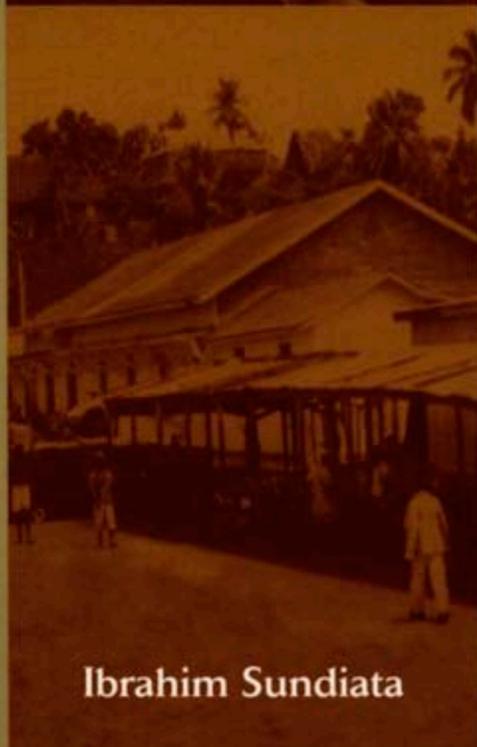




BROTHERS AND STRANGERS

Black Zion,
Black Slavery,
1914–1940



Ibrahim Sundiata



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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Durham and London

2003

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Printed in the United States of

America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by C. H. Westmoreland

Typeset in Carter & Cone Galliard

with Jaeger Daily News display

by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-

in-Publication Data

Sundiata, Ibrahim K.

Brothers and strangers : Black Zion,

Black slavery, 1914–1940 /

Ibrahim Sundiata.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references

(p.) and index.

ISBN 0-8223-3233-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-8223-3247-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Back to Africa movement. 2. African

Americans — Colonization — Liberia.

3. African Americans — Colonization —

Africa. 4. Liberia — History — 1847–1944.

5. Garvey, Marcus, 1887–1940. I. Title.

DT634.S86 2003

966.62'00496073 — dc22

2003016058

FOR
MY MOTHER
IN MEMORIAM



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Acknowledgments



This study has had a long gestation, from research long ago to insights gained over the last few years. Initially I published a study of the crisis surrounding accusations of slavery against Liberia in 1929. Several years later, I was a contributing editor to *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*. I knew Liberia the place; I knew less of Garvey and the circumstances that had produced him. The editor of the papers, Robert A. Hill, sent me tons of material whetting my appetite to know more. I thank him very much for that impetus. My growing interest in the Diaspora led me to wonder why African American emigrationism had been seen by many as an impractical, if glorious, detour on the road toward participation in a multiracial society. Ten years ago Randall Kennedy of the Harvard Law School suggested to me that I pursue the question. Time and other projects pulled me in other directions, but the questions remained. This book is my answer to some of them, and it hopes to raise other questions, especially with regard to human rights and the frameworks in which we view them.

I conducted research in Liberia, Great Britain, the United States, and Spain. In Liberia I went through the National Archives before the overthrow of the Tolbert regime and have not retraced my steps. The same is true of the United Kingdom. I have returned to Spain several times. The Archivo General de la Administración Civil del Estado in Alcalá de Henares, which was closed to me earlier, is now open. In the late 1980s I was also given access to previously closed archives in the Republic of Equatorial Guinea.

I thank all those who aided my early efforts, especially Joel Jutkowitz who helped me first get into print on Liberia and labor. As an Africanist who has “drifted” toward the Diaspora, I want to thank all of those who have helped me along the way. African American collections have been invaluable in bridging that “middle passage” between the formerly artificially separated fields of Africa and its Diaspora. The Moorland-Spangarn Research Center at Howard University was more than helpful. I thank chief librarian Jean Church and Ida Jones, Donna Wells, and Clifford Muse for their assistance, especially with my insistent requests for photographs. I thank Leila Torres of the center for her moral sup-

port. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York gave me a whole new insight through its Lester Walton Papers, and a short return trip to the Chicago Historical Society provided valuable insights into the ongoing relationship between Walton and his confidant, Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press. I thank Lonnie Bunch for expediting my visit to the Historical Society archives. Walter Hill of the National Archives very kindly supplied me with the complete guide to the archives's Liberian and Garvey material compiled by Jacquelyn A. Kyles.

I have been able to count on Wilson Jeremiah Moses, Pan-Africanist scholar par excellence, who acted as an example and moral support. Some old friends have remained a constant in this evolving work. Among other things, it is to Hans Panofsky, bibliophile and unintentional mentor, that I owe my knowledge of the fate of the Liberian diplomat Antoine Sotille. I very much appreciate that it was Arnold Taylor, professor emeritus of Howard University, who long ago lent me photocopies of the J. P. Moffat Papers. Joseph Harris, Taylor's colleague and mine, has been an inspiration as he persisted with hard questions on how we speak about *Diaspora*. Elliott Skinner, emeritus professor at Columbia University, and I had interesting conversations about sources, and I look forward to his forthcoming volume on African Americans and foreign policy since the mid-1920s. Jane Martin, emerita of Boston University, has been steadfast over the years in providing valuable information and contacts. Indeed, she kept me aware of the Liberian dimension of the story. Elizabeth Elderedge, former student and fellow Africanist, was incredibly steadfast in those times when it was most needed. John Yoder, whom I knew as a graduate student, was more than generous in supplying me with his manuscript on current conditions in Liberia. Svend Holsoe, a man with a long association with Liberia and founder of the Liberian Studies Association, was marvelous in letting me use his photographs, which are now at the University of Indiana. Adele Logan Alexander of George Washington University offered her time and contacts for obtaining papers. She went the extra mile; I am obliged to her for gaining access to the journal of William H. Hunt, and I thank Phyllis Gibbs Fauntleroy for letting me use the Hunt journal.

I am very fortunate to have been at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute in 2003 as a Du Bois Research Fellow. As one colleague described it, it is an "intellectual playground" in which people from various disciplines meet, mingle, and challenge disciplinary boundaries. Kudos go to Henry Louis Gates and his wonderful team. The business of preparing a manuscript is a daunting one, at least for this writer. At Harvard I had an incredibly efficient and hardworking fact checker and factotum in Ash-

ley Aull. Reference librarian Barbara Burg's electronic wizardry at the Widener Library was invaluable. I want to thank Milagros Denis, my research assistant at Howard University. Also, typing is not done by automatons; many thanks to Geraldine Shearod, my typist at Howard. A special thanks to Bessie Hill, administrator of the History Department at Howard University. Her steadfastness and efficiency left me with the time to produce this work.

More than thanks, more than anything, I acknowledge the support of Eleanor Stewart, who oversaw this project as if it were her own. She critiqued, she edited, and she mailed. She made it happen.

Introduction



What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronze men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved.
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?
— Countee Cullen

“What is Africa to me?” This too oft quoted line by a New World black man still interrogates. To many, the continent signifies the home of the black race, the iconic antipode of Europe, the home of the white. Indeed, Africa in the American popular perception continues to be either an edenic mother/fatherland or the barbarous home of famine, disease, and civil war. With an acknowledgment of this dual vision we begin our investigation of how two constructs — the image of Africa and the image of slavery — have mediated, and continue to mediate, relations between the Black Diaspora and the peoples of the African continent.

In the years immediately preceding Countee Cullen’s rhapsodic question, the immigrant Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey created a mass movement bent on transforming inchoate longings into a modern nation state. In the year World War I began, he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Liberia was eventually chosen as the black Zion, and between 1920 and 1924, millions of African Americans were briefly caught up in the thrill of having a nation of their own, a nation on the ancestral continent. Haiti existed, but it was not African.

Ethiopia was independent, but too feudal to present a blueprint for the future. Liberia, “founded” by returnees from the African Diaspora in the early nineteenth century, seemed to meet all the desiderata of a national home, a land of “strong bronze men, or regal black.” However, sadly, it was in the Black Republic that the poesy of trans-Atlantic longing ran headlong into African sociopolitical reality — including slavery. Garvey’s plan to merge the image and the reality of Africa foundered in a sea of disillusionment. The planned return of millions of the scattered sons and daughters of Africa to their ancestral continent failed, and Liberia, long touted as the black Zion, proved to be a “bitter Canaan,” to use Charles S. Johnson’s phrasing. This book is partially an account of the rise and fall of the twentieth century’s most potent African dream.

Four short years after the collapse of Garvey’s dream, the United States officially accused the Black Republic of the most heinous of black-on-black crimes — slavery. Racists excoriated the small state, while Pan-Africanists, like Du Bois, and other anti-imperialists mounted a campaign of defense. Moral certainties became cloudy. White newspapers called for reform. At the same time, many of them screamed, in hardly masked contempt, of how a state “founded” by black returnees to Africa was enslaving fellow blacks. A Brooklyn newspaper remarked on its editorial page in 1931, “It is strange that in a country, founded as a haven for escaped American Negroes long before the Civil War, and ruled ever since that time by the Negro race, slavery still rears its horrid head.”¹ Many commentators argued that Liberia, like Haiti, had failed as a nation. The forced labor scandal quickly became part of a revived debate on “the Negro’s place in nature.” One writer in *Current History* declared, “In a real sense the Negro race in Liberia is on trial before the world.”²

Africa in the diasporic imagination represents many things — things imaged, things recorded, and things suppressed. African Americans are perpetually left with Cullen’s question and the specter of slavery and the Middle Passage that stands behind it. We may begin by asking: What *is* the relationship to ancestral Africa? We do know, of course, that from the fifteenth century onward, approximately 15 million forced migrants left the African continent to people both of the Americas and the islands of the Caribbean. At the point of egress, captured women and men were phenotypically and culturally African, but much has happened since then. Their culture was never static; it went through syncretistic reformation, subsumption/transmogrification and reintegration/reassertion. In the United States, persons of African descent form a minority, but perhaps nowhere else is the sense of diaspora greater. As Elliott Skinner has noted, African Americans “remain . . . structurally linked to Africa whether they had any emotional bonds to that ‘myste-

rious' continent or not. . . . Whenever African Americans sought equality with Americans of European descent, they were reminded that their Africaness precluded such aspirations."³

Blackness has been defined by rigidly imposed endogamy and residential segregation. African Americans have a corporate identity that has arisen in the context of white political and ideological hegemony. For the 10 percent of the population that is "black," the future is seen as one of separate but equal communities, each with equal access to the economic and social benefits of the society at large. The gradual construction of whiteness in the North American context has made blacks operate as the perpetual Other in a society with no common myth of origin nor any national myth of eventual fusion. Africa operates as a fixed point, the loadstone of ethnic identity, an identity often analyzed so as to diffuse issues of hybridization and creolization. Whether the locus of collective origin lies in ancient Egypt or among the Yoruba, a core Africanity is posited because societal constructs so clearly set off the black community from the white in a Manichaean worldview governing everything from politics to the music industry.

Where "race" has been enforced for over nine generations, as in the United States, we must take that construct very seriously. The fact that by the 1990s, the term *African American* had displaced most others is, by itself, very indicative. The black population, by its very name, asserts its Africanity. As Sterling Stuckey has pointed out:

The final gift of African "tribalism" in the nineteenth century was its life as a lingering memory in the minds of American slaves. That memory enabled them to go back to the sense of community in the traditional African setting and to include all Africans in their common experience of oppression in North America. It is greatly ironic, therefore, that African ethnicity, an obstacle to African nationalism in the twentieth century, was in this way the principal avenue to black unity in antebellum America. Whether free black or slave, whether in the North or in the South, the ultimate impact of that development was profound.⁴

Hypodescent, the "one drop rule," has molded discussions of the culture and delimitation of the Black Diaspora. It is within this context that Pan-Africanism developed and a sense of kindredhood with the peoples of Africa and the Anglophone Caribbean emerged. While often focused on parochial issues, American blacks could never forget and were never allowed to forget that they constituted a separate people, one with roots on an alien continent. However creolized their culture, they were consciously reminded at every turn that they were a distinct folk, regardless of class position. Never numbering more than 20 percent of the popula-

tion, African Americans made for the permanent minority, whose exact place within the polity was never fully spelled out. Under segregation, separate but equal became the law of the land and, by a queer trans-mogrification, separate but equal remains the ideal for all but public spaces after integration.⁵

The image of Africa and the image of slavery are inextricably bound. In early 1998, President Bill Clinton visited Africa. The trip was a triumphal one, focused on trade, international security, and the ties that bind Africa and African Americans. Howard French, an African American writer for the *New York Times*, mused over whether the United States should apologize for the Atlantic Slave Trade. He said, "In the end, appropriately solemn Mr. Clinton stopped short of an outright apology for America's part in the slave trade, finding other ways to express his regret as he focused on the future."⁶ When the president did express regret, he spoke at a school in Uganda. The act was unintentionally symbolic, the equivalent of apologizing for the Irish Potato Famine in Slovakia. Perhaps most telling, in the president's discussion of the evils of slavery, nothing was said of present-day bondage across the border in neighboring Sudan. "In what seems to be a recurring political ritual," in 2003 George W. Bush went to Goree Island in Senegal and "talked about Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Abraham Lincoln." As the *New York Times* noted, the American president "traveled to an island off the coast of Africa to give a speech on slavery in America."⁷

In the Diaspora, the subject of slavery can produce either rage or shame. The latter is especially true of slavery in Africa. Commenting on President Clinton's decision to express official regret for the historic slave trade, the *New York Times* writer mentioned what we may call the *slavers' canard*: "Weren't Africans engaging in slavery themselves well before the first Europeans came and carried off their first human cargoes? Didn't African chiefs themselves conduct . . . slaving raids on neighboring tribes and march their harvest to the shores for sale?"⁸ The charge is an old one. Beginning in the eighteenth century, defenders of Atlantic slavery maintained that Africa itself was rife with the institution; Europeans only took away the surplus produced by semipermanent warfare. In 1734, Thomas Snelgrave, a trader, remarked: "It is evident, that abundance of captives, taken in war, would be inhumanly destroyed, was there not an opportunity of disposing of them to the Europeans. So that at least many lives are saved, and great numbers of useful persons kept in being."⁹

The canard has been around for more than two centuries and continues

to mold much of the North American discussion of slaving. Nineteenth-century abolitionists responded to the slavers' canard by painting an image of a bucolic Africa in which slaves were part of the family, a status hardly comparable to chattel status in the American South. In the twentieth century, Maulana Karenga maintains that bondspeople in Africa "often lived as members of the family, married their masters' daughters and rose to political and economic prominence and did not face the brutalization and dehumanization which defined European chattel slavery."¹⁰ From the right of the political spectrum, polemicists continue to hammer away. The conservative ideologue Dinesh D'Souza decries attempts to "downplay African slavery." Any claims "of the benign quality of African slavery are hard to square with such reports as slaves being tortured at the discretion of their owners, or executed en masse to publicly commemorate the deaths of the kings of Dahomey."¹¹ Perhaps the most bizarre version of the canard appeared in *Harper's* in the late 1970s. Lewis Latham, miffed at Andrew Young's stance in the United Nations, let off a broadside. Latham accused Young of forgetting "to mention that the tribes of Africa speak as many as 700 languages and that in a disturbingly large number of those languages the verb 'to eat' has the further and metaphorical meaning of 'win,' 'conquer,' or 'gain.'" In seeking to inform himself about African history, Latham lamented that he could only read "extensively about the slave trade, cannibalism, tribal wars, woodcarving, raffia waving, and the steady state of Stone Age cultures that had survived for possibly as long as 250,000 years." Of slavery itself, according to the journalist, the record was dismal: "Its success depended on the eagerness of the African tribes to sell their enemies, their wives, their friends, and their children at whatever price was offered."¹² This racist fantasy of Africa as a Hobbesian nightmare persists, deforming the continent's image among both whites and blacks.

If *Africa* is simply the metonym for *Black Man's Land*, a place without nations, ethnicities, or languages, the charge of slavery is devastating. Zora Neale Hurston lamented, "But the inescapable fact that stuck in my craw was: my people had sold me. . . . My own people had exterminated whole nations and torn families apart for profit before the strangers got their chance at a cut."¹³ Richard Wright was bedeviled by similar thoughts. "Had some of my ancestors," he mused, "sold their relatives to white men?" The writer wondered: "What would my feelings be when I looked into the black face of an African, feeling that maybe his great-great-great-grandfather had sold my great-great-great-grandfather into slavery?"¹⁴ Recently, Henry Louis Gates Jr., the doyen of African American studies, has commented, "The image of slavery we

had when I was kid was that the Europeans showed up with these fish nets and swept all the Africans away.” He is startled. “Rubbish. It’s like they went to a shopping mall. Without the Africans there wouldn’t have been a slave trade.”¹⁵ The indictment is particularly blistering:

For African Americans the most painful truth concerning the extraordinary complex phenomenon that was the African slave trade is the role of black Africans themselves in its origins, its operation, and its perpetuation. It was an uneasiness and anger about this truth that fueled Richard Wright’s barely concealed contempt for his Ghanaian kinsman in *Black Power* and that led many African Americans to view their New World culture as *sui generis*, connected only tenuously to its African antecedents, if at all. Western images of African barbarism and savagery, of course, did not endear us to our native land [*sic*]. But for many of my countrymen, the African role in the slave trade of other Africans is both a horrific surprise and the ultimate betrayal, something akin to fratricide and soricide. Imagine the impact of a revelation that Sephardic Jews had served as the middlemen in the capture and incarceration of Ashkenazi Jews during the Holocaust, and you can perhaps begin to understand Richard Wright’s disgust.¹⁶

This raises the question of who is a “brother” and a “kinsman.” Of course, if the African continent is the “nation,” an equivalent would be to view the Holocaust as a *Mittel-Europäische* family feud of particular ferocity—Europeans exterminating their own people while in league with an alien race from the other end of the world.¹⁷ Pearl-Alice Marsh, executive director of the Africa Policy Information, laments, “There are millions of Americans who still think Africa is a country, not a continent.”¹⁸ The idea of an Africa composed of competing ethnicities and polities is irrelevant in the face of the metonym. Unfortunately, in the popular American imagination, the fifty-odd African states still remain an irrelevant hodgepodge. The continent remains largely featureless; languages are “dialects” and ethnicities are “tribes.” If Africa—three times the size of the United States and containing 748 million people speaking some 1,500 languages—is reduced to simply a mythic homeland, confusion is sure to follow. And worse than confusion, a basic lack of understanding or sympathy for Africans as they exist will ensue.

The North American image of slavery in Africa has historically stood as a distortion, either a magnification or diminution, of the image of American slavery. Trans-Atlantic bondage is the absolute before which all other manifestations are held as relative. In the United States, slavery is the cause of the essential national fissure. The national (white) image of the institution has gone through various permutations, without questioning basic assumptions. Early in the twentieth century, Southern

historians like Ulrich B. Phillips painted a rosy picture of bondage in Dixie; indeed, slavery was a benign “school” for blacks. D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* contained images of both “faithful darkies” and “ferocious bucks.” The popular image of kindly slavery perhaps reached its apogee in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*.

The African American view of slavery has changed drastically in the years since emancipation. Various nineteenth-century black thinkers, among them Martin Delany, Henry M. Turner, Alexander Crummell, and Edward Blyden, saw the Middle Passage as providential, even if highly painful. Turner maintained that the world might one day be thankful for slavery, as it would eventuate in the evangelization of Africa. To Blyden, Africans were people who “had been carried away, in the providence of God, . . . carried away from heathenism into slavery among civilized and Christian peoples.”¹⁹ Booker T. Washington, the leader of African American opinion at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote, “Notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery, the ten million Negroes . . ., who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe.”²⁰ Later, the Nation of Islam preached, “Our slavery . . . was actually all for a Divine purpose, that Almighty Allah (God) might make Himself known through us to our enemies and let the world know the Truth that He alone is God.”²¹ An echo of these earlier sentiments comes in journalist Keith Richburg’s 1997 assertion that “condemning slavery should not inhibit us from recognizing mankind’s ability to make something good arise often in the aftermath of the most horrible evil. . . . In short, thank God that I am an American.”²²

By the time of the civil rights movement, providential slavery had all but disappeared from most African American discourse on slavery and the slave trade. The image of slavery emerged not so much as a labor system, but as a systematic torture of millions rooted in innate racial antagonism. In this scenario, sexual exploitation and gross barbarity fueled by raging hatred characterized every day of slave existence. The plantation resembled not so much Booker T. Washington’s “school” as it did Stanley Elkins’s later comparison with a concentration camp.²³ The Jamaican-born sociologist Orlando Patterson has elaborated on “social death” and dishonor as the essential features of slavery. Slavery is, in his psychodynamic view, “the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons.”²⁴ In the realm of high art, the chief proponent of this view is the Nobel laureate Toni Morrison. Reflecting a sea change since *Gone with the Wind*, she provides an anti-

dote in the terminally bleak *Beloved*. The book is dedicated to the “60 million” people she estimates perished in the slave trade. The number, a significant multiple of 6 million, holds power.²⁵

An Old Dixie Narrative had emerged. Simply stated, this view of history says: Slavery was confined to Dixie and slaves grew cotton. Nowhere else in the history of humanity has slavery existed and nowhere else were human beings chattel. Africans, in this version of history, were selected slaves because they were black. Racism drove a slave trade and slavery, which existed as the ultimate form of psychosexual torture. The numbers immolated in the holocaust of the Middle Passage and in the cotton fields ran into the hundreds of millions. At the popular level, the Old Dixie Narrative floats in the American collective consciousness, even among those who have never given it much thought.

For many African Americans, looking back through the prism of Jim Crow and lynch law, a view of slavery as the ultimate horror provides ample proof of the ultimate fixity of human nature. Racism was as alive in fifteenth-century Lisbon as it was in nineteenth-century Louisville. History becomes one long version of *Up from Slavery*, and always a struggle against the Manichaean “Other.” Blacks remain the ultimate out-group, one that erases European division and suffering. But Morrison rightly notes, “If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other’s throats out, as they have done everywhere else.”²⁶ Or, as Cornel West puts it: “White supremacy dictates the limits of the operation of American democracy — with black folk the indispensable sacrificial lamb vital to its sustenance.” Thus “black subordination constitutes the necessary condition for the flourishing of American democracy, the tragic prerequisite for America itself.”²⁷ In the Old Dixie Narrative, both sides of the racial divide agree that blacks have always been drawers of water and hewers of wood. Class becomes eternally raced. It constitutes a mythos above and beyond all empirical analysis or comparison. It may be true, as David Brion Davis points out, that “some of the privileged ‘Atlantic creole’ slaves in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake and in Carolina clearly possessed more de facto freedom and range of choice than did the later Chinese indentured servants who shoveled guano, or seafowl excrement, off the coast of Peru.”²⁸ In terms of the Old Dixie Narrative, however filthy this work, it becomes irrelevant.

If slavery were only about race, then Africans could not have engaged in slave traffic in Liberia or anywhere else. Indeed, the charge itself constitutes racial calumny. However, long ago, the Trinidadian historian Eric Williams sounded a cautionary note. Best known for maintaining that white humanitarianism did not abolish the slave trade, the scholar

made a subsidiary, and often overlooked, point: capitalism and slavery are no great respecters of persons. Writing from beyond the confines of the Old Dixie Narrative, he observed, “The ‘horrors’ of the Middle Passage have been exaggerated. For this the British abolitionists are in large part responsible.” Furthermore, “A racial twist has . . . been given to what is basically an economic phenomenon. Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery. Bound labor in the New World was brown, white, black, and yellow; Catholic, Protestant and pagan.”²⁹ Orlando Patterson notes that “slavery has existed from the dawn of human history right down to the 20th century, in the most primitive of human societies and in the most civilized.” Moreover, “There is no region on earth that has not at some time harbored the institution. Probably there is no group of people whose ancestors were not at one time slaves or slaveholders.”³⁰ What is remarkable about slavery in the United States is not that it existed, but its long afterbirth—legalized segregation and a caste society. North American racial theorists noted that the country’s “peculiar institution” was not very peculiar at all. What they boasted about was American “race feeling,” a phenomenon that kept the United States from descending into the Latin American “coffee-colored compromise” of race amalgamation. The United States *is* the most racially organized society in the Americas.

Unfortunately, few could think in terms of C. L. R. James’s dictum: “The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics. . . . But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is error only less grave than to make it fundamental.”³¹ We should go a bit further and “put . . . slave systems in the context of unfree labor in general, and its role in the evolution of the modern world.” In this broader context, “American slavery—and New World slavery in general—is a part of what can be termed the ‘labor question’: who should work for whom, under what terms should work be performed, and how should it be compelled or rewarded?”³² If we follow this tact, we end up with somewhat different conclusions. Slavery, like marriage, emerges as a fairly universal institution. Most societies have had some form of it. Slavery, at base, rests on the ability to coerce labor and/or sexual reproduction. Charging a peculiar black guilt for slavery makes for an ahistorical and presentist trap. However, denial of slavery in Africa, like a denial of the existence of prostitution in Africa, is no more than a flight from reality. Like the flight from the acknowledgment of AIDS and prostitution, it is also dangerous.

Slavery need not be raced. It could exist in ancient Rome, medieval Kosovo, nineteenth-century Korea, and in the Liberia of the interwar years. This brings us to the central question: How do we confront social

oppression in black-ruled Africa? Liberia provides a test case of the limits of Pan-Africanism. Whole libraries have been written on the movement as anticolonialist ideology. These range from the congresses organized by Du Bois to the activism inspired by Garvey in places as disparate as South Africa and Brazil. My aim here differs. I look at “Pan-Africanism in one country,” a specific African place. In crisis, Liberia stretched forth her hands to the Black Diaspora. The appeal affected both those who viewed the Black Republic as the symbol of black independence and those who viewed it as a field for black capitalism. The question subtly became: What is Liberia to me? If the oligarchy in Monrovia was corrupt, it should be condemned. Yet condemnation fell in very nicely with the charges of white racists and might threaten black independence. The deep desire of many blacks in the Diaspora to keep Liberia open as a “Black Man’s Country” encouraged apologetics, even in the face of festering doubts about the country’s rulers. This ambiguity of the erstwhile black Zion in the interwar period raises the continuing question of whether racial solidarity calls for solidarity with unrepresentative present-day African regimes — or the people made to suffer under them. More broadly, it raises the question of how American minorities are to react to conflicts in the “old country,” be it Northern Ireland or the West Bank.

Liberia, a country that operated more or less as an American protectorate from the First World War through the cold war, is today beyond the range of major United States foreign policy interests. Seventy years ago, in the name of human rights, a Republican administration stood on the verge of using military force to secure a material deemed essential to national defense. Today, amid the slaughter of thousands, another Republican administration is timorous of all but token involvement. Interventions proceed, but perceived national interests have shifted elsewhere. This is the most cautionary part of this tale.

1 Confronting the Motherland



The Negro is an American. We know nothing of Africa.

— Martin Luther King Jr.

For many generations, slaves and the descendants of slaves in America invented a homeland called “Africa” — a land before slave ships, a prelapsarian savanna whereupon the provocatively dressed gazelle could stroll safely after dark. Perhaps someday Africa will exist, in which case it will have been patented by African Americans in the U.S.A. from the example of the American Civil Rights movement.

— Richard Rodriguez

People from the African Diaspora have often been at the forefront of the movement for African liberation. Their contribution to anticolonial Pan-Africanism has been immense. In 1947, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) observed, “The idea of one Africa to unite the thought and ideals of all native peoples of the dark continent belongs to the twentieth century and stems naturally from the West Indies and the United States.” In these two places, “various groups of Africans, quite separate in origin, became so united in experience and so exposed to the impact of new cultures that they began to think of Africa as one idea and one land.”²¹ Thinkers and activists such as Alexander Crummell, Edward Blyden, Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, and Malcolm X have all formed part of a long tradition. *Vis-à-vis* European colonialism and racism, they have been the proverbial miner’s canary. Diasporic blacks have borne witness to and warned of the full meaning of white supremacy. They have known (and continue to know) that whatever differences of ethnicity or language may exist among blacks, white supremacy posits the subordination of all blacks. As Malcolm X told the Organization of African States in 1964, “Your problems will never be fully solved until and unless ours are solved. You will never be fully respected until and

unless we are also respected.” He reminded his listeners, “Our problem is your problem. It is not a Negro problem, nor an American problem. . . . It is not a problem of civil rights, but a problem of human rights.”²

Identity in the Diaspora has assumed tremendous importance. Du Bois struggled with the issue for the more than seventy years of his adult life. The intellectual, educated at Fisk, Harvard, and The University of Berlin, was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 and, until 1934, the editor of its journal, the *Crisis*. He has emerged as a central figure in twentieth-century Pan-Africanism; Du Bois was at the forefront of organizing a series of Pan-African conferences held in Europe in the years following World War I. In his ninety-five years, the African American polymath moved from a rather genteel late-Victorian emphasis on the transformative power of the liberal bourgeoisie to Marxist-Leninism and membership in the Communist Party.

On the question of identity, the Massachusetts-born Du Bois was an early multiculturalist. In the address “The Conservation of Races,” delivered in 1897, he spoke of what Africa meant to him and his folk. Races, not individuals, were the motive force in history. His people had a racial message they had not yet been able to give to the world. Because of the uniqueness of their gift, “the advance guard of the Negro people—the 8,000,000 people of Negro blood in the United States of America—must soon come to realize that if they are to take their just place in the van of Pan-Negroism, then their destiny is *not* absorption by the white Americans.”³

African Americans were just that, one branch of the great and ramifying Negro race whose seat was Africa. Du Bois makes a virtue of necessity in the face of white American psychosexual hysteria surrounding “mongrelization.” A year after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and in a country in which many states had miscegenation laws, Du Bois’s minatory tone on absorption was unneeded. His defensive conceptualization of what black folk had to offer American society was a spirituality that harkened back to Africa. His ideas resemble those of an earlier Pan-African thinker, Edward Blyden (1832–1912). The older man had elaborated the idea of the “African Personality,” which stressed warmth, communality, and spirituality in opposition to European coolness, individualism, and materialism. Such dichotomizations formed part of a more general late-nineteenth-century pattern. As in Slavophilism and Hindutva, “spirituality” constituted a counterweight to the values of the successfully imperialist West.

In 1897, Du Bois called African Americans a nation, but he avoided

nationalist appeals. Blacks were distinct and should perpetually remain so, but without a political state of their own. Instead, they should seek entrance into the civic sphere in a secular and race-neutral state. At the turn of the twentieth century, Du Bois advocated a politically engaged version of “separate but equal.” Whereas Booker T. Washington, the dominant spokesman in contemporary black political life, publicly eschewed political participation, Du Bois demanded access to full civil rights within a pluralistic sociopolitical order. He felt that, “if . . . there is substantial agreement in laws, language and religion; if there is a satisfactory adjustment of economic life, then there is no reason why, in the same country and on the same street, two or three great nation ideals might not thrive and develop, that men of different races might not strive together for their race ideals as well, perhaps even better, than in isolation.”⁴ Over his long lifespan, Du Bois remained insistent on a core of African American rights. Much else changed and shifted. The man who could see danger in amalgamation in 1897 could write in 1920 that he saw no reason to exclude blacks from social, including sexual, equality.⁵ Fourteen years later, in one of the greatest shifts of his life, Du Bois embraced black self-segregation and self-development as the answer to the problems of Depression-weary black America. Perhaps unintentionally, Du Bois’s most lasting contribution to the ongoing debate on race was his early enunciation of the liberal *modus vivendi*, which had become part of the American consensus on race relations by the 1960s. What is most significant is that his lifelong commitment to the advancement of his folk at all times remained consistent with a general concern for social justice. His quest for the latter was never ending, although he seldom took a straight path.

Throughout Du Bois’s adult life, Africa remained important. He first visited the continent in 1923; he died there some thirty years later. David Levering Lewis notes:

In Du Bois, the Pan-African idea found an intellectual temperament and organizational audacity enabling it to advance beyond the evangelical and literary to become an embryonic movement whose cultural, political, and economic potential would assume, in the long term, worldwide significance. No other person of color then living, with the significant and calamitous exception of Marcus Garvey, was more capable of articulating the idea and mobilizing others in its service.⁶

Africa, however enveloped in mythopoeic projections, was necessary. While whites posited exclusion because of the inferiority of Negro blood, Du Bois retorted with the claim of a specific gift contained within that blood. Hence the two races might remain separate together, to their

mutual benefit. In his 1903 collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, he assures his audience that the black man “would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world.”⁷ The Negro derived his gift from Africa. Of his people, Du Bois said, “We are Americans, not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion. Farther than that, our Americanism does not go.” To the obvious question of why, he responds, “We are Negroes, members of a vast historic race that from the very dawn of creation has slept but half awakening in the dark forests of its African fatherland.”⁸ Du Bois’s Africa is totemic, a *lieu de mémoire*; it gives the eternal social separation of North American blacks a rationale. It is a lyrical conception, a construct that transmutes exclusion into conservation. It is not a geographical expression, but a spiritual pedigree. As such it proves essential to Du Bois’s American project, but it is an Africa projected from without, from the Diaspora. It is the Black Man’s Land, a peaceful *Volksgemeinschaft* (national/folk community). Totemic Africa long preceded Du Bois’s encounter with Africa as a geographical place. He later remarked, “I did not myself become actively interested in Africa until 1908 or 1910. Franz Boas really influenced me to begin studying this subject and I began really to get into it only after 1915.”⁹ By this time, Africa the totem was firmly in place, filtering all information from Africa the place.

Admittedly, Du Bois did eventually move away from assertions of grand spiritual affinities and conceived of the link between Africa and the Diaspora as one of shared oppression. In 1940, he proclaimed, “But one thing is sure and that is the fact that since the fifteenth century these ancestors of mine and their descendants have had a common history; have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory.” Phenotype was no cardinal point. What provided a connection was the “social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult, and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa.”¹⁰ The slave trade, slavery, and its heritage of discrimination thus prove central to the linkage between Africa and its Diaspora. However, what happens if we look backward and inward? Are class, ethnicity, and gender so easily trumped? Do all African social classes become linked to the forced migrants? Did the Middle Passage really bind together a cane cutter in Jamaica and King Gezo of Dahomey? If we succumb to the Manichaean binary of an exploiting West and a

passive and undifferentiated “rest,” we are left with no critique of multiple forms of social oppression found among this rest.

Enter Garvey

Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) stands out as the most programmatic of diasporic Pan-Africanists. Malcolm X credited Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) with starting “the entire freedom movement, which brought about the independence of African nations.”¹¹ The Trinidadian historian Tony Martin says Garvey “demonstrated the underlying unity of the African world, despite its regional diversities. He showed that Africans from Canada to South Africa and from Australia to Panama could be appealed to and mobilized around a common program of race first, self-reliance and nationhood.”¹² Garvey linked the disparate parts of the Diaspora—the Caribbean, the United States, and Africa—in a great arc of black suffering, which was, in turn, linked by a future of racial greatness. Combined with this notion of common cultural affinity, but not always coterminous with it, was the idea of a unified political destiny.

Garvey continues to be endlessly analyzed and critiqued, his person and thought often caught between the opposing perceptions of hagiographers and detractors. Recently, looking at the evolution of Caribbean radicalism, Winston James has argued that Garvey’s non-American background proves particularly important:

It is almost unthinkable . . . that an African American leader at the time would have adopted the high profile, noisy, confrontational posture adopted by the Garvey movement in the early part of the century—the Universal African Legions, a proto-military wing of the UNIA, even had a cavalry unit which paraded on the streets of New York on horseback, in full military regalia; it is almost unthinkable, because the historical experience of Afro-America would certainly have ruled out such an option. It was too much of an obvious high-risk gamble.

Given the later career of the Black Panthers, one might question this assertion. Some critics dismiss Garvey as simply the leader of an ephemeral and doomed back-to-Africa scheme. More than forty years ago, George Padmore, a doyen of Pan-Africanism, compared Garvey and his rival Du Bois: “Garvey’s bombastic broadsides against the white man, coupled with his garish showmanship, had an hypnotic effect upon the unlettered, unsophisticated West Indian immigrants and Southern Ne-

groes.” The reason for the UNIA’s success was that “Du Bois could not compete with Garvey’s appeal to these under-privileged people. He was too intelligent, too honest to play on their ignorance of the real situation in Africa.”¹³ In the mid-1980s, Judith Stein came to just the opposite conclusion. Seeking to place the UNIA within a non-Marxist class critique, she maintained that Garveyism represented the yearnings of a would-be black bourgeoisie whose aims diverged in significant ways from those of the black masses. For her, it constituted a movement of urbanized strivers enamored of black capitalism. “Because the class structure of the black community was different from that of the Anglo-Saxon, Jewish, Italian, and Chinese communities did not mean that it was nonexistent.” Furthermore, “the class structure of the black community in Gary, Indiana, was different from the ones in Macon County, Alabama, in Kingston, Jamaica, and in Monrovia, Liberia. The lives of black farmers, factory workers, and teachers were not identical. It would be surprising if their politics were.”¹⁴

The abortion of Garveyism has been attributed to many causes: the narrowness of its class aims; the opposition of the established African American elite; the interference of the European colonial powers; the opposition of the Liberian oligarchy; the harassment by the FBI. All of these played a part in the subversion of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA. None of them, in and of itself, suffices as an explanation. The defeat (rather than the failure) of Garveyism does not rest on the inherent illogic of its program. It rests on a failure to disentangle the claims of a national minority from those of pan-ethnicity. In Liberia, the site of the proposed experiment, the UNIA ran into issues of class and ethnicity, which belied the very unity it proclaimed as its *raison d’être*.

The lineaments of Marcus Mosiah Garvey’s biography are well known and oft repeated. A considerable literature has already accumulated, much of it focused on the rise and fall of Garvey’s movement within the United States. Other writings have assessed the impact of his anti-colonial rhetoric in the broad African and Caribbean contexts. I intend neither of these approaches here. My purpose is to examine Garveyism and its aftermath in Liberia, the “national centre” which Garvey promised his followers and the world.

Briefly summarized, Garvey’s life was truly international, moving as it did between the Caribbean, North America, and Europe. The future leader was born at St. Ann’s Bay, in northern Jamaica, on August 17, 1887, the son of a mason and a seamstress. The youth left school at the age of fourteen and became a printer’s apprentice in Kingston. Garvey subsequently achieved the status of master printer and foreman at the large P. A. Benjamin Company. In 1907, the young foreman supported a

strike and lost his position as a result. He went to work in the Government Printing Office and founded a short-lived newspaper, *Garvey's Watchman*. Subsequently, he joined the political and literary National Club and published a bimonthly newspaper called *Our Own*. Garvey also made the acquaintance of Dr. J. Robert Love, a British-trained Bahamian political critic, who published the *Advocate*. The future black nationalist left Jamaica in 1910 for Costa Rica, where he worked for the United Fruit Company. Outraged by the treatment of his fellow West Indians on the plantations, Garvey went to Port Limón, where he demanded that the British consul protect black workers. In Costa Rica, the young ex-printer established yet another ephemeral publication, *La Nacional*, before moving on to Panama, where he started *La Prensa*.

The politically awakened Garvey returned to Jamaica in 1911. His sojourn was brief; he left for London the following year. In the imperial capital, he came into contact with a wide range of black opinion. One of his contacts was the journalist and Pan-Africanist Duse Mohammed Ali, the publisher of the *African Times and Orient Review*, who gave him employment. In October of 1913, Garvey observed, "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." He predicted that "the people who inhabit that portion of the Western Hemisphere [i.e., the West Indies] 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 ceaseless as it shines on the Empire of the North today."¹⁵

At the same time that he espoused a triumphant vision of black imperialism, Garvey was also drawn to the moral uplift and economic self-sufficiency preached by Booker T. Washington. Washington's book, *Up from Slavery*, inspired the Jamaican to plan a program of vocational education in his homeland. Garvey returned to Jamaica in July of 1914 determined to do something "Washingtonian" for his people. The outgrowth of this striving was the Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and the African Communities League. On the face of it, he pursued a conservative aim. "The bulk of our people," he observed, "are in darkness and are really unfit for good society." The new association proposed "to go among the people and help them up to a better state of appreciation among the cultured classes, and raise them to the standard of civilized approval."¹⁶ In March of 1916, Garvey traveled to the United States to see Washington for the purpose of raising money for a school in Jamaica. Unfortunately, his arrival came several months after the Sage of Tuskegee's death.

Garvey's arrival proved a turning point. In the wider ambit of North

American society, he very quickly came to the conclusion that the organization of black business must supersede his original plan to establish an educational institution. Garvey, once an optimist about the prospects of education and uplift in the Diaspora, was deeply affected by the wave of racial violence during and after the First World War. Lynching and riots convinced him that the United States was essentially a white man's country. The Jamaican immigrant moved his headquarters to New York's Harlem after spending about fifteen months lecturing and fund-raising across the United States. Within a few years, his UNIA had emerged as the most dynamic group in Harlem.

Garvey's advent coincided with the Great Migration of African Americans from the South. Seeking better conditions, thousands left. Between 1910 and 1920, the first wave (300,000) arrived in the North. In the next decade, a huge number (1,300,000) arrived. Northern cities saw the expansion of urban ghettos. Chicago's black population went from 44,103 to 233,903 between 1910 and 1930, Detroit's from 5,741 to 120,066. New York, the nation's largest urban area, had a black population that grew from 91,709 to 327,796.¹⁷ In the black metropolis, migrants from the agrarian American South both warily viewed and mixed with immigrants from the Anglophone West Indies. Whatever their differences, both were caught on the wrong side of the color line, sharing a common language and a heritage of Protestant evangelization.

It was to these people that Garvey revived many of the emigrationist hopes of the nineteenth century which he promised to give concrete form. In May of 1919, he announced the formation of the Black Star Line, a steamship company linking the scattered sons and daughters of Africa and supported by their investment. The flagship of the line was the *Yarmouth*, which was bought to enter the produce trade with the West Indies. The company also purchased the *Shadyside*, a fifty-year-old ferryboat and the *Kanawha*, a steam yacht. The shipping concern was to constitute the centerpiece of a commercial empire envisioned to include stores, factories, and a host of retail enterprises (a mail-order business, steam and electric laundry, and the Negro Factories Corporation). The association also owned a restaurant and a newspaper, the *Negro World*. Efforts toward economic self-sufficiency included the purchase of Liberty Hall, the UNIA's Harlem headquarters. The organization ramified to include the African Black Cross nurses, the African Legion, and a motor corps. The association held its national convention in August of 1920 and, for a month, Madison Square Garden was filled with 25,000 delegates. They approved the fifty-four-article "Declaration of Negro Rights." A number of offices were created: Supreme Potentate, Provisional President of Africa, American Leader, and leaders of the Eastern

and Western Caribbean. The potentate and his deputy were required to be African-born and to reside on the African continent. Garvey became Provisional President of Africa. The association pursued bold and broad general aims:

To establish a universal confraternity among the race; to promote the spirit of pride and love; to reclaim the fallen, to administer to and assist the needy; to assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa; to assist in the development of independent Negro nations and communities; to establish a central nation for the race; to establish commissaries or agencies in the principal countries and cities of the world for the representation of all Negroes; to promote a conscientious spiritual worship among the native tribes of Africa; to establish universities, colleges, academies and schools for the racial education and culture of the people; to work for better conditions among Negroes everywhere.¹⁸

Writing in the early 1960s, the Nigerian analyst E. U. Essien-Udom said of the Nation of Islam, "It is . . . extraordinary that its belief in itself as a definite nation of people has produced absolutely no political program for the establishment of a national home." Furthermore, "the final national homeland is guaranteed solely through eschatological beliefs taken from Old Testament prophecies."¹⁹ This is certainly not true of Garveyism. As one commentator has noted, "Garvey's proposal of a separatist solution cannot be dismissed as a superficial *deus ex machina* or delusory *non sequitur*." Whether it was correct or not, "apropos the specific dilemma of the minority black community within the United States, he discerns no democratic remedy for black genocide in a regime which, by its very nature, is controlled by a prejudiced white majority."²⁰

Some have portrayed the UNIA as simply a back-to-Africa movement bent on provoking an uncontrollable mass exodus from the Western Hemisphere. This was not the case; Garvey himself quite explicitly said so. In 1921 he explained, "It is a mistake to suppose that I want to take the Negroes to Africa. I believe that the American Negroes have helped to establish the North American civilization and, therefore, have a perfect right to live in the U.S. and to aspire to equality of opportunities and treatment." Indeed, "Each Negro can be a citizen of the nation in which he was born or that he has chosen. But I foresee the building of a great state in Africa which, featuring in the concert of the great nations, will make the Negro race as respectable as the others."²¹ Emigration would occur, but it would be spread out over a half century. The head of the UNIA believed that an "overwhelming majority [is] in favor of the plan of returning the race to Africa by careful and proper arrangements and methods, whereby the somewhat settled national equilibrium, indus-

trially and generally, would not be disturbed.”²² White immigration would eventually provide the labor the South and other sections of the United States depended on.

Garvey’s political blueprint for the future was vague. By the end of 1919, the UNIA had set its sights on Liberia in West Africa. Beyond this, the conceptualization of the future “central nation for the race” always remained sketchy and a bit naive. The envisioned polity was to be capitalist and authoritarian; socialism and trade unionism represented anathemas. However, capital would not go unchecked. Individual investments over 1 million dollars and corporate investments over 5 million dollars would be prohibited, with the government controlling capital above this limit. An elite, bound together by love of race, would occupy positions of trust. The creation of titles and honorifics, derided by Garvey’s enemies, foreshadowed the black meritocracy that would govern after the nation’s creation. In that polity, the president would be elected, but would also have absolute power to appoint all subordinate officers. Should the chief executive or any of his subordinates prove corrupt, they were to be put to death. Love of race would supposedly prevent malfeasance, even among officials holding unbridled power.

The Universal Negro Improvement Association reached its apogee in 1919–20. Its message struck a chord with large numbers of African Americans, many of whom had migrated from the Deep South only to find their dreams of a better life cruelly betrayed. The UNIA spoke to this constituency. For thirty-five cents a month, black women and men experienced solidarity and received a message that promised an end to socioeconomic subordination. “Liberty Halls” were set up in every town where the association had a chapter. Within them, the social mingled with the political — there were concerts, dances, public meetings, and religious services.

August of 1920 became the climactic. Membership was affected by a downturn in the economy in 1920–21, and sales of stock in the Black Star Line fell off. The UNIA received only \$4,000 in membership fees in 1921 from a claimed membership of 4 million.²³ In addition to financial problems, the movement found itself attacked from both the political right and left. Garvey had gained an enemy in Du Bois. The intellectual had initially maintained a rather neutral stance toward the association; he had made contact in 1915 during a trip to Jamaica. However, Du Bois could not help but realize that Garveyism directly opposed his integrationism. Also, he had developed his own elite version of Pan-Africanism; he organized congresses in 1919, 1921, and 1923, which directly competed for attention with the UNIA’s annual conventions. In the pages of the *Crisis*, he increasingly questioned Garvey’s methods. In

his view, Garvey was as foolish as he was impolitic: "And finally, without arms, money, effective organization or base of operations, Mr. Garvey openly and wildly talks of 'Conquest' and of telling white Europeans in Africa to 'get out!' and of becoming himself a black Napoleon!"²⁴ The black socialist A. Philip Randolph voiced similar sentiments when he announced in his *Messenger* publication that "the whole scheme of a black empire, in the raging sea of imperialism would make it impossible to maintain power, nor would it bring liberation to Africa, for Negro exploiters and tyrants are as bad as white ones."²⁵ Eventually Randolph and William Pickens of the NAACP, calling themselves the Friends of Negro Freedom, held four meetings with a central aim — Marcus Garvey must go! From a completely different angle, J. Edgar Hoover of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was convinced that Garvey was, as Martin Luther King Jr. was later to be, "a notorious Negro agitator." Hoover aimed to speed "the prosecution . . . in order that he [Garvey] may be once and for all put where he can peruse his past activities behind the four walls in the Atlanta clime."²⁶

A number of UNIA officials left the association in 1921 and 1922, and a number of prominent African Americans distanced themselves from the organization. This held especially true after a June 1922 meeting between Garvey and Edward Young Clarke, the second in command of the Ku Klux Klan. Events now moved toward their tragic denouement. Garvey purged his leadership in August 1922, but dissension continued. At the beginning of 1923, James Eason, a former UNIA official and later vitriolic Garvey critic, was murdered in New Orleans. On May 21, 1923, Garvey was tried for mail fraud in federal court in New York; almost a month later the court declared him guilty. His second wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, estimated that the movement had taken in \$10 million between 1919 and 1921, leaving no assets and running a deficit of \$700,000.²⁷ Garvey was given a \$1,000 fine, made to pay court costs, and sentenced to five years in prison. The Provisional President of Africa was jailed and then released on bond pending appeal. The organization was battered, but still intact. Membership numbers were still impressive: New York City, 30,000; Chicago, 9,000; Philadelphia, 6,000; Cincinnati, 5,600; Detroit, 4,000; Washington, D.C., 7,000; Jamaica, 5,000; Guatemala, 3,000.²⁸

Garvey's judicial appeals proved futile, and in February of 1925 he was remanded to Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. In the final act of the U.S. phase of the Garvey drama, President Calvin Coolidge commuted the sentence in November of 1927. Less than a month later, on December 2, Marcus Garvey was deported from the United States, never to return. The UNIA in the United States fell victim to factionalism and lost its cohesion, and Garvey's attempts to reestablish himself in Jamaica

W. E. B. Du Bois.
Photo from Prints and
Photographs Department,
Moorland-Spingarn Research
Center, Howard University.



Marcus Garvey
in plumed hat.
Photo from
*The Philosophy and
Opinions of Marcus
Garvey.*

amounted to little. In 1935, he took up residence in London, the capital of the empire he had once hoped to topple. Garvey, who had constantly predicted race war, died in 1940 during a different kind of war, but one that would begin to shake the foundations of imperialism.

Although Garveyism has been analyzed as a religious movement, its significance lies in its rejection of chiliastic solutions.²⁹ In his modernist project, Garvey, unlike many later black nationalists, eschewed eschatology.³⁰ What others would later promise to do through divine intervention, he would do with tractors and cement. James Weldon Johnson, a one-time secretary of the NAACP remarked that Garvey “might have succeeded with more than moderate success. He had energy and daring and the Napoleonic personality, the personality that draws masses of followers.” Furthermore, “He stirred the imagination of the Negro masses as no Negro ever had.”³¹ One might ask: How could a conservative, antisocialist, and segregationist organization fail in an era of increasing xenophobia and racism? Garvey’s aim of throwing white imperialism out of Africa, while complementary to white supremacy in America, ran counter to the wider claims of white imperial hegemony. Garvey’s anti-colonialism, seen as antiwhite bombast by his critics, obscured the accommodationist racial modus vivendi contained in his message.

One can envision, perhaps, a counter-historical Garvey, the leader of an organization stressing Christian proselytization and white support. Perhaps he could have initially renounced the title of provisional president of Africa. Fascinatingly, Du Bois essentially proposed this scheme in 1922. As the Black Star Line’s fortunes seemed to be ebbing, Du Bois wrote the American secretary of state to suggest that the government take it over. The professor suggested a “small company in which colored people had representation” to open up direct trade between Liberia and the United States. The government owned ships, and Du Bois requested to know if there was any legal way for them to be diverted to linking the United States and Liberia. Such an undertaking would restore the faith of the “mass of American Negroes in commercial enterprise with Africa, possibly having a private company headed by men of highest integrity, both white and colored, to take up and hold in trust the Black Star Line certificates.”³² Du Bois’s appeal proved futile.

A Black Mother/Fatherland

In the nineteenth century, Liberia, the state “founded” by refugees from the Diaspora, was touted by some race men as a place where the despised black man of the Diaspora might truly feel at home. Early Liberia

had received settlements of African Americans under the auspices of the white American Colonization Society. Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, was founded in 1822. The Maryland State Colonization Society established a colony at Cape Palmas (Harper) in 1833; the Louisiana and Mississippi Colonization Societies founded a settlement at Sinoe in the year 1837. Ten years later, the settlers, except those in the Maryland settlement, proclaimed their independence. By 1850, the coast between the Gallinas and San Pedro Rivers (except for one small enclave), was claimed either by Liberia or by the independent Maryland County. The latter joined the republic in 1857. The coastal settlements came to be grouped into five counties (Grand Cape Mount, Montserrado, Grand Bassa, Sinoe, and Maryland). Many toponyms were redolent of Dixie (e.g., Clay-Ashland, Virginia, Greenville, and Maryland), and the settler elite aspired to a lifestyle echoic of the Old South. By the late 1920s, 12,000 to 15,000 “Americo-Liberians” lived surrounded by an indigenous population of perhaps 1.5 million.³³

In the early days, many of the Americo-Liberians took to commerce rather than agriculture, developing a good trade in fish and rice with indigenous villages. Cloth, rum, and tobacco were also exchanged for cam wood, cane sugar, palm kernels, rice, and some ivory. Agriculture went in fits and starts. In 1835, black Quakers established farms near the mouth of the Saint John River. Three years later, an agricultural settlement was founded at the entrance to the Sinoe River by freedmen sent out by the Mississippi Colonization Society. In the same year, Lewis Sheridan, a North Carolina freedman, was granted a long lease on six hundred acres. In spite of this early start, however, farming experienced continuing problems. Local food crops proved unattractive to the settlers, and the market for cash crops appeared limited. In the second half of the century, coffee cultivation promised to be the mainstay of a prosperous export agriculture. By the 1870s, production was in full swing, and by 1892, the country grew well over a million pounds. The boom did not last, however. Liberian producers suffered from competition with Indonesia and Brazil and from failure to rationalize marketing. By the early twentieth century, world prices for coffee had greatly declined, and Liberia’s coffee exports sank to a level of under 500,000 pounds.³⁴ The dearth of labor, laterite soils, and competition in international markets all helped retard export-oriented agriculture.

The desire to emigrate to somewhere, be it Liberia or the Caribbean, has always had as an impetus the marginal status of blacks in the American republic. We face the fact that the *Herrenvolk* Democracy of the founding fathers was premised on the creation of the White through the exclusion of the Black. In the 1850s, Martin Delany proclaimed: “I am

not in favor of caste, nor a separation of the brotherhood of mankind and would as willingly live among white men as black, if I had an *equal possession and enjoyment of privileges*; but shall never be reconciled to live among them, subservient to their will.”³⁵ For many whites, the central challenge of Delany’s statement lay in the “equal possession and enjoyment of privileges.” For much of the history of the United States, African Americans have existed as a species of the permanent alien, either de facto or de jure. The attraction of the Universal Negro Improvement Association lay in the promise of carving out a place and location to be somebody. The legal end of slavery did not shatter the carapace of caste. Under legalized segregation, blacks remained economically discriminated against, endogamous, and residentially segregated. It is this perpetually liminal state that black nationalists before and after Garvey have found unacceptable. Delany referred to African Americans as a “nation within a nation.” They were as much a nation as “the Poles in Russia, the Hungarians in Austria; the Welsh, Irish and Scotch in the British Dominions.”³⁶

Delany did not favor Liberia as a destination. His contemporary, Edward Blyden, did. He is the Pan-African thinker who most clearly foreshadows Garvey. Blyden was born in the Danish Virgin Islands, lived briefly in the United States, and then spent more than sixty years in West Africa, principally in Liberia. He became a Presbyterian minister, served as president of Liberia College, and headed the Liberian diplomatic corps. To him, black people, both in Africa and abroad, possessed the “African Personality,” a bundle of traits centered on communalism and spirituality. These would serve the world, in Blyden’s formulation, as an antidote to the materialism and rampant individualism of the industrial West.

Beyond elaborating his theory of cultural vitalism, Blyden looked forward to a time when those blacks with Western skills would return to the African continent, beginning with Liberia. In the 1860s, Blyden struck a note that the UNIA would later echo:

We need some African power, some great centre of the race where our physical pecuniary, and intellectual strength may be collected. We need some spot whence such an influence may go forth in behalf of the race as shall be felt by the nations. We are now so scattered and divided that we can do nothing. . . . So long as we remain thus divided, we may expect impositions. So long as we live simply by the sufferance of the nations, we must expect to be subject to their caprices.³⁷

More than half a century later, Garvey asked himself, “Where is the black man’s Government? Where is his King and his kingdom? Where is

his President, his country, and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?” He responded, “I could not find them, and then I declared, ‘I will help to make them.’”³⁸ In Africa, the Word would be made Flesh. In Africa, specifically Liberia, the idea of a place to be somebody combined with the promise of untapped riches. The promise may have seemed utopian, but the same could have been said of the Irish nationalist proposal to divide the British Isles after eight centuries of union. Equally unrealistic to many was the Zionist proposal to create a homeland in the Middle East after nearly two millennia of absence. At times, Garvey and his movement saw themselves as parallel to the later movement in many ways. Robert Hill, the editor of the Garvey Papers, cogently notes: “The redemption of Africa, which Garvey took to mean that Africa must be for the Africans, and them exclusively, was thus on a par, ideologically, with the Zionist goal of restoring Palestine for the Jews. The goal of Jewish restoration also served as the key political paradigm for the sense of unity that the leaders and supporters of the scattered Garvey movement sought to communicate.”³⁹

Garveyism, infused with a deep and homegrown African American pessimism, offered a most logical way out of the specifically American dilemma. Blacks in North America were a minority surrounded by enemies in perpetuity; the only permanent refuge was emigration. Rent strikes, unionization, cooperative buying, and the establishment of small businesses did not address the central problem of national minority status. Electoral politics, while not entirely dismissed, could provide no permanent solutions. As with Theodor Herzl and his Zionist colleagues, coalition politics in situ could only provide palliatives. While sometimes suspicious of its aims, Garvey noted the Zionist precedent: “Thanks to Zionism, a very recent growth considering the age of the Jew, they can betake themselves to a national home in Palestine.” He observed further that “this is a good object lesson for the Negro.”⁴⁰ In 1920, at the height of his powers, the leader of the UNIA chided the previous generation of leaders: “Because Washington did not prepare us, because Moton did not prepare us there is no Africa for the Negro as there is a Palestine for the Jew, a Poland for the Poles, but what they did not do in the years past we’re going to do now.”⁴¹

The foundation of a Jewish state cannot be truly compared with Pan-Africanism — the latter encompasses a far greater number and diversity of peoples. However, if we think only in terms of African American nationalism, there are apparent points of conjuncture. David Brion Davis observes the similarities: “The Zionists ideal is to create a national center that will radiate pride, dignity, and standards of conduct for

those Jews (or African-Americans) who remain in the Diaspora (and it should be stressed that many Jews and peoples of African descent have long believed that they live in a Diaspora.)”⁴² He reminds us that “countless times, in various kinds of societies from Moorish Spain to Weimar Germany, Jews have ‘succeeded’ and won ‘acceptance’ only to encounter a sudden pogrom or outburst of ancient anti-Semitic canards.” Remembering this, it is possible that “like Jews (to say nothing of Kosovars, Serbs and Tutsis), African-Americans might seem more accepted and then face a revival of the kind of anti-black racism that had supposedly disappeared . . . we have no reason for complacency about having conquered such feelings here.”⁴³

But of course differences exist. The rise of fin de siècle anti-Semitism had its roots in the real and imagined growth of Jewish power in the Western world. Proscription of African Americans was aimed at keeping what Booker T. Washington referred to as the “world’s most complacent peasantry” exactly that — a peasantry. In 1924, a communist writer for the *Daily Worker* decried “Negro Zionism,” despite all the superficial resemblance, as “the wildest folly”: “The Great Powers and the League of Nations can cheerfully give a few thousand Jews a chance to settle in Palestine,” but “the Great Powers cannot tolerate for one instant the propaganda for Negro independent nationalism in any quarter of Africa — not even in the Negro states of Abyssinia and Liberia, especially not in the “fanatical” form in which alone this movement is found.”⁴⁴ Superficially, Zionism and Garveyism have some resemblance. However, and very importantly, the former represented an exclusive minority nationalism seeking to be the bulwark of the West. The latter was a “pan” movement seeking to include peoples who had never been united and to mold them into worldwide resistance to Western imperialism. There is no Pan-Semitism analogous to Pan-Africanism.

To some Garveyism represents just one more example of a peculiar, paranoid style in American political culture. For these persons, the Liberia plan marks a flight into a world of make-believe: “The ‘Back to Africa’ slogan was particularly disturbing. In essence, it was a form of escapism. There was no possibility of transporting millions of Negroes across the Atlantic to a strange and inhospitable environment guarded by a half-dozen European powers.”⁴⁵ One must be careful here, separating out the impediments imposed by “an inhospitable climate” and those imposed by hostile interests. By the 1920s, major epidemiological hurdles to African emigration had been removed. Malaria prophylaxis, steam transportation, and motor transport made the prospect of movement far different from what it had been one hundred years earlier. At

the time of Garvey's movement, hundreds of Lebanese traders (Syrians) were already well ensconced in West Africa. Indeed, in 1919, riots broke out in Freetown, Sierra Leone, against their supposed lock on small-scale retail trade.⁴⁶

The generalized American hostility to black emigration remains somewhat puzzling. The United States itself was a place of both entrance and exit in the period 1880–1920. One-fourth to one-third of all entrées returned to their country of origin. And, interestingly, elsewhere in the Americas, black repatriation was neither novel nor threatening. Hundreds of Afro-Brazilian returnees, mainly of Yoruba descent, left for the areas of present-day southern Nigeria, Togo, and Benin. African Americans had also migrated. German colonialists used African American agronomists in Togo before the First World War, and the Stalinist regime used them for the same purpose in Central Asia in the 1930s. In one sad irony, the United States, the government which squelched the back-to-Africa scheme, shipped over a thousand African Americans to Liberia during World War II—as soldiers.

Garvey was not the first twentieth-century emigrationist. Hope sprang eternally and ephemerally. Emigrationism was a mixed bag, arising as it did from the desire of some to flee persecution and the desire of others to benefit from the supposed riches of the “motherland.” One of the foremost boosters of turn-of-the-century emigration, Bishop Turner, saw Liberia as a place where fortunes could be made. He was far too optimistic. But his message had appeal to people ground down by poverty and proscription. Between 1890 and 1910, approximately 1,000 African Americans emigrated to the Black Republic.⁴⁷ For more than a generation before Garvey, ephemeral emigration societies had come and gone. In 1900, the African Jubilee Emigration Society promised to provide passage to Liberia for less than \$20 and grant each emigrant twenty-five acres of land. In October of 1901, Bishop Turner helped unite various independent emigration societies into the Colored National Emigration and Commercial Association (CNECA). The CNECA planned to raise a capital of \$100,000 through the sale of stock to purchase a ship to travel to Africa, “especially the Republic of Liberia.” The initiative flopped, much to Turner’s chagrin. He demanded to know, “Had all of us rather remain in this country and be disfranchised, uncivilized, shot, hunted, burnt and skinned alive, without judge or jury, than build up a nation of our own outside of this devil-ridden country?”⁴⁸ A few years later, two organizers proposed the New York and Liberia Steamship Company. It offered \$5 shares of stocks in blocks of the five through fifty. The company received the endorsement of Arthur Barclay, the Liberian president, and his entire cabinet. Unfortunately, by 1905, the

company had disappeared. Another enterprise, the Ethiopian American Steamship Freight and Passenger Colonization Company, was capitalized at \$500,000 and promised to carry mail, freight, and passengers between San Pedro, California, and Monrovia. It failed. In 1905 a Mrs. M. French-Sheldon visited Liberia on behalf of the Americo-Liberian Industrial Company. She was “a native of the United States of America . . . some of whose greatest men [are] moved by their love of Africa and just desire for the welfare of the Negro race.”⁴⁹ French-Sheldon initially got the Liberian legislature and the president to agree to her commercial plans. In a move that adumbrated the later treatment of the Garvey movement, President Arthur Barclay reneged on promises made.

On the eve of the Great War, yet another venture, the African Union Company (AUC), appeared. It was organized in December of 1913 and incorporated in March of 1914 in New York. Capitalized at \$500,000, it looked to trade with Africa generally. The firm announced holdings in mahogany and timberlands, as well as palm oil plantations. Although the organizers claimed that several “kings” and “chiefs” had bought stock, it did not give their names. As many of its predecessors had, the company vanished like a will-o-the-wisp. One African chief did present himself, however. In 1912 in Oklahoma, Chief Alfred Sam, a Gold Coaster interested in U.S.–West African trade, struck a cord with several hundred land-hungry farmers. In 1915, his Akim Trading Company venture managed to take men, women, and children not to Liberia, but to the Gold Coast. Unfortunately, Chief Sam disappeared, and many of the emigrants eventually returned to the United States.

Liberia was the cynosure of emigrationist interest, but many people just wanted to get away, be it to a British colony like the Gold Coast or elsewhere. One example, which adumbrates Garveyism, occurred in 1912. Issac B. Atkinson, the sixty-three-year-old editor of *Atkinson's Monthly Magazine*, published in Louisville, Kentucky, appealed for an “On-to-Africa Congress.” Atkinson, an Arkansan, had been a successful farmer, schoolteacher, and small-time politician. He also presided over the Ethiopian Afro-American Franchise Protective League, headquartered in St. Louis. Atkinson's planned On-to-Africa Congress planned to send commissioners to England, Germany, France, and Belgium to secure lands. Treaties with the colonial governments would guarantee “the right to select the location for the colonies, to build railroads, and public highways, to develop [*sic*] and protect the waterways to develop farming and commerce, the right to have and maintain any army for the protection of the colonies, etc.” The African American colonies would have the same relationship with the metropole as did Canada or Aus-

tralia. Atkinson was not planning to set up a steamship company. Instead, "The [colonial] governments will be asked to furnish ships. . . . Money to be loaned on 20, 40, and 60 years time with reasonable interest."⁵⁰ Atkinson's appeal, which was sent to George V, was not answered by the British Foreign Office.

Garvey's own interest in Liberia formed part of a general quickening of outside interest in Africa during the period around the First World War. Liberia seemed to offer entry to Africa even as other schemes, including the possibility that the United States might acquire former German colonies, faded. However, there were both political barriers and inducements. The country was de jure independent when Garveyism burst on the scene. However, this independence was far from unfettered. Liberia exemplified a case of neocolonialism before the invention of the term. Nineteenth-century debt had enmeshed the country in a financial tangle which only grew worse with time. An 1871 loan had proven disastrous; most of the money never arrived in the hands of the Liberian government. A British-engineered loan of 1906 promised to repay the debt, but it also brought undue British influence into Liberian affairs. In 1909, the black government sent a commission to the United States to ask for financial and other aid. The following year, an American commission visited the African country and recommended reforms and financial assistance. In 1912, the Liberians succeeded in obtaining a new loan overseen by customs receivers from the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany. In 1918, the United States converted the receivership into an all-American one, and the Liberian Frontier Force received training by American officers.

Thus by the time Garvey became interested in Liberia, the country had turned into a semiprotectorate of the United States. However, it was not a protectorate the Americans were willing to pay for. Between 1918 and 1922, the U.S. State Department attempted to secure an intergovernmental loan for the Black Republic. At first this was to happen under the terms of wartime measures, which allowed the extension of credits to allied nations. Although Liberia declared war on Germany in 1917, no loan had been authorized by the time of the armistice in November of 1918. The State Department then tried to get Congressional approval for the loan of 5 million dollars. The effort remained unsuccessful, and the Liberian loan was defeated in the Senate in November of 1922.

In its attempts to procure American aid, Liberia had long had important trans-Atlantic collaborators. For instance, in 1909, Booker T. Washington was instrumental in securing a successful hearing for the Liberian commission. The group, headed by Vice President James Dossen, was squired around the capital by Washington, who wrote to Theodore

Roosevelt that this was the first “Commission, composed of Negroes” to pay an official visit. The educator “was most anxious that they be treated with just as much courtesy as the custom by the United States will allow even if an exception has [to be] made, I think it will be a fine thing.”⁵¹ As expected, the visitors asked for financial aid. In addition, they asked for help with industrial education, Washington’s great achievement. The Liberians maintained that the country should be kept “intact for all Negroes in America who might, in the future, desire to go to the fatherland.”⁵² Dossen and his colleagues went on a subsequent tour of Tuskegee, and the following year an American mission visited Monrovia. It included Washington’s personal secretary, Emmett Scott, as its only black member.

A decade later, Garvey chose to emulate his hero and step in to aid the Black Republic. The UNIA approached president-elect of Liberia, C. D. B. King, while he stayed in Paris for the 1919 peace conference. In September of 1919, King came to New York, and a group of Garveyites, among them John E. Bruce and Reverend F. Wilcom Ellegor, approached him on the subject of assistance to the Black Republic. Hilary Johnson, the son of the mayor of Monrovia, appeared at Liberty Hall in November and encouraged UNIA members to visit Liberia.

Reverend Dr. Lewis G. Jordan, secretary of the National Baptist Convention, informed a Liberty Hall audience in April of 1920 that conditions were ripe. Jordan had just returned from Liberia, where President King had supposedly told him that the UNIA was indeed welcome.⁵³ The UNIA hoped that, finally, the rhetoric of Pan-Africanism would see realization. Garvey declared, “We of the UNIA at this moment have a solemn duty to perform and that is to free Liberia of any debt that she owes to any white government.”⁵⁴ In 1920, a group of Liberians paid mayor Gabriel Johnson’s passage to the United States. Importantly, Johnson was a member of a Liberian faction that opposed the American loan.

Plans concretized with the first association mission to Liberia. It set out in May of 1920, headed by Elie Garcia, a striving Haitian entrepreneur. The immigrant had come to the United States to pursue trade in logwood. Later he worked for the United States government at a laboratory in Nitro, West Virginia. He met Garvey in Philadelphia in 1919 and became the local representative of the Black Star Line. Once in Liberia, Garcia was outwardly effusive about prospects. He also succeeded in recruiting several prominent Liberians to the cause. Gabriel Johnson was proclaimed supreme potentate — titular head of the world’s black peoples. The UNIA’s coup in co-opting a prominent African politician promised to insure close collaboration between Harlem and Monrovia.