

Exile and the Perils of Travel: The Challenges Behind Nineteenth-Century Black Women Organizer's Fight for Dignity

For many nineteenth-century Black women organizers like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells, exile was an all-too-common experience and consequence of speaking out against slavery, racial and sexual violence, inequality, and injustice within their communities precisely because they were Black women openly addressing these issues in public space and seeking to assert their voices through various publication outlets guarded by Black and white male editors. Their public indictments against the country's and the Black community's failure to protect their right to citizenship and dignity oftentimes placed them in danger, leading them to be either permanently or temporarily exiled from their home and at times, feel exiled by their own communities. This paper will primarily consider how Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells grappled with various forms of exile as well as how they addressed exile in their literary and organizing efforts amidst their fight to center Black women's voices within conversations about Black freedom, dignity, and equality. This paper argues that in exploring the tensions between their public activism, the perils of travel, and exile within their published and private writings, they challenged and redefined what dignity meant for Black women.