Women and Migration

Responses in Art and History

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31. The Roots of Black American Women's Internationalism: Migrations of the Spirit and the Heart

Francille Rusan Wilson

Black American women's intentional travels began in the late eighteenth century as migrants fleeing slavery and racism in the US, alone or with their families, escaping in visible numbers to Canada, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Trinidad and Mexico. Information from and about these woman migrants, fugitives and travelers circulated through letters, newspaper articles and petitions to Congress but some women emigrants returned to the United States to tell their stories. In one such case, Eliza Bowers (1824–1878) returned to Baltimore from Trinidad in the mid 1840s having moved there — in her words she was 'deported to Trinidad'¹ — with other free Black families as a youngster at the start of the third significant migration of Black Americans to the island. Back

1 Nathan Francis Mossell, unpublished autobiography, 1–2 in the University of Pennsylvania Archives, http://www.archives.upenn.edu/primdocs/upf/upf1_9ar/mossell_nf/mossell_nf_autobio.pdf. Nathan Mossell wrote that his mother told them 'exciting stories of her deportation, when a child [...] about 1838'; it is more likely that her family was part of several hundred free Black people from Baltimore who voluntarily emigrated to Trinidad from 1839–1841. See Christopher Phillips, *Freedom's Port: The African American Community of Baltimore 1790–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), pp. 215–21.

in Baltimore, Eliza married Aaron Mossell, a free Black brick maker, and began a family. But as the political situation for free people of color deteriorated, the family of four fled Maryland moving first to Hamilton, Ontario in 1853 and later returning to the US as a family of eight after the Civil War, settling in upstate New York.

Fig. 31.1 The Mossell family, group portrait, ca. 1875. Photographer unknown. Eliza Bowers Mossell, 3rd from right; Aaron Mossell Jr. (Sadie's father) standing 2nd from right. University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania.

One hundred years after Eliza's return to Baltimore, her granddaughter, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander (1898–1989) supported petitions to the newly formed United Nations for safeguarding the rights of Black Americans, and launched her own campaign to persuade the US to ratify UN conventions on genocide, forced labor, and the political rights of women and children. Was Sadie Alexander influenced by stories of her grandmother Eliza's relentless quest for freedom? How did Black American women develop a commitment to international human rights and forge links with women activists, especially other 'women of the darker races' across time and class?

Fig. 31.2 Sadie T. M. Alexander (1898–1989), ca. 1948. Portrait photograph by Wilson G. Marshall. University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania.

Black American women were an active part of a centuries-long circulation of ideas concerning human rights causes and concerns, serving as speakers, travelers, missionaries, and migrants. Historians Robert Harris and Robin Kelley remind us that Black peoples on both sides of the Atlantic became interested in the possibilities and penalties of international law, foreign policy and the status of other peoples of color as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Haitian revolution, abolitionist and emancipation movements in the Caribbean and South America. The scramble for Africa, the question of emigration to Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the racial dimension of the Spanish American War were frequent topics in the Black press, pulpits, and among political organizations.² A small cadre of Black American women were

2 Robert L. Harris, Jr., 'Racial Equality and the United Nations Charter', in Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan (eds.), *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), pp. 126–48; Robin Kelley,

also international travelers as representatives of religious bodies and women's clubs.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME, f. 1816) offered gendered positions of authority and international contacts for women. After the end of slavery African Methodists established district offices, schools, missions, and congregations in west and southern Africa and the Caribbean. Women were in charge of the AME's foreign missionary societies and raised funds to send missionaries and build schools abroad. By the 1880s AME women had established missions in Haiti, San Domingo, Trinidad, St. Thomas, and Sierra Leone, providing a constant flow of information about economic and political conditions in the Caribbean and Africa to churchwomen throughout the United States. In 1888 Fannie Jackson Coppin (1837–1913), president of the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society, was the denomination's delegate to the Centenary Conference of Protestant Missions held in London. Coppin was a former slave, school principal, and, as a graduate of Oberlin College, one of the most educated women of any color in the United States. Her address to the section on Women's Missions to Women focused on women's rights and she admonished men for failing to realize that there was not a shred of scriptural basis for denying women an active role in church matters.³ In 1900, she moved to Cape Town, South Africa after her husband, the Reverend Levi Jenkins Coppin, was elected the thirtieth AME Bishop. Her account of her work and travels in South Africa stressed the similarities of the oppression experienced by native Africans, Cape Coloreds, and Muslims. 'Perhaps one of the things that has caused Mohammedans to step over the religious barriers that have kept the dark races apart in Africa, is the fact that, when the lines of proscription are drawn — and this is becoming more and more so — the Malay, the Indian-East Indian — the native and the "coloured" are all treated alike in matters social.'⁴

Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (New York: Beacon Press, 2002), chs. 3 and 5.

3 James Johnson (ed.), *Report of the Centenary Conference of Protestant Missions to the World, Held in Exeter Hall, London (June 9–19)*, vol. 1 (London: James Nisbet, 1888), pp. 412–14.

4 Fannie Jackson-Coppin, *Reminiscences of School Life and Hints on Teaching* (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1913), pp. 122–33, quote on p. 132. Lawrence S. Little, in *Disciples of Liberty: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Age of Imperialism, 1884–1916* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), pp. 41–43,

Fig. 31.3 Fannie Jackson Coppin, 1865. Photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of the Oberlin College Archives.

Coppin offered a model of religious and educational activism that stressed women's equality and critiqued imperialism, while three slightly younger women from Sadie Alexander's mother, Mary Tanner Mossell's generation continued to travel abroad on behalf of religious, racial and gender projects and received extensive coverage and favorable comment in the Black press. Ida B. Wells (1862–1931) made two trips to England in 1893 and 1894 to garner support for her anti-lynching campaign. Mary Church Terrell (1863–1954) gave speeches calling for racial and gender equality at international women's conferences in 1904, 1919 and 1937. Addie Hunton lived and studied in Europe, aided Black soldiers in France in 1918–19, and became an important activist in the Pan-African Movement.

Sadie Alexander was six years old in 1904 when Mary Church Terrell spoke at the International Conference of Women (ICW) in Berlin.

argues that the success of the Church Review under Levi Coppin was due to Fannie Coppin's skill as an editor.

Terrell, an Oberlin graduate and founding member of the National Association of Colored Women, received many favorable comments from her hosts as the only American delegate to give her address in German. Terrell quickly felt that she 'represented not only the colored women of my country' but as the only person of African descent at the conference, 'I represented the whole African continent as well.' After the ICW conference, Terrell stopped in Paris to see Henry O. Tanner's prizewinning 'Raising of Lazarus.' She gained a personal viewing at the Louvre after explaining that she knew the Tanner family in the US, 'his father, his mother, his sisters, his brothers,' and declaring that if she did not see the painting, 'I could not return to my country without my head erect.'⁵ The expatriate artist was Sadie Tanner Mossell's uncle and young Sadie met the Black intelligentsia, including Terrell, at the Philadelphia home of her grandfather, AME Bishop and influential editor Benjamin Tucker Tanner.

Fig. 31.4 Mary Church Terrell, ca. 1890, three quarter length portrait, seated, facing front. Photographer unknown. Library of Congress. Public domain.

5 Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington, D.C.: Ransdell, 1940), pp. 204, 197–208. The painting is now in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Fig. 31.5 Tanner family, group portrait, 1890. Photographer unknown, Mary Tanner Mossell (Sadie's mother) seated far right; Henry O. Tanner standing left. University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania.

In 1919, Terrell, a charter member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, was selected by the Women's Peace Party as one of thirty American delegates to the meeting of the International Congress of Women. Terrell was thus able to evade the concerted efforts of the State and War Departments to prevent African Americans from attending the Paris peace conference by denying them passage to Europe. Terrell soon observed that she was the only delegate that was not white, 'it finally dawned upon me that I was representing the women of all the non-white countries in the world.' In that spirit, Terrell introduced a resolution on behalf of the US delegation calling for the end to discrimination in education or employment based upon race, color, or religion. She also criticized the Versailles Peace Conference for its poor treatment of Japan and failure to condemn racial discrimination and called for 'justice and fair play for all the dark races of the world.'⁶

⁶ Terrell, pp. 333, 335, 329–47.

Dubbed the 'genteel militant' by historian Sharon Harley, Mary Church Terrell became even more militant if ever genteel near the end of her productive life at age ninety in 1952, when she both signed the radical *We Charge Genocide* petition to the UN by the Civil Rights Congress and wore a hat and gloves when picketing a segregated restaurant in Washington, D.C.⁷

Addie W. Hunton's life also brings together multiple sources of foreign policy ideas that had critical intergenerational implications for Sadie Alexander and the women of her generation: the Black women's club movement, women's peace movements, the 'Y' movement, and Pan-African conferences. Hunton (1866–1943) and her husband William Hunton created YWCA and YMCA branches at Negro colleges. Both 'Y' organizations had regular unsegregated international conferences that created opportunities for young Black Americans living under Jim Crow to meet their counterparts from around the globe.⁸ Addie Hunton and her children moved to Europe while she studied foreign languages for several years before the First World War. When the US entered the First World War, a newly widowed Hunton and two other intrepid Black women traveled to France with the American Expeditionary Forces joining eighty Black male social workers assigned to serve the 150,000 Black soldiers serving in segregated units. Her eyewitness account detailed her growing disillusionment as a result of the US military's discriminatory practices.⁹ At the war's end Hunton attended the 1919 Pan-African Congress in Paris led by W. E. B. Du Bois, a long time

7 Sharon Harley, 'Mary Church Terrell: Genteel Militant', in Leon Litwak and August Meier (eds.), *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 291–307. William Patterson (ed.), *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People* (New York: International Publishers, [1951] 1970), pp. xvii–xviii.

8 Francille Rusan Wilson, *The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Creation of Black Labor Studies, 1890–1950* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2006), pp. 62–64, 200–01. Johanna Selles, 'Women and Historical Pan-Africanism: The Hunton Family Narrative of Faith Through Generations', *Pan-African News Wire*, 19 November 2006, http://panafricannews.blogspot.com/2006/11/women-and-historical-pan-africanism_19.html

9 Addie W. Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson, *Two Colored Women with the American Expeditionary Forces* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Eagle Press, 1920), pp. 22–40; Susan Kerr Chandler, "'That Biting, Stinging Thing Which Ever Shadows Us': African American Social Workers in France During World War I', *Social Services Review* (September 1995), 498–514. Nikki Brown, *Private Politics & Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), pp. 84–107.

friend and neighbor. In 1920 Hunton and Terrell helped the National Association of Colored Women launch the International Council of Women of the Darker Races, an indication of Black clubwomen's increasing interest in forging ties with women across continents.

In 1923 Sadie Alexander, newly married, was struggling to find meaningful employment despite having earned a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, while Hunton and a small group of Black women 'who believe in the universality of the race problem' started the Circle for Peace and Foreign Relations.¹⁰

Hutton and the Circle raised funds for Du Bois to attend the 1923 Pan-African Congress held in London and Lisbon, and they organized the fourth conference with over two hundred delegates that was held in New York City in 1927. That same year, Sadie T. M. Alexander added a law degree to her growing educational accomplishments: she already was one of the first three Black women to earn a PhD, and the first Black American with a doctorate in economics. Although she went to law school because of limited opportunities to work as an economist, Alexander became the first Black woman to earn a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania, and first to pass the state bar exam. She joined her husband Raymond Pace Alexander's law firm in Philadelphia and they practiced law together for over thirty years.¹¹

Sadie T. M. Alexander's long standing emphasis in her public life was to use her own privileged status as a 'true daughter' within the AME church and her growing influence in numerous local and national civic organizations to call for women's political and economic empowerment. Her parallel participation in Black women's organizations that had focused international policy agendas drew her into the foreign affairs

10 Brenda Gayle Plummer, 'Evolution of the Black Foreign Policy Constituency', *TransAfrica Forum*, 6 (Spring/Summer 1989), 66–81; Christine Lutz, 'Addie Hunton: Crusader for Pan Africanism and Peace', in Nina Mjagkij (ed.), *Portraits of African American Life Since 1865* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 109–27, quote at p. 116; Penny M. Von Eshen, in *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 58–59, maintains that Hunton got a degree in linguistics from the Sorbonne, but other sources say she studied at the University of Heidelberg.

11 Francille Rusan Wilson, "'All of the Glory... Faded... Quickly": Sadie T. M. Alexander and Black Professional Women, 1920–1950', in Sharon Harley and the Black Women and Work Collective (eds.), *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 164–83.

arena by the late 1930s.¹² One of the first institutions that Alexander sought to directly influence on international issues was her own AME Church, but she did not initially show the same concerns for international peace and solidarity as Mary Church Terrell or Addie Hunton who together had helped the denomination formulate clear positions on international affairs that decried colonial practices in the 1930s. Alexander's public opinion of whether Blacks had a vital interest in fighting fascism evolved between 1935–40 from the isolationism favored by Republicans, albeit inflected with a racial critique, to fervent support of the Double V concept of victory abroad over fascism, and victory at home over white supremacy. During the 1930s Alexander also began to travel more outside the United States, going to Europe and Russia with her husband and began a long association with Haitian lawyers who made her an honorary member of their bar association.

In October 1935, Alexander gave a speech promoting neutrality to women gathered at Bethel AME church in Baltimore. Black people, she argued, were disproportionately affected by international wars since they were already the lowest paid and most vulnerable. 'We were urged to join in making the world safe for democracy when we ourselves never enjoyed the true benefits of democracy.'¹³ Rather than falling for this argument again as war enveloped Europe, Black American women should try to affect public opinion at home by urging neutrality and should take up the plea, 'War Must Cease'.¹⁴ However, once the United States entered the war, Alexander pivoted, having also switched political parties from Republican to Democrat and advised Black churchwomen to continue to fight for gender as well as racial equality by embracing Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. Her subsequent speeches depicted the Second World War as an

12 Francille Rusan Wilson, 'Sadie T. M. Alexander: A "True Daughter" of the AME Church', *A.M.E. Church Review*, 119: 391 (2003), 40–46; Sadie Alexander to Rev. Edward E. Taylor, 26 August 1942, in Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander (hereafter STMA) Papers, University of Pennsylvania Archives, Box 55 ff 18. Francille Rusan Wilson, 'Becoming "Woman of the Year": Sadie Alexander's Construction of a Public Persona as a Black Professional Woman, 1920–1950', *Black Women, Gender, & Families*, 2:2 (2008), 1–30. Alexander considered herself a 'true daughter' because her maternal grandfather Benjamin T. Tanner (1835–1923) and paternal uncle Charles W. Mossell (1849–1915) were prominent AME ministers and other relatives were lay leaders and missionaries.

13 Sadie T. M. Alexander, 'The Role of the Negro Woman in the Postwar South', unpublished speech, ca. 1945, STMA papers 71/80.

14 'War Must Cease', STMA papers 7/49.

opportunity for women's advancement arguing, 'the war [is] using a new reservoir of Woman Power and Negro women along with all other American women are entering every activity of the nation's life including the armed forces,'¹⁵ foreshadowing her role in the successful campaign in 1947 to desegregate the armed forces. Sadie Alexander now also helped to focus both the AME church and Black women's organizations postwar visions in a more activist manner as they firmly linked colonization with segregation and called for an end to both. National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) President Mary McLeod Bethune asked Alexander to help plan a panel on 'racial policies as the basis for permanent peace' for their 1942 annual meeting. Alexander asked Bethune, a college president and New Deal official, to invite other women of color from 'China, India, Haiti, South America and Mexico as well as representatives of minority groups in the United States' to participate.¹⁶ Alexander had now fully embraced the international solidarity with women of color on political, economic, and gender issues long advocated by Mary Church Terrell and Addie Hunton.

In 1946 Alexander was one of two women and two African Americans appointed by President Truman to a fifteen-member committee to recommend changes in the country's civil rights policies.¹⁷ Alexander's talking points to build public support for the President's Committee on Civil Rights 1947 Report, *To Secure These Rights*, stressed the linkage between US civil rights practices and US foreign policy, charging that the gap between US beliefs and US practices was creating a 'moral dry rot.' She attacked the House Un-American Activities Committee in public speeches linking it to Nazi policies, saying that after the investigations and witch hunts, 'we will have purges, Gestapos and concentration camps.' Ever the economist, Alexander warned that full postwar employment should be the goal rather than job discrimination which might harm the ability of postwar America to feed itself and Europe: 'Firing a Mexican, a Jew, a Negro or any other worker because of his race or religion creates

15 Sadie T. M. Alexander, 'The Role of the Negro Woman in the Postwar South', unpublished speech, ca. 1945, STMA papers 71/80.

16 'Program of Annual Conference of National Council of Negro Women, Inc. Oct 16-18 1941.' STMA to MMB 8/12/42 both in STMA Papers 57/9.

17 The committee had twelve prominent white men, one white woman — Mrs. M. E. Tilley a Methodist churchwoman, and a Black man — Channing Tobias of the Phelps Stokes Fund and Alexander.

a vicious economic circle.¹⁸ The Truman Administration was sensitive to the potential effect of Jim Crow on US foreign policy, and the State and Justice Departments began the unprecedented step of supporting selected lawsuits aimed at dismantling formal segregation. Alexander made this point when she argued that, 'our security is tied to that of the people of all other countries. What happens to the American Indian, to the Mexican, to the Oriental, to the Negro in New York or in Georgia is taken as evidence of our attitude toward millions of people abroad of the same races as these victims of our un-democratic practices at home. Our enemies abroad hold up these incidents as proof that democracy in America is a fraud, and proclaim their system of government the only true road to freedom.'¹⁹ The gruesome murders of Black veterans, bombings of civil rights activists, capricious and harsh sentences for minorities while known white killers walked free all received unfavorable international coverage, as Alexander predicted. Alexander was an officer or on the board of several Black American organizations that successfully petitioned the United Nations for observer status including the NCNW and National Bar Association.²⁰

Sadie Alexander and other Black lawyers in the city were not invited to join the Philadelphia Bar Association (PBA) until 1952, twenty-five years after she had passed the state Bar. The same year Alexander traveled to India and Israel and she visited many other countries as a delegate to conferences and as a private citizen in the years that followed. Not content to rest on her considerable laurels, Alexander began to gather materials on the UN's human rights conventions including the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) and those having to do with the political rights of women and children, opposing slavery and forced labor. Despite the Holocaust, the US would not ratify the Genocide Convention for fear racial minorities would invoke the 'and

18 'Americans are Called Mentally Ill Because of Fear and Hate in Nation', *New York Times*, 8 October 1948 describes Alexander's address at a forum sponsored by twenty-nine organizations in New York at 60th Street and Park Avenue on 'Proposals for A Better World'. 'Why We Must Act Now To Secure the Recommendations of President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights', 3 pages typed, no author, STMA Papers, Box 40/5. 'Why We Must Act' contains the same phrases Alexander is quoted saying in the *New York Times* article.

19 Ibid.

20 'Resolutions to be presented to the Legal Committee of the General Assembly of the United Nations Conference', STMA 50/30.

Fig. 31.6 Sadie T. M. Alexander holding *To Secure these Rights*, ca. 1947.
Photographer unknown. University Archives and Records Center,
University of Pennsylvania.

punishment' section from the title to use international law to force the end of segregation and racial discrimination, and it was indifferent to the other human rights conventions. By 1965 Alexander had become the chair of the PBA's subcommittee on human rights treaties and conventions. Her subcommittee began a two-year effort — ultimately fruitless — to get their organization to recommend that the American Bar Association change its position and support the ratification of the conventions on genocide and on practices akin to slavery, forced labor, and the political rights of women. Alexander keenly remembered her efforts to link segregation, women's rights, and international atrocities some twenty years earlier, but she found her colleagues in the PBA less interested in condemning genocide. Three of the five-person subcommittee voted in favor of ratification of the treaties (with one no vote and one abstention). In what must have been a bid to have some success with the full body, the committee voted to send the recommendation to ratify all the conventions

forward but to have a separate vote on the Genocide Convention. Despite the successes of the Civil Rights Movement in 1965–66, Alexander might have thought time was going backward rather than forward in terms of human rights issues. At the same time, Sadie Alexander was working to persuade the Philadelphia Bar to reject genocide, Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton set out in Oakland California to write the platform of their new organization, the Black Panther Party.²¹ The Panthers' critique of western hypocrisy and their desire to use the UN to obtain Black peoples' human rights was not very different from the postwar petitions to the UN of the Civil Rights Congress or the National Bar Association that Alexander had supported.

The United States did not ratify the Genocide Convention until 1988 under President Jimmy Carter, forty years after it was adopted by the United Nations. Alexander died one year later at age ninety-one. Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander was not a radical by any conventional definition, but her insistence that American democracy should exhibit the same core principals in foreign and domestic policy was grounded in a centuries-long Black oppositional critique that called on the US to protect the human rights of all persons.

This chapter has used a grandmother and granddaughter who never met to chart the enduring legacy of Black women activists, migrants, and travelers who used their voices, writings, and their church to call for human rights. These women's prophetic visions of their place and space in the world stretched from the determined search for freedom over decades and thousands of miles by Eliza Bowers Mossell to her granddaughter Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander's urgent public voice in twentieth-century debates over race, gender, economic opportunity, and foreign policy. Alexander continued a long tradition of Black American women intellectuals' advocacy for the rights of women, and their opposition to racism and imperialism in all its forms — at home and abroad. Her life provides a window onto the multi-generational nature of African-American women's repeated attempts to bring their country and their world's crimes against people of color to an international stage and to forge solidarities with like-minded women of all nations and creeds.

21 'October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program', in *The Sixties Project* http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/Panther_platform.html

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