

Marcus Garvey: A Pioneer in the Empowerment of the Oppressed

Llewellyn Cornelius

Abstract: “Empowerment” has recently become a buzzword in the social sciences and has come to be connected with the notion of helping the disenfranchised find the resources to improve their circumstances. However, contemporary discussions of empowerment understate the early empowerment pioneer Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). At a time when African Americans were defined as second-class citizens, the UNIA succeeded in fostering positive self-esteem and self-determination among over 2,000,000 individuals through the world. This reflection essay documents these achievements both during the height of the UNIA movements as well as in the decades that followed.

Keywords: African Americans, community organization, self-empowerment, community empowerment

Introduction: Author Reflection

I have long known about Marcus Garvey from growing up a child of the 1960s in Harlem, New York City, as Harlem was one of the centers for his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) decades before I was born. Even these decades after the height of the UNIA movement, its spirit was alive in the community I grew up in, thus I understood the issue of empowerment on a personal level—even before the publication of Dr. Barbara Solomon’s seminal 1976 book *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities* which opened up the door for inclusion of empowerment theory in social work practice. Thus, while this has centered my practice work for decades, I am very aware that even today, some voices find Marcus Garvey unsettling. This is in spite of President Biden pardoning Marcus Garvey on January 20, 2025, following more than 100 years of community advocacy to restore his reputation (Reed, 2025). In the spirit of fostering empowerment, though, this essay is presented to inspire the reader to become more curious about this issue. It is hoped through this discovery process one can see the connection between Garvey’s principles of collective community engagement and what is taken for granted today under either empowerment therapeutic practice, collective social empowerment activities, or community engagement, respective of one’s background.

Contextualizing Empowerment

“Empowerment” is one of the latest buzzwords in the social sciences. It is typically used to represent the idea that we can help people change their circumstances, or at least how they see their circumstances. Like most buzzwords its current use is without an acknowledgement of the contributions of pioneers who predate the use of this term. This essay focuses on one of these pioneers—Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) whose contributions, especially those which focused on developing self-respect and fostering self-determination, represented examples of black empowerment long before the notion of “empowerment” became popular.

In 1976 Barbara Bryant Solomon, in her classic work *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities*, defined *empowerment* as follows:

A process whereby the social worker engages in a set of activities with the client or client system that aim to reduce the powerlessness that has been created by negative valuations based on membership in a stigmatized group. It involves identification of the power blocks that contribute to the problem as well as the development and implementation of specific strategies aimed at either the reduction of the effects from indirect power blocks or the reductions of the operations of direct power blocks. (p. 19)

Gutierrez (1990) has defined empowerment as “a process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations” (p. 149). In short, empowerment focuses on finding the barriers to social change within individuals and within communities, then providing strategies to overcome them (Gutierrez, 1990; Simon, 1990; Solomon, 1976). These concepts will be used to examine how Marcus Garvey and the UNIA empowered African Americans long before “empowerment” became popular.

Precursors to Garvey

Marcus Garvey was not the first leader of African descent who attempted to instill ideas and concepts which we popularize today under “empowerment” in African Americans (See depiction of Marcus Garvey in Figure 1). Any tribute to Garvey would also have to reflect the efforts of others such as Sojourner Truth, Richard Allen, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Dubois, David Walker, Martin Delany, Ida B. Wells, Casely Hayford, Duse Mohammed Ali, Robert Love, and Alexander Bedward.

Figure 1

Marcus Garvey, Eminent Scholar



Note. From *Marcus Garvey, eminent scholar* [Photograph], by Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library, 1941 (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8e0981a2-4adf-a10a-e040-e00a18063089>), New York Public Library Digital Collections.

As implied, there were a multitude of historical factors which set the stage for the Garvey Movement. One of these factors was the proliferation of written material which sought to correct the contemporary worldview of Africa and Africans. It is believed that Garvey was indebted to Duse Mohammed Ali, a Sudanese-Egyptian author who was credited with reporting the first history of Egypt written by an Egyptian, for his understanding of the importance of ancient

Egyptian civilization and historical achievement (Clarke & Garey, 1974). Ali was also sensitive to the commercial potential of Pan-African collaboration in face of Europe's exploitive control over the African continent and its resources (Clarke & Garey, 1974).

A second influence on the Garvey Movement was the work called *Ethiopia Unbound* by Casely Hayford, which called for the need to build up the black race through the development of Ethiopian leagues (Clarke & Garvey, 1974). In fact, the source for the Garvey motto "One God, One Aim, One Destiny" was Hayford's discussion of W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (Clarke & Garvey, 1974).

A third influence on the Garvey Movement came from the activities of Dr. Robert Love, who is best known for his militant journalistic activities in the *Jamaican Advocate* during the period of 1894–1905 (Lewis, 1988). In fact, Garvey stated once,

Much of my early education in race consciousness is from Dr. Love. One cannot read his *Jamaican Advocate* without getting race consciousness ... if Dr. Love was alive and in robust health, you would not be attacking me, you would be attacking him.
(as cited in Lewis, 1988, p. 25)

Dr. Love was committed to increasing the number of black representatives in the Jamaican colonial legislature (Lewis, 1988). For both Love and Garvey, race consciousness was a cry of a people and of a class. Among other activities, Dr. Love proposed land reform to redistribute property to the landless peasants, decried police brutality and the injustices levied out to migrant workers in central America, stressed the need to elevate the role of women in society; and called for attention on the significance of the Haitian revolution. Finally, he was interested in promoting Pan-Africanism—which included securing the political rights of Africans and their descendants; ameliorating the condition of the oppressed; encouraging educational, industrial, and commercial enterprises; fostering friendly relations with whites; and raising money for these causes (Lewis, 1988).

A fourth influence on the Garvey Movement was the religious/community organization efforts of members of the Bedward movement in Jamaica, founded by Reverend Alexander Bedward, whose height was from the 1890s through the 1920s (Chevannes, 1991). The focus of Bedwardism was the need of the downtrodden masses to look to God for their salvation; Bedward used parables from the Bible to challenge the colonial state. Bedwardism attracted the most oppressed section of the poor peasantry and the semi-proletarian masses—out of which Rastafarianism later came (Addisa & Daba, 2022; Chevannes, 1991).

The Garvey Legacy

What made Garvey different from both his African and Anglo contemporaries was his ability to succeed in galvanizing a large number of individuals of African descent to formulate and implement plans to take control of their own destinies. At the time of the first convention for the UNIA, neither African Americans nor the United States itself had ever witnessed a gathering of

25,000 members who met for a month to establish a racial agenda for the world community of African peoples (Hill, 1983). At the height of the UNIA, there were 2,000,000 members in 1,200 branches in 43 countries, with 700 of these in the United States (Marin, 1991; Watson, 2014; See depictions of the UNIA in Harlem, 1920, in Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2

Negro World Newspaper, 1920

The Indispensable Weekly
The Voice of the Anointed Negro—The Pathless Paper

Guaranteed Circulation 50,000
Reaching the Masses of Negroes Throughout the World

Negro World

A Newspaper Devoted Solely to the Interests of the Negro Race

VOL. VIII. No. 24 NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JULY 24, 1920

GREAT WORLD CONVENTION OF NEGROES

Members of the Race From All Parts of the World to Assemble at Liberty Hall, New York, Sunday, August 1, at 10 A. M.—Biggest and Most Representative Assemblage in History of the Race

CONSTITUTION OF NEGRO LIBERTY IS TO BE WRITTEN

FELLOW MEN OF THE NEGRO RACE, GREETINGS:—

This is to inform you that on Sunday, August 1, the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities' League of the World will call its great convention to order at 10 A. M. in Liberty Hall.

Millions of people have been looking towards this

... of the four hundred million members of our race. The black man refuses to be dictated to by foreign Parliaments and alien statesmen. This is the time when all races feel it incumbent upon them to protect their own interests, and if sixty million Anglo-Saxons can be dominant in Europe, and a few million French and Italians and Germans, we do not see why we should allow ourselves to be dominated and abused by alien power. The Convention of the Universal Negro Improvement Association shall give new life and new spirit to the Negro peoples of the world; hence, I ask that every Negro lend his moral and financial aid to this great cause. The first meeting of the Convention will be at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning, August 1; the second meeting at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and the third at 8 o'clock in the night. On the morning of the 2nd the Convention will assemble at 10 o'clock, to adjourn for a parade at 2 o'clock and to assemble at 8 o'clock sharp in Madison Square Garden in a great public demonstration. Twenty-five thousand delegates will be in line to march in the great procession of the Convention. All members of the Association in New York and surrounding States are asked to report in New York not later than 8 A. M. on Sunday, August 1. Everybody should report in time to be properly seated in the Convention and to take part in the parade. Madison Square Garden on Monday night will be the Mecca of the Negro peoples of New York. It can be said without fear that there will not be a seat vacant in Madison Square Garden at 8:30 Monday night. All roads will lead to this world-famed building. Churches, lodges, fraternal organizations, clubs and educational institutions that are sending

delegates to the Convention are requested to have their delegates report to the Registrar's office at 56 West 135th Street, New York City, before they attend at Liberty Hall, so that proper credentials can be given by the Registrar for admission to the Convention. Let your thoughts for the entire month of August be centered around the great Convention here held at Liberty Hall. Year for the success of this

... will create a new people, a new purpose, and a new nation realized.

Immediately after the convention the Black Star Line contemplates opening up direct routes between America and Africa and South America. More ships must be bought, and bigger ships. The Directors, therefore, ask that every Negro make now a desperate effort to buy more shares in the Corporation. The more ships the Black Star Line has the better accommodations we will be able to give to the race. Liberia must be built. Men must be transported. Skilled mechanics and craftsmen are wanted. We cannot transport them in balloons, in air ships; we can only transport them in the ships of the Black Star Line. First of all, we must buy ships to make transportation possible. Hundreds of miles of railroads must be laid down in Liberia. Docks must be built; educational institutions must be built; industrial enterprises must be constructed, and all will mean the transportation of skilled men from this Western Hemisphere, so we ask that every Negro who can afford it to buy more shares in the Black Star Line. You may buy from one to two hundred at Five Dollars each. My advice to you is that you buy now, so that by the close of the Convention the Directors will be able to give a statement to the world of the acquisition of more ships for the Black Star Line, which will make it possible for us to transport at our will. Write the office of the Black Star Line, 56 West 135th Street, New York City, N. Y., U. S. A., for your shares.

And let me say to you adieu for a while until we meet at the Convention on Sunday morning at 10 o'clock in Liberty Hall.

Yours fraternally,
MARCUS GARVEY.

NEW YORK, JULY 27, 1920.

HON. MARCUS GARVEY, WORLD FAMED ORATOR
WILL SPEAK FOR THE "BLACK STAR LINE" AT HUGE CONVENTION AT
LIBERTY HALL
120 WEST 138th STREET
Bet. 7th and Lenox Aves., New York

SUBJECT: "OUR CONVENTION"

SUNDAY, AUGUST 1; 3:30 AND 7:30 P. M.

Note. From *Negro World*, vol. 8 no. 24, front page [Photograph], by Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library, 1920 (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a4fcc980-c60d-012f-b16c-58d385a7bc34>), New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Figure 3

UNIA Parade in Harlem



Note. From *UNIA parade in Harlem* [Photograph], by Liberty Hall: UNIA Cleveland, n.d. (<https://clevelandhistorical.org/files/show/10004>), Cleveland Historical.

Given that by the early 1920s the UNIA had established branches throughout the world, it is not a surprise that Garvey and the UNIA were seen as threat to colonialism. Direct connections to Garveyism continued to be found outside of the U.S.—Davis (2021) notes that there were more than 50 branches of the UNIA in Cuba during the 1920s. Adjete (2021) notes that the elements of self-determination and Pan-Africanism that are attributed to the UNIA were not just present in the U.S. between 1919 and 1931, but were also vibrant in Canada via the Coloured Literary Association of Toronto. The sphere of Garvey was also felt in Garvey to bring social justice to South Africa and southwest Africa (Namibia) in 1922 and in 1928 via his petitions to the League of Nations (Jones, 2022) as well as the independence efforts in Malawi between 1914 and 1920 (Page, 2022). Page (2022) asserts that it was the publication of “Africa for Africans” in the *Negro World* that planted the seed to the nurturance of activists across the African continent over the course of the 20th century.

One example of Garvey’s threat to colonialism was the attempt of the Bermuda’s colonial government both to prevent Garvey from entering Bermuda and to undermine Garvey’s newsprint publication *The Negro World* (Swan, 2010). In spite of this attempted obstruction, the presence of the UNIA in Bermuda led to a Black Renaissance there (Swan, 2010). In another case, Watson (2014) noted that young intellectuals in Ibadan Nigeria saw Garveyism more as a means to reflect on their own state of colonial oppression as opposed to a call to action. In the same vein, in Brazil, there was an equal split between the black press who was praiseworthy of Garvey and the mainstream press which presented negative views of Garvey (Domingues,

2017). These actions are examples of the divide and rule tactic presented in Frieres' (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when talking about strategies oppressors use to subjugate people. They are also examples of the self-denigrating tactics that neocolonists practiced throughout the diaspora in their efforts to identify with their colonial benefactors as noted by Fanon (1963) in the *Wretched of the Earth*.

When reviewing the long-term legacy of the Garvey Movement as it relates to self-determination, empowerment, and autonomy, one must not only examine the structural presence of the UNIA, but also consider its impact on the thinking of leaders in Africa and throughout the African diaspora¹. Christian (2008) noted,

The Garvey movement played a massive role in giving future African leaders a much-needed psychological boost toward gaining the fight for independence. Among those Africans who benefited from the ideas of Marcus Garvey are Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria, governor-general 1960), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya, prime minister 1960, president 1964), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana, president 1957), Kenneth Kuanda (Zambia, president 1964), and others. (p. 325)

Moran (2021) has pointed out the parallels between the UNIA movement and the work of Cesar Chavez and the United Fruit Workers, in this case via their focus on collective economic empowerment and self-determination. The influence of Marcus Garvey can also be seen in the growth of Rastafarianism, which in the early 1930s in both Jamaica and Ethiopia identified Garvey as its prophet (Addisa & Daba, 2022).

More contemporary discussions of Nationalism and Pan-Africanism are reflected both in the United Nation marking 2011 as the year of African Descendants, focusing on the anti-colonial and civil rights struggles through the diaspora as well and the modeling of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission by others around the world (Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2016; Dong-choon, 2010; Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2006; Lewis, 2011; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sri Lanka, 2011; National Truth Commission Brazil, 2014; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, n.d.; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2016; United States Institute of Peace, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2009). Even though the impact of Garveyism has been felt around the world, there was a missed opportunity in the U.S. to reinforce the legacy of Marcus Garvey, as "President Barack Obama issued 212 presidential pardons and 1715 commutations during his tenure, but he refused to sign a presidential pardon for the Right Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey" (Philp, 2017, para. 1).

While some of Garvey's legacy can be quantified, some can only be measured in conceptual terms. The Garvey Movement represented a mobilization of both the middle class and poor oppressed Africans who worked as house servants, migrant laborers, during a time when "unionized farmer organizations, trade unions, independent churches, and student organizations

¹ An interesting side note regarding the indirect ripple effect of Garveyism can be found in a notation from Carew (1994) who indicated that Malcolm X's Grenadian grandmother and grandfather met at a Montreal UNIA meeting in 1918.

were banned or kept under strict state control” (Campbell, 1991). Garveyism captured the imagination of African in the U.S. and the Caribbean and Africa as well as Latin Americans. In crossing the alleged “barriers” implied by language, metropolitan affiliation, and constitutional status, the appeal of the movement demonstrated the structural similarity of the conditions of African people all over the Americas over two generations after the abolition of negro slavery (Girvan, 1991).

Fostering Positive Self-Esteem and Self-Respect

Marcus Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica and extended it to other Caribbean nations and Africa, but it was strongest in the United States from 1919 through 1923. The very essence of the Garvey Movement was Garvey’s plea to help African people everywhere to develop the “courage of manhood” (which we would now term “personhood”) and to work and build for themselves. His speeches are replete with attempts to help Africans foster positive self-esteem and develop self-respect. For example, Garvey states that “we come now to the turning point of the Negro, where we have changed from the old cringing weakling, and transformed into full-grown men, demanding our portion as MEN” (Garvey, 1969, p. 8). In defining the word “man” (today we would say “person”), Garvey said:

So few of us can understand what it takes to make a man—the man who will never say die; the man who will never give up, the man who will never depend upon others to do for him what he ought to do for himself; the man who will not blame God, who will not blame nature, who will not blame fate for his condition, but the man who will go out and make conditions to suit himself (Garvey, 1969, p. 26).

The central purpose of the Garvey platform was to help Africans change the way in which they view themselves and the world around them. He challenged African people to accept their own beauty and worth and competence to go along their own way in the world (Cronon, 1973).

The goal of the UNIA movement was not to “succeed” or to “fail” as we are too apt to evaluate; rather, the purpose of the movement was to open the minds of African people and to counter the messages used to make Africans feel inferior. Garvey understood that in order for African people to help themselves they had to free themselves from the psychological and political consequences of oppression. In assessing Garvey’s contributions to self-esteem, Jordan (1975) notes that Garvey emphasized that the emancipation of black people needs to be centered on both their pride in their skin color and their African past.

There were in fact many examples in the works about Garvey and the UNIA that showed Garvey’s attempts to translate the principles of self-respect and self-esteem into an action agenda. For example, at the first International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the world in 1920, the UNIA promoted the use of the Red, Black, and Green flag. Red stood for the blood of the race, which should not be shed in vain; black was used to show pride in the color of the race; and green was used to promote and new and better life (Hill, 1983). This color combination and symbolism was used throughout the UNIA movement and can be seen today in Kwanzaa rituals and other symbols of African pride and respect.

Garvey's concern about the promotion of self-esteem and self-respect included promoting not just racial pride but also cultural appreciation. When Garvey returned to Jamaica in 1927, he used the Edelweiss Park headquarters of the UNIA as a focus point for a multitude of cultural events ranging from dances, dramatic presentations, musical revues, vaudeville, comedies, oracle renditions, public speaking, singing and dancing contests, films, picnics, and fairs (Hamilton, 1991). The purpose of these events was to provide public recreation and cultural entertainment for the poorer people of the Kingston Jamaica capital and the St. Andrew area (Hamilton, 1991). Some of the events included works written by Garvey (*Roaming Jamaicans, Slavery from Hut to Mansion, Coronation of An African King, Let My People Go, Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice, A Night in Havana and Wine, Women and Song*); mock trials (at least three of which written by Garvey); dance training for 200 women and 100 men; and the directorship of two choirs, a concert orchestra, and a jazz orchestra (Hamilton, 1991).

Fostering Self-Determination

Along with promoting positive self-esteem and self-respect, Garvey used the organizational structure of the UNIA to foster self-determination for persons of African descent. First, the UNIA developed paramilitary organizations to foster discipline and professionalism. For the men there was the Universal African Legion. For the women there was the Universal African Motor Corps (the first corps of its type for African American women; Martin, 1991). Along with military training, the Universal African Legion also emphasized employment training. A second structural component developed by the UNIA was the Black Cross Nurses for women. This organization consisted of nurses who were both medical professionals and caretakers of children in the Juvenile Division. One of the implicit goals of the Black Cross nurses was to have the children play with black dolls early on to develop positive self-esteem, an issue that later became the focus of research by Kenneth Clark (Clark & Clark, 1939; Clarke & Clark, 1947; Jordan, 1975). A third structural component of the UNIA was the annual conventions, whose purpose was to formulate plans for improving the status of Africans in Africa and the diaspora.

Women were not only represented in the rank and file of the organization but also among the leadership. Amy Ashwood Garvey, Marcus Garvey's first wife, was the co-founder of the UNIA in 1914 (Ford-Smith, 1991). Amy Jacques Garvey, Marcus Garvey's second wife, worked as an editor of *The Negro World* and worked tirelessly during Garvey's imprisonment to keep the UNIA going (Ford-Smith, 1991). Henrietta Vinton Davis served as a vice-president of the UNIA on several occasions (Martin, 1991). Lillian Galloway ran a string of businesses called the Negro Factories Corporation. Garvey also came into contact with Ida B. Wells-Barnett, known for her sustained campaign against the lynching of African Americans, and Madame C. J. Walker, the cosmetologist who became the first African American millionaire (Martin, 1991).

Other examples of the direct translation of principle of self-determination into action was the development of businesses and economic cooperatives. Examples of these enterprise efforts include a restaurant, a hat factory, a millinery shop, a steam laundry, a number of grocery stores, and a dressmaking and tailoring shop.

Probably the most talked-about enterprise of the Garvey Movement was the development of the Black Star Line, whose significance needs to be viewed in the context of the period. Stein notes that at the time of the Black Star Line, the U.S. Navy and Marine usage of ships for military purposes was still in its own embryonic stages. During World War I, “most American men and women and material went to war on foreign ships, but the establishment of the U.S. Shipping Board and a shiploading auxiliary in 1916 revealed the governments’ commitment to commercial expansions and naval power” (Stein, 1991, p. 205). Stein (1991) equates the notion of the plan to build a shipping line in the Garvey era with the equivalence of possessing nuclear weapons in the later stage of the twentieth century. Under the Black Star Line, Garvey purchased three ships, worth then a total of 2 million dollars, for the purposes of transporting African Americans back to Africa (Hill, 1983). His plan to transport Africans was derailed by the U.S. government, who accused Garvey of mail fraud in his attempt to solicit money for the acquisition of these ships.

The Garvey Movement in the Context of History

While the efforts of Marcus Garvey appear notable in their own light, they loom even larger in history once one contrasts his achievements with historical issues which occurred during his time. The time of the Garvey Movement was characterized by the loss of political power by African Americans following the *Plessy v. Ferguson* court ruling approving separate but equal institutions for African Americans (AKA Jim Crow legislation); the mass migration of African Americans from the U.S. South to northern states; racial riots and competition between African and immigrant Americans over living space; lynchings; and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (Edwards, 1991). In the summer of 1919, race riots exploded in most major cities. Violence was used to enforce the second-class status of Blacks. Lynching was rampant, and the police often turned a blind eye to instances of crime when it was targeted at Blacks (Grant 2003). In 1920 there were 61 lynchings, and in 1921 there were 62, including “soldiers returning from the Great War who after fighting and winning significant victories—just as they had fought in the Revolutionary and Civil wars” (Eburne, 2014, p. 2). The NAACP (n.d.) reported that between 1882 and 1968 there were 4,743 lynchings in the United States. Olusanya (1994) notes that, by 1920, “the whole of the African continent, except Ethiopia and Liberia, had been parceled out among European colonial powers,” and, as a result, Africans who “had been brought to the reality of colonization with its racial intolerance, economic exploitation and social injustice” would welcome “any movement which sought to emancipate them from European subjugation” (p. 123).

Liberia presented a unique dilemma because while the country was “established” through the efforts of the American Colonization Society in the 1820s, it was built upon the infusion of freed African Americans (called Americo-Liberians) to an already established community in West Africa, which set the stage for decades of internal conflict and civil war (Cooper, 2008). In fact, these Americo-Liberians did not want an anticolonial movement led by Garvey in Liberia (Lewis, 1988, pp. 71–75). Note one of the key figures of colonialism in Africa in the 19th Century, Cecil Rhodes, set forth a colonialist philosophy that was directly opposed to empowerment in self-determination. In referring to the British Colonial presences around the

world, Rhodes stated “I contend that we are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race” (Parkinson, 2015, para. 13). With regards to Africa, Rhodes’ “famous desire” was his wish to “‘red line’ from Cairo to Cape Town, building a railway across the entire continent without ever leaving British territory” (Parkinson, 2015, para. 13).

Before 1890, less than 10 percent of the African Americans in the United States lived in urban areas; by 1940, half of them lived in urban areas (Farley and Allen, 1989; Wilson, 1980). While social welfare programs such the Freedmans Bureau proliferated after the Civil War in the South to improve the plight of African Americans (Franklin, 1970), the progress in social welfare programs and political activity achieved during the reconstruction period was stripped by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* supreme court ruling which relegated African Americans to inferior schools, housing, employment, and living accommodations.

The passage of the Jim Crow laws in turn contributed to the great migration of African Americans to the north which began after 1890. The great migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North was also influenced by a loss of jobs and poverty combined with the promise of a better life in the North. In 1917, the *Chicago Defender* used claims of high paying jobs, better school systems, voting rights, and freedom from lynchings and terrorism by whites to lure African Americans to the urban North (Spear, 1967). However, industrialists used African Americans in urban areas to break strikes by immigrant workers organizing for a better work environment (Wilson, 1980). This led to race riots between indigenous, African, and immigrant Americans. These race riots around issues of employment did not decrease until President Franklin Delano Roosevelt passed legislation in 1933 that provided legal protection for workers to organize for better working conditions, hours, and wages (Davis, 1986; Wilson, 1980).

American social policy and social welfare activity in the early part of the twentieth century was influenced by two strands of thought: Social Darwinism and Progressivism. Social Darwinism argued in favor of “survival of the fittest.” Its most notable proponent, Herbert Spencer, argued that the progress of humans was dependent on acquired physical and mental abilities, which were genetically transmitted (Hofstadter, 1944). This type of philosophy led to the suggestion by some that social legislation (e.g., child labor laws) should not be passed to improve the plight of the poor because they interfered with the natural development of society. The most insidious application of this notion, though, was its use as a justification for a “natural experiment” on African Americans with latent untreated syphilis which began in 1932 and ran until 1972 (Brandt, 1978). In the years preceding the initiation of this experiment, “scientists” reported in medical journals that African Americans would make a favorable subject for such a study as a result of their sexual prowess and low level of intellectual activity (Brandt, 1978).

In contrast to the Social Darwinists, advocates of the Progressive movement believed that the environment could be changed to improve the plight of individuals (Hofstadter, 1944). Examples of these proponents include social workers who were part of the settlement movement in the U.S. Settlement workers such as Jane Addams, Sophonisba Breckenridge, Graham

Taylor,, Louise DeKoven Bowen, Raymond Robins, Celia Parker, and Mary McDowell used their skills to examine the systematic unfairness in labor, housing, and health in urban neighborhoods (Diner, 1970; White, 1959; Davis, 1959). They fought for better housing laws, shorter working hours, and better working conditions; additionally, they conducted research on social problems to develop programs for the poor.

However, while they all have had a consistent track record in addressing the plight of poor Americans, the actions of these early Progressive era leaders demonstrated some ambivalence with regards to their commitment to resolving the plight of African Americans. An example of such ambivalence is noted in the activities of Louise DeKoven Bowen, a leader in both the Chicago Bureau of Charities and Hull House in Chicago (Diner, 1970). While she was heralded as being one of the few Chicagoans in the progressive era who was concerned about the plight of African Americans, Ms. Bowen felt that interventions to solve the problems of African Americans should focus on the individual instead of their environment (Diner, 1970).

Graham Taylor, the founder of what was to become the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, showed even less of a concern for the plight of African Americans. While Taylor praised the potential contributions of American immigrants to America, he saw African Americans as a problem in this system, calling them “depraved” (Diner, 1970, p. 401). Another leader in the Chicago settlement movement, Mary McDowell, placed African Americans at the bottom of the ladder of group achievement, citing that they were poorer and more ignorant than Greek and Lithuanian immigrants (Diner, 1970). In contrast, other prominent Progressives such as Jane Addams, Julie Lathrop, Sophisba Breckenridge, and Grace and Edith Abbott all worked to develop legislation to improve the plight of African Americans (Diner, 1970).

Overall Reflections

As seen from the window of time, the legacy of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA is truly noteworthy as a potential model for the empowerment of individuals and organizations (Harvey, 1994). In a time where African Americans were considered at best second citizens without political rights, Garvey succeeded in mobilizing large numbers of African Americans to take pride in themselves and their accomplishments and to seize an active role in shaping their future. While the material accomplishments of the Garvey Movement are no longer with us, the legacy is reflected today in cultural traditions in the African American community and the popularization of the notion of “empowerment.”

As we look for ways to foster the self-empowerment of African Americans and other people of color, efforts need to be made to look to successful models as sources of inspiration for social change. The actions of Garvey and the members of the UNIA focused on encouraging the powerless to take a proactive stance in their own development. Given the merits of leaders such as Marcus Garvey, more attention needs to be paid towards using their accomplishments to help in the development of culturally relevant methods of individual and community empowerment.

The “So What” Issue—Why is This Narrative Important?

At the time of the UNIA, social work as profession was in its early phase. In 1915, Flexner criticized social work as not being a profession at all. The work in the field was driven both by psychodynamic therapy and the settlement movement. Yet at the same time there were strategies in motion that (the Garvey Movement) that has led to a long arc of the inclusion of principles of ally ship, empowerment, self-determination and abolitionism in social work. However, the connection between Garveyism and 21st century social work still appears to be understated. One of the important takeaways of this reflective essay is our need to understand more within the context of communities (both locally and globally), how geo-political factors affect the nature of social action to counter oppression. As we move forward it will be important to capture the contextual issues that are occurring in the present and how they may plant the seeds for future empowerment movements.

Social Work Education Recommendations

It remains curious that more than 100 years post Flexner’s report, there is a lack of inclusion of multi-cultural his/her/their-stories of the contributions of international trailblazers such as the persons who have influenced the formation of the UNIA as well as the ripple effects of their focus on social, emotional, and economic liberation, community organizing and advocacy in the U.S., Caribbean, Canada, Africa, and Latin America. At minimum there is a need for social welfare history courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels to infuse content on how grassroots organizers—such as Marcus Garvey, Cesar Chavez, Nelson Mandela, and so on—have created social movements. There is also a need to include in this learning space discussions of how music is being used around the world to mobilize others as exemplified by Caribbean protest music, Reggae Roots Music, Afrobeat music (Nigeria), and Conscious/Political Rap/Hip-Hop (Davis, 2021, Feracho, 2010; Harris, 2022; Hylton, 1975; Opeyemi, & Johnson, 2024).

To say it another way, as Helen Harris Perlman (1959) did, “start with the client” (p. 22)—thus, if the client has their own liberation story to tell, we need to speak to that from both a learning perspective and a praxis perspective (moving theory into practice).

Research Recommendations

There is a need for more knowledge discovery, as opposed to knowledge generation here. Examples would include the production of more special issues in journals that encourage scholars to publish work that dig deeper into the local socio-cultural contest of change—whether it focuses on individual empowerment theory, fostering allyship and accomplice advocates, using the internet for electronic advocacy, evidence of community transformation using models and theories that speak to empowerment/liberation and scholarship regarding policy effects to address social and economic inequities.

Policy Practice Recommendations

Here there is need to see the dissemination of more examples of successful community engagement organizing efforts that lead to the passage of policies that benefit communities. For example, Cornelius and Lawrence Webb (2021) noted the Poor Peoples Movement campaign, started by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr in the 1960s and continues today under Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II focuses promoting fair wages and countering discrimination or all for all. Cornelius and Lawrence Webb (2021) also provided an international example on the use of sovereign wealth by a country to improve the well-being of its citizens, in this case performed by Norway, who currently does so using profits from the oil extracted from the sea. Finally, Cornelius and Lawrence Webb (2021) show how in the U.S. the funds from the 46-state Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement were used between 1999 and 2024 to address public health issues within their communities (Cornelius & Lawrence Webb, 2021).

Final Author Reflections

Community groups today are having discussions about relying less on the public sector (local, state, or federal government) and more on each other to promote empowerment and self-determination. Some are using the South African principle Ubuntu (I am because we are) to reflect this transformation process. We are seeing this transformation occurring in the 21st Century via the development of voluntary online learning communities like the Historically Black educational platform Hillmantok University (active 2025) or via the promotion of advocacy through social media like the grassroots “Win With Black Women” network (active 2019–2025; Duncan, 2024). In the end, irrespective of one’s stance regarding Marcus Garvey and the UNIA movement, it is hoped that practitioners use the empowerment principles presented here to develop culturally responsive practices to address the was to transform their own communities. A great resource to consider if one wants to delve into this matter further is the 100 articles and books that can be found in Harty’s (2020) *Black Contributions to Mutual Aid, Social Welfare, and Social Work History Supplementary Reading Guide*.

Acknowledgement

This paper is dedicated to Mark (Marcus) Garvey Battle, who was Executive Director of NASW from June 1984 to June 1992 and visiting Professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work in Baltimore from 1992–1999 as his social work leadership reflected the empowerment spirit of his namesake Marcus Garvey.

References

Abdisa, B. M., & Daba, B. A. (2022). Historical origin of Rastafarian, Marcus Garvey and Pan-African Movement. *Journal of Algebraic Statistics*, 13(2), 2789–2801.

- Adjetey, W. N. L. (2021). In search of Ethiopia: Messianic Pan-Africanism and the problem of the promised land, 1919–1931. *Canadian Historical Review*, 102(1), 53–78. <https://doi.org/10.3138/chr-2019-0048>
- Brandt, A. M. (1978). Racism and research: The case of the Tuskegee syphilis study. *The Hastings Center Report*, 8(6), 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3561468>
- Cronon, E. D. (Ed.) (1973). *Marcus Garvey: Great lives observed*. Prentice-Hall.
- Campbell, H. (1991). Garveyism, pan-Africanism and African liberation in the twentieth century. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant, *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 167–188). Third World Press.
- Chevannes, B. (1991). Garvey myths among the Jamaican people. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 123–134). Third World Press.
- Christian, M. (2008). Marcus Garvey and African unity: Lessons for the future from the past. *Journal of Black Studies*, 39(2), 316–331. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934708317364>
- Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. K. (1939). The development of consciousness of self and the emergence of racial identification in Negro pre-school children. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, 591–599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1939.9713394>
- Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. K. (1947). Racial identification and preference in children. In T. M. Newcomb and E. L. Hartley (Eds.), *Readings in social psychology*. Henry Holt.
- Clarke, J. H., & Garvey, A. J. (1974). *Marcus Garvey and the vision of Africa*. Vintage Books.
- Cooper, H. (2008). *The house at Sugar Beach: In search of a lost African childhood*. Simon and Schuster.
- Cornelius, L. J., & Lawrence Webb, C. (2020). Unraveling the persistent legacy of structural racism against poor persons of color in the U.S. *Journal of Poverty*, 24(5–6), 355–368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2020.1811444>
- Davis, A. F. (1959). Raymond Robins: The settlement worker as municipal reformer. *Social Service Review*, 33(2), 131–141.
- Davis, M. (1986). *Prisoners of the American dream*. Verso.
- Davis, S. F. (2021). Garvey-Rodney-Marley: A pan-African bridge over Cuba. *Race & Class*, 62(4), 19–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396820978580>

Diner, S. J. (1970). Chicago social workers and blacks in the Progressive Era. *Social Service Review*, 44(4), 393–410.

Domingues, P. (2017). O “Moisés dos pretos”: Marcus Garvey no Brasil [The “black Moses”: Marcus Garvey in Brazil]. *Novos Estudos [New Studies]*, 36(3), 129–150.

Duncan, J. (2024, October 31). “Win With Black Women” founder Jotaka Eaddy on how the group is embracing its role in a historic election. CBS News.
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/win-with-black-women-founder-jotaka-eaddy-2024-election/>

Edwards, J. (1991). Garveyism: Organizing the masses or mass organization. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant, *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 215–228). Third World Press.

Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.

Farley, R., & Allen, W. R. (1989). *The color line and the quality of life in America*. Oxford University Press.

Feracho, L. (2010). Hip hop and global politics in Caribbean music: Debates in transnationalism and resistance in Caribbean hip hop. In D. P. Alridge, J. B. Stewart, & V. P. Franklin (Eds.), *Message in the music: Hip hop, history, and pedagogy* (pp. 239–260). Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History.

Ford-Smith, H. (1991). Women and the Garvey Movement in Jamaica. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 73–86). Third World Press.

Franklin, J. H. (1970). Public welfare in the South during the Reconstruction Era, 1865–80. *Social Service Review*, 44(4), 379–392. <https://doi.org/10.1086/642601>

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.

Garvey, A. J. (Ed.) (1969). *Philosophy and opinions of Marcus Garvey (Vols I and II)*. Charles Scribner’s Sons.

Girvin, N. P. (1991). The political economy of race in the Americas: The historical context of Garveyism. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 11–22). Third World Press.

Grant, O. B. (2003). Social justice versus social equality: The capitalistic jurisprudence of Marcus Garvey. *Journal of Black Studies*, 33(4), 490–498.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934702250031>

- Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (2006). *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission report: Executive summary*. http://www.greensborotrc.org/exec_summary.pdf/
- Gutierrez, L. M. (1990). Working with women of color: An empowerment perspective. *Social Work*, 35(2), 149–153. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/35.2.149>
- Hamilton, B. (1991). Marcus Garvey and cultural development in Jamaica: A preliminary survey. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 87–112). Third World Press.
- Harris, A. L. (2022). Black protest as public theology: Considering Bourdieu's *habitus* theory with a comparative analysis of protest approaches in the Civil Rights Movement and the hip-hop generation. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 16(4), 422–446. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-20220059>
- Harty, J. S. (2020). *Black contributions to mutual aid, social welfare, and social work history: Supplementary reading guide*. University of Chicago. https://www.prof2prof.com/system/files/resources_files/Harty-BlackSocialWork-v2-20201122.pdf
- Harvey, A. R. (1994). A Black community development model: The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League 1917–1940. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 21(1), 113–124. <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2112>
- Hill, R. A. (1983). *The Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers Vol. I-X*. University of California Press.
- Hofstadter, R. (1944). *Social Darwinism in American thought*. Beacon Press.
- Hylton, P. (1975). The politics of Caribbean music. *The Black Scholar*, 7(1), 23–29.
- Jones, D. R. (2021). 'The League will not ignore the cry of the Negro race for justice': Marcus Garvey, the League of Nations and South-West Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48(1), 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2018828>
- Jordan, J. S. (1975). *Beyond contribution: Marcus Garvey as the subject of a case study approach to understanding Afro-American participation in American history and culture*. PhD Dissertation, Columbia University.
- Lewis, R. (1988). *Marcus Garvey: Anti-colonial champion*. Africa World Press.

Lewis, R. (2011). Marcus Garvey: The remapping of Africa and its diaspora. *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies*, 25(4), 473–483.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2011.639956>

Liberty Hall: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Cleveland. (n.d.). *UNIA parade in Harlem* [Photograph]. Cleveland Historical.

<https://clevelandhistorical.org/files/show/10004>

Martin, T. (1991). Women in the Garvey movement. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 67–72). Third World Press.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sri Lanka. (2011). *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation*. <https://peace-srilanka.org/images/publications/LLRC-Report-in-Sri-lanka.pdf>

Moran, R. F. (2022). The pocketbook next time: From civil rights to market power in the Latinx community. *American University Law Review*, 71(2), 579–647.

<https://scholarship.law.tamu.edu/facscholar/1900>

NAACP. (n.d). *History of lynching in America*. <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america>

National Truth Commission Brazil. (2014). Conheça e acesse o relatório final da CNV [Get to know and access the CNV final report]. <http://cnv.memoriasreveladas.gov.br/index.php/outros-destaques/574-conheca-e-acesse-o-relatorio-final-da-cnv>

Olusanya, G. O. (1994). Garvey and Nigeria. In R. Lewis & M. Warner-Lewis (Eds.), *Garvey, Africa, Europe, the Americas* (pp. 121–134). Africa World Press.

Opeyemi, B. N., & Johnson, A. A. (2024). Nonviolent protest in Africa: Echoes and lessons from Fela Anikulapo Kuti. *Ramon Llull Journal of Applied Ethics*, 15, 63–90.

<https://doi.org/10.60940/rljaev1n15Id424041>

Page, M. E. (2022). A century of Black Nationalism in Malawi: Echoes of Marcus Garvey, 1914–2020. *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 55(1), 115–130.

Parkinson, J. (2015, April 1). *Why is Cecil Rhodes such a controversial figure?* BBC News Magazine. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32131829>

Perlman, H. H. (1959). *Social casework: A problem-solving process*. Chicago University Press.

Philp, G. (2017, February 14). *Marcus Garvey and President Obama's missed opportunity*. GlobalVoices. <https://globalvoices.org/2017/02/14/marcus-garvey-and-president-obamas-missed-opportunity/>

Reed, B. (2025, January 26). *Inside the 100-year fight to get a Black revolutionary pardoned*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/jan/26/marcus-garvey-pardon-campaign>

Simon, B. L. (1990). Rethinking empowerment. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 1(1), 27–39. https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v01n01_04

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library. (1920). *Negro World*, vol. 8 no. 24, front page [Photograph]. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a4fcc980-c60d-012f-b16c-58d385a7bc34>

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. (1941). *Marcus Garvey, eminent scholar* [Photograph]. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a4fcc980-c60d-012f-b16c-58d385a7bc34>

Simon, B. L. (1994). *The empowerment tradition empowering the powerless*. Columbia University Press.

Solomon, B. B. (1976). *Black empowerment: Social work in oppressed communities*. Columbia University Press.

Spear, A. (1971). The origins of the urban ghetto, 1870–1915. In N. I. Higgins, M. Kilson, & D. M. Fox (Eds.), *Key issues in the Afro-American experience*. Harcourt Brace Jovanich.

Stein, J. (1991). The ideology and practice of Garveyism. In R. Lewis & P. Bryant (Eds.), *Garvey: His work and impact* (pp. 199–214). Third World Press.

Swan, Q. J. (2010). Bermuda looks to the east: Marcus Garvey, the UNIA, and Bermuda, 1920–1931. *Wadabagei: A Journal of The Caribbean & its Diasporas*, 13(1), 29–61.

Tanis, F., Brown, S., Wagner, W. C., Tesfay, N., Tomlinson, Y., & Middleton, T. (2017). *When truth is justice and not enough: Executive summary of the Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*. Black Women's Blueprint.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2016). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. https://nctr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (n.d.). Promotion of national unity and reconciliation act 34 of 1995. <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf>

United States Institute of Peace. (2001). *Truth Commission: Peru 01*. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2001/07/truth-commission-peru-01>

United States Institute of Peace. (2002). *Truth Commission: Timor-Leste (East Timor)*.
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2002/02/truth-commission-timor-leste-east-timor>

United States Institute of Peace. (2004). *Truth Commission: Morocco*.
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2004/12/truth-commission-morocco>

United States Institute of Peace. (2009). *Truth Commission: Kenya*.
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2009/07/truth-commission-kenya>

Watson, R. (2014). Literacy as a style of life: Garveyism and gentlemen in colonial Ibadan. *African Studies*, 73(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2014.887750>

White, G. C. (1959). Social settlements and immigrant neighbors, 1886–1914. *Social Service Review*, 33(1), 55–66. <https://doi.org/10.1086/640616>

Wilson, W. J. (1980). *The declining significance of race: Blacks and changing American institutions*. The University of Chicago Press.

About the Author: Llewellyn J. Cornelius, PhD, LCSW is Donald L. Hollowell Distinguished Professor and Director, Center for Social Justice, Human and Civil Rights, School of Social Work, University of Georgia, Athens, GA (lcornel@uga.edu).