lover, for instance, who encouraged Murray to identify as homosexual.

Drawing on nascent early twentieth-century ideas about the biology behind gender expression, Murray instead described herself in 1937 as having a “glandular” predisposition to “inverted sex instinct—wearing pants, wanting to be one of the men, doing things that fellows do, hating to be dominated by women unless I like them.” Bell-Scott asserts that Murray used the term “lesbian” to refer to herself in conversations with several people, but provides no citations, dates, or other evidence to document this assertion. It may be that as Murray grew older, and as gay and lesbian identities consolidated themselves as sites of political affiliation, she eventually embraced the term as a means of definition for her complicated sexuality. Without more evidence, however, this assertion remains firmly in the realm of speculation, as well as anachronistic for the period the book principally addresses. Like her contemporary, Langston Hughes, Murray’s hard-to-define sexuality has intrigued many scholars and activists but simply does not match up to our present-day political imperatives.

Bell-Scott also indulges in the temptation to give Murray’s sexual identity more explanatory weight than it can bear. For instance, she argues that Murray’s sexuality (which she hid from the public) may have been the reason that the NAACP ultimately rejected her as a plaintiff to desegregate the University of North Carolina. Yet as has been demonstrated elsewhere, Murray probably had a losing case since she was not a North Carolina resident, and the sole evidence that Murray’s personal characteristics might
have played a role in the decision comes from an ambiguous interview she
gave nearly forty years later. The evidence we have from the 1930s, including
Murray’s private correspondence after the NAACP rejected her case, point in
the opposite direction.

Likewise Bell-Scott speculates that Murray’s sexuality might have played a role
in the NAACP’s decision, one year later, to refuse to appeal her conviction
after she was arrested aboard a segregated bus in Virginia. At first the
NAACP’s leaders eagerly embraced her case, publicized it, and wanted to take
it to the Supreme Court—which of course undercuts the argument that they
were worried about her personal characteristics. Here again the evidence does
not support Bell-Scott’s proposition. She does not seem to recognize the
significance of the fact that Virginia authorities chose to convict Murray of
disorderly conduct rather than under their bus segregation law, making it
extremely difficult for the NAACP to use her case to challenge the segregation
law. In fact, the NAACP had a policy in such cases of not appealing disorderly
conduct convictions, and its leadership treated Murray just like they treated
other black clients in similar cases. Murray’s liminal identity certainly explains
some of the disappointments and exclusions that characterized her long life
and career. It would have been hard for any woman, particularly one such as
Murray, to have had the kind of prominence in the male-dominated civil rights
circles that she craved. But it does not explain every such disappointment.

Nonetheless, Patricia Bell-Scott has done an extraordinarily important service
in bringing Pauli Murray’s complex, important, and once-forgotten story to
the attention of the larger public. Everyone should know about Murray. She
expressed her complex individuality in a way that seems to speak to universal
experience. Roosevelt did also. That is why their lives, both as biography and
history, have had so much appeal to successive generations of writers, readers,
and activists. It is easy to find ourselves reflected in their lives and stories. It is
dangerous as well. Perhaps the most important story that both women teach is
about the difficulty of making into history a life that was so expressively and
painfully human.