

Pauli Murray's Peter Panic

*Perspectives from the Margins of Gender and Race
in Jim Crow America*

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Abstract This article investigates the history of intersectional feminism and demonstrates that the theory is grounded in a trans-of-color analysis of the racial caste system known as "Jim Crow." In 1944, Pauli Murray, an African American activist, journalist, and lawyer, coined the term *Jane Crow*, which critiqued the simultaneous structural and affective impacts of white supremacy and male supremacy. These hegemonies divided individuals into binary categories of race and gender, categories that were naturalized and violently upheld. Murray lived on the margins of these classifications as a light-skinned African American who expressed a trans gender and desired medical transition. S/he was read as a variety of genders and races and observed others' attempts to discern her/his "true" identity. From this perspective, Murray scrutinized this quotidian yet fundamental process of categorization, analyzed the operations of race and gender subjectification, and crafted an intersectional feminist analysis s/he called "Jane Crow."

Keywords intersectionality, Civil Rights movement, transgender history, passing, Pauli Murray

Intersectionality argues that racism and sexism cannot be treated separately as single oppressions, especially when considering the lives of black women (Crenshaw 1989). The history of intersectional feminism demonstrates that the theory is grounded in a trans-of-color analysis of the racial caste system known as "Jim Crow." In 1944, Pauli Murray, an African American activist, journalist, and lawyer, began exploring the simultaneous structural and affective impacts of "white supremacy as well as male supremacy" (Murray 1947: 5). Murray argued that Jim Crow, a system of binary racial categorization, social segregation, violence, and political and economic repression, had a companion: "Jane Crow" similarly classified humans into two binary gender categories, segregated the groups and violently policed their intimate interactions, and restricted the economic and political possibilities of those labeled "woman" (Panic 1944; Murray 1947, 1950; Murray and Eastwood 1965). For three decades, Murray wrote

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prominent legal briefs and policy recommendations about Jane Crow and the negative effects it had on women of color, and when Murray moved from law to the priesthood in the 1970s, Jane Crow's perilous affects became the focus of a number of spiritual tracts and sermons.

This article explores Murray's writing on Jane Crow, but instead of charting the progression of Murray's thesis forward through the Civil Rights and feminist movements, I look backward. I build upon the historiography of Civil Rights activists that connects an individual's early encounters with racist oppression and their radical thoughts and actions, and I examine Murray's experiences as a person whose racial appearance and gender expression fell outside black/white and female/male binaries. Jane Crow was developed out of Murray's early navigations of Jim Crow gender and racial categories. At times, Murray purposefully played with the norms that shifted as s/he¹ moved across geographies and institutional settings, but s/he was acutely aware that the power to name her/his race and gender was rarely in her/his hands. Following Kenneth Mack (2012), I ask, how does a life of navigating these hegemonic binaries shape one's analysis of their operation and effects? Through exploring this question, I highlight the trans-of-color analysis of and resistance to Jim Crow central to the historical and theoretical development of intersectional feminism.

Pauli Murray was born in 1910 in Baltimore, a child of what s/he calls "my dual family heritage" (Murray 1987: xiv). Descended from a free woman and freeman, an enslaved woman and her owner, Murray was light-skinned but did not pass as white in the strict racial binaries constituted by Jim Crow. Especially salient to Murray was her/his childhood experiences of segregation that split her/his own family. Out of six siblings, only Murray and one other did not pass as white, separating the siblings in both the public spaces they could inhabit and the social statuses they were afforded. Even with light skin, Murray was designated as black and was "very, very conscious" that her/his movements were regulated and restricted throughout her/his childhood in the South (Murray 1976: 6).

Therefore, from a young age, Murray was a keen observer of the processes of racial categorization, in which, in any (and every) given situation, a more powerful white individual could observe and determine her/his race and admit or refuse her/him entrance into these local, privileged spaces. Murray was simultaneously also restricted by contemporary binary gender norms that insisted each individual be demarcated as either female or male. S/he expressed a pronounced masculine sense of self throughout childhood, and during her/his twenties and thirties, Murray (1937a) wrote that s/he "desired experimentation on the male side." In 1939, s/he clipped an article from the African American *Amsterdam News* reporting that experiments with testosterone "transform[ed]

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effeminate males into normal men, strong and virile" (*New York Amsterdam News* 1939). S/he immediately visited the hospital where the experiments were conducted, inquiring whether "the clinic would experiment" on her/him "with the male hormone" (Murray 1940).

Recently, and finally, historians (Azaransky 2011, 2013; Gilmore 2009; Mack 2012) have begun to read Murray's archive using a trans-analytical lens, refuting the conflation of her/his identification as a heterosexual male with internalized homophobia in an era before the modern gay liberation movement. From this perspective, Murray was attempting to align her/his physical body with her/his sense of normative male gender (described as her/his sexual attraction to feminine women, drive to compete in "men's" occupations, a desire to partner with a woman in a monogamous marriage, and "wearing pants" [Murray 1937a]). Even though Murray implored endocrinologists for treatment, stating that her/his "desire to be male was so strong," s/he was rejected—it was recommended s/he "accept treatment using female hormone[s]" instead (Murray 1940). Murray pursued testosterone therapy until at least 1944; there is no record that her/his numerous appeals were ever fulfilled.

During this period, Murray was hospitalized three times, each for "emotional breakdowns" from a combination of intense overwork, heartbreak, and the struggle to normalize her/his gender and sexuality through testosterone therapy (Azaransky 2011: 23). Murray's personal notes (1937a, 1937b, 1938, 1940) from these episodes are centered on these "conflicts," and her/his race, and others' perception of it, is always in play. In one document (1937a), s/he wonders if part of this inner turmoil is not also racial—that being "hemmed in" by Jim Crow "restrictions" adds additional strain on her/his precarious gendered life. S/he wonders why, since s/he is so eager to become more masculine to ease this "conflict," s/he does not desire to pass as white, or make efforts to do so: "Why is [it] I am proud of my Negro blood?" While considering these critical questions, hospital staff "palmed [her/him] off as Cuban" so that s/he might receive a higher level of treatment.² Murray (1937b) simply left "the race question in the open" and let others decide what racial category to place her/him into.

Murray spent a great deal of time and energy observing the operations of racialization and gendering at work as those surrounding her/him tried to categorize her/him for their own purposes. In her/his 1938 poem "Mulatto's Dilemma," Murray writes:

Oh God! My face has slipped them . . .
 Can I endure the killing weight of time it takes them
 To be sure? (Murray 1938)

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Although the poem centers on the “killing” wait while others attempt to identify Murray as either black or white, her/his gender was simultaneously appraised. Racial and gender nonnormativity explicitly crossed paths on Murray’s body, and as s/he walked through the world, others were always taking measure of this dual nonbelonging.

I argue that it is this trans perspective, not only Murray’s experience “as a black woman” as others have concluded (Hartmann 2002: 75; Lewis 1977), that led to her/his first formulation of *Jane Crow*. Murray first introduced the term in a short 1944 *Los Angeles Sentinel* article, “Little Man from Mars: He’s All Mixed Up,” penned under the name Peter Panic (Panic 1944). The nom de plume is a nod to the character Peter Pan, traditionally played onstage by a woman. But Murray isn’t Pan—s/he is Panic, perhaps referencing her/his failed quest for masculinization therapy and gender alignment. The article itself centers not on this gender tension but rather on the panic over the arbitrary violences of Jim Crow. Published in the largest African American newspaper on the West Coast, it is told from the perspective of a “little man from Mars” who observes the processes of racial and gender categorization from above. The martian literalizes Jim Crow as a bird that bites “culud” people, giving them “something like an itch” that “nearly drives them crazy.” Keeping the words “culud folks” and “white folks” in quotation marks demonstrates that it is actually the bite of the bird and its harmful effects that demarcates who is “culud” and who is “white,” not a physiological “truth” that stands outside processes of subjectification.

The martian rarely sees the bird, but humans erect “certain signs” that delineate not only space but also the people within it. Describing the infamous “white only” signs that littered the public spaces of the South, including the cemeteries, Murray/Panic writes, “If you get buried with the wrong sign on you, they dig up your bones, put the proper label on you, and bury you in the designated graveyard.” To the martian, this represents the extreme in racial categorization, in that even without skin, proper racial binaries must be retained. While these strictures might hold in the daylight, at night, “sometimes they’re careless and forget to put up their signs . . . then everybody gets mixed up.” Alluding to the interracial intimacies, consensual and not, that occur throughout segregated communities, Murray/Panic is also connecting these hidden relationships within her/his own ancestry. Intimacies that cross racial lines leave people “all mixed up,” just like the man from Mars is. Murray writes, “Being changeable color—green-and-blue—I don’t know which sign to choose” (Panic 1944).

In the last paragraphs, the martian introduces Jim Crow’s mate, Jane Crow. Although Murray/Panic does not expound upon Jane Crow’s “bite,” it is clear that Murray sees similarities between their operations and effects. Articulating an early form of social constructionism, s/he argues that both racialization

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and gendering are violent binary systems imposed from without—"the bite"—rather than from truths that emerge from the body. Those that are "bit" by these birds, those labeled black and/or woman, suffer both the internalized sense of inferiority—the "itch" that "drives them crazy"—and the material effects of systemic racism and sexism. However, as exemplified by the little man from Mars, Peter Panic, and Pauli Murray herself/himself, there are those who do not easily fit into these binarized categories and are themselves "all mixed up."

During this period, Murray took several interstate trips, sometimes in the company of a lover. S/he carefully recorded others' perceptions of her/his race and gender, which changed as s/he traveled through different parts of the country. In 1940, Murray, dressed in men's clothes, and her/his partner Adelene MacBean were arrested in Virginia during the first recorded utilization of Gandhian nonviolence in the struggle against Jim Crow. While some reports of the incident describe Murray and MacBean as two women, another describes one of the arrestees as "a young colored girl" and the other as a "young man . . . lighter than she, of slight build" (Gilmore 2009: 322). In the South, Murray was read as black regardless of gender.³ But upon leaving the region, the perception of Murray's racial identity was more fluid, as was the case during Murray's hospitalization in 1937. For example, on a 1935 hitchhiking trip through Illinois, one woman thought Murray "was a Boy Scout," while another "thought [s/he] was Indian" (Murray 1935).

Contemporary trans and critical race scholarship (Omi and Winant 1994; Serano 2009; Snorton 2009) invites us to see Murray as passed rather than passing. Instead of the responsibility for identification falling solely on the individual, it rests on the racial and gender norms that shape the way they are assessed. One's visible and audible embodiments are read through governing hegemonic categories, and the identification of the individual as a particular race and gender is created through that process. In this way, the experiences of people who are passed as more than one race and/or gender can teach us about the structural norms of that historical moment. Each time the individual is read and then categorized as one singular race and gender, the local racial and gender norms are exposed. Witnessing this quotidian yet fundamental process can build comprehension of complex hegemonic discourses.

Murray was labeled in ways that changed day to day and place to place. This, then, is a set of experiences that sets Pauli Murray apart from most of her/his movement activist counterparts—other "race women" who made black women's experiences a central focus of their racial justice work. While race women spent the majority of their time in the public sphere, most kept the details of their intimate lives well hidden. Darlene Clark Hine (1989: 914–15) argues that many black women who "desire[d] to achieve personal autonomy" developed a "culture

of dissemblance” wherein they denied whites and black men access to their interior psychic and sexual selves. This was crucial for black women in leadership positions, toward whom stereotypes about black female sexual excess was explicitly and implicitly directed. Race women crafted personas of “openness” while “actually remaining an enigma,” allowing them to inhabit culturally held white heteronormative ideals of virtuous womanhood, industriousness, emotional regulation, and gender respectability.

A long historiographical conversation regards the negative impact of the culture of dissemblance on black women, lesbians, and gender-nonnormative people. Hine highlights black middle-class women’s attempted management of poor women, nonmonogamous women, and sex workers. Evelyn Hammonds (1999: 101) argues that lesbian and queer black women have been and are among those labeled as “traitors,” in that not only do they invite additional scrutiny, but their expression of queerness enunciates their nonnormative sexual desires. Fearing that revelation might displace them from their racial community, black queer women police themselves, furthering the silences surrounding black women’s intimacies.

Matt Richardson (2003) uses Hine’s analytic to understand the absence of transgender people from black history. He cites her research on Cathy Williams, who lived under the name William Cathy, was read consistently as a black man, and served as a buffalo soldier in the late nineteenth century. Richardson argues that what is missing from Hine’s analysis is the connection between Cathy’s race and gender expression and the racial and gender norms in which Cathy was read and categorized. Separating William Cathy from the historical governing hegemones results in the relegation of her/his gender and sexual nonnormativity to a biographical aside, rather than a lens through which to view the historical effects of changing cultural discourses.

Hammonds and Richardson argue that scholars perpetuate the culture of dissemblance in two ways. First, dissemblance maintains a closet for historical figures, denying queer and trans African Americans a place in the historiography. Second, it refuses the likelihood that one’s sexuality or desire for gender self-definition is woven into one’s race work, even if it is not spoken outright. Murray’s crucial role in the histories of Civil Rights activism and intersectional feminism has been marginalized because both disciplines have yet to fully include transgender as a category of analysis that offers a distinct perspective on systemic operations of subjectification. Only a handful of scholars have recognized Murray’s transgender history, and only Mack (2012) has begun to unpack how those experiences shaped Murray’s theoretical analysis of Jane Crow.

Making her/his way through Jim Crow’s strict racial and gender norms, Pauli Murray had plenty to Peter Panic about. Before studying law at Howard

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University, Murray was rejected from the University of North Carolina on account of her/his race; after graduating from Howard as valedictorian, s/he was rejected from Harvard Law School on account of her/his sex. In response to this latest exclusion, Murray famously wrote, "Gentlemen, I would gladly change my sex to meet your requirements, but since the way to such change has not been revealed to me, I have no recourse but to appeal to you to change your minds. Are you to tell me that one is as difficult as the other?" (Mayeri 2013: 87).

Just one month later, Murray introduced Jane Crow to an African American readership rapidly coalescing into a national civil rights movement. S/he articulated what would be intimately resonant to many: white supremacy and male supremacy operated in tandem, and their combined effects fell squarely across the bodies and psyches of African American women. As the analysis gained popularity among Murray's colleagues and friends, s/he used her/his full name when writing about Jane Crow, and by the mid-1960s, Murray was regarded as the legal expert on the civil rights of black women. But the bird's first sighting was by Peter Panic—the spirited boy played by a woman, and a little man from Mars—a color-changing observer from another planet. These caricatures represent Murray's sense of nonbelonging in a social world built on racial and gender binaries, and these outsider observations became the theoretical foundation of intersectional feminism. Murray's trans gender is more than a biographical aside in feminist and Civil Rights historiography; these experiences informed Murray's racial justice work and shaped her/his analysis of hegemonic racism and sexism.

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Notes

1. I use *s/he* pronouns for Murray to both accentuate Murray's internal sense of male/masculine gender during the 1930s–1950s and also Murray's identification with female experience after this period until her death. My desire is to use a third-gender pronoun; yet I feel the contemporary *they* is ahistorical. As scholars continue to consider the lives of gender-nonconforming people living before the availability of a transgender/transsexual identity, a more uniform system of pronoun usage will likely emerge.

2. It is unclear whether the Long Island Rest Home (Amityville, New York) excluded African American patients at this time, but regardless of the admittance policy, a light-skinned Cuban client would likely receive better treatment than an African American.
3. This has much to do with the discursive expansiveness of the racial category "colored," constituted as such to maintain white racial purity and enfold the greatest number of individuals into a politically and economically subordinate position.

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