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Linda T. Wynn

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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Juliette Derricotte (1897 - 1931)

Juliette Aline Derricotte was born in Athens, Georgia, on April 1, 1897, the fifth of nine children. Her parents were Isaac and Laura Hardwick Derricotte, an interracial couple. Her African American father was a cobbler and her mother of European descent was a seamstress. Reared in the South, Derricotte soon became cognizant of the region's mores and values of racial segregation. Racial exclusivity shattered Juliette Derricotte's aspirations of attending the Lucy Cobb Institute in Athens. Although she was disappointed at limitations being placed upon her because of her race, the experience proved critical to fashioning her resolve to combat discrimination. It fashioned her perception of the world and her desire to change people's racial predispositions.

After completing her education in the public schools of Atlanta, Derricotte attended the historically black Talladega College in Alabama, where all of the teachers were white. At Talladega she became a popular student and a leader on campus. One of her professors, recognizing her potential, suggested that she try for a public-speaking prize that included tuition. Although she almost convinced herself that she could not compete, with coaching she won the contest and in doing so gained needed self-confidence. Derricotte became involved with the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), joined the intercollegiate debating team, made speeches, and ultimately became president of the YWCA. It was during her tenure at Talladega that she realized one should work for something larger than oneself.

After graduating from Talladega in 1918, Derricotte moved to New York, to work at the national headquarters of the YWCA in the student

division. That fall she became secretary of the National Student Council of the YWCA, a position she held for eleven years. As secretary, she visited colleges, planned conferences, and worked with student groups, bringing ideas and building leadership. While in New York, Derricotte became friends with Lillian "Sadie" Alexander, Adele Hunt Logan, Mabel Byrd, Juanita "Jane" Saddler, Marion Cuthbert, and Lucy Diggs Slowe, African American women who supported the Harlem Renaissance. A member of Delta Sigma Theta, Inc., she was affiliated with the Alpha Beta Chapter, the sorority's first graduate chapter in New York City. She also became friends with white women working in the YWCA's student division. Although she did not constantly partake in issues of race, her presence made race an item of conversation. In 1924, Derricotte became a member of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), an international ecumenical organization, and began traveling the world as a delegate representing American colleges. After traveling the world representing the WSCF, she wrote of her experiences by saying "that there is so much more to know than I am accustomed to knowing and so much more to love than I am accustomed to loving".

In 1927 she received a master's degree in religious education from Columbia University, and continued her travels for the next two years, before resigning her position at the YWCA to become Dean of Women at Fisk University. Upon her arrival, Derricotte found the campus churning with the vicissitudes of change and in upheaval against obsolescent policies and rules, principally for young women. Derricotte was an adherent to the philosophy of interracialism. Interracialism

connoted a particular type of struggle for racial justice—one marked by dialogue, education and patience rather than protests, boycotts, and legal changes. Her adherence was inspired by the fruitful interactions between whites and blacks she witnessed during her tenure with the YWCA.

After conversing with her friend, Lucy Diggs Slowe, then Dean of Women at Howard University, Derricotte changed the Dean of Women's paradigm at Fisk University. She wanted the position to be academic rather than one of a chaperone. She transferred her residence from the dorm to one of the cottages on campus, giving students more freedom and more responsibility. While maintaining an open door policy to the university's young women, the move allowed her not to be an omnipresent overseer. Because of the student uprising of 1925 under the administration of President Fayette Avery McKenzie, Fisk went through major transformations. Dean Derricotte embraced the new autonomy given to students.

Following an illness in the summer of 1931, in November, Derricotte decided to visit her mother in Athens. She was accompanied by three Fisk students from Georgia. Outside of Dalton, Derricotte's car collided with that of a white couple. She and a student were seriously injured, and given emergency treatment in the offices of several white physicians in Dalton. No one directed them to Hamilton Memorial Hospital because the local residents knew it was for whites only. Critically injured, Fisk coed Nina Mae Johnson and Derricotte were sent to the home of an African American woman who had beds available for the care of African American patients. They were there for five hours before the other two students managed to contact friends in Chattanooga and Nashville. Derricotte and Johnson were transferred to Walden Hospital in Chattanooga. The hospital was owned and operated by Dr. Emma Rochelle Wheeler, a 1905 alumna of Meharry Medical College. Before they arrived in Chattanooga, Johnson died in route. Derricotte died the next day, November 7.

On November 12, 1931, members of the YWCA assembled in New York City to pay

tribute to Board member and former Student Secretary Juliette Derricotte. Her memorial at the YWCA was a moment of domestic racial awareness for the members of the National Board. Nancy M. Robertson in her work *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-46* indicates that Derricotte's death caused a change within the YWCA, because her maltreatment unmasked the systemic injustice of Jim Crow. Following Derricotte's memorial service, the Headquarters Board of the National Student Council vowed to embark on "an unremitting effort for a new and different civilization where segregation shall be abolished."

Derricotte's death caused national outrage, causing individuals such as W.E.B. DuBois and organizations including the Commission on Interracial Cooperation of Atlanta at the request of Fisk University, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, to led an investigation into her death. Memorial services were held across the country. Her *alma mater*, Talladega College honors the memory of its first woman trustee through the Juliette Derricotte House, a women's dormitory on campus. Derricotte sought to preserve black colleges as a space of interracial cooperation.

Linda T. Wynn

For further reading:

Lauren Kientz Anderson. "A Nauseating Sentiment, a Magical Device, or a Real Insight? Interracialism at Fisk University in 1930," in *Higher Education for African Americans Before the Civil Rights Era, 1900-1946*, Mary Beth Gasman and Roger L. Geiger, editors, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2012. 75-111.

Jean Elder Cazort. "Juliette Derricotte, 1897-1931" in *Notable Black American Women, Book 1*, Jessie Carney Smith, editor, Detroit: Gale Publishing, 1991. 275-277.