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# Marcus Garvey

Giulia Bonacci

*Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887-1940) is a major figure of Black nationalism and Pan Africanism. An indefatigable orator, world traveler and skilled organizer, he was also a charismatic, controversial personality who founded the largest Black organization in history, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).*

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Giulia Bonacci is a historian, she studies the intellectual history and the popular cultures that circulate between Africa and the African Diaspora since the 19th c. Her book Exodus! Heirs and Pioneers, Rastafari Return to Ethiopia was published by The University of the West Indies Press (2015) and received two awards in the USA. Her latest papers were published in Tumultes, Northeast African Studies, The International Journal of African Historical Studies, Volume! and New West Indian Guide.

Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887-1940) was a standard-bearer of early twentieth-century Black nationalism and Pan Africanism. The tireless orator, world traveler and talented organizer was a charismatic and controversial figure. Contemporaries derided his populism, criticized his demagogy and rejected the sacredness he associated with the idea of the "Black race". However, he elicited adulation from Caribbean immigrants, received massive support from the working poor and became an exemplary figure, paternal or prophetic, in many Black homes, churches and social institutions throughout the Caribbean and in the United States, Europe, Africa and even the Pacific. Garvey traveled the Black Atlantic and contributed to its significance for the colonial subjects, second-class citizens and economically and politically marginalized, exploited laborers who, in Barbados, Toronto, Nyasaland, or Brazil, participated in their own local cultures and political organizations while imagining themselves to be members of a "Black nation" that would transcend particularisms and bring them pride, power and recognition. In 1969, Garvey became the first national hero of Jamaica, which was independent since 1962.



Marcus Garvey in 1920

**Source:** Giulia Bonacci, Exodus ! L'histoire du retour des Rastafariens en Ethiopie (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), 60

## The foundations: Caribbean mobility

Garvey was born August 17, 1887 in St Ann's Bay on the northern coast of Jamaica, then a British colony. His parents were farmers. He left school early and, like many other Jamaicans, migrated to Kingston, the capital. By the age of 18, he was working as a printer and had become active in trade union activities and strikes, as well as in the *National Club,* which campaigned against the privileges of British rule on the island. Between October 1910 and January 1912, Garvey traveled to Costa Rica, Panama and British Honduras, working as a seasonal laborer while publishing his first newspapers. These were formative

years in his intellectual and political development. He became familiar with the plight of thousands of migrant Caribbean laborers who worked in three main areas of employment: the building of the Panama Canal (1881-1914); the Atlantic railroad between Puerto Limon and the capital of Costa Rica (1872); and banana plantations, where workers and their unions struggled against the monopoly of the United Fruit Company. He met migrants from Jamaica, of course, but also from all the other Caribbean islands. This is how Garvey discovered regional diversity and the idea that becoming Black would transcend it. Workers' struggles for their rights were also formative experiences: in 1911, Jamaican migrants in Limon, Costa Rica backed workers from the small island of St. Kitts in their great strike against United Fruit. Garvey also interacted with the media, took positions and spoke in public. He wrote for the English-language Caribbean newspaper *The Times* in Limon as well as for *La Nación*. His two years of traveling in the Caribbean were a founding experience. As a colonial subject seeking a political base and partnerships, he launched a subscription drive for the Coronation Fund of King George V's enthronement, planned for June 1911 in London. Going to Great Britain would allow Garvey to acquire references and experiences that would shape his social and political action.

## Introduction to pan-Africanism in London

In June 1913, Garvey left for the "mother country", the United Kingdom, taking advantage of his sojourn to visit several European countries. He met many West African students in London, where they grew aware of new political challenges posed by the racism they encountered there and became acquainted with the views of the anti-colonialist political organizations in which they took part. [1] In contact with the excitement of London, Garvey became familiar with the vocabulary of African nationalism and self-determination. He met Dusé Mohamed Ali (1886-1945), a Sudanese-Egyptian ex-actor and a Pan African nationalist political activist who took him under his wing for a while. After the 1911 Universal Races Congress in London, Dusé Mohamed Ali founded *African Times and Orient Review*, a newspaper with a noteworthy circulation and influence in England, West Africa and the Pan African world at the time. T he young Garvey (he was 26) published an article, "The British West Indies in the Mirror of Civilization: History Making by Colonial Negroes", about the maturation process he was going through.

> *"As one who knows the people well, I make no apology for prophesying that there will soon be a turning point in the history of the West Indies; and that the people who inhabit that portion of the Western Hemisphere will be the instruments of uniting a scattered race who, before the close of many centuries, will found an Empire on which the sun shall shine as ceaselessly as it shines on the Empire of the North to-day."* [9]

What Garvey expressed in these lines was decisive. He claimed to know the people living in the colonial world and wanted to speak their language, therefore he used a prophetical tone, promising sweeping changes within a short span of time to his readers and listeners. Above all, he made the connection between uniting a "scattered race" and founding an empire whose size and power could rival that of the British. To the Black diasporas he met in Central America and Europe, Garvey explained what they could become once organized. His base was among Caribbean people and he saw himself as a Moses for his people. This representation of Garvey akin to Moses the prophet was nurtured and maintained in Jamaican popular culture, especially by the Rastafari. [2]

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGN3R49-CAE

The great Jamaican reggae group Burning Spear pays homage to Marcus Garvey with an eponymous album (1975)

**Source:** YouTube

## The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)

With all this experience behind him, in July 1914 Garvey returned to Jamaica, where he and his first wife, Amy Ashwood (1897-1969), founded the *Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities (Imperial) League (UNIA-ACL)* in Kingston. The name reflected* Garvey's international vision opened up by his travels and the fear that the Black race, in the conditions of the time, would be driven to extinction. He sought backing in the United States, notably from Booker T. Washington, to open schools like the Tuskegee Institute in Jamaica, but with little success. Garvey spoke at several meetings in Kingston and St. Ann's Bay, but by 1915 the *UNIA-ACL* had only about 100 members. After the Panama Canal opened and the laborers who worked on the project had to be reclassified or find other jobs elsewhere, and the outbreak of the First World War, Garvey left for the United States. In March 1916 he arrived in New York and set on a nationwide fund-raising tour. The trip was supposed to last five months but took nearly a year. Then he settled in Harlem, where the UNIA found its social base. Harlem was becoming a Black capital where Caribbean immigrants, arriving in the United States by the thousands every month, met Blacks from the southern states, of whom nearly 1.6 million went north between 1910 and 1940. These great migrations transformed hardworking West Indians and rural, peasant African Americans into a national, urban and industrial population, creating new opportunities for civic and political activism. [3] They had a decisive social impact: neighborhoods like Harlem were transformed, inter-ethnic relations between Caribbeans and between Caribbeans and African Americans were revitalized, the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing and the UNIA, whose headquarters was established in 1918, found its social base and its international springboard. Meanwhile, West Indians were massively enlisting in the colonial armies. After demobilization, feeling bitterly disappointed, if not betrayed, by the racism they experienced there, they swelled the ranks of the UNIA.

## Garvey's Black nation

For Garvey, the primacy of race was a key issue. The UNIA sought to raise the self-esteem of Black men and women and instill them with pride in the color of their skin. The Black race, its beauty, purity and redemption, became the ideological node from which a whole series of practices and positions flowed. For example, Garvey proclaimed that Blacks must see God in their image, and therefore through the "spectacles of Ethiopia". [4] The reappropriation of God was part of a broader process of social and economic rehabilitation of Blacks by Blacks referring to a nationalist political imagination. Thus, the UNIA represented the Black nation with a whole series of attributes: a black, green and red flag, a national anthem (*The Universal Ethiopian Anthem*), a military corps, a medical corps (the Black Cross nurses), uniforms, an executive hierarchy of men and women from across the Caribbean and a tight social organization. The race-based nation would attract poor workers, but the African American press, especially on the left, as well as trade unions condemned the project. Indeed, the American far right embraced the idea of establishing separate Black and White nations. Garvey's ties with the Ku Klux Klan made him a controversial figure who ran afoul of some African American intellectuals.

**VIDEO**

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDvJGw58V_M

Jimmy Tucker sings *The Universal Ethiopian Anthem*, which in 1920 became the UNIA anthem

**Source:** YouTube

Regular public meetings in Liberty Hall, the UNIA's headquarters, and annual conventions bringing thousands of people together in large parades through the streets of Harlem had a major impact. The organization of the Black nation was also reflected in cultural activities such as poetry, plays and relations with figures in the Harlem Renaissance, business ownership, which was necessary for economic independence (on the local level this often included UNIA mutual aid societies) and educational endeavors (schools and curricula). Garvey set up retail sales networks, cooperatives and entrepreneurial initiatives to establish the "modified form of capitalism" that was the cornerstone of his development strategy. [5] The April 1919 launch of the Black Star Line Steamship Corporation had a decisive impact on the UNIA's growth. Its aimed, first, to develop business between Black communities in the Americas and Africa and, second, to bring a race scattered across the world back to Africa. The ship, a chronotope constituting the Black Atlantic, was featured as a tool of power to benefit the Black nation. Garvey survived an assassination attempt and in 1920 organized the *First Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World*, which 35,000 people attended. The same year, he founded the UNIA's Negro Factories Corporation, which managed a printing press and companies. In 1924, he set up the Black Cross Navigation and Trading Company.

One key component to the Black nation was missing: land, which Garvey wanted to find in Africa. At a time when Europe's colonial empires in Africa were at their height, he took up the old slogan "*Africa for the Africans, at home and abroad*". In Africa, Blacks would no longer be a minority and they would command respect: "*The aim is to establish in Africa a strong Negro nation, which would command respect for the Negro, who resides in white countries*." [6] Thus, Garvey and his movement were intimately related to the idea of a possible return to Africa, an ambiguous and far-reaching project structuring Black political thought in the Americas.

Liberia was at the heart of the UNIA's back-to-Africa project. The organization sent several delegations to the country to lay the groundwork for Garvey's followers to move there. But the West African state founded by freed American slaves and independent in 1847 opposed the massive arrival of Garvey's Black nation, which threatened to upset the political balance and scare off American investors. Eventually, the UNIA was banned from Liberia in 1924. Despite this setback, in a few years Garvey became the leader of the largest Black organization in history. He then came under heavy criticism from European and American governments as well as integrationist Black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois and his organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded in 1910.



LET US GUIDE OUR OWN DESTINY

BY FINANCING OUR OWN COMMERCIAL VENTURES.
HELP US TO HELP YOU HELP YOURSELF AND THE NEGRO RACE IN GENERAL
YOU CAN DO THIS BY PLAYING A MAN OR WOMAN'S PART IN THE WORLD OF COMMERCE.
DO YOUR FULL SHARE IN HELPING TO PROVIDE
A DIRECT LINE OF STEAMSHIPS OWNED, CONTROLLED AND MANNED BY NEGROES TO REACH THE NEGRO PEOPLES OF THE WORLD
AMERICA, CANADA, SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA, AFRICA AND THE WEST INDIES

There should be no trouble about making up your mind to help your race to rise to a position in the maritime world that will challenge the attention and command the admiration of the world. "Men like nations fail in nothing they boldly attempt when sustained by virtuous purpose and firm resolution."
Money awaiting an advantageous investment should go to purchasing shares in the Black Star Line and reap the reward that is bound to follow.

DO A MAN'S PART RIGHT NOW

Send In and Buy Your Shares Today

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Capitalized at $10,000,000 Under the Laws of the State of Delaware

2,000,000 shares of common stock now on sale at par value of $5.00 each for a limited time only at the office of the corporation, 56 West 135th Street, New York City. Phone Harlem 2877.
The Black Star Line, Inc., is the result of a Herculean effort on the part of Hon. Marcus Garvey, world-famed Negro orator, who in July, 1914, founded a society known as the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, of which he is now President-General.
The Association now has a membership of over three million persons, with branches all over the United States, Canada, South and Central America, the West Indies and Africa.

THE BLACK STAR LINE, Inc.

is backed today in its operations by the full strength of its organization to say the least, of millions of other Negro men and women in all parts of the world.

BUY SHARES TODAY AND NOT TOMORROW

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SUBSCRIPTION BLANK

"THE BLACK STAR LINE, Inc."
56 West 135th Street, New York City

Date .....

Gentlemen:

I hereby subscribe for..... shares of stock at $5.00 per share and forward herewith as full payment $..... on same.

Name .....
Street .....
City .....
State .....

Poster advertising shares in the Black Star Line

**Source:** Giulia Bonacci, Exodus ! L'histoire du retour des Rastafariens en Ethiopie (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), 64

## *The Negro World* and the UNIA's international branches

The role of *The Negro World* in circulating Garvey's ideas, speeches and vision cannot be underestimated. The importance of print in formulating and embodying nationalism has already been demonstrated elsewhere, and it is valid here as well, even for a nation without a territory. *The Negro World* was founded in August 1918 and circulated worldwide thanks to Black immigrants and seamen, who were key figures in the Atlantic economy. The publication could not hope for more efficient distributors. The weekly featured photographs, news from all the UNIA's local branches, articles in French and Spanish and a letters-to-the-editor section that reflected its global footprint.



THE Negro World

ONE GOD, ONE AIM, ONE DESTINY

A Newspaper Devoted Solely to the Interests of the Negro Race

VOL. IX. No. 26 NEW YORK, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 1921

WILL NEGROES SAVE THEMSELVES?

A Plea for the Negro People of America, Canada, Central and South America and the West Indies to Put Their Money Together and Save Themselves—Invest Your Money Now in The Black Star Line Before it Becomes too Late.

Fellow Men of the Negro Race, Greeting:

It is my duty once more to write to you asking your co-operation in the great work we have started in the interest of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities' League. Reports from all parts of the Western World reveal the fact that thousands of our men are out of employment. My personal experience through my travels in this condition? Are we waiting or some imaginary saviour to come and relieve the situation? Are we waiting for some spiritual being to help us? We will wait until doomsday, and the miracle will not be performed. You must now be up and doing, having a heart for my fate. By your own actions, if initiated now, shall we leaved the fate of threatened disaster. While conditions a[illegible] among a large number when man knows no kindness, when man knows no love, when man's one desire is to grab and take away from his brother that which Nature and God gave him. How long will Negroes sit down idly, waiting for some one to do something for them? How long will Negroes depend upon chance as a guiding star in their economic horizon? A man's bread and butter is only insured when that man works for it. Men work out their own energies, and not only [illegible]

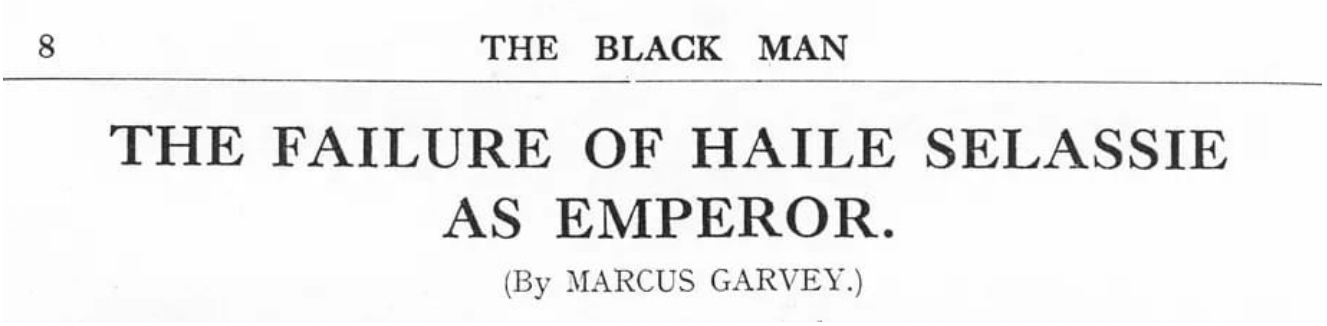
"Will Negroes Save Themselves?", *Negro World*, New York, February 12, 1921

**Source:** Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

The newspaper's circulation pattern can be tracked by looking at when and where it was banned. Between February 1919 and February 1920, *The Negro World* was prohibited across almost the entire Caribbean, starting with British Honduras and Trinidad (February 1919), then British Guyana (May-June), Jamaica, Grenada, the Lesser Antilles (the Windward Islands), Costa Rica in August, St. Vincent and, in October, the Grenadines, where all existing copies were burned the following month, and the Bahamas in February 1920. It was also banned in Europe's African possessions, where colonial governments did everything in their power to curb the movement and influence of Garvey and UNIA's ideas as much as possible. By the early 1920s, the United States had 725 UNIA branches—454 in the south and 271 elsewhere. [7] Internationally, the Greater Caribbean, including Central America and the northern part of South America, was its largest stronghold. Cuba had 52 branches, Panama 47, Trinidad 30, Costa Rica 23 and Jamaica 11. South Africa had eight active branches and there were also some in Dahomey, the Belgian Congo, South West Africa, etc. In fact, UNIA branches were active in every part of the world with a significant Black population, including Canada, Europe and Australia. It is estimated to have had several million members in the 1920s, making it the world's largest Black mass organization. The UNIA inspired many communities and activists, such as the *Frente Negra* (the Brazilian Black Front*, 1931);* the first organizations for the defense of the Garifuna nation founded by TV Ramos in British Honduras; Afro-Hispanic organizations in Costa Rica; the first political party in Australia (the *Australian Aboriginal Progress Association*, AAPA, 1924); and the *Kikuyu Central Association* in Kenya, also in 1924.

## In Kingston and London

Shortly after marrying his second wife, Amy Jacques (1895-1973), Garvey was found guilty of mail fraud in connection with his management of the *Black Star Line* and sentenced to a term in the Atlanta penitentiary in February 1925. Released early in 1927, he left the United States for Jamaica, arriving after a stopover in Panama. He continued travelling, notably to England and Canada, but also spent several years with his family in Kingston. He wrote plays and historical reconstructions and developed cultural and musical activities. Two UNIA conventions took place in Jamaica in 1929 and 1934. Garvey also threw his hat into the political arena, founding the People's Political Party (1929). In late 1933, he began publishing a new newspaper, *The Black Man*, which crossed the Atlantic with him when in March 1935 Garvey moved back to London, where he continued to promote the UNIA's activities. Now past the peak of his fame and influence, he sometimes took positions that UNIA members found hard to fathom. For example, he fiercely criticized the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I who was living in exile in Bath after fascist Italy invaded his country in 1935, for refusing to see him. Yet Haile Selassie was adulated in the Americas as both the representative of a Biblical dynasty and the leader of Africa's only uncolonized country. Garvey's attitude split the UNIA, already weakened by his prison term and shaky financial resources. He took ill and died in London on June 10, 1940.



8 THE BLACK MAN

THE FAILURE OF HAILE SELASSIE AS EMPEROR.

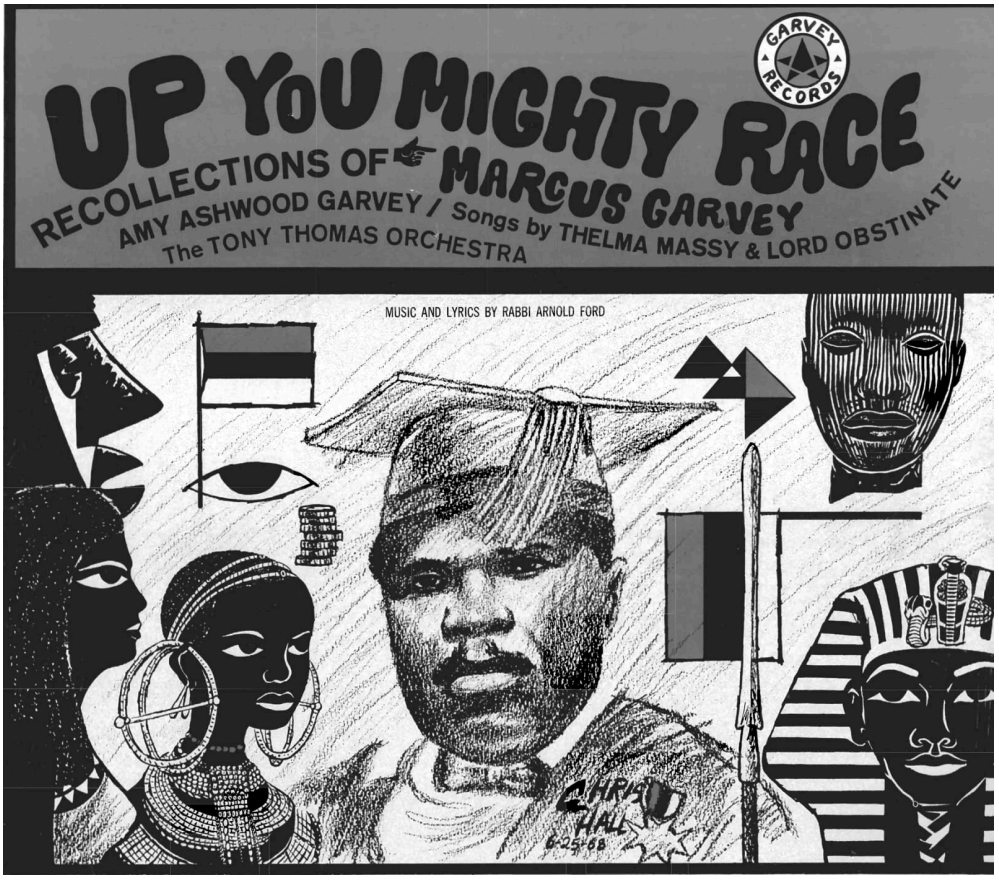
(By MARCUS GARVEY.)

Garvey criticizes the Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie I in *The Blackman*

**Source:** The Blackman 2, no 6 (mars-avril 1937)

## Garvey's legacy

In the early 20th century, Garvey represented the most radical ideas that Black nationalism had produced. His charisma and popularity brought him further than any of his predecessors. Today, he is seen as the trailblazer of all the forms of Black nationalism that emerged in the century. His new racial and nationalist grammar spread with the movement of men, women and ideas. "*It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance to the West Indies, the Americas, and the world of the movements of West Indians*." [8] References to Garvey, evoked, repeated and instrumentalized, have gone far beyond political circles, seeped into everyday discourse and inspired many other cultural organizations and movements. Rastafari view Garvey as a prophet. Dozens of reggae songs have been written about the leader, helping to popularize him and keep his name alive. Kwame Nkrumah, independent Ghana's first president, said that Garvey served as an inspirational model, although in many respects their paths diverged. But a black star is in the center of Ghana's flag, its fleet is called the *Black Star Line* and its football team is named the *Black Stars*. Today, despite its complex institutional organization, long-standing rifts due to various reasons, inter-branch rivalries and struggle for legitimacy, the UNIA is still active and holds conventions on a regular basis. The red, black and green flag is still carried and waved as a visible sign of Black nationalism and has become a global cultural touchstone.




*Up your mighty race*: Album recorded in 1968 by the Marcus Garvey Benevolent Foundation under the direction of Amy Aswhood Garvey

**Source:** Collection personnelle, photo de l'auteure/private collection, courtesy of the author

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