



Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler

Kathryn Talalay

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George Schuyler, a renowned and controversial black journalist of the Harlem Renaissance, and Josephine Cogdell, a blond, blue-eyed Texas heiress and granddaughter of slave owners, believed that intermarriage would "invigorate" the races, thereby producing extraordinary offspring. Their daughter, Philippa Duke Schuyler, became the embodiment of this theory, and they hoped she would prove that interracial children represented the final solution to America's race problems.

Able to read and write at the age of two and a half, a pianist at four, and a composer by five, Philippa was often compared to Mozart. During the 1930s and 40s she graced the pages of *Time* and *Look* magazines, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and *The New Yorker*. Philippa grew up under the adoring and inquisitive eyes of an entire nation and soon became the role model and inspiration for a generation of African-American children. But as an adult she mysteriously dropped out of sight, leaving America to wonder what had happened to the "little Harlem genius." Suffering the double sting of racism and gender bias, Philippa had been rejected by the elite classical music milieu in the United States and forced to find an audience abroad, where she flourished as a world-class performer and composer. She traveled throughout South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia performing for kings, queens, and presidents. By then Philippa had added a second career as an author and foreign correspondent reporting on events around the globe--from Albert Schweitzer's leper colony in Lambréné to the turbulent Asian theater of the 1960s. She would give a command performance for Queen Elisabeth of Belgium one day, and hide from the Viet Cong among the ancient graves of the Annam kings another.

But behind the scrim of adventure, glamour, and intrigue was an American outcast, a woman constantly searching for home and self. "I am a beauty--but I'm half colored...so I'm always destined to be an outsider," she wrote in her diary. Philippa tried to define herself through love affairs, but found only disappointment and scandal. In a last attempt to reclaim an identity, she began to "pass" as Caucasian. Adopting an Iberian-American heritage, she reinvented herself as Felipa Monterro, an ultra-right conservative who wrote and lectured for the John Birch Society. Her experiment failed, as had her parents' dream of smashing America's racial barriers. But at the age of thirty five, Philippa finally began to embark on a racial catharsis: She was just beginning to find herself when on May 9, 1967, while on an unauthorized mission of mercy, her life was cut short in a helicopter crash over the waters of war-torn Vietnam.

The first authorized biography of Philippa Schuyler, *Composition in Black and White* draws on previously unpublished letters and diaries to reveal an extraordinary and complex personality. Extensive research and personal interviews from around the world make this book not only the definitive chronicle of Schuyler's restless and haunting life, but also a vivid history of the tumultuous times she lived through, from the Great Depression, through the Civil Rights movement, to the Vietnam war. Talalay has created a highly perceptive and provocative portrait of a fascinating woman.

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