

Introduction

Global Garveyism

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Drawing on a rich prehistory of pan-African mobilizations and rhetoric, propelled by the ferment of the Great War, global Garveyism worked its way into the warp and woof of twentieth-century black liberation politics.¹ The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA) established hundreds of branches in the United States and Canada,² in the Caribbean,³ in Central and South America,⁴ and in western and southern Africa,⁵ organizing dynamic centers of community building and giving local activism a dazzling, and galvanizing, global context. Garveyites carried the news, networks, and self-assured predictions (“Africa for the Africans!”) of their movement throughout the diaspora, variously informing, influencing, and cooperating with an eclectic mix of admirers and organizations. By the early 1930s, Garveyism had played a role in shaping everything from trade union politics in the greater Caribbean to Aboriginal politics in Australia; from welfare association politics and independent church building in central-southern Africa to millennial religious revivals throughout Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean.⁶ Garveyism’s impact was observable in the ways early leaders of the African National Congress and Industrial Commercial Workers’ Union in South Africa embraced and translated its methods.⁷ It could be glimpsed in the attention and grudging respect granted to the movement by its ideological opponents, whether in the Communist International or the Colonial Office.⁸ It was made manifest in the work of Garveyites, former Garveyites, and Garvey acolytes in the several decades following the UNIA’s 1920s heyday. Spanning continents and traversing oceans, Garveyites built the largest mass movement in the history of the African diaspora.

Despite the breadth and scope of Garveyism's achievement—and despite the impressive and pioneering work of Garveyism scholars like Amy Jacques Garvey, Robert A. Hill, Tony Martin, Rupert Lewis, Barbara Bair, Emory Tolbert, and others—it has only been in the new century that Garveyism has received serious attention in works published by mainstream academic presses in the United States. In crucial respects, Garveyism's marginalization within mainstream historiographical debates persists. This volume—the first edited collection devoted to Garveyism studies in three decades⁹—showcases original essays by scholars working in Africa, the West Indies, the Hispanic Caribbean, North America, and Australia. Such work has rendered untenable the persistent idea that Garveyism was a brief and misguided phenomenon or that it was a side-show to the normative political trajectories of African American, Caribbean, African, and global history. Rather, the essays appearing in *Global Garveyism* encourage students and scholars to rethink the emergence of modern black politics in a manner that moves Garveyism from the margins of analysis to the center. They suggest the need to revisit global, national, regional, and local histories in light of what Garveyism scholars have uncovered.

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The UNIA was founded in Jamaica in 1914 by Marcus Garvey and Amy Ashwood (later Amy Ashwood Garvey, Marcus Garvey's first wife). Finding his ambitions stifled on the island, Garvey set out on a fund-raising and speaking tour of the United States in 1916, and threw himself into a rising wave of anti-racist, anti-war, and anti-colonial ferment in Harlem—what Hubert Henry Harrison termed the “New Negro” movement. Deploying his prodigious gifts as an orator, publicist, and mass mobilizer, Garvey skillfully shifted the gravity of the New Negro movement away from Harrison's nascent Liberty League and toward his newly restructured UNIA.¹⁰ By 1919, in the eyes of the American intelligence community, Garvey was the most dangerous “Negro radical agitator” in town. Months earlier, the UNIA had launched the Black Star Line Steamship Company, promising to join African-descended people from the United States, the Caribbean, and West Africa in a new triangular exchange intended to foster commerce, cooperation, and racial unity. Later that year, Garvey announced plans to shift the headquarters of the UNIA to Monrovia, Liberia, a central command from which to better pursue the organization's primary aim: the liberation of Africa from foreign domination. In August 1920 the UNIA hosted its first International Convention, drawing thousands of delegates to Harlem

to adopt the Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World; to select the red, black, and green as a flag to represent Africans at home and abroad; and to elect Garvey “provisional president of Africa.” Garvey declared that the scattered sons and daughters of Africa would be united once again, that the race would be reborn and redeemed, and that the UNIA would be the vehicle to bring this about.

Garveyism was born in the cauldron of wartime and postwar radicalism, amid the global insurgencies of colonial populations and peoples of color. Very quickly, however, the moment of instability and opportunity closed; the 1920s was a decade of reaction and repression, of a reinvigorated and reformulated white supremacy. As Garveyites carried their message and their movement across the globe, they were met by a coordinated assault from agents and defenders of the imperial order. The Black Star Line foundered in the face of government intrigue, undercapitalization, and poor business operations. Plans for Liberia were dashed by pressure from the British and the French and by the calculations of the Liberian government. Marcus Garvey was subjected to what the scholar Robert A. Hill has fairly described as a “witch hunt” by the United States intelligence community; failing to secure a sedition charge, the Bureau of Investigations (the precursor to the FBI) built a tenuous mail fraud case, for which Garvey was charged in 1923, banished to federal prison in 1925, and deported in 1927.¹¹

As the UNIA entered a period of organizational crisis, Garveyites—in search of practical outcomes—embraced newer strategies for formulating, delivering, and implementing African and black liberation. Amid institutional decline, Garveyism paradoxically retained its vitality as a device for mass politics making. In her pioneering book, *Garvey and Garveyism*, Amy Jacques Garvey (Marcus Garvey’s second wife) noted this vitality: the way news of Garveyism was carried from its home base in Harlem to locations around the globe, transported on ships, smuggled by sailors and students, translated into local dialects; the way contacts were maintained from Sydney, Australia, to Honolulu, Hawaii, to Vladivostok, Russia; the way Africans were “indoctrinated in Garveyism in England, France, and the U.S.A., and on their return home, quietly and secretly spread the gospel of Unity and Freedom.” Jacques Garvey suggested that nervous colonial states collected voluminous “secret reports” which they held from public eyes. “It would hurt the prestige of colonial powers for the world to know that a lone black man caused them so much concern,” she wrote, “that their statesmen had their ears to the ground to hear of his every movement and utterance.” The scattered archives of Garveyism, when they became available,

would “prove what awakened black minds can achieve in defiance of lashings, imprisonment, and bullets.”¹²

This pivot—what Marcus Garvey described as the transition to the UNIA’s “second period” of modulated and strategic organizing—is crucial to understanding the enduring legacy of Garveyism. Regrettably, few in the academy were willing to acknowledge *Garvey and Garveyism*, let alone take it seriously, when it was published in 1963.¹³ Attention focused instead on E. David Cronon’s *Black Moses* (1955), the first historical work on Garvey and the UNIA produced by an academic press. Cronon, who dismissed *Garvey and Garveyism* as a “book of reminiscence,” was drawn not to the global organizing work described by Jacques Garvey but to the dramatic rise and fall of Marcus Garvey, to the flashy drama of the UNIA’s grand and ill-fated projects, to hopes of liberation dashed and delayed.¹⁴ This framing had the unfortunate consequence of encouraging the impression that Garveyism, for all its bluster, accomplished very little. And indeed, Cronon thought very little of Garvey and his politics. The UNIA’s “gaudy uniforms, colorful parades, high-sounding titles, and grandiose dreams,” wrote Cronon, captured the imagination of “the unsophisticated and unlettered masses” while repelling the “most thoughtful men.” Its appeal to “racial nationalism” revealed the movement’s “inherent weakness.” In a remarkable sleight of hand, Cronon acknowledged and marveled at Garvey’s accomplishment—his leadership of the largest mass movement in the history of the African diaspora—and rendered it somehow meaningless. “Garvey’s unparalleled success in capturing the imagination of the masses of Negroes throughout the world,” wrote Cronon, “can be explained only by recognizing that he put into words . . . what large numbers of his people were thinking.” And yet “little of practical significance” was accomplished. In Cronon’s estimation, Garvey’s message, which so inspired black people throughout the diaspora, amounted to “an unrealistic escapist program of racial chauvinism.” Garvey’s ability to catalyze mass support hardly mattered, because the masses, apparently, had their dreams of liberation figured out wrong.¹⁵

Cronon’s chauvinistic dismissal of Garveyites as “unsophisticated and unlettered masses,” thankfully, did not survive the test of time. But his perplexing insistence that Garveyism, despite its global mass appeal, need neither be studied as a global mass movement nor taken particularly seriously has become a widely accepted commonplace. For the remainder of the twentieth century, only one other book on Garveyism was published by an academic press in the United States—Judith Stein’s *The World of Marcus Garvey* (1986), which nearly matched Cronon’s

work in its skepticism about Garveyism and its lack of attention to Garveyism's global impact.¹⁶ In the new century, Garvey scholars have finally attracted the attention of academic presses. But as the historian Steven Hahn observes, Garvey and the UNIA continue to be briefly summoned in influential histories of the interwar period only to serve as foils, and to be quickly "marginalized, dismissed, or derided."¹⁷ In surveys of American and African American history, Garveyism is deemed worthy of brief mention but hardly worthy of serious analysis. The movement continues to be narrated as a flashy sideshow, an enlivening and quixotic diversion from the *real* story of the black freedom struggle.¹⁸

This neglect can be partially attributed to the nature and timing of African American history's integration into the white American academy. Bracketed within what Hahn calls a "liberal integrationist framework," and narrowed by the rise of Cold War-era area studies, historical work on the black freedom struggle long emphasized African American connections to—rather than alienations from—the nation-building project of the United States.¹⁹ This uneven acceptance of African American history meant that the types of transnational and diasporic visions that animated the work of black historians like George Washington Williams, W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Dorothy Porter Wesley, C.L.R. James, Amy Jacques Garvey, Walter Rodney, Chancellor Williams, and Cedric J. Robinson—the types of framings that allow us to glimpse the contours of Garveyism in its proper, global context—were quieted within the academy. For many decades, to borrow from Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Garveyism was "unthinkable" history.²⁰ It is no accident that the profession's "discovery" of Garveyism in the new century paralleled the "discovery" of extra-national perspectives. The transnational turn, after all, illuminated connections across national and natural borders that black historians, working outside of and on the margins of the academy, had long taken for granted.

This marginalization of Garveyism did not go unchallenged. While the story of the movement was being written out of mainstream historical narratives, its accomplishments were being doggedly and brilliantly traced, cataloged, and preserved by mostly West Indian and African American scholars, and recorded in volumes published by West Indian and independent presses. In 1976, Trinidad-born scholar Tony Martin published his masterpiece, *Race First*, which remains the most complete and most impressively researched work on Garvey's movement to date.²¹ And in the 1970s, Robert A. Hill launched his monumental Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers Project, which operated out of UCLA (and more recently Duke University) but

remains powerfully reminiscent of the preservationist efforts of Arturo Schomburg and a host of legendary African-descended archivists who have kept alive a counter-memory of African diaspora history against persistent pressures of erasure.²² The work of these scholars—Jacques Garvey, Martin, Hill, Rupert Lewis, John Henrik Clarke, Theodore Vincent, Randall Burkett, Emory Tolbert, E. U. Essien-Udom, Barbara Bair, Arnold Hughes, Ula Y. Taylor, and others—established the pedagogical framework of global Garveyism that made the explosion of twenty-first-century scholarship possible. If this volume seeks to bring attention to the flowering of new work on Garveyism in the past decade, it also honors the legacy of those who never doubted Garveyism’s importance.²³

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Marcus Garvey and the UNIA arrived at a pivotal moment in global history. As Michael O. West argues in the chapters that open and close this volume, Garveyism was both an end and a beginning. It pulled together and catalyzed the strands of pan-African thought forged during the Age of Revolution and carried throughout the Atlantic world in the decades that followed.²⁴ And it played a crucial role in inaugurating a new struggle against colonial rule and white domination that would reach its peak—and suffer its ultimate defeat—in the revolutionary decades of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Great War and its aftermath shattered the illusion of cooperation. At the outbreak of the conflict, leading black spokesmen from the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa encouraged black citizens and subjects to enlist in the army to “make the world safe for democracy”—to “close ranks,” as W.E.B. Du Bois famously enjoined, in order to secure favorable treatment in the postwar world.²⁵ Du Bois’s calculation was rooted in the long-standing expectation among leading pan-Africanists that European and European-descended statesmen would accept, in the end, the challenge of adapting their practices to more honestly reflect the aspirational rhetoric of the Enlightenment. The Paris Peace Conference, where the principle of self-determination was explicitly delimited to European peoples, and the Covenant of the League of Nations, which articulated a reformulated mandate for global white supremacy, betrayed this hopefulness and sparked outrage by anticolonial activists throughout the world. Many were drawn to the newly constituted Third Communist International, which loudly declared its commitment to self-determination and liberation for peoples of color and colonial populations.²⁶ In the African diaspora, many more were drawn to Marcus Garvey’s vision of a rising tide of color: the inevi-

table resurgence of the world's non-white majority, the rise of a black empire, and the dawning of a new golden age.

Garveyism embodied, at its root, a revolt against the West. To be sure, Marcus Garvey was shaped by the Victorian moralities of the British Empire, and embraced a civilizationist discourse derived from his Western education. He did not set out to overturn Western conceptions of commerce, gender roles, faith, or culture. And yet Garvey understood that the foundation of global order was a racial calculus that granted white peoples resources and power at the expense of peoples of color. His demand of Africa for the Africans, Asia for the Asians, and Europe for the Europeans—in other words, an equitable distribution of the world's land and resources among the world's people—amounted to a revolutionary declaration. Much has been made about Garvey's "philosophy and opinions"—his views on socialism and capitalism, his advocacy of emigrationism, his promotion of racial separatism—but at the core of Garvey's message was a thundering prophecy: Africa will be free. The black race will be free. A new world will be born out of the ashes of global white supremacy. Black people must organize and work and prepare to bring this about.

The UNIA was constituted for the purpose of bringing this prophecy to life. The Great War, Garvey argued, revealed both a declining white civilization and an unprepared, disorganized black race. Now that the conflict had lit the flame of anticolonial agitation, a new war—a war between the races—loomed on the horizon. The medium of the UNIA was thus its message. Building a mass movement was an ideological, theological, and practical imperative.

The success of Garveyism rested on its ability to convey this new message of opportunity and transformation in a way that seemed old and familiar. The rhetoric of the "New Negro" was galvanizing because of this confluence—because, in the words of Lawrence Levine, Garvey "preached it in the right syllables."²⁷ In the generations before Garvey's rise to prominence, sailors, missionaries, intellectuals, and activists had charted paths across the African diaspora, articulating the outlines of the pan-African vision—racial rebirth, African redemption, and transatlantic cooperation—that would become associated with the UNIA. Garveyites built a mass movement because they were able to translate these old rhythms of community memory and politics in ways that effectively captured the possibilities and constraints of the postwar order. And Garveyism remained a mass politics so long as African diasporic peoples saw it as a usable framework for enacting their own traditions, meeting their needs, and seeking their broader aspirations.