Pauli Murray, here a twenty-seven-year-old WPA teacher, composes a poem on Election Day 1938 on Riverside Drive, New York City. She often marked historical and personally meaningful events by writing poetry and prose. *(The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University and the Estate of Pauli Murray)*

I

"It Is the Problem of My People"

The clatter of Pauli Murray's old typewriter bounced off the walls of her one-room Harlem apartment on December 6, 1938. Working at breakneck speed, she stopped only to look over a line in her letter or take a drag from her ever-present cigarette. Although she was only five-foot-two and weighed 105 pounds, she hammered the keys with the focus of a prizefighter. She had been forced to move three times because neighbors found the noise intolerable.

The catalyst for Murray's current agitation was Franklin Roosevelt's speech at the University of North Carolina the day before. It was his

first address since the 1938 midterm elections and the fourth visit to the university by an incumbent president. The reports of his isolation at his vacation home in Warm Springs, Georgia, and the arrangements for radio broadcasts to Europe and Latin America had sparked international interest in his speech.

Thousands lined the motorcade path to UNC in the drenching rain, holding handmade signs and flags, hoping to catch a glimpse of the fifty-six-year-old president in his open car. When it became apparent that there would be no break in the downpour, organizers moved the festivities from Kenan Stadium to the brand-new Woollen Gymnasium. There, in an over-capacity crowd of ten thousand, a man fainted from the swelter. Many people went to other campus buildings to listen to the broadcast. Countless numbers stood outside the gym in the rain. Before FDR spoke, the university band played "Hail to the Chief," school officials awarded him an honorary doctor of laws degree, and an African American choir sang spirituals.

Under the glare of klieg lights, the warmth of his academic regalia, and the weight of his steel leg braces, the president made his way to the flag-draped platform. He paused often during his twenty-five-minute address for roaring applause, wiping his face with the handkerchief he slipped in and out of his pocket, gripping the lectern to maintain his balance. He praised the university for its "liberal teaching" and commitment to social progress. He declared his faith in youth and democracy. He urged Americans to embrace "the kind of change" necessary "to meet new social and economic needs."

Having listened to the broadcast the day before, Murray underlined passages in the speech from the *New York Times* front-page story "Roosevelt Urges Nation to Continue Liberalism." The "contradiction" between the president's rhetoric and her experience of the South made her boil. She would never forget the day a bus driver told her to "relieve" herself in "an open field" because the public toilets were for whites only. Insulted, she rode in agony for two hours, not knowing if there would be toilet facilities for blacks at the next stop.

Murray wondered if it mattered to the president that the "liberal institution" that had just granted him an honorary doctorate, and of which he claimed to be a "proud and happy" alumnus, barred black students from its hallowed halls and confined those blacks who came to hear him to a segregated section. Did he understand the psychological wounds or the economic costs of segregation? And how could he rationally or morally associate a whites-only admissions policy with liberalism or social prog-

ress? Having applied to UNC's graduate program in sociology a month before FDR's visit, Murray aimed to see just how liberal the school was.

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EXACERBATING MURRAY'S FRUSTRATION with the president was his previous condemnation of lynching as "a vile form of collective murder" and his recent silence during a thirty-day Senate filibuster of the Wagner–Van Nuys bill that would have made lynching a federal offense. After the bill died, FDR proposed that a standing committee of Congress or the attorney general investigate "lynchings and incidents of mob violence."

The black press lashed out against his political maneuvering. The *New York Amsterdam News* condemned him for keeping "his tongue in his cheek!" The *Chicago Defender* called him "an artful dodger." The *Louisiana Weekly,* predicting that blacks would abandon the Democratic Party, declared, "You're too late, Mr. President, and what you say is NOTHING."

Murray understood that FDR's reticence on anti-lynching legislation was an attempt to placate conservative politicians from the South, where whites lynched blacks with impunity. Her introduction to politics had begun as a preschooler, reading newspaper headlines to her grandfather Robert Fitzgerald, a Union army veteran whose injury in the Civil War cost him his vision in his old age. Robert, originally from Pennsylvania, settled in North Carolina after the war to teach ex-slaves. He had also nurtured his granddaughter's intellect and her love of African American literature and history. That this year marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation made the president's inaction even more objectionable to Murray. Since 1863, more than three thousand blacks had been lynched, and at least seventy of these murders had taken place during FDR's presidency.

Murray's indignation was rooted in bone-chilling stories she had heard as a child of racial brutality and the Klansmen who circled her grandfather's property nightly on horseback, threatening to shut down his school for blacks. Ever brave, Robert had kept "his musket loaded" and the school door open. Murray had her own stories, too.

When she was six years old and on her way to fetch water from a community well, she and a neighbor came upon a group of blacks gathered around the body of young John Henry Corniggins, sprawled near a patch of thorny shrubs. Murray saw "his feet first, the white soles sticking out of the grass and caked with mud, then his scratched brown legs." His eyes were open. Blood seeped through a bullet hole in his shirt near his heart.

John Henry lay motionless as large green flies wandered over his face and into his mouth. Nearby, a solitary "buzzard circled." Murray raced home, trembling in a cold sweat. The word among blacks was that a white man had assumed John Henry was stealing watermelons and shot him. No evidence of theft was found near the boy's body. No one was arrested for his murder.

Six years later, violence touched Murray's family when a white guard at Maryland's Hospital for the Negro Insane murdered her father. At the funeral, she could hardly believe that the "purple" bloated body in the gray casket was her once proud father. She was horrified by the sight of his mangled head, which had been "split open like a melon" during an autopsy "and sewed together loosely with jagged stitches crisscrossing the blood-clotted line of severance."

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THE FIGHT OVER ANTI-LYNCHING LEGISLATION was but one of Franklin Roosevelt's worries. His attempt to purge Congress of his enemies had failed, and a coalition of anti–New Deal Republicans and Democrats had emerged. Despite the continuing economic depression, important legislation remained deadlocked. Frightening developments loomed on the world stage, as well. Under Adolf Hitler, Germany's aggression in Europe escalated with the annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. During Kristallnacht, hundreds of synagogues were destroyed. Thousands of Jews were stripped of their citizenship, property, and business rights and sent to concentration camps.

As Murray pounded out her letter to the president, she recalled Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to Camp Tera. Murray had been following reports about the first lady, listening to her radio broadcast, and reading her syndicated newspaper column, "My Day," since it had begun publication, on December 30, 1935. In it, ER chronicled get-togethers with family and friends, meetings with public figures, impressions of what she saw during her travels, and her opinions on a range of cultural and political matters. Writing the column six days a week and meeting her duties as first lady, which frequently went past midnight, required her to compose on the go. After one day-long visit to Camp Jane Addams (as Camp Tera had been renamed, in 1936, in honor of the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize), Tommy sat her typewriter on a rock near the Bear Mountain Bridge so that ER could dictate her copy and meet her deadline.

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the place. She did not accompany the president to UNC, but two weeks earlier, she had attended the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama, on her own. SCHW was an interracial gathering of liberals who met to discuss health, economics, housing, labor, race relations, voting rights, opportunities for young people, and agricultural issues affecting the region. The conferees included a mix of labor, religious, youth, and civil rights activists, politicians, government administrators, journalists, educators, and representatives from organizations affiliated with the socialist and Communist movements.

ER was the most celebrated attendee, and her presence drew the national press. Of her whirlwind schedule, a *New York Times* reporter noted, "Mrs. Roosevelt arrived at 5 o'clock this morning . . . and rested until 8 o'clock and thereafter in rapid succession held a press conference, visited several institutions, spoke informally to an afternoon session meeting on youth problems and tonight gave an address on 'Democracy in Education.'" Seven thousand people, nearly half of them black, jammed into the city auditorium to hear her speak about the importance of "universal education" and the contribution each citizen makes to the nation, "regardless of nationality or race." She fielded questions for the better part of an hour.

The first lady's participation at the SCHW was historic. However, her skillful circumvention of a local ordinance requiring segregated seating was what interested Murray most. When city officials learned that conferees were mingling freely during sessions, without regard to race, the police came and directed everyone to obey local law. Having walked into a session late, ER sat down in the black section near her friend Mary McLeod Bethune, who was now director of the Negro Affairs Division in the National Youth Administration. When the police ordered ER to move, she had her chair placed between the white and black delegations. And it was there she sat, symbolically outside of racial strictures, for the remainder of the conference.

The first lady's deft reaction warmed the hearts of conferees, angered segregationists, and thrilled the black press. The influential *Afro-American* newspaper, of which Murray was a devoted reader, underscored the significance of ER's aisle-straddling tactic by proclaiming, "Sometimes actions speak louder than words."

. . .

AFTER CAMP TERA, Murray got a job with the Works Progress Administration, initially as a remedial reading teacher, then with the Workers'

Education Project. Now that the WPA was in jeopardy, she planned to return to North Carolina, where she could do graduate work at UNC and look after her adoptive mother, Aunt Pauline. The thought of living in the South again filled Murray with dread. On the other hand, it seemed worth the sacrifice to further her education and be with family.

In no mood for armchair liberalism, Murray counted herself among a group of young radicals incensed by FDR's "coziness with white supremacy in the South." She reasoned that if UNC were half the institution the president said it was, its administration would find a way to accommodate her. Murray knew of only one way to challenge his roundly praised address. She typed a bold missive, spelling out what the South was like for blacks, daring him to take a stand as a fellow Christian for democracy and the liberal principles he espoused.

December 6, 1938

Dear President Roosevelt:

I pray that this letter will get past your secretaries and reach your personal consideration.

Have you time to listen to the problem of one of your millions of fellow-citizens, which will illustrate most clearly one of the problems of democracy in America. I speak not only for myself but for 12,000,000 other citizens.

Briefly, the facts are these:

I am a Negro, the most oppressed, most misunderstood and most neglected section of your population.

I am also a WPA worker, another insecure and often misrepresented group of citizens. I teach on the Workers' Education Project of New York City, a field which has received the constant and devoted support of your wife, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

My main interest, the tradition of my family for three generations, is education, which, I believe, is the basic requirement for the maintenance and extension of democracy.

At present, in order to do a competent teaching job, a job comparable to the work of established educational institutions, like all other professional WPA workers, I feel the need of more training. To understand the knotty economic and social problems of our country and to interpret these problems clearly and simply to workers makes it imperative that we continue our studies. Our wage standards are such that we are unable to further our education. Those of us who do not have degrees are unable to get them because of the general WPA arrangements. Those of us who have degrees, and yet feel an

inadequacy of information and formal training, find it impossible to go further and obtain our Master's Degree.

Sometime ago I applied to the University of North Carolina for admission to their graduate school. They sent me an application blank, on the bottom of which was asked, "Race and Religion." (For your information, I am a confirmed Protestant Episcopalian.) As you know, no Negro has ever been admitted to the University of North Carolina. You may wonder then, why I, a Negro knowing this fact, did make application.

My grandfather, a Union Army soldier, gave his eye for the liberation of his race. As soon as the war was over, he went to North Carolina under the Freedmen's Bureau to establish schools and educate the newly freed Negroes. From that time on my entire family has been engaged in educational work in that state. My own father was a principal of one of the Baltimore City schools and my sisters and brothers are also teachers. You passed through Durham, where my family lived and worked, and where my aunt now a woman of sixty-eight years, still plods back and forth to her school training future citizens of America. This aunt has been teaching since she was fifteen years old, and for more than thirty years in the Durham Public Schools, and yet if she were to become disabled tomorrow, there is no school pension system which would take care of her, neither does she qualify for the Old Age Pension system which excludes teachers.

12,000,000 of your citizens have to endure insults, injustices, and such degradation of spirit that you would believe impossible as a human being and a Christian. We are forced to ride in prescribed places in the busses and street cars of those very cities you passed through in our beloved Southland. When your party reached the station at Durham yesterday, you must have noticed a sign which said "White," and then a fence, then another sign which said "Colored." Can you, for one moment, put yourself in our place and imagine the feelings of resentment, the protest, the indignation, the outrage that would rise within you to realize that you, a human being, with the keen sensitivities of other human beings were being set off in a corner, marked apart from your fellow human beings?

We, as Americans and Negroes, actually have few rights as Americans. Laws are passed designed to prevent us from using the ballot, an elementary and fundamental principle of democracy. We have to live in "ghettoes" everywhere, not only in Warm Springs, Ga., but also in the city of Washington, the very heart of our democracy.

It is the task of enlightened individuals to bring the torch of education to those who are not enlightened. There is a crying need for education among my own people. No one realizes this more than

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I do. But the un-Christian, un-American conditions in the South make it impossible for me and other young Negroes to live there and continue our faith in the ideals of democracy and Christianity. We are as much political refugees from the South as any of the Jews in Germany. We cannot endure these conditions. Our whole being cries out against inequality and injustice. And so, we come to Northern cities to escape the mental and physical cruelties of the land in which we were born and the land we love.

You said yesterday that you associated yourself with young people, and you emphasized their importance in the current affairs of our nation. Can you ask your young Negroes to return to the South? Do you feel, as we do, that the ultimate test of democracy in the United States will be the way in which it solves its Negro problem? No, President Roosevelt, our problems are not just those of other people. They are far deeper, far more trying, and far more hopeless. Have you raised your voice loud enough against the burning of our people? Why has our government refused to pass antilynching legislation? And why is it that the group of congressmen so opposed to that passing of this legislation are part and parcel of the Democratic Party of which you are leader?

Yesterday, you placed your approval on the University of North Carolina as an institution of liberal thought. You spoke of the necessity of change in a body of law to meet the problems of an accelerated era of civilization. You called on Americans to support a liberal philosophy based on democracy. What does this mean for Negro Americans? Does it mean that we, at last, may participate freely, and on the basis of equality, with our fellow-citizens in working out the problems of this democracy? Does it mean that Negro students in the South will be allowed to sit down with white students and study a problem which is fundamental and mutual to both groups? Does it mean that the University of North Carolina is ready to open its doors to Negro students seeking enlightenment on the social and economic problems which the South faces? Does it mean, that as an alumnus of the University of North Carolina, you are ready to use your prestige and influence to see to it that this step is taken toward greater opportunity for mutual understanding of race relations in the South?

Or does it mean, that everything you said has no meaning for us as Negroes, that again we are to be set aside and passed over for more important problems? I appeal for an answer because I, and my people are perplexed.

Sincerely yours,
Pauli Murray

Hoping to ensure that the president would get her correspondence, Murray sent a copy of it with a cover letter to the first lady.

December 6, 1938

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

You do not remember me, but I was the girl who did not stand up when you passed through the Social Hall of Camp Tera during one of your visits in the winter of 1934–35. Miss Mills criticized me afterward, but I thought and still feel that you are the sort of person who prefers to be accepted as a human being and not a human paragon.

One of my closest friends and pals is "Pee Wee," whom you know as Margaret Inness [*sic*]. I have watched with appreciation your interest in her struggle to improve herself and to secure employment. Often I have wanted to write you, but felt that you had more important problems to consider.

Now I make an appeal to you in my own behalf. I am sending you a copy of a letter which I wrote to your husband, President Roosevelt, in the hope that you will try to understand the spirit and deep perplexity in which it is written, if he is too busy.

I know he has the problems of our nation on his hand, and I would not bother to write him, except that my problem isn't mine alone, it is the problem of my people, and in these trying days, it will not let me or any other thinking Negro rest. Need I say any more?

Sincerely yours,
Pauli Murray

Given how fired up Murray was when she composed these letters, the clamor coming from her tiny, smoke-filled apartment must have disturbed her fellow tenants. It is not known if her typing led to another eviction. What we do know is that her missives opened a conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt that would continue until ER's death in 1962.

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THE PRESIDENT'S STAFF FORWARDED Murray's correspondence to Ambrose Caliver, senior specialist in Negro education at the federal Office of Education. Caliver would pass it on to Hilda Worthington Smith, specialist in workers' education in the WPA, from whom Murray would hear a month later. ER, on the other hand, responded in two weeks.

December 19, 1938

My dear Miss Murray:

I have read the copy of the letter you sent me and I understand perfectly, but great changes come slowly. I think they are coming, however, and sometimes it is better to fight hard with conciliatory methods. The South is changing, but don't push too fast. There is a great change in youth, for instance, and that is a hopeful sign.

Very sincerely yours,
Eleanor Roosevelt

While the first lady's plea for patience was not an answer Murray could accept, she was grateful that ER "answered under her personal signature." The contrasting tone in their exchange—Murray the impatient youth and ER the cautious elder—symbolized the tension at the beginning of their friendship.

Even though ER advised Murray against pushing "too fast," the young woman's argument reverberated two days later in "My Day." "I could not help thinking of some of the letters which pass through my hands," the first lady told readers. Paraphrasing Murray's appeal to the president, ER wrote, "Are you free if you cannot vote, if you cannot be sure that the same justice will be meted out to you as to your neighbor; if you are expected to live on a lower level than your neighbor and to work for lower wages; if you are barred from certain places and opportunities?"