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A "Common Spectacle" of the Race: Garveyism's Visual Politics of Founding

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The questions of what makes a people a people and how they are endowed with political power are central to political founding. Through the Universal Negro Improvement Association's first annual convention, this essay reconstructs the central role of aesthetic practices to the constitution of a new people. The convention's spectacular performances were a vehicle through which participants came to understand themselves as constituting the Universal Negro—a transnational and empowered political subject. Founding was tied to the development of "reverential self-regard," which was a process rather than a singular moment. Central to this process was both the gaze of spectators whose affective responses confirmed the power of the people and the political leader who served as the people's mirror. Focusing on a mass movement rather than canonical instances of constituting republics brings into sharp relief the reiterative labors of staging, enacting, and viewing necessary to the practice of founding.

Addressing a crowded meeting of the New York Division of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) on July 11, 1920, the organization's cofounder Marcus Garvey reminded his audience, "We are a new people, born out of a new day and new circumstance. We are born out of the bloody war of 1914-1918" (Hill 1983b, 411).[1] Garvey's declaration joined a global explosion of nationalist and revolutionary projects, each articulating visions of peoplehood. Within the United States, his claim of a new people entered a wider set of debates about the making and meaning of the "New Negro," a figure associated with migration, urbanization, and postwar radicalization.

Garvey's own political vison had been transformed in the context of these processes. When Garvey and Amy Ashwood founded the UNIA in 1914, they sought to secure the rights of Britain's Black subjects within the ambit of the Empire. By 1920, however, the UNIA had pivoted away from securing imperial citizenship to a program centered on African redemption. The UNIA rapidly expanded its membership after this shift. According to the historian Robert Hill, in 1921, there were 418 UNIA divisions with an additional 422 awaiting charters (Hill 1984, xxxiv). By 1924, the UNIA boasted six million members organized in 1,400 separate branches. UNIA divisions were concentrated in the United States and the Caribbean but stretched to southern and west Africa and included one division in Sydney, Australia (Stephen and Ewing 2019). "Garveyism," as it came to be known, is still recognized as the largest Black mass movement in history.

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[1] Much of the primary material in this essay is drawn from the *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, edited by Robert Hill of which there are now 13 volumes published by the University of California and Duke University Presses between 1983 and 2016.

The language of political founding employed in Garvey's declaration of a new people was central to this phase of the UNIA's history. In this essay, I examine the organization's practices of political founding attending in particular to the constitution of the Universal Negro, a transnational and empowered political subject. I argue that aesthetic practices—especially a visual politics of spectacle, pomp, and performance—was central to the founding of the Universal Negro. Scholars of Garveyism have long noted the movement's preoccupation with aesthetic representation, which included the employment of iconography, photography, theater, poetry, and literature in its effort to refashion the image of the Negro race (Boone 2020; Hill 1994; Martin 1983; Raiford 2013; Stephens 2005).

Focusing on the first annual convention held in August 1920 and with specific attention to the opening parade and the ceremony of its proceedings—I illustrate that political founding was a means through which participants came to understand themselves as constituting the figure of the Universal Negro. Founding was on this view a process of transforming one's self-perception, of cognizing oneself as a member of a transnational people capable of transforming the prevailing conditions of racial domination. Attending to the visual politics of the convention, from the parades to the theatrical representation of the deliberations, I trace the ways in which the convention was mobilized to cultivate new habits of self-regard among those who participated in these spectacular occasions.

An extensive literature has explored the dilemmas of political founding (Ackerman 1998; Bernal 2017; Frank 2010; Honig 1991; Sultan 2020). The questions of what makes a people a people and how they are endowed with political power are not limited to exceptional moments of constitution making, but also imbue wider and more routine registers of popular politics. Those who claim the mantle of the people do so from an unstable and precarious authoritative position (Bernal 2017, 13). This experience of underauthorization requires that the people not only counter alternative claimants to political authority but also cultivate an internal sense of their authoritative standing. For Jason

Frank, a central element of this process is the development of what John Adams called a "reverential self-regard" (Frank 2014, 25), which endows the people with a newfound sense of their capacity for self-rule.

Garveyism's visual politics worked to engender such a reverential self-regard among its members. To see oneself with reverence might appear as an entirely self-referential exercise, but I show it was a reiterative process that depended on the presence of spectators. The UNIA's founding convention sought to generate a spectacle of political empowerment and transnational union against both denigrating images of Black people and the ingrained habits of racial inferiority. If we approach the work of developing reverential self-regard from this position, we encounter immediately how reverential self-regard is circuited through the regard of others—both racial others and others in a more intersubjective sense. First, given that the renovation of Black self-image necessarily occurred against the ubiquitous and denigrating white gaze, white spectators are summoned to play the role of mirrors that reflect back an image of the newly empowered race. Second, the spectacular staging of Black empowerment worked to reorient a skeptical and critical Black audience by producing the conditions for an active identification with the UNIA's political vision through the theatrical staging of the convention.

This project of engendering reverential self-regard was also deeply implicated in the paradoxes of political leadership. The UNIA mobilized two models of self-regard—one constituted by the collective enactment of the assembled people and the other articulated by transposing the image of the race onto Garvey himself. Garvey not only played the role of the singular founder but also redirected the routing of self-regard from the gaze of spectators to modes of identification between people and leader. Garvey appeared in this instance as a mirror that reflected the new people and represented the best version of the Universal Negro. While collective enactment and popular identification are in tension with each other, they may not be easily disentangled from each other insofar as Garvey's leadership emerged as key terrain for the development of reverential self-regard.

If I attempt to expand our conception of founding by exploring the role of images and performance in political empowerment, I also intend to contribute to rethinking Garveyism as mass movement. Conceived primarily as the highpoint of classical Black nationalism, interpretations of the movement center on the assumed telos of statehood (Jagmohan 2020; Moses 1978). While the formation of a Black state was not insignificant to the movement's self-understanding, a range of aspirations from repatriation and economic self-help to racial pride and anti-imperialism contributed to the movement's popular success (Harold 2007; Moses 2004, 249–50). In this essay, I extend Adam Ewing's recent call to view "Garveyism less as an ideology but as a method of organic *mass* politics" (Ewing 2014, 6). Situating Garveyism within contemporaneous interwar debates about and practices of mass politics, I set aside the question of the movement's ends to consider its political practices. Visual spectacles of the parade and mass assembly were only one such practice. At the annual convention and reiterated in the local divisions, these spectacles became political rituals that performed the movement's commitments to internationalism and instilled a sense of political empowerment. When they gathered, Garveyites saw themselves—in how others reacted to them, in the shape of their leader—and a new self-image came into focus.

FOUNDING THE UNIVERSAL NEGRO

That Garvey would come to lead a mass movement steeped in a nascent anti-imperialism was not foretold. In its early years, the UNIA, based in Jamaica, expressed "loyalty and devotion" to the British empire (Hill 2011, 785). Appeals to imperial citizenship sought to secure the political standing of colonial subjects. By the end of World War I, these appeals were violently repudiated in the racial terror that followed the end of military conflict (Elkins 1970; Jenkinson 2009). Garvey encountered the postwar era of racial violence in the United States where the 1917 East St. Louis race riots and the Red Summer of 1919 marked key moments in his pivot away from a political program of imperial loyalism (Lumpkins 2008).[2] After working in Central America and traveling to England, he arrived in the United States in 1916 with the objective of raising funds to build an industrial school modeled on the Tuskegee Institute (Grant 2008, 25–51). A year later, Garvey abandoned this goal and now embraced a wider anticolonial demand for self-determination. Central to this reorientation was Garvey's encounter with fellow West Indian émigré Hubert Harrison, whose Liberty League and short-lived magazine *New Negro* incubated a political project centered on racial unity, internationalism, and mass mobilization. Harrison continued to outline this position as editor of the UNIA's *Negro World* in 1920 and as a regular contributor until 1922 (Grant 2008, 92–93; Kwoba 2020).

When the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League was incorporated in New York in 1918, it now sought to be "a worldwide movement that is endeavoring to unite the sentiments of our people" for the project of building a "a vast Negro empire" (Hill 1983a, 397). Garvey turned in this moment to the idioms and practices of political founding. Making the case for the historic first annual international convention of the UNIA scheduled for August 1920, he declared, "Every country has a constitution of its own. Every nation has a code of government" (Hill 1983b, 38). The month-long gathering scheduled for August served a similar purpose, he

[2] As his biographer Colin Grant notes, Garvey's speech "The Conspiracy of the East St. Louis Riots" delivered in New York soon became a popular pamphlet circulated throughout the United States, introducing African Americans to Garvey and the UNIA (Grant 2008, 101–02).

explained in a later address, comparing the meeting of the UNIA's delegates to the Philadelphia Convention (Hill 1983b, 439).

Through the example of 1787, Garvey made explicit the UNIA's aspiration to political founding. Like the delegates at the Philadelphia Convention, the UNIA delegates were elected by local bodies of the organization to represent them at the deliberations of the international body. But unlike Philadelphia in 1787, no delegates came to New York in 1920 with the purpose of founding a republic. Instead, the textual product of the convention, the "Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World," announced the new people as a political subject capable of self-authorization. Such a performative speech act was accompanied by the equally important visual politics of the convention, staging the figure of the Universal Negro.

This act of political founding was articulated in the context of multiple and competing claims to represent an emerging political and cultural consciousness among Black people. Invocations of a "New Negro," which signaled racial awakening, were recurring tropes of Black cultural and political life since Reconstruction (Gates 1988). By the 1920s, however, such invocations reached a crescendo. In this context, the Universal Negro of the UNIA indexed a political project that prioritized racial unity, transnationalism, and mass mobilization. The distinctiveness of this combination is best discerned in comparison to parallel articulations of the New Negro. In the same month as the UNIA's convention, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen described the New Negro as a figure who had come to recognize his class position "as essentially a worker." In doing so, this radicalized figure sought to realize his conception of political, economic, and social equality in and through a workers' party (Randolph and Owen [1920] 2008, 41).

First in a 1923 special issue of *Survey Graphic* and later in the 1925 anthology *New Negro*, Alain Locke offered another competing vision. While stressing "self-respect and self-dependence," characteristics embraced across various formulations of the New Negro, Locke turned in particular to the renovation of the image of the race undertaken by a new generation of cultural producers (Locke 1925, 4). Describing Garveyism as "a transient, if spectacular phenomenon," he argued, "Our greatest rehabilitation may possibly come through such channels, but for the present more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective" (Locke 1925, 15). The artist, rather than the traditional race leader, was in Locke's view the agent of transformation (Locke 1925; Wall 2018, 84–87).

Garveyism shared with Randolph and Owen's vision a commitment to political radicalism, but where they located class at its center, Garveyism followed what Harrison called a "race-first" program (Harrison [1920] 2001, 109; Martin 1976). "The international fact to which Negroes in America are now reacting," Harrison argued, "is not the exploitation of laborers by capitalists; but the social, political and economic subjection of colored peoples by white." Internationalism, which stemmed from "a similarity of suffering" around the world (Harrison [1919] 2001, 103) distinguished Garveyism from the US-centered New Negro movement. Locke, for instance, acknowledged growing Black internationalism as "an effort to recapture contact with the scattered people of African derivation," but he saw the New Negro's objectives as "none other than the ideals of American institutions and democracy" (Locke 1925, 15; Mitchell 2010, 645–46). Garveyism's prioritization of the international stage, its investment in a Black politics articulated to a global scene of racial/imperial domination, was central to the conception of the Universal Negro.

While its race-first, political, and internationalist orientation distinguished it from Locke's conception of the New Negro, Garveyism participated in what Locke called the "repair [of] a damaged group psychology" through the creation of new images of the race (Locke 1925, 10). The *Negro World* was in this regard a focal point for cultural production and served as a central site in which the relationship between aesthetic and political representation were debated (Martin 1983, 5). "In every issue of the *Negro World* space is given to the aspirants of the race in the realm of literature and poetry," the April 1922 issue of the weekly paper proclaimed (Maloney 1922). The *Negro World*'s literary output, which peaked between 1920 and 1923, included leading figures of Harlem's literary renaissance such as Arturo Schomburg, Eric Walrond, and Zora Neale Hurston but also many unknown, aspiring, and amateur writers from across the diaspora (Martin 1983, 25–26). The paper prided itself on giving space not only to the best writers of the race but also to those contributions that were "amateurish and lacking in etymology and syntax, crude in diction and utterly tawdry" (Maloney 1922). The popular "Poetry for the People" section of the *Negro World*, for instance, fostered a community of poets, who dedicated verses to each other, offering encouragement and criticism (Martin 1983, 56–57).

The desire to cultivate and showcase a range of literary talents stemmed from the UNIA's commitment to building a mass movement. There were "inherent possibilities" among the "rank and file" of the race that awaited cultivation and organization (Maloney 1922). On the one hand, this was a claim that artistic genius could be found among the masses. On the other hand, it was an argument for the self-representation of the masses. It would be in producing new images of themselves that the Negro race would recognize its political power. This orientation toward mass self-representation was distinct from the main thrust of the New Negro literary renaissance. Even when figures like James Weldon Johnson made the case for a fluidity between folk and formal art, the self-image of the race was still to be mined and mediated by the master artist (Wall 2018, 90).

The idea of mass self-representation was not limited to the literary arena but also appeared in the performative and theatrical staging of the convention. Through such acts of self-representation, members of the Negro

race would come to see themselves as the Universal Negro, a collective, transnational, and empowered political agent. Garvey acknowledged this was no easy task. "It was a difficult proposition to get Negroes to see through one common spectacle," he warned (Hill 1984, 598). Here, the spectacle indicates both an instrument, a prosthetic eye, employed to aid or supplement a limited capacity for perception—and also a striking public display that generates "curiosity, or contempt, marvel or admiration" (OED 2021). The UNIA's founding politics sought to overcome the limitations of sight that prevented the race from recognizing itself as a new political subject by enacting a spectacular performance of the Universal Negro. That is, the visual spectacle of the convention corrected and enhanced the lens through which Black people perceived themselves.

The production of a common spectacle worked against the ever-present ideology of white supremacy, which justified racial and colonial domination as inevitable and natural. "The great white man," Garvey argued, "has succeeded in subduing the world by forcing everybody to think his way … He has given to the world … a literature that established his right and sovereignty to the disadvantage of the rest of the human race" (Garvey 1923). What Garvey called the propaganda of the white race was not limited to Jim Crow America but a global structure that reproduced an image of the Black race as inferior. "When we scrutinize the attitude of the American, English, French and German white man," according to the UNIA's International Organizer Henrietta Davis, "we find that all four have the same opinion of the Negro. They all believe that the Negro should be a subject race; that he is not to have self-government; that he is not capable of taking a place in the great governments of the world" (Hill 1983b, 29). Habituation to the domination and ideology of white supremacy had psychic and psychological costs, including accepting and performing racial inferiority. The old Negro, according to Davis, had a "subservient manner, with hat in hand, a bending of the body, a shrinking look and bowing as he says, "Yes, boss, yes, master" to every remark from the 'master'" (Hill 1984, 599).

The production of counter-propaganda through alternative images and literature, which cultivated race pride and a sense of nationhood, was a central component of the Garveyite project and Garvey continues to be remembered as a master propagandist (Hill 1994, 184; Martin 1976, 91; Moses 2004, 254). By generating new images of the race, Garveyites engaged in an education of the senses that could counteract and undo ingrained habits and feelings of racial inferiority. This is one feature of the "improvement" to which the name "Universal Negro Improvement Association" aspired. In the act of political founding, the improvement of self-image is made possible through the performance of racial unity and political empowerment. Self-development is here concerned with reorienting the perceived place and position of the Negro race. In the procession of the parade and the acts of collective assembly, UNIA members come to cognize the figure of the Universal Negro and understand themselves as its referent.

Counterposed to the old subservient Negro, the Universal Negro was one that recognized a common grievance … [and] common complaint" across the geographically scatted race (Hill 1984, 599). Elevated from a national minority, no longer "hemmed in" by national and imperial boundaries, this figure indexed "a universal movement" for racial equality (Hill 1984, 598). Garvey's frequently-stated (and exaggerated) count of 400 million Negro people of the world signaled this potentiality of global racial union. But to speak of a universal movement among Negro peoples did not mean that the organization elided difference. During the first convention, a week was devoted to short presentations of each delegation representing local UNIA divisions. "We want the convention to clearly understand the universal Negro situation," Garvey explained, and this required hearing from representatives of Georgia, Mississippi, the colonies of Africa, the independent states of South and Central America, and the islands of the West Indies (Hill 1983b, 510). The *Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples*, which emerged from the reports of the delegates, articulated both the common experience of racial oppression and its specific instantiations. It opens by stating "nowhere in the world, with few exceptions, are black men accorded equal treatment with white men." But it quickly turns to chart the specific instances of this inequality: Jim Crow in the United States, native dispossession in Africa, the denial of "fuller rights of self-government" in the Caribbean (Hill 1983b, 571–572). In this way, the UNIA sought to tether together the variegated experiences of racial domination across national, imperial, and geographic lines in ways that rendered those experiences equivalent yet retained their specificity.

Through the *Declaration*, the assembled delegates of the UNIA acted as representatives of a transnational people who "are masters of ourselves" (Hill 1984, 299). This marked a rupture with the Old Negro who "tamely submitted to the indignities heaped up on us by other races that call themselves superior" (Hill 1983b, 29). In both Davis's and Garvey's accounts, racial superiority was held together by a visual economy that reproduced images of white supremacy and Black inferiority. Black participation in the Great War, Davis argued, demonstrated that there was no basis for this claim. "The white man has no monop[o]ly on knowledge" in politics, science, art, or literature (Hill 1983b, 29). In her claim that the Negro was already "equal to the white man," Davis echoed a wider postwar anticolonial critique, which viewed the devastation of World War I as a condemnation of European civilization (Hill 1983b, 29; Moses 1978, 251–53). The war undermined an ideology of European superiority while demonstrating Europe's dependence for troops and war materials on the colonized. For Davis the postwar period marked a break from the tutelary idea of the civilizing mission. "All that is necessary on the part of the Negro," she argued, "is the proper application of the knowledge he [already] possesses" (Hill 1983b, 29). This is the voice of the "new Negro," who emerged from participation and sacrifice during the war with a newfound awareness

of his own political capacity. All that was left to do was "link up your strength, morally and financially, with the other Negroes of the world" (Hill 1983b, 117).

The centrality of the war to perceptions of the Negro's political capacity had a double valence. By highlighting the moral bankruptcy of the West and emphasizing the crucial role of Black soldiers, the UNIA rejected the view that Black people were politically immature or lagged behind other peoples. The UNIA's political project joined struggles in Ireland, India, Egypt, and Eastern Europe in an "age when all peoples are striking out for freedom, for liberty, and for democracy" (Hill 1983b, 478). At the same time, the recurring reference to the Black soldier as the model of political empowerment rendered the Universal Negro a masculine and martial subject. Black soldiers who "fought and died in Flanders, France, and Mesopotamia" modeled an exemplary courage while also authorizing the demands for equality (Hill 1984, 240). We will see, in the final section, how Garvey's embodiment of this soldier-statesmen figure shaped the UNIA's politics of founding (Stephen 2005, 94). Before turning to his role, I examine the collective enactment of the Universal Negro through the spectacles of the convention.

A COMMON SPECTACLE OF THE RACE

The annual convention was "a visible inauguration" of the new people—united by common cause and empowered by a sense of political capacity (Miller 1927, 495). The first convention in 1920 began on August 1 with the convening of 2,000 delegates representing 22 countries and ended on August 31 with closing ceremonies and parades. A parade on August 2 started at the UNIA headquarters at W. 135th and wound its way through Harlem. Representatives of the Black Star Line and the Negro Factories Corporation, the organization's two commercial enterprises, led the parade. Following in automobiles were Garvey, Davis, William Ferris, Reverend Eason, and other "high officials of the association … wearing their [academic] regalia" (Hill 1983b, 492). Behind them, the procession included the Black Star Line Choir, divisional marching bands, the women's Black Cross Nurses, and the African Legion. Over 20,000 were present at Madison Square Garden where the parade culminated.

Through the parade, the Universal Negro was visually conjured from the multiplicity of regional and national affiliations. The procession was organized according to the divisional structure of the UNIA, which highlighted the local settings of its members. The "Negroes of the World" were not one undivided people, but "represented under the banner of [their] respective country, state or island." Additionally, the participants carried signs that reflected competing demands and political positions. Slogans like "Africa for the Africans" and "Africa a Nation One and Indivisible" stood in conjunction with banners that read "We Believe in the Liberal Institutions of America" and "Long live America" (Hill 1983b, 493). Liberty Hall, where the convention proceedings took place, was decorated with "buntings and flags of various countries [including] England, Africa, the United States, Haiti, Panama, Central America, San Domingo, and other world empires, and nations" (Hill 1983b, 642).

In these practices, the UNIA emphasized its transnational political membership. It was a Convention of the Negro *Peoples* of the World, but one that sought to join together the scattered race and "consolidate [its] racial force" (Hill 1983b, 478). The parade's synchronicity, produced by carefully tailored regalia and uniforms, as well as the choreographed tempo of the procession weaved together this tapestry of national affiliations and political visions to represent the Universal Negro. Like the use of the tricolor cockade and proposals for a national costume in revolutionary France, the parade created "virtual unity through symbolic means" (Olson 2016, 81). Central to the symbols of the Universal Negro was the red, black, and green flag, which would be officially adopted at the convention and written into the *Declaration of Rights* (Hill 1983b, 575). Assembled together and marching in unison, the UNIA paraders transcended the specific claims and experiences of racial domination to manifest a new image of self-assertion and political empowerment. According to the convention's daily *Bulletin*, "it was a parade expressive as it was intended to be of the Negro's serious, his unswerving and unswervable determination to solve his own problems by larger reliance on his own resources and power, physically, economically, religiously and otherwise than heretofore" (Hill 1983b, 491).

The convention's parade specifically and Garveyism's broader aesthetic practices were part of a wider interwar landscape of mass politics that sought to transform the mass from a sociological category that exceeds the institutions of political representation to a political agent constituted by its own self-representation (Jonsson 2013, 25, 189). Parades, pageants, public festivals, and street theater coupled with new media technologies of photography, radio, and film were mobilized as strategies and techniques of articulating collective political identities in settings that ranged from unions and ethnic associations to socialist parties and revolutions (Gillman 2007; Glassberg 1990; Jonsson 2013; Tolstoy 1990). What these various practices and contexts shared was a search for modalities of self-representation. Stefan Jonsson notes of interwar Germany and Austria, the concern with aesthetic and political representation of the masses "addressed fundamental issues at the heart of any democratic politics: how to make a people speak, how to organize, exhibit, promote and present the social whole?" (Jonsson 2013, 210).

The interwar circulation of such political questions restaged dilemmas opened by the eighteenth-century age of revolutions. Jason Frank has argued that the transition from monarchical to popular sovereignty required "images of peoplehood [that] mediate the people's relationship to their own political empowerment" (Frank 2017, 125). The assembled collective had to recognize itself as the people with a newfound political capacity for self-rule. To do so,