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Pauli Murray Hopes To "Supply Insights" In Her Archive

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Abstract: In 1956, Pauli Murray's first autobiography, Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family, was published. Thirty-one years later, Murray's second autobiography, Song in a Weary Throat: Memoir of an American Pilgrimage, was published posthumously in 1987. Pauli Murray captures the remarkable life of her maternal grandparents in Proud Shoes because she was able to access archival materials, family records, and interview senior members of her family. In Song of a Weary Throat, Murray writes about her own extraordinary life because she assiduously kept correspondences, diaries, journals, drafts of speeches, newspaper clippings, letters to the editors of the New York Times, and various other materials. As an African American, Murray keenly understood the value of primary documents to help document the life of African American people. In this article, I rely on letters and journal entries I read in Murray's archive to illustrate her belief and hope in the archive.

Keywords : Pauli Murray, Black women writers, Black women's archives, autobiography, social justice, sexual orientation

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Introduction

Anna Pauline "Pauli" Murray was a poet, lawyer, civil rights activist, professor of law and politics, co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the first African American woman ordained as an Episcopal priest. She[1] earned several degrees, including an AB in English from Hunter College in 1933, three law degrees, an—L.L.B., L.L.M., and a J.S.D.— in 1944, 1945, 1965 from Howard Law School, the University of California, Berkeley Law School, and Yale Law School respectively. She also earned a M. Divinity degree from General Theological Seminary in 1976. Pauli Murray accomplished all this at a time when many Black women were unable to earn one degree let alone five. One of the best kept secrets about Murray is that she wrote two autobiographies, *Proud Shoes: The Story of An American Family*, published in 1956 is the first genealogical history of a Black family traced in the United States; her second autobiography, Song in a *Weary Throat: Memoir of an American Pilgrimage*, completed in 1985 and published posthumously in 1987. To conduct research for Proud Shoes, Murray relied on materials maintained by members of her maternal family, conducted oral histories interviewing family and community members, and read documents housed at "historical societies, state archives, the National Archives in Washington, and school and

1 In private letters, Murray sometimes referred to herself as Pete. At other times in her life, Murray sought male hormone treatments. Of course, during Murray's lifetime she was not able to transition to a male or to live publicly as a gender nonconforming person or as an out lesbian. This makes referring to Murray complicated. Some scholars use female pronouns, others use male pronouns and still others use gender neutral they/them pronouns. I have chosen in this article to use she/her pronouns given the topic. I am writing about Black women's archives and in the materials I cite Murray uses she/her pronouns.

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church records" (*Proud Shoes* xvi). To write her second autobiography, Murray relied on her personal papers she had been collecting throughout her adult life. Obviously, Murray recognized the importance of the archive as a way to maintain historical records, specifically for Black people; she also recognized that writing inspired by materials in the archive could bring people's past to life.

Pauli Murray lived an extraordinarily interesting and complicated life, and we know this because she left traces of her life recorded in diaries, journals, and letters to close friends, family, and acquaintances. This article explores part of her writerly life while writing her autobiographies. To that end, I focus specifically on a tiny part of her archival materials that includes letters between Murray and Caroline Ware[2] which also includes feedback about *Proud Shoes* from Helen Lockwood.[3] I also analyze a couple of Murray's diary and journal entries about writing Proud Shoes and a letter where she describes drafting *Song in a Weary Throat*. Furthermore, I briefly highlight more broadly the scarcity of Black women's archives in juxtaposition to Murray's which is vast and accessible.

Pauli Murray donated her papers in 1970 and 1973 to Harvard University's Schlesinger Library. After Murray passed, Karen Watson, her grandniece, donated more of Murray's papers in 1987. A portion of Murray's collection includes "135 file boxes spanning the years 1827-1985…22 photograph albums…[and] 120 audiocassettes," (Hollis for Archival Discovery, Harvard Library, Pauli Murray). In the archival materials I reviewed, Murray does not use the term archive or explain her archival process; she does, however, reveal in a 1971 letter to Ware she "happily…tended to document important experiences as [she] went along" (Murray archives, MC, Box 78, August 19, 1971). This comment to Ware acknowledges that Murray knew for many years she would write another autobiography. What is revealed in the Collection Overview section of the Pauli Murray Papers' finding aid webpage is an explanation describing Murray's archival process:

> The arrangement reflects Murray's filing system as closely as possible. Murray clearly kept alphabetical and chronological correspondence files, employment files, and files containing personal and autobiographical information … Murray apparently kept a number of separate alphabetical groupings within her subject files.

(https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/8/resources/48744#).

It is evident in the collection that she assiduously kept correspondences, diaries, journals, photographs, drafts of speeches, sermons, poems, short stories, newspapers clippings, letters to the editors of the

2 Caroline Ware was an historian who taught at Howard University from 1941-1961. Pauli Murray met Ware when she was a law school student at Howard in the 1940s. Pauli Murray sought feedback from Ware on both autobiographies.

3 Helen Lockwood was a professor of English and one time department chair of English at Vassar College from 1950-1956. Caroline Ware and Lockwood were friends, and Pauli Murray came to know Lockwood through her friendship with Ware. Although Lockwood and Murray exchange letters, I do not cite them in this article. I cite from a letter written by Ware to Murray which includes feedback from Lockwood concerning *Proud Shoes*..

New York Times, and various other materials for future review, analysis, and publication.

As an African American who understood that history that is told and written lives on in perpetuity, Murray's archive is an embodied expression of the desire to be seen and remembered. This desire for the archive to keep alive Murray's contributions to history is reminiscent of Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams's call for the discipline to make space for the histories written by and about voices on the "margins." In brief, Jones and Williams suggest a "new kind of interrogation" that encourages the discipline's histories to be "recursive, one that allow[s] us to re-see and re-think" (583) which stories are told, acknowledged, and centered. Their suggestion to "re-see" and "re-think" helps me to think about the archive and the way it can function historiographically to tell the stories of marginalized individuals and groups even beyond those in rhetoric and composition. Pauli Murray's archive comes to mind instantly because she wanted her contributions to American society to be seen and for Americans to "re-think" the ways she contributed to major social justice movements in the twentieth century.

To better understand Murray's archive, it is necessary to consider the archives of other Black women writers. Jean-Christophe Cloutier writes about the Black American literary archive. He notes both the absence of Black women's archives and the extent to which the repositories that house the few "remain neglected" (13). To emphasize his point, Cloutier points to Ann Petry's collection at Boston and Yale University to make a broader statement about Black women's archives. He admits, "the history of the Ann Petry archive is a particularly painful reminder of the many ways—both external and self-inflicted—in which black women writers' archives are scarce" (Cloutier 13). Moreover, Cloutier admits in his own quest to learn more about Petry that "evidence gathered in the Ann Petry Collection at Boston University began to point to another, undisclosed manuscript collection at Yale and the research efforts [he] undertook in [his] fevered attempt to find it" (13). Lack of information about the location of Petry's archives, and more broadly, lack of care for Black women's archives concern Cloutier. Although he is referring to the literary papers of Black women writers, his assessment is apropos. The collections are small and the information about Black women's archives is scarce no matter the genre.

A similar point is underscored by Natasha N. Jones and Miriam F. Williams who explain the difficulty of gaining access to Black women's mental health archives for their research purposes. Their goal had been to learn about Black women's mental health from "the mid to late 1800s" (179). They learned, however, that the records they needed had been "restricted" (180). Equally upsetting, Jones and Williams were told that additional records containing information about Black women's mental health was on microfilm but poorly maintained (qtd. in 183). Such denied access to them and accountability to maintain records that include the experiences of Black women frustrated Jones and Williams. They admit, "this meagerness, this disappearance of, or, more appropriately, the **disappearing** of Black lives and lived experiences has been persistent and consistent, making hard work for researchers, scholars, or individuals interested in tracing the Black experience in the US across the centuries" (184). These realities are indeed problematic, which makes it all the more remarkable that Murray had the presence of mind to not only keep her papers but donate them in hopes that

access would reanimate her life in death.

Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family: Journal and Diary Entries and Letters

Jean-Christophe Cloutier points out that Black writers in the twentieth century "accumulated papers" (9) because, "in part, many African American authors lived with a constant threat of annihilation and in part because of a forced self-reliance, they deliberately developed an archival sensibility whose stakes were tied to both politics and aesthetics, to both group survival and individual legacy" (9). Indeed, in the voice of a third person observer, Murray writes in an undated typed synopsis of *Proud Shoes* the importance of recording her family history to make a point about her family legacy. She acknowledges, "that neither her family nor herself have been failures, that that struggle for status and achievement is basically the heart of America, that as long as there are Americans like the Fitzgeralds, white or black, something solid and essentially good will endure in America" (Murray archives, MC, Box 78 ND). This third person observation provides Murray the opportunity to acknowledge her own achievements without appearing grandiose while also linking her own successes to the achievements of her maternal family whom she knew to be good, decent Americans. In sum, these good, decent Americans, including herself, deserved to have their stories documented and told to the larger public so that their contributions would not be forgotten.

While Murray was intent on writing about the Fitzgerald family, she acknowledges in her private journals that writing can be hard. In one January 1953 journal entry, Murray worries about whether she had something to contribute to the world in writing *Proud Shoes*. She admits:

> I did a little revision work on the book today. But nothing new and original. I wonder whether I have anything in me worth saying, or whether I am really capable of saying it. Sometimes I think I am a big fake all around…Is my story important to tell? I think so, yet the burning passion to get it down on paper which I had last spring seems gone from me.
>
> (Murray archives, MC, Box 1, January 10, 1953)

The next day Murray, continuing to fret, writes, "I seem to be plodding along, just pitching it out, unable to decide what is significant and sayable and what is not" (Murray archives, MC, Box 1, January 11, 1953). Of course, Murray eventually completes the autobiography which provides such important genealogical and historical details about her maternal family.

To know Murray is to know that she processes much of her life through her letters to family, friends, and acquaintances. Thus, the correspondence between Murray and Ware reveals a writer longing to perfect and preserve her family's stories and her own independent and interdependent life among family and friends. In a typed letter dated January 21, 1953 to Ware, Murray tells her the Saxton award she received to write *Proud Shoes* provided financial relief but also "psychological value…—it kept the spirit alive—and

while I am a long way from a best seller, I think when it finally comes it will be worth reading. I want it to reflect the blend of laughter and tears which after all is the essence of every life and therefore universal" (qtd. in Scott 80). Pauli Murray is referring to the Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Award given to writers by Harper & Brothers, which she received in 1952. In an undated handwritten letter to Murray, Ware tells her she likes the introduction to *Proud Shoes.* Caroline Ware offers the following feedback, "The introduction-prologue is terrific. It packs a wallop and sets the stage for both. The writing is fine as is with just a wee bit of paring here and there. It would be better a little shorter" (Murray archives, MC, Box 78, ND).

Caroline Ware gives more detailed feedback on November 22, 1953, which also includes feedback from Lockwood. They focus on "structure" (qtd. in Scott 84) and "presentation" (qtd. in Scott 85). Regarding structure they comment, "both of us think you should go from p.15 to the chapter on the Fitzgeralds without bringing grandmother in until you have given grandfather's narrative to the point where he marries grandmother" (84). Concerning presentation they offer the following, "we think it should be narrative and character throughout, avoiding editorial treatment, genealogical excursions, historical reviews, essays, etc." (qtd. in Scott 85). The feedback ends with enthusiastic support for Murray's eventual book to come. They declare, "It's a wonderful and absorbing story, with some superb pages, and many more that will be as good when the unnecessary detail or comment is weeded out" (qtd. in Scott 85). In between jobs and the passing of her adopted mother, Pauline Dame Fitzgerald, the maternal aunt who raised her, Murray continues to add chapters to the manuscript even as she admits that the stresses of life make writing challenging. On December 10, 1955, Murray writes to Ware, "Proud Shoes, like a veteran from the wars, hobbling along home. Have rewritten one chapter and completed four new chaps since my return from New York and end is definitely in sight—word limit almost exceeded" (qtd. in Scott 104).

Nearly one year after the December 1955 letter to Ware, Murray's book was published on October 17, 1956. A *Proud Shoes* file contains a review written by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt published in *The Washington Daily News* on Wednesday, October 24, 1956. Mrs. Roosevelt concludes the book review by suggesting, "I think this book is American history, which all Americans citizens should read. It will bring pride to our Negro citizens and greater understanding to all of us who, tho of another race, are part of the human brotherhood and are citizens of the same country which all of us love in the same way" (Murray archives, MC, Box 79, 24 October 1956). In a January 1, 1957 diary entry, Murray reflects on the year 1956. She begins by noting her trials and triumphs by admitting, "it was a tumultuous and very significant year for me…the Stevenson campaign and simultaneous publication of Proud Shoes; rave book reviews but no book clubs" (Murray archives, MC, Box 103 1 January 1957). The autobiography did not sell as well as Murray hoped, nevertheless, it was an achievement for her as a Black woman in the 1950s.

Song in a Weary Throat: Memoir of an American Pilgrimage: Journal Entries and Letters

Move forward fifteen years later and Murray definitely has something to offer the world about her life. She hypothesizes to Ware in 1971 about a biographer who might write about her life. Murray confesses, "The significant thing which came through to me was a very real question as to whether an active individual should attempt an autobiography for publication or merely leave a record to supply insights to future biographers" (Murray archives, MC, Box 78, August 19, 1971). This revelation from Murray underscores what Helen Freshwater writes about the purposes of the archive. For Freshwater, "the archive exists in and through text, as the written record of another time" (733). Freshwater's concept of "another time" is evident in the same 1971 letter to Ware when Murray reflects on feedback she had received from her on drafts of four chapters of *Song in a Weary Throat.* Pauli Murray appears overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information she wants to transmit from memory to page that she reveals in the letter that she might have to leave "Notes for my Biographer" (Murray archives, MC, Box 78, August 19, 1971). In other words, Murray recognizes her archive may provide "another time" for a biographer to come along and tell a different part of her life's story.

In journals and letters to friends, Murray makes it clear that she often thinks about her physical and mental health, her intrinsic worth, money, or lack thereof, employment, social status, and even her sexual orientation. Yet, there is something else on her mind. Murray thinks about her legacy, which in turn means she thinks about the archive. In Murray's second autobiography, *Song in a Weary Throat,* she recounts how precious she viewed her papers. For instance, in 1969 student protestors at Brandeis University had taken over a building that housed Murray's office which "contain[ed]…file cabinets crammed with manuscripts, research notes, correspondence, and other irreplaceable records" (Murray 535). Murray worries, at first, about the student protestors using the building as a weapon against the university administrators because "one student had told [her] half-jokingly that in a confrontation they just might burn down [her] office. [She] feared that if the rumored threats were carried out [her] most cherished possessions would go up in flames" (Murray 535). Murray became enraged, however, when after the student protestors left, she returned to her office to find the students had "appropriated personal items, helped themselves to [her] books and supplies, and left behind notes of their strategy sessions" (Murray 535). Pauli Murray valued her papers too much for them to be defiled or damaged by student protestors. She was, in fact, already thinking about the future of her papers, i.e., her legacy, even as she lived in the present.

The Archive: Pauli Murray's Crowning Achievement

I take seriously Royster and Williams's observations that textual histories need to be more inclusive, thus, I offer as have Jessica Enoch, Eric Darnell Pritchard, Candance Epps-Robertson and others for an expansive understanding of histories that can provide a macro, micro, and meta lens on the ways history is written and remembered. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Williams remind us that "history is important, not just in terms of who writes it and what gets included or excluded, but also because history, by the very

nature of its inscription as history, has social, political, and cultural *consequences*" (563). No one understood these realities more than Murray. Amid so much turmoil and change in the twentieth century, Murray's decision to maintain the papers and artifacts of her life was prescient. Throughout her life, she challenged gender and racial oppression and won and lost key civil rights battles. Murray wanted the battles and sacrifices recorded by way of a written history. This law of self-regard that Murray advances by collecting her papers for a future archive illustrates her abiding hope and faith in the living word.

It may be that of all of Murray's accomplishments, her crowning achievement is that she kept her papers, photograph, and other key documents and donated them so that scholars would someday write about how she and her family contributed significantly to American society. Troy R. Saxton, a most recent biographer, notes "Murray provided an incredible resource to tend and expand the historical record" (294). Murray understood, like Royster and Williams and Jones and Williams that the voices and contributions of Black people should not be ignored. Black people are an integral part of American society and their contributions to discipline specific histories and to American society more broadly need to be documented and made public. The collection that Murray assembled and subsequently donated provides the backdrop for a kind of eternal hope that her history, in fact, will live on in perpetuity. Hope, along with foresight, carried Murray far. As Cheryl Glenn tells us, "...with hope comes a collaborative belief in some kind of future, some alternatives to the current situation" (123). Murray's hope to "supply insights" for biographers and scholars alike to tell a more complete story is that belief come to life.

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