A RARE COLORED BIRD: MARY CHURCH TERRELL, DIE FORTSCHRITTE DER FARBIGEN FRAUEN, AND THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN’S CONGRESS IN BERLIN, GERMANY, 1904

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On June 13, 1904, at the International Council of Women’s (ICW) congress in Berlin, Mary Church Terrell, a prominent African American feminist and civil rights advocate, delivered her speech, Die Fortschritte der farbigen Frauen [The Progress of Colored Women] before a large audience of leading international social and political activists. In her autobiography, Terrell recounted the significance of her presence at the conference: “I represented not only the colored women in my own country but, since I was the only woman taking part in the International Congress who had a drop of African blood in her veins, I represented the whole continent of Africa as well.” Terrell was likely correct in her observation of being the only woman of color in attendance, as the ICW did not expand its membership beyond Europe and North America to include women activists from the “non-West” until the interwar years. She discussed issues such as the sexual virtue of black women, their unequal access to quality education, and the discrimination professional blacks faced in employment opportunities. The closing remarks of Terrell’s speech captured the hope and deep dedication to the struggle for gender and for racial equality that lay

at the heart of her international work: "If I have succeeded at interesting just a few women outside of North America in the fight that the colored woman is waging in the United States ... then my mission here in Berlin will be happily fulfilled."² Terrell’s ability to explain in German and French the kinds of racist and sexist barriers that threatened African American women’s progress earned her a standing ovation. German feminists who had enthusiastically anticipated the arrival of “die Negerin” (the Negress) from the United States were impressed with the performance of this “rare, colored bird,” as Terrell referred to herself.³ Terrell’s speech made headlines in Germany, France, Norway, and Austria, all of which subsequently requested more information on America’s racial dilemma.⁴

Mary Church Terrell successfully wove the mission of the black women’s club movement into the agenda of a predominantly white and predominantly transatlantic women’s organization and the broader European public. The overwhelmingly positive reception Terrell received before a European audience marked the international sphere as a fruitful site for African American women’s pursuit of gender and racial equality in the United States. In some ways, the reception was reminiscent of Europeans’ ardent support (especially in Great Britain) of American abolitionists in the nineteenth century. Though organizations such as the International Council of Women did not extend membership to individuals, on rare occasions, African American feminists were invited to give lectures at international women’s conferences. Terrell and others seized these opportunities to share the “good news” of the rapid progress African American women had attained in all realms of society despite the obstacles that stood in their way. Notable anti-lynching supporter Ida B. Wells may have put it best after her lecture tour in Europe in 1893: “My trip abroad had shown me more clearly than ever the necessity of putting our case before the [European] public.”⁵

This essay offers a reconsideration of Mary Church Terrell through the lens of her European activist endeavors. Black women’s activism abroad emerged at the juncture of complex domestic and international issues including Jim Crow discrimination, the rise of international labor organizing, woman’s suffrage, U.S. imperial efforts in the Philippines, scientific racism, colonialism, and claims to national citizenship. A close examination of Terrell’s 1904 Berlin appearance sheds light on the ways domestic concerns and debates regarding racial and gender inequality informed African American feminists’ agenda within transnational women’s groups.

² Mary Church Terrell, “Die Fortschritte der farbigen Frauen,” in Der Internationale Frauen Kongreß, Berlin 1904, ed. Marie Stritt, 567-73 (Berlin, 1905); I am using the translation provided by the editors Kathryn Sklar, Anja Schüler, and Susan Strasser in Social Justice in the United States and Germany: A Dialogue in Documents, 1885-1933 (Ithaca, 1998), 115. The conference proceedings of the 1904 International Council of Women congress in Berlin, Germany are available online: https://ia800204.us.archive.org/26/items/derinternational00fraugoog/derinternational00fraugoog.pdf

³ Terrell, Colored Woman in a White World, 198.

⁴ Terrell, “Die Fortschritte der farbigen Frauen,” 115; “Bilder vom Internationalen Frauen-Kongress 1904,” Die Woche, June 1904, 22. German-language newspaper advertisement announcing Mary Church Terrell’s participation in the congress in Mary Church Terrell Papers, Box 14 Folder 270; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. Mary Church Terrell’s lecture at the ICW Congress continues to be viewed as an important contribution to Berlin history, as well as German-American transatlantic dialogue. See Ingo Juchier, Amerikaner in Berlin: Der historische Reiseführer (Berlin, 2016), 18-19

The emergence of transatlantic feminist organizing at the end of the nineteenth century provided leading feminists of the North Atlantic an opportunity to establish a more permanent transnational dialogue. For them, forging an international sisterhood was one strategy for overcoming the challenges that confronted their sex. Holding regular women’s conferences in locations as diverse as Paris, London, Zurich, and Washington DC made feminist transnationalists visible players on the international scene. But practicing international sisterhood proved to be difficult, particularly when it came to matters involving race. African American women’s participation in the early transnational women’s movement often challenged white leaders to live up to the great principles the ICW and other organizations claimed to uphold. Yet, up to now, African American feminists’ contributions have remained nearly invisible in scholarship on first-wave transnational feminist organizing.  

This essay is part of a larger project that explores the career and networks of Mary Church Terrell, an African American feminist prominent on the international stage, as a window into the international activism of African American women. First, I will place Terrell in her local and global contexts. Next, I will examine Terrell’s participation at the International Council of Women’s Congress in Berlin 1904 and her subsequent travels in Europe to engage with European activists. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion on the significance of Terrell’s early transnational activism and its importance in the historiography of African American women’s international work.

**African American Feminist Transnational Activism: Taking “Race Work” from the Domestic to the International Sphere**

African American women’s activism needs to be understood in the context of the post-Reconstruction revival of discrimination at home. Most historians recognize the years 1890–1920 as the Progressive Era, a time in which ordinary citizens’ participation in political and social reforms thrived. In this era, “ordinary folks” began to organize to challenge exploitive working conditions and demanded fair political representation. But it was also a time when elites gained even greater authority by supporting policies that helped strengthen class distinctions, and upper-middle-class white women reformers made significant strides toward gender equality. For African Americans, as opposed to white reformers, the Progressive Era was “the Nadir,” a time of legally sanctioned (de jure) discrimination and racism, as well as socially permissible (de facto) terror and violence.  


7 The term “Nadir” was coined by Rayford Logan, a scholar of African American history, and introduced in his seminal monograph, The Negro in American Life and Thought, The Nadir, 1877–1901 (New York, 1954). I will use the term and spelling in the same way as Logan hereafter.
“The Nadir” was not only a period in which blacks’ and whites’ social relationship deteriorated but also captures the extent to which national and local law aided the process. The U.S. Supreme Court’s 1883 decision declaring the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional set precedent for state legislatures to pass laws that would create two separate societies — one for blacks and one for whites. In the South, state ordinances — also referred to as Jim Crow Laws — restricted African Americans from sitting next to whites on trains, chained them to a cyclical debt system known as sharecropping, and kept them disenfranchised at voting polls through intimidation, high poll taxes, literacy laws, property qualifications, and “grandfather clauses,” which denied the vote to African Americans but not to illiterate whites.8 The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court ruling formalized the infamous “separate but equal” doctrine, thus endorsing the growing trend among Southern states to pass more formal segregation laws. Jim Crow policies were generally supported by courts; thus, the power and privilege that came along with being white in America was extended in the South by building “a culture of segregation” in all areas of public life. This system, which constantly reminded African Americans of their inferior status, was not only enforced by regulations, electoral fraud, negative racial stereotypes, and economic pressure but also by unprecedented terror and violence through lynching, cross-burning, and mob violence. Lynching was, arguably, the most diabolical form of domestic terror waged against African Americans — especially African American men. Southern white men sought to revive pre-Reconstruction white male supremacy. Before the Civil War, abolitionists successfully conducted a public campaign that depicted Southern white men as sexual predators raping black women. In the Jim Crow era, white men manipulated racial and sexual politics to create the “black rapist.” White women then used this mythical threat for their own political gain in the New South. For white men, constructing a political discourse that made rape a crime committed by black men against white women not only gave them permission to lynch black men with impunity but to continue sexually assaulting black and white women alike.9 In the main, Jim Crow was a deliberate campaign crafted by white elites to prevent African Americans from obtaining any political, economic, and social power.10

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8 See Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill, 1996), for more on tactics used to remove black men from the public sphere and the role rising populism and shrinking support of black male politicians in the Republican Party played in empowering Southern white supremacy.


10 Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York, 1998); C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Commemorative Edition* (New York, 2002), 31-34, 65, and 97-102. “Jim Crow” has a complex history. The term originated in the 1830s when a white performer, Thomas Rice, performed minstrel routines in blackface for white audiences as the fictional character “Jim Crow.” The shows exacerbated negative representations of African Americans through jokes and songs in an exaggerated slave dialect. By the nineteenth century, the term was used for anti-black laws. Jim Crow became a reaction to interracial organizing (e.g., American farmers’ alliances).
African Americans responded to Jim Crow by strengthening their own communities; they established social and cultural institutions such as churches, secondary schools, philanthropic clubs, banks, and secret societies. These sites produced a thriving African American public sphere and offered support for civil rights organizations that included the National Afro-American Council (AAC) in 1898 and W.E.B. Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter’s Niagara Movement in 1905. To understand Mary Church Terrell’s and other middle- and upper-class African American women’s life decisions, it is imperative to contextualize them within the hostile and rapidly changing environment of “the Nadir” of the Progressive Era.

Jim Crow segregation laws eroded black masculine authority and power through disfranchisement, terror, and violence — thus engendering tensions between African American men and women activists. Just as it had done during the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, for some black men — and a few black women — the proposition of gender equality threatened mobilization efforts to fight racial injustice. Feminist black women responded to this resistance by starting their own organizations in which they could advocate for gender and racial uplift simultaneously. They held that because racist laws and violence aimed to restrain the political power of black men, the progress of the race rested on women’s shoulders. In the words of Martha Jones, a historian of black women, “If the nadir was the problem, the woman’s era was the solution.”

By the late nineteenth century, African American women had expanded the reach of their “race work” beyond the black community through interracial cooperation with white women activists and organizations. For black women involved in the temperance and suffrage movements, having access to white activists’ networks also brought opportunities for international work. In 1888 prominent white suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton of the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) invited women activists from all over the world to Washington DC to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. It was at this gathering that Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a notable black abolitionist, suffragist, and member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), delivered an address on temperance; it also saw the founding of the first international women’s organization, the International Council of Women. U.S. suffragists envisioned the ICW as an umbrella organization comprised of national councils.

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11 Mary Church Terrell was an active member of the AAC. Though short-lived, the AAC is considered to be among the early organizations that laid the groundwork for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded in 1909. Terrell was a founding charter member, helped establish the Washington DC branch, and served as its vice-president.

12 Martha S. Jones, All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900 (Chapel Hill, 2007), 176.

13 Mary Ann Shadd Cary Papers, Box 1 Folder 53; Moorland-Springarn Research Library, Howard University.

representing independent women’s groups from each respective country. By establishing a more formal relationship between women of the North Atlantic, the organization aimed to strengthen transatlantic dialogue concerning the shared barriers confronting women. To this end, the ICW sought to strengthen its international ties by establishing two international standing committees in 1899 — one focused on peace and international arbitration, and the other on the legal position of married women.15

Despite the progress that the founding of the first international women’s organization symbolized, the ICW, similar to the NWSA and other white women’s organizations, did not consider the challenges confronting African American women. Yet African American women nonetheless spoke at ICW conferences and gatherings as guests because they understood the larger reward: these events constituted a means for them to make an impression on an international crowd, thus injecting U.S. race issues into the organization’s larger agenda. A shared commitment to woman’s empowerment brought black and white American feminists together; however, it was often white women’s insistence on maintaining racial hierarchies that made cultivating a successful interracial cooperative environment challenging. White women needed black women’s political influence to mobilize black communities behind their causes (e.g., local elections), while black women needed a powerful organization into which they could channel their demands for an end to social and institutional discrimination.16

The ICW held its first quinquennial conference, the World’s Congress of Representative Women, in Chicago in 1893 to coincide with the World’s Columbian Exposition. A number of African American feminist women attended, including Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who gave a keynote address, Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Jackson Coppin, Sarah J. Early, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Hallie Quinn Brown, who also delivered a lecture entitled “Woman’s Political Future.” In her keynote address, “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation,” Harper declared before an international audience: “to-day we stand on the threshold of the woman’s era.”17 The Board of Lady Managers excluded these African American women from participating in the organization of exhibits and events to be held in the Woman’s Building, citing internal divisions and a lack of a national organization as the reasons.18 But black women suspected racism to be the real

15 Rupp, Worlds of Women, 15 and 19. Those hungering for a more assertive suffrage association established the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) at the first ICW conference in Berlin in 1904. The IWSA also criticized the ICW for not taking a firmer stance on suffrage.

16 Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow, 45–50. Also see Lisa Tetrault, The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1848–1898 (Chapel Hill, 2014).


motivating factor behind these exclusionary policies. The Columbian Exposition was a celebration of the progress of Western civilization. White men aimed to establish a direct correlation between white manhood, white supremacy, and the advancements of the West. To this end, they ensured their dominance by keeping the exhibits predominantly male and by keeping the World’s Fair spatially segregated along racial and ethnic lines. White male organizers had rejected the Lady Managers’ plans to showcase women’s progress and contributions to the advancement of [white] civilization, reinforcing white women’s marginal status in American society in relation to their white male counterparts. This failed attempt to establish equality between women and men made maintaining the racial privileges and power that came with being white over African Americans that much more important to the Lady Managers.

After being denied the opportunity to manage exhibits representing African Americans, Hallie Quinn Brown penned a letter to the Board of Lady Managers to protest the lack of representation of African American men and women in the design of the exposition:

> It seems to be a selected conviction among the colored people, that no adequate opportunity is to be offered them for the proper representation of the World’s Fair [...]. If, therefore, the object of the Woman’s Department of the Columbian Exposition is to present to the world the industrial and educational progress of the breadwinners — the wage women — how immeasurably incomplete will that work be without the exhibit of the thousands of the colored women of this country.

While Brown and others defied American racial etiquette before a global audience at the exposition, anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells began work on a critical pamphlet, *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition* (1893), during her anti-slavery lecture tour in Great Britain to educate foreign visitors on the lack of African American representation and to tell the truth about race relations in the United States. Frederick Douglass, former U.S. ambassador to Haiti (1889–1891) and a prominent abolitionist, supported Ida B. Wells’s efforts, writing the introduction and contributing a chapter on “The Convict Lease System” to the edited volume. The success of Wells’s pamphlet garnered international attention from France, Russia, Germany, India, and England. African American

21 Ibid., 70.
women’s demand for inclusion sparked international debate about the limits of American citizenship when it came to race and gender, and, as a result, “expanded the civic space that they occupied in Chicago and the nation.”

African American women’s efforts to obtain leadership positions within black male and white female-dominated organizations were often thwarted by sexism and racism, leaving black women little choice but to carve out a niche within black public culture to call their own. The establishment of independent black women’s clubs in the 1890s provided sites of intellectual community wherein black women articulated a shared vision for uplifting their race and sex, agreed on the fundamentals that shaped their daily activities in the larger community, and presented themselves as a respected and unified political body. Though not monolithic in their thinking, Mary Church Terrell and other prominent African American feminists shared the belief that the elevation of the race hinged on the progress of its women.

The Colored Women’s League (CWL), founded in 1892 by Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Jane Patterson, served as an early model for African American women nationwide. Drawing on the philosophies of racial uplift and self-help, CWL members brought social services to poor black neighborhoods, for example, educating mothers on the latest advanced domestic skills and tools; for them, the quality of home life was directly linked to racial improvement.

The rapid growth of independent black women’s clubs made evident the urgency with which black women sought to fulfill the public service needs of government-neglected black communities in urban centers and the rural South. As a result, in 1896 prominent club women Anna Julia Cooper, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Josephine Silon Yates, Mary Church Terrell, Fannie Barrier Williams, and others established the first African American women’s national organization, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).

Terrell was elected as the first president of the organization, and during her tenure (1896–1900) she worked hard to advance the strategies with which black women’s clubs confronted Jim Crow and gender discrimination through community engagement and fundraising. The organization increased its impact by establishing public institutions such as kindergartens, medical clinics, and nursing schools to train black nurses and help them pass state examinations. Of equal importance, the NACW expanded its leadership role in the public sphere through political agitation. Black clubwomen challenged...
discriminatory state laws that undermined their rights as U.S. citizens, for example, petitioning against Jim Crow street car laws and the exploitation of female prisoners by the convict lease system.27 Though community building was the cornerstone of the NACW, when the organization implemented initiatives it sometimes incited tensions between middle-class and working poor African Americans, engendering accusations of elitism against Terrell and other leaders.

In her 1904 presidential address, Terrell’s chose the motto “Lifting As We Climb” to underscore the “duty” of educated black women to elevate their less fortunate sisters:

I no way could we live up to such sentiment better than by coming into closer touch with the masses of our women, by whom, whether we will or not, the world will always judge the womanhood of the race. Even though we wish to shun them, and hold ourselves entirely aloof from them, we cannot escape the consequences of their acts. So, that, if the call of duty were disregarded altogether, policy and self-preservation would demand that we go down among the lowly, the illiterate, and even the vicious to whom we are bound by the ties of race and sex, and put forth every possible effort to uplift and reclaim them.28

Terrell’s statement not only confirmed class tensions within the African American community but highlighted the hypersensitivity of black middle-class women and the urgency with which they sought to preserve their image as respectable women.29 As she had in her speech in Berlin, Terrell attempted to associate Africa’s potential with the progress of African American women, reflecting anxieties about negative images of the supposed “dark continent”: if properly westernized, Terrell and others implied, Africans could advance, just as African Americans were doing. Terrell’s unequivocal claim to being a qualified representative of Africa suggested an imperialist impulse in African American feminists’ political consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century. In both instances, we see the ambivalence of her simultaneous privilege and position of speaking for “all” African Americans, or even all people with “African blood.”

The establishment of the NACW in 1896 also proved beneficial for black feminists as it enabled them to continue their engagement with foreign and “progressive” North American white women activists,

27 Mary Church Terrell, “Club Work of Colored Women,” The Southern Workman, August 8, 1901.

28 Mary Church Terrell, “The Duty of the National Association of Colored Women,” A.N.E Church Review (January 1900). This essay, along with others by Terrell, can be found in Beverly Washington Jones, Quest for Equality: The Life and Writings of Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863–1954 (Brooklyn, 1990), 144.

now with the status of being representatives of a national organization. In 1899, while on tour in Europe, Hallie Quinn Brown and Margaret Murray Washington attended the ICW conference in London as NACW representatives. When a white American woman only spoke of the hardships experienced by European immigrants in the U.S., even though the topic of the day was “Underprivileged Races,” Brown gave an impromptu speech exposing the racial indignities imposed on blacks by white Americans. In her unpublished autobiography, Brown reflected on that moment: “My opportunity had come to tell of the Negro’s sufferings … to tell of brutal lynchings, … of the barbarity of constant discrimination. I fairly shouted my catalog of outrages against a helpless people. I was later told that my speech covered thirty minutes. I stopped of my own accord.”

These black feminist internationalists, by being present at the ICW conference, marked a new era of black feminism; as a cohort, they would establish a foundation for and consistency in engaging in international debates. But no other African American feminist would test the boundaries of bringing the ideals of transnational interracial cooperation to bear on her own world to a greater extent than Mary Church Terrell.

Mary Church Terrell Vindicates Her Race in the Chicago of Europe

As highlighted in this chapter’s opening, Mary Church Terrell left a truly exceptional impression on an international audience at the 3rd Quinquennial Congress of the International Council of Women in Berlin in 1904. At that time, the city had become a modern metropolis, having overcome its formerly cheap, unsanitary, and pestilent conditions to develop into a tidy, tree-lined capital with theater patrons, university students, and government officials. This transformation had prompted Mark Twain to describe it just over a decade before Terrell’s visit as the European Chicago. Though invited to Berlin based, in part, on her activist reputation in the U.S., Terrell enjoyed an unusual social position for an African American at the turn of the twentieth century that distinguished her from other African American feminist transnationalists at the time. As the daughter of the first black millionaire family of the South, Terrell had a very privileged upbringing. She attended an integrated secondary school, earned post-secondary degrees from Oberlin College, and studied abroad for two years in Paris, Lausanne, Florence, and Berlin. Her husband, Robert H. Terrell, earned degrees from Harvard and Howard Universities and became the first black municipal court judge for Washington DC. This upbringing
and social position made her conversant in the world of her affluent white American and European counterparts, a necessary precondition for her role at the congress in Berlin, since the ICW was an organization comprised of well-connected women — whose wealth, national prominence, education, and aristocratic lineage qualified them as elites.33 Access to financial resources made it possible for Terrell to afford a first-class ticket on the Nord Deutsche Lloyd steamer, elegant gowns and hats to wear each evening to events, and visits to major cities following the Berlin congress.

The issues Terrell brought to the attention of her primarily white European audience related to her long-standing activism and leadership in organizations in the U.S. as a civil rights advocate, educator, and lecturer on rights for women and African Americans.34 Drawing on her German language skills and cultural acumen, Terrell impressed those she encountered — from German stewards, maids, and journalists to the high-ranking German statesmen Count von Bülow (the Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Count von Posodonsky (the Minister of the Interior). Terrell was equally captivated by the modern metropolis of Berlin. In Terrell’s description, the events organized by the ICW German delegation mirrored the opulence of the city: “[E]legant homes were made available to the [foreign] committees, delegates, and speakers ... [T]he banquet ... seemed less like reality than a dream ... no expense was spared.”35

Factors such as socioeconomic status, educational background, nationality, and an ambiguous racial identity shaped Terrell’s experience in Berlin more than current scholarship suggests. Though Terrell was fair-skinned — and even passed for white occasionally — she was fully aware that those eager to get a glimpse of a black woman from the United States likely imagined her as dark-skinned with “rings in her nose” and “conjoining” or “cakewalking” about the streets.36 German newspaper reporters competing for an interview unknowingly asked Terrell when “die Negerin” would arrive, to which she responded, “Haven’t you seen her?”37 Terrell made a point of counteracting such stereotypes in her personal appearance as well as in her lecture on “The Progress of Colored Women,” which both reflected her embrace of the ideology of black middle-class and elite women’s respectability and racial uplift — and confirmed the necessity of “respectability” for black women involved in international work. Subsequent reports on Terrell’s success underscored this reality in the international media:

33 Rupp, Worlds of Women, 52.
34 Mary Church Terrell was the first black woman to be appointed to the Washington DC Board of Education in 1895, where she served a total of eleven years (1895-1901 and 1906-1911), and was involved in a wide range of organizations, such as the Colored Women’s League, Afro-American Council, and Young Women’s Christian Association; Alison M. Parker, “What Was the Relationship between Mary Church Terrell’s International Experience and Her Work against Racism in the United States?,” in Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600–2000, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin. Accessed October 14, 2015.
36 Terrell, Colored Woman, 199.
37 Ibid., 198.
The woman who made the best appearance on the platform was Mrs. Terrell, of Washington, a lady of Andalusian complexion, who in ease of manner, gracefulness, and force of gesture and naturalness of expression was ahead of all the other "oratrices." Mrs. Terrell spoke in German with the same fluency and ease as in her native tongue.  

Terrell’s presumptions about what the German delegates expected of an African American woman were not improbable. German intellectuals (particularly anthropologists) had long been fascinated by the daily practices of Jim Crow segregation in a so-called democratic society, and how — despite such prejudice — a class of upwardly mobile African Americans had developed. Though it is difficult to pinpoint any one factor eliciting Germans’ reactions to Terrell, her success in Berlin is, nonetheless, surprising given the ethno-racial character of German nationalism, the influx of commercial goods reinforcing negative stereotypes about Africans and African Americans into German markets, and Germany’s entanglement in a colonial war against the Herero in Namibia at the time.

Mary Church Terrell’s Travels and Publications after the Berlin Congress

By participating in this international conference, Terrell made institutionalized racism in the U.S. visible to international audiences. This gave her a firm concept of what race work overseas could do. In a 1904 article for The Voice of the Negro, Terrell articulated her new outlook:

I have made up in my mind ... that for the rest of my natural life, I shall devote as much of my time and strength as I can to enlightening my friends across the sea upon the condition of the race problem in the United States, as it really is.

Among other things, her success on the international stage convinced Terrell to make use of contacts with prominent reformers and writers on the other side of the Atlantic to speak out against racism at home. For instance, after the congress, Terrell traveled to London to meet with William T. Stead, the famous journalist and editor of the Review of Reviews, as well as the Countess of Warwick, a prominent British reformer and philanthropist. The meeting with Stead was particularly


40 For further reading, see David Ciarlo, Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany (Cambridge, 2011); Mischa Honeck, Martin Klimke, and Anne Kuhlmann, eds., Germany and the Black Diaspora: Points of Contact, 1250-1914 (New York, 2013); Larry Greene and Anke Otlepp, eds., Germans and African Americans: Two Centuries of Exchange (Jackson, 2013); and Lora Wildenthal, German Women for Empire (Durham, 2001).

41 Mary Church Terrell, “The International Congress of Women,” The Voice of the Negro (October 1904): 460.

42 Following the congress, Mary Church Terrell first traveled to Paris, where she met briefly with Jean Finot, the editor of the French magazine La Revue des Reues and well-known critic of scientific racism. Terrell, A Colored Woman, 209–20.
fruitful and beneficial to both parties. Before her appearance in Berlin, Terrell had published an article entitled “Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View” in the *North American Review.* The article’s international success, along with the attention Terrell gained in Berlin, had motivated Stead to seek her expertise on the “race problem” in the United States. Stead helped Terrell expand her international readership by introducing her to British editors who were willing to publish articles that white American journals had rejected. As a result, Terrell published two articles in the British journal, *Nineteenth Century and After,* in 1906 and 1907. The first article, “A Plea for the White South by a Coloured Woman,” presented the hard-hitting argument that white Americans’ propensity for violence against African Americans reflected a spiraling moral demise that could only be resolved by other (non-Southern) whites. In Terrell’s second article, “Peonage in the United States: The Convict Lease System and the Chain Gangs,” she exposed a degrading and racist convict lease system that exploited the labor of many African Americans in the South. In return for this favor, Terrell published an interview she conducted with Stead during his visit to Washington DC later that year, in which he shared his thoughts on the ongoing struggles for racial equality outside of the United States, in the *Voice of the Negro.* This introduced Stead as an ally to the African American community.

Terrell’s meeting with the Countess of Warwick, like that with Stead, was precipitated by the attention Terrell had garnered in Berlin and by her article on lynching. When the countess learned that a black woman from the United States had delivered an address at the International Women’s Council congress, she invited Terrell to her residence, as she was deeply interested in Terrell’s work and in grasping America’s race problem. The countess, like Stead, expressed horror and astonishment at the practice of lynching, the barbarity and violence of which Terrell had detailed in her article: “[I]t cannot be possible that colored men ... are still hanged, burned, and shot in the United States by mobs.” Yet, as Terrell knew, even disgust at the barbarity of lynching did not necessarily translate into doubt about the soundness of the accusations made against those who were lynched: false information concerning African American men’s sexual practices circulated freely within and outside the United States. Terrell seized the moment to enlighten the countess: “I felt it my duty ... to tell her Ladyship the truth — that out of every hundred colored men who are lynched in this country, from seventy-five to eighty-five are not

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44 Mary Church Terrell, “A Plea for the White South by a Coloured Woman,” 1905, Reel 21, Papers of Mary Church Terrell, Library of Congress. An edited version appeared in *Nineteenth Century and After* [London], Vol. 60 (July 1906): 70-84.


47 Due to sudden illness, the Countess of Warwick canceled her lecture at the ICW. The countess and Mary Church Terrell were scheduled to speak on the theme of “Wage-Earning Women” the same morning.
even accused by the South of what is so maliciously and falsely called “the usual crime.” 48 Despite clarifying the daily challenges for African Americans in the South, Terrell was, nonetheless, reluctant to leave a negative impression of home: “I took special pains to emphasize the loyalty of the colored people to the country in which they and their parents had been born, and this seemed to please her Ladyship very much.” 49 Terrell’s meeting with the Countess of Warwick showed that carrying out race work abroad required a delicate balance. African Americans’ deep sense of patriotism and loyalty to the United States complicated advancing the black clubwomen’s political agenda at times. 50

Upon returning home, Mary Church Terrell was able to place race relations in the United States in a global comparative framework on the basis of her international experiences, which she did in an article for the African American press organ, *The Voice of the Negro*, later that same year. 51 As she described life for people of color “across the sea,” she observed that there was “absolutely no prejudice against a man on account of the color of his skin” in Europe. 52 She asserted that there were “innumerable cases of inter-marriage between black and white” in France, and that “a colored man of ability might become an officer in the German army.” In England, by contrast, Terrell ascertained a “slight antipathy toward all dark races,” but individuals with exceptional talent would find no social obstacles to hinder their success — like the composer and conductor Samuel Coleridge Taylor, the son of an African father and English mother (whom Terrell met while visiting London). 53 Terrell acknowledged the rise in German anti-Semitism and the violent repression that characterized British colonialism but nevertheless drew the same conclusion as many other African American intellectuals in Europe: that societies abroad were seemingly colorblind, allowing them to be the determiners of their own destiny. 54 For Terrell and other African American intellectuals such as Alain L. Locke, Georgiana R. Simpson, and W.E.B. Du Bois, Europe was a refuge from America’s racially hostile environment during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

49 Ibid., 217.
50 The double burden African Americans felt of being both American and black is well documented by historians. It is perhaps most powerfully described by W.E.B. Du Bois in his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He coined the term “double-consciousness” to describe the “... two-ness — an American, a negro ...” that African Americans struggle with in their sense of identity. Historians have successfully shown that this internal conflict was most pronounced in times of war and domestic unrest. See Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women’s Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington, 2006); Lisa Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era* (Jackson, 2009); Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill, 2006); Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African American Experience During World War I* (Lanham, MD, 2011).
52 Ibid., 259.
Conclusion
This essay has expanded the definition of African American women’s activism based upon their embrace of the international stage as a powerful platform for demanding change. Considering Mary Church Terrell’s transnationalist career in the dual contexts of the black feminist experience in the United States and international political debates shows that her participation at the ICW congress in 1904 Berlin proved to be a critical moment for African American feminist transnational activism. Terrell’s success in Berlin is a concrete example of how African American women played a role in shaping transnational feminist organizations. This is crucial, as Terrell’s later involvement in the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) following World War I positioned her to convince her white American and European colleagues to adopt resolutions on “Race Equality” and the “Military Use of Native Populations of Colonies.” As the first African American woman elected to serve on the United States’ executive board of the WILPF, Terrell proposed policies that stressed the inextricable link between social justice, equal human rights, and world peace; and, as a result, connected the black freedom struggle for civil rights at home to demands for black liberation abroad.

A reexamination of Mary Church Terrell through her transnational activism and connections abroad opens up the little-known world of African American feminist transnationalism and first-wave international feminist organizing. Equally important, Terrell’s involvement in the ICW’s early years — along with that of other African American women — raises questions about periodization, suggesting that events in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were more critical to shaping African American women’s international history in the twentieth century than previously thought.

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56 Mary Church Terrell, “Colored Women and World Peace,” Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom Pamphlet (1932), in Mary Church Terrell Papers, Box 13 Folder 263; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Howard University.