

The following excerpts are quoted from an audio interview transcript included in “Documenting the American South”, a freely available resource hosted by the University Library (UNC-Chapel Hill).

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0044/menu.html>

“PAULI MURRAY:

It's the same thing, "protest if you must, but at the same time, let your throat ache double with the cry of beauty here and now." Here is a child that was brought up essentially close to nature and essentially, I think, with great freedom and a sense of love, being surrounded by loving people in one's environment. And never really relinquishing this longing for love in however a way you wished to describe it. Love as the great instrument of change and whatnot. I think that it comes out perhaps more in "The Newer Cry" than it does in "Youth, 1933." Because in "Youth, 1933" I'm really talking about my contemporaries, the young Communists, the young Socialists, the young radicals. In "The Newer Cry" I'm talking particularly, I guess, about the protest literature that is being written and so much of it is so heavily weighed with the protest of being a black person in America at this time. For me, you can see that always responding to challenge. You say I can't and I'll *show* you I can even if I die trying. This was my attitude toward America and so was it Claude McKay's. You know, "I must confess I loved this cultured hell which tests my youth, although she feeds me bread of bitterness and sticks her tiger's tooth into my ...", whatever, "I must confess I love this cultured hell." Well, this has been my attitude toward America. I love America and whatever she hands me, I'm handing her back with, I hope, a championship quality. So, so many of my heroes, my racial heroes, have been the champions, the Jackie Robinsons, the people who climbed over and said, "I'll show you."

GENNA RAE McNEIL:

For the sake of all those who may in the future listen to this and not be able to understand, perhaps because of the circumstances under which they listen to it, let's go into a little bit more about "I love America." You are saying, "I love America" for a particular kind of reason. Was it really America as it was actually, with violence and with all the problems of society, all the injustices, but can you explain more about what it was?

PAULI MURRAY:

Well, I mean by saying that "I love America," that first, it is home. No one can be more native to America than America's black population, because America's black population biologically is all of the great streams of mankind that make up America. The first American, the indigenous American, by this time there has been so much recirculation of genes that we are all mixed up. We all have Indian, European and African ancestry. Secondly, traditionally, black Americans go back to the very beginnings of America. Our blood and our sweat and our tears and our memories are built into the country and I maintain that Africa has already made her contribution to America, that America is as she is today, culturally, because of the presence of black Americans. The impact upon speech, the impact upon customs in the South. America would have been a different country without the presence of blacks.

GENNA RAE McNEIL:

Yes, even though it was involuntary, it was something that left an indelible imprint upon America.

PAULI MURRAY:

Right.

GENNA RAE McNEIL:

And of course, as you said, that as much as we are built into it, we built it.

PAULI MURRAY:

Yes. All of this, then, plus America's dreams. Some people might call it her pretensions. I want to see America be what she says she is and I consider it part of my responsibility to do that. It's a kind of patriotism ...well, let me give you a symbol of it. When I went down to look at the archives, to look at the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States for the first time, enshrined in the Archives, behind those glass cases, with its honor guard, just as I entered, here was a uniformed black American standing as the guard of honor to protect these two hallowed documents, from the point of view of our history. To me, there was such great symbolism in that, that it was black America who was safeguarding the true meaning of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. Well, poetic people tend to deal in symbols, but it just happened that this is the way I saw it."

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"GENNA RAE McNEIL:

Now, while you were doing all these things and meeting with radical intellectuals, did you maintain close contact with your relatives, with your family, your extended family, and your friends in North Carolina and your friends at Hunter? How did this affect those relationships?

PAULI MURRAY:

I would come back and forth, but obviously, I suppose my ideas would tend to be more radical than those of the community that I left. So much so, that when I, in 1938 when I applied to the University of North Carolina, this was met with consternation by my family, my immediate family, primarily because they were afraid that they would be lynched, or that the house would burn down, I think it was real fear, not disagreement with me on principle, and I think that by that time, I was perhaps so far from a ... I don't want to say, "sedate," but by that time, I had become a completely emancipated mind, let me say. Fairly independent and no longer willing to come back and be a part of the social milieu of the little community I left. I mean, it was definitely almost "you can't go home again."

GENNA RAE McNEIL:

Now, there is another aspect of Pauli Murray, the former English major now, that would seem to foretell, or from which one might infer a special direction and character of activism, certainly these activities in which you were involved before entering law school did that, a Pauli Murray as a mature adult that I think tends to be revealed in two very short poems, which I'll just read because they are very brief. One called "Quarrel." "Two ants at bay on the curved stem of an apple are insufficient cause to fell the tree." And "Color Trouble." "If you dislike me just because my face has more sun than yours, then when you see me, turn and run, but do not try to buy the sun."

These are written in 1937 and 1938. Now, there are three major incidents prior to your entering Howard University Law School in 1941 that come to mind in connection with these poems and in connection with the work that you did after you left Hunter. Although documentation is available on these, I would like you to discuss briefly for the sake of the record, what you consider the salient issues involved in the following three activities between 1938 and 1941. First of all, one that you mentioned already, in 1938, your attempt to enter the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, unsuccessfully challenging the exclusion of blacks from graduate school and professional schools at UNC and blacks, of course, not being admitted until 1951 despite the Gaines decision in 1938. The second is the Petersburg, Virginia bus incident involving your arrest and conviction for resisting segregation on an interstate bus, and the third is becoming field secretary of the Workers Defense League in relationship to the case of Odell Waller, a black sharecropper convicted of first degree murder of his white landlord by a white poll tax jury.”