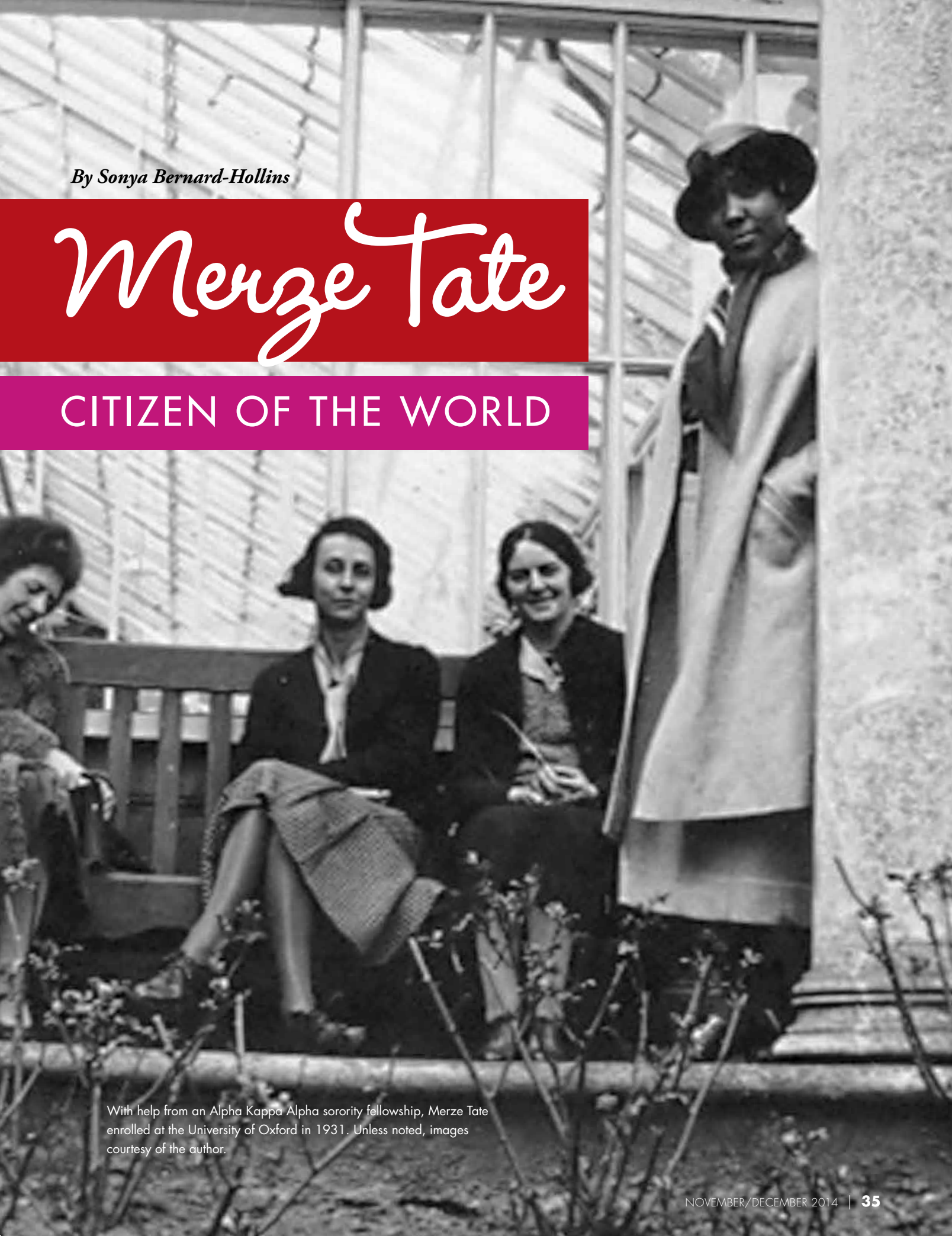


*By Sonya Bernard-Hollins*

# Merze Tate

CITIZEN OF THE WORLD



With help from an Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority fellowship, Merze Tate enrolled at the University of Oxford in 1931. Unless noted, images courtesy of the author.

*Merze Tate* spoke five languages and was a respected author of scholarly works on international affairs in addition to her duties as a college professor. Gender and race restrictions never held her back. And she felt at home almost anywhere in the world.



Tate moved to Battle Creek at age 15, and worked as a maid to complete her junior and senior years at Battle Creek Central. Far from home and without family close by, she still managed to receive all As on her report cards. In 1921, as a junior, she became the first African American to win the town's Hinman Oratorical Contest, earning her a prize of a \$50 gold coin.

In her speech, "The Negro in the World War," Tate eloquently addressed the wrongs suffered by her race in America. She noted that her grandfather had fought with the 102nd Regiment U.S. Colored Troops in the Civil War, and that such regiments had distinguished themselves in battle:

"Over two million blacks from Africa, Asia and America fought for democracy [in that conflict]. Many fought like tigers and became heroes. Whole regiments were decorated for bravery. They died with honor, but they still gained little reward for their service. I plead with this audience and the rest of America to give the Negro race proper recognition. Please forget the differences between white and colored. Respect the Negro's good qualities."

### On to Western

After graduating from Battle Creek Central in 1922, she took time off to earn money for college and then enrolled in Kalamazoo's Western State Normal School (now Western Michigan University). She lived off campus, as African Americans were required to do; the family of a local paper company president provided room and board in exchange for work. She graduated in 1927—finishing her degree in just three years.

Despite earning her teaching credential, she was

Top left: Born in Blanchard, Tate is pictured here with her mother, Myrtle, and her brother Keith. Right: She was the first African American to graduate from Oxford.



**U**ernie Merze Tate was born in the quiet farming community of Blanchard, Michigan in 1905. Educated first in a one-room schoolhouse on her family's property, Tate later had to walk four miles one way to attend the local high school. Her walk didn't seem so long when she daydreamed about what she had learned in her geography textbooks. She wondered what it would be like to travel as explorers Christopher Columbus and Ferdinand Magellan had—with fearless curiosity.

In her 10th-grade year, a fire burned her Blanchard school to the ground, forcing students into temporary quarters in a local church. At the completion of the year, the students were graduated. Tate, the only African-American student in the class, was named valedictorian. But for a girl who wanted to see the world, a 10th-grade education wasn't enough.



Above: A student club she established at an Indianapolis high school whetted her appetite for travel. Below: A trip to Hawaii as a college professor prompted her to research and write two books about the Aloha State. Courtesy of Bookstellyouwhy.com.

not permitted to teach in Michigan secondary schools due to her race. But Western President Dwight Waldo, Registrar John Hoekje, and Dean of Women Bertha Davis came to the aid of their scholar. They personally funded Tate's search for work, which led to offers in Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Indianapolis.

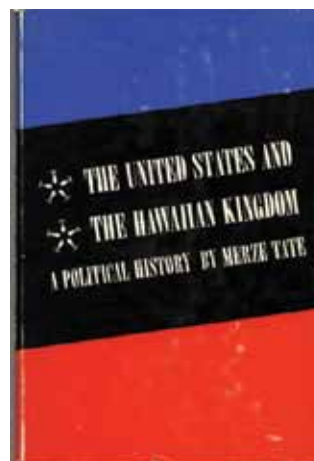
She opted to take her talents to Indianapolis' Crispus Attucks High School—then segregated by race by the Ku Klux Klan-influenced school board. Still longing to visit places near and far, she formed a travel club at Attucks in 1928. Students with a grade point average of 4.0 were invited to travel with her to such places as New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.

During her summers off, Tate earned a master's degree from the Teachers College at Columbia University.

### Europe Beckons

Her desire to make her mark on the world was fueled in the fall of 1931, when she received an Alpha Kappa Alpha fellowship amounting to \$1,000. After she expressed plans to use the money to pursue a degree at Oxford University in England, the sorority increased her award to \$2,000.

While in Europe, she took advantage of the opportunity to see many of the places she had read about as a child,



including London and Paris. She and her Oxford classmates were especially excited to travel to Oberammergau, Germany in 1934 to view the historic passion play staged there. One of her professors recommended the group attend a rally which was scheduled to take place just before the play. The featured speaker was the country's chancellor, Adolph Hitler.

Tate spoke five languages and was fluent in German, so she knew what Hitler was saying. She later told family members that she was afraid of what this man might do with even more power in his hands.

Tate remained in Germany through August of that summer to take classes at the University of Berlin, but left the country after Hitler was elected president.

## First at Oxford

In 1935, Tate earned a bachelor's degree in social studies at Oxford, becoming the first African American to graduate from that university.

Her education abroad helped her to enter the teaching ranks in the U.S. at the college level. She accepted her first position, as the dean of women and history instructor, at Barber-Scotia College in Concord, North Carolina. Not one to rest on her academic laurels, she took a year off from teaching to study at Radcliffe College (now part of Harvard University) where, in 1941, she became the first African-American female to earn a Ph.D. in political science. That



experience was followed by an invitation to join the history faculty at Howard University in Washington.

## Expanding Her Role

During the war years, Tate's career began to accelerate. She took a job at Morgan State College in Baltimore, Maryland and wrote two books: "The Disarmament Illusion: The Movement for a Limitation of Armaments to 1907" and "The United States and Armaments." Both works became required reading for those who studied law, diplomatic history, and other international courses at such schools as Yale, Princeton, and Harvard as well as for U.S. State Department employees.

In 1948, her expertise in international affairs led to her selection as one of three Americans representing the U.S. at a gathering hosted by the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). She was personally welcomed to this role by General (later President) Dwight D. Eisenhower, whom she kept apprised of developments.

In 1950, she was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to teach

Top left: Oxford, England was Tate's jumping-off point for travel to Europe. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Right: Through a Fulbright scholarship, she was able to teach in India and expand her knowledge of international affairs.

at Rabindranath Tagore's World University in West Bengal, India. Using India as a springboard, she traveled throughout southeast Asia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Japan, accumulating enough miles to equal two trips around the world.

She also visited Rome to hear Pope Pius XII speak in St. Peter's Basilica. A practicing Catholic, Tate was fascinated by this religious figure and was among those honored to meet with him after he delivered an encyclical defining the dogma of the Assumption of Mary.

## Developing Other Skills

As a young girl, Tate was rarely seen without a camera. That love for photography continued throughout her life, and enabled her to obtain a press card from an African-American newspaper in Baltimore. During her time in India, for example, she used her credentials to arrange an interview with Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister. After a day of photographing him doing everything from water skiing to greeting admiring children, Tate was invited to dine with him and his daughter, Indira Gandhi.

Tate was also commissioned—this time by the U.S. State Department—to create travelogues of the places she visited abroad. Her films depicted the culture and history of these faraway lands, and served to educate and entertain audiences of many backgrounds.

In 1965 and 1968, she published another two books, titled "The United States and the Hawaiian Kingdom: A Political History" and "Hawaii: Reciprocity or Annexation," which established her as the foremost expert on the 50th state's governmental history. She went on to write three other books and dozens of articles on subjects ranging from "The Justification of a Women's College" to "The International Control of Atomic Energy." In 1973, 27 of her articles on





Top: Tate's Indian trip included a visit to the Taj Mahal. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Above: While in the country, she also arranged to interview and photograph Jawaharlal Nehru.

Pacific affairs were published in a volume titled "Diplomacy in the Pacific."

For her efforts, she was awarded several honorary degrees. Her alma mater, Western Michigan University, named her its first African-American Distinguished Alumna and nominated her for the Distinguished Alumnus Award of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Tate was also the beneficiary of the Most Distinguished Citizen of Isabella County, Michigan Award (1969); a Spirit of Detroit Award for substantial efforts toward the betterment of Detroit (1978); and the Detroit Mayor's Award of Merit (1978). In 1990, she

was inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame.

Despite her love of travel, Tate's last few years were spent homebound, challenged by dementia. She died in Washington, D.C. on June 27, 1996 and was buried back in her Michigan hometown.

### Philanthropic Activities

Tate drew upon her extensive education and overseas experience to provide her students with a superior education in international history. She also worked to ensure that they succeeded on a personal level by extending loans from her own account.

To further these aims in perpetuity, she established three bequests. To Western Michigan University, she bequeathed more than \$1 million, which funded the establishment of a scholarship and the Tate Grant and Education Center

associated with the College of Education and Human Development. Radcliffe College received a gift of stock, her book rights, and funding to endow a Merze Tate Graduate Fellowship. Howard University, where she taught for 35 years, received her papers and an endowment for the Merze Tate Seminar in Diplomatic History.

Former WMU President John T. Bernhard underscored Tate's achievements in the letter nominating her for the AASCU award: "Merze's career as an international scholar and exceptional teacher in and of itself commands recognition. But she also has been a model and an inspiration for black men and women, encouraging them to strive for the academic and personal excellence that proves the folly of racial prejudice."

*Sonya Bernard-Hollins is the publisher of Community Voices magazine and the author of the forthcoming photo biography, "Who in the World Is Merze Tate?"*

## THE OLD SETTLERS, FROM THE EAST COAST TO OHIO TO MICHIGAN

Merze Tate may have been motivated to travel because she was the descendant of explorers.

Her grandparents were part of Ohio's Letts Settlement: a self-sustaining community of mixed-race families. The families had formed ties through marriage and common background during the mid-1700s in Virginia and Maryland. These African-American pioneers migrated to Ohio as free people of color, and began acquiring land in Muskingum County and adjacent areas during the 1820s. The families of the Letts Settlement were landowners and taxpayers in Ohio before the Civil War, and challenged the state for the right to vote and for access to education during the 1840s, '50s, and '60s.

With the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862, Merze's ancestors and others from the Letts Settlement were motivated to move to mid-Michigan to begin new lives as farmers and lumbermen. In Mecosta, Isabella, and Montcalm counties, they established schools and churches and raised their children in collaboration with their white neighbors. Reunions of these pioneering families—collectively called "The Old Settlers"—are still held in the region each year.