

Pauli Murray: A Case for the Poetry

by Christina G. Bucher

Though born in Baltimore in 1910, from the age of three (when her mother died) through sixteen when she graduated from the new, “colored” Hillside High School in 1926, Pauli Murray lived in Durham, North Carolina, with her maternal grandparents Robert and Cornelia Fitzgerald and her aunts Pauline Fitzgerald Dame, who eventually adopted Murray, and Sallie Fitzgerald Small. For those unfamiliar with Murray, she was a remarkable woman whose life and career marks her as a true Renaissance woman. A lifelong warrior for civil rights, she challenged the University of North Carolina’s segregation policy in 1938 and Harvard Law School’s male-only policy in 1944, and though both challenges were unsuccessful, they were crucial steps to eliminating the exclusive policies at both schools. She received her undergraduate degree from Hunter College in New York City and went on to attend law school at Howard University, where she engaged in several nonviolent protests in the 1940s, long before their becoming mainstream and growing in popularity in the 1950s and ’60s. Murray received graduate degrees in law from Boalt Hall of Law at the University of California at Berkeley and Yale University; later she would practice law as well as teach at the Ghana School of Law, just shortly after Ghana adopted its first constitution, and at Brandeis, where she not only taught law but was responsible for helping to design their first African American Studies program. Murray was also an ardent advocate for women’s rights, coining the phrase “Jane Crow” to refer to women’s second-class status in the United States (Murray, *Song* 183) and serving as one of the founding members of the National Organization for Women in 1966. In 1973, at the age of sixty-two, Murray entered divinity school and in 1977 became one of the first women, and the first African American woman, to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church in the United States. Murray died on July 1, 1985.

In addition to these accomplishments, Pauli Murray was also a gifted writer, the vocation she always yearned after most, and is most well known for her autobiographical works. *Proud Shoes* (1956) chronicles the remarkable story of her maternal grandparents Robert and Cornelia Fitzgerald, the former a free black man from Chester County, Pennsylvania, who came to North Carolina during Reconstruction as a teacher devoted to educating the newly-freed slaves, and the latter the offspring of a slave woman named Harriet and her owner, prominent Orange County family member Sidney Smith, who raped her repeatedly (*Proud* 39-44). Later Sidney’s brother Frank would claim Harriet for himself and produce three more daughters (*Proud* 45-47). Mary Ruffin Smith, the Smith brothers’ unmarried sister, raised her neighbors’ eyebrows when she took the three girls into her household, brought them up much differently than other Smith slaves (including instilling in them a sense of their aristocratic blood), and bequeathing each of them substantial parcels of land upon



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Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives

