

**MARCUS GARVEY, THE U.N.I.A, AND THE  
HIDDEN POLITICAL HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS**

S t e v e n H a h n  
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## I

Late in the winter of 2005, I saw a notice in a Philadelphia paper for an upcoming exhibit on Marcus Garvey and his organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (or the UNIA). The exhibit was to be on display at the African-American History Museum in Center City, and it was scheduled for several hours on a Saturday afternoon. At the time, I thought it odd that a museum exhibit would be up for a mere afternoon, but I was very interested in Garvey and his movement and eager to see what might be there, so I decided to go.

When I entered the museum that Saturday and explained that I wished to see the Garvey exhibit, I was directed to a lower floor. There I entered a space that was packed, not with photographs, documents, or other memorabilia, but with people. A great many of them, all seemingly of African descent, ranging from children to adults in their seventies and eighties. They were seated in folding chairs (or standing all around them), on the floor, before a small stage where, at the moment I entered, some of the children, of elementary school age, were performing a skit about Marcus Garvey, much to the delight of the very attentive audience. When the children finished, a tall, very striking looking black man in a dark suit rose to speak, and as he did I learned that I had not walked into a museum exhibit on Garvey and the UNIA at all; I had instead walked into a meeting of the Philadelphia branch of the UNIA.

I had no idea that the UNIA, which Garvey founded in Jamaica in 1914 and which had its

heyday in the United States in the late 1910s and 1920s, was still in existence and, obviously, drawing crowds of followers. And virtually everyone I subsequently told about this event, including scholars who work in the field of African-American history, expressed similar astonishment. This was clearly news to them. But it probably shouldn't have been. Along with the one in Philadelphia, there are currently UNIA divisions in Washington, D.C., Richmond, metropolitan Atlanta (3 of them), metropolitan Chicago (3 of them), Cleveland, Los Angeles, Detroit, Durham, and Baltimore, as well as in Montreal, Dakar, Port Harcourt (Nigeria), Bergvlie (South Africa), Montego Bay, and Kingston; and although some of the divisions may have been reorganized relatively recently, there is every reason to think that most hark back to the UNIA's founding.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, there is a deep history of the UNIA about which we know very little, though this seems emblematic of a larger and more curious elision: that is to say, how little we know, at any point in its history, about what is acknowledged to be the greatest mass movement of people of African descent in the twentieth century. Garvey himself has, of course, drawn a good deal of attention and thanks to the labors of Robert A. Hill and his associates we now have nine of a projected twelve volumes of the papers of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there remains no

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<sup>1</sup> Information on the present-day divisions of the UNIA may be found on the organization's website, <<http://www.unia-acl.org>> where there are links for further local information.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, WI, 1955); Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (1976; Dover, MA, 1986); Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge, 1986); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York, 1978); Lawrence W. Levine, "Marcus Garvey and the Politics of Revitalization," in John Hope Franklin and August Meier, eds., *Black Leaders*

major biography of Garvey or history of the movement, no oral histories of people who regarded themselves as Garveyites, and almost nothing about the local experience of Garveyism and the UNIA outside of New York, where Garvey had his headquarters before he was imprisoned for mail fraud and then deported. Representations of the social basis of the UNIA are largely conjectural (and often contradictory), and only a handful of scholars have bothered to study either the geographic expanse of the organization or the character and activities of the membership in any one place.<sup>3</sup> And to the question of why so many thousands of African-Americans (not to mention African Caribbeans and Africans) were drawn to Garvey's message and his movement – and would continue to be drawn to it well after Garvey's own demise – to the question of what people heard and how what they heard resonated with and transformed their sensibilities, the answers are few and, for the most part, unsatisfying.<sup>4</sup>

The limitations in our knowledge and understanding of Garveyism and the UNIA

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*of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL, 1982), 105-38; and Robert A. Hill et al., eds., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* (9 vols.; Berkeley, 1983-2004).

<sup>3</sup> See, Mary Gambrell Rolinson, "The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Georgia," in John Inscoe, ed., *Georgia in Black and White* (Athens, GA, 1994), 202-24, and her forthcoming book, *Grassroots Garveyism: The UNIA in the Rural South* (Chapel Hill, 2007); Barbara Bair, "Garveyism and Contested Political Terrain in 1920s Virginia," in John Saillant, ed., *Afro-Virginian History and Culture* (New York, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> There does, however, seem to be a developing interest in the Garvey movement and popular responses to it. This includes, Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Ula Yvette Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill, 2002); Ibrahim Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-1940* (Durham, NC, 2003); Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States* (Durham, NC, 2005); and dissertations on the UNIA in Louisiana by xxxxx, and on the transmission of Garvey's ideas by Robert Trent Vinson, and on the UNIA in rural Missouri by Jared Roll, "Road to the Promised Land: Rural Rebellion in the New Cotton South, 1890-1945" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2006).

would be comprehensible if the movement were fleeting and relatively superficial. But this was hardly the case. Garveyism won massive support in the 1920s, and its intellectual and political legacies have been profound. It left its mark on every major black social and political movement of the twentieth century (here and abroad) and was an influence (often the dominant influence) on every form of popular black nationalism in the United States from the Nation of Islam to the Black Panthers. Elijah Muhammad came into early contact with, and Malcolm X grew up in the household of, Garveyites. John Hope Franklin remembers how avidly Garvey's newspaper, the *Negro World*, was read in the black section of Tulsa when he was a boy. Members of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union in the South African Transkei imagined, in the late 1920s, that Garveyites would be arriving from America by ship and air to support their struggles, and Garvey's call for "Africa for the Africans" helped energize anti-colonial mobilizations throughout the continent. Leaders of the Black Panther Party often carried Garvey's writings and instructed recruits to study them. And there can be little doubt that Garveyism established far more of a popular base among black Americans than the NAACP ever would, or that Garvey-inflected black nationalist ideas continue to have great currency among black workers and the black poor.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York, 1997); Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as told to Alex Haley (1964; New York, 1987), 1-2; John Hope Franklin, "Foreward," to Cronon, *Black Moses*, xvii; Helen Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924-1930* (New Haven, 1987), 213-45; Michael O. West, "The Seeds Are Sown: The Impact of Garveyism in Zimbabwe in the Interwar Years," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35 (2002): 335-62; Amanda D. Kemp and Robert Trent Vinson, 'Poking Holes in the Sky': Professor James Thaele, American Negroes, and Modernity in 1920s Segregationist South Africa," *African Studies Review*, 43 (April 2000): 141-59; Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago, 2001).

Yet, for all of this, studies of W.E.B. Du Bois and the NAACP, of black union organizing and black communists, of black middle-class politics and institutions, and of the Civil Rights movement in its national, regional, and local incarnations abound, while Garvey and the UNIA are often summoned only to be marginalized, dismissed, or derided. An immense world of politics, ideas, and cultural practices, which may complicate or confound our views of the past century, thereby remains largely hidden from us. And although the challenges of research have helped keep much of this world from view, the main culprits, I would suggest, are scholars and intellectuals who have chosen not to see.

## II

It isn't easy to get much beyond square one. Considerations of Garveyism and the UNIA naturally begin with Garvey himself, a figure who has, for the most part, been vilified, disparaged, scorned, and lampooned. Observers at the time (including a fair share of African American intellectuals and political leaders, beginning with Du Bois) and many scholars since have depicted Garvey in derisive and almost comical terms: as a foreigner out of touch with American life; as a political dreamer who misled his followers; as a scam-artist looking to fleece the masses and line his pockets; as something of a religious revivalist who traded on the traditions of faith and fraternalism; as a racial purist whose dangerous sensibilities led him to political associations with white supremacists; and as a self-absorbed and self-referential buffoon, outfitting himself and his African Legion with silly, resplendent military attire in pathetic mimicry of the colonial powers that be. That he attracted so much attention makes Garvey all the more problematic and his movement something of an embarrassment. How could

the UNIA be anything but a collection of angry, ignorant, unsophisticated, and displaced black folk, easily duped by the veneer of authority and the offer of community. Small wonder that Garvey's principal adherents are often made out to be West Indians, recently arrived from the islands.<sup>6</sup>

Finding one's way through this thicket of representation to a clearer sense of Garveyism and the UNIA is a formidable task, and it may help explain why there have been few takers. Unlike the records of the NAACP, which are voluminous, well-organized, and very substantial as to operations on the national and local levels over time, those of Garvey and the UNIA are far thinner. The published papers focus on Garvey, his writings, speeches, and doings, the many ways in which he was harassed by federal and local authorities, his conflicts with African-American leaders, and his growing legal problems. There is also a good deal on the UNIA's structure, its annual conventions, and its divisions in large cities like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The unpublished records, housed in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, are relatively scanty (6 microfilm rolls worth) and chiefly spotlight the activities and correspondence of the Central Division in New York. The UNIA did publish a weekly newspaper, the *Negro World*, which printed reports from divisions all over the United States and the world, and had a Spanish-language page, but has long been regarded as little more than Garvey's mouthpiece and propaganda organ.

Still, there is much with which to work. Garvey's speeches, editorials, and correspondence, which may be found both in his published papers and in the *Negro World*,

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<sup>6</sup> See, Lewis, *Du Bois*; etc. Thus, E. David Cronon describes some of Garvey's staunchest supporters as southern blacks who had recently migrated to the North, "poorly educated, superstitious, disillusioned." See Cronon, *Black Moses*, 27.

reward close readings because they show a political vision in an almost continuous state of evolution and because his ideas and plans bear little resemblance to the ways they have been represented and caricatured. The unpublished papers, moreover, include several boxes of index cards, which provide information on the UNIA's many divisions in the United States, the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa in the mid-to-late 1920s: the location, the division number (a sense of when it was organized), the names of the president and secretary, and occasionally the membership. Further information on members and sympathizers may be obtained in the pages of the *Negro World*, which not only published letters to the editor but routinely listed the names and hometowns of men and women (hundreds of them) who contributed even a few cents to Garvey's various causes – especially to his legal defense fund. All of this material combines to yield a far richer portrait of Garvey, Garveyism, and the UNIA than we currently have, and, even more, one that is challenging and surprising in its meanings and implications.

Perhaps the greatest surprises concern the movement's geography and social base. The UNIA has long been seen as an organization of the urban North, a testimony to the impact of the Great Migration as well as to the arrival of thousands of West Indian immigrants in the first two decades of the twentieth century. And there is no question that, in terms of total members, the UNIA divisions in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago were among the largest, with New York easily having pride of place (as many as 30,000). But the picture is very different if we consider the number of divisions and where most of them were to be found.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The UNIA divisions in New York City may have had between 25,000 and 30,000 members in the early 1920s. For some information on the size of the large urban divisions see Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, II: 397, 410, 496, III: 163, 175-76, 252, 419, 495.

The growth of the UNIA was nothing short of explosive. Garvey arrived in the United States in the spring of 1916 intending to raise money for a Jamaican school modeled after Booker T. Washington's, Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama. Indeed, Garvey had corresponded with Washington and initially planned his American trip around meeting with him when Washington died unexpectedly in 1915. Garvey decided to come to the United States anyway, hoping, in part, to see Washington's successors and secure financial support from them, but shortly after landing in New York, he set off on a thirty-two state tour of visiting and lecturing. By the time he returned to New York, he was more interested in advancing the prospects of the UNIA, which had never taken off in Jamaica. He quickly established a division in Harlem and began publishing the *Negro World*, which was soon circulating in black communities not only across much of the United States, but also throughout much of the Atlantic world.<sup>8</sup>

By 1922 – within five years – the UNIA could boast more than a thousand divisions, and there would be further growth through the 1920s, even after Garvey's incarceration. Well over two hundred of the divisions were outside of the United States, in southern and western Africa, in South America, in Canada, and particularly in the Caribbean basin, where much activity was in evidence, especially in Panama, Costa Rica, British Honduras, Trinidad, and Cuba. The reach of the *Negro World* – thanks in good part to black maritime laborers, sailors, and soldiers – came to be so great in the years after World War One and to appear so threatening to the stability of colonial regimes, that officials from Cape Town to Lagos to Belize and to Port-of-Spain moved

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<sup>8</sup>Estimates of the *Negro World's* circulation range between 60,000 and 200,000. See Cronon, *Black Moses*, 44-46.

to ban its distribution. It made some sense for them to do that. The *Negro World* was a spark (usually the main spark) in organizing UNIA divisions and the paper was customarily read to those who attended the division meetings.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, about three-quarters of the UNIA divisions (over 900) operated within the borders of the United States, and most of them were neither in the Northeast, the Middle Atlantic, or the Midwest, nor were they in large urban areas. Rather, the majority of the UNIA divisions were in the former slave states of the South, and the great majority of them were to be found in small towns, villages, and rural areas. Louisiana had more divisions than any other state in the nation (about 80), and it was followed by the southern states of Virginia (48) and North Carolina (47). The only northern states in the top ten were Pennsylvania (45), Ohio (39), and New Jersey (31). New York and California (16) together ranked sixteenth, behind Illinois (23) and Missouri (21), and well behind Mississippi (44), Arkansas (38), Florida (32), Georgia (26), and South Carolina (24).

New Orleans proved to be a hotbed of UNIA organizing, and many divisions grew up in and around the city, or in the towns and country districts of the surrounding sugar bowl. The

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<sup>9</sup> On UNIA divisions outside of the United States see, Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, 997-1000; Tony Martin, "Marcus Garvey and Trinidad, 1912-1947," Arnold Hughes, "Africa and the Garvey Movement in the Interwar years," G.O. Olusanya, "Garvey and Nigeria," all in Rupert Lewis and Maureen Warner-Lewis, eds., *Garvey: Africa, Europe, the Americas* (Trenton, NJ, 1994), 47-78, 99-134; Robert A. Hill and Gregory A. Pirio, "Africa for the Africans": The Garvey Movement in South Africa, 1920-1940," in Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, eds., *The Politics of Race, Class, and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London, 1987), 209-53; West, "Seeds Are Sown." On efforts to ban the distribution of the *Negro World*, see, Samuel A. Duncan to Earl Curzon, 8 January 1920, in Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, II, 188-99; W.F. Elkins, "Marcus Garvey, the *Negro World*, and the British West Indies, 1919-1920," in Lewis and Warner-Lewis, eds., *Garvey*, 33-46. On how the *Negro World* circulated see, *La Nation Belge*, 25 June 1921, in Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, IX, 46.

same was true of Charleston. But in Virginia, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Missouri the divisions were overwhelmingly rural, located in the Tidewater, in the old tobacco and cotton belts, and in the new cotton frontier of the Mississippi Delta. Their memberships were generally of small or modest size. The UNIA required at least seven "members of the Negro race [displaying] . . . sufficient intelligence as to safeguard the interests of the society" before it would grant a charter, and while the dues were not to exceed 25 cents per month, that clearly pressed beyond the resources of most rural and small-town African Americans.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the southern divisions, therefore, had somewhere between ten and thirty members at any one time, although this offers only a baseline estimate of Garvey's support. Local UNIA meetings and conventions could bring impressive turnouts – such as the 1,500 who showed up in Merigold, Mississippi (population, 606), or the 10,000 who reportedly gathered in Pelham, Georgia (population, 2,640) – and the *Negro World* circulated much more widely than the UNIA divisions and got into many more hands than those of direct subscribers. "I am not a member of the UNIA but a well wisher," began a typical letter-to-the editor, this from Ross,

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<sup>10</sup> On the UNIA's requirements for divisions and membership see, "Constitution and Book of Laws," Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, I, 257, 265, 266, 269. For the distribution of UNIA divisions see Records of the Central Division, Manuscript 20, Boxes, 22a-c, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City; Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 9861000; Martin, *Race First*, 15-16; Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopianism: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London, 1998), 365-66. There are small differences in the total numbers of divisions reported in each of these sources owing to the different moments at which they came available. There is information on division memberships in the index-card boxes at the Schomburg, but it is uneven and only covers the period between 1926 and 1928. Still, it demonstrates that urban divisions, such as those in Atlanta, New Orleans, Charleston, Mobile, Richmond, Newport News, and Tampa generally had the largest number of members.

Texas. A meeting in Baxley, Georgia (population, 1,142) in August 1923, called to protest the legal "injustice" being done to Marcus Garvey, brought only a small crowd owing to threats of local harassment but also 200 signatures on a petition.<sup>11</sup>

The social composition of UNIA divisions – as best as can be determined at this point – varied, in part, according to the demographic character of the places in which they were located. West Indians figured prominently in New York and south Florida, and to a lesser extent in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Boston. Southern migrants were centrally important in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and even Los Angeles. And in the urban areas generally, the UNIA attracted a range of middle and working-class African Americans. But almost everywhere, the rank-and-file of the UNIA seemed to be composed disproportionately of black workers who sought or had attained some measure of respectability. In cities and towns they tended to be factory and railroad workers, longshoremen, shipyard workers, porters, tradesmen, and wage laborers. In the countryside, they might be lumber or turpentine workers, though they were more likely to be tenants and farm laborers in districts that raised cotton, sugar, and tobacco. The men tended to be older (in their forties), to be married or widowed, to live in households with a number of women, to be literate, and to send their children to school; often they had resided in a locale for a good stretch of time and had achieved economic stability, even if that involved mortgages or debt that also tied them to the land. In Marcus Garvey and the UNIA, they appear to have heard

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<sup>11</sup> *Negro World*, 22 September 1923, 2 August 1924, 4 August 1923. On the population figures, see, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Population*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C., 1921), 191, 194, 242.

voices, ideas, and plans that resonated with their experiences and aspirations.<sup>12</sup>

### III

During the years of the UNIA's most rapid growth – 1918-1922 – Marcus Garvey presented an argument and a set of projects that simultaneously took sobering account of African-American prospects in the depths of the Jim Crow era and offered a breathtaking vision of political struggle and redemption. He seemed to be especially inspired by the World War One moment, not only because it brought a ferocious racist outburst in the United States but also because of the political transformations it appeared to be unleashing internationally. Irish nationalism, Zionism, the Russian Revolution, the Versailles Peace Conference, and PanAfricanism heralded both a dramatic shake-up of the old order and the possibility of creating something new. People of African descent, Garvey believed, had to ready themselves, to "make up our minds now," to play a central role in history's unfolding.<sup>13</sup>

First and foremost, that would mean retaking their homeland of Africa. The world, as Garvey had come to see it, was organized around races, nations, and empires. African peoples –

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<sup>12</sup> Report by Bureau Agent H.J. Lennon, 1-2 October 1920, in Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, III, 41-43; *Baltimore Observer*, May 1920, *ibid.*, II, 344; Kimberley L. Phillips, *Alabamallorth: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-1945* (Urbana, IL, 1999), 186-87; Barbara Bair, "Garveyism and the Contested Political Terrain in 1920s Virginia," in John Saillant, ed., *Afro-Virginian History and Culture* (New York, 1999), 227-49; Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, 1993); Emory Tolbert, "Outpost Garveyism and the U.N.I.A.: Rank and File," *Journal of Black Studies*, 5 (March 1975): 233-53; Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, chaps. II, IV; Roll, "Road to Promised Land," chap. II.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Garvey Speech, 12 March 1921, Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, III, 210; Garvey Editorial Letter, 1 November 1920, in *ibid.*, 68; Garvey Address, 25 August 1919, *ibid.*, I, 502.

whether on the continent or elsewhere in the diaspora – had fallen subject to the rule and exploitation of whites, and "no race can be completely free, living as subjects of an alien race." It would be a "big mistake," he insisted, to "think that the white man is going to be more liberal" or that blacks could successfully achieve equality in societies dominated by whites. They would continue to be lynched and mobbed and ground down until their oppressors had to answer to power – to a black nation with the muscle to defend itself and command the world's respect. "Some serious attempt must be made," Garvey told a UNIA meeting in New York, "to build up a government and a nation sufficiently strong to protect the Negro or your future in the U.S. will not be worth a snap of a finger . . . [W]ithout an independent Africa, without a powerful Africa you are lost."<sup>14</sup>

Like the Irish struggle of the time to which he was drawn, Garvey's vision was nationalist and anti-colonial. He called, not so much for African repatriation as for a movement to oust the European colonizers and to establish a basis for black self-governance, a movement that would link "every member of the race in every part of the world" who, wherever their residence, were "citizens" of Africa.. "We of the UNIA," he proclaimed, "are not endeavoring to repatriate at the present moment . . . twelve million Negroes of America, or twelve or fifteen million from the West Indies, . . . [or] twenty-five millions in South and Central America . . . We are first trying to organize these [millions] . . . with the one object of a free and redeemed Africa, and we are saying all the millions organized in this Western Hemisphere can be organized until we are ready." Garvey acknowledged that such an undertaking would require time, that "we have years

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<sup>14</sup>*Negro World*, 13 November 1920; "Advice of the Negro People to the Peace Conference," 30 November 1918, in Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, I, 303; *West Indian*, 28 February 1919, in *ibid.*, 374-75.

before us," perhaps "a hundred years," until "Africa finds a Napoleon" and "we will march from this Western Hemisphere sixty million strong." Nonetheless, he was "preaching preparedness."<sup>15</sup>

Yet, the UNIA was to be more than the vehicle of organization and preparedness; it was also imagined as an embryonic form of the new African nation itself, a government in exile.

"We are endeavoring to perform the function of the government of our race," Garvey announced, "just as the Government of America performs the function of government for ninety million white people." To that end, the UNIA drew up a constitution and a "declaration of rights," created an African Legion and a Black Cross Nursing Corps, recognized organizational units by the military term "divisions," invested in factories, laundries, and restaurants, discussed the wisdom of a "civil service" to avoid corruption and train a political class, established a Black Star Shipping Line to move people and goods in what was seen as a global political economy, looked to ally with the government of Liberia, paraded in large processions, sang an anthem and waved a national flag (red, black, and green), and made Marcus Garvey provisional president. "If we are to rise as a great people[,] to become a great national force," Garvey declared, "we must start business enterprises of our own; we must build ships and start trading with ourselves between America, the West Indies, and Africa. We must put up factories in all the great manufacturing centers of the country . . . and in these factories we must manufacture . . . all the necessities of life, those things that people need, not only our people . . . but the people of China, of India, of South and Central America, and even the white man." Eventually, "we must have an

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<sup>15</sup> *Negro World*, 19 July 1919, 11 November 1919, 3 March 1920. As a Garveyite in Los Angeles later recalled, "Mr. Garvey never did advocate for all Negroes to go back to Africa. [No] he never did that. He was teaching the people that as long as you're in somebody else's house you can't rule . . . [and] Africa was the only continent in which they could have a government of their own." See Tolbert, "Outcast Garveyism," 238.

African Army second to none and a Navy second to none" so that "if they should lynch and burn you the Ambassador of the African Republic in Africa will send home the news to Africa and we will send our battleships." If some said or sneered that "this is a dream," Garvey responded: "it wasn't a dream for George Washington."<sup>16</sup>

Nothing attracted more popular enthusiasm or brought more financial support from the UNIA faithful than did the Black Star Line. Even with three rickety, problem-plagued, ships, it served as a symbol of power, pride, and destiny in a world of commerce and migration, and thousands of blacks turned out at ports stretching from New York to Havana to Colon, Panama in order to greet the Black Star vessels when they steamed in. "It must be understood," a federal agent could report in the fall of 1920, "that the foundation and strength of Garvey's anti-white movement rests solely on his retaining ownership of these ships . . . [whose] commercial value . . . is by far a secondary consideration against their moral and racial value."<sup>17</sup>

The popular appeal of the Black Star Line is worthy of attention not because it identifies an entrepreneurial and capitalistic impulse among Garvey's followers or because it suggests the fundamentally bourgeois orientation of the movement (though, of course, these arguments can and have been made, especially when Garveyism is viewed from the top down);<sup>18</sup> it is worthy of

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<sup>16</sup> "Constitution and Book of Laws," July 1918, in Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, I, 25775; "Amended Constitution," and "Declaration of Rights," August 1920, *ibid.*, II, 576-77, 67781; Garvey Speech, 20 September 1920," and Garvey Speech, 26 September 1920, *ibid.*, III, 2425, 28; *Negro World*, 1 February 1919, 13 August 1921; Taylor, *Veiled Garvey*, 41-42.

<sup>17</sup> Report by Special Agent P-138, 24 September 1920, in Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, III, 15; Martin, *Race First*, 151-160; etc. See also Reports by Special Agent W.W., 26 February 1920, in Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, II, 216.

<sup>18</sup> See, especially, Stein, *World of Marcus Garvey*.

attention because it draws us to deeper currents of sensibility and practice, of aspiration and belief among many thousands of African Americans and thereby helps us understand how Garvey was able to build a mass movement so quickly, and one that would endure in many incarnations.

Garvey and other UNIA leaders attracted a mass following because they cultivated fertile terrain. Together, they offered a critique of American society that made popular sense; they spoke a language that had familiar ideas and cadences; they tapped into long-standing institutional forums and rituals; and they offered means and ends that comported with grassroots struggles of the postemancipation period and with the more general social and political experience of most African Americans. They also constructed a global context that enabled followers to envision a new and expansive arena of strength, numbers, and power, and new and expansive identities based on categories and associations that had come to organize their lives, "race" chief among them. The problem is that these confluences have been greatly underappreciated.

To be sure, the intellectual genealogy of Garvey and Garveyism has been elaborated by numbers of scholars, and it includes a collection of nationalists, proto-nationalists, and emigrationists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, Edward Blyden, Booker T. Washington, and Henry McNeal Turner. It includes, as well, Pan-Africanists like Duse Mohammed Ali on whose paper, the *African Times and Orient Review*, Garvey worked when he was in London during the early 1910s, and even W.E.B. Du Bois whose famed battles with Garvey can easily obscure the perspectives they shared. Here scholars have emphasized the embrace of Christianity and European culture, the idea of

"civilizing" Africa and Africans, and the need for self-help, uplift, community development, and industrial education. And there is much in Garvey's speeches and writings – particularly in his early speeches and writings, that is to say, before he came to the United States – to bear these lineages out.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, what has often been overlooked – and at times ignored – are the ways in which issues of self-governance and separatism, rather than civilizationism and repatriation, enlivened Garvey's projects for African Americans whose parents had been born into slavery and who grew up, overwhelmingly, in the rural and small-town South of the late nineteenth century (which is to say that this was not a "back-to-Africa movement). "I am proud of the fact that I am a member of what I consider the greatest organization in the world," a black North Carolinian wrote to the editor of the *Negro World* in 1925, adding that "I see nothing left for the Negro except to try to regain his motherland where he may govern himself [mine] and may have freedom for himself and the respect of other races and nations." The impulse to self-governance emerged out of the struggles and experiences of enslavement and quickly manifested itself in the period after emancipation. It was to be seen in the efforts of freedpeople to reconstitute kinship groups, to form squads and other family-based work units, to pool resources, and, of course, to acquire land. It was to be seen in the process of mobilizing Union Leagues and other paramilitary organizations, in the battles over officeholding and policy influence in local Republican parties,

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<sup>19</sup> See, Hill et al., eds., "Introduction," *Garvey Papers*, I, xxxvi-lxxxix, Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Camden, CT, 1978); Cronon, *Black Moses*, 202-24; Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 540-625; Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, 2004). The cultural and political genealogy should include black freemasonry as well. See, Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 17-148.

and in the forging of "fusion" agreements with Democrats. Indeed, instead of subsuming the impulse to self-governance to the larger quest for "citizenship," the two may better be seen as interconnected, perhaps mutually constituting.<sup>20</sup>

Self-governance and separatism were especially powerful in fueling a grassroots emigrationism that began to take shape immediately after emancipation and then developed into a large movement in the cotton belt of the Deep South during the 1870s and 1880s. In this, African Americans held meetings, organized clubs, petitioned Congress and the President, contacted the American Colonization Society, circulated literature, and looked to a variety of sites – in the trans-Mississippi West, in the Caribbean, and in Liberia – not to do missionary work, not to civilize the "heathen," but rather where they might re-establish their communities on a more stable and secure footing.

The obstacles were formidable and relatively few blacks managed to move out of the South during these years. But it does appear that a great many – perhaps a great many more than we have yet imagined – found other avenues to attain a semblance of these goals. Some established "black towns" like Mound Bayou in Mississippi, Promiseland in South Carolina, and Bookman in Arkansas; far more came to reside in unincorporated "settlements," clustered on tenant plantations or located at the edge of market towns or growing around small hubs of black landowners and renters, that were held together by kinship groups, churches, schools, and benevolent societies and by a determination to distance themselves, as best as possible, from the reach of whites. In east Texas, more than 500 such settlements came into being between 1865

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<sup>20</sup> *Negro World*, 13 June 1925. I have written at length on this impulse to self-governance in my book, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

and 1900. Many of them survived well into the twentieth century, and there is every reason to believe that the same was true in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and the Carolinas. This, after all, is what W.E.B. Du Bois discovered during his journey to southwest Georgia in the late 1890s and then wrote about so powerfully in *Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>21</sup>

Amid the violent white supremacist campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which sought to enforce black submission through lynching, disfranchisement, and legal segregation, distance, numbers, and arms offered the best protections – as they always had. Under these precarious circumstances, who could deny Garvey's claim that America was a white man's country, that white racism was intractable, that white allies were few and ineffective, and that blacks had to organize for self-defense. And as black soldiers returned from a war to make the "world safe for democracy" only to find a hardened and more vicious Jim Crow at home, as thousands of black southerners made their way into the cities of the North, and as black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and then the *Negro World* began to circulate North and South, apprising African Americans of a wide and complex world, who could not be energized by Garvey's vision of 400 million black allies over the globe.

The extent of UNIA organizing and appeal in any section of the United States is, at the present time, barely understood. The locations of the many divisions established in the 1910s

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<sup>21</sup> On the black "settlements" see, Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad, *Freedom Colonies.. Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow* (Austin, TX, 2005); W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York, 1986), 443-445, 448-449, 458-74; Chalmers Archer Jr., *Growing Up in Rural Mississippi: Memories of a Family, Heritage of a Place* (New York, 1992). On grassroots emigrationism and black towns see, Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet*, 317-363, 457-64; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York, 1976); William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1991), 138-97; Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence, KN, 1979).

and 1920s offer a useful starting point, but they may also direct us to a significant underground of African-American political activity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of which the UNIA was only a part. UNIA divisions in the South, for example, tended to surface in areas – southeast Virginia, eastern North Carolina, southwest Georgia, Louisiana, the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta – where emigrationist sentiment had developed four decades earlier and then carved arenas of organizational activism. Emigrationists of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, in turn, carried their sensibilities with them if and when they migrated from southeast to southwest (to newly cleared and drained lands of Arkansas, Missouri, Louisiana, and Texas), from countryside to town (the first moves of what turned into the "Great Migration"), and eventually from South to North. Indeed, the earliest UNIA mobilizations in the southern states occurred in Hampton Roads, Newport News, Norfolk, and Portsmouth, Virginia where emigrationism had long been in evidence and from which American Colonization Society vessels had long departed for Liberia – and to which families (like Ella Baker's) moved from eastern and east-central North Carolina, where emigrationism was especially widespread. Still other Garveyites had been among the estimated 300,000 African Americans involved in the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association – the first mass reparations movement – established around the turn of the twentieth century by Tennessean Callie House.<sup>22</sup>

Organized chiefly in the late 1910s and early 1920s, UNIA divisions in the South appear to have held on long after the movement crested and Marcus Garvey had come under intense fire.

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<sup>22</sup> See Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet*, 317-63, 465-76; Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, chap. II; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 13-45. On the first reparations movement, see Mary Frances Berry's powerful, *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York, 2005).

In the period between 1926 and 1928, over four hundred divisions were operating in the southern states, and by that point Garvey had been indicted, tried, convicted, and incarcerated, and was on the verge of deportation. Little is known about the subsequent histories of these divisions, though in all likelihood their members found outlets for their political energies if their divisions became moribund. In eastern Arkansas, counties that had a substantial UNIA presence in the 1920s became bases for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in the 1930s; in the 1940s and 1950s, some of the STFU faithful then became active in local struggles for civil rights.<sup>23</sup>

The Arkansas-Mississippi Delta not only proved to be fertile ground for the UNIA; it also sprouted chapters of the NAACP, particularly after the Elaine Massacre of 1919 when planters brutally crushed the Progressive Farmers and Household Union, which had been contemplating a strike. The NAACP is, of course, associated with the legalistic road of the Civil Rights movement, and its base has been seen to be among the urban black middle and professional classes. And, for the most part, this appears to be true. Yet, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, the NAACP cast an even wider net, moving – often at the behest of local activists – into small towns and villages, and attracting (in town and country) laborers, farmers, seamstresses, laundresses, letter carriers, janitors, and dock workers. By 1921, the NAACP had Kentucky branches in Cynthiana, Earlington, Maysville, and Hopkinsville, as well as in Louisville, Lexington, and Frankfort; had Georgia branches in Waycross, Thomasville, Brunswick, and

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<sup>23</sup> Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta, 1900-1950* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 74-190; Jeannie Whayne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas* (Charlottesville, VA, 1996), 47-77; M. Langley Biegert, "Legacy of Resistance: Uncovering the History of Collective Action by Black Agricultural Workers in Central East Arkansas from the 1860s to the 1930s," *Journal of Social History*, 32 (Fall 1998): 73-99.

Rome, as well as in Atlanta, Savannah, and Macon; and had Texas branches in Wharton, Orange, Corsicana, and Texarkana, as well as in Houston, Galveston, and Dallas.<sup>24</sup>

Although branch directors (including James Weldon Johnson) for the NAACP kept files on the activities of Garvey and the UNIA, and although Garvey tangled with and denounced the work of the NAACP, on the ground the organizations seem not to have competed for members – at least outside of the large cities. In Kentucky, the UNIA had divisions in places like Banham, Coxton, Erlander, and Sassafras; in Georgia in places like Camilla, Haylow, Shingler, and Ty Ty; in Texas in places like Cameron, Egypt, Hillsboro, and Whitney. Where the NAACP and UNIA overlapped, their organizational histories may have been sequential and members may have moved between them. Thus, the NAACP established a chapter in the Delta town of Caruthersville, Missouri in 1920, but when the chapter collapsed in 1922 the area saw 14 UNIA divisions established within a span of three years. In East Drew, Mississippi, on the other hand, a local minister who served as a UNIA secretary in the 1920s went on to affiliate with the NAACP in the late 1930s – a path later followed by E.D. Nixon, who helped organize the Montgomery bus boycott.<sup>25</sup>

What I am suggesting therefore is not only that the Jim Crow South included vibrant African-American political thoroughfares, many effectively subterranean, which have largely

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<sup>24</sup> Woodruff, *American Congo*, 74-109; Drive Director to Lee L. Brown, 23 March 1921, Papers of the NAACP, Part 12, Series A, Roll 11, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., *The Branch Bulletin*, April 1919, Papers of the NAACP, Part 12, Series A, Roll 11; Steven Reich, "Soldiers of Democracy: Black Texans and the Fight for Citizenship, 1917-1921," *Journal of American History*, 82 (March 1996): 1492-1501; Greta de Jong, *A Different Day: African-American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 67-68.

<sup>25</sup> Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 986-95; Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, chap. VI; Roll, chap. II

escaped the notice of historians; I am also suggesting a hybridity of politics and political ideas among African-Americans that defies the customary oppositions of integrationism and separatism, assimilationism and nationalism, NAACP and UNIA, civil rights and black power.<sup>26</sup> Once more fully investigated, these thoroughfares and this hybridity may help us better understand how interconnected and mutually reinforcing black political trajectories have been in the twentieth century, and how important — especially among workers and the poor — have been traditions of self-governance and self-defense.<sup>27</sup>

#### IV

Why is it that such investigations have hardly taken place? Why is it that this grassroots political history remains largely hidden from our view? In part it is because of the ways in which local black activists — especially those associated with the UNIA — practiced their politics and set their political goals. Outside of the cities, UNIA divisions had relatively few members (mostly under fifty), they could meet in lodges, farm houses, and churches without attracting very much attention, and they generally did not stage processions and parades. They also did not seek to challenge the Jim Crow system directly, and thereby did not pose any recognized threat to local whites. Although any black assemblies could court white harassment and word of the UNIA's

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<sup>26</sup> For thoughtful objections to political and intellectual oppositions such as these see, Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> We are, however, beginning to pay more attention to these traditions. See, for example, Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, 1999); Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

presence could strike alarm among whites, little notice of the UNIA was registered in the public record.<sup>28</sup> Not so with the NAACP, which required fifty members for a charter, was a known enemy of Jim Crow, and struggled (often unsuccessfully in the South) to survive. Historians, therefore, have to look hard. Why haven't they?

The declining interest in social historical work and methods has played a role in keeping this political world hidden from our view. Despite the limitations of the public record, we could learn a great deal about the character of the UNIA in different parts of the country from sources that are readily available. But that would require copying down lots of names, referencing them in census and tax records, trying to follow them over time and space, and tracing the circuits of correspondence and information. And few historians seem inclined to do this sort of thing – even though changing technologies have made it a great deal more manageable than it once was. Predictably, recent scholarship that touches on Garvey and the UNIA focuses either on the discourse and its imagined middle-class constituency or on the leadership and the leading critics.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, I suspect that what is involved here – what has kept this world hidden – has far less to do with methodological, and far more to do with intellectual and political, indispositions. Historians have not been much interested in Marcus Garvey, in the UNIA movement, in the sort

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<sup>28</sup> When the UNIA established a division in Key West, Florida in 1920 and Ku Klux Klan chapter was quickly organized in response. UNIA organizers were also harassed in Texas and Alabama, but in general it appears that local divisions of the UNIA either were unknown to whites or did not provoke them. On harassment, see Martin, *Race First*, 345.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Summer, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 66-148; Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 218-39; James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 122-94; Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey*; Stephens, *Black Empire*, 75-125.

of people who gravitated to the movement, or in the current of nationalist thinking that Garveyism represented. They have, on the other hand, been interested – incredibly interested – in W.E.B. Du Bois and the legacies with which he is identified. And although Du Bois admired Garvey's charisma, energy, and eloquence, he not only attacked Garvey's politics and behavior but also helped isolate Garvey in the midst of his legal woes. Du Bois described Garvey as a "stubborn and domineering leader," as an "inexperienced business man," and as a "demagogue" whose "movement is not representative of the American negro," but whose "followers are of the lowest types of negroes, mostly from the Indies." In Du Bois's view, Garvey's projects were "dangerous, ill-considered, impractical," and bordering on the "criminal." The UNIA, Du Bois declared, "cannot be considered an American movement in any sense of the word." This portrait, and these charges, have been adopted by many historians of the period, and of African-American history more generally, including by Du Bois's distinguished recent biographer, and they have, I believe, helped discourage scholars from taking Garvey and the UNIA seriously.<sup>30</sup>

But the embrace of Du Bois and the disparagement of Garvey may reflect a far broader phenomenon: the hegemony of a liberal integrationist framework and narrative in American historical writing. Moving from the mid-eighteenth century when the slave population of British North America began to reproduce itself, to the antebellum period when free blacks in the North began to mobilize for their safety and their rights, to the era of emancipation and Reconstruction when freedpeople began to organize in new ways, to the twentieth century battles against Jim

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<sup>30</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Marcus Garvey," *The Crisis*, 122 (December 1920): 60; *The Crisis*, 123 (January 1921): 114-15; W.E.B. Du Bois to Editor, *New York Age*, 25 June 1921, in Hill et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, III, 480; *Garvey Papers*, II, 620; W.E.B. Du Bois to Charles Evans Hughes, 5 January 1923, and W.E.B. Du Bois to W.A. Domingo, 18 January 1923, in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Amherst, MA, 1973), I, 261-64.

Crow, historians have developed their analyses around a widely accepted set of assumptions. They have emphasized African-American identification with the United States. They have not considered slaves to be political actors and have seen politics coming to freedpeople from outside of their own communities. They have privileged and lent legitimacy to African-American struggles for inclusion and assimilation, for individual rights, and for "citizenship," while at the same time regarding African-American interest in separatism and community development, in collective rights, and in forms of nationalism as the products of failure and defeat, as somehow lacking in integrity. Voices and movements that do not fit the integrationist framework or narrative tend either to be ignored or relegated to the margins, acknowledged only to be diminished in significance, viewed chiefly as components of the pathologies and cycles of American racism.

Not surprisingly, many of the major historical works on Marcus Garvey and the UNIA have been produced by scholars born and educated in the Caribbean and Britain rather than in the United States – Robert Hill, Tony Martin, Rupert Lewis, Winston James – and they have certainly begun to excavate a political history that has long been hidden. But their work needs to be continued, their leads pursued. Given the thousands, if not millions, of people of African descent, in the United States and abroad, who came within the orbit of Garveyism, who regarded themselves as Garveyites, and who transmitted their experiences and perspectives to subsequent generations, we condescend to Garvey and the UNIA at our own peril.

The association created a societal model of black nationalism and Pan-Africanism through political, economic and social means, says Robert Hill, a research professor of history at UCLA and a Garvey expert. The UNIA also established the Universal African Legion, a paramilitary group, as well as the Black Cross Nurses, a group modeled after the Red Cross that provided health care to black communities. Garvey also established the Black Star Line steamship company, which transported passengers and goods to Africa. The organizations moved to New York City's Harlem neighborhood when Garvey immigrate