

Pauli Murray: In & Out of the Pulpit

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Abstract

This keynote address was delivered on August 6, 2018 at Societas Homiletica at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina and explores the relationship between preaching and identity. The lecture introduces Pauli Murray, a local saint whose activism, writings, and ministry challenged the church and broader society. After a detailed introduction, I consider three principal influences on Pauli's voice: Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald, Langston Hughes, and James H. Cone. Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald, Pauli's maternal grandmother, provided a lens for thinking about the ethical and spatial contexts in which sermons arise. Langston Hughes, a fêted poet and author, offered literary inspiration and a model for moving among different genres. James Cone, a path-breaking scholar, gave Pauli vital theological footing and a framework for linking preaching, identity, and activism. Overall, I argue that Pauli Murray makes a singular contribution to the study of African American preaching.

It is an unparalleled honor to address Societas Homiletica and talk about a person who has epitomized the preaching life and its associated risks: Pauli Murray. A luminary of the twentieth century, Pauli Murray was an activist, poet, attorney, memoirist, professor, and Episcopal priest. This lecture, entitled "Pauli Murray: In & Out of the Pulpit," explores her contributions to homiletics and to the study of African American preaching. This lecture has a local thrust because Pauli grew up here in Durham. Her family home is just southeast of this campus, but in many ways, a world away from Duke University. Pauli lived in part of the black community in a marshy area behind Maplewood Cemetery called "The Bottoms."

In our time together, I will first provide an overview of her life and then, discuss the evolution of her voice. I will discuss three teachers who shape her theology and preaching. In doing so, I will examine womanist preaching as dissent rhetoric that protests the evils of white supremacy, sexism, and authoritarianism in light of the gospel. And here, dissent is not merely reactive but constructive; it is a means of fashioning an alternative culture in which memories are exhumed and used to shape ethical behavior in the present, and bonds of solidarity among oppressed people

around the earth are strengthened. Overall, I intend to reveal Pauli Murray as one who preaches in Christian liturgies through sermons and the celebration of the Eucharist and disrupts anti-Christian liturgies of violence when preaching through poetry, speeches, and demonstrations.

1. Biographical Sketch of Pauli Murray

First, who was Pauli Murray? Pauli is not very well known but led a remarkable life. What follows is a robust summary. Born on November 20, 1910, she was the fourth of six children born to her parents, Agnes Fitzgerald Murray, a nurse, and William Murray, a school principal. Agnes and William were a turbulent pair, continually breaking up and getting back together. Part of the strain on the marriage was William's mood swings. Due to a severe case of typhoid fever and encephalitis, he was prone to violent frenzies that frightened Agnes so much that she would periodically go to her family in Durham, North Carolina and take the children with her. This pattern lasted a few years and ended abruptly in March of 1914 when Agnes, just thirty-five years old and pregnant with the couple's seventh child, died of a stroke. Since William was unable to care for the children himself, Pauli and her siblings were separated and cared for by other relatives. Pauli came here to Durham to live with her aunt Pauline, her namesake, and her maternal grandparents, Robert Fitzgerald and Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald.

Shortly afterwards, tragedy struck again. In 1917, William was committed to Crownsville State Hospital, the Hospital for the Negro Insane of Maryland. The social stigma associated with his confinement would trouble the family for years. Then, in 1923, William became the victim of a racially-motivated attack. He was beaten to death by Walter Swiskowski, an inexperienced hospital guard. After the deaths of her parents, Pauli's other relatives told vivid stories about them that deepened her sense of their presence. And throughout her life, she sensed her parents as twinkling lights reaching out to her from the invisible world. Pauli's early calamities contributed to her sensitivity and urgency – she was aware of the fragility of life and the need to speak to the moment.

As early as age eight, Pauli preferred wearing boys clothing and, especially in her twenties and thirties, felt she was inwardly male and outwardly female.¹ “My little boy-girl,” is the term her Aunt Pauline used to convey her acceptance of Pauli's identity.² In addition to buying boys' clothing, she even allowed Pauli to chop wood and take up a paper route – roles typically reserved for boys. Considering the way Pauli describes herself in letters and in medical records, we might describe Pauli as nonbinary or possibly transgender today, but these descriptors were not available to her

¹ *Rosalind Rosenberg*, Jane Crow. The Life of Pauli Murray, New York 2017, 2.

² *Ibid.*

and nor were gender neutral pronouns.³ So, for historical purposes, I am using female pronouns when referencing Pauli. While her birth certificate reads “Anna Pauline Murray,” Pauli used several names that reflect her gender identity, including “Paul,” “Pete,” and “Pixie,” but legally changed her name to Pauli. Because of its gender ambiguity and significance to her, I am breaking with the scholarly custom of referring to individuals by surname and using her first name.

Pauli felt loved and accepted by her immediate family and the black community but felt humiliated here in Durham by the racial segregation, the activity of the Ku Klux Klan, and the constant threat of racialized violence, which she described as “the atmosphere one breathed from day to day, the pervasive irritant, the chronic allergy, the vague apprehension which made one uncomfortable and jumpy. We knew the race problem was like a deadly snake coiled and ready to strike, and that one avoided its dangers only by never-ending watchfulness.”⁴

She fled Durham in 1928 to attend Hunter College in New York, matriculating slowly due to limited finances. During the Great Depression, she took whatever work she could find waitressing at the Alice Foote McDougall Restaurant, operating a switchboard, and serving as a typist. As dire as her situation was in New York, she preferred it to a segregated existence in the South, an existence she compared to living under Nazi rule.⁵ Curious about ways to resist authoritarianism and learn from freedom movements around the world, she lived for a time in a Harlem Ashram, a small intentional Christian community guided by Christian scriptures, Gandhian principles, and a commitment to resist colonialism. In 1938, Pauli applied to the sociology department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill but was denied admission due to her race.

During the 1940s, Pauli broke new ground in challenging Jim Crow laws. She was jailed in Virginia for protesting segregated seating on a Greyhound bus and led successful sit-ins at two Washington, DC restaurants to integrate them. As a law school student at Howard University, she came up with an argument to unsettle the doctrine of separate but equal in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. People chuckled at the time, but her argument later became a key resource for Thurgood Marshall and Spotswood Robinson in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* cases. She applied to Harvard Law School’s graduate program in law but was denied admission based on gender. The University of California did not have race or gender restrictions at that time, so Pauli went there and flourished in its International House, a living community modeled around the United Nations with “more than

³ *Rosenberg* provides a helpful note on her decision to use female pronouns for Pauli Murray given the binary culture she navigated. *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁴ *Pauli Murray*, Pauli Murray. *The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet*, Knoxville 1989, 36.

⁵ She sees similarities between Southern bus drivers and Nazis that include hostile treatment of African Americans, a “swaggering manner,” and uniforms. *Ibid.*, 109.

150 students of all colors and some thirty nationalities [...]. Chinese, Icelanders, Panamanians, [...] Mexicans, Palestinian Jews, British, Indians, Latin Americans of many complexions and political hues, as well as white and negro North Americans from the United States and Canada.”⁶ She delighted in hearing over a dozen languages at dinner tables and listened to discussions about the “rights of small countries and the responsibilities of large ones.”⁷

Pauli went on to practice Civil Rights law and then, in 1956, joined Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison, an influential law firm in New York. She became the firm’s first black female associate attorney. Shortly afterwards, her global consciousness took her to Accra where she taught law at the University of Ghana. Upon returning to the United States, she studied at Yale Law School and became the first African American woman to receive its doctorate degree. She went on to serve as one of the founders of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and teach law and political science at Brandeis University from 1968–1973. It was around this time that she discerned a call to ordained ministry which she saw as the summation and chief end of all her prior work. On her ordination day in January 1977, she said “all the strands of my life had come together.”⁸ Pauli became the first African American female priest in the Episcopal Church, U.S.A.

Inspired by the power of language, Pauli authored several books, including two legal texts, a memoir, a book of poetry, and an autobiography.⁹ She also authored numerous essays and articles and was inspired by her friendship with writers like Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Countee Cullen. Creative partnerships with people like Maida Springer, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Eleanor Roosevelt, A. Philip Randolph, and Howard Thurman also spurred her work.

On November 30, 1930, Pauli married William Wynn, but the relationship ended within a few weeks. Her most significant attachments were to women. She and Irene Barlow shared a deep bond that lasted more than sixteen years. Pauli Murray died of pancreatic cancer on July 1, 1985, and she was buried next to Irene Barlow, whom she called her “silent partner,” in New York.¹⁰

Interest in Pauli’s life has sparked in the last decade, and she was recently included in the Episcopal Church’s *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*. In 2016, Yale University named one of its new undergraduate colleges “Pauli Murray College.” Honors like these recognize the power of Pauli’s witness and her insistence that the world reckon simultaneously with all the

⁶ Ibid., 258.

⁷ Ibid., 259.

⁸ Ibid., 435.

⁹ *Pauli Murray*, *States’ Laws on Race and Color; and Appendices Containing International Documents, Federal Laws, and Regulations, Local Ordinances, and Charts*, Cincinnati 1950; *Proud Shoes. The Story of an American Family*, New York 1956; *Dark Testament and Other Poems*, Norwalk (CT) 1970); *Song in a Weary Throat. An American Pilgrimage*, New York 1987; *Leslie Rubin/Pauli Murray*, *The Constitution and Government of Ghana*, London 1964.

¹⁰ *Rosenberg* (note 1), 353.

dimensions of human identity. She saw herself as a woman of color who was also over age seventy, and short, and hard of hearing, and left-handed, and all these aspects of her life counted. And, just so that you have a fuller sense of her, she loved cigarettes, dogs and camping and named her car, a black Volkswagen, “Sojourner Truth.”

2. Pauli the Preacher

Pauli brought her expansive worldview and chutzpah with her into the pulpit. Sermon manuscripts are notoriously inadequate in conveying the color and energy in a sermon, and this problem arises when reviewing Pauli’s sermon manuscripts. Cassette tapes help, but some of the power in her preaching is representational. She brings her queer, black body to a space where it had not been welcome, and this boundary crossing applies regardless of the racial demographics of the congregations in question.¹¹ Her body presented a new aesthetic of authority to pulpits where intellect, charisma, and masculinity made the preached word compelling. Pauli embodied intellect, charisma, and masculinity, too, and used them to nurture the church’s inventiveness – that is, its ability to offer life-giving responses to moral dilemmas. She thought this work required reliance on the “three-legged stool” of scripture, tradition, and reason while recognizing that each leg of the stool had been tainted by colonialism and a failure to respect human and ecological diversity. Attending to human experience was paramount.

In her sermons, she addresses the kinds of ethical issues one would read about in newspapers during the 1980s, but she tries to stretch her listeners’ understanding of who God is, how God is recognized, and what it means to be human. Enlarging the congregation’s vision of God is instrumental for her, and she finds using feminine imagery especially effective. As much as she values images of God as Father, King, and Lord, her soul is fed by God the midwife who helps human beings birth new possibilities, and God the woman in labor who we meet in Isa 42:14:

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
Now I will cry out like a woman in labor;
I will gasp and pant.¹²

Equally intriguing were images of God as mother (Isa 66:13), scorned lover (Ps 123:2), and Divine Wisdom (Wis 7:25).¹³ Through exposure to such images, Pauli thought Christians would see

¹¹ It is important to note, however, that she generally preaches in mainline congregations.

¹² Isa 42:14 NRSV. The image of God the midwife appears in Ps 22:9 and Isa 66:9.

¹³ In an article that opens with a reference to Julian of Norwich’s maternal image of God, Pauli argues for the inclusion of more feminine imagery of the divine. Pauli sees “scriptural basis for symbolizing God as ‘Mother’ as well as ‘Father,’” and suggests that exclusively masculine images of God stifle the church’s faith and imagination. *Pauli Murray*, *The Holy Spirit and God Language*, in *The Witness* 66, 2 (1983), 8,19.

themselves as responsible and capacious rather than passive. And more, drawing on such images would end the church's attraction to authoritarians. Christian preaching was about raising the dead. Even if the preacher was half-dead herself, the task was to awaken strength and tenderness in the listeners, to stir commensurate supplies of joy and courage.¹⁴

2.1 Lessons from Cornelia

Pauli had an unconventional approach to preaching, and the first lessons came early, before she even knew she was being taught to preach. The teacher was her maternal grandmother, Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald (1844–1923). Enslaved until age twenty-one, “Cornelia” was the daughter of an enslaved woman named Harriet and her owner, Sidney Smith, an attorney.¹⁵ Cornelia was baptized in her father's church at age ten, but she was only allowed to sit in the balcony. Little else is known of her early faith formation, but she developed an active spirituality that she expressed by sharing food and medicine with people in need. God was, for her, a Righteous Judge who weighted human action with significance but also intervened mightily in cases of apparent defeat. Her favorite bible stories were Daniel in the Lions' Den and Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones, and she never tired of hearing Pauli read them.

Pauli describes Cornelia as affectionate and warm with a habit of calling her “Baby” and slipping little treats to Pauli when Aunt Pauline, the disciplinarian, was not looking. Cornelia's sweetness did not extend to her neighbors in the Bottoms whom she found nose-y, messy, lax about respecting property lines, and prone to bother her vegetable garden. The response to any of these violations was to walk up to the edge of the property line she shared with said offending neighbor, garden tools in hand, and offer a sermon on the spot. Looking back Pauli remembers, “Let one of the neighbors or their cattle stray onto our property by an inch when they weren't coming to see us, and Grandmother was ready to preach a sermon. You could tell when somebody had provoked her and one of her preaching spells was coming on. She'd always start singing ‘By and By.’”¹⁶ That is, Charles A. Tinley's “We'll Understand It Better By and By.”

After this prelude, she would begin by naming her neighbor's transgression and the character faults that precipitated it. Then, Cornelia would select a text and launch into her sermon. Sometimes she appealed to scripture, “I'm old enough to be your grandmother. The bible tells you

¹⁴ A former professor of mine, *Judy Gebre-Hiwet*, described her teaching vocation as the half-dead raising the dead. I find this metaphor helpful in describing *Pauli Murray's* understanding of preaching.

¹⁵ I am using “Cornelia” deliberately for honorific purposes.

¹⁶ *Murray*, *Proud Shoes* (note 9), 8.

those that don't honor gray hairs will be cut off and cast into hell's fire."¹⁷ Other times she drew on Christian principles like "Right is right and right don't wrong nobody."¹⁸ Her tone, direct, accusatory, and insistent on ethical decision-making, was reminiscent of John the Baptist calling his listeners to task with lines like, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? [...] Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees [...]"¹⁹ Cornelia was equally poetic.

The African American literary scholar Houston A. Baker, Jr. suggests the black preacher must "seize the word," and for Cornelia, this seizure is evident in the way her message is unmoored from notions of respectability and strewn with insults and expletives to scald the listeners.²⁰ She assumes her listeners have numb consciences that can only be awakened with a shock. Two kinds of truth are operative here: first, scripture or biblical truth, and second, a form of temporal truth that is proto-womanist in form. To quote Zora Neale Hurston, this truth involves being "free from other people's fictions."²¹ Cornelia's preaching is a form of dissent rhetoric designed to interrupt troublesome patterns like disregarding a person's boundaries.²²

Now historically, African American women who were loud and angry in white spaces have been ignored, discredited, or counseled to be "civil" when raising grievances. But Cornelia speaks in a black space, and her listeners do not misread her as giving mere rants. In the Bottoms, Cornelia's speech is legible as "sermon." Pauli's aunts and her grandfather call them sermons to signify their authority and make it clear that she was not simply pouring out her thoughts but speaking a word that was understood to be inspired. Neither the spontaneity nor the setting undermines this classification for Cornelia's listeners. Pauli remembers that during Cornelia's sermons, "The Bottoms rang with 'Amens,' catcalls, and loud handclaps."²³ Some would urge her on, "Aw preach it, Miz Fitge'!"²⁴ The hybridity of the setting made it possible for listeners to be more than spectators; they were witnesses at a tribunal. Dolan Hubbard suggests that preaching in such "extrachurch" settings encourages listeners to judge not only the preacher, but themselves, their circumstances, and God.²⁵

In this ritualistic speech, the meaning is carried linguistically but also in the rhythm that characterized the delivery. "She stamped her feet, shook her head, waved the mattock in the air

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Luke 3:7.9 NRSV.

²⁰ *Houston A. Baker, Jr.*, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*, Chicago 1980, 31.

²¹ *Dolan Hubbard*, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, Columbia (MO) 1994, 52.

²² *Cornelia's* boundaries came to signify the community's disregarded boundaries. *Charles Campbell/Johan Cilliers*, *Preaching Fools. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*, Waco (TX) 2012, 33.

²³ *Murray*, *Proud Shoes* (note 9), 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵ *Hubbard* (note 21), 23.

and brought it down to earth again with loud guttural sounds to emphasize her points.”²⁶ These guttural sounds unmasked the voice and communicated in a purer way than language allows. David Applebaum, in his book, *Voice*, says language conceals the human voice and when we cry out, groan, laugh, or cough we reveal a part of the voice that is ordinarily concealed in human speech.²⁷ In those instances, we reveal the depths of ourselves as the body negates the mind’s life.²⁸ Luke Poverly illumines the homiletical implications in *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope*, when he explains that sound is freighted with as much content as language.²⁹ For Cornelia, preaching means offering up all the sound her body can muster. She does not conclude with a celebration or even a formal ending; the sermon ends when she is exhausted and hoarse.

The music in Cornelia’s message energizes and expands the forum in which she and her neighbors are situated by pointing to the limits of the rational world. In doing so, she elevates the ethical situation and asserts that there is something of eternal significance at stake. To draw on the analysis of womanist ethicist Katie Geneva Canon, Cornelia vocalizes “biblical conflicts of dominance and submission, assertion and deference, the righted and the outlawed, the propertied and dispossessed.”³⁰ Listeners are urged to reckon with these conflicts in their common life.

Through her syncopated exhortations, Cornelia gave messages of racial uplift. Often, she pushed her listeners to assimilate and adhere to white upper-class norms of respectability. Tensions with her own blackness pervade her messages. For example, she is wedded to black exceptionalism and prone to colorism. Despite these shortcomings, Cornelia’s offers a capacious vision of blackness and encourages her neighbors to bring honor to the black community. And, her words compel a response. Occasionally, her invectives provoke a reciprocal insult from a listener. In these cases, her pattern is to select another text and start again.³¹

On the whole, Pauli remembers the neighbors respecting Cornelia as their local prophet. Pauli recounts a time when Lucy, a teenaged neighbor, allowed her horse to trample corn in Cornelia’s garden. When rebuked, Lucy scoffed, and Cornelia pointed an accusing finger at her and pronounced doom. “As the Lord is my witness, you and that horse is marked for a bad end. Vengeance is mine saith the Lord, and I will repay.”³² Later that day, the horse fell over an embankment and suffered a broken leg. It had to be put down. Within a few months, Lucy had to

²⁶ *Murray*, *Proud Shoes* (note 9), 15.

²⁷ *David Appelbaum*, *Voice*, Albany 1990, xi.9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Luke A. Poverly*, *Dem Dry Bones. Preaching, Death, and Hope*, Minneapolis 2012, 56.

³⁰ *Katie Geneva Cannon*, *Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church*, in *I Found God in Me. A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutic* (ed., Mitzi J. Smith) Eugene (OR) 2015, 60.

³¹ *Murray*, *Proud Shoes* (note 9), 17.

³² *Ibid.*, 22.

withdraw from school due to an unwed pregnancy. For Pauli, and perhaps others in the Bottoms, these events suggested Cornelia was a contemporary prophet whose words did not fall to the ground.³³

To say that Pauli admired Cornelia is an understatement. Cornelia becomes an invisible companion in Pauli's ministry. In 1977, after her historic ordination, Pauli celebrated her first Eucharist at the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the church where Cornelia was baptized in 1854. CBS journalist Charles Kuralt did a segment on Pauli Murray for his show, "On the Road." In his interview he asked, "Do you think your grandmother would've been pleased to have been there at that communion service? Maybe sitting at her old seat in the balcony and looking down on you holding communion?" Pauli answered, "My grandmother was much closer than that. She was right behind me."³⁴

I share Pauli's reflections on Cornelia because I believe they clarify some of the assumptions Pauli brings to the preaching task. First, Cornelia helps Pauli see the ethical situation as the engine for a sermon and the determiner of the text. Any text's suitability is determined by its ability to distill a pressing ethical dilemma and honor the emotions arising from that dilemma. Second, Cornelia also teaches Pauli that a sermon is not an exclusively rational form of discourse but a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Third, she teaches Pauli that anger is generative, and its energy should be put to good use. Fourth, Cornelia shows Pauli that prophets must speak outside the pulpit where the conflicts of life occur. Pauli's preaching reflects all of these characteristics.

2.2 Lessons from Langston Hughes

On December 12, 1982, Pauli gave a sermon called "The Prophetic Impulse," which begins:

In every age of political and social crisis, human prophets appear to sound warnings of what is to come unless humanity changes its course. They may be humble, untutored individuals, like Amos, the sheep-farmer of the eighth century B.C. They may be learned public figures; they may be gentle poets, or wild creatures driven by some inner fire to burst suddenly upon the scene and command attention [...]. Long before the riots of the late 1960s that called attention to the racial crisis in the United States, a genial

³³ 1Sam 3:19.

³⁴ Charles Kuralt, Interview with Pauli Murray, On the Road, 1985. <https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/exhibits/show/leadership/clergy/murray> (accessed May 20, 2018).

poet of Harlem (who encouraged my own poetic efforts), Langston Hughes, wrote:
What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
Like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.
*Or does it explode?*³⁵

Pauli sees Hughes as a prophet because his poems outline the implications of moral situations.³⁶ He amplifies many of the lessons she learns from Cornelia and his impact on her voice is tremendous.

James Mercer Langston Hughes was a literary phenome. He is perhaps the most celebrated Harlem Renaissance writer and author of *I, Too Am America* (1926), *The Weary Blues*, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) and a host of other volumes. Hughes was concerned about black liberation and the equality of workers around the globe. He was cynical about the notion that white elites would share power based on moral conscience alone and for a while supported socialist movements. His curiosity even took him to Moscow for a time to examine Communism.

Like Pauli, Hughes had a rocky childhood. His father left his mother and moved to Mexico while he was a child, and afterwards his family struggled financially. Throughout his life, he was conflicted about Christianity due to the extent of human suffering and the longing for a personal experience of God that he never had. At times, he sounds like a prophet lashing out at God with an anti-sermon, as in his poem, “God to Hungry Child,” in which God scolds a hungry child and

³⁵ *Pauli Murray*, Pauli Murray. *Selected Sermons and Writings* (ed. Anthony B. Pinn), Maryknoll (NY) 2006, 166; *Langston Hughes*, Harlem [2], in: Arnold Rampersad/David Roessel (eds.), *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, New York 1995, 426.

³⁶ *Murray* (note 35), 166.

asserts that the world was created for the rich.³⁷ Other anti-sermons made him a symbol of agnosticism. Despite his apparent conflicts with God, Hughes had an unwavering faith in black people and was captivated by the defiance to oppression that was woven throughout African American culture. Simple rhyme and black dialect have special appeal to him because he heard self-definition and the rhythm of resistance in them.³⁸

Pauli met Langston Hughes in the early 1930s when she was living at the YWCA in Harlem where he had been invited to read his work. What Pauli appreciated most about Hughes was his precision, his ability to mine an ethical dilemma and plumb an emotion. Soon after their first meeting, Pauli was sending him drafts of her own poems to get his opinion, and he was publishing her work in a magazine he was editing and recommending her to others. Before long, the friends were writing on parallel themes. They both explore black disappointment in President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Hughes writes “Ballad of Roosevelt” to comment on the New Deal. The refrain, “waitin on Roosevelt” begins with jazzy hope but escalates into jarring rage, “Damn tired o’ waitin’ on Roosevelt.” It ends with a demand for response, “Mr. Roosevelt, listen!/What’s the matter here?”³⁹

Pauli also has questions to pose regarding President Roosevelt. In 1943, race riots break out across the country due to the unequal treatment of African Americans who are expected to absorb white hostility at home and fight for the United States abroad. The riots prompt an icy statement from Roosevelt, “The recent outbreaks of violence in widely spread parts of the country endanger our national unity and comfort our enemies. I am sure that every true American regrets this.”⁴⁰ Pauli composes a poem, “Mr. Roosevelt Regrets,” in which she fumes about the paltriness of the President’s statement in the light of the missing teeth and cracked skulls black men suffer.⁴¹

The friends also explore similar themes in August of 1943 when a riot breaks out in Harlem, killing six people and leading to 600 arrests. The riot began after Margie Polite, an African American hotel guest, was mistreated by a white police officer, James Collins. When Robert Bandy, an African American soldier, intervened on Polite’s behalf, he was shot by the police officer. While Bandy survived the shooting, rumors of his death triggered the riot. Sympathetic to the rioters, Hughes penned “The Ballad of Margie Polite,” which begins:

³⁷ *Hughes*, *God to Hungry Child*, in: *The Collected Poems* (note 35), 48; *Faith Berry*, *Langston Hughes Before and Beyond Harlem*, Westport (CT) 1983, 10, 328.

³⁸ *Michael Gomez* sees black dialect in a similar way. *Michael A. Gomez*, *Exchanging Our Country Marks. The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*, Chapel Hill 1998, 172–177.

³⁹ *Hughes*, *Ballad of Roosevelt*, in *The Collected Poems* (note 35), 178–179.

⁴⁰ *Murray*, *Mr. Roosevelt Regrets*, in *Dark Testament* (note 9), 34.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

If Margie Polite
Had of been white
She might not've cussed
Out the cop that night.⁴²

He goes on to celebrate the community's resistance to violence and criticize the voice of the "race leader" who attempts to quell Harlem's justified anger.⁴³ Though equally cynical about racialized violence in the United States, Pauli could not side with the rioters as easily. She worried about larger scale violent attacks against people of color and had doubts about what anger could achieve by itself. Her poem, "Harlem Riot, 1943," reveals a longing for divine insight in the wake of the riot. She speaks as "a prophet without eyes to see" and the poem has the haunting quality of a desperate but unanswered prayer.⁴⁴

What she could see by 1943, was that writing poems stirred her prophetic voice. Through her poems, she could explore the spiritual implications of social events before a broad audience. Pauli came to see sermons and poems as overlapping genres.⁴⁵ Poetry proved an effective way to expose injustice and urge a faithful response. So, when Mack Parker, a young black man, is lynched near Poplarville, Mississippi in 1959, she writes, "Collect for Poplarville," drawing on petitions from the Book of Common Prayer. Her poem weds the careful, stately syntax of the Prayer Book with sounds and images of mob violence that are equally deliberate and predictable. The poem juxtaposes those who "follow" the cross and those who "burn" it.⁴⁶

Verna Dozier says, "theology has to be in the language of poetry because no other language can contain the extravagance of the idea."⁴⁷ Pauli finds this to be true in her own experience. Through poems she lays her anger and grief before God and the broader public. On the page, the direct language that is deemed unbecoming for a woman thrives. Pauli explicitly credits Hughes for helping her claim her voice as a poet.

⁴² *Hughes*, *The Ballad of Margie Polite*, in *The Collected Poems* (note 35), 282.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 283.

⁴⁴ *Murray*, *Harlem Riot, 1943*, in *Dark Testament* (note 9), 35.

⁴⁵ *Murray*, *Selected Sermons* (note 35), 207.

⁴⁶ *Murray*, *Collect for Poplarville*, in *Dark Testament* (note 9), 38.

⁴⁷ *Verna Dozier*, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return*, Cambridge (MA) 1991, 15.

Part of his influence stems from his understanding of an author's task. He moved among different genres as he deemed necessary based on his core message, writing not only poems but plays, short stories, novels, an autobiography, an opera, and journalistic prose. This movement allowed him to demand more from the audience and point to a level of truth that defied categorization.⁴⁸ He saw the project of large-scale human liberation as vast enough that it required multivocality. Genre functioned more as a means of indicating the mood and duration of a message than as a firm category with rules one had to respect. Rather than genre, what had to be respected, even revered, was the anger and fear that surged in the human heart. Examining anger and fear was central to the writer's task. Pauli knew it was this skill that had made Cornelia so compelling. So increasingly, Pauli had questions about the theological implications of black suffering.

2.3 Lessons from James H. Cone

Pauli discerned a call to ordained ministry while in her 60s. She hoped seminary would help her integrate the advocacy and freedom fighting she had done in her vocations as an activist, lawyer and professor, and she hoped seminary would be a place where her unique voice would be nurtured. She was disappointed. Over the course of three years, Pauli attended two Episcopal seminaries, and found the process difficult because at that time, like most American seminaries, the curricula and the institutional cultures were designed around the needs of young, married white men.

Signs of a problem appeared early – even at the application stage. One of her seminary applications includes multiple areas where she has corrected the application and instructed the school not to assume all applicants are men.⁴⁹ She responds to several of the questions with sarcastic remarks. “Have you ever seen a physician regarding emotional or mental difficulties?” the form asks. “Who hasn’t?” she responds.⁵⁰ “What part did you take in student athletics and activities?” Her response: “Hardly applicable at this late date, wouldn’t you think.”⁵¹ Such exchanges foreshadowed her experience as a student. Repeatedly, she found that her urgent theological questions were of little interest to her professors (though they were well-meaning).

⁴⁸ Concerning the fluidity of genre, Jennifer Heinert argues that genre categories are “no less slippery” than racial categories. *Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert, Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, New York 2009, 8.

⁴⁹ Pauli Murray Seminary Application, V26.01, Virginia Theological Seminary Archives, Alexandria, Virginia.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

With rare exception, faculty members had little grasp of all that was at stake in the development of her theology and preaching voice.

She was thrown a lifeline by a professor at Union Theological Seminary named James H. Cone, who died just a few months ago. In Cone, Pauli found a theologian who read the meaning of Christianity through the lens of African American experiences of suffering and survival. He made an indelible imprint on Pauli's theology and understanding of preaching. For one, Cone shared her view of Langston Hughes as a poet-prophet exposing the moral bankruptcy in white America. Hughes's ability to articulate the sense of divine abandonment that often accompanies experiences of social exile intrigued Cone. He celebrated the prophetic tenor in Harlem Renaissance poetry and used it as a primary source for theological reflection.⁵²

In addition, Cone spoke of preaching the truth in ways that Cornelia would have approved. He had a high view of truth and argued that the preacher had the responsibility to "speak truth to people."⁵³ "To know the truth is to appropriate it, for it is not mainly reflection and theory. Truth is divine action entering into our lives and creating the human action of liberation. Truth enables us to dance and live to the rhythm of freedom in our lives as we struggle to be who we are."⁵⁴ This kinetic vision of truth resonated with Pauli who felt abstract understandings of truth had little to offer people living in the grip of imperialism.

Pauli also found Cone's discussions of freedom compelling. Cone explains, "The preaching of the Word must itself be the embodiment of freedom. When freedom is a constituent of the language itself, then that language refuses to be bound to the limitations of categories not indigenous to its being. Possibilities are thus given for the communication of the Word that transcends intellectual concepts."⁵⁵ The idea that freedom is elemental to the preached word stretched the normative paradigms of preaching and offered a theological foundation for Pauli to see her activism as proclamatory. Her protests of segregated seating on Greyhound, her sit-ins at segregated Washington lunch counters, her protests of the poll tax, police brutality, and executions of people like Odell Waller had been rooted in her faith-based outrage at injustice and her sense that she had to make her objections known. She had long before rooted this activism in Christian witness. For example, as she was arrested on Easter weekend in 1940 for refusing segregated seating on a Greyhound bus, she made a stern declaration to the bus driver, saying, "You haven't

⁵² *James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed*, New York 1975, 27.

⁵³ *Cone* is inspired here by the poet, *Mari Evans* who says, "Speak the truth to the people/Talk sense to the people/Free them with reason/Free them with honesty/Free the people with Love and Courage and Care for their being." *Ibid.*, 16; *Mari Evans, I Am a Black Woman*, New York 1970, 91.

⁵⁴ *Cone* (note 52), 30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

learned a thing in two thousand years.”⁵⁶ Now she could see this incident as a prophetic sign-act like those of Isaiah and Ezekiel.⁵⁷ This, too, was preaching.

Pauli was eager to join Cone in criticizing and revising the language of the church, and Cone made it clear that this task involved “not only language as uttered speech but the language of radical involvement in the world.”⁵⁸ Theology did not operate as “intellectual exercise” but as “worldly risk.”⁵⁹ Pauli celebrated ministers who made direct links between preaching and social activism. Rev. Walter Fauntroy, for instance, tried to “translate the gospel he preached on Sunday into his political activity in Congress on Monday.”⁶⁰ The correlation was critical.

Another reason Pauli was drawn to James Cone had to do with his generative understanding of anger. In his introduction to *Black Theology & Black Power*, Cone plainly states that the volume is written “with a definite attitude” of “an angry black man disgusted with the oppression of black people in America and with the scholarly demand to be ‘objective’ about it. Too many people have died, and too many are on the edge of death.”⁶¹ Cone makes it clear that his anger is borne of love for black people and desire for their flourishing. Anger provides a long-burning fuel source for doing the emotionally expensive work of examining the history of African American suffering and working toward a response that can justifiably be called Christian. Anger, then, is not an emotion to be feared but interrogated, because as Audre Lorde argues in her famous essay, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” anger is first and foremost informative, a sign of a relationship that needs attention.⁶² Anger is a vital resource for healing that which is deeply broken.

“I am critical of white America,” Cone explains, “because this is *my* country; and what is mine must not be spared my emotional and intellectual scrutiny.”⁶³ He agrees with Kenneth Clark, who says:

[W]here [...] moral issues are at stake, noninvolvement and non-commitment and the exclusion of feeling are neither sophisticated nor objective, but naïve and violative of the scientific spirit at its best [...]. Where anger is the appropriate response, to exclude the recognition and acceptance of anger, and even to avoid the feeling itself as if it were an

⁵⁶ Murray (note 4), 142.

⁵⁷ Murray, Selected Sermons (note 35), 166, 168.

⁵⁸ James Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, New York 1989, 84. Cone also says relevant action should accompany the church’s speech. *Ibid.*, 67.80.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁰ Murray, Selected Sermons (note 35), 214–215.

⁶¹ Cone (note 58), 2.

⁶² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider. Essays & Speeches*, Freedom (CA) 1984, 124.127.

⁶³ Cone (note 58), 4.

inevitable contamination, is to set boundaries upon truth itself. If a scholar who studied Nazi concentration camps did not feel revolted by the evidence no one would say he was unobjective but rather fear for his sanity and moral sensitivity. Feeling may twist judgment, but the lack of it may twist it even more.⁶⁴

Rational analysis and emotion are not mutually exclusive.

Cone's discussion of the theological role of anger had a personal impact. Pauli was known for her short temper, a trait she said she inherited from Cornelia. But, as far as I can tell, neither were prone to self-centered or irrational anger. Rather, theirs mirrors the ire of the Hebrew prophets who were in touch with divine passion.⁶⁵ This righteous anger animated their responses to injustice.

Pauli also knew from personal experience that anger can have corrosive effects on the psyche. Being an advocate for justice in her queer, black body had come with steep emotional costs. Sometimes anger turned inward, and she found herself depressed. On at least three occasions, the despair was deep enough to demand psychiatric hospitalization. One of these hospitalizations occurred in December of 1937 at the Long Island Rest Home in Amityville, NY.⁶⁶ Pauli wrote a long list of questions for her doctor that included the following:

7. Where do you think is the seat of conflict – in the brain, the body, the glands- or where?
8. Where could I go to get an answer? What fields are doing experimentation and have the equipment?
9. Why this nervous exciteable [sic] condition all my life and the very natural falling in love with the female sex? Terrific breakdowns after each love affair that has become unsuccessful? Why the willingness to fight instead of running away in this instance?⁶⁷

More questions follow regarding attraction, heteronormativity, and her desire for monogamy. She presses also questions about the limits of psychiatry: “12. Why is it that I believe that psychiatry

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2–3; *Kenneth B. Clark*, *Dark Ghetto*, New York 1965, 79–80.

⁶⁵ *Abraham Heschel* says the prophets had “fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with divine pathos.” *Abraham Heschel, The Prophets. An Introduction*, New York 1969, 26.

⁶⁶ Since this hospital had a “no Negro” policy, *Pauli's* physician described her as Cuban.

⁶⁷ *Pauli Murray, Papers, 1827–1985*, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., Personal and Biographical. MC 412, Series I, Box 4, Folder 71; *Rosenberg* (note 1), 121.

does not have the answer to true homosexuality, but that experimental science does?” “15. Why do I prefer experimentation on the male side, instead of attempted adjustment as a normal woman?” She also wonders “what hospitals, fields or medical institutions” are experimenting “in this and other countries?” Question number 17 is especially poignant, “Do you think this conflict is an ego drive, or any organism (this one human) fighting for survival?”⁶⁸

I share these details because it is important for you to know the chiseling effects of anger and sorrow on Pauli’s spirit. Her questions show that she is decades ahead of the medical science in some respects, but they also reveal tremendous frustration. She is angry about the pressure to conform to white, cisgender, heterosexual norms.

During this hospitalization in New York, she can articulate her concerns. But during others, like one at Freedman’s Hospital (affiliated with Howard University), tears are Pauli’s primary mode of speech.⁶⁹ She wept for a week and had to be sedated. Betsee Parker says, “Weeping is the most deeply communicating sound that the human can make. And words don’t get in the way of the sound of weeping. Words only hide the depth. But when one hears the sounds – unobstructed sounds, no words in there – you really feel the depths of the emotion that’s in the person.”⁷⁰

Pauli needed theology that could account for these experiences. So, when James Cone argues that “the reality of black people—their life of suffering and humiliation” must serve as the “point of departure of all God-talk,” when Cone says that Jesus takes on black suffering as his suffering, and identifies with those who are despised, Cone’s words resonate with Pauli.⁷¹ When he says Christianity ought to free people “to create new possibilities for existence” and help them unlearn humiliation, she is inspired.⁷²

Pauli does not have an especially demonstrative preaching style, but her words are fueled by righteous anger about oppression. She urges self-determination and warns against leaders like Jim Jones who usurped his congregation’s freedom in Jonestown, Guyana.⁷³ And she insists on accountability to those in previous generations who suffered and died and did not get to see their hopes for equality materialize. Their struggles and triumphs are, as Cone advises, the “point of

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Kimberley Christine Patton/John Stratton Hawley (eds.), *Holy Tears. Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, Princeton (NJ) 2005, 12.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 292.

⁷¹ *Cone* (note 58), 117; *Cone* (note 52), 136.

⁷² *Cone* (note 58), 130. *Murray* also cites *Major J. Jones’* influence on unlearning humiliation. *Murray*, *Selected Sermons* (note 35), 213.

⁷³ *Murray*, *Selected Sermons* (note 35), 209.

departure” for her God-talk. In her sermons, Pauli shines a bright light on black women, and this includes historical figures, local heroines, and members of the congregation. For a time, this emphasis on black female experience reflects her critique of Cone, who, at least initially, foregrounds black male experience. Pauli is quick to applaud him when he corrects this pattern and urges preachers to “relate the story of our mothers’ and fathers’ struggles to our present struggles and thereby create a humane future for our children.”⁷⁴

For Cone, preaching involves remembering. He counsels preachers to lead congregations in remembering biblical narratives and in remembering the histories of oppressed people. Pauli does this remembering in her sermons and in her celebration of the Eucharist which, as an Anglican priest, she usually celebrated each week. In black Anglican circles, the Eucharist functions as a ritual and as a sermon proclaimed in unity with clergy around the world. While the focus is on remembering Jesus’ suffering, resurrection, and return, the Eucharist also proclaims the kinship between the living and the dead and encourages worshippers to live in that consciousness. So, in celebrating the Eucharist, Pauli unites her memory of black struggle with Christ’s work of reconciliation.

More could be said about James Cone’s theology and his vast impact on black preaching. I have only attempted to trace his influence on Pauli’s preaching and illumine the ways he appears on the surface and in the deep tissue of her thought. Pauli saw preaching as the church’s lifeblood. She preaches in a way that honors black anger, liberates the oppressed, respects the world beyond the church, and embodies Christian love. She also foregrounds the experiences of black women in her sermons. Womanist theology is in a nascent stage during her ministry, but she demonstrates many of the hallmarks.

Conclusion

In our time together, I have introduced Pauli Murray and described three influences that I see as primary in her growth as a preacher. From her grandmother, Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald, Pauli learned the primacy of the ethical dilemma and the proclivity for the Word to erupt outside the pulpit in secular spaces where the conflicts of life arise. When Cornelia was told to hush once, she responded by saying, “The Lord gave me a mouth and I aim to use it whenever and wherever I’ve

⁷⁴ Cone (note 52), 29.

a mind to.”⁷⁵ In claiming her voice, Cornelia passed on an invaluable lesson to her granddaughter, Pauli. Langston Hughes helped Pauli build on that foundation. Through their friendship, she learned that poetry can articulate experiences of exile and reach those on the fringes of the church. She also saw the value of moving in and out of genres. James Cone helped Pauli build on Cornelia’s foundation even more by offering a theological frame for re-imagining truth-telling in light of the experience of oppressed people in black America and throughout the world. He also pointed to the plasticity of the pulpit and married the preached word to relevant social action. To be sure, Pauli had other theological influences, including J. Deotis Roberts, Jacquelyn Grant, Bayard Rustin, Marianne Micks, and Letty Russell. A comprehensive examination of Pauli’s theology would examine their influence on her thought and practices in detail. Yet, in tracing the evolution of her preaching voice, Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald, Langston Hughes, and James Cone have profound impact. They enriched her preaching and her understanding of the preaching task and helped Pauli recognize that she did not become a preacher upon ordination. Preaching was a mainstay of her life’s work. The impact of her contribution is just beginning to surface.

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⁷⁵ *Murray*, *Proud Shoes* (note 9), 13.