

# Preface: A Reparatory History of the Present

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I recently received a copy of volume 13 of *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* courtesy of its publisher, Duke University Press.<sup>1</sup> Subtitled *The Caribbean Diaspora: 1921–1922*, this volume represents the third in the projected five of the Caribbean series of the larger edition. It brings to a close those volumes devoted to the Greater Caribbean, excepting Jamaica, which will be the separate focus of volumes 14 and 15. The Caribbean volumes are the finale to the overall publishing project of the Garvey papers. Inaugurated more than thirty years ago (memorably, volume 1 was published in 1983), the edition encompasses two earlier series: the seven volumes of the American series, tracing the evolution of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in North America, and the three volumes of the African series, covering the expansion of the Garvey movement in sub-Saharan Africa and among Africans living in Europe. As the project's founder and editor in chief, Robert A. Hill, puts it in his general introduction to volume 11, the first in the Caribbean series, “When completed, the three series—American, African, and Caribbean—should be read together as parts of a coherent whole, each series informing as well as illuminating the events narrated in each of the others that, in spite of their diversity, demonstrate throughout a close interrelationship spanning continents and colonial empires.”<sup>2</sup> Hill, I believe, is

1 Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 13, *The Caribbean Diaspora: 1921–1922* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

2 Robert A. Hill, general introduction to Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 11, *The Caribbean Diaspora: 1910–1920* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), lxvi.

being overly modest here.<sup>3</sup> To my mind, when completed, the three series should be read together as a documentary expression of the contribution of the global Garvey movement to the *moral*—indeed, the *reparatory*—history of the world we live in. In the face of the dead ends of racial justice that define our present, it is reparatory history that ought to command our attention, and in this respect the Garvey papers may have something to teach us.

The gift of volume 13 has prompted me to reflect on the concern to establish a framework through which to view the Garvey movement in its Caribbean dimension. In his carefully considered introductions to these volumes, Hill advances a *revisionist* conception, not only of the centrality of the Caribbean to the whole institution and expansion of the UNIA but also, reciprocally, of the ethos of Garvey's doctrine of black self-determination to the development of Caribbean people as modern cultural-political subjects of *universal* rights. Part of what the volumes inspire, then, in my opinion, is a reflection on the way the Garvey movement projected not only a recognition of the global historicity of black experience (in which the Caribbean was a generative dynamic) but also the normative assumption of the universality of the claims of black people against the injustices that shaped their historical experience of enslaving and racially discriminatory powers.

In the general introduction to volume 11, Hill reminds us that the Garvey movement has often been seen in largely US-centric terms. This, he suggests, is a mistake (if not a conceit). No one would deny that it was in the United States that Garvey found his feet, where he found the organizational wherewithal to build what would turn out to be the greatest social movement of peoples of African descent the world has so far seen. But this view can obscure the poetics of relation that make the Caribbean a fulcrum of the movement. As Hill says, "Although the main crucible of the Garvey movement was situated in the U.S., the main driving force was West Indian. Furthermore, if the Garvey movement, as a mass movement, was launched in America, the ground was not only prepared in the West Indies; it was also where the movement had its greatest political impact."<sup>4</sup> Notably, the target of Hill's intervention here is *both* the historiography of the UNIA *and* the historiography of early-twentieth-century anticolonial nationalism in the Caribbean (perhaps especially in Jamaica). It needs to be remembered that in leaving Jamaica for the United States in March 1916, Garvey was joining a wave of West Indian migrants making their way north, in particular to New York and especially to Harlem—to an imagined horizon. These were the West Indians who would constitute the bulwark of the early UNIA; and in turn it was the UNIA that provided these West Indians with an early education in the politics of collective dissent in the region and that prepared them for the upheavals of the 1930s.

The succeeding volume covers the period from the inaugural international UNIA convention in New York in August 1920 to Garvey's return to the United States in mid-July 1921 from his extended Caribbean tour. This was a momentous period for the Garvey movement, in the United States as well as in the Caribbean. But it was also a period of impending organizational and financial crisis. As Hill puts it, the period "represents the moment of political apotheosis for the movement, but also

3 On Hill and the making of the Garvey project, see David Scott, "The Archaeology of Black Memory: An Interview with Robert A. Hill," *Small Axe*, no. 5 (March 1999): 80–150.

4 Hill, general introduction," 11:ix.

the moment when the finances of Garvey's Black Star Line went into freefall." One of the outstanding documents collected in this volume is the "UNIA Declaration of Rights," more formally known as the "Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World." The document was unveiled at the 1920 UNIA convention, and it marked, Hill argues, "the high point, ideologically, of the entire Garvey phenomenon."<sup>5</sup> In a real sense, I believe, Garvey's whole project could be thought of as the articulation of a demand to acknowledge the universality of the social, economic, and political rights of black people. The preamble boldly asserted the convention's resolution to speak as the chosen representatives of "the Negro peoples of the world" and offered both a list of wrongs as well as a cogent declaration of what was owed to black people in respect of those accumulated wrongs. It observed, for example, that blacks are "denied rights due to human beings for no other reason than their race and color." But interestingly, too, it took aim at imperialism: it impugned the division of the African continent among the European colonial powers, and it attacked the denial to blacks in the Caribbean of the "fuller rights of government to which white citizens are appointed, nominated and elected."<sup>6</sup> Against these systemic injustices, the document declared the absolute entitlement of blacks to equal "rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as "free denizens" of the world; to "common human respect"; to "even-handed justice"; to control of their social and economic institutions; and to recognition of their leaders. Above all, grasping the emerging moral-political language of its time, the document declared black people's entitlement to a peremptory right of self-determination.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is perhaps in this demand that the Garvey movement articulated a cultural-political idiom of black universality.

Volume 13 covers the period from August 1921 to August 1922—from the second through the third UNIA conventions. This is a period, says Hill, that marked "a very dark hour for Garvey and the UNIA parent body."<sup>8</sup> There was serious disarray within the leadership of the New York organization; there was now the irreversible collapse of the Black Star Line shipping company; and there was the collapse too of the much hoped for Liberia initiative. It was also the period that witnessed Garvey's abandonment of his earlier political radicalism and his adoption of a language of "racial purity." From here on he would refrain from challenging the global structures of racial domination; he would tone down his anti-imperialist rhetoric, court European governments, and, infamously, even meet with the head of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, however, this was also a period of continued expansion and vitality within the Caribbean Garvey movement. Hill attributes the resilience of the Caribbean organizations to the fact that they were established on the older cultural model of the community-based "friendly societies," which "formed the template and bedrock of the institutional life" of the organization. "At the same time," Hill goes on to explain, "the strength of the UNIA's devoted following confirms yet again the fact that the real homeland of the movement during these

5 Robert A. Hill, introduction to Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 12, *The Caribbean Diaspora: 1920–1921* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), xxxiii, xxxiv.

6 Hill, "UNIA Declaration of Rights," 12:32, 33.

7 *Ibid.*, 33. On the transformation of this political language, see David Scott, "Norms of Self-Determination: Thinking Sovereignty Through," *Middle East Law and Governance* 4, nos. 2–3 (2012): 195–224.

8 Hill, introduction, 13:xxxvii.

9 *Ibid.*, xxxviii–xxxix.

years of the early nineteen-twenties was in the Caribbean. There it attained a depth and a breadth of social outreach and cultural meaning that no other area of the black world equaled or could ever equal. That was because the name of the UNIA happened to be a new label for what people throughout the Caribbean and the wider Caribbean Diaspora had been practicing for a long time prior to the advent of Garvey.<sup>10</sup> This is a novel and important theme that, hopefully, will be taken up by future scholars of the Garvey movement in the Caribbean.

Now, as I have suggested, the story of the global Garvey movement, as reconstructed in the volumes so magisterially and authoritatively edited by Hill, forms an integral chapter in not only the social and cultural but also the *moral* and even *reparatory* history of the twentieth century. Why so? A moral history, as I wish to commend it, is a history-of-the-present that centers on the perpetration of historical evils and injustices and the moral and material harms that these have spawned. A reparatory history, specifically, is one dimension of such a moral history and is concerned with those historical evils and injustices that *remain* unrepaired in the present, whose wrongs continue to disfigure generations of human lives; and it is concerned, moreover, to *reconstruct* these evil and unjust pasts in ways that potentially enable us to rethink the moral responsibility that the present owes in respect of them. The history of those Garvey referred to as the “Negro peoples of the world” is now a vast archive that demonstrates, from various perspectives, multiple dimensions of the social formations and cultural practices through which, against great odds, black people constructed their historical lives in and after slavery. But that history, I believe, needs also to be written as a moral and reparatory history, that is, as a history of the fundamental claim that unrequited wrongs *remain wrongs still*, that they do not fade with the mere passage of time. It is the telling of one strand of this moral story that the papers assembled by Hill make possible. For the story of the Garvey movement in the Americas is not only the cultural story of a social movement, though it is that too. It is also part of the overall moral story of how, in the face of the persistent denial of the reparatory justice owed to them by the slave-owning powers and their collaborators, and by the generations of their beneficiaries, the descendants of freed slaves sought courageously to respond to the enormities of violence and exclusion and humiliation to which they continued to be subjected and that precluded the full expression of their common and specific humanity. To put it another way, what the Garvey movement aimed at was the moral repair of a racially disordered world; and it did so both as a demand for the recognition of the *universal* rights of black peoples and also as a means of lifting the collective souls of those whose dignity had for generations been disregarded and disrespected.

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10 *Ibid.*, xlv.