INTRODUCTION

In 1916, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, a young Jamaican printer, entrepreneur, and aspiring race leader, sailed into New York harbor. Before the end of the First World War, from his base in Harlem he launched his great mass organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL, hereafter UNIA), ostentatiously pledging to redeem both the continent of Africa and its descendants from the thrall of white supremacy. To facilitate industrial progress and generate new mechanisms of commercial wealth, he organized the Negro Factories Corporation and founded a transatlantic shipping company, the Black Star Line, inviting the scattered members of the race to participate as clients, passengers, and stockholders. To begin the process of reclaiming occupied Africa he announced plans to transfer the central operations of the UNIA to Liberia, which was, along with Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), one of the two remaining independent nations on the continent. In August 1920, he hosted a monthlong International Convention in Harlem, the first of four such gatherings, drawing delegates to New York representing Canada, the West Indies, Central America, Africa, and nearly every American state. “We are assembled here tonight as the descendants of a suffering people and we are also assembled as a people who are determined to suffer no longer,” Garvey told a capacity crowd at Madison Square Garden on August 3. “If Europe is for the white man . . . then, in the name of God, Africa shall be for the black peoples of the world.” Delegates crafted a charter, the Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World, to “guide and govern the destiny of four hundred million Negroes.” To great acclaim, Garvey was elected Provisional President of Africa.1

By the early 1920s, the UNIA had attracted tens of thousands of members, and millions of admirers. The rhetoric of “Garveyism” was carried by sailors, migrant workers, and other mobile black subjects to nearly every corner of the African diaspora. But the fall came just as quickly as the rise. Liberian colonization plans were dashed in 1921, and again in 1924, by the combined energies of the British, French, and Liberian governments. The Black Star Line was undermined by poor business management, employee graft, and government intrigue, and slid into bankruptcy in early 1922, costing its enthusiastic investors, most of whom were of limited means, an estimated $900,000.2 Weeks earlier, Garvey had been indicted on charges of mail fraud stemming from advertisements for the Black Star Line’s promised transoceanic vessel, the S.S. Phyllis Wheatley, which never materialized. Convicted on tenuous evidence, Garvey spent three months in the Tombs in New York City. Following a failed appeal, he then spent nearly three years in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta. Released in December 1927, Garvey was
transported to New Orleans and put on a ship to Jamaica, never to set foot again in the United States. Unable to resurrect the fortunes of the UNIA’s central infrastructure from abroad, the organization continued its decline, splitting into two factions following the contentious International Convention of 1929 in Kingston. Frustrated in a series of local political projects, Garvey and his second wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, moved their family to London in 1935, where Garvey was overshadowed by a new generation of pan-African radicals who disdained his anachronistic and “petit bourgeois” sensibilities. Garvey died in relative obscurity on June 10, 1940, after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage earlier in the year.

Garveyism is commonly recognized as one of the most important phenomena in the history of the African diaspora. “When you bear in mind the slenderness of his resources, the vast material forces and the pervading social conceptions which automatically sought to destroy him, [Garvey’s] achievement remains one of the propagandistic miracles of this century,” reflected C.L.R. James, no apologist of the movement, in the 1960s. Nevertheless, from the beginning observers of the Garvey phenomenon have struggled to explain its success. The venerable African American journalist (and future Garveyite), John Edward Bruce, when asked his opinion of Garvey in

early 1918, doubted that the young Jamaican’s colorful and boorish tactics would have much traction. “We like to listen to the music of his mouth,” he conceded, “[b]ut Mr. Garvey will find that the Negro race is not so easily organized as he imagines.” That same year, Emmett J. Scott, secretary of the Tuskegee Institute, and special assistant to the Secretary of War, dismissed the UNIA as a “paper organization,” and reported to the War Department that its activities “should not be seriously regarded.” When these judgments proved wrong, when Garvey proved unexpectedly—unprecedentedly—successful at mobilizing mass support, his detractors dismissed his program of African redemption as whimsical and unrealistic, and disparaged his followers as unlettered and unsophisticated dupes. Amidst the triumph of the UNIA’s International Convention of 1920, Garvey’s great antagonist, W.E.B. Du Bois, observed that Garveyites “are the lowest type of [N]egroes,” declared Garvey a “demagogue,” and predicted that his movement would “collapse in a short time.” Chandler Owen, co-editor, with A. Philip Randolph, of the black leftist journal, the Messenger, considered Garvey “an ignoramous,” lacking “the scientific type of mind necessary to lead a big movement,” and able to appeal to Negroes only through “their emotional nature.” He gave the UNIA “three months of life.” In a searing critique of Garveyism in the Messenger in 1921, Randolph dismissed the premise of racial organization as a “fallacy,” argued that the UNIA’s business ideas made “no practical sense,” and condemned the notion of African liberation as an impossible idea, and an insidious distraction from the project of interracial worker solidarity.4

Garvey has traditionally fared little better with scholars. Until recently, there had been only two full-length treatments of Garvey and Garveyism published by mainstream academic presses, neither one especially complimentary. In his pioneering study, Black Moses, E. David Cronon argues that Garvey sold “an unrealistic escapist program of racial chauvinism” to “the ignorant black masses.” In The World of Marcus Garvey, Judith Stein dismissively views the “methods and visions” of the UNIA as having been shaped by “the fatalism of the powerless” and “the utopias of hustlers and charlatans.” Historians of the interwar period have tended to be drawn to the poetic and sophisticated dissent of Du Bois, casting Garveyism as a populist, flashy, and dangerously misguided foil. David Levering Lewis, in his magisterial, Pulitzer Prize–winning biography of Du Bois, describes Garveyism as “calamitous,” and Garvey as a conservative, megalomaniacal, and naive purveyor of “racial exclusivism.” If Du Boisian Pan-Africanism offered a “prudent program for the gradual empowerment of the darker world,” Garvey “threatened the continuity of these efforts with an opera bouffe act that amounted to little more, really, than pageantry and incantation—‘Africa for the Africans,’ a heady slogan in place of a sober program.” The view expressed in all of these works—attributing the success of the UNIA
to a timely convergence of mass credulity and political hucksterism—has remained remarkably durable.\(^5\)

Thirty-seven years ago, Garvey scholar Tony Martin began his opus, *Race First*, with the observation that “no one could have organized and built up the largest black mass movement in Afro-American history, in the face of continuous onslaughts from communists on the left, black reactionaries on all sides, and the most powerful governments in the world, and yet be a buffoon or a clown, or even an overwhelmingly impractical visionary.”\(^6\) In the decades since, a growing body of literature has sought to reframe popular perceptions of Garvey, Garveyism, and the UNIA, largely, as Martin suggested, by broadening attention from the UNIA’s epicenter in Harlem to the myriad communities touched by the movement, to the remarkable contours of Garveyism’s reach, reception, and influence across the African diaspora. Research has made clear that the UNIA was not the mere province of the urban American north, as it was once portrayed, but a global movement that established local divisions across the United States and Canada, through the Caribbean archipelago and Central American isthmus, along the northern shores of South America, and across western and southern Africa. Garveyism, it is now understood, did not simply attract “the ignorant black masses,” but an eclectic and malleable coalition of participants across diverse localities, including urban workers and farmers, aristocrats and paupers, unionists and strikebreakers, educators and the uneducated, men and women, and mobile migrant workers across Africa, the Caribbean basin, and the United States. It is hard, faced with the evidence we now possess, to deny Garveyism’s persistent and broad-based appeal in the years following World War I.\(^7\) Starting from what should by now be a firmly grounded assumption that diasporic blacks were driven by complex and generally rational motivations, this appeal is profoundly significant. Marcus Garvey built a movement that resonated with people’s dreams, hopes, and expectations—a movement that encouraged them to organize against large and intractable systems of power.

Nevertheless, as historian Steven Hahn has forcefully asserted, the elision of Garveyism from mainstream academic discourse persists.\(^8\) Much of the problem is that Garveyism continues to be remembered, for what appear to be self-evident reasons, in the terms laid out by this introduction’s first two paragraphs: as a catalog of Garvey’s triumphs and travails, by the most bombastic and ultimately fleeting elements of the UNIA’s brief heyday, and by the years in Harlem, where Garveyism had its most visible and vocal success. This coalescence of our historical memory around the image of Garvey as, to quote one typical account, “the proverbial comet who lit up the sky before crashing down to earth,” has tempered any acknowledgment of Garvey’s accomplishments with the burden of their imminent collapse.\(^9\) The problem is illustrated by Colin Grant’s sympathetic and judicious new
biography, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey*, which—as the subtitle suggests—casts Garveyism in the familiar mold of Greek tragedy, its dazzling emergence obscuring for a glorious moment the fissures and contradictions that foretold its fall. Or, as historian Wilson Moses has put it, the “story of Garvey . . . contains only the possibility of defeat . . . because of his heroically irrational refusal to face an unacceptable reality.”

*The Age of Garvey* tells a story about Garvey, the UNIA, and Garveyism that seeks to align the movement along a different axis by foregrounding the latter. This orientation takes the story far beyond the peak organizational years of the UNIA, roughly 1919 to 1924, and beyond the operational reach of the UNIA entirely. Instead, the book focuses much of its attention on the influence of Garveyism on the construction of diasporic politics in the diverse contexts that the movement bridged: within urban and rural black communities stretched across the United States; among West Indian migrants and labor activists in the Caribbean; in the millennial religious revivals, local “welfare associations,” and independent churches extending across central and southern Africa; and in the emerging politics of Kikuyu cultural nationalism in central Kenya. From this perspective, what was most important about Garveyism was not the bombast for which it is best remembered—the parades and shipping lines and colonization schemes—but the engagement of its proponents in a sustained and more informal project of organizing, networking, and consciousness raising. This work was perceived as a fundamentally global project, with much more of its focus directed at grassroots activism on the African subcontinent than has been previously acknowledged. It was also an orientation partly born of necessity, designed after it became clear that the radical moment of upheaval and possibility following the war was passing, that Garvey’s presidency of Africa would remain provisional, and that the UNIA would not be the organizational vehicle of African liberation. Yet it was this acknowledgment of the movement’s limits, and Garveyism’s resulting resonance as an organizational strategy during a reactionary period of limited opportunities, that cemented its viability as a diasporic politics. Viewing Garveyism from the broader lens of the interwar diaspora both provides a clear sense of its enduring importance and demands a rethinking of the era it dominated. This was, as the book’s title suggests, an Age of Garvey.

This study follows the spread of Garveyism throughout the United States, the greater Caribbean, and a good portion of Africa. It suggests that Garveyites stretching across the African diaspora were connected by a vast and sustained project of network building; that they pursued a common set of aims, structured around broad appeals to pan-Negro unity, political education, and racial pride; and that they shared a common understanding about
the opportunities presented by global events, and a faith in the liberatory implications of racial preparation and organization. The political movements that grew from this network owed as much to local conditions as to diasporic currents; they responded to the particular opportunities available in particular places and at particular times, and flowed from homegrown traditions as well as global organizing. Some Garveyites sustained an official relationship with the UNIA; others, confronting harsh political realities, could not. In Africa, some black subjects borrowed the rhythms of Garveyism, others the attendant mythologies that it carried abroad, and transformed them in ways that Garveyites in the Americas could hardly have imagined. Amidst this diversity, Garveyism provided a powerful organizing principle, a political approach that combined caution and ambition, that proposed both a practical and an inspiring means to confront a postwar world dictated by the logics of colonial domination and white supremacy. For subaltern black subjects living in the decade-and-a-half after the First World War, Garveyism provided usable materials for political engagement.

“Garveyism” has been traditionally viewed as a product of the “philosophy and opinions” of Marcus Garvey, as an ideological foundation for the political activism of the UNIA. The characterization of Garveyism as an ideology has never really fit. As Wilson Moses derisively noted several decades ago, Garvey’s intellectual program was a pastiche, a derivative compilation of greatest hits from nineteenth-century black intellectuals, updated to reflect the new currents of world anticolonial activism and racialism. More than this, attempts to characterize Garveyism at a point along an ideological or political spectrum do not hold up to scrutiny: Garveyism was radical in some moments and reactionary in others, strident in some places and cautious in others. As we have learned more about the local and regional manifestations of the movement, we have been confronted time and again by its fundamental diversity. Scholars have attempted to resolve the divide between the “tenets” of Garveyism and its execution in practice by noting the movement’s flexibility, its multidimensionality, its transformation on the ground. But to acknowledge that these were the essential properties of Garveyism is to say that Garveyism was not essentially an ideology.

The Age of Garvey views Garveyism not as an ideology but as a method of organic mass politics. Garvey variously presented himself as an ideologue, as a liberator, as a prophet, but he was first of all an organizer and a propagandist. The movement he founded relentlessly spread a series of broad and relatively fixed assumptions: a belief that African redemption and Negro redemption were coterminous and biblically ordained; a view of the “Negro race” as a unified and ancient category of belonging; and an understanding of history that suggested a declining white civilization and an ascendant Negro one. These beliefs were sufficiently dramatic enough to demand action, while remaining capacious enough to ensure that the work done...
on their behalf would be malleable, adaptable to changing circumstances and fortunes, and amenable to local and regional innovations. The effect of Garveyist organizing was to empower black communities to direct attention to their own needs, to build upon their own traditions, to confront systems of power within the purview of their own discretion. Framing this work was the understanding by local Garveyites that their often mundane and limited political efforts were joined to a vast, expanding, and dazzling project of diasporic connectivity and international organization. Garveyism not only generated local political activism but connected otherwise isolated efforts within a sophisticated network of communication; it encouraged black men and women to believe that their modest work of racial organization, education, and preparation was not in vain, that it was inexorably undermining the status quo, and that it was hastening the end of global white supremacy and colonial rule.

Broadly speaking, the success of Garveyism as a mass movement suggests the need to think carefully about the relationship between ideology and political action. Garveyism privileged “process” over “stance.” It was fashioned not as an ideology—structured to reside outside of and remain critically detached from systems of power—but as a politics, shaped to operate within existing relations, to engage in the unequal negotiations out of which those systems were tested, contested, and ultimately recreated. Confronted with powerful white gatekeepers, Garveyites’ sensitivity to the spectrum of the possible allowed their movement to flourish beyond the unsettled years of the postwar period, providing an organizational framework for diasporic black politics during a period of limited political opportunities. Dedicated to the mobilization of black subalterns, Garveyites likewise began with process, with the act of organization itself, building on the premise, either explicitly or intuitively, that politics is not enacted on inert populations, that political action must be nurtured by—and grow out of—communal practices and beliefs, modes of association, and relations of power. The history of Garveyism demonstrates that to organize communities is to stir deep wells of political knowledge and wisdom, and to encourage the development of new, hybrid, and organic forms of belief and possibility.

If Garveyism was an organic mass politics, it was also a sustained project of diasporic identity building. The term “diaspora” (from the Greek, διασπορά, meaning “scattering,” or “dispersion”), most closely associated with the forced exile of Jews from modern-day Israel and Palestine that began in the sixth century BCE, was introduced to global black studies nearly fifty years ago by the legendary historian George Shepperson. Central to Shepperson’s project, as diaspora scholar Brent Hayes Edwards argues, was the desire to deploy a concept that was neither beholden to a specific political
history, like Pan-Africanism, nor limited in the scope of its analysis by a unitary focus on the “idea and practice of African unity.” As an alternative to such frameworks, Shepperson projected the idea of African diaspora studies widely, as “the study of a series of reactions to coercion, to the imposition of the economic and political rule of alien people in Africa, to slavery and imperialism.” Such an approach proffered a field of analysis—structured first by the global system inaugurated by the Atlantic slave trade, then by imperialism—without precluding the fundamental heterogeneity of black experience. It offered the possibility of solidarities and affinities across national and natural boundaries without assuming their emergence, or ignoring the complexities of difference, or of competing affinities. Importantly, Shepperson eschewed the binaries of exile and return, diaspora and homeland, instead observing the ways in which continental Africans were themselves constituted by diasporic dispersals: by the internal slave trade, by the migrations of refugees and former slaves, and by the movements of African soldiers, clerks, laborers, and missionaries facilitated by the economic and political geographies of colonial rule. Considering the lack of attention given to Africa in many subsequent articulations of an African diaspora, it is notable that Shepperson’s paper was first delivered in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, and published three years later in a volume dedicated to enumerating new themes in African history.14

Over the past half century, the best theoretical work on diaspora has reinforced the foundational principles established by Shepperson. Defining diaspora as a “framework of analysis” constituted by “a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance,” scholars have noted the persistence of the African diaspora as an “identity option,” a site for the construction of “alternate public spheres” in order to dwell within systems of white economic, political, and cultural privilege.15 Echoing Shepperson, cultural theorist James Clifford observes that “transnational connections linking diasporas need not be articulated primarily through a real or symbolic homeland,” but can be mediated by “[d]ecentered, lateral connections,” such as those forged by the “imperial formations” of what historian Frank Guridy has recently called the “US-Caribbean world.”16 This decentering of the “homeland” does not preclude its importance, but rather draws attention, as J. Lorand Matory notes, to the ways in which Africa is not a subject of past desire or future reward but “coeval,” involved in the ongoing, transatlantic “dialogue” that invents black identity again and again. The promise of diasporic solidarities, warns Brent Edwards, offers not the “comfort of abstraction,” an easy appeal to cross-border racial and cultural affinities, but rather insight into the ways communities residing within different national borders, speaking different languages, and bearing different local traditions might—under the right circumstances—forge cultural and political linkages “through and across difference.” This
awareness of the “practice of diaspora” focuses attention not only on the “routes” of transnational identity making, but also on its “roots”—those local communities that must filter the raw material of hybrid transnational culture through “overlapping diasporas” (ethnic, vernacular, gendered, etc.) and extant power relations. For all of its mobility and flexibility, diaspora does not transcend the messiness of place and localness. It must, as anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown insists, be articulated “through place and localness.”

Marcus Garvey—like his intellectual forebears in the pan-African tradition—imagined Negro identity in far different terms. The “race,” he argued, was a fixed signifier, connecting peoples of African descent to a single, ancient history, and guiding them to a common destiny. The ruptures of slavery and imperialism, rather than inventing an African diaspora (or Africa, or the Atlantic world), submerged from view a fundamental Negro unity. The primary aim of his organization was to reawaken the scattered peoples of Africa to their natural solidarity, refocus their gaze on racial cooperation and progress, and by doing so hasten the day when the African continent would be returned to its proper Negro owners.

Yet Garvey, to his great fortune, was rarely forced to face the pretensions of racial unity. The realities of global politics in the 1920s and 1930s ensured that Garveyites would never have to organize a Negro empire, or a United States of Africa, or transform their “portable eschatology” into concrete policy. Instead, Garveyism flourished during the interwar years as a diasporic politics, its claims of solidarity facilitating and inspiring the organization of local initiative, its global vision of Negro ascendance and anticolonial resistance cutting through and across difference in creative and generative ways. Garveyites, as Frank Guridy has brilliantly shown, participated in a “relentless effort to use performance to enact an African diaspora.” By engaging in embodied practices big and small—the inauguration of two shipping lines, but also the execution of parades, elocution contests, newspaper distribution, poor relief, uniform wearing and local institution building—Garveyites broadcast a global sense of race dynamic enough to seem real, and seem useful, for black subjects across the world.

The Age of Garvey pursues a selection, rather than the sum, of stories that can be written about the consequences and uses of Garveyism between the two world wars. A comprehensive history of the movement would follow its influence from Canada to Australia, would devote considerably more attention to Caribbean hotspots of Garveyite activity such as Cuba, would ask searching questions about the unwritten influence of the movement in places like Brazil. Regrettably, to acknowledge Garveyism’s primary importance as an organizational and inspirational device for interwar black...
politics making—rather than as a metonym for the Universal Negro Improvement Association—is to acknowledge the logistical difficulty of writing a truly inclusive history of the movement. For the global spread and impact of Garveyism becomes truly apparent only by digging into local or regional sites of struggle and following its translations on the ground, often far removed from the centers of bureaucratic Garveyism. By design, *The Age of Garvey* traces the rhythms of Garveyism more vigorously than its reach. It narrates not a linear history of an organization’s rise and fall but rather a method of understanding the legacy of a man and a movement that came, in ways both direct and indirect, to dominate an era.

Part 1, “The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey,” follows the emergence of the UNIA and its institutional decline, paying particular attention to the global contours of racial discourse, empire building, and pan-African politics that helped dictate Garveyism’s growth and evolution. The movement was in many respects a product of the extended, and profoundly uneven, negotiations surrounding the parameters of citizenship, economic agency, and racial identity following the abolition of Atlantic slavery—and the rich traditions of diasporic politics that emerged as a result. It was galvanized by the Great War, which violently tore the world apart, and cast established verities and assumptions briefly into doubt. The UNIA that emerged from the war was radicalized, eager to spread its message abroad as a means of participating in the anticolonial uprisings that were erupting across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Caribbean. As the tectonics of racial domination were reestablished, and as the UNIA entered a period of institutional crisis, Garveyites began to formulate new, and decidedly more cautious, strategies for hastening the moment of African, and Negro, liberation.

Part 2, “The Age of Garvey,” explores some of the myriad ways in which Garveyism’s influence was fruitfully sustained in the decade following Garvey’s incarceration and the disintegration of the central edifice of the UNIA. In the United States, Garveyites embraced a rhetoric of global, anticolonial agitation that projected its radical implications abroad, to Africa, and forward, to a moment better suited to strident politics. Such a stance helped shield Garveyites from the repressive consequences of white supremacy, and allowed them to sustain vibrant local communities of organizational work that offered adherents a new and shifting platform upon which to participate in politics, challenge hierarchies, and negotiate racial, religious, class, and gender identities. In southern and central Africa, the wide transmission of Garveyism—and its popular translation as a series of rumors predicting the imminent arrival of black American liberators—provided the vocabulary for a series of millennial religious revivals spreading from the Eastern Cape to Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). At the same time, Garveyite organizing in the region facilitated the proliferation of local “welfare associations” and independent churches, modest and creative efforts by a cadre
of clerks, ministers, traders, and workers to nurture the movement—which was anathema across colonial Africa—under the guise of cautious reformism. In Kenya, young activists translated the lessons and tactics of African Garveyism to meet the needs of a nascent Kikuyu cultural nationalism.

In late 1924, months before his imprisonment in Atlanta, Garvey declared the inauguration of the UNIA’s “second period.” Much of what we remember about Garveyism was a product of its earlier iteration: the militancy, the pomp and circumstance, the ambitious refusal to accept the constraints of global white supremacy. And yet much of Garveyism’s legacy was forged after 1924 in more cautious and mundane circumstances, a product of the second period commitment to what Garvey described as the work of “quiet and peaceful penetration.” This work would be directed less by the provisional president of Africa than by millions of men and women inspired and energized by his message, who saw in the call to Negro unity and organization an opportunity to enact local political projects, to confront the indignities of disempowerment in their own lives. The Age of Garvey seeks to tell this story.