

Learning by Living:  
The Interdependence of Personal and Political Influences  
on Eleanor Roosevelt's Civil Rights Activism

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### Learning by Living: The Interdependence of Personal and Political Influences on Eleanor Roosevelt's Civil Rights Activism

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While there are many books, articles, and other resources that discuss Eleanor Roosevelt's life, work, and contributions to the causes of social, economic, and political equality in the United States, few consider at length the impact that her personal relationships with civil rights activists had on her political evolution over the course of her life. Recent biographies have acknowledged these relationships but do not delve deeply into the ways that Roosevelt was influenced over time by the interdependence between the external events of the outside world and the friendships that she formed with activists such as NAACP Executive Director Walter White, stateswoman and educator Mary McLeod Bethune, and most significantly, the lawyer, educator, and writer, Pauli Murray. To this end, this thesis will examine Roosevelt's political and public writings, her personal correspondence, Pauli Murray's autobiographies, oral history interviews, and correspondence with others, as well as secondary sources, including books, articles, essays, and other scholarship on Eleanor Roosevelt, her friendships and political relationships, and the same on Murray and her life, work, and identity.

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My profound thanks go to the staff at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, particularly Education Specialist Jeff Urbin, Public Programs Specialist Cliff Laube, and Deputy Director Bill Harris, for their invaluable support, insight, and encouragement during my internship there, for the generosity of their time, and for always listening to my ideas and answering my (many) questions. I would also like to thank the fantastic staff in the Archives, particularly Patrick Fahy and Virginia Lewick, for all of their help, knowledge, and advice while I worked in the research room.

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## Introduction

The story of Eleanor Roosevelt's life spanned the course of more than 7 decades, beginning with her birth in 1884 and ending with her death in 1962, and took place amid some of the most consequential events in American history. Born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in New York City to future President Theodore Roosevelt's brother Elliott Roosevelt and his socialite wife Anna Hall Roosevelt, Eleanor was the product of a Victorian upbringing during the Gilded Age, part of an upper-class family of wealth and social privilege. Yet her life was marked by tragedy from its earliest years; an orphan by the age of 10, the idyllic world she had been born into "was also in the end a world shattered by disappointment, alcoholism, and betrayal."<sup>1</sup> Her relationship with her parents was painful and conflicted; before her death in 1892 of diphtheria at the age of 29, her mother Anna was cold and distant to her daughter, consumed with her role as a socialite and by her marital struggles with Eleanor's vibrant, affectionate, but tormented father Elliott, who would die in 1894 at the age of 34 of alcoholism and depression. Elliott was, like his brother and father before him, a proponent of the Gilded Age concept of *noblesse oblige* and passed the concept of acting with generosity and compassion to those born less privileged on to his daughter Eleanor, who took these ideas to heart.<sup>2</sup> Early memories of her father's charity work would help inspire her lifelong commitment to social justice and equality of opportunity, a commitment that grew and evolved in conjunction with the events and circumstances of the tumultuous world around her and

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<sup>1</sup> Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume I* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993-), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin: The Story of Their Relationship, Based On Eleanor Roosevelt's Private Papers* (New York: Norton, 1971), xviii.

was influenced by her friendships with other men and women engaged in the struggle for civil rights.

In addition to her many books, essays, articles, and *My Day*, the daily newspaper column she wrote from 1935 until shortly before her death, ER received and wrote hundreds of thousands of letters, which are available for researchers to view and analyze in the archives at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, NY. As the years have passed and the number of archival materials related to Eleanor Roosevelt and her personal and political relationships has grown as a result of donations and the unsealing of previously restricted files, ER scholars have approached the telling of her story in new ways and with new goals. Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of a groundbreaking three-part biography on Eleanor Roosevelt, has suggested that in order to understand ER (as Roosevelt signed her correspondence and is often referred to in scholarship) in her own right rather than simply as Franklin Roosevelt's wife and First Lady, we must combat the tendency to "constrict the range of historical inquiry about women."<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt lived a political life, both as the wife of a politician and as an active and vital member of Democratic party organizations beginning in the early 1920s. It is her public work for the many causes that she supported over the course of her life that characterizes much of the early scholarship on ER, but as the fields of history and women's studies have grown to include more women, modern scholars strive to ensure that, as feminist authors and women historians have been doing for decades, they are making connections between the personal and the political. Through these connections, more recent biographers such as Cook, Allida Black, Doris Kearns

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<sup>3</sup> Cook, *Volume I*, 11.

Goodwin, and Patricia Bell-Scott have worked to illuminate neglected aspects of ER's history and reveal the relationships and influences that shaped who she was as a woman and as a humanitarian.

As a graduate intern at the FDR Library, I created an educational presentation that detailed ER's civil rights advocacy and activism, and in the course of this work, I was struck by the different ways over the course of her life she spoke and wrote about racial inequality and how it should be dealt with. It was clear that her reactions to racial discrimination changed to some extent as a response to the events in the world around her; the Depression, two world wars, her roles as First Lady, as a delegate to the UN and as an author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the tensions of the Cold War and the subsequent "Red Scare" incited by Senator Joseph McCarthy all opened ER's eyes to the impact racism and discrimination had on democracy and on the lives of many Americans and those around the globe. Yet this can only partially explain her personal evolution as an advocate of civil rights. As I researched ER's life and work in the archives at the FDR Library, I struggled to understand what Tamara K. Hareven describes as ER's "omnipresence and involvement in many different causes, her paradoxical statements, and her support of seemingly contradictory causes [which] bewildered her contemporaries and left even her supporters feeling that her activities had no coherent pattern."<sup>4</sup> A surface reading of her life through cursory examinations of her public actions makes it difficult to understand many of the decisions ER made in relation to humanitarian and progressive causes. However, an examination of the larger events of

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<sup>4</sup> Tamara K. Hareven, *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt*, ed. Joan Hoff and Marjorie Lightman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 201.



her life along with her voluminous private correspondence and more personal written works reveals a much more nuanced image of the private thoughts and motivations of a very public woman.

In a later installment of her autobiography Eleanor Roosevelt writes, “One curious thing is that I have always seen life personally; that is, my interest or sympathy or indignation is not aroused by an abstract cause but by the plight of a single person whom I have seen with my own eyes... Out of my response to an individual develops an awareness of the problem to the community, then to the country, and finally to the world.”<sup>5</sup> ER counted among her many friends renowned politicians, world leaders, celebrities, and royalty, yet it is often her friendships and correspondence with seemingly more “ordinary” people from which it is possible to form a clearer picture of her feelings, thoughts, and emotions in response to the changing world around her. She befriended men, women, and children regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, or creed. In a time when many privileged women of her generation surrounded themselves with friends and acquaintances of similar backgrounds, ER formed lasting friendships with people she felt had something to teach her and to better help her imagine “that larger framework that must one think [within] today if mankind is to survive the threat that hangs, in a mushroom cloud, over it.”<sup>6</sup>

Through her friendships with African American leaders and civil rights activists such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Walter White, and Pauli Murray, ER was exposed to the reality of racism and discrimination in a way that would not have been possible for her to

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<sup>5</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 413.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

imagine on her own. As she explained, it was these relationships that helped her connect the problems of individual people to the problems of the country and to the world.

Bethune and White wrote to ER frequently, hoping that she would use her influence and resources to aid their causes, such as educating Black children and preparing them for vocations on Bethune's part, and garnering government support for anti-lynching and anti-poll tax bills on White's. Although she always responded to these letters and often did lend her support to these causes, her correspondence with leaders like Bethune and White, although certainly more prolific, does not make the leap from the political to the personal in the same way that is evident in her correspondence with Pauli Murray, a young Black activist who would go on to become a lawyer, writer, poet, educator, and Episcopal priest and who would change the face of anti-discrimination and anti-sexism law. A recent book by Patricia Bell-Scott on the friendship between Murray and ER notes that "unlike Eleanor Roosevelt's friendships with the Black civil rights leaders Mary McLeod Bethune and Walter White, which have been duly noted, ER's friendship with Pauli Murray has not been fully examined."<sup>7</sup> The friendship between Murray and ER began in the late 1930s and lasted until the end of ER's life, and grew from one predominantly characterized by their written correspondence to a much closer and more intimate bond that would change the course of both of their lives. While White and Bethune were ER's contemporaries, Murray was much younger than ER, and full of the fire and passion of a generation that wanted change *now*, not through a delayed and moderate process of gradual government action. Her youth was likely one of the reasons ER was so interested in her experiences and perspectives; ER often befriended young

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), xiv.

people, believing, as her good friend Joe Lash writes, “that the youth constituted the future of a nation.”<sup>8</sup> Her close friendships with “radical” young people such as Pauli Murray and Joe Lash (a journalist and liberal activist who would later become one of ER’s biographers) attest to her abiding interest in the concerns and perspectives of youth.<sup>9</sup>

In the book *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, Brittney C. Cooper writes in her eye-opening chapter on Murray, “Queering Jane Crow,” that “Murray’s work on behalf of antiracist and feminist struggles places her within the most active traditions of Black women’s leadership.”<sup>10</sup> Yet as Cooper, Bell-Scott and others have noted in their recent scholarship, Pauli Murray’s radical politics, temperament, and her conflicted relationships with race, sexuality, gender identity, and mental health make her a complex figure that even modern scholars struggle to characterize and understand. As Rosalind Rosenberg writes in *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray*, “her gender-nonconforming persona made it difficult to win the recognition she might otherwise have achieved.” The discomfort of early scholars with Murray’s “otherness” most likely contributed to the de-emphasis of her influence on Eleanor Roosevelt’s views on civil rights and racial and socioeconomic injustice. My own interest in Pauli Murray was piqued when my supervisor at the FDR Library scribbled “Don’t know much about this!” next to Murray’s name in one of my weekly progress reports during my internship. If a senior staff member at the Franklin D.

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<sup>8</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, xii.

<sup>9</sup> Allida M. Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Brittney C. Cooper, “Queering Jane Crow,” in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, Women, Gender, and Sexuality in American History (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 87.

Roosevelt Presidential Library is unfamiliar with Pauli Murray's important story and the significance of her relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt, what might that say about the general public's knowledge?

In the same way that it is necessary to look beyond the public life of Eleanor Roosevelt to more fully understand her thoughts and actions, so too must we examine the more personal aspects of Murray's life and correspondence in order to comprehend what drove her ties to ER and her persistent determination to influence ER's perspectives and beliefs. Through an analysis of their correspondence and the words they wrote about each other and their long friendship, it is possible to discern the aspects that set that relationship apart from ER's friendships with other African American activists, and to identify the ways in which Murray represents an example of the kind of "single person" whose insight and friendship helped create the connections ER formed between the problems of individuals and those of the greater world. Pauli Murray believed "that for us to transform the country from a racist to a nonracist one, we must learn to organize in multiracial coalitions."<sup>11</sup> Her friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt represented one of the coalitions to which she referred. The evolution of Eleanor Roosevelt's views on civil rights was driven both by her experiences as First Lady and as a leader in her own right as well as the important and influential friendships she formed with civil rights activists. Tracing a path through the second half of her life which examines these influences in relation to each other highlights the vital and dynamic interdependence of the personal and the political.

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<sup>11</sup> Sarah Azaransky, "Jane Crow: Pauli Murray's Intersections and Antidiscrimination Law," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29 29, no. 1 (2013): 160, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/509052>.

## Chapter 1: Becoming a Civil Rights Advocate

*"I think the day of selfishness is over; the day of really working together has come; and we must learn to work together, all of us, regardless of race or creed or color... we go ahead together or we go down together."*

Eleanor Roosevelt, 1934  
Address at the National Conference on Fundamental  
Problems in the Education of Negroes<sup>12</sup>

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt arrived in the White House in 1933 determined to use her influence and position to do work that mattered; her husband, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, had firmly rejected her offers to take charge of his mail, a task ER knew other politicians' wives had assumed. Fearful that she would lose the freedom and autonomy she had gained in the decade since her discovery of FDR's affair with her social secretary Lucy Mercer and his fateful contraction of polio, ER knew that she could not spend her days attending teas and luncheons and idly sitting by as a society matron. She had been coached by her husband's chief advisor Louis Howe following the onset of FDR's illness to think, talk, and act politically, with ER referring to Howe in a 1954 *Look* article as one of the seven people who shaped her life.<sup>13</sup> Stemming from this influence and from that of her father and of Marie Souvestre, the progressive, liberal French headmistress of the English school ER had attended for 3 years (all of whom she also named as important people who shaped her life) she began her life as First Lady with the resolute conviction that she would use her role to help change the fate of the country, which was mired in the Great Depression.

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<sup>12</sup> Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume II: The Defining Years* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 190.

<sup>13</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, "The Seven People Who Shaped My Life," *Look*, June 19, 1951, 58.

In 1933, ER's views on civil rights were still in their infancy and bore little resemblance to the perspectives and goals she would establish for herself and the country before her death nearly 30 years later. Although her early writings and speeches make it clear that she recognized the danger racism posed to the country and to democracy, during this time in her life she advocated for gradual change achieved within the bounds of federal law. While it could certainly be said that she was more progressive-minded on the issues of race relations and racial prejudice than many other White Americans in the early 1930s (as evidenced by the barrage of angry mail and press she received whenever she spoke or wrote about racial issues) she had little firsthand knowledge of the unique problems Black Americans faced in the midst of the Depression.<sup>14</sup> This would quickly change, as NAACP president Walter White wasted no time in establishing a relationship with the sympathetic First Lady. ER met with White and other leaders in the Black community early in 1934 to discuss the ways that FDR's New Deal was failing to address the needs of African Americans, and she promised them that she was on their side and would fight for them in the coming days. Although ER's influence and action (and that of her husband's) would often be constrained by the exigencies of party politics and FDR's desire to placate Southern congressmen, biographer Allida Black writes that "ER's policy represented a new formation in America's racial geometry."<sup>15</sup> From that point on, ER would serve as a liaison between African Americans and her husband and his administration, often to the consternation of FDR's advisors, who were by no means

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<sup>14</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *Courage in a Dangerous World: The Political Writings of Eleanor Roosevelt*, ed. Allida M. Black (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Cook, *Volume II*, 153.

united in their approval of what they often saw as her burdensome and distracting interference.

Although the tragedies of her own life led her to develop a compassionate and empathetic personality, it was the friendships she formed with Walter White and other African Americans who informed her views on the ways that racial injustice plagued the citizens of the country and its promise of democracy. Having been an admirer of educator Mary McLeod Bethune since meeting her at an education conference in 1927, ER suggested her name when FDR's advisor Harry Hopkins asked her for a recommendation on a Black woman being appointed to the Presidential Cabinet. Bethune, known as "The First Lady of the Struggle," thus became the director of Negro Affairs for the National Youth Administration, and the unofficial leader of what came to be informally known as the "Black Cabinet," a group of officials appointed to lower-level supervisory positions in FDR's administration. In *Love, Eleanor*, his 1982 tribute to her many friendships, ER's friend and biographer Joe Lash repeats a comment she once made to her daughter Anna about her friendship with Bethune: it was "not until she kissed Mrs. Bethune without thinking of it" that she felt she had "at last overcome the racial prejudice within herself."<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, ER travelled with Bethune to conferences, and Bethune sent her friend literature, memos, and lists of concerns she hoped ER would address and forward to the appropriate officials with her endorsement, particularly those relating to Bethune-Cookman College, a coeducational junior college for which she

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph P. Lash and Eleanor Roosevelt, *Love, Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982), xi.

served as president. The archives at the FDR Library hold the many letters Bethune and ER exchanged between the early 1930s and Bethune's death in 1955, many of which featuring Bethune's requests for ER's attention and/or assistance, or expressions of Bethune's profound gratitude for help given. Despite the affection and respect the two women felt for each other, rarely does their correspondence resemble the more informal heartfelt conversations found in the letters ER and the young activist Pauli Murray would begin exchanging with each other several years later, following Murray's passionate initial letter to ER and her husband. This is also the case in ER's relationship with NAACP president Walter White; although White's correspondence with ER represents one of the most prolific collections in the FDR Library's archives, the vast majority of their letters to each other pertain to White's requests for meetings with ER and the President, or to political matters White sought ER's attention to and/or endorsement of. Most often, their correspondence refers to the proposed Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill that was White's main focus for many years.

Yet her relationships with Bethune and White represent the changes that were taking place within her own world, changes that serve to explain her ever-growing interest in ameliorating what she believed to be the damaging impact of racism on the lives of Americans. She later wrote that she supposed "caring comes from being able to put yourself in the position of the other person. If you cannot imagine, 'This might happen to me,' you are able to say to yourself with indifference, 'Who cares?'"<sup>17</sup> Her friendships with civil rights leaders, Allida Black writes, were one of the influences that

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<sup>17</sup> Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 413.



“continually exposed her to the brute fact of American racism.”<sup>18</sup> Not interested in being cocooned in the White House, ER sought out contacts with men and women who could help *her* help America. Many of Mrs. Bethune’s letters to ER over the course of their friendship were full of her gratitude for ER’s frequent interventions on the behalf of her school and other causes, with Bethune writing, “You have made glad the hearts of the people... everywhere. You are like a guiding Angel for the people of our land during these dark days of unrest.”<sup>19</sup> As did Walter White, Bethune well understood the benefit of having a sympathetic friend in the White House, and when she reminded the 1937 National Conference on the Problems of the Negro and Negro Youth that “This is the first time in the history of our race that the Negroes of America have felt free to reduce to writing their problems and plans for meeting them with the expectancy of sympathetic understanding and interpretation,” it was likely Eleanor (who also addressed the audience that day) that she largely referred to.

ER would come to see for herself the harsh reality of the Depression and its particular effects on Black Americans. Her close friend and companion, the journalist Lorena Hickok, reported to ER shortly after FDR assumed the presidency in 1933 that endemic poverty was widespread throughout the South, particularly in West Virginia. This observation led to ER’s visits to the area and her concerns about African Americans being barred from Arthurdale, the New Deal homestead subsistence project she championed despite conservative outrage in response to what they saw as a socialist

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<sup>18</sup> Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune to Eleanor Roosevelt, December 3, 1942, from Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library Archives, [http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/\\_resources/images/ersel/ersel007.pdf](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/ersel/ersel007.pdf).

waste of government funds. These issues and the continued failure of Franklin Roosevelt to support the anti-lynching bill championed by Walter White led ER to increase the frequency of her requests that FDR meet with White and other Black leaders to discuss the bill and the dire issue it addressed. In response to White's concerns that no action was being taken by the government, ER responded that she shared his feelings, and that she had recently told the Attorney General that "it seemed rather terrible that one could get nothing done and that [she] did not blame [White] in the least for feeling that there was no interest in this very serious question."<sup>20</sup> White recognized that ER represented the African American community's best hope of communicating their concerns and requests for support to the President. After being received at the White House by FDR in May 1934, White wrote to ER to thank her, and in addition to forwarding her all of the letters he sent to FDR, he often sent her literature for her personal consideration, writing in 1934 that he wanted her to personally have a copy of reports the NAACP had received on a recent lynching, as he knew she would "be horrified."<sup>21</sup>

Yet despite these frequent reminders of the desperate conditions under which African Americans were living, ER was still years away from changing her mind about the ability of the federal government to address these concerns. She wrote in her 1938 manifesto *The Moral Basis of Democracy* that racism could be overcome, but that it could "take a great many years before there is sufficient change throughout the world to

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<sup>20</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, March 19, 1936, from Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library Archives, [http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/\\_resources/images/ersel/ersel098b.pdf](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/ersel/ersel098b.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Walter White to Eleanor Roosevelt, November 20, 1934, from Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library Archives, [http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/\\_resources/images/ersel/ersel098b.pdf](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/ersel/ersel098b.pdf)

eliminate some of the dangers we now face daily.”<sup>22</sup> ER’s own socioeconomic privilege prevented her from fully understanding the critical urgency that Black men and women felt in relation to the adverse political, economic, and social conditions that precluded them from sharing equally in the benefits of New Deal programs that were slowly helping the nation to heal the wounds inflicted by the Depression. Her friendship with Bethune led ER to challenge segregationist policies at the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in 1938. At this event, ER chose to place her chair in the aisle rather than on the “White side” as she had been directed to do. This action sparked conflict with conservative conference-goers and earned her enmity from the Southern press. The press publicized actions such as this and her 1939 decision to resign from the Daughters of the American Revolution after they refused to bend the laws of segregation to allow the popular African American contralto Marian Anderson to perform in their Constitution Hall. ER wrote somewhat ambiguously in *My Day* that month (without naming either the organization from which she was resigning, or Marian Anderson) that she belonged “to an organization in which I can do no active work. They have taken an action which has been widely talked of in the press. To remain as a member implies approval of that action, and therefore I am resigning.”<sup>23</sup> ER and FDR had previously hosted one of Anderson’s performances at the White House, and ER was asked by the NAACP to present Anderson with the its Springarn Medal in the same year she resigned from the DAR. Despite these and other events that signify ER’s continued willingness to publicly

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<sup>22</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *What I Hope to Leave Behind: The Essential Essays of Eleanor Roosevelt*, ed. Allida M. Black (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Pub., 1995), 85.

<sup>23</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, February 27, 1939," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017), accessed 12/20/2019, [https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?\\_y=1939&\\_f=md055200](https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1939&_f=md055200).

support the cause of civil rights, ER had not yet reached that point where she could truly imagine herself in the position of Black Americans, as she would later write was necessary for sincere empathy and compassion. War, Hitler, and her friendship with the young activist Pauli Murray would soon change that.

## Chapter 2: Pursuing Equality in the Name of Democracy

*"I have read the copy of the letter you sent me and I understand perfectly, but great changes come slowly... sometimes it is better to fight hard with conciliatory methods. The South is changing, but don't push too fast."*

Letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to Pauli Murray, December 19, 1938<sup>24</sup>

Following her resignation from the Daughters of the American Revolution, Eleanor Roosevelt helped to arrange for Marian Anderson to perform at the Lincoln Memorial on April 9, 1939, and although she did not attend herself, she persuaded radio stations to carry the event live; ER then wrote an article for the *Washington Post* asking Americans how they could rationally curse Hitler and Nazism while they themselves fought to suppress African Americans such as Marian Anderson.<sup>25</sup> Her actions in relation to these incidents indicate where her views stood as America approached the end of the 1930s and the looming war in Europe. Although she did eventually resign from the DAR, her choice was neither easy nor immediate. Like her husband, ER often weighed her actions against what she knew would be the reaction of the Southern congressmen who held the fate of the New Deal in their hands; she confessed that because of his calls for her caution, "I frequently was more careful than I might otherwise have been."<sup>26</sup> But for ER, what she knew to be right usually won out, and so it was in this case. However, more than a month would pass between the time of the DAR's initial refusal to allow Anderson to perform and ER's resignation. ER initially told friends that she would like to make a statement, but she believed that "this situation is so bad that plenty of people

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<sup>24</sup> Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, "Why Curse Hitler While Suppressing Marian Anderson?" *The Washington Post*, March 2, 1939.

<sup>26</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1949), 162.

will come out against it.”<sup>27</sup> When no one else resigned, ER did, making history, albeit belatedly. In this way ER was learning to use the power of the White House to challenge racial discrimination in America without attaching her husband’s name to the causes she supported. Yet her hesitance and her tendency to equivocate in situations such as this (she initially refused to either confirm or deny her resignation from the DAR when asked at a press conference the day after she resigned) indicate her struggle to balance political pragmatism with her interest in combating inequities such as race-based segregation. She firmly believed that racism was one of the greatest dangers to democracy, but she was reared in the traditions of 19<sup>th</sup> century progressivism; “she was, accordingly, an advocate of equal opportunities rather than a social critic or an architect of structural change.”<sup>28</sup> The day would come when ER would grow weary of 20<sup>th</sup> century progressivism and the promises of Democratic politicians, but that day remained years in the future.

At the end of 1938, Pauli Murray, a young activist and teacher for the Works Progress Administration, fired off an indignant letter to Franklin Roosevelt following his enthusiastic acceptance of an honorary degree from the University of North Carolina, an institution which counted Murray’s white ancestors as alumni but which would refuse later that year to admit Murray based on her race. Having encountered (but not spoken to) ER on one of the First Lady’s visits to Camp Tera, a Federal Emergency Relief Administration camp located at Bear Mountain, New York which was founded largely by the First Lady’s efforts, Murray felt that ER would be more sympathetic to her views and

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<sup>27</sup> Allida M. Black, “Championing a Champion: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Marian Anderson 'Freedom Concert',” in “Modern First Ladies White House Organization,” special issue, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Fall 1990), [www.jstor.org/stable/20700156](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20700156), 724.’

<sup>28</sup> Joanne Schneider Zangrando and Robert Zangrando, *Without Precedent*, 95.

also forwarded the letter to her. Murray had read his address to the university and been immediately incensed by the “contradiction between President Roosevelt’s high-sounding phrases and the realities.” Her letter asked FDR if he felt the way Black Americans did, “that the ultimate test of democracy in the United States will be the way in which it solves its Negro problem?”<sup>29</sup> As Murray predicted, FDR did not respond, but to her surprise, ER did. Although the cautionary tenor of her response did not resonate with the young and passionate liberal, Pauli was gratified by the First Lady’s having taken the time to write to her, and heartened by ER’s recent rebellious action at the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, Murray agreed with the *Afro-American*’s summary of ER’s decision: “Sometimes actions speak louder than words.”<sup>30</sup>

With Germany’s invasion of Poland, ER clung even more firmly to the belief that civil rights were essential to democracy, an assertion echoed in Murray’s letter to the Roosevelts. Although ER was not yet speaking or writing openly about the need for an immediate legal end to segregation, she wrote in 1940 that in denying some of its citizens equal opportunities America had forgotten the basic tenets of democracy. In the first book she wrote as First Lady, *The Moral Basis of Democracy*, she lamented that “we have never been willing to face this problem, to line it up with the basic underlying beliefs in democracy...”<sup>31</sup> Pauli Murray was encouraged by ER’s public condemnations of racial intolerance, and she reached out to ER again in December 1939. This time Murray shared an editorial with ER that Murray led her to believe was written by a friend

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<sup>29</sup> Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989, 1987), 111.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>31</sup> Roosevelt and Black, *What I Hope to Leave Behind*, 89.

but in fact was authored by Murray, who was evidently uncomfortable about making her misfortune known to the First Lady. Referring to her own recent struggles with the indignity of unemployment and relief programs, Murray wrote that “we cannot help thinking that the difference between our plight and that of the European refugees is only one of degree... Whatever the cause for this state of being, until democratic society can find a dignified use for all the individuals who comprise it, there can be no peace.”<sup>32</sup>

This comparison of the circumstances of poverty-stricken Americans to Jewish refugees seeking asylum from Nazi persecution was precisely the sort of perspective that resonated most with ER, and she referred to Murray’s letter in *My Day* on December 14<sup>th</sup>, reminding her readers that winning the war in Europe would be futile if America did not address its own social and economic inequities.<sup>33</sup>

After their collaboration on several joint efforts, the casual acquaintance begun by these first letters between Murray and ER would soon be replaced by a much more personal relationship. In January 1940 Murray was serving as the executive secretary for National Sharecroppers’ Week, an event sponsored by the Southern Tenant Farmer’s Union, an organization that worked to secure government relief for sharecroppers and tenant farmers. After being granted a request to visit ER’s NYC apartment to discuss the event with her, Murray asked the First Lady to be a guest speaker at a charity dinner for the STFU. Although this experience bolstered Murray’s belief in ER’s commitment to relieving the economic problems of all American citizens, she cringed at the First Lady’s comments in *My Day* on January 23, 1940. In her column, ER discussed her experience

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<sup>32</sup> Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady*, 48.

<sup>33</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day”, December 14, 1939.



crossing a picket line in front of a Washington, DC movie theater, seemingly unaware that the protestors were there in response to the Keith Theater's decision to cancel a promotion because it had been won by a Black man. After reading ER's comments, which seemed to suggest that although she was sympathetic, she was also criticizing the picketers for their demonstration, Murray sent off a passionate rebuke. Referring to ER's comment that "there comes a time... when one must stand up and be counted for the things in which one believes," Murray responded that she was unable to reconcile that belief with ER's decision to cross a picket line "against her deeper feelings."<sup>34</sup>

Although she received no direct response to this reproachful letter, Murray believed that her closing comment, "there can be no compromise on the principle of equality" was one that ER did essentially agree with, but that she had "not yet become fully aware of the extent to which all Negroes suffered almost daily humiliations and how bitterly we felt about these injustices."<sup>35</sup> ER's gradual awakening combined with Murray's self-described "impatience" sometimes put them at odds and created friction between them, but their ability to thoughtfully and respectfully resolve their disagreements only served to bring them closer together. Despite their differences of opinion, Murray's belief in ER's fundamental commitment to the causes near and dear to Murray's own heart did not waver. This belief would be put to the test over the next two years, while Murray and ER worked together to save a man's life. Odell Waller, a Black man convicted by an all-White jury of killing his White landlord in what Waller maintained until the end of his life was self-defense, spent two years on death row, while

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<sup>34</sup> Murray, *The Autobiography*, 137.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

his mother, Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the socialist labor rights organization the Workers' Defense League as well as the NAACP and other groups fought to prove he had not been given a fair trial. Due to Virginia's discriminatory poll tax law which targeted African Americans, Waller's peers were effectively barred from the jury. Although they were ultimately unsuccessful in saving Waller's life, ER's involvement and the compassionate embrace she would later bestow upon Murray in response to his death further cemented the closeness between the two friends. As she had done in the case of the anti-lynching bill, ER pleaded with her husband to intervene, knowing her husband had faced a similar issue as governor of New York and granted the prisoner clemency. Despite FDR's request that the governor of Virginia consider commuting his sentence to life in prison, Odell Waller was executed on July 2, 1942. His execution prompted the labor and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph to lead a march through the streets of Manhattan later that month.<sup>36</sup> The events of Waller's case and subsequent execution would ultimately inspire Murray to pursue a career in law.

In response to Waller's execution, Murray penned an open letter to FDR signed by the delegation that had worked to free Waller, warning him that "if the Negro is not given full rights now, then the battle for Democracy is lost." She also sent the President and First Lady a letter from herself which posed a question as to why Black Americans could not be evacuated from lynching areas in the same way that FDR claimed to have evacuated Japanese Americans in the wake of Pearl Harbor to shield them from harm.<sup>37</sup> This letter, sent in the aftermath of the emotional conclusion of Waller's death, elicited a

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<sup>36</sup> Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume III: The War Years and After, 1939-1962* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 432.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 433.

heated response to Murray from ER which would lead to the start of their friendship in earnest. In response to Murray's suggestion that FDR be as forthcoming about "the race question" as his political opponent Wendell Willkie, ER testily responded, "We have to face realities and [we] cannot move faster than the people wish us to move."<sup>38</sup> Murray sensed that she had upset the First Lady and while Murray replied in a more conciliatory manner, she refused to back down, telling ER that her letter had been written "from a depth of desperation and disgust, such as every thinking Negro often experiences."<sup>39</sup> Likening the plight of African Americans to those victimized by Hitler and Nazism, Murray pleaded with ER to understand the despair she and other Black Americans felt and their desperate hope that the President would use his power to help them. Faced with the bald truth of these statements, ER invited Murray to discuss them in person at her apartment in New York, where she would embrace Murray upon her arrival, remarking that the night Waller's final appeal was denied had been a terrible one. This evidence of her compassion and their heartfelt conversation about Waller's death and the circumstances that surrounded it won Murray over permanently. Murray later wrote in her autobiography that the First Lady's honesty and empathy turned Murray's "wariness of Mrs. Roosevelt" into "unreserved affection."<sup>40</sup> During an oral history interview Murray participated in for the FDR Library in 1978, she said that ER's attitude during this meeting "just removed all of the anger... And I think from that moment on I began to

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<sup>38</sup> Murray, *The Autobiography*, 190.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 191.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

try to understand where Mrs. Roosevelt was coming from... and she came closer to understanding where I was coming from.”<sup>41</sup>

As the war raged on, ER continued to insist that it would be fruitless to preserve democracy abroad without doing so at home, echoing the goals of the “Double V for Victory” campaign, a national call by African Americans for victory over tyranny abroad and racial discrimination on the home front. Writing for *Negro Digest* in 1943, ER asserted, “We are fighting a war today so that individuals all over the world may have freedom... If we believe firmly that peace cannot come to the world unless this is true for men all over the world, then we must know in our nation that every man, regardless of race or religion, has this chance. Otherwise we are fighting for nothing of real value.”<sup>42</sup> After Walter White, Mary McLeod Bethune, A. Philip Randolph and other prominent Black leaders brought their grievances to the White House and informed FDR that they were planning a march on Washington, DC in protest of racial discrimination in war industries, FDR reluctantly issued Executive Order 8802, which prohibited discrimination in the defense industry. The meetings between FDR and the group of leaders was arranged by ER, who supported their cause and convinced FDR of the seriousness of their threats after receiving memorandums on the march from Randolph.

When the Fair Employment Practices Commission was established following the passage of Executive Order 8802, Walter White telegraphed ER his “Warm thanks for the major part you played in... [the] appointment... of [a] board to investigate and correct

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<sup>41</sup> Pauli Murray, interview by Dr. Thomas F. Soapes, February 3, 1978, Interview 80-32, transcript, Oral History Interviews, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, NY.

<sup>42</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, “The Four Equalities,” *Negro Digest*, September 1943, 4.

racial discrimination in national defense programs.”<sup>43</sup> Despite the fact that she had also suggested to White and Randolph that a march on Washington would likely result in violence and be contradictory to their goals, ER had also provided a willing ear to their grievances and granted their requests for an audience at the White House. This openness led them to turn to her in the future for similar assistance. ER’s genuine interest in alleviating the ill effects of racial discrimination was for many years tempered by her belief that these problems could be solved through the “moderate, procedural instruments of a progressive liberalism,” and thus she initially shunned the behavior of those activists she felt were pushing too hard and too fast.<sup>44</sup> Yet White and other African American leaders recognized that in spite of her reservations she remained an important ally; when other Black leaders criticized what they saw as her reticence, White never failed to defend her and point out the gains they had made as a result of ER’s support.

As Tamara K. Hareven asserts, ER was a woman of often seemingly contradictory goals and viewpoints, but she was unwaveringly committed to social justice, and “ready to work for social betterment step by step and to compromise under the pressures of political reality.”<sup>45</sup> This description is an accurate characterization of ER in the years before her husband’s death, the end of World War II, and the beginning of the Cold War. It is somewhat difficult to reconcile the actions of a woman who did not directly condemn FDR’s internment of Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor with the thoughts ER shared in “My Day” soon after the bombing, in which she wrote, “If we cannot meet the challenge of fairness to our citizens of every nationality, of really

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<sup>43</sup> Joanne Schneider Zangrando and Robert L. Zangrando, *Without Precedent*, 96

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>45</sup> Hareven, *Without Precedent*, 201.

believing in the Bill of Rights and making it a reality for all loyal American citizens, regardless of race, creed or color; if we cannot keep in check anti-semitism [sic], anti-racial feelings as well as anti-religious feelings, then we shall have removed from the world, the one real hope for the future on which all humanity must now rely.”<sup>46</sup> ER’s comments about her actions being curtailed by her husband’s political concerns as well as descriptions of her own political outlook as “being willing to compromise” explain why she did not denounce her husband’s actions. Despite the obvious fact of her disapproval with his passage of Executive Order 9066 and with FDR’s refusal to permit more European refugees to enter the United States, and despite the First Lady’s own tireless work for these efforts, which led to the establishment of the US Committee for the Care of European Children, ER would not go as far as to directly criticize her husband for his decisions. Yet her sentiments in her 1943 speech about Japanese internment camps, during which she lamented that “we have no choice but to try to correct our past mistakes,” make her position clear.<sup>47</sup>

The letters between Pauli Murray and Mrs. R., as Murray came to refer to her friend, indicate a relationship bound by mutual respect and a desire to understand each other’s perspectives. Murray knew that ER had many friends in the African American community, but she desperately wanted the First Lady to understand the unique problems that war, poverty, and discrimination posed to the lives of younger people like her. Apologizing for what she realized might seem like thoughtless or reckless words in her earlier letters, she reminded ER in 1942 that she did not “speak from the generation of

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<sup>46</sup> ER, “My Day,” December 16, 1941.

<sup>47</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 430.

Negro leaders whom you know and respect... I speak out of the hearts of the declassed and degraded young Negroes who never had much chance and yet must bear the responsibilities which fall from the present generation. Trained as an American, my loyalties are divided between race and country.”<sup>48</sup> These thoughts, which triggered that first meeting between them as friends rather than acquaintances, were echoed in ER’s 1943 article for *Negro Digest*, in which she professed that “if I were a Negro today, I think I would have moments of great bitterness. It would be hard for me to sustain my faith in democracy and to build up a sense of goodwill toward men of other races.” Murray’s influence is evident in ER’s words, which by this time were beginning to more clearly call out racists and the discriminatory practices that Murray continued to point out to her. Yet also clear is ER’s continued unwillingness or inability to accept that the changes that African Americans were calling for needed to be achieved immediately. In the same article, she wrote, “I would not do too much demanding. I would take every chance that came my way to prove my quality and my ability... I would not try to bring those advances about any more quickly than they were offered.”<sup>49</sup> She continued to assert her belief that the government would act eventually to correct discriminatory practices, and that in the meantime, Black Americans should be patient and endeavor to change the minds of the rest of the country by educating themselves and accepting the slow progress of federal law.

Pauli Murray was aware of ER’s belief in the value of moderate progressivism, but emboldened by the memory of the First Lady’s public support of Marian Anderson

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<sup>48</sup> Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady*, 103.

<sup>49</sup> Roosevelt, *Negro Digest*, 1943.

and Odell Waller, her actions at the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, and her willingness to discuss Murray's perspectives, the young activist also believed that ER's mind was open and able to change. She sent ER news clippings related to protests and activist work Murray was engaged in at law school in Washington DC, as well as poems and other written works she authored. When FDR stated that he was "sure that every true American" regretted the violence of the Detroit race riots of June 1943 which killed twenty-five Black citizens and nine White people, Murray sent ER a poem she wrote in response and sarcastically entitled "Mr. Roosevelt Regrets." ER replied simply, "I am sorry but I understand."<sup>50</sup> ER would not openly condemn FDR's limited willingness to address the problems of racial discrimination and racial violence, but nor would she complacently accept it. Although her husband directed her to stay away from Detroit following the riots, which were a result of the angry reaction of White residents to FDR's attempts to integrate the Sojourner Truth housing development for war defense workers, ER traveled to Detroit to speak at an NAACP event. Thurgood Marshall, head of the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund, referred to ER as "Lady Big Heart" and marveled that "the president's wife had the guts to speak [in Detroit] when racial hostilities were at their peak."<sup>51</sup> The Southern press had long disparaged ER for her efforts to aid the cause of civil rights, such as her enthusiastic and public support of the Tuskegee Institute program which trained Black pilots and the constant pressure she put on the federal government to include African Americans in New Deal programs. In response to the violence in Detroit, a Mississippi newspaper published an editorial

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<sup>50</sup> Murray, *The Autobiography*, 212.

<sup>51</sup> Cook, *Volume III*, 473.



condemning her for “personally proclaiming and practicing social equality at the White House and wherever she went,” telling her she had “blood on [her] hands.”<sup>52</sup>

Over the long years of their friendship, Murray seldom confided to ER that she was frequently hospitalized and/or under the care of physicians for various ailments, both physical and mental. Although she shared with ER her thoughts about race and details of the personal and professional battles she fought in the areas of racial and sexual discrimination, asking her for help with problems such as the denial of her application to Harvard Law School due to her sex (a matter that eventually even FDR would address at ER’s behest) this openness did not extend to Murray’s lifelong struggles with her sexual orientation and gender identity. That their friendship had grown to new heights and had become one of great affection is evidenced by ER’s casual address to “Pauli” rather than “Miss Murray” by 1944, but there were few people with whom Murray felt comfortable discussing her fears and concerns about her mental health and sexuality. Although she never spoke to ER of men (or romantic interests in general) and would one day feel comfortable enough to bring her longtime partner, Renee Barlow, to meet ER, there is no evidence in their correspondence or in Murray’s writings that the topic of sexuality was ever broached by either of them. Brittney Cooper’s treatise on Murray, *Queering Jane Crow*, discusses Murray’s enduring struggle to represent an “unhyphenated” identity, and her constant frustration with the inability of doctors to explain “why she, a biological female, experienced sexual attraction to women and preferred a masculine gender identity.”<sup>53</sup> While she wrote prolifically about her thoughts on race in America in her

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<sup>52</sup> Bell-Scott, 123.

<sup>53</sup> Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 87.

autobiographies, Murray seldom spoke or wrote about the issues of her sexuality and gender openly; much of what is known about these struggles has been gleaned from surviving medical documents. Rosalind Rosenberg explains that “Although [Murray was] a pioneering leader in both the civil rights and feminist movements, Murray insisted to the end of her life that nontraditional gender identity and sexual orientation were private matters that should be protected as part of the campaign for human rights, not used for the purposes of separate organizing efforts.”<sup>54</sup>

The history of Murray’s relationship with ER and its relevance to American history is evidenced by the fact that Murray has generally been included in biographies on ER, but what is puzzling is the briefness of this inclusion in most scholarly works until relatively recently. Joe Lash, one of ER’s closest friends in later life, wrote several books on the First Lady, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Eleanor and Franklin* as well as several books on her friendships and life following the death of her husband. Lash was also friends with Murray, and curious about the possibility of margin notes and postscripts that might reveal more about their friendship and the issues they discussed, he asked Murray for access to her correspondence with ER while he was writing the follow-up to *Eleanor and Franklin*, titled *The Years Alone*, which was released in 1972.<sup>55</sup> Yet despite this access, Lash did not feature any of the letters between ER and Murray in either of his collections of the former’s letters, although he does credit Murray in *Eleanor and Franklin* for helping ER “understand the mood of Negro youth.”<sup>56</sup> This decision is

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<sup>54</sup> Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Murray, Oral History Interview for FDR Library, 1978.

<sup>56</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 524.

curious, as is Murray's relative absence from other biographies of ER, such as Doris Kearns Goodwin's Pulitzer Prize-winning *No Ordinary Time*, which details the story of FDR and ER and the home front in America during World War II. As the events of this book naturally do not extend far beyond 1945, it is understandable that it does not describe Murray and ER's friendship beyond that time. However, as ER's work for civil rights during this period is one of the central themes in the book, that Goodwin mentions Murray only twice is difficult to understand, particularly considering the frequent references to Walter White and Mary McLeod Bethune. It is especially incongruous in light of the fact that Goodwin acknowledges that after their work together on the Odell Waller case, "a friendship was born which lasted until Eleanor died."<sup>57</sup>

Not until relatively recently have scholars begun to revisit the life of Pauli Murray and acknowledge her many contributions to the causes of civil rights and women's rights, and perhaps this is the reason why, as Bell-Scott suggested, that her friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt has been under-emphasized in past scholarship. The facts of Bethune and White's work as government appointees and leaders in the early civil rights movement have been well-documented; as discussed (and noted by Murray herself) Bethune and White were of an older, less radical generation, and researchers involved in early histories of the Roosevelts seem to have found their politics and personalities easier to characterize and situate within their scholarship. Despite the fact that Murray coined the phrase "Jane Crow" in a 1965 law review article to describe the unique double discrimination faced by black women decades before Kimberlé Crenshaw developed her

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<sup>57</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 354.

groundbreaking treatise on critical race theory, Crenshaw does not credit Murray in her works on intersectional feminism, another curious omission.

As the fields of women's history and gender studies grow in popularity and scholars work to correct the absences of important stories such as Murray's, this progress has also made it possible to fill in some of the blanks concerning the impact of these neglected figures on the histories of others. Today, scholars such as Brittney Cooper and Rosalind Rosenberg are plumbing the prolific documentary record Murray left behind, and as race, sexuality, and gender theories have advanced, so has our understanding of her struggles and accomplishments, and her impact on the causes of civil and women's rights. These advances mirror those related to Eleanor Roosevelt; modern ER scholars such as Blanche Wiesen Cook and Allida Black have worked to counteract what they recognize as the deliberate and calculated destruction of documents related to aspects of ER's life that her friends and heirs chose to keep hidden. As Cook explains, a main goal of their recent biographies and collections has been to "turn the prism, refocus the lens, and widen the scope" of our understanding of ER's life.<sup>58</sup> This process has cleared a path for greater consideration and a clearer perspective of both ER and the influences that shaped her thoughts and deeds.

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<sup>58</sup> Cook, *Volume I*, 8.

### Chapter 3: Evolving into an Activist

*"I'm not afraid to tell the American people the truth."*

Eleanor Roosevelt at the Democratic National Convention, 1960<sup>59</sup>

In 1945, three months after being elected to the presidency for an unprecedented 4<sup>th</sup> term, an ailing Franklin Roosevelt succumbed to a fatal cerebral hemorrhage, and ER insisted to reporters following her husband's funeral that "the story [was] over."<sup>60</sup> Yet in a letter to her friend Lorena Hickok a few days later, she struck a decidedly different note, writing, "Franklin's death ended a period in history and now in its wake for lots of us who lived in his shadow periods come and we have to start again under our own momentum and wonder what we can achieve."<sup>61</sup> Freed from the political constraints of being Franklin Roosevelt's wife and First Lady and bolstered by the insight and experience she had gained through war, politics, and friendship, ER's own story was far from over. In her autobiography, ER confessed that her husband's tendency to prioritize politics over causes he believed in had frequently "annoyed [her] very much."<sup>62</sup> Although her own perspectives on civil rights were still evolving at the end of World War II, her words and actions in the wake of her husband's death demonstrate that she considered herself much "freer," as she put it to her friend Trude Lash, wife of Joe Lash.<sup>63</sup> Within months of FDR's death, ER joined the NAACP Board of Directors and the Congress on Racial Equality Board, and was appointed to the NAACP's legal affairs

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<sup>59</sup> Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 180.

<sup>60</sup> Cook, *Volume III*, 542.

<sup>61</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt to Lorena Hickok, April 19, 1945, from the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, (<https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/>).

<sup>62</sup> Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 191.

<sup>63</sup> Cook, *Volume III*, 544.

committee. She recognized that it was imperative to continue the fight for civil rights amidst the social, political, and economic upheaval brought about by the end of the war in Europe and had no intention of resting on her laurels. Although she was driven to act and to give her support to causes such as civil rights as a result of the inherent danger she believed racism and discrimination posed to American democracy, as Joe Lash writes in *Love, Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends*, “Her relationship to causes and movements was through people. The relationship was reciprocal. Without people whom she cared about in a movement, she did not feel she understood it in its detail and complexity.”<sup>64</sup> While throughout her life she remained passionate about her work toward political, social, and economic justice, as she herself suggested, it was the people she knew and cared about that helped her connect their problems to those of the greater world. As she grew older and bore continual witness to the failure of government policy to effectively address racial discrimination and persecution, her friendships and relationships with those affected by this injustice helped her to better understand their frustration and desperation for change.

Over the next 17 years, ER continued to write books, articles, and her daily “My Day” and monthly “If You Ask Me” columns, and she traveled the world as a UN delegate, a drafter of the historic and influential Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and as a broker of world peace who throughout the Cold War continued to be an enemy of dictators and despots everywhere. Although she never held an elected government position, her continued influence in the Democratic party was still evident near the end of her life when John F. Kennedy traveled to her home in Hyde Park, NY to win her

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<sup>64</sup> Lash, *Love, Eleanor*, x.

endorsement in the presidential election of 1960 despite her initial criticism that his position on civil rights was not strong enough. While ER's own continually evolving position on civil rights can be tracked through the articles, speeches, and books she shared with the public, a consideration of these public materials in conjunction with her private correspondence with Pauli Murray from this time period provides insight into the connections between the public and private aspects of her life and the effects of these interactions on her social and political awareness. ER believed that "When you stop learning you stop living in any vital and meaningful sense," and that "You can understand [the meaning of experiences] only if you have arrived at some knowledge of yourself, a knowledge based on a deliberately and usually painfully acquired self-discipline..."<sup>65</sup> The prolific and persistent nature of her public and private written works make it possible to follow the progression of her perspectives on civil rights through the end of her life, with her final "My Day" column appearing less than two months before her death. She would continue to correspond with her friend Pauli Murray up until the summer before her death, after which she was too ill to personally respond to Murray's letters.

At the end of World War II, fearful that a new president and administration would lead to the end of many of the New Deal programs designed to combat racial discrimination, she again reminded her "My Day" readers of the futility of fighting for democracy abroad while restricting it at home, writing, "if we do not see that equal opportunity, equal justice, and equal treatment are meted out to every citizen, the very

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<sup>65</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living: Eleven Keys for a More Fulfilling Life* (1960; repr., n.p.: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2011), Foreword.

basis on which this country can hope to survive with liberty and justice for all will be wiped away.”<sup>66</sup> Pauli Murray credited ER with convincing President Harry Truman to publicly condemn racial discrimination in employment, praised the former First Lady for her “long years of liaison work,” and suggested that ER had “grown not only in your own understanding of our problems, but you and Mr. Roosevelt taught people like me to grow.”<sup>67</sup> In the late 1970s, Murray would state in an oral history interview for the FDR Presidential Library that mutual respect was the basis of their long friendship, and that “it was a growing relationship, a very painful, growing, but loving relationship.”<sup>68</sup> The “growing” that Murray refers to was a reciprocal process that would continue through the end of ER’s life, and slowly but ultimately transform her from a cautious and politically pragmatic ally of the early civil rights movement into an activist in her own right. When Murray was asked to speak at a 1982 conference that examined ER’s role as First Lady, she spoke of the respect, love, and friendship they had shared, as well as the inspiration she continued to derive from ER’s legacy and influence. Yet also evident in her tribute was Murray’s recognition of the role she herself had played in ER’s growth; she told conference-goers that at one time she had been a “youthful challenger and critic” of the former First Lady’s, and that she had “[taken] it upon herself to challenge [ER’s] behavior in the area of race relations as an important figure and a part of an Administration which was moving too slow.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Roosevelt, “My Day,” April 30, 1945.

<sup>67</sup> Bell-Scott, *Firebrand and the First Lady*, 172.

<sup>68</sup> Murray, Oral History Interview for the FDR Library, 1977, 35.

<sup>69</sup> Bell-Scott, *Firebrand and the First Lady*, 354.



As she had intimated in the past, while FDR was alive ER's publicly expressed opinions were often inhibited by a fear of political backlash against her husband; although Franklin seldom directly censored her, his advisors always made it clear that as First Lady her voice and her pen were never entirely her own. After his death, ER eschewed suggestions that she run for office herself but was eager to have more time to devote to writing, which she always considered her true occupation. Resuming "My Day" several days after FDR's death, she told readers she believed that "in order to be useful we must stand for the things we feel are right, and we must work for those things wherever we find ourselves. It does very little good to believe something unless you tell your friends and associates of your beliefs."<sup>70</sup> For the rest of her life she would use her column, her books, and her other public writings and speeches to help Americans better understand the changing world around them and the ways they could aid the causes of freedom and equality. Frequent references to her columns and other written works by everyone from friends like Pauli Murray to the President of the United States indicate the influence her words had on those who read them; she would continue to utilize "My Day" to both criticize and praise leaders, legislators, and American and world citizens for their actions regarding civil rights.

The conclusion of World War II and her role as First Lady did not end ER's interest in ensuring the survival of democracy both home and abroad. President Truman was cognizant of her reputation regarding civil rights and asked her to serve on the U.S. delegation for the first session of the United Nations General Assembly in London, but she only hesitantly accepted his appointment, at first protesting that she knew too little

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<sup>70</sup> ER, "My Day," May 7, 1945.

about international affairs to take on such a responsibility. After ultimately agreeing to serve, she asked those whose opinions she respected for advice and recommendations of problems and issues to address as she proceeded to the inaugural session in London. Her friends Walter White, Mary McLeod Bethune, and W.E.B. DuBois asked her to work towards promoting education and the end of colonialism, poverty, and disease around the world, stating that such requests represented the “desires of American Negroes.”<sup>71</sup> Being a U.N. delegate and a drafter of 1948’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights gave ER the opportunity to tackle these and other issues on a world stage; her belief that the problems of individual people, countries, and continents were interconnected lay at the basis of her work with the United Nations. In a “My Day” column in 1946, she praised the comments of a fellow delegate who called upon the various nations of the assembly to identify their mutual interests and problems, telling her readers, “for only as we make these discoveries and see the pattern of mutual interests grow, can the real objectives of the United Nations be attained.”<sup>72</sup> Her service in the U.N. made it possible for ER to address problems associated with social and economic injustice that had concerned her for many years. After the end of the U.N.’s first session, she traveled around Europe to view the ravages of the war firsthand, and following a visit to a camp for Jewish displaced persons in Germany, she asked, “When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?”<sup>73</sup>

In 1946, Pauli Murray wrote to thank ER for her service in the U.N., telling her that her presence there “gave many of us [Americans] reassurance that at least one

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<sup>71</sup> Cook, *Volume III*, 549.

<sup>72</sup> ER, “My Day,” November 22, 1946.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, February 16, 1946.

delegate would represent our point of view.”<sup>74</sup> The warm friendship between ER and Murray persisted despite their individual busy schedules and the physical distance that often stretched between them; in early 1947 ER invited Murray to visit her for the first time at Val-Kill, her country home in Hyde Park, NY. Although Murray was at that time occupied by her search for employment following her graduation from law school and had to put off her visit, she was gratified by ER’s invitation, as “such an invitation meant one had significance in ER’s personal life.”<sup>75</sup> Murray would be invited to visit and stay at Val-Kill on numerous occasions in subsequent years, sometimes accompanied by family members eager to meet the former First Lady, such as Murray’s foster mother, aunts, nieces, and nephews, whom ER often included in her invitations. Murray continued to send ER her poetry, articles, and other literature that she believed would better equip her friend to understand and confront the problems and perspectives of African Americans. While the increasing freedom she felt in broaching more personal topics of discussion with ER did not extend to the subject of her continued struggles with sexuality and gender, Murray eventually felt comfortable enough to share a letter with ER that detailed her family’s history of mental illness and her own battles with anxiety. Writing amid the paranoia and suspicion of the McCarthy era in 1954, Murray noted that she hoped such honesty would work to combat the current “atmosphere of fear.”<sup>76</sup> ER took these admissions in stride, visiting Murray in the hospital and frequently asking after her health.

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<sup>74</sup> Bell-Scott, *Firebrand and the First Lady*, 181.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 222.

Murray wrote in her autobiography that ER “admired and trusted my habit of not letting her high position prevent me from speaking out on a political issue when I disagreed with her.”<sup>77</sup> While Murray’s blunt honesty had occasionally ruffled ER’s feathers in the past, there is less evidence of this in the later years of their friendship. In her 1953 article for *Ebony*, “Some of My Best Friends Are Negroes,” ER details the history of her friendships with African Americans, beginning with Mary McLeod Bethune. ER affectionately refers to Murray as “one of her finest young friends” and a “firebrand,” noting that their relationship was “very satisfying” and that she was very fond of Murray.<sup>78</sup> These feelings were clearly reciprocal, as Murray noted that after ER left the White House, “[our friendship] began to be even more of a personal relationship than a political relationship.”<sup>79</sup> With the death of her foster mother and aunts occurring in quick succession in the mid-1950s, Murray increasingly came to see ER as a maternal figure, often affectionately referring to her as “family.”<sup>80</sup> Although their growing closeness and familiarity is evident in the correspondence between Murray and ER in the 1950s, Murray continued to direct ER’s attention to political matters related to racial equality and justice as well as the government persecution of Americans suspected of Communism. ER seldom failed to respond to these requests or to intervene if it was in her power to do so, but as Murray later noted, “[ER] perceived the civil rights issue as secondary to [political considerations such as] winning the White House for Adlai Stevenson.”<sup>81</sup> In her autobiography, Murray noted that the two women disagreed about

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<sup>77</sup> Murray, *Autobiography*, 289.

<sup>78</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, “Some of My Best Friends Are Negroes,” *Ebony*, February 1953.

<sup>79</sup> Murray, Oral History Interview for the FDR Library, 1978.

<sup>80</sup> Pauli Murray to Eleanor Roosevelt, June 6, 1954, from Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library Archives ([http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/\\_resources/images/ersel/ersel072.pdf](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/ersel/ersel072.pdf).)

<sup>81</sup> Murray, *Autobiography*, 309.

the civil rights plank of the Democratic party platform in the middle 1950s, writing that “[ER’s] pragmatism, directed toward holding Southern Democrats in the party, ignored another reality – the increasing momentum of the civil rights movement...”<sup>82</sup> At this time ER still had faith in the power and intentions of Democratic leaders to address the problems of racial discrimination and injustice, and Murray was frustrated by ER’s failure to recognize that presidential candidates such as Adlai Stevenson lost the vote of many African Americans because of their equivocation on civil rights in the interest of political expediency. When ER told Murray that African American leaders should avoid criticizing Stevenson for his advocacy of “gradual” racial integration as he was “after all the only real hope they ha[d],” Murray realized that there continued to be a fundamental difference in their “perception of the racial experience,” in spite of ER’s efforts to promote desegregation and her willingness to take Murray’s advice and consult with Black leaders such as Ralph Bunche on these issues.<sup>83</sup>

Despite these setbacks, by the 1950s, ER was writing publicly about her disdain for Jim Crow segregation, whereas in the past she had usually referred more obliquely to the importance of equal “opportunity” in education, housing, and employment, rather than openly condemning the practice of segregation and calling for its immediate end. In a 1959 article for *The Educational Forum*, ER warned Americans that a continued failure to adequately address the problem of racial segregation left the country vulnerable to the influence of Communism. The “Red Scare” (as the government’s hunt for Communists and other political “subversives” is often referred to) consumed the United States in the

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<sup>82</sup> Murray, *Autobiography*, 310.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 309.

years after World War II, and its power to ruin friendships, livelihoods, and the very fabric of the nation was a problem ER often spoke and wrote about. She asked readers of *The Educational Forum*, “why should it be possible to attract the colored peoples of the world to our philosophy, our form of government, to our way of life when we are unwilling to give our own colored people an opportunity for equality and justice?”<sup>84</sup> There was no doubt in ER’s mind by this time that Americans could not live in peace if segregation persisted. The violent reaction of White Americans to the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in schools unconstitutional and to the actions of the Freedom Riders who challenged Southern bus segregation in the early 1960s challenged ER’s faith in the power of politicians to solve this problem. When President Eisenhower ordered federal troops to ensure that Arkansas governor Orval Faubus did not continue to interfere with the integration of Little Rock’s schools in 1959, ER, who was frequently critical of the President, wrote in “My Day” that “Instead of sending troops I wish President Eisenhower would go down to Little Rock and lead the colored children into the school... The world has changed. The old doctrine of separate but equal cannot hold any longer.”<sup>85</sup> Her deep dissatisfaction with what she referred to as the “Eisenhower brand of Republicanism” is likely what blinded her to the faults of Democratic candidates like Adlai Stevenson, with even her friend Joe Lash admitting that because of her desperate desire for Democrats to return to power, “she had failed to do justice to the urgency of the civil rights issue.”<sup>86</sup> Stevenson’s loss to Eisenhower in the 1956 election seemingly opened her eyes to the perils of relying on the hope that politicians would be

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<sup>84</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, “Segregation,” *The Educational Forum*, no. 1 (November 1959), 5-6.

<sup>85</sup> ER, “My Day,” August 23, 1958.

<sup>86</sup> Joseph Lash, *Eleanor: The Years Alone* (n.p.: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 265.

able to adequately address the nation's escalating racial tensions and the discrimination and racism at the heart of these tensions. By the time of the 1960 presidential election, the last one of her life, ER was no longer willing to compromise with politicians on the issue of civil rights.

As she approached the final years of her life, ER followed the developments in the movement for civil rights with increasing interest and support. Although she suffered from aplastic anemia which often left her weak and tired, she continued to travel, write, and make public appearances. She lent her support to the aforementioned Freedom Riders and the "Little Rock Nine," met with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and other leaders of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and often wrote about these experiences and her perspectives on developments in the movement in her column. ER continued to correspond with Pauli Murray, often inviting her to relax in the peace and quiet of her country home in Hyde Park when the women were able to coordinate their schedules, and was vocal about her support of Murray's many legal and literary triumphs.<sup>87</sup> After ER delivered a particularly inspirational address at the Women's Luncheon for Stevenson in late 1956, Murray wrote to tell ER that "one of the reasons we 'firebrands' (your own term) love you so is that when you're 'riled up,' you're a bit of a firebrand yourself... I gloried in you... You are a constant inspiration to us more obvious 'firebrands.'"<sup>88</sup>

In 1958, ER befriended singer African American singer Harry Belafonte and defended him in "My Day" when he and his family were continually turned down in their

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<sup>87</sup> Bell-Scott, *Firebrand and the First Lady*, 233.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 254.

search for housing in New York because of their race, telling readers that she would welcome the Belafontes as neighbors and that “discrimination does something intangible and harmful to the souls of both white and colored people.”<sup>89</sup> She wrote in her autobiography that she had “long ago learned to stare down fear,” and the fearlessness and urgency with which she addressed the problems of America and the world as she approached the eighth decade of her life were evident in her words and her actions.<sup>90</sup> Whereas in the past ER had seldom encouraged protesters and demonstrators, believing that showing support rather than opposition to an issue was more effective, by this time she “refused to back away from endorsing confrontational demands for racial equality.”<sup>91</sup> In addition to her support of the Freedom Riders and other desegregation activists, ER joined forces with progressive organizations working against racial segregation and discrimination such as the Southern Conference Education Fund (which had replaced the Southern Conference for Human Welfare) and the Highlander Folk School in rural Tennessee, for which she taught workshops on civil disobedience. This shift in her ideology is increasingly evident in her writings and speeches in the wake of the “red-baiting” of the post-war years, a transformation that increasingly came to define her perspectives on racial justice and equality in her final years, writing in 1960 that “a liberal cannot give lip service to civil rights.”<sup>92</sup> Having been a firsthand witness to the persecution of her friends (including Murray, who was rejected for a position at Cornell University because of her politics) and other Americans by Senator McCarthy had

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<sup>89</sup> Roosevelt, “My Day,” October 20, 1958.

<sup>90</sup> Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 412.

<sup>91</sup> Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 105.

<sup>92</sup> Roosevelt, “My Day,” March 3, 1960.



brought the issue close to home for her and demonstrated the precarious nature of freedom and democracy.

Biographer Allida Black writes that “while ER continued to believe that the Democratic party was liberalism’s best hope, she nevertheless understood that working in tandem with party leaders did not ensure that the party would practice what it preached.”<sup>93</sup> In her last book, *Tomorrow Is Now*, which was published posthumously in 1963, ER issued a bold challenge to Democratic moderates, writing, “Staying aloof is not a solution, it is a cowardly evasion.”<sup>94</sup> When Senator John F. Kennedy sought her endorsement in the 1960 presidential election, she refused to grant it until several meetings with the young senator from Massachusetts led to her satisfaction that he meant what he said about being tougher on civil rights than he had first appeared to be. She told former Stevenson supporters in a letter she forwarded to JFK that “[Kennedy] really is interested in helping the people of his own country and mankind in general.”<sup>95</sup> JFK was reportedly very taken with the former First Lady, and after their meeting at Val Kill in August 1960, she became a vocal supporter of his, actively campaigning for him despite being increasingly ill. Pauli Murray was not as confident about Kennedy’s promises regarding civil rights; when she heard that ER had given him her endorsement, her droll response to ER was, “no comment.”<sup>96</sup>

After Kennedy’s election to the presidency in 1961, ER accepted a position to serve on the board of the newly created Peace Corps as well as chair of the President’s

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<sup>93</sup> Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 172.

<sup>94</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *Tomorrow Is Now: It Is Today That We Must Create the World of the Future* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2012), 19.

<sup>95</sup> Lash, *The Years Alone*, 298.

<sup>96</sup> Bell-Scott, *Firebrand and the First Lady*, 296.

Commission on the Status of Women, which JFK authorized by Executive Order in December 1961. In turn, ER recommended that Pauli Murray serve on the PCSW's civil and political rights subcommittee, a position Murray gladly accepted. Murray hoped that this would give her an opportunity to spend time with ER after seeing her only a few times over the last several years due to ER's illness and busy schedule as well as a year-long teaching position Murray had accepted in Ghana in 1960. Murray was unaware of the seriousness of ER's declining condition; her visit to Val-Kill on July 14, 1962 would be the last time she saw ER. It was during this final visit that the only picture ever taken of the two friends was snapped. Murray would later say that she was glad to have gotten ER a glass of lemonade on this visit, as ER had seldom asked her for favors over the two and a half decades of their friendship. Murray also recognized, belatedly, that the unusual request should have signaled her alarm as to the dire status of her friend's health.

Eleanor Roosevelt died at home in her apartment in New York City on November 7, 1962 from complications related to drug-resistant tuberculosis. Pauli Murray later wrote that "[ER] had filled the landscape of my entire adult life as she had done for millions of my generation, and it was unthinkable to associate her with death."<sup>97</sup> Murray considered the memorandum she presented on sex discrimination to the President's Commission on the Status of Women on October 1 her "memorial to [ER's] last public service," knowing at the time that her friend was dying and determined to honor her legacy in this last of ER's public service endeavors.<sup>98</sup> At ER's funeral on November 9, Adlai Stevenson delivered the eulogy, lamenting, "I have lost more than a beloved friend.

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<sup>97</sup> Murray, *Autobiography*, 351.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

I have lost an inspiration. She would rather light a candle than curse the darkness, and her glow has warmed the world.”<sup>99</sup> Pauli Murray called her death “the passing of an era.”<sup>100</sup> She would later refer to ER as the “greatest heroine of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” and she spoke and wrote affectionately about their friendship for the rest of her life.<sup>101</sup> Before her own death in 1985, Murray co-wrote “Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII,” which discusses the ways that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 could be interpreted to protect women, became the first African American to receive a doctorate in Juridical Science, co-founded the National Organization for Women, and became the first female African American priest in the Episcopal Church. In the 1970s Murray continued to be an instrumental figure in both the civil rights and women’s movements, and as she later wrote, as she “struggled with the racial and sexual conflicts of that period, [she] clung to the twofold legacy left to the world in the 1960s – the life and work, respectively, of Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Luther King, Jr.”<sup>102</sup> What had begun as a polite but occasionally defiant written correspondence characterized by Murray’s “confrontation by typewriter” in the midst of the racial turmoil of the war years eventually became a lifelong friendship which was a source of love and affection for both women as well as a relationship that challenged them and changed the way they looked at themselves and the world. As Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her autobiography two years before her death, “we all of us owe, I imagine, far more than we realize to our friends... I know that in my own case my friends are responsible for much that I have become and

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<sup>99</sup> Cook, *Volume III*, 570.

<sup>100</sup> Murray, *Autobiography*, 351.

<sup>101</sup> Pauli Murray, interview by Genna Rae McNeil, Alexandria, VA, February 13, 1976. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0044/menu.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Murray, *Autobiography*, 417.

that without them there are many things that would have remained closed books to me.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, Preface.

## Conclusion

*"We shape our lives and we shape ourselves.*

*The process never ends until we die."*

Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living*, 1960.

In 1953, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote that it might perhaps be surprising that she had so many African American friends, as prior to her time as First Lady, she had met few Black people either in America or abroad, and up until her arrival in the White House she “had never dreamed they had a special problem of any kind.”<sup>104</sup> Once she began to form friendships in the 1930s with Black men and women such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Walter White, she quickly came to recognize the many ways that American democracy was failing to include African Americans in its promises of equality, opportunity, and freedom. She spent the majority of her adult life engaged in the defense and dissemination of democracy throughout the world, but she refused to accept the idea that true democracy could exist in any country if every citizen of that nation did not enjoy the fundamental rights that she believed all human beings are born with: equal access to basic necessities such as housing, employment, and education. In their essay on ER and Black civil rights, Joanne Schneider Zangrando and Robert L. Zangrando wonder if “perhaps [ER] had lived too long in the privileged world of the upper classes” or “had worked too long in the give-and-take of American political compromise” to truly be able to understand the “everyday realities” of Black life in America or to abandon her belief that

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<sup>104</sup> Roosevelt, “Some of My Best Friends Are Negroes,” 74.

individuals would always ultimately do the right thing.<sup>105</sup> The Zangrandos' essay marvels at the "remarkable" fact of ER's devotion to civil rights in light of her socioeconomic privilege, patrician background, and somewhat naive faith in the power of the federal government to effectively address and remedy racial discrimination and injustice. The missing link in this formulation and in understanding ER's passionate commitment to the cause of civil rights is the fact of her close friendships with men and women who lived with this discrimination and injustice in their daily lives. In neglecting to explore the influence of the personal in the form of her friendships with civil rights activists, ER is given all of the credit for her ability to connect and respond to the struggle for racial equality in America.

Although when ER arrived at the White House in 1933 she had already been involved in the world of progressive politics for over a decade, her experiences as First Lady during World War II and the Depression more fully opened her eyes to the disparate ways that different groups of Americans were affected by war, poverty, and FDR's New Deal programs. Despite her conviction that racism and discrimination threatened the future of American democracy, at that time ER believed that civil rights advocates should exhibit patience towards the power of the federal government to combat the negative effects of racial discrimination. Allida Black, biographer and editor of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, writes in the introduction to *What I Hope to Leave Behind: The Essentials Essays of Eleanor Roosevelt* that "[ER] did not understand the problems African Americans faced" when she took up the role of First Lady, but "after working with civil rights leaders... ER recognized the pernicious effects of racism and pressured

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<sup>105</sup> J. Zangrando and R. Zangrando, *Without Precedent*, 105.

the administration to speak out against racial discrimination and acts of violence.”<sup>106</sup> Yet until the 1950s ER would continue to advocate caution and patience to African Americans, not yet able to acknowledge that her own socioeconomic privilege blinded her to the reasons why, as Pauli Murray explained to her in a 1942 letter, that Black Americans “were compelled to speak out, ‘appealingly, caustically, bitterly, as long as we are able...’” and that “‘fundamental approaches must be made to eliminate [discrimination], now, not after the war is over.’”<sup>107</sup> Letters such as this one led ER to affectionately refer to Murray as a “firebrand;” the sparks created by Murray’s bold and provoking missives fed the flames of ER’s passionate sense of social justice, pushing her beyond her comfort zones and forcing her to confront difficult and painful truths about America and its unfulfilled promises of democracy.

In the first volume of her seminal three-part biography on Eleanor Roosevelt, Blanche Wiesen Cook comments on the way that “everything changed” after ER’s friend Lorena Hickok’s papers were opened for the first time in 1978, and ER scholars “learned that there were many more dimensions to Eleanor Roosevelt’s life.”<sup>108</sup> Cook observes that during ER’s life and in the immediate years after her death the public could only take ER at her word; because she “told us nothing of her political ambitions or of the intimate details of her private life” the public was forced to accept the descriptions that “ER herself gave... [which] have since become the clichés of her life” as well as the oft-repeated claim that she had held no power or influence of her own.<sup>109</sup> The opening of the

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<sup>106</sup> Roosevelt and Black, *What I Hope to Leave Behind*, xxi.

<sup>107</sup> Murray, *Autobiography*, 192.

<sup>108</sup> Cook, *Volume I*, xii.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

Hickok papers called attention to the more personal aspects of ER's life that researchers had not often considered or discussed, and generated many new questions about her life, her work, her passions, and her influences. These new considerations and questions have since inspired a wealth of scholarship on ER which has re-examined who she was as First Lady, as a shrewd and indomitable political negotiator, and as a woman who as a result of her friendships with civil rights activists evolved from a cautious "defender of equal treatment... [to] a staunch advocate of integration [and] nonviolent protest."<sup>110</sup>

The unsealing of the Lorena Hickok papers also revealed the fact of a close and emotionally intimate relationship between Eleanor Roosevelt and Hickok; when her friend Joe Lash published his book *Love, Eleanor* several years later, Lash and ER's son FDR Jr., who wrote the foreword, dedicated several pages to denying the possibility that the relationship could possibly have been a romantic or sexual one. Her son "urged that [his] mother's letters [to Hickok] be read in the context of those written to other close friends and that her style of writing be judged in the framework of what was considered customary and conventional when she was growing up."<sup>111</sup> While Lash is less unwilling to consider the possibility of such a relationship, his introduction to *Love, Eleanor* nonetheless offers readers many reasons why he believed it could not have happened, representing the "high-strung and voluble [denials]" that Blanche Wiesen Cook suggests have hidden the fact "that ER lived a life dedicated to passion and experience."<sup>112</sup> As Jennifer Reed writes in her 2016 article "Queering Eleanor Roosevelt," while ER "was not known as a queer person during her life" she frequently challenged accepted ideas

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<sup>110</sup> Roosevelt and Black, *The Essential Essays*, xxii.

<sup>111</sup> Lash, *Love Eleanor*, vii.

<sup>112</sup> Cook, *Volume I*, 13.



about womanhood and what was considered “normal” at the time, and “[h]er queerness was a presence not known.”<sup>113</sup>

In consideration of these facts, it is perhaps understandable that up until relatively recently ER’s biographers exhibited a reluctance to discuss her friend Pauli Murray beyond perfunctory references to their friendship; although Murray did not openly speak or write about her sexual orientation or gender identity during her lifetime, she did acknowledge her nonconformity and speculate about its repercussions. When she encountered hostility from a female colleague while serving as a Priest-in-Charge for the Episcopal Church late in her life, she wondered, “How much of it was my fault?” she mused, “My style of dress? My freedom from convention and the ‘canons of respectability?’”<sup>114</sup> In 1939, when she was refused admittance to graduate school at the University of North Carolina due to her race, the NAACP declined to take up her case, a decision Murray would speculate about for the rest of her life. Although she was told at the time that it was due to her no longer being a resident of North Carolina, she believed it had more to do with her politics and/or her personal background, telling an interviewer in 1976 that the NAACP had found her “not quite Simon-pure.”<sup>115</sup> Patricia Bell-Scott suggests in *The Firebrand and the First Lady* that Murray’s radical politics, fiery temperament, family history of mental illness, and unconventional personal life are all potential explanations for the NAACP’s refusal to represent her.<sup>116</sup> These factors may also explain the tendency of Eleanor Roosevelt’s early biographers to downplay Murray’s

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<sup>113</sup> Jennifer Reed, “Queering Eleanor Roosevelt,” *The Journal of American Culture* 39, no. 1 (March): 9-19, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jacc.12519>.

<sup>114</sup> Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 384.

<sup>115</sup> Murray, Oral History Interview with Genna Rae McNeil, 48.

<sup>116</sup> Bell-Scott, *Firebrand and the First Lady*, 37-38.

influence in ER's life. While she is briefly mentioned in Joe Lash's books on ER, that a decades-long friendship between two women of great historical importance which took place amid the circumstances of some of the most significant events in 20<sup>th</sup> century history warranted only a few sentences in a book written by a man who knew Murray well is peculiar. Brittney Cooper writes in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* that Murray's "refusal to comply... [with] compulsory heterosexuality... became costly as she sought to champion racial causes."<sup>117</sup> It is only recently that historians, sociologists, and activists have begun to recognize and discuss the significant impact that Murray's life and work had on the women's and civil rights movements. While her sexuality and gender identity were not topics Murray discussed openly, the obvious facts of her unconventional lifestyle and appearance as well as her radical politics were likely topics as uncomfortable to ER's biographers as ER's own unconventional relationships.

Joe Lash wrote in his introduction to *Love, Eleanor* that ER's "approach to race... was neither intellectual nor sociological, a matter neither of statistics nor syllogisms, but of individual people whom she had made it a point to know in all their flawed humanity."<sup>118</sup> This summation of her relationship to the cause of civil rights acknowledges the power of the personal in Eleanor Roosevelt's political evolution, although it underemphasizes the initiative, tenacity, and motivations of the men and women who made it a point to know *her* and to put their faith in her ability to listen, learn, and act upon her principles. Speaking after ER's death, Pauli Murray suggested

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<sup>117</sup> Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 96.

<sup>118</sup> Lash, *Love, Eleanor*, x.

that “the greatest challenge of the individual is to try to move to the very boundaries of our historical limitations and to project ourselves toward future centuries... [ER] did just that.”<sup>119</sup> But she did not get there alone, and in exploring ER’s relationships with civil rights pioneers such as Murray and the ways that they influenced her personal growth, understanding, and empathy, it becomes more possible to understand ER’s ever-increasing ability to, as she termed it, “put [herself] imaginatively in their place... to think, ‘these could be my people.’”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Bell-Scott, *Firebrand and the First Lady*, 354.

<sup>120</sup> Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 413.

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