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## Book Reviews

Editorial Staff

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# Russia and The Negro: Blacks in Russian History And Thought

By Allison Blakely, Howard University Press,  
201 pp.

Reviewed by Samuel F. Yette

For 45 breathtaking minutes in Geneva in the fall of 1985, Jesse Jackson debated world issues with Mikhail Gorbachev, thereby assuaging and being assuaged by the Soviet premier, while upstaging and angering the President of the United States.

President Ronald Reagan had come to Geneva for private talks with Gorbachev, and had declined to meet with Jackson, a 1984 Democratic presidential hopeful. But Gorbachev, with the eyes of the world watching, did meet with Jackson — even before his meeting with Reagan — a move that infuriated official Washington.

Doubtless, the Soviet leader found the *tete-a-tete* with Jackson more in character than most Americans — including Black Americans — could easily comprehend. What Gorbachev surely knew, and what Americans until now have been tacitly forbidden to understand, is the fact that Africa and her sons have had significant presence in Russia, and have been strategic pieces on the Russian geopolitical chessboard from “time immemorial,” or at least for a long and strategically important time.

But, what did the Jackson-Gorbachev upstaging mean?

Was Reagan’s snub of Jackson, even if customary in the American context, a smart superpower move? And, was Gorbachev’s receptivity a symbol of the respect and deference Russians normally extend to gifted Afro-Americans? Or, was it just another Russian ploy to use one more Black pawn to check a white king? And, was Jackson an unwitting Soviet pawn, or was he performing the all-too-rare role of Black global self-determination?

Allison Blakely’s revealing new book, *Russia and the Negro*\* does not answer these questions unequivocally. But it does provide unprecedented scope through which to view them. Indeed, the explorations of this book have been so taboo in American discourse, so veiled in ignorance and suspicion, that heretofore, in the United States, only daring, non-conforming intellectuals — “fellow-travelers” — were likely to skim the surface.

Blakely’s explorations feature epic Black figures who range from the legendary military hero, Abram Hannibal and his great-grandson, Alexander Pushkin, Russia’s “greatest poet,” to such Afro-Americans as novelist Richard Wright and Paul Robeson, the most brilliantly diversified man ever to come out of the United States.

The list includes such other luminaries as:

- Ira Aldridge, U.S.-born Shakespearean actor, who was decorated by the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts for his triumphant tours in Russia between 1858 and 1866.
- W.E.B. Du Bois, prodigious intellect, who espoused socialism early in life, began visiting Russia in 1926, and who, like Robeson “received more unreserved respect abroad than at home.”

- Claude McKay, Jamaica-born poet and journalist, who became a self-proclaimed “propagandist” for the Russian revolution, but who, in time, became disenchanted and “gradually came to renounce Marxism.”

- George Padmore, born in Trinidad and member of the Communist party, who criticized Robeson’s hard line against white racism in South Africa, but who was eventually pushed out of the party for his own emphasis on race — rather than class — in the struggle against colonialism.

- Richard T. Greener, Harvard graduate and lawyer, who served the United States as its “commercial agent” — spy — at Vladivostok from 1898 to 1905, and whose career inspired author Blakely’s interest in exploring the Negro-Russian connection.

Blakely’s investigation into the historic relationships between Negroes and Russia’s attempt to capture the world’s Black masses uncovered disturbing and fascinating riddles.

For example, what is to be made of the fact that, long before Jesse Jackson came on the scene, Du Bois, Robeson, poet Langston Hughes, and other talented Negroes had been greeted in the highest circles of the Soviet hierarchy while being rejected by segments of their own government in the United States?

Further, what must be understood from the fact that, in most instances, those Negroes known to have embraced the Soviet system to a significant degree eventually suffered disappointment and reason to question Soviet sincerity? Richard Wright, George Padmore, and Claude McKay are characteristic examples.

What accounts for these ambivalences?

Blakely is not the first student of Russian history and culture to recognize her inherent contradictions. And, no student of Black or American history can miss the fact that Negroes, too, are often more susceptible than impervious to contradictions.

A people’s “historical experience” decisively impacts on their existence, Blakely has said. Of himself, Blakely said in an interview: “I have always wanted to know where I fit into things.” His passion to know where he and other Negroes “fit into things” led him to another kind of contradiction: a Black scholar in *European* history.

Now a professor of history at Howard University, Blakely was born Black and bright in the backwoods of Eutaw, Alabama, at the end of the Great Depression and at the start of World War II, which ended it. Inevitably, Blakely was encompassed by ancient racial boundaries and cultural contradictions side by side. His mother, Alice, could launder white folks’ clothes and bake their bread with her bare hands, but she could not try on her own purchases in the dry goods store, or sit down and eat in a public restaurant.

At age six, Blakely’s mother took him to Portland, Oregon, with a sparse Black population, far removed from his native Alabama. From these extremes, a bright young Black student could soon see how other peoples’ lives and cultures impacted on his own. In time, he would come to see how the Soviet Union, “one of the most colossal and fascinating experiments in world history . . . a land of opportunity,” would have access to Negro vulnerabilities, potentialities, and unfulfilled aspirations.

Blakely’s search for understanding stretched from his own beginning in the Black Belt of the United States to the Black Sea region of the Soviet Union. It was to the latter region that Blakely’s research found some fabled, though not unreasonable, speculation of Black settlers as far back as the eighth century, B.C.

Other research cited by Blakely speculates that two peoples — “some were black with pronounced Negroid features” — had been “indigenous to the area for many centuries.”

Such tracing by Blakely, who reads Russian, Dutch, French, and German, leads into the more relevant political periods and personalities — foremost among them, Peter the Great.

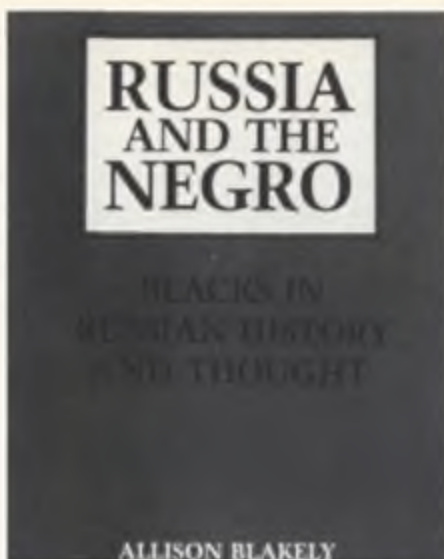
*"As with many developments in the history of modern Russia, the time from which the arrival of Negroes in Russia can be most clearly traced is the reign of Peter the Great. Moreover, it was this innovative tsar-reformer who was most instrumental in bringing about their presence in Russia. He was personally responsible for bringing some as slaves or servants and at least a few others as immigrants. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs records show that while on a visit to Holland in 1697, Peter hired at least one black servant, one sailor, and an artist among the several hundred foreign workers he took back to Russia."*

The yes and no Russian response to slavery and the slave trade are additional, but crucial, contradictions in the Russian mind and history.

*"Among the European states, Russia was highly conspicuous for her lack of involvement in the slave trade. A number of reasons for this are readily apparent. First, in looking at other European societies, it is clear that none used slaves on a large scale at home. The slave trade served principally the colonies in the Americas. Although Russia had enormous holdings in America, they were mainly in the far north, did not lend themselves to a plantation economy, and were largely unexplored and undeveloped. Russia's vast, contiguous empire did include some cultures in which slavery was an integral part, but there was no demand for an outside supply of labor."*

And, from these deep passions and contradictions has come a work of genuine scholarship, stunning discoveries, and provocative analyses. In this volume, Blakely meticulously — occasionally tediously — produces firm and overwhelming evidence that Black people in Africa, the Americas, Russia, and elsewhere, have been historically key to the geopolitical aspirations of the superpowers.

Those readers sensitive to the needs of Black self-determination, however, must face Blakely's evidence of the absence of a Black methodological or ideological alternative in the worldwide struggle of capitalism v. communism. Without Blakely saying so directly, this void, nonetheless, left key Black players — regardless of their roles in the strategies of others — at the



mercy of their sponsors, who, most often in the end, found their Black players expendable.

The movements of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Marcus Garvey might have represented alternatives, but from the Soviet point of view, at least, they were not fully developed political and economic ideologies, and relied too much on race.

Indeed, the international communist movement specifically rejected Garveyism, and even Stokely Carmichael's call for "Black Power" in the 1960s, as being too much committed to Black nationalism, Blakely writes:

*"Official denunciation of Garveyism surfaced at the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928. The movement was criticized as a utopian Zionism which would damage the cause of world revolution by advocating removal of American Negroes from their location in American society where they could be a most effective disruptive force. However, this same congress then signalled its acknowledgment of the power of nationalism by proposing that independent Negro republics be established in South Africa and in the southern United States. This proposal, which had no practical foundation in either continent, apparently grew out of the concept of union republics adopted in Russia to solve the nationalities problem on her own soil. This measure caused factionalism to emerge within the American and South African Communist parties and practically destroyed the latter. Part of the difficulty here was that the white membership feared black domination of the party."*

That Soviet fear of being dominated by their ostensible students (Negroes they were trying to recruit and direct in ad-

vancement of the Soviet communist cause) is genuinely ironic, yet it has an almost patently American ring to it.

The most casual students of American history can cite chapter and verse of how whites in the United States have often exhibited fear of competition from those they branded as inferior. Indeed, much of U.S. media history is replete with attempts to disguise this contradiction, even by inventing stories to "document" the inferiority and/or immorality of Negroes.

As Blakely discovered, Soviet media, too, have behaved in a remarkably similar fashion:

*"... As one African who studied for seven years in the Soviet Union observed, even the official Soviet stance may represent a dangerous flirtation with racism. In the Soviet news, entertainment media, and educational system, the oppression and misery of people of African descent around the world is highlighted. There is no coverage of great achievements by black Africans or black Americans who live in capitalist nations, for obvious ideological reasons. As a result, there is little opportunity for the Russian public to see evidence showing blacks to be their equals in intellectual ability. It would seem then that the Soviet public is conditioned more toward pity than respect for their African brothers and sisters. Firmly cautioned against the evils of racism, the Soviet public may inadvertently be led to believe in a false inferiority."*

Despite such examples of similar results faced by Negroes who, lacking their own alternative, passionately embrace either the communist or capitalistic system in rejection of the other, Blakely found a difference at the point of policy.

"It would appear," Blakely wrote, "that such racism as exists in the Soviet Union is of the individual, rather than the systematic, variety. Racism has not been made official policy, as has historically been the case in many other countries."

Indeed, as a policy, such a distinction becomes both a crucial lure and a base of validity in the superpower struggle for the "hearts and minds" of Black people worldwide.

Blakely underscores his findings that both Imperial Russia and Soviet Russia — at least, compared to other Europeans — abstained from the slave trade and opposed colonialism in Africa. In point of fact, he argues, the Soviet preoccupation — not occupation — in Africa has focused dispro-

# Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage

By Pauli Murray, Harper & Row, New York, 451 pp.

Reviewed by Harriet Jackson Scarupa

<sup>32</sup> In June 1977, five months after Pauli Murray had become the first Black woman ordained as an Episcopal priest, I interviewed her in her modest, sparsely furnished garden apartment in Alexandria, Va., for a long profile for *Essence*.

To prepare for the interview, I'd researched her background, jotting down the highlights of her multifaceted achievements: the degrees (A.B. in English from

Hunter College, LL.B from Howard University, master's in law from the University of California at Berkeley, doctorate in law from Yale University, master of divinity from General Theological Seminary); the teaching (Benedict College, Brandeis University, the Ghana School of Law); the books ("Dark Testament and Other Poems," "Proud Shoes," "States' Laws on Race and Color," "The Constitution and Government of Ghana.")

From the lengthy entry under her name in "Who's Who in America," I'd also learned of her involvement in the National Organization for Women (NOW), President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Institute for Non-Violent Social Change, Church Women United and numerous other socially concerned groups. I'd noted, too, the slew of awards she'd accrued over the years, including an alumni award for distinguished postgraduate achievement in law

and public service from Howard in 1970.

As my research progressed, I saw how her groundbreaking role in the Episcopal Church was part of a recurrent pattern of being "first," "only," "before her time." She had been the only woman in her class at Howard Law School; the only woman for a time in the distinguished New York law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkin, Wharton and Garrison; the first Black woman to go to the MacDowell colony, the prestigious writer-artists' retreat in New Hampshire. She was talking about non-violence and feminism when most people scarcely knew what they were and her account of her own roots in "Proud Shoes" had preceded Alex Haley's blockbuster by 20 years.

Given all this, the prospect of meeting Murray face to face had filled me with awe and more than a touch of nervousness. But when I did meet her that balmy June afternoon, awe flew out the window. Dressed in rumpled striped slacks, sneakers and a comfortable pink sweat-shirt, the pioneering civil rights activist/feminist/writer/teacher/lawyer/priest flashed an ear-to-ear grin, welcomed me warmly and eased my nervousness with small talk about Roy, the spindly Labrador retriever who stood devotedly by her side.

Roy's hip had been crushed by a car, she explained, and his owners had planned to have him put to sleep. Murray had volunteered to keep him for one night and in 24 hours he had rallied so much she decided to have him operated on and keep him permanently. "He had so much heart," she said, reaching down to give the dog a pat. "He just didn't give up."

At the time I was struck by how that remark seemed to echo the theme of Murray's own pilgrimage through life.

Pauli Murray died in June 1985 at the age of 74. "Song in a Weary Throat" is her posthumously published autobiography. It is a detailed, finely crafted, often stirring chronicle of the life of a woman who "just didn't give up" in her quest for self-actualization, despite the barriers that stood in her way as a Black, as a woman, as a Black woman.

In her pilgrimage, she had come across one barrier after another, but discovered that if she pushed and pushed and then pushed some more it was bound to give way — if not immediately, then eventually, if not for her, then for those who followed. It was a lesson she learned early.

In her book she tells of how in the tenth grade she took a double load of courses,

## Russia and the Negro

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portionately on Ethiopia. As Blakely saw it, the Soviet's coveting of Ethiopia has been largely to learn from the Ethiopians and to use that land base to spread Soviet influence throughout the rest of Africa.

Whether the wolf is there to guard the sheep, or is there for the more usual purpose, in the case of Russia, Blakely tends toward benefit of doubt. That same benefit he would seem to extend to other socialist societies:

*"Given the importance of Marxist ideology in the Negro experience with the Soviet Union, it may provide some clues to what Negroes can anticipate as they have now begun to look toward other socialist societies, such as China, Cuba, and African socialist states, in their continued search for a truly free society. Soviet society has not proven to be a panacea for the Negro. . . . However, the fact remains that, regardless of Soviet motives, their championing of Negro rights and those of colonized peoples on the international level as well as at home has brought benefits to the Negro. A good example is the pressure this placed on the United States government to show better progress in making Negroes full citizens."*

As Blakely acknowledged at the outset, one's "historical experience" makes a lasting, perhaps decisive, impact. His own

findings, unquestionably pursued with intellectual courage, suffer, reflect and benefit from experiences not wholly dissimilar to the experiences of participants he uncovered in his assiduous research.

"What has most impressed Negroes about Russian society," Blakely's book concludes, "is the absence of institutionalized racism. There may be racist individuals, but if detected these persons are subject to crushing public opprobrium."

What Blakely's excellent book leaves unchanged is the fact of Negroes being left to be impressed by someone else's society — not yet a society that they themselves have devised or control. □

*The reviewer is publisher of Cottage Books and former professor of journalism at the School of Communications, Howard University.*

*\*The choice of an appropriate term to denote people of African descent is uniquely complicated in the Russian setting. Consider, for instance, the various meanings of the expressions "White Russian" and "Caucasian." The latter term is especially confusing in the present context because the largest part of the Negro population native to Russia lived for centuries in the Caucasus mountains and was, therefore, Caucasian. . . .*

*The term "Negro" as used here denotes only people of primarily Black African descent. This is not the definition — peculiar to the United States — that would include Alexander Pushkin and also Alexandre Dumas pere (who traveled extensively through Russia in 1858 and 1859 and left a detailed account). In terms of the definition used here, Pushkin's maternal great-grandfather and Dumas's paternal grandmother were Negroes; the two writers were not. Nevertheless, attitudes that Pushkin and other Russians have expressed concerning his African heritage do figure prominently in the present work.*



enrolling in a new program in commercial studies along with the regular academic classes. Some of her classmates ridiculed her heavy schedule, predicting she would flunk out. "I did not argue with them," Murray writes, "but set my jaw and immersed myself in the extra work. Instead of flunking out, I learned from that challenge that what is often called exceptional ability is nothing more than persistent endeavor."

**O**n a larger scale, Murray's persistent endeavors to battle what she saw as the twin outrages of American society — racism and sexism — not only helped to raise the nation's consciousness, but paved the way for substantive changes.

Item: In 1938, her application to the University of North Carolina, the school her (white) maternal ancestors helped found, was rejected on the grounds of race.

Thirteen years later, the university admitted its first Black student.

Item: In 1940, she was arrested and jailed in Virginia for refusing to move to the back of the bus.

Fifteen years later, Rosa Parks' refusal to do the same launched the historic Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott which successfully overturned segregation in public transportation in that city, sending reverberations throughout the nation and propelling a young minister named Martin Luther King, Jr., into the limelight.

Item: In 1943, she and other Howard University students led sit-ins to protest segregation in Washington, D.C., restaurants.

Ten years later, in the Mary Church Terrell case, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation illegal.

Item: In 1944, she sued Harvard Law

School when it refused to admit her because of her sex.

Six years later, the school opened its doors to women.

Sometimes her weapon in such battles was her body (the sit-ins, for instance). More often it was her intellect, a compelling intellect whose force she channeled into legal briefs, position papers, articles, poems, letters of protest. . . . As she told one of her favorite Howard professors: "One person plus one typewriter constitutes a movement."

What sustained her through all her battles, long before she had ever thought of entering the ministry, was her faith. As she writes of her protests against segregation in the '30s and '40s: "If there were moments of deep despair in those years, there was also the sustaining knowledge that the quest for human dignity is part of a continuous movement through time and history linked to a higher force."

The song Pauline Murray has left with the world is one so full of struggles waged, triumphs witnessed and hope sustained that it is not surprising its songstress was weary. (The autobiography's title is from the last line of one of her "Dark Testament" poems: "Hope is a song in a weary throat.")

But her song soars beyond the particular, providing insight into some of the movements for social justice that have helped shape 20th century America.

In the subtitle of her autobiography, "An American Pilgrimage," is an implied message directed at those who would contend that radicalism in America has its genesis in "foreign" ideologies cultivated on "foreign" soils. Pauline Murray was a radical, yes. But she also was an American. And in that she saw no contradiction whatsoever.

During the height of the McCarthy hysteria, she was denied a job she much wanted (working on a Cornell University-affiliated project to codify the laws of Liberia) because questions had been raised about her "past associations." She fought back innuendos about her "disloyalty" to her country via her trusty typewriter. The result was "Proud Shoes," the story of her maternal ancestors, which Harper & Row published in 1956. (It has recently been reissued in paperback.)

As she wrote of the birth of that book: ". . . in one of those inexplicable flashes of insight, the phrase that had tormented me ['past associations'] suddenly took on new meaning. The Fitzgeralds, my mother's family, with whom I had grown up, were

actually my earliest and most enduring 'past associations.' They had instilled in me a pride in my American heritage and a rebellion against injustice. Those proud, independent forebears who stubbornly held their ground and refused to be cowed by adversity had peopled my childhood. The example of courage they set had fueled my own political activism. My best answer to Cornell in defense of 'past associations' would be to turn the phrase on its head and present the doughty Fitzgeralds as my first exhibit.

"The thought grew so compelling that I rolled a sheet of paper in the typewriter and began to write . . ."

**M**urray's own writing in "Song in a Weary Throat" — which could be viewed as the natural sequel to "Proud Shoes" — is often compelling, always thoughtful, sometimes poignant. Some of the book's most moving sections are those in which she describes her early years. Listen to her opening:

"My first memory is of standing on the floor of our kitchen in Baltimore when I was around three, entangled in my mother's billowing white skirts to which I clung as she went about her work. I cannot remember her face or her voice, only her movements and the warm fragrance of her body."

That warm domestic scene, the reader soon learns, serves as prelude to tragedy. Murray's mother, a graduate of Hampton Training School for Nurses, died of a massive cerebral hemorrhage at 35, in the fourth month of her seventh pregnancy. Her father, a school principal who was a graduate of Howard's college preparatory department, was plagued by attacks of depression and violent moods, which led to his confinement in a state mental hospital not long after her mother's death. He was later to die at the hands of a vindictive white hospital attendant. The pathetic end of one whose future had once looked so promising left Murray with "a dread of hereditary insanity," she writes, and also "a vulnerability to human sorrow, especially when it was the result of human violence."

After the death of their mother and the hospitalization of their father, the Murray children were divided among relatives, with Pauline making her home in Durham, N.C., with her beloved Aunt Pauline, a teacher of modest means who firmly believed "It's not what you have but what you *are* that counts."

Growing up in Durham, surrounded by members of her extended family, Murray

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began "learning about race," as she titles one of her chapters. She writes: "In our segregated world, we had a sense of identity and a sense of racial pride, fragile though they might be. We were close to the roots of our immediate past because of the many elderly people still alive who had been born in slavery . . . Surrounding and intersecting our segregated world at many points was the world of 'the white people.' It was a confusing world to me because I was both related to white people and alienated from them."

34 Coming to terms with a multiethnic ancestry (African, European, Native American) in a racially polarized society, accepting the fact that her forefathers included both slaves and slave owners, was an often-painful process for Murray throughout much of her life. She came, finally, "to affirm my own identity by anchoring myself firmly in the immediate American past, which had produced my mixed racial origins with all their Ishamelite implications—a stance that made both blacks and whites uncomfortable."

This was especially so in the '60s and early '70s. While teaching at Brandeis from 1968-73, she was confronted by militant Black students waving the flag of "Blackness," students who were "marching to a different drummer" than her own. It was for her "a ghastly period of adjustment," she writes.

Initially, she had felt that the students' rhetoric "smacked of an ethnic 'party line' and made absolutely no sense to me." She was also disturbed by what she saw as a contempt for academic excellence some of the student militants exhibited and she bristled at what she saw as the "macho attitudes" displayed by some of their male leaders. Moreover, in such demands as separate Black dormitories and cultural centers and Black studies controlled by Blacks and taught exclusively by and to Blacks she detected "a symptom of a deep-seated fear of failure in an open competitive society."

Later, given emotional distance from the campus turmoil, she was able to recognize value in the forces behind it. As she writes: ". . . in time I came to realize that beneath the superficialities and the strident revolutionary rhetoric of many black students of that period, something profound was taking place. Notwithstanding excesses that were destined to fail, the more enduring result of the black consciousness movement was the transformation of a people robbed of a prideful past, the retrieval of a communal

history that had long been ignored, the affirmation of a positive identity after centuries of denigration, and the flowering of racially inspired art, music, literature, and scientific achievements once barriers began to fall.

"In later years, trying to put my relation to this development in perspective, I realized that my own resolution of the question of identity had been in seeing myself as the product of a slowly evolving process of biological and cultural integration. . . . Dur-

## Those in the Howard community will find her reflections on her experiences as a law student at the university of particular interest.

ing the black student rebellion at Brandeis, I was too threatened to appreciate the necessary intervening stage of a newly raised ethnic consciousness."

On Sunday, February 13, 1977, Pauli Murray—now the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray—seemed to lay to final rest any lingering emotional dilemmas surrounding her identity. On that day she celebrated her first Holy Eucharist at the Chapel of the Holy Cross in Chapel Hill, N.C., the same place where her grandmother had been baptized more than a century earlier as one of "Five Servant Children Belonging to Miss Mary Ruffin Smith."

"All the strands of my life had come together," she writes of that historic occasion. "Descendant of slave and of slave owner, I had already been called poet, lawyer, teacher, and friend. Now I was empowered to minister the sacrament of One in whom there is no north or south, no black or white, no male or female—only the spirit of love and reconciliation drawing us all toward the goal of human wholeness."

And, thus, in a chapter entitled "Full Circle," Pauli Murray ends her "Song in a Weary Throat."

In previous pages, she had described so many rich scenes, so many rich experiences, to give just a bare sampling; her struggles to support herself through college by working as waitress, secretary, switch-

board operator and whatever else she could find, making do on one meal a day and almost non-existent hours of sleep; her trip riding the rails across the country during the Depression disguised as a teenage boy; her correspondence with Eleanor Roosevelt which led to an enduring friendship; her transformation of her tiny room in Howard's Soujourner Truth Hall into an informal meeting place for undergraduates interested in civil rights, among them a first-year student named Patricia Roberts (later Harris); her 16-month residence in Ghana which revealed to her how deeply entrenched was her "Americanness;" her performance of last rites at the bedside of a dying woman friend which brought her face to face with her own mortality, leading to her decision to enter the ministry. . . .

Those in the Howard community will find her reflections on her experience as a law student at the university of particular interest. As she writes, "In the early 1940s Howard Law School stood virtually alone in its strong emphasis upon civil rights. Our senior Civil Rights Seminar was easily the most popular course in the curriculum. . . .

"Bound together by an overriding passion, we were a tiny band of fighters trying to establish defensible positions from which to launch a massive attack upon the entire system of legally enforced segregation, reinforced as it was by decades of court decisions."

While paying tribute to the law school for equipping her for "effective struggle against Jim Crow," she also reports that her experience at the school as the lone woman in her class made her acutely conscious of another type of bias—sexism—which she quickly labeled "Jane Crow." "I was shocked on the first day of class when one of our professors said in his opening remarks that he really didn't know why women came to law school, but since we were there the men would have to put up with us," she writes. "His banter brought forth loud laughter from the male students. I was too humiliated to respond, but though the professor did not know it, he had just guaranteed that I would become the top student in his class."

It was, again, a typical Pauli Murray response when confronted with an obstacle.

Murray's autobiography is replete with details of such responses. What is also interesting, and perhaps revealing, is what she chose not to include in her autobiography.

Of her brief marriage to a man she identifies only as "Billy," she writes: "It was

a dreadful mistake. We were so poor that we spent our honeymoon weekend in a cheap West Side hotel [in New York City]. Both of us were sexually inexperienced, and the bleak atmosphere aggravated our discomfort. We had no money to begin house-keeping and no place where we could meet in privacy. After several months of mounting frustration, we gave up in despair."

Her book includes no other reference to an intimate relationship with a man. If she spurned all romantic attachments after her

## "Song in a Weary Throat" is like drinking from a deep well filled with equal parts fortitude and optimism.

brief, sad marriage or if she distanced herself from even the prospect of motherhood because of her fear of passing on the mental illness that had afflicted her father is not something she discusses or may have felt comfortable probing.

Murray is also curiously silent about her attitude toward the Vietnam War, the focus of so much national soul-searching. Given the stance she took on so many issues, her religious commitment, her early attraction to non-violence and her admiration for Martin Luther King, Jr., a staunch opponent of the war, one would think that she would have stood solidly in the anti-war ranks. But there is nothing in her chronicle even obliquely touching on the subject.

Whether this was an oversight or a deliberate omission is unclear. She was unable to put the finishing touches on her manuscript before her death (from cancer) so it could be that the book, as published, contains some gaps she intended to fill in later. An unfinished quality does seem evident in a few parts of her narrative. The writing in the sections on her role in founding NOW and her work on the President's Commission on the Status of Women, for instance, lacks the color and reflection so typical of that in the book as a whole. They read almost as if Murray or her editor merely pieced them together from minutes of meetings.

These are the threads that run through what stands by any index as a remarkable chronicle of a remarkable life. A life that seems to send out multiple messages.

To those weighted down by adversity, Pauli Murray provides ample evidence of the power of the intellect to lift one above the most difficult life circumstances.

To those for whom the relentless pursuit of consumerism seems the *raison d'être*, she posits her Aunt Pauline's dictum: "It's not what you have but what you *are* that counts."

To those who insist there can be no meeting ground between Blacks and whites, she reminds us that all many of us have to do is look in the mirror to see evidence of our entangled inheritance, whether we like it or not, and that we should accept this reality and draw upon it to build a rich, variegated and tolerant society.

To those who would consider themselves "set" in life at age 20 or 30 or 60 or 70, she serves as a testament to the renewal, growth and continued expansion of the human spirit.

For these reasons and then some, reading "Song in a Weary Throat" is like drinking from a deep well filled with equal parts fortitude and optimism. In a world in which so many problems seem overwhelming, God knows we need both. □

*The reviewer is staff writer for New Directions. Her article, "The Extraordinary Faith of Pauli Murray," appeared in the December 1977 issue of Essence.*