
Mary Church Terrell's Multiple Border Crossings (1863-1920)

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Abstract

Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) was a southern-born prolific African American writer, intellectual, clubwoman, activist and feminist. Mary C. Terrell left numerous writings of different nature: being a regular contributor to African American newspapers and magazines, she wrote many articles. She also kept diaries at times and published a 400-page long autobiography in 1940. Her writings offer evidence of her unique activism. In this analysis of Terrell's multiple experiences of border crossings, my essay argues that she used the different experiences of her geographical, social and at times racial border crossings in order to serve the African American community. Because these experiences also helped her to define (and redefine) herself as a woman of color in America, they also enabled her to challenge conventional gender roles of her time. My essay considers a series of questions such as the following: How did her experiences of border crossings influence her life and her writing? How was Terrell able to defy the traditional gender norms of her time? Was she able to break completely free from the remnants of Victorianism? My essay explores how her many transnational and international border crossings helped her define her identity and nourished her vision as an activist and a feminist. She indeed ceaselessly worked for the unity of women across regions in America within the National Association of Colored Women from 1896 onwards. My essay also explores how she transgressed the gender expectations of her class and time, (from the moment she refused to obey her father's order to become a housewife in Memphis, Tennessee and started a teaching career in Wilberforce, Ohio to the moment she married a progressive man who shared her views about women's voting rights and cared little about the fact that she was not a perfect housewife) without totally freeing herself from the Victorian ideals of the time.

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