Yale Talk: Conversations with President Peter Salovey

Episode 1: Professor Crystal Feimster on the Long Civil Rights Movement

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Transcript

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone. I’m Peter Salovey. I’m delighted to launch this series at the start of a new calendar year. About once a month, I’m going to speak with you about what is happening on campus, how I’m spending my time, what I’m thinking about, what others are doing. For some of the podcasts we’ll actually be joined by a member of the faculty or students or staff members or alumni for a conversation, and that is true for this first podcast today.

I’m joined by Professor Crystal Feimster. She’s an associate professor of African American Studies, of History, and of American Studies at Yale.

So today, at Yale and around the country, we’re observing Martin Luther King Day. And Martin Luther King Day is a day when we honor Dr. King’s courage and leadership. It’s also an opportunity to reflect on the broader civil rights movement and the work that remains to be done in our own country and around the world.

I invited Professor Feimster today to join me so that we could hear about her research and her teaching related to African-American history that’s so relevant today, and really on all days, for the challenges faced by our world and certainly in American society. Thank you for being here with us today.

**Crystal Feimster:** Peter, I’m honored to be on the program. Thank for having me. I’m looking forward to the conversation.

**PS:** Great. Me, too.

You’ve taught a history course at Yale called “The Long Civil Rights Movement.” Can you talk a little about the class and what is meant by the “long” civil rights movement?

**CF:** So when I talk to my students about, “What do you know about the civil rights movement?,” they start with 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*. And usually that narrative and what they know ends around ’64 with the Civil Rights Act or ’65 with the Voting Rights Act.

**PS:** So that’s the “short” civil rights movement. That’s a decade.

**CF:** It’s a decade. And that is, of course, an important decade. No one can deny that. Anybody who’s writing about twentieth century American history has to reckon with that decade. And it’s what we call the classical civil rights narrative. We know that Martin Luther King is at the heart and the center of that narrative because he comes on the stage soon after ’54 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

But often King is either there in Montgomery, or we find him in the Birmingham jail, and then he kind of ends, trails off, after 1963 with the March on Washington and “I have a dream” speech. And there’s a reason that King is at the center of that narrative—in part because, as a nation, we’ve decided that he is a national hero, and in the ‘80s Reagan created the national holiday that we’re celebrating today. But also because he was a brilliant speaker, was a trained orator, was an intellectual, was able to speak to a broad audience—not just to ordinary black people and white people in the South, but to speak to the nation, really, and was a voice of our moral conscience.

So I think there’s a reason that he stands at the center of our understanding, but it’s also problematic because we know that there is no King without the movement. There is no King without hundreds of black women and men and children refusing to ride the bus system in Montgomery in ’54, without Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat.

So I think it’s important to remember that—and I often say this to my students—that the movement made Martin, Martin didn’t make the movement.

**PS:** Let me ask you about a Yale connection—Pauli Murray, a namesake of one of our residential colleges, a ’65 graduate of the Yale Law School. Is she important in this history?

**CF:** Pauli Murray is a key figure in the long civil rights movement. In many ways, she makes the course possible in terms of structure. And let me just say I’ve been a longtime fan of Pauli Murray from my days as an undergraduate. I’m a North Carolinian. It’s her home state. Any class that I teach, Pauli Murray makes an appearance, I have to say. But in the long civil rights movement, I can start with Pauli Murray.

In the 1930s, she’s in New York. She’s there after attending Hunter College. She’s a part of the kind of unionization that’s happening in New York, particularly during the New Deal and right after the New Deal. And she’s amazing because she predates....*Brown v. Board of Education*, for example. In 1939, she applies to UNC-Chapel Hill to try to desegregate the graduate program. She applies to the School of Social Work, and she’s denied. And she calls out the university, and it’s interesting because Roosevelt is there getting his honorary degree maybe a month after she gets her rejection letter, and she’s rejected on the grounds that she’s black. Roosevelt is there giving a speech after he’s gotten an honorary degree, talking about democracy. And she writes to him, and she says—she doesn’t really call him a hypocrite—but she says there’s an irony here that you’re making this speech at UNC-Chapel Hill where I’ve been denied, and is this how democracy works? He sends her a form letter. She publishes it in the black press, and then she also sends a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, and that’s the beginning of their long friendship. So she’s out there, sort of pushing a legal case before *Brown v. Board of Education*.

She refuses to give up her seat on the bus in the 1940s, almost 15 years before Rosa Parks. And in the 1940s when she’s a graduate student at Howard, she leads the sit-in to desegregate the lunch counters in several of the restaurants in D.C. And then she goes on to get a law degree, understanding that the law is a tool and a method as a member of the NAACP, as a member of the March on Washington Movement, which was founded by labor activist A. Philip Randolph. And she does work to try to deal with the poll tax in the South in the ’40s. So all of these issues that most of our students think about young people taking up in the ’50s and ’60s—she’s already doing that work.

**PS:** And had been doing it for 20 years.

**CF:** For 20 years. Exactly. And then she ends up here at Yale, ultimately doing her Ph.D. in law, and it’s here that she writes what we think of as her treatise on Jane Crow, thinking about the intersection of race and gender and how that plays out in women’s lives. She’s a founder of NOW [National Organization for Women].

In many ways she’s a contradiction. She starts out with her one-woman campaign, putting her in sort of direct action, because she thinks the NAACP’s legal activism isn’t enough, things aren’t changing fast enough. But then ultimately she turns to that.

Even when we think about the civil rights movement, and we think about the leaders and we think about King, a minister—in some ways she’s doing things backwards.

**PS:** She becomes a minister as her last profession in her life.

**CF:** She calls on a higher power than the law. And if you look at the traditional narrative of the civil rights movement, what you see is the legal narrative, the NAACP doing that slow work in the ’30s and ’40s, building up to *Brown v. Board of Education*. And then you have the ministers sort of taking on the movement, and then you have young students moving to direct action. But if you start with Murray, you see that direct action first. Then you see the legal. And then you see the kind of religious and moral turn.

She’s great in the sense that students can see that there was no set path. Because oftentimes when we think about history, we think, “Oh, well of course it happened that way,” but it could have happened many different ways. And Pauli Murray is a good example of what was possible.

**PS:** You’re describing a living history—a history that is important for our understanding of our nation and our world today.

So in this class the students do their own research, I understand. Is that an important feature of the class?

**CF:** It is. It changes every time I teach it in terms of what I ask the students to do. I do make them go into the archives. The last time I taught it, taught “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” it was during this semester that the college was opening.

**PS:** Pauli Murray College.

**CF:** Yes, Pauli Murray College was opening. And I really wanted to introduce the students to her in a different way. I wanted them to learn about her. Usually I do three lectures that are really focused on Pauli Murray. But I wanted *them* to research her, and one of the great things about Yale is that we have so many resources. So, I usually have four TFs [teaching fellows], and that year I was able to get a digital humanities fellow to work with me in the class. And what we decided was that…we would divide [students] according to their sections. They would have a decade of Pauli Murray’s life. As individuals and as groups, they would go into the archives, they would go online. They would find any primary document that they could find related to Pauli Murray or that she had produced, and we uploaded them. And they were ultimately digitized, and there is a project that the graduate student ultimately did. But the students had to work together in terms of figuring out, “What kind of documents do we need to have so that we can understand Pauli Murray in the 1930s?”

What I made them do was not a traditional paper, but I made them do a zine. I often think of them as pamphlets or brochures that give people a particular kind of information. And they were used in the ’60s and ’70s in the students’ movements, in the women’s rights movement, because it was before the photocopy machine; it was when they had those Xerox copy machines. And a zine can be eight pages. You can use the front and back, but it’s one sheet of paper that you fold in a certain way.

**PS:** So it’s like a ditto master?

**CF:** Yes, exactly. And so they had to create these zines, and they did amazing jobs, but they had to use secondary and primary sources to tell us something about Pauli Murray in that particular decade. And then I had them do children’s books. Also, the last time I taught the course it was cross-listed with education—the new education studies program. And so I thought, if some of these young people are going to be teachers, I want them to think about, “How would you teach this to a middle school kid? How would you teach civil rights to a third grader or high schooler?” And they could choose which age group they wanted to produce a book for. I gave them a lot of flexibility about the subject they could write about, but they had to engage in primary research so that their book had to include primary documents, and they had to footnote secondary literature. The footnotes didn’t have to go in the actual book, but they had to attach it separately.

We have an amazing handmade book collection here at Yale. And so we went into that, and they saw different ways to make books. So I try to get them into the Beinecke, the Yale Art Gallery, and to think of themselves as makers because oftentimes they leave my class and....I used to be very traditional: write a paper, argument, thesis statement, all of that. And they have to have that in these smaller projects, but it’s something that they can take away and look at.

So a lot of them made coffee books that they gave to their parents for Christmas. And so they felt like, “Oh, I can do something besides just write a paper.” And the kids don’t often ask their parents to read their papers, but they were really happy with these projects.

**PS:** That’s fantastic. And recognizing that those wonderful collections—for example, the Beinecke Library, Manuscripts and Archives in Sterling Library, or the galleries—they’re there for the students, they’re there to facilitate their learning, and I think our students often are surprised. They think they are there for the general public, which they are, but the number one reason is for them, for their own learning.

**CF:** And the staff is amazing. It really does get them in the archives holding documents. Not even just documents. The Beinecke will bring out material culture from posters, too. Last year, they brought out little figurines that were connected to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, for example, that were made in the 19th century so the students were able to hold those things. They were able to hold face cream tins that that were made for lightening people’s skin color in the nineteenth century. And so I think they find that really inspiring. And then they have to think about, “What do you do with this material? How do you write about it? How do you make it relevant in this day and age?”

**PS:** What a great experience for our students.

In one of his sermons, Dr. King said, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’” I think this is a question that we should be asking ourselves, and I hope we’re asking ourselves. I’m very proud of how Yale students and faculty and staff and alumni serve others in their community and the world—not just today, when we commemorate Dr. King, but throughout the year. And in that sense, they’re carrying on the legacy of Martin Luther King and of Pauli Murray, whom we spoke about, and so many other pioneers of the long civil rights movement. They’re all working for a just and more peaceful world.

I want to thank you, Professor Feimster, for joining me and reflecting on these issues and sharing your work, both in the classroom and as a scholar. It’s been fascinating, and it’s been an honor to spend some time with you.

**CF:** Thank you, Peter, for having me, and thank you for this amazing opportunity to talk about the work that our students are doing and my own research.

**PS:** Thank you, and I really appreciate you giving us some time and your thoughts today.

To members and friends of the Yale community, thank you for joining me for our first podcast. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.

The theme music, “Butterflies and Bees,” is composed by Yale Professor of Music and Director of University Bands Thomas C. Duffy and is performed by the Yale Concert Band.