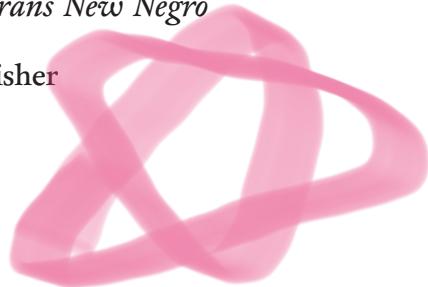
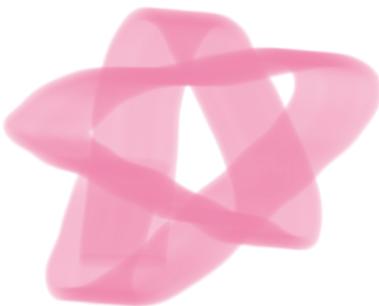


*Challenging Dissemblance in Pauli Murray Historiography,
Sketching a History of the Trans New Negro*

Simon D. Elin Fisher



In 1940, Pauli Murray and Adelene “Mac” McBean were the first African Americans to use nonviolent direct action to challenge Jim Crow segregation, protesting their placement in the back seat on a Greyhound bus traveling to visit Murray’s aunts in Durham, North Carolina. Just three years earlier, before Murray had met Mac through their work in Harlem, Murray was hospitalized after a mental health crisis. Her doctor, famous African American physician May E. Chinn, arranged for Murray to stay at the Long Island Rest Home, where she would meet with doctors Chinn thought could help get to the root of what Murray called “my conflict.”¹ The term “conflict” captured

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1. Previously, I have used *s/he* pronouns when discussing this period of Murray’s life, because it was evident to me that, if given the option, Murray would have used *he* pronouns at this time. However, Murray later in life identified more as a woman and, I believe, would have chosen to use *she* pronouns if given the option. As this was the case when she died, I have chosen to use *she* pronouns out of respect for this latter choice. In her biography of Murray, Rosalind Rosenberg offers an excellent narrative of her journey in deciding which pronouns to use for Murray in

the tension between Murray's masculine sense of self and gender expression, attraction to "extremely feminine and heterosexual women," and her female sex, a strain that would reach a breaking point "after each love affair that had become unsuccessful."² This was frequently the case, it seems, since she desired "monogamous married life," but the women who might, as Murray later wrote, "admit attraction . . . feel unable to handle it, [and] usually suggest hospitalization and psychiatric care."³ Murray penned those comments, among almost fifty other questions, in just that environment.⁴

Murray was treated well at the hospital—she was gaining weight and the nightly sedatives did help her sleep. But the doctors she met with did not offer the solutions she needed to fully address her "conflict." Most people believed that she was a woman attracted to other women, a homosexual, which, by 1937, was largely regarded by the medical community as a problem of the psyche. Murray instead asked doctors at the hospital about what caused an "inverted sex instinct," which she defined as "wearing pants, wanting to be one of the men, doing things that fellows do, hating to be dominated by women unless I like them." Next to the question, likely written during or after the appointment with the doctor, were the words "Answer – Glandular."⁵

The notion that an "inverted sex instinct" might be a "glandular" issue was not new to Murray. In the mid-1930s, she had been researching medical science from earlier decades that defined sex inversion as a kind of complete sex and gender reversal that included sexual attraction but forefronted the aspect of cross-gender expression. Although some sexologists continued to search for biological causes of same-sex desire, it was gender inversion that most were sure was rooted in the body, not the psyche. British sexologist Havelock Ellis was, according to biographer Rosalind Rosenberg, "most helpful" to Murray because he clearly differentiated between homosexuality, a pathological condition he believed was acquired, and gender inversion, a biological condition

Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (New York, 2017), xvii; Pauli Murray, "Interview with Dr. _____," December 16, 1937, box 4, folder 71, Pauli Murray Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University (hereafter PM Papers).

2. Pauli Murray, "Questions Prepared for Dr. Titley," December 17, 1937, box 4, folder 71, PM Papers.

3. Ibid., and Pauli Murray, "Summary of Symptoms of Upset," March 8, 1940, box 4, folder 71, PM Papers.

4. Murray, "Questions Prepared"; Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 57.

5. Murray, "Interview with Dr. _____." Several scholars discuss the irregular development of the changing meanings of homosexuality from a gender variance model to a sex-object model. See especially George Chauncey, *Gay New York Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994).

caused by illness or birth defect.⁶ Later sexologists would use this theory to propose the possibility of gender transition through sex organ transplant and, later, hormone therapy. However, other scientists saw a cure for gender non-normative individuals in that testosterone could make an effeminate man more masculine, and estrogen could transform a masculine woman into a more feminine one.⁷

One of the medical terms that Murray gravitated toward, “pseudohermaphrodite,” was Ellis’s term.⁸ He proposed that in a case of pseudohermaphroditism, a condition that would now fall under the term “intersexed,” a woman’s femininity, determined by the presence of female sex glands and hormones (ovaries and estrogen), was inhibited by the invisible yet powerful presence of a male sex gland (teste), that secreted its own masculine hormone (testosterone) and overrode her supposedly natural feminine disposition. (The opposite was proposed for a male-assigned patient.) Over the several documents Murray wrote in the late 1930s concerning her “conflict,” she regularly raised the question about “whether or not [she was] a pseudohermaphrodite.”⁹ She also asks if perhaps “one of [my] ‘genitals’ is male in composition,” although she later renders it an “impossibility,” written perhaps after meeting with the doctor or conducting further research on her own.¹⁰

6. Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*; Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

7. Jennifer Terry, “Anxious Slippages between “Us” and “Them”: A Brief History of the Scientific Search for Homosexual Bodies,” in *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*, ed. Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla (Bloomington, IN, 1995), 129–69. Kadji Amin critiques historians eager to construct narratives of transgender progress who tend to erase the eugenic discourses weaving through endocrinological experiments during this period. These value systems were implicitly written into the development of modern transsexual surgical and hormonal therapies and continue to render some transgender people as more deserving of treatment than others. See Kadji Amin, “Glands, Eugenics, and Rejuvenation in *Man into Woman: A Biopolitical Genealogy of Transsexuality*,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 589–605; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, 2017); Jake Pyne, “Arresting Ashley X: Trans Youth, Puberty Blockers and the Question of Whether Time Is on Your Side,” *Somatechnics* 7, no. 1 (February 2017): 95–123. Shane Vogel notes that European sexologists, like Ellis, tended to focus their experiments on helping sexual and gender non-conforming patients, while American sexologists leaned toward correcting deviancy within otherwise heterosexual populations; see “The Sensuous Harlem Renaissance: Sexuality and Queer Culture,” in *A Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson (Chichester, 2015), 267–83.

8. Murray, “Interview with Dr. _____.”

9. Murray, “Questions Prepared.”

10. Murray, “Interview with Dr. _____”; the term “hermaphrodite” is historically linked to the contemporary category of intersex but is considered stigmatizing and scientifically incorrect. See the Intersex Society of North America website at www.isna.org.

Since 2002, several scholars have taken up the archive containing Murray's questions regarding her gender and sexuality during this period. In each case, most notably Rosenberg's *Jane Crow: The Life and Times of Pauli Murray* and the chapter on Murray in Brittney Cooper's *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, both published in 2017, Murray's quest for information has been narrated as her own private mission, conducted largely through engagement with early twentieth-century sexology and endocrinology. For example, Rosenberg paints an image of Murray conducting this research in 1935, before her hospitalization: "Pauli repaired to the New York Public Library, where she spent her days in the American History Room, a quiet ante-chamber to the much larger central Reading Room. The library, with its vast holdings, well-organized card catalogue, and helpful reference librarians, was an ideal place to expand her knowledge. . . . She wanted to know more about her 'boy-girl' self."¹¹

I love this image of Pauli Murray, alone in that quiet beautiful room, piles of scientific journals and textbooks surrounding her. Rosenberg's list of Murray's chosen authors includes Ellis, as well as Magnus Hirschfeld, the German Jewish sexologist who advocated for compassion and rights for sexual minorities in the face of ethnocentric nationalism in the 1920s. Gregorio Marañón, a Spanish physician, drew a direct connection between the endocrine system and one's psychology. Interspersed within the European sexologists was American anthropologist Ruth Benedict, who had published about the "*Berdache*" [sic], the "she-men" of various American Indian tribes.¹² According to Rosenberg, Murray kept her reading to herself, sharing what she learned only with her girlfriend at the time, Peggie Holmes. At the library, Murray was "lonely" but "better read."¹³

However, Murray could have gained more contemporary information regarding sexology and glandular science from other sources, although they are not mentioned in her archive nor histories written about her. In Joanne Meyerowitz's foundational study of the history of transsexuality in the United States, she notes that in the 1930s, the information of this kind most readily available to American readers was the sensationalized accounts of sex

11. Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 49. "Boy-girl" was one of the ways Murray described her gender to those closest to her. This particular term is from Murray, "Dear Mother," June 2, 1943, box 10, folder 253, PM Papers.

12. Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 50. "Berdache" is a non-Indigenous term and was imposed by European and American settlers and scientists. The Indigenous terms for what is now broadly called "two-spirit" vary by nation/tribe and language. See Aiyyana Maracle, "A Journey in Gender." *Torquere* 2 (2000): 36–57.

13. Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 51.

change surgeries coming from Magnus Hirschfeld's clinic in Germany.¹⁴ Most famously, Danish artist Lili Elbe had received an undisclosed form of surgery, likely the removal of the testes and an ovarian transplant, that had transformed her from a man to a woman.¹⁵ Her story was first published in the United States in 1933. Details of her treatment were sparse, but the articles that circulated described Elbe as a "hermaphrodite" with both testicles and ovaries.¹⁶ Meyerowitz argues that this was likely untrue, but it bolstered the prevailing theory that the presence of both testes and ovaries created a bigendered hormonal composition within the patient. Removal of one set of these sex glands allowed the other to fully dominate the endocrinological landscape and make the patient either fully male or fully female, rather than sex inverted.¹⁷

A 1932 *Baltimore Afro-American* article, titled "Are Pansies People?," briefly mentions an even more vague account of "an artist" who received treatment for "a painful condition" from a Swiss scientist that transformed him into a woman.¹⁸ Again, there are no details, but the reference to the kinds of treatment offered at Hirschfeld's clinic is clear: "Doctors decided to operate, and the result was that he developed into a perfectly normal woman." This article, which I discuss in detail below, demonstrates that at least some information regarding sex inversion, glandular conditions, "hermaphroditism," and sex change were circulating in the African American press at the same time Murray was contemplating these issues for herself.

Two documents in Murray's personal archive point to the possibility that she gained this kind of knowledge not only from her personal research at the library but also from regularly reading the local black newspaper. After the handwritten lists of questions, there is a yellowed clipping from the front page of the November 11, 1939, issue of the *New York Amsterdam News*, the most widely read African American newspaper in the city. Titled "Sex Tablets Stir Medics," the article excitedly reports that "a synthetic white tablet is being hailed today in medical circles as the magic formula that transforms effeminate males into normal men, strong and virile."¹⁹ At the Post Graduate Medical School at nearby Columbia University, endocrinologists had organized an

14. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*.

15. Amin, "Glands, Eugenics, and Rejuvenation."

16. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 31.

17. Ibid., 31–34.

18. Ralph Matthews, "Are Pansies People?" *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 2, 1932, 3.

19. "Sex Tablets Stir Medics," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 8, 1939. The experiment was originally reported in the mainstream newspaper *World Telegram* in "Pill 'Planted' in Boys Turns Weak, Effeminate Youths into Strong, Virile Men," *World Telegram*, November 3, 1939. The practice of the black press re-reporting on an event or issue found in mainstream papers

event revealing the results from experiments conducted on “shrill-voiced” men using “pure crystalline testosterone” to masculinize their bodies, voices, sexual behavior, and overall temperament. The doctor and—judging by the congratulatory tone of the article—the article’s author hailed the drug’s ability to transform the “human guinea pigs” into “husky, solidly built” young men. According to the experiment’s lead endocrinologist, Dr. Joseph Eidelberg, the young men arrived at his clinic with their “male characteristics . . . suppressed to the point where they had almost disappeared.” The subjects were significantly lacking in “the hormones that normally are excreted by the male sex gland,” but they were effectively masculinized through the testosterone tablets. Two hundred doctors gathered to witness the experiment’s success. Murray clipped the article and, within weeks, marched to the endocrinology clinic to ask if the doctors would be willing to include her in their testosterone experiments.²⁰

At the time, Murray was living with Mac, a Harlem-born West Indian woman. The day after the *Amsterdam News* published the “sex tablet” research, Mac and Murray penned a letter to the editor, thanking them for the article and taking seriously “the problems arising from sexual maladjustments in the individual.”²¹ African Americans facing these issues were the “minority of minorities,” and due to “racial prejudice coupled with economic difficulties,” black scientists and physicians had no ability to conduct similar experiments. “The sex problem,” she concluded, “must be discussed openly and frankly, and with great humility,” and the *Amsterdam News* article served as an eloquent model. This typed letter, signed A. McBean, is also included in the archive folder.

Rosenberg’s vignette describing Murray alone in the quiet library is quite different from the idea of Murray and Mac reading the *Amsterdam News* article together and talking it over with friends, as Doreen Drury postulates. I like to imagine the couple reading it over breakfast like thousands of other black Harlemites did that morning, nearly spitting out their oatmeal as they saw the headline and realized the possibilities entailed within what they read.

was common. Murray also clipped this article and saved it alongside the *Amsterdam News* article. Because I am most interested in the circulation of this discourse among the African American public, I have chosen to focus on the *Amsterdam News* printing.

20. “Sex Tablets Stir Medics.”

21. A. McBean, “Letter to the Editor,” November 9, 1939, box 4, folder 71, PM Papers. A type-written version of the letter is held in Murray’s archive, and it was also published in full in the November 25, 1939, issue of the *Amsterdam News*. I agree with Doreen Drury, who writes that it is likely that Mac and Murray cowrote the letter; see Doreen M. Drury, “‘Experimentation on the Male Side’: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Pauli Murray’s Quest for Love and Identity, 1910–1960” (PhD diss., Boston College, 2000), 201.

In Rosenberg's narration, Murray is by herself and only talks to her girlfriend about what she is reading, suggesting that the quest for information about gender nonnormativity is a solitary one, conducted outside and away from one's so-called regular life—in Murray's case, away from her racial and economic justice work and the African American network of activists she was connected to. But in the second narrative regarding the publication of the testosterone experiment and the subsequent letter to the editor, Murray gains her information from within a broad African American circuit of information that likely included the activists she worked with on a daily basis. Given that the *Amsterdam News* was so widely read, and the story ran on the front page, Murray's colleagues, friends, and just about everyone else she encountered that day had probably seen the same headline.

The contrast between the account of Murray's research into gender nonnormativity as a private engagement with sexology experts and the notion of a transgender discourse circulating within an African American public raises some important questions about the way we understand Murray's archived documents and tell the story of her gender nonnormativity during this period. Since 2002, Murray scholars have been using the term "transgender" to describe Murray's gender identity but have not contextualized it nor her archive within the social history of American transsexuality or the African American history of (trans)sexuality of the period. While this history is situated before the more modern identity categories "transgender" or "transsexual" had become available for general usage in the United States, historical work on gender variant African Americans, black trans cultural production, and discourses of gender inversion in the first half of the twentieth century provides useful components of trans history during this period.²²

While this historiography might be slim in comparison with that of African American gay and lesbian history, it is crucial that it is evoked when writing about a figure who is now frequently held up in popular history as a black transgender trailblazer.²³ Historicizing Murray's archived list of questions regarding gender nonnormativity and her wish to participate in the testosterone experiment in this way illuminates the unique cultural context in which she

22. In comparison with other fields within US transgender studies, trans history, especially before the Stonewall era, is small. The most widely recognized monographs are Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*; Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, Seal Studies (Berkeley, CA, 2008); Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*. On the use of the terms "transgender" and "transsexual," see Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*; David Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (Chicago, 2004).

23. I cite several scholars working in this field below. For Murray as black transgender trailblazer, see, for example, Kathryn Schulz, "The Civil-Rights Luminary You've Never Heard Of," *New Yorker*, April 10, 2017.

decided not only how she would disclose (or not) her gendered sense of self but also what courses of action she could pursue to relieve her “conflict.” Absenting this specific historical framework and letting Murray’s research and questions stand as a unique and lonely project perpetuates the bifurcation of Murray’s life during this period into, on one hand, her private transgender struggle and, on the other, her public black activism.

Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s is well known for its African American queer and gender nonconforming cultural icons, such as Bruce Nugent and Gladys Bentley, and its plethora of spaces where queer and trans expression was accepted, such as speakeasies, rent parties, and drag balls. But we do not have any evidence that Pauli Murray participated in Harlem’s queer underground directly. Whether because of her efforts to maintain expectations of individual respectability during this time, as Doreen Drury has argued, or her later attempt to protect the African American historical record from the threat of queerness and transness, as I have argued elsewhere, it is not possible to reconstruct or recover Murray’s personal black trans Harlem history. Instead, I propose that we work with what we have: Murray’s own record of her trans expression and desires; histories of the New Negro movement in which Murray proudly participated; and evidence of a black trans Harlem found outside Murray’s archive, both figuratively and literally, since queer Harlem was very much taking place all around her.²⁴

To help in the construction of a context that brings these disparate yet proximate histories together, I first use Darlene Clark Hine’s “culture of dissemblance” to analyze the documents found in Murray’s archive and also to demonstrate how dissemblance has perpetuated the separation of this archive from the African American trans historical context that I believe is crucial to its understanding.²⁵ Then, I discuss one aspect of this history—the tension between the militant New Negro movement of the 1930s and the largely working-class black queer and trans presence popularized by, but not limited to, the cultural legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. In line with Murray’s consideration of

24. Drury, “Experimentation on the Male Side”; Simon D. Elin Fisher, “Pauli Murray’s Peter Panic: Perspectives from the Margins of Gender and Race in Jim Crow America,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, nos. 1–2 (May 2016): 95–103. Both Matt Richardson and Anjali Arondekar argue that the archive’s lack of evidence regarding queer and trans subjectivities speaks just as loudly as its presence does; see Matt Richardson, “No More Secrets, No More Lies: African American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 63–76; Anjali R. Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC, 2009). As George Chauncey and many others note, segregation forced African Americans of all classes and subcultures to co-exist, however uneasily, in close proximity; see, for example, Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

25. Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (July 1989): 912–20.

glandular science regarding her “conflict,” I focus on the use of what Michael Pettit calls “glandular psychology” in the efforts by black reformers to transform working-class migrants into respectable New Negroes.²⁶ I ground the historical discussion in a reframing of the glitz and glamor of the gender nonconformity resplendent in this time and place as a queer facet of the New Negro movement itself. These cultural formations found within black Harlem were often at odds, but they were also, as I will demonstrate, two sides of the same coin.

PAULI MURRAY'S ARCHIVE, DISSEMBLED

Murray did not openly discuss her trans desires nor her queer sexuality with her activist friends and colleagues, but it would be wrong to say that she hid them. Throughout her adult life, Murray kept her hair short, wore slacks in public, and in the early 1930s, changed her birth name to the androgynous “Pauli.” At that time, while driving, train hopping, and hitchhiking across the country on various trips, she created a photo album of self-portraits, dressed as different male archetypes, such as “The Acrobat,” “The Imp!,” “The Vagabond,” and “Peter Pan” (fig. 1).²⁷ Murray’s transness was also largely accepted by her family. Letters home openly discuss the difficulty she had moving through the world as gender nonconforming, which her adopted mother Pauline Dame affectionately named her “boy-girl personality.”²⁸ However, in the works from the first decades of scholarship on Murray that generally focus on her founding contributions to black feminism, her nonnormative gender and sexuality are simply not mentioned. As I discuss elsewhere, in this work, generally written before 2000, Murray’s identity was often labeled uncomplicatedly as “a black woman,” without regard to the trans material readily available in her archive.²⁹ While this language may not be altogether incorrect, as

26. Michael Pettit, “Becoming Glandular: Endocrinology, Mass Culture, and Experimental Lives in the Interwar Age,” *American Historical Review* 118, no. 4 (October 2013): 1052.

27. This album, along with several other photographs that compliment the documents regarding Murray’s gender nonconformity, was created over several years. The Schlesinger Library, where Murray’s archive is held, dates the photographs from 1928–41. See also Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2012); Doreen M. Drury, “Love, Ambition, and ‘Invisible Footnotes’ in the Life and Writing of Pauli Murray,” *Souls* 11, no. 3 (September 2009): 295–309. Rosenberg records several of the trips where Murray dressed in men’s clothes in *Jane Crow*, 38–42, 51. For histories of working-class women cross-dressing while traveling, see Faderman, *Odd Girls*.

28. Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 127.

29. As quoted in Serena Mayeri, “Pauli Murray and the Twentieth-Century Quest for Legal and Social Equality,” *Indiana Journal of Law and Social Equality* 2, no. 1 (2013): 80–90; Schlesinger Library Research Services, e-mail message to author, July 6, 2018. Murray was light-skinned and what we would now call mixed-race, but she firmly identified as “Negro” and “African American,” as the lexicon changed.



Figure 1. Pauli Murray. Harvard University, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, 20001573_1. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Murray did become more comfortable with female identity later in life, excluding a queer or trans perspective or the homo- and transphobia she faced negates the possibility that Murray's sexual and gender nonnormativity informed her black feminist thinking and activism.³⁰



As Darlene Clark Hine notes, race women—that is, African American women who individually and collectively worked toward the self-preservation and uplift of the race—often separated their outward persona of “openness” from their “interior” psyche and emotions.³¹ While protecting themselves from the charge of sexual excess from whites and of gender inferiority from black men, race women also portrayed themselves as adhering to conservative mainstream norms distancing work from feelings, public actions from the private home, and the rational mind from the supposedly unruly body. As Hine notes, this was a common practice at the time for the historical actors, and unfortunately the culture of dissemblance continues to negatively shape the writing of their histories. Evelyn Hammonds and Matt Richardson both use Hine’s analysis to explain the absence of black queer women and gender nonconforming people from the historical record. Dissemblance closets sexual and gender nonconformity, as it not only maintains secrecy about any interior, affective, embodied sense of selfhood but also erases perceived threats against public efforts to construct and maintain African American respectability for white or mainstream consumption.³²

Richardson discusses how dissemblance is used, not altogether successfully, to silence sexual and gender nonconformity in African American historical writing. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, following social, political, and academic trends toward rendering visible and acceptable transgender people and histories, scholarship on Murray has increasingly featured her trans self-expression. Rosalind Rosenberg wrote in her first essay discussing Murray’s gender in 2002 that Murray’s masculine comportment and choice of dress “hinted” at her transgender desires, which, at least for Rosenberg, were confirmed by Murray’s research into gender nonnormativity and her pur-

³⁰. Brittney Cooper offers an excellent corrective to this in Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Champaign, IL, 2017).

³¹. Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women,” 915.

³². Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)Holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2/3 (Summer 1994): 126; Richardson, “No More Secrets”; Sarah Azaransky, *The Dream Is Freedom: Pauli Murray and American Democratic Faith* (Oxford, 2011). To note, neither Hammonds nor Richardson discuss the absence of transgender women from the historical record, a topic that would benefit from the application of Hine’s analytic.

suit of testosterone.³³ Trans-authored scholarship exploring female-to-male transgender and transsexual life was first published in the late 1990s, but it was not until 2008 that other Murray scholars would begin to use the term as well. Glenda Gilmore published new evidence that Murray was dressed as a man when she and McBean were arrested on the southbound Greyhound bus in 1940, just as Murray was also attempting to obtain testosterone, which confirmed the suitability of the term. Not incidentally, by 2008, transgender studies had claimed a foothold in academia, and theories and methods from the field were picked up across the humanities and social sciences. Since then, most writing about Murray features some version of the suggestion that Murray may have identified as transgender if the term had been available.³⁴

Rosenberg's *Jane Crow* and Cooper's *Beyond Respectability* fully reject the closeting power of dissemblance in their writing on Murray. Building on previous work from Kenneth Mack, Sarah Azaransky, and Doreen Drury that explores the impact of Murray's queerness and transness on her political work, Rosenberg identifies the role of gender nonnormativity in Murray's entire life, not just in her youth when she engaged with the issues most directly. Cooper instead focuses on this specific period, arguing Murray was not given the opportunity to make external the male identity she felt internally, compelling her to instead challenge head-on the sexism she faced within the masculine legal profession where she hoped to serve the race. In these texts, Murray's transness is not just included as a biographical note but is treated as an identity as intrinsic to her public life and works as is her pride "in [her] Negro blood."³⁵

However, even though Murray's transness is made visible and essential in these texts, it is still "dissembled" away from the African American history in which the rest of her biography is contextualized. Murray's gender nonconformity is most thoroughly archived in her own collection from the late 1920s through the mid-1940s. At this point, she spent most of her time and efforts within local Harlem organizations, challenging racism, poverty, violence, and inequality in New York and across the country. Because Murray's archive is

33. Rosalind Rosenberg, "The Conjunction of Race and Gender," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 2 (2002): 69.

34. Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York, 2008), 321–25; and see, for example, Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*; Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*; Azaransky, *The Dream Is Freedom*; Schulz, "The Civil-Rights Luminary You've Never Heard Of."

35. Murray, "Questions Prepared"; Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*; Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*; Kenneth W. Mack, *Representing the Race: The Creation of the Civil Rights Lawyer*, reprint edition (Cambridge, MA, 2014); Azaransky, *The Dream Is Freedom*; Doreen M. Drury, "Boy-Girl, Imp, Priest: Pauli Murray and the Limits of Identity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 1 (2013): 142–47.

flush with documentation regarding her participation in New York's African American political world, scholars generally use the historical backdrop of the New Negro movement of the 1930s to give dimension to her personal actions and interactions of this period. For example, Rosenberg writes that during the 1935 Harlem Riot, protestors "raged" over the "discrimination that limited [African Americans'] opportunities for work" and reliance on government assistance.³⁶ Murray was on the road with Peggie Holmes at the time, but the riot was such a momentous symbol for black Harlemites' overall anger about their condition and such an important historical event that, even without Murray's direct participation, it must have had an impact on her.³⁷

In a slightly different yet proximate Harlem historiography, the famed annual Hamilton Lodge Ball hosted thousands of performers and spectators, and, as George Chauncey remarks, "nowhere were more men willing to venture out in public in drag than in Harlem."³⁸ Furthermore, as Thaddeus Russell argues, drag balls, and the plenteous rent parties that formed the more private counterpart to the balls' confrontational publicness, were primarily spaces that signaled queerness and gender nonconformity as "a central part of working class culture."³⁹ Although many of the queer African Americans who were part of the widely popular Harlem Renaissance arts movement were quiet about their nonnormative sexuality, the broader black public of Harlem was, according to Russell, "stunningly open" about their desires.⁴⁰ Trans people, not just in entertainment venues but also in the public sphere, were a visible presence in everyday Harlem just as gender nonconforming celebrities graced the pages of the gossip columns. It should not be inconceivable that the black working-class culture that made tuxedo-donning, woman-marrying, blues-singing bulldagger Gladys Bentley a celebrated "figure in the community" was the same culture that rioted and raged over housing shortages, discrimination in federal relief policies, and racial violence in Harlem and around the world.⁴¹

Locating Pauli Murray's black transgender history away from the black transgender community that surrounded her is the culture of dissemblance

36. Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 52.

37. Ibid.

38. Thaddeus Russell, "The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2008): 105; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 249.

39. Russell, "Color of Discipline," 105.

40. Ibid., 103; Vogel, "Sensuous Harlem Renaissance."

41. Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Kim T. Gallon, "Between Respectability and Modernity: Black Newspapers and Sexuality, 1925–1940" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2009); Laura Grantmyre, "'They Lived Their Life and They Didn't Bother Anybody': African American Female Impersonators and Pittsburgh's Hill District, 1920–1960," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2011): 983–1011; "Night Club Notes," *New York Times*, March 14, 1936, 5.

at work. Murray is not closeted in the recent histories mentioned above, but the history of African American race work is still protected from the potentially sullying effects of queerness and transness. The same holds true for the separation of the New Negro movement, the protest culture in which Murray belonged during this period, from its queer and trans people and places. Denying that the activism that formed the direct predecessor to the Civil Rights Movement concretely overlapped with the most prominent queer and transgender community in contemporary African American history reinforces the notion that queer and trans black subjects and their history do not have a place in stories celebrating civil rights history more broadly.

Murray arrived in New York in 1928, and throughout the Great Depression she went to school, worked as many odd jobs as she could acquire, and lived on the cheap. In 1930, she moved to Harlem and rented a room at the Emma Ransom House at the YWCA. Segregation, migration, and the resulting severe housing shortage meant that Murray boarded at the “Y” with experienced activists like Mary Church Terrell, who had already garnered recognition and respect as a formidable race woman. The Harlem YWCA was a hub of gender, race, and class consciousness, and young women like Ella Baker and Maida Springer, together with Murray, created an “informal network” of activists that lasted well through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.⁴² Through the mid-1930s, Murray engaged in Harlem’s broader African American political scene alongside the women at the “Y,” and she would discuss the events with those from different classes, educational backgrounds, employment, and membership in communist, socialist, and religious organizations.

Like its men’s counterpart, the YWCA housed women who were largely unencumbered by familial or parenting responsibilities and were freer to pursue other kinds of passions. Segregated by gender, the “Y” gave shelter to same-sex relationships that could be friendly, romantic, and sexual in nature. According to her own records, Murray’s relationships within the YMCA stayed platonic, and she kept her feelings about her gender and sexuality away from her Harlem friendships, activist circles, and work life. Maida Springer stayed close with Murray for decades, but when asked about Murray’s concerns regarding homosexuality or gender crossing, Springer said Murray mentioned one time that she “felt more male than female” and was “attracted to feminine, heterosexual women.” Springer responded that the whole idea was “ridiculous” and, unsurprisingly, the topic never came up again.⁴³

42. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 71.

43. Ransby, *Ella Baker*; Richardson, “No More Secrets”; Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 376.

Murray spent the better part of the 1930s throwing herself into black Harlem's revolutionary politics. Struggles with her "conflict," the hospitalizations, and frantic lists of questions about glands and hormone experiments only took her away from her work in the local organizations that cooperated with New Negro organizations and coalitions. In the summer of 1935, with Ella Baker and others at the YWCA, Murray worked at the Workers Education Project (WEP), which supported the organizing efforts of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Murray was introduced to what she described as "young, radical intellectuals of that period, young Communists, young Socialists, young Trotskyites," all working toward alleviating poverty through mass mobilization and protest.⁴⁴ Murray joined the Communist Party (Opposition) and was arrested supporting automotive workers who orchestrated the first sit-down strikes, a technique used by Murray a decade later when she helped organize a sit-in to desegregate a Washington, DC, cafeteria. During this period, she witnessed a tremendous generational shift in tactical approaches to radical social change. Across groups of activists—religious and secular, black and white, local and international, racial and labor—protestors demanded a more vigorous, direct, embodied course of action to force the powerful to relinquish their stranglehold on political and economic resources.⁴⁵

As mentioned above, Murray did not leave evidence attesting to her participation in the kinds of events or spaces that historians associate with queer and trans Harlem of this period. Instead, her archive is full of documents from her work for New Negro efforts, only a few which are listed above. In the following section, instead of staying so close to Murray's archive, following her footsteps that somehow stepped around the colossal sexual and gender nonconforming presence within her city, I leave Murray behind to join the throngs carousing within Harlem's queer nightlife. But moving away from Murray's biography does not force a distancing from the New Negro protest culture altogether. Rather, in what follows, I offer a consideration of these queer and trans Harlem subcultures as part and parcel of the larger New Negro movement.⁴⁶

44. "Oral History Interview with Pauli Murray, February 13, 1976. Interview G-0044. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007)," <https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0044/menu.html>.

45. Ransby, *Ella Baker; Rosenberg, Jane Crow; Beth Tompkins Bates, Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001).

46. Murray also was a student at Brookwood Labor College, worked at several black newspapers, taught as part of the Works Progress Association, campaigned on behalf of black sharecropper Odell Waller, attempted to single-handedly desegregate the University of North Carolina, studied Gandhian nonviolence with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, attended Howard Univer-

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Many histories attribute the aforementioned turn toward direct-action tactics to a confluence of returning African American veterans who had fought against European fascism in segregated units in the first World War, internationalist communism that encouraged class-based revolutionary action, a growing Pan-African resistance to global colonialism, and rage against the upsurge in American racist violence as seen in the “Red Summer” of 1919.⁴⁷ However, Davarian Baldwin offers a different trajectory, one rooted in discourses of embodiment and pleasure, working-class migrant culture, and intraracial tension, which intersects with the history of sexuality. The drive to use the body as an instrument of protest within the 1930s New Negro movement was based in earlier working-class African American resistance to dominant racial, gender, and sexual norms. As Baldwin effectively argues, the black working-class of the 1920s invested “leisure spaces within the mass marketplace” with forms of embodied comportment that challenged racist and sexist endeavors to control their bodies and labor.⁴⁸ Public “displays of pleasure, bodily release, and decorative self-mastery” in sites like sporting arenas and movie theaters and on the radio offered a different kind of “New Negro visions of respectability” that prioritized self-expression and economic autonomy and clashed with the racially respectable uplift efforts of their “old-guard” middle-class counterparts.⁴⁹

These conflicting class-based “race discourses” were especially salient in the early decades of the twentieth century in northern cities, where newly arrived migrants both relied on middle-class philanthropic efforts and also challenged their attempts to manage migrants’ behavior for presentation to the judging eyes of whites. Baldwin writes, “At the center of debate were competing ideas about the appropriate displays of black migrant bodies and behaviors, especially in public commercial arenas, where the possible implications

sity Law School, and worked with A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement, all before 1945.

47. Many histories suggest this in part, but Barbara Foley brings these strands together in *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Champaign, IL 2003). Historians generally agree that the Great Migration played at least an underlying role in all aspects of cultural and political transformation within African America in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Murray’s narrative of growing up in the South and moving to New York as a young adult to escape segregation and experience a greater degree of freedom is typical among Great Migration stories; see Murray, “Oral History Interview.”

48. Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life*, Kindle ed. (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 182.

49. Ibid., 183.

for ‘the race’ were magnified.”⁵⁰ In the same urban centers, queer and transgender African Americans made up a visible and popular component of this new kind of New Negro expression. Setting aside the more widely known history of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement whose impact was felt largely outside the borough that hosted it, queer and gender nonconforming individuals of the 1920s participated in spaces within Harlem, public and private, that catered not only to their gender and sexual preferences but also to their class-based New Negro sensibilities. Building on the twin pillars of economic self-sufficiency and bodily displays of “pleasure” and “self-mastery,” these alternative sites—rent parties, buffet flats, speakeasies, and drag balls—demonstrate a concomitant and related queer component of the larger New Negro movement.⁵¹

Rent parties were gatherings held within one’s home to raise money to cover the high cost of rent created by a segregated real estate market and landlords who exploited black renters’ lack of options, a condition shared by hosts and participants. James Wilson notes that these were often queer spaces, either in that they were specifically advertised as such or that there was no censorship as to the kinds of intimacies that could be created there. He argues that these parties also reflected the more accepting attitude working-class African Americans had toward their sexual and gender nonconforming members. Participants drank booze and listened to the latest jazz trends, and many were open to explicit sexual activities, creating intimate social networks among the attendees. Part and parcel of the enjoyment experienced at rent parties was to let out, as Wilson writes, “the pent-up economic difficulties that many of Harlem’s residents faced.”⁵²

Shawn Vogel writes that Harlem’s speakeasies, cabarets, and theaters, like the private rent parties, also “offered a tenuous sense of refuge from the pressures of racial/sexual norms,” including class-based norms concerning sexual and gender propriety.⁵³ Harlem’s subcultural performance spaces provided entertainers and their audiences a place to express themselves, but just as importantly, they offered queer and trans African Americans economic opportunities that could not be found elsewhere. Ann Stavney writes that Gladys Bentley was drawn to Harlem’s “nocturnal milieu” because she could make

^{50.} Ibid., 177.

^{51.} Shawn Vogel recommends we look beyond the well-known “gay and lesbian” Harlem Renaissance to study the more fluid, sensuous dimensions of working-class queer life during the period; see Vogel, “Sensuous Harlem Renaissance”; Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, 183.

^{52.} Shannon King, *Whose Harlem Is This, Anyway?: Community Politics and Grassroots Activism during the New Negro Era* (New York, 2015); James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2011), 19.

^{53.} Vogel, “Sensuous Harlem Renaissance,” 270.

good money in a place that was welcoming to homosexuality.⁵⁴ Like boxing champion Jack Johnson, beauty culturist and businesswoman Madame C. J. Walker, and other New Negro icons found in Baldwin's study, Bentley fashioned her persona on and off stage, dressing in flawless expensive clothing and making a very good living in her career that depended on a thriving working-class African American marketplace. Although Bentley's sartorial choice was a pressed white tuxedo and her business was crooning about lascivious sexual acts, she was largely in control of her wages and self-presentation, demonstrating what could be called a queer New Negro sensibility.

It follows then to consider drag balls as sites where trans New Negroes' subjectivities were created and performed. In his pathbreaking work on Harlem's drag balls, George Chauncey writes that while the Hamilton Lodge Ball, Harlem's oldest and largest, had been an annual event since the late nineteenth century, its popularity skyrocketed in the 1920s and 1930s. By the mid-1930s, attendees numbered in the thousands, and newspapers across the country, especially the black press, covered the event.⁵⁵ Chauncey and Kim Gallon note that with the rising popular interest in the balls and the female impersonators that graced their stages, newspapers took special interest in the performers' and attendees' luxurious dress and success at performing the 'opposite' gender.⁵⁶ For example, Ralph Matthews, one of the *Baltimore Afro-American* journalists who covered female impersonator Alden Garrison's career extensively, called him "'Miss' Garrison," and complimented one of his ensembles as a "flowing gown of egg-shell satin with studded rhinestones, [and] a tiara of similar crystals."⁵⁷ Chauncey notes that the New York papers often reported the names of the pageant winners and the dollar amounts of the cash prizes, conferring their success at performing both opulence and convincing female gender.⁵⁸

Russell writes that the sympathetic coverage of drag balls demonstrates the public's increased tolerance of trans people and places, but it is not solely due to larger acceptance of gender nonnormativity that newspapers, the mouthpieces of the middle class, included drag balls as legitimate community news

54. Anne Stavney, "Cross-dressing Harlem, Re-dressing Race," *Women's Studies* 28, no. 2 (January 1999): 134.

55. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 250.

56. See also Russell, "Color of Discipline."

57. Ralph Matthews, "'31 Debutantes Bow at Local 'Pansy' Ball," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 21, 1931, 1, as quoted in Kim Gallon, "'No Tears for Alden': Black Female Impersonators as 'Outsiders Within' in the *Baltimore Afro-American*," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27, no. 3 (September 2018): 377; see also Russell, "Color of Discipline."

58. I distinguish between Bentley, who dressed in masculine clothing, and the female impersonators, who I identify as trans subjects. Unlike many female impersonators, Bentley never advertised herself as an impersonator, never took a male name, and did not use male pronouns in either her personal or professional life; Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Gallon, "No Tears for Alden."

and performers as legitimate community members.⁵⁹ Drag performers and drag balls upheld working-class New Negro values, and some journalists, such as Matthews, seem to have recognized this. Using Baldwin's definition, we see that drag balls also incorporated the working-class New Negro emphasis on bodily display, spectacles of pleasure, and "decorative self-mastery" in the form of luxurious clothing, makeup, and hair.⁶⁰ Balls were also economic generators that kept money circulating within the black working class—performers were often residents of the neighborhoods where the balls took place, and the events were sometimes located in black neighborhood institutions or supported local fundraisers.⁶¹

Of course, where blackness, queerness, pleasure, and economic autonomy meet, charges of vice are soon to follow. Kevin Mumford states that, by the late 1920s, "Harlem had become a site of homosexual leisure," and with this development came renewed scrutiny by vice squads, religious reformers, and intrigued academics.⁶² He points to the broad influence of both Freudian theories of deviant sexuality and eugenic discourses of degeneracy in the language used by these outsiders to describe the nonnormative sexual and gender behaviors, like homosexuality and interracial intimacy, observed in these spaces, arguing that terms like "repression" and "perversion" were defined not just through scientific discourse, but through the evaluation of social practices found in the vice districts in cities like Harlem.⁶³

As Siobhan Somerville argues, this terminology exemplified the eugenic backdrop against which any spaces or communities that defied racial, sexual, and gender norms were measured, and although these discourses were deeply racist, many black reformers had no issue turning them against members of their own race.⁶⁴ Glandular theories dominated medical discussions about both racial and sex/gender deviance and were circulated throughout mass media outlets, black and white. As Michael Pettit notes, this field of science attributed glands with far-reaching powers over physiology, emotions, and behav-

59. Russell, "Color of Discipline," 105.

60. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 183.

61. Gallon, "No Tears for Alden."

62. Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York, 1997), 84.

63. Ibid. George Chauncey also argues that medical definitions often followed social formations and practices, not the other way around; see "From Sexual Inversion To Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," *Salmagundi*, nos. 58/59 (1982): 114–46.

64. Siobhan Somerville, "Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2 (1994): 243–66. Importantly, Somerville also notes that Havelock Ellis, who advocated for compassion toward homosexuals and gender nonconforming people, believed his work was advancing racially eugenicist goals.

iors, and it was believed imbalances in the endocrine system resulted in “physical illness, mental pathology, and moral deviance.”⁶⁵ Medical theories conceptualized the body as entirely governed by an alterable, “pliable” series of hormones; intervention could recalibrate glandular imbalances, restoring one’s condition from a deviant to normal state.⁶⁶

Although the racist and eugenic framework running through this discourse seems clear, African American reformers used glandular science as one means of castigating behaviors they saw as immoral and therefore threatening to racial uplift efforts. Historians have noted the religious overtones to reform efforts that labeled individuals and communities as immoral, but less work has been done on the use of glandular theories that offered a secular, scientific strength to these accusations.⁶⁷ Hazel Carby argues that migrant and other poor and working-class women were especially targeted by reform efforts, as they were seen as the creators and protectors of the future race.⁶⁸ Already by the mid-1920s, glandular science was utilized as part of these tactics: one 1924 *Chicago Defender* article congratulated and reprinted a *Chicago Tribune* column attributing “children born with mental defects” to “neurasthenia” (weak nerves) in poor mothers, a result of “deranged glands” and being forced to work outside the home.⁶⁹

Russell makes a similar claim for working-class queer and trans Harlemites as well. He writes that homosexuality and gender nonnormativity became easy targets for movement leaders who shared the reformers’ desires to rid the African American public sphere of vice districts and residents’ so-called deviant behavior in the hopes of advancing racial uplift causes. In the late 1920s, white moral reformers named Harlem the “most vice-ridden neighborhood in New York,” and soon after, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., leader of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and prominent member of the NAACP and the Urban League, used his power of the pulpit to, as Russell writes, “purge queerness from black life.”⁷⁰ In 1929, he preached a series of sermons decrying the “prevalence of sexual perversion and moral degeneracy” that was steadily on the rise in “all the large cities” across the country. As the *New York Age* reported, Powell saved

65. Pettit, “Becoming Glandular.”

66. Somerville, “Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body.” See also Amin, “Glands, Eugenics, and Rejuvenation.”

67. For example, Helen H. Hun, “Black Orientalism: Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Race and U.S. Citizenship,” in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, ed. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (Durham, NC, 2011), 293–314.

68. Hazel V. Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (July 1992): 738–55.

69. “Environment Is Important Item in Motherhood,” *Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1924, 5.

70. Russell, “Color of Discipline,” 104.

his most scathing critique for “homo-sexuality and sex-perversion among women,” which had “grown into one of the most horrible, debassing [*sic*], alarming and damning vices of present day civilization.”⁷¹ Although the sermons and articles focused much of their attention on other black preachers who themselves supposedly practiced such “vile” lifestyles, Powell’s opinion on the subject in general was clear.

Although Powell’s religious screed against “degenerate” practices such as homosexuality was circulated through both his wide sphere of influence and the generous press coverage, the medical discourses regarding homosexuality and gender nonnormativity in the black press more often reflected what Gallon argues was an effort by newspapers to “explor[e] and mak[e] intelligible black male sexual aberrations to its readers in the context of racial uplift.”⁷² Like the papers’ use of glandular theories to encourage working-class black women to conform to middle-class gender norms governing motherhood and sexual propriety, many journalists used the latest developments in endocrinology and sexology to identify and criticize male sexual and gender transgressions as representing a threat to racial progress.⁷³

However, some writers also chose to educate their readers about the role of biology in the production of gender inversion, which slanted their discussions toward sympathy rather than disgust. The black columnists who utilized sexology to explain homosexuality and gender nonnormativity to their readers used turn-of-the-century theories that identified gender inversion as a symptom of a biological condition rendering the individual as sexually “intermediate”—partially male and partially female. Because their gender nonnormativity was a sign of a “natural condition” rather than a chosen degenerate behavior, sexual and gender transgressive individuals deserved, as Reverend Charles E. Stewart wrote in his 1934 *Baltimore Afro-American* editorial, “pity and sympathy of society instead of ostracism and ridicule.”⁷⁴

Casting members of the “third sex” as victims to their own biological shortcomings worked alongside the complimentary comments regarding female impersonators’ opulent femininity to legitimize certain kinds of New Negro gender nonnormativity within the black public the papers represented. In 1932,

71. “Dr. Powell’s Crusade against Abnormal Vice Is Approved: Pastors and Laity Endorse Dr. Powell’s Denunciation of Degeneracy in the Pulpit: Chorus of Commendation Is Heard as Eminent Men Express Approval and Give Promises of Their Support,” *New York Age*, November 23, 1929, 1.

72. *Ibid.*; Kim T. Gallon, “Between Respectability and Modernity,” 170.

73. For example, see “Henpecked Husbands Have Bad Glands, Says H.U. Prof.,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 6, 1935, 14.

74. Charles E. Stewart, “Debunking Pansy Talk,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 27, 1934, 19. Quoted in Gallon, “Between Respectability and Modernity.”

Ralph Matthews wrote a full-page story in the *Baltimore Afro-American* titled “Are Pansies People?,” which on the surface is a report on the local Baltimore drag ball, the “neuter gender . . . annual promenade,” but is more so a discussion about gender nonnormativity from the perspective of glandular science.⁷⁵ Matthews strategically structures the article around two concurrent events: the local ball and a talk given across town at the Baltimore City Medical Society by white gynecologist Emil Novak, whose “experiments had proved that a change in the activity of certain glands could change the sex.”⁷⁶

When discussing the ball, Matthews mocks the “gay masqueraders” as “tripp[ing] around” in their high heels, and warns, in a bolded subheading, that the “third sex is flooding the country.” However, introducing the medical experiments through a brief interview with the ball participants, Matthews emphasizes the ability of “men . . . with apparent ease, convert themselves into women and ‘feel more comfortable that way.’”⁷⁷ This “transformation” was newly explainable by the kinds of glandular experiments discussed at the Medical Society gathering. “While the local degenerates were dancing,” Matthews writes, Novak explained to his Baltimore audience that it was possible for a man to change into a woman (and vice versa) if the “activity” of one or more of his (or her) glands was “arrested” due to illness, injury, or birth defect.

Straying from the subject of the ball into discussions of glandular science and “sex change” more broadly, Matthews reports that Novak’s theories on human sex change were based on experiments he conducted on a hen that he “changed . . . to a rooster” through glandular therapy. The reason that glandular adjustment had the effect it did was because the hen’s endocrine system was already compromised: “an autopsy . . . revealed that one of the fowl’s ductless glands had been destroyed by tuberculosis.”⁷⁸ Crucial to Novak’s hypothesis on the sex change was that the hen was already a “hermaphrodite” before glandular therapy; this preexisting condition made possible the glandular therapy that transformed a hen into a rooster.⁷⁹ Matthews was likely informed by Havelock Ellis’s broader definition of hermaphroditism—the internal and external manifestation of a nonnormative composition of sex glands.

75. Matthews, “Are Pansies People?”

76. Ibid.

77. Gallon notes that Matthews in particular included direct quotations from female impersonators which conferred a certain marker of humanity and acceptance; see Gallon, “No Tears for Alden.”

78. “Ductless glands” are glands like the ovaries and testes that deposit the hormones they produce directly into the bloodstream; see Poosha Darbha, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Sexology* (Samalkot, India: 2001), 41.

79. Matthews, “Are Pansies People?”

This was the kind of disorder that could impact the normal gendered performance of one's entire glandular system, the result of which might not be seen on a chicken but would be clearly discernable on a human.

The article's last vignette, mentioned in the introduction of this article, narrates the story of a male "artist" who was intentionally "turned into a woman": "Swiss scientists cite the instance of a man turned into a woman following an operation. The man, an artist, was rendered deathly ill periodically, his condition growing more painful with each recurrence of the intermittent attacks. Doctors decided to operate, and the result was that he developed into a perfectly normal woman."⁸⁰ Matthews also reported that Johns Hopkins Hospital had treated a woman who suddenly began to turn into a man: she grew "hair on her chest and develop[ed] hard muscles." It was "discovered" that a "tumor had partially destroyed certain glands," which were "restored" through an operation, after which her male symptoms ceased.⁸¹ The connection between the artist who became a woman and the woman who grew chest hair is that they were both, at least under the surface, members of the "intermediate sex" because of their irregular glandular composition. Their sex changes were due not to a pathological psychological condition but rather to a biological deficiency affecting them through no fault of their own. By including the female impersonators at the drag ball with these other sex-changing subjects (and animals), Matthews reasons that perhaps they can "convert themselves into women" so easily because of a similar biological condition.⁸²

Gallon argues that Matthews and others who instructed their readers in the science of queerness and gender nonnormativity became the "*experts* on homosexual culture for the black masses."⁸³ Rather than castigating queer and trans people and spaces as degenerate, and hence an embarrassment to the race, writers and readers respected them for their ability to craft personas signifying glamor, economic success, and bodily autonomy. In the face of social ostracism and a perceived biological deficiency, these particular black gender-nonconforming individuals prevailed. And while their tempered acceptance was short-lived, coverage of their way of life in the 1920s and 1930s showed readers that there was indeed a way to be a gender nonnormative New Negro.⁸⁴

^{80.} Ibid.

^{81.} Ibid.

^{82.} Ibid.

^{83.} Gallon, "Between Respectability and Modernity," 219.

^{84.} On the rapid demise of the female impersonators' status in the black press, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Gallon, "Between Respectability and Modernity."

CONCLUSION

I do not believe that Pauli Murray wanted to be a gender nonconforming New Negro, as she likely pursued testosterone to dampen any remaining female traits stemming from her existing ovarian glands and the hormones they produced. But her logic as recorded in her multiple questions prepared for various doctors follows that which was proposed by Matthews and other writers in the black press who covered homosexuality, drag balls, and the “pansy beat” for a wide African American readership. Her questions surrounding her gender “conflict” stem from knowledge that a glandular dysfunction could create endocrinological chaos significant enough to cause gender inversion. Some of the language she used in her documents lines up neatly with that in “Are Pan-sies People?,” pointing at the very least to the likelihood that Murray and Matthews were conducting the same research and drawing similar conclusions. For example, in one document, Murray notes to ask about the “development of tumors,” which Matthews reported had caused a woman to develop masculine features.⁸⁵ In others, she uses the term “pseudo-hermaphrodite,” a version of Ellis’s definition of “hermaphrodite,” which Matthews mentions is responsible for the male tendency in the hen-turned-rooster.⁸⁶

In the early and mid-1930s, when the black press covered sex and gender nonnormativity with regularity, theories concerning the role of glands in changing sex (rather than effeminacy in men and masculinity in women) were only beginning to enter the larger national discourse. Joanne Meyerowitz writes that during this period, “most Americans remained oblivious to the possibility of sex change,” and it was then only sensationalist coverage of European experiments that circulated among the margins of mass media.⁸⁷ What I have tried to show here is that readers of the black press were clearly then not “most Americans,” and while only a handful of articles from this period mention the possibility of sex change, they were published as part of a previously established discourse that brought the information to a national African American audience.

What is lost when we separate Pauli Murray’s trans archive from this African American history of sexuality? I believe that when we paint Murray as a

85. Murray, “Questions of Approach,” n.d., box 4, folder 71, PM Papers.

86. I am not as convinced as Rosenberg that Murray wanted to be a man, nor do I agree with Doreen Drury that Murray desired to be “normal.” But given what she knew of endocrinological science and the role of hormones in gender transition, she likely believed that the testosterone pill would transform her body just as it had the effeminate men in Eidelesberg’s experiment. It is not clear whether this means she wished to undergo surgery to achieve a sex change—she never mentions surgery in her documents other than exploratory surgeries to locate a possible undescended teste; see Murray, “Questions Prepared.”

87. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 29.

transgender visionary who, out of a series of outdated reference texts written by white European men, composes a complex medical diagnosis and treatment plan, we lose the rest of the queer and gender nonconforming African Americans who relied on the daily paper for information regarding their own condition. We lose the connection between Murray, the New Negro activist, and other queer and trans New Negroes who wanted similarly to have control over their self-presentation, physical bodies, and economic status without compromising their gender identity or sexual desires. In short, we lose the idea that Pauli Murray is but part of a larger early twentieth-century African American history of sexual and gender nonconformity that continues to be written.